



bioStories
magazine



**Volume 7,
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XOX
love-spit,
with
blood.
XOX

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Volume 7, Issue 1

Summer/Fall 2017



Cover Art: Malado Francine Baldwin

"Self-portrait with African masks, Modigliani; Grenoble 1995". c1995/2015, mixed media on book pages

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Reverse Bartending and Wilted Wings

by Tessa Torgeson

My peers poured craft beer into frosted mugs for the miniskirt wearing set that clutched their smart phones with manicured fingers. Meanwhile, a few blocks away I poured Karkov vodka into yellowed Tupperware containers for people wearing yesterday's clothes, their hands shaking with delirium tremens. I went to AA meetings.

I called myself a reverse bartender. My role was to be a compassionate security guard/receptionist, a job that required me to mediate/allot liquor/enforce rules/listen/tend to emergencies. My technical job title was "mental health technician", but I never liked that title because I thought it made me sound like a computer. Things need fixing. People need compassion.

I worked at a newly developed public housing project called Housing First designed for people who were both chronically homeless and chemically dependent. It was a fifty-unit apartment building with a surprisingly modern design, kitty corner from a strip club and conveniently down the alley from a liquor store. Housing First allowed residents a daily liquor allotment, thus it was a radical departure from most public housing programs for people with chemical dependency issues that were abstinence only. On those programs, if you relapsed/pissed dirty/got caught with alcohol, you were booted back to the gutter. As a result, drunks literally froze to death in Fargo. One drunk forty-year-old man froze to death last winter, passed out on the steps of the Cathedral because he had been evicted and shelters wouldn't take him. Housing First took a humanitarian approach, called harm reduction, that teaches people how to be safer about drinking and using, offers health options and housing. It is more cost effective than the revolving doors of jails, institutions, and ERs.

I heard about Housing First through my friend from Texas, Aly, who was my trainer when I joined the staff. We sat in a tiny office that staff referred to as "the chicken coop," with security cameras, giant glass windows, and a buzzer tenants and visitors used to gain entrance. On my first day working for Housing First, immediately, the buzzer sounded. A man with tapestries of tattoos on his face and body came in the

entryway. His belly peeked under a spikey vest littered with railroad train-hopper patches.

"Trey, this is Tessa. She's new here. Be nice to her."

"Of course, Miss Ally, I'll try to be nice. Good to meet you, miss."

"I know you will. Just want you to make her feel welcome because she's an old friend of mine. You're looking good. How many days have you been clean this time?"

"Ten. Been eating real food again." He talked out of the side of his mouth, and his teeth were like stalactites hanging from its roof. The left side of his body had frozen and he had to drag it along like luggage. "I gotta run, so I'll see you guys later."

"He got into some kinda accident when he was strung out on meth and heroin," Aly explained. "Nobody really knows what happened but he's got a lot of brain damage. He pretty much keeps to himself but will disappear for weeks on end hopping the trains to go to hobo conventions."

"Seems like an interesting guy."

"We got a lot of them. He's one of the more talkative ones. Some of the residents really just want to be buzzed in and out and don't want to chit-chat. Others are so lonely they're just starving for connection."

We chatted about clients and policies for a few minutes until a man in tattered jeans with a handlebar mustache stumbled in. Bulges the shape of bottles protruded from his pockets.

"I see the bottles sticking out of your pockets."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rob slurred as he tried to shift his coat to conceal the bottles.

"You know the rules. You checked in your liquor max for the day at 3 pm, hun. By the way, this is Tessa. She's a new staff." Turning to me, she said, "Tessa, there's a little chart right here about the maximum amount each client can check in per day."

Harm reduction liquor allotment chart:

500 ML of hard liquor

24 cans of 12 ounce beer

12 cans of 24 ounce beer

4 bottles of 40 ounce beer

(Please encourage clients to drink beer instead of hard liquor because it has lower alcohol content and fills them up faster).

Two bottles of wine

Aly used a liquid measuring cup and poured the liquor from the bottles he'd attempted to hide in his pockets into a Tupperware container, as casually as if she were baking chocolate chip cookies. The alcohol burned like napalm on my nostrils, my gag reflex choking. She put the container on Rob's shelf in the staff cupboard. Cheap rail brands lined the shelves: Karkov, Silverwolf, and E&J. I was plenty familiar with such brands. A bottom shelf girl.

Aly left to prep for the next day's food bank. A resident crashed through the entryway wearing a baggy blue Roca coat and jeans, a blue bandana wrapped around her head, and blue Air Jordans.

"Who the fuck are you?" She slurred, slamming down a fifth of Karkov vodka on the counter. (My friends in college called it Car Crash; I called it my demise.)

"I'm Tessa. I'm new."

"Hurry up and check this shit in. I gotta get drizz-unk." She gestured with her hands in a spinning motion.

"What's your name?"

"Lola. Like the song. Don't ever call me that or I'll smash your head in."

I measured 500 milliliters of the arsenic and recorded it in the liquor log. Again my nostrils burned. I tasted it in my throat. Lola handed me a Tupperware to dump it in. I wrote her name on the bottle, laughing at the threat by a woman about half my size.

Tonight was busy because a lot of residents had just finished working at day labor stints at the new Wal-Mart on the edge of town. Instant cash. Instant booze.

Just as Lola got in the elevator, a character named Waltzing Will sashayed past her from the community room. Will shimmied over to the staff window and leaned on it for support. He had stars in his eyes. Distant and missive.

Aly had returned and greeted him. "Hey, Will, there's a new staff. I think you'll like her a lot."

“Welcome to the nut house,” he said. “I’m kinda drunk but I’ll talk to you another time. I should really go up to my room.”

It was a typical night at Housing First. But then there was really no such thing as a typical night. But the mornings offered predictable hangovers and delirium tremens. Residents clutched the guardrails of the elevator with unsteady hands and sweaty palms. Beads of sweat decorated their foreheads, highlighting reptilian skin, yellow and jaundiced as bananas. They shuffled to the office to retrieve their precious remaining liquor from the previous day. They arrived with an alchemy of internal detox symptoms: irritability, nausea, anxiety, psychosis, confusion, and depression. We doled out their medicine like pharmacists.

This was harm reduction, grittier than neat academics. Such reduction was an art learned on the streets. It was folklore; it was science. We asked residents to mix Gatorade with their vodka and coat their stomachs with food pantry pastries. We asked them to switch to beer. We asked them if they would go to detox for a few days where they could get some real food and give their bodies a break from drinking and their minds a break from the chaos of the other residents.

We asked because asking was quintessentially what it meant to practice harm reduction instead of telling them how to live, the way other programs do. Meeting people where they were, light or dark. Most often the grey space in between.

“They don’t want to change,” Aly said while sanitizing the phone. “We’re just keeping them alive, for now.”

“Keeping them alive” entailed strange methods such as throwing away client’s hidden bottle stashes in the nearby bakery shipping yard, alleys, and parking lots. I’d hidden enough bottles in my day to know the good places. I put on my mauve bubble duster coat circa 1980, strapped on my checkered bomber hat, and slipped into my fingerless gloves. I lit up a Camel. History repeated itself, so did bottle hidings. Lola hid her Smirnoff under the loading dock dumpster. Rob hid his E&J bottles in the alley underneath neighbor’s yard ornaments. Gary hid his cooking wine on the 10th Street underpass by the strip club. When he was broke, he bought cooking wine with food stamps. Cooking wine was particularly high with toxic chemicals and not meant for consumption in large quantities.

I put confiscated bottles on my supervisor's shelf with a large label, "DUMP," alongside office supplies. She kept them as evidence. People asked if it was hard for me to clutch such poison in my hands and so close to my lip's reach. It was and it wasn't. Some days I dreamed of careening into the comforting arms of oblivion again.

The nostalgia never lasted long. Working at Housing First reminded me of the rusty road liquor paved.

~ ~ ~

After working at Housing First for a few months, I got to know the ebb and flow of the chaos, the silence, and the drunken debauchery. The best part of my job was getting to know the clients. I developed a huge soft spot for Gary and his buddy Catfish. The duo was inseparable. Catfish spun tall tales of catching his namesake bare-handed in the swamps of the south. He taught Gary about his kind of survival: day labor and trampin' around at dusk for pocket change, snipes, and the occasional treasure. Gary taught Catfish about flight—literally and figuratively. Gary was fascinated by flight patterns, ornithology, wings. Prone to soaring bouts of mania, he knew flight viscerally.



Farcical Play by Leonard Kogan

When Gary was not too drunk to be in the community room, he watched PBS documentaries online. One of the few literate residents, Gary taught others how to use the computer, especially social networking and Wikipedia.

Gary introduced Catfish and other residents to Poe's "Nevermore," so from then on both were transfixed with crows. During their benders, both were keen on opening Catfish's window and making crow calls to any passerby in the parking lot, whether they

were housing staff, EMTs, or police. The aftermath was Gary's famous booming cackle, other residents' yelling, slamming of doors, and complaints to the front desk.

Complaining residents became incessant. Gary even received a formal complaint, "Consider this a verbal warning for crowing out of your window and irritating other residents and staff. Further warnings will result in disciplinary notice."

Staff were told to discourage the behavior, but I laughed every time I heard them crow during my break.

"Hey, Tess, come hang out with us on your next hall check. Come say hi!" Gary yelled.

I often knocked on room 304 during my hall rounds and chatted with Catfish and Gary. They usually offered me a cigarette, which I usually declined. They both were interested in literature. As an English major, they were always curious to know what I was reading.

I became reluctantly attached to the residents despite the many ways they tried to push us away with yelling, odors, name-calling, and slamming doors. I guess I knew I could have been one of them had I kept drinking. I felt there was a shortage of compassion and that was one thing I had. I didn't know if I was good at anything except caring for people society threw away.

"Why can't you just get a normal job?" my mom jokingly lamented. My family worried about me working in a triggering environment. But I couldn't quit. Even though seeing people at rock bottom often left me emotionally drained. Even though I've seen way too many sagging body parts and mopped up too many bodily fluids. Even though I felt a cognitive dissonance between giving people alcohol at work and abstaining from alcohol at home. I needed Housing First as much as the residents. Basking in codependence, I needed to be needed.

~ ~ ~

A year and a half later, I took a position within the same company as a case aide where I helped Housing First and other public housing residents with basic living tasks like shopping, cleaning, budgeting, and socializing. I was excited that Gary would be one of my clients, as we had continued to bond over nature documentaries and the cosmos, but I dreaded cleaning his apartment. He was on the verge of eviction. His

efficiency apartment was a palace of grime, where towers of mold, stale food, and cigarette butts leaned on the countertops, floor, and furniture. He was not a slob out of laziness or stupidity, he just did not know how to maintain an apartment after living on the streets for so long.

I came armed with a bucket of dollar store cleaning supplies sufficient to blast through a minefield or the aftermath of a fraternity party. Gary peered at the bucket quizzically. When I asked him to mop after I swept, he poured bleach straight on the floor and put paper towels underneath his feet. He tried to warm up bleach in the microwave and we almost started a chemical fire. He then collapsed into his armchair that was littered with sunflower seed shells, banana peels, and shreds of tobacco. I used my best motivational techniques to try to help him recognize the serious threat of eviction. The other staff helped me turbo clean his apartment before inspection, with a little assistance from Vick's vapor rub under our nostrils to mask the putrid smells. Gary offered profuse thanks. But he continued to marinate himself in cooking wine day after day, lighting matches as he chain-smoked. And we could only put out fires for so long.

Gary was found passed out in a snowbank outside Housing First. Staff carried him inside and offered him medical attention, which he declined. Gary warmed up and began drinking again. After Gary was banned from the nearest grocery store for stealing cooking wine, he blew a BAC that was seven times the legal limit. Yet Gary somehow continued to survive.

One day I went to his apartment to visit. "Holy shit, you're on fire, Gary." I pointed to his moustache, which was ablaze as he lit another hand-rolled cigarette.

"Oh that's the smell of burning hair, isn't it just lovely! I'll be okay, Tessa."

It was hard not to laugh. Gary was in flight and he wanted me to come with him. He paced around the room anxiously, muttering about unintelligible subjects under his breath.

"I'll be back tomorrow to check on you. Remember we're going to go get some groceries and your work boots?" I said.

The next day Gary was swooping back down: quiet, withdrawn. We listened to AM radio and he spoke about some current events as we strolled through the shoe aisle. He picked the first pair that fit. I told him he could spend more, but he declined.

“Thank you. Thank you for the new boots. I don’t know why you keep helping me. But you’re . . . you’re something else.”

The next day Gary was gone, so I went back again on Monday. I followed the mud-caked foot step trail across the white linoleum and up three flights of stairs. Each landing had its own scents and superstitions. I rounded the fourth flight and took a right. I was greeted by streaks of toothpaste and foreign substances on his door. The pungent smell of stale tobacco and rotted fruit wafted into the hall.

I rapped as hard as my skinny knuckles allowed. Silence. I tilted my ear against the door to listen for the steady KFGO blaring in the background. Nothing.

His best friend Catfish’s door swung open across the hall. This was the man who made crow calls with Alan Jackson playing in the background. He wore his fading orange camo pants slung low, challenging the fabric’s elasticity.

“Haven’t seen Gary in three days since I quit drinking. Had to take a break at detox.” He pounded and pounded on Gary’s door with calloused knuckles.

“Open up you crazy bastard!”

We swung his door open.

He was in repose by the kitchen counter, dirt crusted hands neatly clasped across his lap. His lips were cracked and bleeding and slightly parted. His skin looked pallid, with a slightly reptilian sheen.

I expected his tobacco tinged, maniacal laugh to resonate over the concrete walls like a pipe organ. I waited for him to say how he needed to lay off the cooking sherry. His wrist was arctic, his arms completely rigid.

I put my ear next to his heart and there was a colossal silence. I rubbed my knuckles against his sternum like they instruct in CPR to wake somebody.

Please believe me when I say that I wanted the thrum of my own steady heart to resuscitate him. Please believe me when I say that I was hoping for him to take flight.

I called 911. The EMTs said that he was beyond revival. I couldn’t remember the muddled faces of all of the cops on the scene, but I remember when the cop with the bottle tan and leftover crust crumbs in his mustache pronounced Gary’s time of death at 10:04 a.m.

There was no autopsy, obituary, casket, gravestone, or burial site. But after nine years of sleeping on the streets anonymously, I was grateful that Gary died in a home of his own. He had a flowered Rival crock pot, a dusty Emerson radio that crackled and spit on the AM stations, a twin sized bed, and a recliner of questionable color and odor.

He taught others that food stamps could be used to buy cooking sherry. And that was his demise.

Nick Flynn writes of his experience working with the homeless in his memoir, *The Ticking is The Bomb*. One night on homeless outreach, Flynn discovered a man passed out on a bench and tried to bring him to the shelter. The man resisted. Turned volatile. An hour later, they checked again and found the man unresponsive. The man was pronounced dead. Turns out hypothermia, in its extreme form, mimics drunkenness. Flynn wrote, "I didn't put my boot on John Doe's head and push him under the waves, but I also know that I wandered through the next many years feeling as if I had."

It is with that same heaviness that I got through my work days, haunted, and zipped shut. I wonder still if I had arrived three hours earlier, could I have revived him? Did he even want to be revived?

Our mental health team worked with the most "severe persistently mentally ill and chemically dependent" population in the county mental health system. We worked with forgotten people who plummeted through cataclysmic rifts in the system through no fault of their own. Our clients' average lifespan was fifteen years less than that of the overall population, due to chronic mental health struggles, addiction, trauma, homelessness, and other environmental stressors.

These statistics are abysmal black holes that threaten to swallow my residents. To people who have never been in the trenches of this black hole, it may seem that Gary and my residents would all be doomed to a subterranean existence. But what I saw was them trying with all the force of their beings to burrow towards the light. Light just looks different for some people. I saw light each time the residents would help unpack the food bank truck in bone-chilling thirty-degree below zero weather to help others, or when they tenderly nursed each other's collective wounds with hugs or socks

to the stomach when needed, with a hot pot roast, with a hand-rolled cigarette, with beer. Light was some residents' version of taking flight.

I guess I chose to see strength in fragility, the need to give compassion and dignity to people society threw away. Partly because I saw parts of myself in Gary. Some days I too chose darkness, other days I chose that elusive, immeasurable, intangible thing called "hope." The minute I stop having hope is the minute I must find a different line of work. Or become a mortician. Make some potato salad for funerals. Embalm bodies. Powder faces to make them look alive.

Vanished

by Amy Kathleen Ryan

I was on the subway. It was Sunday evening, but the train was crowded. A family got on at Union Square. The woman was tall and heavy, with an open face and thick russet hair. She had round trusting eyes. She had her little boy sit in the empty seat next to me while she sat across the aisle. Her little girl, in a stroller, she arranged in front of her knees, while her portly husband stood over them all, in the center of the aisle where he could see everyone. I made eye contact with the woman and asked if she would like to switch seats with me so that she could sit next to her little boy. She smiled and shook her head no, that wasn't necessary, thank you.

I felt trusted.

I rode a few stops with the family, and I watched the little girl. She had her mother's round eyes and lovely pale tan skin. I stole glances at the little boy. He was so small, and I felt quite large sitting next to him. He was such a little person, complete unto himself.

Again, I made eye contact with the mother and smiled at her. In New York, you do not smile at the children themselves, you smile at the parents to give them the intended compliment. Your children are beautiful. She smiled back at me. Thank you.

I had the impulse to tell her something very personal. I wanted to tell her, "I lost my baby two months ago. It died inside of me, and I'll never know why." Of course, I said nothing.

The train stopped at Graham Avenue, and I got off. I didn't look back at them.

~ ~ ~

It's a tired cliché, but it really does feel like a miracle. Suddenly your body kicks into a state unlike any you've known before. You're so tired, and your breasts get huge, and you're starving all the time. Your hair gets thicker and your skin oilier. Sometimes you want to be left alone, but sometimes you want your mate so much you can't wait to tear his clothes off. You're angry one moment, crying the next, and by supper you're laughing wildly at a *Seinfeld* episode you've seen five times already.

Through it all you're so happy. You surf the internet for baby names, and cribs, and you learn new words like 'layette' and 'areola.' You know you shouldn't, but you tell your father because he made you promise. And he's so happy when you tell him, it becomes like a drug. You tell your mother, and her voice hits a register you hadn't heard since you were a little girl. You need another fix so you tell your best friend, and then your other best friend. Suddenly you're walking up to other pregnant women and saying things like, "Do you ever feel cramps in your lower abdomen?" and you point to the side, just near your hip-bone, and they roll their eyes and they say, "Just wait. It gets worse." And you both pretend to be tired of the nastier symptoms, but the truth is every new ache makes you a little happier because every day you're getting closer to your baby.

~ ~ ~

For our first prenatal visit I was nervous. My doctor, a warm Italian woman with a ready smile squinted at the monitor as she moved the wand over my stomach. "This screen is so..." she muttered.

I didn't watch the screen. I watched her face. If there was something wrong, I knew her face would tell me, and then I wouldn't have to hear it out loud. I looked at my husband, whose brown eyes were trained on the screen. He was trying not to show how nervous he was, but I could feel his hand sweating as he held mine. I tried to smile at him, but then my doctor said, "Ah! There it is! Just what we want to see!"

She pointed at a tiny moving dot on the screen. Just a tiny little fluttering motion. The heart.

Rich and I stared.

I'd imagined this moment so many times. I thought we'd laugh, or cry, or both. But we didn't. We didn't move; we just stared. We were perfectly quiet. We were in awe.

~ ~ ~

I had a lot of rules.

Don't buy any clothes for the baby until after the second prenatal appointment.

If you feel tired, just lie down. It's not a race.

Only one small cup of coffee a day.

Yogurt.

Don't care about the acne. Just ignore it. It doesn't matter.

Don't buy any maternity clothes until you absolutely need them.
Only buy unisex clothes so the second baby can have hand-me-downs.
Work out four times a week. Labor is like a marathon, after all.
Don't talk about baby names with anyone.
Don't worry about things you can't control.
Enjoy this.

~ ~ ~

I imagined this child at different ages, all different ways.
If I imagined a teenager, it was a girl. She had glossy brown hair and long legs. She was rebellious, but I didn't worry too much because she had a good head on her shoulders. She loved me, but she thought I was boring. If she only knew.

If I imagined a toddler, it was always a boy. He and I played in the backyard of the house we would buy. First, I'd roll the ball at him until he felt confident enough, and then we'd toss the ball back and forth. When he fell down, he'd get right back up. He was a solemn child, and thoughtful, but he was happy.

If I imagined a baby, she was a girl again. I imagined how she'd feel in my arms, soft and pliant, so warm. She'd lay her head on my breast as she slept, and I'd curl my hand under her leg to make sure I didn't drop her. Her steady breathing would be my favorite sound in the world.

~ ~ ~

I finally understood the women who would say, "I loved being pregnant." Before, I had always found this puzzling because the process seemed so miserable. Stretch marks and flatulence, morning sickness, mood swings, weight gain, exhaustion—what's to love?

Now I know. What they love is the state of mind. Something happens to your hormones, and suddenly life becomes simpler. After decades of insomnia, you sleep like a rock. You have beautiful dreams about swimming with whales. You don't worry, not even about the baby. You're suddenly the even keel, steady person you've always wanted to be. And you're happy. Life takes on a new sheen, and things make sense. It's a difficult world, and there's violence and terrible problems, but life is beautiful. It really is.

~ ~ ~

We went on a hike in Connecticut in a little state park that we enjoy. It's full of trees and growing things. The air smells green and florid. I was very tired, but I wanted to keep going. I wanted to get to the top. Rich and I would stop every twenty feet or so while I caught my breath.

We had decided we weren't going to talk about the baby. We didn't want to discuss names anymore, or our plans to leave the city. We just wanted to enjoy the day. But I couldn't help thinking that this was baby's first hike, and I wished we'd brought the camera.

After a grueling two hours, we finally made it to the top. We looked out over a large green valley as we sat on top of a mossy rock eating bananas and granola bars. In the sky were three hawks, all of them hovering over the trees, their beaks pointed down as they looked for movement. One of them flew quite close to us, and Rich yelled out. After a while they gave up and soared toward the pastures at the bottom of the valley. I imagined what it would be like to be one of them.

When the sun hung low, we decided to head home. Though I'd been exhausted on the climb up, I was positively bouncing down the hillside. I felt like a fawn jumping from rock to rock. I felt young again, and I remember thinking that I wasn't that old after all. Thirty-six, and we finally had proof that I was still fertile. I'd begun to doubt after a year of trying, but it was all going to be okay. I felt great, and we were only days away from the second prenatal visit.

We might even be able to learn the sex of the child.

~ ~ ~

It was almost clear at first. I thought I was imagining things. It looked slightly colored, that's all. There'd been plenty of fluid, it's quite normal. It was probably nothing.

The next day there was more. Brownish, though. They say you should only worry if it's pink. I read about it in my big pregnancy book. It's called "old blood". The uterus stretches, and old menstrual blood comes loose. It happens in about forty percent of pregnancies.

The next day there was quite a lot. I called my mother. "I'm spotting."

"That can be normal."

"I've been feeling these cramps."

"Oh, I felt cramps all through my pregnancy."

"I'm scared."

"Then call your doctor. But I'm sure it's nothing, honey."

My husband picked me up after work. We drove through Central Park on our way back to Brooklyn. I tried not to panic. He tried, too.

At home, I called the emergency number, and ten minutes later the on-call doctor returned my call. My husband listened as I listed my symptoms. "I'm spotting. The blood is brown. My breasts feel less tender." And then I told her the symptom that had frightened me even more than the blood: "My vulva is no longer swollen."

"Oh, well. Your vulva shouldn't be swollen until the third trimester."

I didn't know what to say to this.

"It doesn't sound serious," she told me. She sounded so certain. "It's probably old blood."

Old blood. It sounded made up, like something you tell a child who has asked why the sky is blue. Because blue is a prettier color than red, you might say. You say that because you know they wouldn't understand the real answer.

"Don't worry," the doctor told me. "You have your second prenatal appointment on Monday. We'll take a look then."

I hung up. I looked at my husband. He rubbed my leg, kissed my cheek. "Try not to worry, honey."

I decided I was being paranoid.

I should try to calm down.

~ ~ ~

The internet.

Chat rooms.

Dozens of miscarriage stories.

Dozens of stories from women with identical symptoms who were now proud parents.

It's old blood.

It can be normal.

The worst thing you can do is worry.

I kept remembering that hike.

The way I'd bounced down the hill.

~ ~ ~

"Are you nervous?" I asked him.

He was driving, and he didn't answer right away. The sunlight seemed particularly bright. I don't know if I just remember it that way, or if it really was unusually bright that day. It hurt my eyes.

"We're late," he said. "I'm never going to find a parking space."

I laughed at him. Trying to act normal.

I went up while he parked the car. I filled out some papers. A woman came in. She was pretty and hugely pregnant. She had a little boy with her. She asked the nurse if she spoke French, and the nurse said no. I said I spoke a little, and I tried to help her fill out the form. She got to the box that asked for the father's name. I didn't know the word for husband. I said, "L'homme?"

She shook her head at me, her lips pursed. She did not look at me.

The nurse thanked me for my help.

I hadn't been any help at all. I'd only embarrassed her.

The next moment, my tall handsome husband breezed in and sat next to me. He kissed me. Then Rich started flipping through a magazine, and I watched the woman's little boy. He had black eyes, and very short black hair. He was beautiful, and perfect. I imagined my son would be similar to him, cheerful and quiet, a little shy.

I smiled at his mother.

She glared at me.

~ ~ ~

First a technician looked. My eyes were fastened to the screen. Rich held my hand. We watched while she moved the sensor over my abdomen, again and again.

On the screen there was an empty black cone. "Is that my uterus?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That's not normal, is it?"

"I'm really not a doctor."

She left.

I remembered the hawks we'd seen in Connecticut. I remembered bouncing down the hillside. Two days after seeing them the blood had started.

After five minutes a doctor came back with the technician. Not my doctor. Someone I didn't know. She looked for it too. She looked and looked. She turned off the machine. She put her hand on my arm. "I have bad news," she said.

"I know," I said. I curled up. She left Rich and I alone.

Old blood.

Now I know what bullshit that is.

~ ~ ~

Two days later, I was teaching my writing class about a beautiful novel called *Kira Kira* by Cynthia Kadohata in which a teenager dies, and I pointed out a brilliant scene that depicts how the family members react to her death. They look for her hairs on the bathroom floor. They search through the garbage for the newspaper that would



Chairs at Rest by John Chavers

help them remember what happened on the day their beloved died. Suddenly my students were talking about how they coped with their deepest, most painful losses. One woman went to work the day after her son killed himself. Another woman couldn't understand how her mother still cooked meals after her sister was killed in a car crash.

I thought about how I'd reacted to my loss.

I realized I didn't remember anything after the appointment.

The whole day had vanished.

Like my baby.

~ ~ ~

If nothing happened in a week, I needed a procedure. Dilation and curettage. It's just like an abortion, but the baby is already dead.

But what if the baby wasn't dead? What if there'd been something wrong with the ultrasound machine? I must call and ask that question before the day of the surgery.

But I didn't call.

I couldn't make myself.

A couple days before the surgery, the doctor's office left a message on my answering machine telling me where to go and what to do. Go to the fourth floor, room M as in Mother. She actually said that. Don't eat or drink after midnight. Bring your insurance card. Someone will have to accompany you home.

I had questions, and I left some of them on the nurse's answering machine:

Will you knock me out?

Will it hurt too much for me to teach my classes?

Will you do an ultrasound to check for the baby's heartbeat, one last time, just to make sure?

I had other questions I did not ask:

Is it wrong that I don't think of my baby as a person?

Am I terrible that I have begun to hate it?

This death inside of me that I'm still carrying around. I can feel it.

I have found a way to stop loving it, but my body can't let go.

Is that normal?

~ ~ ~

I had a terrible headache. The nurse took my blood pressure, and I told her I was dehydrated. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything since before midnight. I was worried being dehydrated would affect me. I was worried I wouldn't wake up from the anesthesia. I was worried I'd never be able to bear a child.

"Will they give me a saline drip during the procedure," I asked the nurse as I rubbed my temple.

For the first time she looked at my face. She stopped. She said, "You really are in pain, aren't you?"

She meant my headache.

~ ~ ~

Dressed in a thin cotton nightgown and some borrowed socks, with a shower cap covering my hair, I was made to sit in a hallway with half a dozen other strangers dressed exactly the same way. It was absurd. Suddenly I had lost my identity, and had joined a temporary society: the sick ones.

There was no chit chat.

I wished I could have some water. My head hurt terribly.

I kept thinking of my husband. He was just on the other side of the door. Just ten feet away from me.

The nurse got me and led me into a large room full of hospital beds and sick people, all in the same gowns, all in plain view. Even after the absurd hallway, I was shocked at the lack of privacy. The nurse began to lead me to a desk in the center of the room, but suddenly my doctor was there, and she said, "Let's bring her in here." I was unbearably glad to see her, a familiar face in this alien, terrifying place. She led me to a small room, and she sat in front of me and said, "Do you have any questions?"

There were two women standing off to the side. They were wearing scrubs. Trainees, I could tell. I didn't care about them. "Are you going to knock me out?"

"Yes."

"How do you know—" I began, choked. "How do you know you aren't killing a living baby?"

One of the trainees gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. I did not look at her, but I felt cared for. To this person, I was not routine.

My doctor's voice softened. "Your baby stopped growing at eight weeks. There was no heartbeat. Believe me, we're sure."

Eight weeks.

My baby had been dead for over a month.

My baby was already dead the day we went hiking, the day I'd seen the hawks. The day I'd bounced down the hillside so happily. Baby's first hike.

I hadn't killed my baby after all.

They left me alone for ten minutes while I cried.

~ ~ ~

My doctor walked with me down a long hallway. "Why is it so cold?" I asked her. "Is that to help the blood clot?"

"It's to quell the spread of infection."

I felt grateful that she was wearing scrubs and a shower cap over her hair.

Her clothes were as humble as mine.

The room was full of people. Six of them. I lay down on the table, and they descended on me. Professional, I remember thinking.

The anesthesiologist tapped my arm. Shot me full of something. I looked at him. He could not have treated me more like a piece of steak.

"Is that the anesthesia?" I asked him.

"Yes." He seemed surprised I was taking an interest in what was happening to me.

The operating table I lay on was shaped like a cross. As they spread my arms and strapped them down, I thought how very much like Christ's position was my own. I wanted to laugh.

My doctor told me, "Go to sleep."

It seemed like a good idea.

And now someone is pulling on something in my mouth. "Open your mouth. Open your mouth. *Open your mouth*," she yells.

Something is pulled from between my teeth.

Two hours have passed, to the rest of the world. To me, it was about five minutes.

"What was in my mouth?" I ask the shape standing over me.

"It was keeping your airway open," she tells me.

I'm in one of the beds in that large room I'd found so shocking before. I'm one of the people lined against the wall. No privacy.

I don't care about that anymore.

As I waken, my middle slowly fills with a deep, horrible ache. Oh. It hurts. I writhe. I cannot stop my legs from squirming, as if the movement could help me avoid the pain. Do I tell the nurse it hurts? For some reason, I want to be brave.

The nurse comes over and says, "Do you want Ibuprofen or a Vicodin?"

"What is that? Is it an opiate?" I ask to prove that she can use medical words when she talks to me. I don't want her baby talk.

"I don't know if it's an opiate," she tells me.

"I doubt I need it," I say, though it hurts. It really hurts.

The nurse looks at my writhing legs and says, "I'll get you the Vicodin."

I have to wait. As the anesthesia wears off, the pain grows deeper and harder, but then finally, oh thank god, the Vicodin kicks in. And it's amazing. The pain is gone.

"My husband," I say to the nurse.

"What is his name?" she asks.

"Rich."

I sleep until he comes, and he holds my hand and says, "See? It wasn't that bad, right?"

He needs to believe I'm okay, but I want to say, "Oh, fuck you." Instead I say, "It wasn't so bad." I want to be brave.

He holds my hand. He knows when to stop talking. He knows I just need him to be there.

The nurse makes him leave after only five minutes.

After a couple hours recovery time, they let me go home. We take a cab. We watch the city go by. The view from the Williamsburg Bridge is so beautiful.

At home I camp out in the recliner and watch *The Third Man*.

The worst is over, I tell myself.

It's finally out of me.

~ ~ ~

Slowly the vanished day has come back to me. The day we found out.

Calling my dad. That was the hardest. He'd wailed in agony, yelled to my brother in the next room, "Mike, the baby didn't make it."

My mother said things about God and heaven.

I think I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

But mostly Rich and I just lay in bed. Rich held my head to his chest and he kept saying, "Don't worry. We'll try again. Don't worry. It will be okay."

I was numb.

I wasn't in my body.

That's why I hardly remember it.

~ ~ ~

Months later, I asked Rich: "Do you ever think about it?"

"The miscarriage? Not as much anymore," he says. But he says it sadly.

We are folding laundry and putting it away. We are quiet for a while, but soon I realize that wasn't really the question.

"Do you ever think about the baby?"

"Well, I had that dream, remember? About our son?"

"I remember."

He'd dreamed that he and I were walking down the sidewalk, holding the hands of a toddler who was stumbling along between us.

He shrugged. "I used to be sad thinking about it, but then I realized that dream wasn't about the baby we lost. It was about the baby we're going to have."

~ ~ ~

The leaves all fell off the trees. Then winter, and then spring. It was a warm spring this year, and the trees were full again so soon.

My due date came and went.

This morning I was walking to work, and I smelled autumn—that wet leaf smell right after a rain. And I thought how beautiful it is. It really is.

I can think about the baby again. The baby I'd held in my dreams. The pliant, beautiful little creature that slept against me, she trusted me so. I remember how soft

she felt in my arms. I remember how she smelled of shampoo and lotion and baby powder.

I remember sitting next to her crib, on the floor, watching her sleep.

I remember my favorite sound in the world: the sound of her breathing.

I remember all the things I'd planned to tell her, about the world. About life. I'm sorry, I tell her now. I couldn't hold you. I had to let you go.

Something in the way I can notice the birds singing helps me know: I am forgiven.

Living in the Nut House

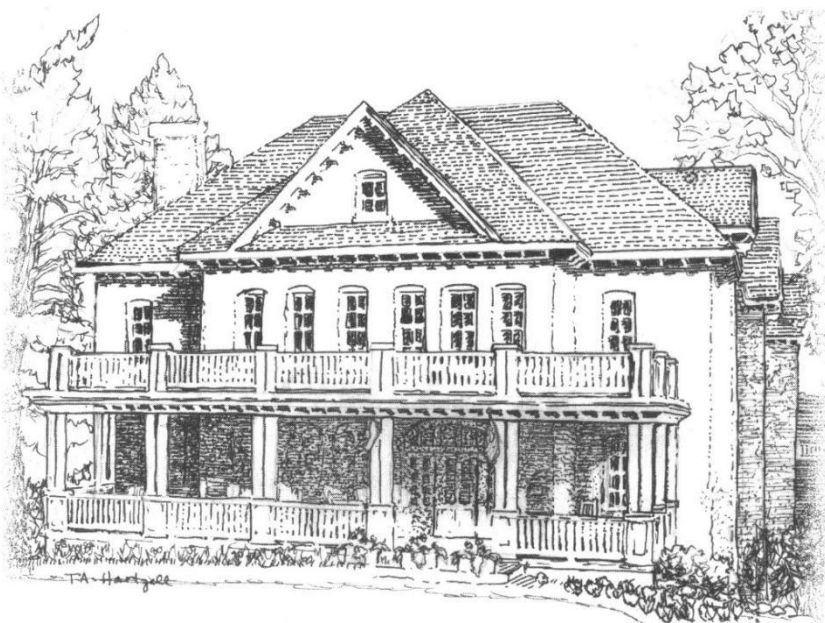
by Richard Ault

For five weeks last winter, I walked a half mile each morning from the "nut house" to my cancer treatments.

Munson Manor sits at the border of the campus of the Munson Medical Center and the old Michigan State Mental Hospital campus in Traverse City. When the mental hospital officially closed down in 1989, after years of slow decline, it was designated an historic site and preservation efforts resulted in what is currently known as The Village at Grand Traverse Commons. Munson Manor, now a gracious "guest house" for hospital outpatients and their families, was originally just plain "Building 27", built in 1903 for female mental patients.

Although we live only about an hour away, what with the vagaries of a Michigan winter and the potential for hazardous driving, my wife Pennie and I decided we would rather remain near the hospital for the five weeks of my chemo/radiation treatments and chose to stay at the Manor House.

Traverse City is the heart of one of the most beautiful regions on the planet, situated in northwest lower Michigan at the base of Grand Traverse Bay off Lake Michigan and surrounded by beautiful inland lakes and idyllic towns and villages—a tourist mecca and increasingly a magnet for retirees. Among these retirees, my wife Pennie and I live nearby on pristine Torch Lake. However, as a kid growing up in the 1940s about three hours south in Saginaw, I and most of my friends knew Traverse City simply as the "nut house." As the location of one of the three state "mental asylums," it was where they sent the crazy people. "You should be in Traverse," was an insult we used when one of us said or did something we thought a little wacky.



But that was just the beginning of my long experience with this place.

As an undergraduate at Central Michigan University in the late fifties, I was a double major in English and Psychology, taking a class in Abnormal Psych as a junior and Clinical

Psych as a senior. Each year the combined classes took the two-hour bus trip from our Mt. Pleasant campus to the mental hospital in Traverse. We first met in a large conference room and were introduced to a few of the "milder" neurotic patients, who were interviewed by hospital staff and then took questions from our group—sometimes fascinating but fairly tame stuff for the most part. But then came the real horrors of the place. We toured some of the most disturbed wards and witnessed firsthand every form of psychoses imaginable—a scene reminiscent of the infamous Bedlam asylum in London. My gut churned. My mind swam. I concluded that I would rather be dead than suffer serious mental disease.

And then came my dad.

Several years after those field trips, my mother and father, both in their late sixties, were stricken with serious cases of the flu and had to be hospitalized in Saginaw. My mother emerged without further issues. But not my dad. Mentally he was completely fried and put in the Saginaw County Home. Soon I received a call in Kalamazoo, where I was living at the time, from my brother Chuck to come to the Saginaw facility for a "family meeting." We never had "family meetings", so I knew it was serious.

It was the first I had seen Dad since before his bout with the flu and it was awful. He was completely incontinent, wearing diapers, and hallucinating. We, his five sons,

were told he was violent and uncontrollable and would not be allowed to stay there. He had never received a formal diagnosis to explain his condition. The five of us discussed his options. My four older brothers carried most of the conversation, not a surprise as I look back now given that I was ten years younger than my next closest brother. Finally, we voted reluctantly but unanimously that the State Mental Hospital in Traverse City was our only option. Though my brain was flooded with the haunting scenes I had witnessed there as an undergraduate, I fully respected and agreed with my brothers' conclusions.

I only got up from Kalamazoo to visit Dad twice. The first time I rode from Saginaw to Traverse with my oldest brother Jack. We sat with Dad briefly in his ward, a scene much like I had seen in my previous student field trips—scary but perhaps not quite so extreme—or maybe I was just witnessing the place through less innocent eyes. Jack then arranged for us to take Dad out for a short car ride. Along the way, we stopped for ice cream cones and then parked to enjoy them near a beach with a nice view of East Grand Traverse Bay. Dad was in the passenger seat while I was in the back. Jack—who was so much better at this sort of thing than I was—tried to engage Dad in conversation about old times, old relatives, and other normally familiar themes. Dad seldom said anything, and when he did, his comments were not very responsive. Then suddenly he opened the car door and tried to take off. We got him back in the car but the ride was over. Back to the mental hospital.

The second and last time I saw my father, Pennie (my wife to be) and I drove up from Kalamazoo for the weekend. On Saturday, I met my brother Jim and his wife Arlene at the hospital and the three of us sat with Dad on an enclosed porch adjacent to his ward. I remember little of what we talked about except that several times he complained that someone had been hurting him physically, maybe an orderly. Given his state of mind, we did not know whether to believe him or not. How could we know—he was crazy after all. At one point, out of the blue, he got up from his chair and stood over me. He stared down with a menacing glare as though ready to punch me. Did he take me for his tormentor? Although I had been on the receiving end of his anger more than once as I grew up and remained afraid of him at that moment, I didn't flinch. I stared

back directly into his hate-filled eyes. Thankfully, he backed off and returned to his chair. We took no action on his complaints about physical abuse.

The weekend was salvaged when on Sunday I took Pennie for a drive around Torch Lake. She fell in love with the shades of turquoise on Torch that day, and though it would take years to make it happen, we had found our future home. Soon after our Traverse visit Pennie and I were married and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where about a year later we received the call that my dad had died.

~ ~ ~

My niece, Connie Ault Kinnaman, has become a passionate family historian, our own genealogist. She made the unfortunate discovery that it was not just my father who died from an extreme case of dementia, but so too did my great grandfather, my grandfather, and a grand uncle, all at the Traverse City State Mental Hospital. In those days, the disease was most often known as senility or hardening of the arteries. We can't know for sure if it was Alzheimer's. As knowledge about the disease has advanced in more recent history, however, we do now know that three of my four brothers were diagnosed with Alzheimer's, as well as three cousins from my dad's side of the family.

While only a small percentage of Alzheimer's cases are thought to be genetic, with my family history I am not comforted by those odds. Until my very recent journey with cancer, the Alzheimer's specter loomed as my only serious health concern as I have aged. I was known to boast that I was the youngest seventy-nine-year old on the planet—at least that I felt that way, leading an active life with no frequent aging issues such as heart disease, diabetes, or high blood pressure.

Despite my claims to good health and fitness, though, I have had a long, rather unfriendly, relationship with my gut, routinely suffering heartburn before new medications virtually eliminated that problem. However, I continued to have frequent night time bouts of acid reflux. That led me some years ago to get an endoscopy, which revealed that I had a condition known as "Barrett's esophagus," in which the lining of the esophagus changes to tissue which is more like the lining of the intestine. About ten percent of us with chronic GERD symptoms develop Barrett's, and, while it does increase the chances of developing esophageal cancer, my doctors assured me that

less than one percent of people with Barrett's esophagus develop esophageal adenocarcinoma.

Nevertheless, I continued to get regular routine endoscopies every three years with no signs of cancer. Until, that is, in November 2015, when my doctor found a tumor near the juncture of my esophagus and my stomach—esophageal adenocarcinoma. So much for those odds. As my doctor attempted to inform me what I now faced by way of a treatment plan, I could scarcely hear, let alone understand, what he was telling me. My brain and my stomach were swirling. The good news was that the cancer was diagnosed early, before I had experienced any of the usual symptoms such as difficulty in swallowing or unintended rapid weight loss.

The first thing I did when I got home was call Max. Dr. Max Wicha was the founding Director of the University of Michigan Cancer Center and is now Director Emeritus. He and his wife Sheila were once our summer neighbors on Torch Lake, owning the cottage next to ours. Max, a world-renowned authority on breast cancer, is also one of the nicest guys I know, and I have long said that, heaven forbid, if I or anyone close to me would ever develop cancer, Max would be the first person I would call. And I did. He told me that their center had one of the best esophageal cancer groups in the country, headed by Dr. Susan Urba. The next day, I received a call from Dr. Urba, a most informative but gently reassuring call. She arranged for me to meet the next week with her and a surgeon, Dr. Rishindra Reddy, to discuss my options.

On December 29, 2015, after a few weeks of tests and further consultations, I had all but the top inch or two of my esophagus removed by Dr. Reddy at the University of Michigan. The procedure also involved stretching and pulling my stomach up to my neck to be reattached to the little bit of remaining esophagus, permanently and radically changing the way I must eat. The surgery was a success and we "celebrated" by spending New Year's recovering in the hospital. As is standard practice, seven days later I was given a barium swallow test to determine if there were any leaks in the new attachments. I passed with flying colors. No leaks. Normally that would mean hospital discharge and going home the next day; however, the surgical team that appeared at my bedside early each morning noticed that the dressing on my neck incision showed more dampness than they were happy with, a likely indication of some minor leakage.

They tried to find a leak by observing me take a drink of grape juice or water each of the next three mornings. No leak. Then, on my soft food diet, one morning I had some yogurt and soft slices of mandarin oranges. When I followed that by drinking some water, my incision let loose and I began to spray through and around my cervical dressing. When I asked Dr. Reddy how it was that I developed a leak despite passing the barium swallow test, he told me it happened about five percent of the time. Those were the odds.

The good news was at least they had determined what the situation was. The bad news was that I had to go home with a feeding tube, able to take nothing in by mouth. Pennie was quickly trained on how to change the dressing twice per day and to provide my medications and nutrition through the tube. We went home the next day with an IV pole and pumps and boxes full of my "formula." In a few weeks, my untrained but loving nurse Pennie got me through. The incision leak healed, and we were ready to move on to the next stage: chemo/radiation at the new Cowell Family Cancer Center at Munson hospital in Traverse City. Just prior to starting chemo I was given a new CAT scan, which showed that I had no signs of cancer anywhere—no lymph nodes, and no other organs. We celebrated by going out for pancakes.

Soon I began five weeks of treatments—chemo each Monday and radiation Monday through Friday of each week. I feared the worst based on stories I had heard about the possible side effects of those treatments. Why, I asked my medical advisors, if my tests showed no cancer, should I go through such an onerous ordeal? Their answer? To increase the odds—the odds of being and remaining cancer free based on probabilities from statistical studies.

So, for five weeks, five days a week, through March and early April 2016, I walked the half mile from Munson Manor to the new Cancer Center across the street from the Munson Hospital: radiation at 8:30 Monday through Friday and a chemo infusion on Mondays.

Thus, I found myself back in the nut house. That is, each of five Sunday evenings we voluntarily checked-in to the old "Building 27", now rechristened Munson Manor, until the following Friday. We slept there and ate our daily breakfasts and other meals there. Beth and Char, the day and night managers respectively, and the rest of the staff

could not have been more gracious, professional, and accommodating. The elegant furnishings and quiet halls created a restful atmosphere perfect for patients' families. Because we all fixed our meals in the same kitchen and ate in the same dining room, and because the only televisions were in the public lounge on each floor, we met and got to know other guests.

Richard, with colon cancer, and Bill, with rectal cancer, were there, like me, for chemo and radiation treatments. Women with husbands and men with wives who were in for back or colon surgery. Two new mom's whose premature babies were still in the hospital, breast pumps sitting in the hallway outside their rooms so that they could continue to nourish their little ones. Another mom whose full-term baby was still in the hospital because he was born with pneumonia. Then there was the family of a teenage girl, a high school senior, who was brain injured when, worn out from her day in school and her full-time job, she fell asleep at the wheel of her car and crashed into a tree. Part of her frontal lobe had been removed to relieve pressure and she was put into an induced coma. After a few days, she was taken out of the coma briefly each day and her mother told us how exciting it was the day her daughter first squeezed her hand. The family could not afford the thirty dollars per night to stay long term at Munson Manor, and we and other guests quietly helped them financially as much as we could. The girl's young sister proudly told us how she enlisted several churches in their small town in offering prayers for her big sister.

Each morning I walked from the Manor to the beautiful new cancer center, and, because it was still winter in March and early April, most days I took the short cut through the hospital. As I walked the long main hall, I always mindfully noted the painting at its end—a portrait of James Decker Munson, the first superintendent of the "Northern Michigan Asylum" from 1885 to 1924. He also donated, in 1915, a boarding house to be used as a community hospital, now grown into the regional Munson Medical Center. Every day but Monday, I showed up a few minutes before my 8:30 a.m. radiation appointment. I was in and out in five minutes or so, free for the rest of the day. On Mondays, I hung around for the next few hours for my weekly chemo infusion with Tina, my pretty, funny, and caring infusion nurse. I was usually finished by about noon when Pennie and I went out for lunch. No signs of nausea. No other side effects. Not so

lucky to get cancer in the first place, I was, despite my worst fears, very lucky with my treatments.

Each afternoon I took a mile or two walk around the grounds of what once was the asylum, now The Village at Grand Traverse Commons.

My first time back at that place after my father's death was several years ago when Pennie and I tried out Trattoria Stella, then a relatively new upscale Italian restaurant in the old Building 50, which was the central building of the old mental hospital and, which is still called Building 50 in its current incarnation. The restaurant is in a lower level, almost like a rathskeller, in what was once the place where they



did lobotomies. As we walked from the parking lot to the restaurant, I looked up at the tall windows of the old building, the one I visited in my undergrad psych class days and the one in which I'm quite sure my father died. My mind was haunted by the horrors I had seen there and what had happened there. My stomach churned all over again. I told Pennie I wasn't sure I could eat at all. But I did. And it was good. Since then, Stella has become one of our go-to spots for special occasion dinners such as birthdays and anniversaries.

In 2008, I took Pennie to Building 50 for her foot doctor appointment and, as I sat in the waiting room, I tried to stream Tiger Woods in the Monday play-off for the US Open that he won playing on one leg. Building 50 these days also houses the Mercato shops, art galleries, and other offices. We have been to Traverse City Film Festival parties there, on the lawn, in the building, and under large party tents. There is also a yoga studio, a bakery, and other eateries. Nearby buildings have been renovated and

made into upscale apartments and assisted living facilities. New buildings have sprung up.

Obviously, my feelings about the place have eased. As I went through those five weeks of treatments and daily walks around those grounds, I consciously tried to look at those buildings through a new lens. Epictetus may have said it first—"It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters," but today that bit of wisdom is even shared by football coaches and golf pros. I decided I would try to put a new, less-haunted frame on my vision: this was no longer Bedlam but a setting for growth, for renewal, for living. Sad to say, I was only partially successful in my reframing.

For me, when I looked up at the Disney-like spires, I still often saw the past. Looking up at those tall windows in which the bars have been replaced by mullions, I still often saw the bars. Despite all the best efforts at transformation I frankly still found it a bit creepy. I will grant renewal—important enough in itself—but not transformation.

~ ~ ~

The same might be said of me, of course. My life has been changed by cancer, by the drastic reconfiguration of my digestive tract resulting in a radical change in my eating habits that will last the rest of my life. All observable evidence shows that I am now cancer free. For five weeks, we treated a disease we no longer knew I even had. I had now done everything that I could do, my doctors did everything they can do, and together we did everything that medical science says we should have done to ensure that I am and will remain cancer free for life. But there are no guarantees—despite the odds.

So, things are different for me. I must adjust, they say, to "a new normal." But am I, myself, different? I am grateful, of course, that I no longer have cancer, grateful that I am still alive. I am grateful for the doctors and nurses and technicians who provided such superb professional care. On the other hand, I was already mindfully grateful for my life before any of this happened—for my family and friends, for a creative and meaningful work life, for all the fun and satisfaction I have experienced along the way. It was not new for me that I am in love with life—not just my life but with life itself—with the very idea of life. I want stay around to continue to savor life in all of its

manifestations as long as I can. I am grateful that my recent journey will enable me to do that for a while longer.

But am I transformed? Not really, I think. Will I, as I know I should, live each day to its fullest? Probably not. Will I spend more time than a sane man should practicing my golf game against all odds of improvement? Probably. Will I waste too much time on Facebook and watching television? Likely. As I try to savor the present moment, I drag all of my past along with me, for better and for worse. The same might be said of the The Village at Grand Traverse Commons.

Perhaps transformation is just the wrong metaphor. A better notion might be "transition" or "a work in progress." We, these old grounds and my old self, are not what we were and we are not what we are going to be. We don't even know what that is. Buddha taught that all is impermanence.

So, I find myself with a strange, almost ineffable connection with this old place. I also find it a hopeful one. We are both changing for the better, I hope. We are both, in a way, healing. Nearing the end of my chemo treatments, while sitting in my infusion chair, I read an old *Time* magazine cover story, "The Alzheimer's Pill: A Radical New Drug Could Change Old Age." Maybe Alzheimer's itself will not be with us permanently. This much I know: unlike some of those of my lineage, I was not "sent to Traverse" to die. I went there so that I could go on living

I lost track of Richard, the colon cancer patient I came to know at Munson Manor, but I have spoken by phone a few times with Bill: his rectal cancer is gone but he must wear both colostomy and urinary bags for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, he expressed happiness that he is cancer free. All the babies who were hospitalized came through healthy and well. The high school senior with the brain damage graduated with her class in June.

One May morning about a month after all my treatments were over and I was feeling fully recovered from my winter's troubled journey, I took my place in "easy seat" on my yoga mat to begin my regular class. Without a thought, without a moment's warning, I began to tear up. It snuck up on me from just below the surface. Pure emotion. Pure sensation. No words attached in that instant, but as the moment passed I realized it was some combination of joy and relief.

I was still alive, and what a wondrous thing that is.

Furry Felonies

by Atticus Benight

During my first year in AA baseball, the team's marketing director, Rob, beckoned me into his office just after the start of a game. His shelves were lined with limited edition memorabilia—bobble heads, signed balls, and souvenir bats—all products of his tenure with the organization. On the opposite wall, life-sized posters hung depicting some of the team's most promising prospects from the past several years—Kenny Baugh and Max St. Pierre.

I occupied a corner stool, the only seat capable of accommodating my tail. As he closed the door, he lowered himself into the vinyl office chair across his desk. He scooted close to the desk and leaned in. As he did so, I noticed an odd resemblance to a young Mickey Rooney—round face topped with red hair, and a lip full of tobacco.

"I need a straight answer," he began with a minty tone of mock sinistry. "What are you willing to do for this club? Any limitations, tell me know."

"Depends on what you had in mind," I answered with a hint of hesitation.

"Well," Rob continued. "Would you be willing to 'apprehend' a few of our competitors—put them out of commission ahead of this next road trip? You know—get the bad juju going for their team?"

"You're suggesting?"

"Kidnapping," Rob said. "More precisely—kidnapping Steamer and Diesel Dawg."

Comprehension dawning at last, I nodded. After considerable thought, I did what any self-respecting employee might do when their boss asked them to commit a felony—I asked for an advance.

"I'll need rope, perhaps some duct tape, a couple of burlap bags—I mean, you gotta have head bags," I said ticking off my grocery list of abduction supplies, as if I had done this before. "Oh, and gas. I'll need gas."

"Gas?" Rob raised an eyebrow.

"For the drive," I said, "and maybe fire. Mostly for the drive though."

~ ~ ~

A few days later, I found myself outside of the Blair County Ballpark in Altoona, PA, lugging an oversized blue and purple bag through the crowd gathering at the front gates and into the stadium. Along the way, plastered all over the ticket windows, front gates, and support columns were wanted posters from the Altoona Police Department. According to the brief narrative, a six-foot tall wolf had accosted two of the most “beloved” mascots in minor league baseball over the prior weekend, and that Steamer and Diesel Dawg had not been seen around the ballpark since. One local television studio claimed to have the “treacherous crime” on video, and a few television screens near the concessions were looping the grainy footage of two over-sized, awkward—perhaps drunken—Muppet-like creatures, bumbling around the empty parking lot. Then, from out of nowhere, a white van screams into view and a fuzzy, gray, four-fingered paw hoists them inside and speeds away. The prime suspect of it all—the diabolical, sinister, no-good mascot—C. Wolf.

Little did I know that at a news conference earlier that day a young boy named Conner was recruited to get to the bottom of this “crime.” He was declared a special deputy of the Altoona Police Department and presented his badge, but the Chief of Police was at a loss. No resources that they possessed would be a match for an anthropomorphic six-foot-tall, baseball-playing wolf. But then, as though called into action by hopeless circumstance, the blue and yellow Power Rangers arrived to provide backup. Conner donned the red ranger’s jumpsuit and mask, and was charged by the Chief of Police to lead a special investigation to pursue and capture the diabolical fugitive known only as C. Wolf.

I was later briefed on these facts by a mole that we had positioned within the front office of the Altoona Curve—named Zee. She was a slender, sexy woman, with long twisted blonde hair and smelled perpetually of peppermint—the top mint aroma in my opinion.

“In something like this,” Zee began with a Cheshire grin that exposed every one of her white teeth, “there are no rules. Your goal is to evade—until the 7th inning. Then, you’re needed here.”

She opened a map and indicated a small area behind the outfield wall.

“That’s where we’ll stash Steamer and Diesel Dawg. There’s a trap door there that you can come through—we usually send a dancer out onto the field when there’s a homerun. Anyway, you’ll go through there, and the Power Rangers will be on your heels.”

I accepted my instructions and thanked Zee. In return, she pulled me in tight for what I found to be an invigorating embrace.

“You’re really great for doing this,” Zee said.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” I told her.

“No, no,” Zee insisted, unwilling to relinquish her hug—not that I was complaining. “You’re a real hero.”

“Well, thanks,” I answered as she released her grip on me.

I gathered my gear and breezed past her, through a sea of cubicles, and into a meeting room where I slipped more easily into character. When I emerged from the room, Zee brushed up against me and offered two half pats, half gropes on either side of my tail, punctuated by a subtle squeeze.

“You know,” Zee said, “I don’t often get the chance to meet another wolf.”

“Another?”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought Rob told you. I’m a wolf too—deep—deep down.” After several moments, Zee revealed that she was a furry. She was self-described wolf and considered that her primary criteria for selecting a potential mate. If you were not a wolf, she would not be interested. Half curious, half frightened, I stepped from the office, slid on the giant wolf head, and readied myself for what I imagined would be the most hostile crowd I would ever face.

When I first emerged onto the concourse, the jeers that I had expected did not materialize. In fact, children were lining up waiting their turn for a high five or a hug. One little girl, three-years old with blonde curls and wearing a t-shirt with Steamer on it, even beckoned me to bend down, and she kissed the eye patch over C. Wolf’s left eye—the one that legend says was knocked out by a rogue foul ball hit by Jose Guillen back in 1995—before the decision was made to install a higher and wider net as a backstop behind home plate.

“Boo boo all better?” she asked in a voice that could melt any heart. I nodded.

Before the game, I ran about the stadium—occupying random seats, offering a handspring or two in the infield, and harassing anyone who crossed my path in an Altoona Curve baseball cap or jersey. After all, with Steamer and Diesel Dawg incapacitated, this was my house, regardless of what any of the wanted posters might imply. Even my team was wearing their home whites, while the Curve sported dingy gray uniforms. Oddly enough, the sentiment that this was my house seemed to be echoed by the fans themselves. The more I taunted, jeered, and harassed them, the more they cheered.

Finally, when the game was about to begin, I sought refuge in the bouncy houses along the first base line as Conner and the two Mighty Morphin Power Rangers took to the third base dugout. As someone who grew up with the first generation Power Rangers, something immediately seemed off. There was a long ponytail flowing from beneath the blue ranger's helmet, and the spandex costume was stretched to the max, barely accommodating the form of what was clearly a rather hippy, full-breasted, plus-sized woman. The uniform of the yellow ranger was similarly taxed to its limits, but with a very different, husky beer-bellied form. The stitches, straps, and buttons of bib-overalls were clearly visible through the thin yellow fabric—even at this distance. Perhaps Billy and Trini (the original blue and yellow rangers) had each undergone hormone therapy, or maybe they had mixed up their power coins before teleporting to the Blair County Ballpark. In either case, I could not help but think that post Power Ranger fame must have been really unkind.

After the crowd was informed of the kidnapping of Steamer and Diesel Dawg, Conner and the other rangers began their pursuit. I remembered Zee's instructions—to evade until the 7th inning, so I did just that. I bounced with a few kids in the bouncy house with a giant likeness of Steamer on top of it. That is until I saw the blue and yellow rangers enter the kid zone. Immediately I hopped out, waggled my fingers at the tip of my long, wolfy snout, and sprinted toward the fence just as a final out was made and the outfielders began trotting into their dugout. I leapt the fence, and ran to my team's dugout where the "power punks" could not follow. It was as if I was Goldar, and the dugout was Rita Repulsa's moon base. Once there, the rangers would not—or perhaps could not—pursue.

I hunkered down there for a bit, until I noticed one of the players exit the stadium through a door in the dugout. At Jerry Uht Park, my home stadium, there were no doors. The clubhouse was located in the Erie Civic Center, and getting there involved a long walk across the outfield. But here, a door in the back of the dugout led to a network of concrete hallways. It was getting hot, and I needed a break, so I followed this player through the door, removed my head, and ambled through the underbelly of the stadium.

Eventually I stumbled upon the laundry and sat in there for a few moments chatting up one of the grounds crew while guzzling a Gatorade. Just then, a yellow body flashed in front of an open door and I saw my nemesis sneaking down the hallway, glancing side-to-side. Luckily, he hadn't looked up and didn't see me, headless, straight ahead. I tossed the giant head back onto my shoulders and ran in toward the open door and slipped behind it, pinning myself in the corner against the wall.

Conner entered the laundry, two drenched, foul-smelling power rangers slinking along behind him. The member of grounds crew that I had been speaking with started to grin. Just as they cleared the doorway, I slipped out and backed into the hallway. I made an exaggerated tiptoeing motion, as if I were a cartoon rabbit evading the hunter by walking in his own footprints. At that point, the grounds crewman lost all composure and I rounded the corner to a booming laugh.

The ballgame progressed quickly and before I knew it, I was called behind the outfield wall. By the time I arrived, members of the front office staff were already wrapping clothesline around Steamer and Diesel Dawg and positioning them next to a large box that contained the transformer that powered the score board. With a boost from Zee, I scurried up on top and struck a menacing pose.

When Conner came into view, he made a bee line straight for my prisoners and began unwrapping the rope from around their chests. Just then the other Rangers noticed me.

"Look out," one of them shouted

Conner assumed a karate-like pose just as cheers erupted inside the stadium from the final out. I looked down at Zee, who was poised at a small hatch in the outfield wall. That was my cue to take the battle onto the field so that the fans could witness the conclusion. I jumped down on the far side of the transformer and waited for Conner to

catch up to me. He grabbed me by the arm and flung me through the hatch and I tumbled onto the outfield just as a convoy of police cars roared onto the warning track through a gate in right field—lights flashing, sirens wailing.

From out of nowhere, Conner emerged with a giant dog catcher's net and he flung it over my head, knocking me to the ground. As I fell, I felt my foot connect with something and when I looked down, to my horror, it was Conner. I had just kicked the Make-A-Wish kid. For a long moment my heart plummeted and I wondered if we had taken this thing too far, but when he finally rolled back to his feet, he struck another pose for the audience, two police officers lifted me up and tossed me into the back of an SUV. The door slammed behind me.

I removed my head and stared out of the tinted glass as this convoy began moving once more. Conner was in one of the patrol units, waving at the crowd, and Steamer and Diesel Dawg bobbed on the back of a golf cart, finally free after a weekend of "torment." The convoy rolled out of the stadium and onto a narrow service road that connected with the parking lot. One of the police officers opened the rear hatch and I replaced my head for the last time that day.

When I rolled out, Conner was waiting and I knelt beside him. He stared at me with serious look on his face.

"I love you C. Wolf," he said. "But you're a bad doggy."

The police officer grabbed one of my arms and locked a pair of handcuffs around my wrist. With my free arm, I covered C. Wolf's eye and cowered in the most pitiful position I could. Conner motioned toward Steamer and Diesel Dawg, still poised, smiling unblinkingly on their golf cart.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said with a pirate-like growl.

Conner looked up at the policeman and said "It's ok, he's sorry. You can let him go."

"Are you sure," the officer said. "We can run him downtown."

"No, he learned his lesson."

And with that, the police officer removed my cuff and I knelt down to offer Conner a long hug of appreciation.

This was Conner's wish. He suffered from a seizure disorder—though I can't recall specifically what it was—and the Make-A-Wish Foundation offered him the chance to live out his dream of fighting crime with the Power Rangers. As I left the ballpark that day, Conner, Steamer, Diesel Dawg, and a few of the police officers were riding up the white hill of the wooden roller coaster that over looked Blair County Ballpark. I watched them teeter over the crest and rattle their way along the rickety track. And that was the last I ever saw of him. Though I think of him often, I never learned what happened to him. I'd like to picture him as a teenager now, sitting atop the Appalachian foothills in central Pennsylvania, wondering occasionally who I was—the man who played a wolf one afternoon so he could have a childhood dream come true. Perhaps he'll read this account of that day and think to himself—"Hey, I think that's me," and maybe, just maybe, he'll kick his five-year old self for wasting his wish on me.

The Witch

by Miriam Mandel Levi

The only other person I knew who feared darkness as I did, was my grandfather. He grew up in a village in Lithuania where ghosts, draped in prayer shawls, prayed upside down in the synagogue and invited unsuspecting boys to join their *minyán*, while others in the study hall rattled the windows on winter nights.

For me, nights brought the witch. She would tap on my window pane with her long, curled nail, her tattered black cape flapping in the moonlight. Where her eyes should have been were black-holed sockets. Her teeth, she had three, were pointed and razor sharp. I trembled under my ruffled yellow bedspread. As her silhouette loomed larger and larger, I would leap from my bed and sprint headlong through the darkness to my parents' room. There I crawled between their sleeping forms on the wire-veined electric blanket, safe. Too soon though, my father would awake. "Don't be ridiculous," he would say, "There's no such thing as witches," and he would carry me back to my room.

My grandfather braved the darkness every night on his way home from *cheder*. "We started out in a pack, lit up with lanterns," he told me, in Yiddish- accented English. The autumn sun lit the sky amber, and my grandfather and I walked side by side, crunching leaves with our boots. "One by one, though, my friends dropped off to their houses, until I was left alone." Then he whispered, "I ran past the cemetery as fast as my legs would carry me, so the demons wouldn't get me." He pulled me to his thick wool coat, as if to reassure me, or perhaps himself.

"Were there witches?" I asked.

"No witches," he replied, "Poles."

After World War One, Ulkenik fell under Polish control. The Poles rode through the village on horses, shooting in the air and robbing its inhabitants. They caught young Jewish boys and put them to work, cutting and hauling wood in the bush, from which they never returned. "They killed Jews on the streets ... for nothing," my grandfather said, his lips curling in revulsion. I tugged his gloved hand with my mitt and he turned to me.

“But those bad people aren’t in Ottawa, right?”

“Right,” he said, and the warm breath of his words met the warm breath of mine in a white cloud.

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I spent many weekends playing with cousins in my grandparents’ basement amidst several frightening relics. There were musty old books, a broken gramophone, and an out-of-tune upright piano with several broken keys. But the scariest item was a painting. In the painting was a large pile of rubble, as if moments earlier the buildings which stood in that place had collapsed. In the midst of the wreckage stood a woman in a tattered dress, holding a cinder block over her head. Years later, I discovered that the painting was a depiction of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. As a child, though, all I saw was a woman’s desperation, for she had lost all she had. She told me, in a parched, cracked voice, that any life could turn to rubble like hers, and I thought of how much I stood to lose. She was the only reminder in my everyday life of the six million about whom I learned at Hillel Academy.

Every spring on Holocaust Remembrance Day the pupils of Hillel Academy gathered in the basement of the school and sat cross-legged on the cold cement floor. A white canvas screen, perched on spindly tripod legs, stood in the far corner. Silent black and white movies, with jumpy, snowy footage, flashed across the screen, recalling a world of evil and devastation that somehow spared our families and us. Nazis in impeccable uniforms taunted Jews; Jewish families huddled together with battered suitcases; children with big yellow stars and frightened faces stared out at us. We sat, hands in our laps, in uncomprehending silence. Then we filed back to our classrooms for the spelling bee and hot spaghetti lunch. None of my teachers explained what hardships the people in the movie had faced. No one reassured me that whatever happened to them would not happen to me one day.

I tried to make sense of it. They had old, gray clothes. I had a fluffy white muff to keep my hands warm in winter. They were hungry. I had pancakes with maple syrup. They had nothing. I had tickets to the Ice Capades. Nobody I knew got sick or died or was murdered. Nobody I knew was angry or sad. I only knew one mean person and that

was my principal, Mr. Heilman, who even at his most vexed would not likely have killed me.

~ ~ ~

When I was nine, though, someone I knew was singled out by the witch's long, curled nail, for misfortune.

Uncle Hymie, my father's uncle, had his left forearm amputated. When he came for dinner one evening, on a rare visit from London, I saw how the shirt sleeve, where his arm should have been, was pressed flat, its cuff fastened with a safety pin.

"What happened to his arm?" I asked my mother in the kitchen.

"An accident," she answered, placing a row of salad plates along the counter.

"What kind of accident?" I asked in a loud whisper.

She didn't answer.

"What does his arm look like?"

"Like yours, but without the part from the elbow down." She placed a lettuce leaf and piece of fish on each plate.

"Where *is* his arm?"

"What arm?"

"The missing arm," I said too loudly.

"Sshh," she said swiveling to hand me two plates. "Can you put these on the table?"

As I sat across from Uncle Hymie at dinner, I imagined the empty space beneath his shirt, his knobby elbow, and the missing arm strewn somewhere in a field where I might come across it one day while picking dandelions. At that prospect, I bolted upstairs to my room, sat on the floor next to the door, hugged my knees, and pressed my ear to the wood. "Miriam," my mother called, "Will you be coming down to join us?" Uncle Hymie, the black and white Holocaust Jews, the woman in the rubble, and the witch peopled my darkness. Each of them told me, in a different way, that I wasn't safe. Not really.

~ ~ ~

If I were a child today, someone might have explained to me just how Uncle Hymie came to lose his arm, and reassure me that he managed just fine without it. I

doubt I'd be exposed to Holocaust movies in primary school. But, if I had asked a question about the woman in the rubble, I would have learned that bad things happened during the war and that she was brave and resilient and that, remarkably, so was I. My parents would have been counseled to acknowledge my fear and talk about it because when fears are not addressed, they grow out of all proportion. My fear of the dark might have even merited a diagnosis, nyctophobia. I would have liked that word.

I don't blame anyone. It was commonplace for parents in the Sixties to believe that they could shield their children from misfortune. The world was a safer place. Ottawa, in particular, was a provincial city with virtually no violent crime. Nobody had to "street proof" me to be wary of strangers. Strangers carried my bike home when I got a flat tire and returned my lost balls from their yards. If there was upheaval in the world at large—war, revolution—I didn't know it. Terrorist attacks and natural disasters didn't flash across my T.V. screen. My safety depended on Elmer the Elephant, who told me to look both ways before I crossed the street, "Use your eyes, use your ears, and then you use your feet."

~ ~ ~

As an adolescent, I pretended to be brave. With my heart in my mouth, I went down to the basement alone to get the laundry, then took the steps three at a time on my way back up. I watched movie thrillers squinting between my index and middle finger. But my fears would not relent. In fact, the more time passed, the more I felt time was running out, that at some point God would catch on that, in doling out misfortune, He had overlooked me. Then, realizing his omission, he'd send me packing to the darkest, dankest place He could find.

He hasn't yet. Over the past twenty-four years, I've mothered three children with all the hair-raising experiences involved in parenting. I have lived in Israel, with war and terrorism. I've lain in bed wondering where, on this dark night, my sons in the I.D.F. are patrolling. Surely, my red badge of courage is long overdue. And yet, after all these years, I'm still scared. I can't shake the thought that at any turn, I might come across Uncle Hymie's arm in a field.

There is, perhaps, one difference between the scared of then and the scared of now. Today, my fear makes me hold things dear: reading side by side in bed with my

husband, our heads touching on the shared pillow; hearing my eighty-two year old father's enthusiastic voice on the phone when I call Canada, "Sheila, quick, pick up the phone, it's Mir;" dancing wildly in the living room with my daughter to "It's Raining Men" by *The Weather Girls*, spinning and gyrating and laughing; coming across an unforgettable sentence in a book: "the tender light of the moon, when it hung like an eyelash and the tree trunks shone like bones."; the chirping of the swallows in the trees at sunset; a bowl of French onion soup.

On a recent trip to Prague, I bought a hand-painted wood marionette. Of the hundreds of marionettes hanging from the ceiling and walls of the workshop—kings, queens, jesters, maidens, goblins, and wizards—I chose a witch. When I brought her home and hung her in the living room, my children protested, "She's ugly ... she's creepy." With her sunken black eyes, jagged chin, and bony sharp-nailed fingers, she is indeed.

The witch watches from her post on the wall. Sometimes I meet her glare head on and a chill runs up my spine, but most of the time, I pay her little heed. I know she's wreaking havoc out there.

For many years I had hoped the witch tapping at the window would take flight. Instead, I've let her in. We've struck an uneasy alliance.

Walk Like a Bear

by Skye Davis

I.

When I call Joel, he tells me my name brings back memories of a comic-book character he admired as a child, Captain Midnight. He also tells me that he had hoped to have his chores completed before sunrise, but that they rarely are anymore. He needs to chop more wood, but it's harder now; in the last ten years, he's lost forty pounds of muscle. "So, that's the state of my life—looks like we are on the way down," he says in a soft, amused tone. Then he launches into long-winded directions to his home. The identifying features I am to watch for when I get close—brush and boulders. Joel's driveway is overgrown and easy to miss from the main road.

The air is warm for October on Cape Cod. When I pull up, Joel jogs toward me, until I get closer; then he stiffens, coming to a stop, as a child might. I reach out my hand and he shakes it, his eyes round.

Joel is wearing a navy-blue sweater with a small hole at his right shoulder and pale blue jeans. In his eighties, he has a full and stiff grey beard that stops halfway down his neck. It seems alive, with unidentifiable crumbs sprinkled throughout. His nails are long, thick, yellow in places, and packed with dirt. His glasses, however, are spotless—clean enough for me to see my reflection on the surface of his eye. He's small in stature, and barefoot. Swelling gums obscure his few remaining teeth, but what's left of his smile is enough.

After years in the army, and more years as a sea captain, Joel eventually washed up on his family property in Brewster, Massachusetts, where he had spent summers as a child. Around the same time, he decided to stop working for a living. "I've never been in line with this society," he explains. He would only take a job if it met the following requirements: if it was so interesting that his curiosity made him take it; if it was just too damned much fun to resist, even if the money was bad; or if the pay was so much money that he couldn't say no—"But it had to be *that* much," he emphasizes. At one point, he had a paper route, just for the fun of it; he also coded computers for a while, unpaid, simply because he enjoyed it—but neither stuck.

Instead of working, he sleeps in four-hour shifts, just as he did at sea; up before the sun to do his morning chores, he will go back to bed at ten AM. Resembling an elderly version of Tom Hanks' character in the movie *Cast Away*, Joel is happily marooned. He sees every part of the day.

We are standing in Joel's driveway, or what used to be his driveway. Now the impeding bushes make it too narrow for a car to drive through, but it's a perfect path for a bike—Joel's only means of transportation. At the end of the grass passageway is his yard. Objects peek out behind overgrown strands of grass like predators: rusty wheelbarrows, boats, lanterns, brown plant buckets, pails of dirty water, broken bicycles and bicycle wheels, a torn plastic sled, a damaged beach chair, multiple metal trash cans, heaps and scraps and stacks of wood, an axe, a ladder, tools, carts and various kinds of netting. Blue tarps are strategically strung above old bikes and naked bushes. Solar panels are scattered around the yard like bodies.

In the middle of everything stands a cabin. It's tiny; what his neighbors might consider a tool shed. A skinny, dark pipe rises out of the roof, releasing pillowed smoke into the white and blue sky. "This is home," he says, affectionately.

The land, tucked in a corner of the town, has been in Joel's family for over one hundred years. The original house, dated back to 1735, Joel can describe down to the rafters. He turns his back to the shed, facing a field of tangled bushes, and sketches his childhood home in the empty air with his finger.

The roof boards were laid vertically over the beams. In the middle of the 1800s, two little rooms were added. The kitchen had a walk-in pantry, and eventually a screened porch was added to the northwest corner—the porch where he would sleep during the summer months when he was a child. At the time, according to Joel, there were no trees in Brewster except for the pine forest that grew behind their home, which was a rookery for the black crowned night heron. A beautiful bird with blue wings, this heron makes a barking squawk when disturbed; when he was a child, the nights were filled with harsh screams and blood-curdling hollers.

When Joel returned to the house, he put everything back to the way it had been when he was young. He didn't use the electricity or running water that his parents had installed in 1960s, although he did use the phone occasionally—mostly to call into radio

stations. He had a well and a pump outside, “and it was just fine.” He heated his home with a wood stove, used kerosene lamps, sometimes collected road-kill for food, cooking it over a harsh fire, and at one point had an outhouse on the property in order to maintain the local housing code—something he has since given up worrying about. Then, in March of 2007, the house burned down.

Joel’s family had left prior to his arrival, his parents opting for a warmer climate, his older sister—“a different one.” She lives in Indiana and now considers herself a Midwesterner, a sentiment Joel doesn’t seem to understand. “I’ve never considered myself this or that, but this is home,” he concludes, his eyes raised to where the house used to stand, his toes snuggling the same dirt they had as a child.

II.

Joel stares at the ground, once scorched, before us. The earth is beginning to find new life; grey, knotted plants lift out of the dirt like weak flames.

He first left the Cape to attend a small liberal arts school in Wooster, Ohio—Scottish, Presbyterian. By the end of his junior year, he didn’t have enough credits for a timely graduation. He was a biology major, “which in those days was a very soft science,” he says. “There was no math, there was no nothing, there were a bunch of taxonomists running around pinning species and genetic names on unknown plants.” In order to graduate, he had to complete an independent study. He had read about a site in Arizona, the Aravaipa Canyon, and decided to head out there.

Arizona was incredibly dry. As he drove across the state, he noticed two ruts traveling across the desert toward a horizon of mountains. “I couldn’t go by it without going up there,” Joel says. He points to the top of the trees at the edge of his yard, and they morph into a series of peaks and valleys. The piles of fall leaves and abandoned projects melt into sand-colored dirt; green, sharp, desert foliage appears around us. Then, without warning, Joel finds himself in the middle of a flash flood. “All the sudden ... a wave this high is barreling down the canyon!” I can see the water rise to his knees. But the flood then ends as quickly as it began. I’m not sure how he escapes. Joel’s stories seem to last only as long as his memories do, but his details are so vivid that it’s as if everything he describes he can touch.

While working on his independent project in Aravaipa, Joel stayed with Cowboy Fred. He spent his days in the canyon, recording the species that lived there, and returned to the farm by dusk, where he discussed shared memories of Cape Cod with Fred's newlywed, a feisty lady with red hair who "wore two guns whenever she went to town." There was a grapefruit tree by the walk-in freezer, covering the ground with large balls of produce. I see one in Joel's hand as he grips the air; it's the size of a volleyball. I watch his nails dig into the thick skin, ripping at the damp bottom of its rind. He can peel each segment away like tape, "The sweetest thing." Two girls, Fred's nieces, sit somewhere behind him, a bench by a barn. They ignore the scattered fruit, instead sipping on iced tea all summer.

"At any rate," Joel says, placing his hands in his pockets. With this phrase and a toothless smile, Joel humbly dismisses the world he's drawn around us. Desert sand sinks back into soil and the world begins to re-materialize—tarps sprawl blue in the sun, bent bikes reappear, smoke balls above the trees. "You're getting cold, I can tell," he says, shrugging a shoulder toward his home. We head inside.

III.

As we walk toward the entrance of his cabin, Joel's feet curve, delicately wrapping themselves around the strings of thorns pressed into the soil. His feet seem unbothered, reacting to the sharp spikes the same way they do to cold stone. "Don't be shocked," Joel warns, as we enter.

The cabin is larger on the inside than it appears from the outside, but crowded. It smells like fire. I stand in the entrance; there's no room to move any further. The stench of the burning wood is overwhelming; with every breathe I inhale a thin layer of smoke. Timber beams stretch above us; gear hangs out of a ceiling loft. Dirty mirrors and brown paper in chipped gold frames line the walls, with a few small windows in between. Books and cassette tapes, to entertain him when he isn't doing his chores, are stacked high everywhere possible. A broken clock with birds instead of numbers hangs on a tilt across from me. Drying clothes droop along a line stretched from wall to wall. Materials are spread on the flat, low surface to my right—somewhere underneath them, I imagine, is a bed.

“It’s just a bloody mess,” Joel says, climbing to the center of the room, his bare feet dodging items. There’s something odd about the fact that he addresses the chaos, that he cares at all. He settles in the only empty space, which is about the size of a big square kitchen tile, in the center of the cabin directly in front of the wood stove. Something is there for him to sit on. In the left corner, behind the stove, a stack of wood climbs toward the ceiling like a ladder. As Joel stands, crooked, he grabs the first of a series of lines that hang above him. They are tied to the ceiling beam and fall toward his reach, secured by a bowline, a sailor’s knot. The rope holds him in place as he leans over an unidentifiable pile next to the wood stack. “You can tell I’m an old seaman, I just grab a piece of riggin’.”

He secures himself, looping his hand in the line, and extends his other hand toward the kindling, grabbing a wedge somewhere in the middle and tugging at its edge until it comes loose. He makes his way back to the stove. He does this twice more; his movements slow, precise, balanced—as if he is somewhere in the Atlantic and the waves are steep on his bow. He stacks the three pieces of wood beside his seat.

He sits, turning a black handle on the face of the stove. The glass window blazes red and yellow; the hinge squeaks as he opens it. He stuffs a block of wood inside.

After his childhood home burned down, Joel declined all offers from neighbors to rebuild. The house, in its original form, was what made it home. Any new building would be just that. Instead, he built a teepee out of local bamboo and recycled plastic in the middle of his charred land. He had a wood stove with a pipe that went right through the top of the teepee. He remembers those days with a smile; if it was cold he knew how to dress. “It was incredibly good,” he tells me, lining the stove with another log.

He lived there for almost four years, until one afternoon during the winter of 2011. He had just left the tent to collect more wood for the cold night ahead, “and suddenly WOOSH.” An explosion. The teepee erupted in flames. “The damned thing burned down,” he says, grunting. The stove’s hinge squeaks as he reaches for the last of his three pieces of wood. When I ask Joel what he thinks may have caused the explosion he explains that outside the teepee, sitting over a large pit, there was a

Coleman gas stove that he used for cooking. He thinks it must have had a faulty switch, unknown to him.

An article written by Doug Fraser in the *Cape Cod Times* explains the event was reported as a teepee fire. On the basis of that description, the firefighters could guess where they were going. Joel was known throughout town. Despite his many housing violations—improper venting or use of space heater or water heater; lack of electricity or gas; inadequate electrical outlets or lighting in common areas; failure to restore electricity, gas, or water, lack of a safe water supply, working toilet, or sewage disposal system; inadequate locks for entry doors; accumulation of garbage or filth that may provide food or shelter for rodents, insects, or other pests, or that may contribute to accidents or disease; and no smoke detector or carbon monoxide alarm—the town officials looked the other way.

According to his neighbor and friend, Kate, town officials have chosen to ignore Joel's disregard for codes and regulations, allowing him to live in the manner that he has preferred. In fact, when his teepee burned down, some of the town officials helped build the new cabin for him. He's often referred to as "the man who lives in the woods," or "the man with the beard," or "the man on his bike." Yet with the description also comes respect: respect for Joel and for the old Cape Cod. This peninsula was his before it was ever theirs.

IV.

Kate first met Joel twenty-three years ago, when she and her husband moved into a house down the road from his. Originally from Maryland, Kate was hesitant to move to Cape Cod, but her affection for her new home grew. When they moved to the house on Lower Road, Kate was pregnant with her third child. "One afternoon, I looked out my back door and observed a man with long hair and a beard walking around my backyard. I wasn't sure what to make of him, so I sent my husband out to see what he wanted. Rob went out back and began chatting with Joel, who explained that he was checking the water levels in the creek behind the house. After a while, Rob came back into the house and announced that, while he was certainly a character, he did not appear to be someone that was a threat."

A few years later, Kate and Rob ended up buying the property that abuts Joel's property, and it was then that she received a glimpse into how he lived. She admits that "There were a lot of people who cautioned us to be careful of the hermit that lived next door," but Kate found that she admired Joel's independence: "I thought it was kind of cool that he was living off the grid." The relationship grew after Kate found a book about a young boy and his pet raccoon in her mailbox. "Attached to the cover of the book was a note from Joel saying 'with your permission, I would like to share this book with Maggie,' our oldest daughter. I was very impressed that he would ask me before just giving the book to her." After that, Kate would often stop at the end of the driveway and chat with Joel when she saw him.

One time, when Kate and her son were checking their mailbox, Joel was just returning from running some errands on his bike and there was a dead squirrel hanging off the edge of his basket. "As Joel and I chatted cordially, my ten-year-old son just kept staring at the dead squirrel hanging off the back of Joel's bike. Joel noticed this, gave me a wink, and then turned to Alex and said 'That's *my* dinner. Go get your own!' Needless to say, my son Alex was horrified at the idea of going anywhere near the dead squirrel."

According to Kate, there are a lot of people around town who are a part of Joel's life. He had a friend, Randy, who worked in Boston a few days a week. Joel would take care of Randy's dog on those days, providing Joel with a chance to eat properly. His other neighbors, Gail and John, are close to Joel. Gail frequently brings him food, and he spends every Christmas Eve with them. "Despite the fact that he drives me crazy sometimes, Joel has come to mean a great deal to myself and my family," Kate tells me. "He is a very warm and caring person. He likes to act aloof, like he doesn't care, but that is not really his nature. He always asks about the kids. When he sees me, he's very concerned if I look tired or overextended."

After the second fire, Joel was turning eighty and once again without shelter. Kate had seen the smoke coming from Joel's property while driving home and had offered to let him come to live with them for a few months. Instead, another one of Joel's friends, a professional house builder, made a deal with a local lumberyard: any lumber

they couldn't sell, he would take for free. He gathered half a dozen people and it took them six days to build Joel's current cabin.

V.

Joel hurries me out of the cabin now, explaining that his friends always get nauseated after staying too long. I offer to drive him to the next town over; there's a particular local sailboat—a custom Catboat—that he's always admired from a distance, and I happen to know the boat builder. He grabs a pair of sneakers near the doorway. "As you can see, I don't wear shoes very much, but just for the owner's peace of mind," he says.

Outside, his face crinkles at the sunlight. We climb down the two steps at the entranceway of his home, one at a time and together. After making our way to the bottom, he pauses to say something he's been holding back: "It seems that I have cancer." His eyes squint in the sun as he massages his gut, looking to name the illness. "What's your... begins with an R ... one of those." He hooks a finger in the heel of each shoe, carrying them down his driveway.

We don't make it very far down the grass path before Joel stops again by a pile of solar panels resting at various angles on a metal cart. Some are large, the size of a window, while others are hardly bigger than a deck of cards. He adjusts them carefully, facing them towards the sun. We will be gone when it is at its strongest. "It's a wonder I'm not blind," he says, staring into a large black square. He uses them to light his home and heat his water.

After Joel completed his independent study in the Aravaipa Canyon, his college let him go on to his senior year—"I guess mostly just to get me out of there." Joel lets out a belly laugh, without the belly. Shortly after graduation, he was drafted. He was sent to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, to learn how to be a weatherman. Between training sessions, the army gave each of them ten days off. They handed everybody a train ticket, "Even the married guys." Joel exchanged his ticket for cash and decided to hitchhike to Wooster, Ohio, to visit a friend from school.

The same day, a blizzard came in from Kentucky. He hitched a ride in a truck heading north, but the storm followed them, becoming progressively worse. Joel

decided to stay with the driver to Detroit. When they arrived, Joel went to the YMCA and purchased a room for one dollar and twenty-five cents. Marooned, he decided to buy a car. The next day, in the midst of the squall, Joel found a used car lot, where he bought a 1941 Chrysler Windsor sedan. It was a wreck, but the salesman charged Joel \$100; “He knew he had me by the short hairs.” He made his rounds at the truck stops, looking for a large tractor-trailer he could draft behind and eventually found a driver heading south to Toledo, Ohio.

The wind was coming from the west. Joel gestures at the gusts against the frail window of his sedan. “Within minutes there was a drift this high right across the road,” he says, flattening a palm as high as his hip.

Joel followed the truck’s running lights. They stopped for coffee and a piece of pie. When they got back on the road, the wind direction had shifted, and it was dark. The heavy tractor-trailer held steady, but Joel kept spinning out, losing more control with each mile gained. “I couldn’t keep up with him any longer.” Joel points ahead, and we watch the truck disappear over a hill, into the dark.

Shortly afterwards, the sedan stalled. It was about midnight, and the sides of the road were walls of snow. “Jesus if somebody comes wheelin’ over that hill and there I am and he’s on ice and can’t stop...” he drifts off, reliving his panic.

Joel began walking. Eventually he found a house with “one little light on.” A man came to the door, “A son of a gun, not even in a night shirt,” Joel recalls, smiling. He owned a gas station nearby. The man wrapped his shoulders in a heavy leather coat and followed Joel to his car. They pushed the sedan a mile to the gas station, where he thawed water out of the fuel system. As Joel describes the man under his car, everything becomes small, the “little fuel line” and the “little heat lamp”—as if he’s playing with a set of vinyl dolls from his past.

He made it to Wooster by six AM. After a nice day spent with an old friend, he took off and headed back to New Jersey.

VI.

As we continue toward the car, Joel notices me look down at his toes. His nails are uncomfortably long and the dirt within them seems decades old. “My feet are the

very best part of me,” he explains, stopping again, “Even the physicians at the hospital don’t know what I’m talking about. I say, ‘Look, you people with shoes don’t even know how to walk; you walk with your heels first.’” He demonstrates. “Watch a bear when he runs, he runs first off pigeon-toed—at least his front paws; they’re like this,” Joel spreads his toes. He explains the mechanics of the foot, how the first part that touches the ground should be the outside edge. “If there’s something like a stone or a thorn down there, its amazing how your foot, without you thinking about it, will automatically shift its weight so it doesn’t poke a nail up through the bottom.” He holds his shoes up in disgust. “You just use up a lot of energy flailing these things back and forth—when you’re barefoot, you’re light on your feet.” As we begin walking again, my boots feel heavy.

When I reach for my seatbelt, Joel takes the hint, reaching for his own. He struggles to match the latch with the plate. I help him. He explains that he has lost all feelings in the tips of his fingers, that he has no tactical or olfactory senses left—if he picks something up, he has to look down to see whether or not he’s holding it. “I can’t do anything delicate,” he explains.

I ask him about last winter. With record snowfall and freezing temperatures, I’m curious as to how he fared. It was described in the *Cape Cod Times* in March of 2015 as the worst Cape Cod winter ever. Joel, a man whose only means of transportation is on two wheels and who doesn’t believe in wearing shoes, responds carelessly, “I didn’t think it was that bad.” His secret: he doesn’t shovel snow; he just walks on top of it. Eventually, it packs down like soil. Also, he doesn’t have a commute. As we drive, he points to a road sign that reads “Route 124.” He comments, “That used to be just 24. Why go and make it complicated?”

VII.

After eight weeks in New Jersey, Joel was sent to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Fort Huachuca lies right on the Mexican border. “Well, the weather in the summertime is just blue sky and sunshine, day after day—you didn’t need a weatherman at all.” Beautiful clouds would form over the mountain every afternoon, “little puffy cumulus clouds.” They

would rise, traveling almost six miles into thin air. When night fell, he watched lightning drill into the tops of mountains, the bolts of yellow lining the horizon.

Joel and his peers spent their weekends off in Tucson, partying at the home of Agnes De Mille, the choreographer of the movie *Oklahoma*; a thespian friend got them the invite. The musical was being filmed in Arizona for the clouds, Joel explains; Oklahoma had empty skies: “No mountains there to make orographic winds.”

De Mille lived in a beautiful brick adobe building in Tucson: “You could hardly tell if you were inside or outside.” There was an irregularly shaped swimming pool with underwater lights that lit up the Sonora Desert. They spent summer nights floating in cool water, looking up at stars through the unpolluted western air. The word “unpolluted” melts out of Joel’s mouth with longing.

We continue along the route that connects Brewster to Orleans. Thick yellow lines center dense pavement. Houses emerge along the edge of the road.

“See, there used to be land everywhere,” Joel says. Growing up, he had never known Cape Codders to be wealthy. They were farmers or fisherman, and they all lived on large pieces of land inherited from their ancestors. They would have a metal pail to milk their cow, a field full of asparagus or turnips or potatoes, and a wood lot near a locust tree where they chopped their way to a warmer winter. And they shared. “Your neighbor’s cows knew you as well as they knew anybody—and that’s the way the Cape worked.” As he speaks, the houses we pass seem to dent the forest like cavities.

“Then the tourists started and people started coming here,” Joel recalls. “They really liked certain parts about the Cape, and there were certain things that bugged the hell outta them.” Things like having to drive down a dirt road through the woods to get to their house, or the trip to the local general store: “You could get a can of house paint, a tablecloth, or a loaf of bread—but you could only get what they had.” The newcomers demanded supermarkets, pavement on the roads, streetlights at intersections; taxes were raised and, before he knew it, “the land was lost.”

Of the thirteen acres Joel’s family used to own, he is now left with his share of two. On the land that he inherited, he used to have goats and chickens, eggs, milk, and cheese. The goats would walk along the stone wall that edged his property and play

king of the mountain, two of them trying to knock the third off. They had incredible balance and would roam the land, feeding on anything that grew green. He had an apple orchard, where his chickens would range freely, rooting in the apple trees. His dog at the time, “a St. Bernard divided by two,” would look after them, protecting them from the fox, hawk, and coyote.

As his land diminished and neighbors moved in, his goats still knew no boundaries. The neighbors kept finding them on their lawn or in their driveway, but Joel thought little of it, “People built their houses on my animals’ home.” Eventually, he was taken to court for animal trespassing, where the judge told him he had to fence in his goats—“And I says, ‘You want me to fence in the deer as well? I suggest, your Honor, that if those people don’t like me or my goats, that they fence us out.’”

He was fined two hundred dollars. The judge complained that he couldn’t fine him two thousand dollars, due to the law being 250 years old. On the other hand, the two hundred dollars that Joel ended up paying, he had earned in the 1960’s. In the 1970s, due to inflation, the money he had saved had suddenly become worthless, “I says, Judge—it’s just like you *were* fining me \$2000.”

Suddenly, his goats disappeared. He believes the town confiscated them. He lost his dog to heartworm, something he had never heard of, and his chickens were picked off slowly. Defeated by the memory of it, Joel sighs.

When we arrive at the boat yard, Joel is like an artist in a museum. He runs the pad of his index finger along the edges of a boat, his long nails shadowing the woodwork. He climbs ladders and peeks inside cockpits, cautiously—like a kid hanging over the edge of a lobster pool. And as he dances his palms over the various hulls, he relives his days on the ocean.

After his time in the army, Joel attended the University of Washington, where he tried his hand at oceanography, eventually becoming part of the scientific staff on a research vessel. He remembers the cobble beaches, the day-lit nights, and the original whaling boats. He wags a finger at certain thoughts, as when he tells me it never snows in the Arctic because there’s not enough water in the air. “It’s a very dry place, it’s a desert,” he says, happy to see my eyes widen.

He tells me a story about Willie Goodwin, a man he met while anchored seven miles off Kotzebue, Alaska. Willie, a local fisherman, was returning a salmon that had been tagged by the research team. “We saw this little Inuit guy, and he’s holding a salmon in his arms like this,” Joel gestures. “So, a couple of guys help him up on deck.” As they go to place the salmon in the freezer, Willie tells Joel he has a walk-in. Joel explains that while other locals dug a hole in the permafrost to store their fish, Willie dug his into the side of a hill.

Instead of attending the meeting, where they were to be told the results of their most recent study, Joel and a friend took “little Willie Goodwin” and went into the galley, where they sat him down at the table, got the coffee pot out and stayed awake until two AM drinking coffee and listening to his stories. “Old folklore stories, ya know, like the old woman that lives at the bottom of the sea and the battle between the sun and moon.”

Years later, when he was back living on the Cape, he received a phone call. It was his friend’s voice on the other line: “Willie Goodwin lives!” His friend had found an article in the *New York Times* about Willie Goodwin, Jr.—after four years tracking rockets, he was returning home to Kotzebue. As he tells me this, Joel catches his breath: “That about blew me away.”

VIII.

After exploring the boatyard, I realize I’m imposing on Joel’s fourth hour awake. But when I ask him if he’s tired, he responds, “Me? Get tired?!” He has a similar response when I ask him if he was ever married: “Oh come on, this society wouldn’t let me have kids. I knew it wouldn’t work, not the way I did things.”

When he was young, he dreamt of going to sea. He liked the feel of the helm, what it meant to handle a boat. “It’s great to get good at,” he explains. Joel became a captain during his last few years on the west coast. He bought a “split-rigged” Bristol Bay Alaska gillnetter. “She was a lovely old vessel. She would roll her scuppers when there was hardly a sea runnin’; she would just wallow, make everybody seasick.” He fished in every salmon run in Alaska; he would “knock all over” Puget Sound, British Colombia, the San Juan Islands, and Vancouver. “All I did was sail,” he says proudly. He quickly points out, though, that a captain must balance his ego as he does his ship

and his schedule—four on, four off. If you aren't humble and careful, you can become overconfident, and too self-satisfied.

He returned to the Cape in the 1960s after a friend of his, Jerry Milgram, called. "He says, 'How 'bout comin' East?'" He was starting a sail loft and wanted Joel to be a part of it. Joel bought a VW Bus for two hundred dollars and drove east. The van was in rough shape, "A light breeze from dead ahead would slow you down to second gear," he says, laughing. Joel didn't last long at the loft, but Jerry became famous the day America had a clean sweep in the Summer Olympics: "His boats always pulled ahead."

Throughout the day, I ask Joel why he has chosen to live life the way he has—why he never took the well-paid job in Provincetown and bought a car, why he never rebuilt his home and sprung for a shower. He never has a straight answer, but instead comes up with another memory, another story. But he does tell me, after a trivial explanation of his sleeping patterns in college, "You know why I do things the way I do? Because I don't have any reason at all not to."

In 2011, while biking home from the Brewster library, he was hit by a car. He went over the hood, his shoulder breaking the windshield. "I feel that first impact and I'll never forget it," he says, circling the cap of his knee with his palm.

When he slid off of the hood onto the road, he landed on his other shoulder, "Of course I didn't have a helmet on—never do." When he regained consciousness another twenty feet down the road, pain was extreme: "It's like your skin is a bag full of red hot coals, and you are full of thorns and barbed wire." A black viscous liquid pooled in the corner of his eye. He wasn't screaming; he couldn't breathe. He compares it to the feeling he had as a child when he would swim to the bottom of the bay, forcing himself to stay underwater until he found a moonstone—a rock known for its charming play of light.

When he got to the hospital he could feel them probing him all over, but even with an X-ray, they couldn't find one broken bone. Then they sent him up to the sixth floor. "I had a nice room, toilet to myself—had a bathtub with a handheld shower and about five big fluffy towels," he recalls. After he showered, four nurses pounced on him with gauze to cover up the abrasions. "I told them no, get away, forget it," Joel

continues. “I’ve known all about abrasions ever since I first skinned my knee as a kid—I know they heal themselves. They take a little bit of time because they’ve got lots of skin that they have to grow, but they do it all by themselves.”

The next day was a Sunday. Breakfast came (“Not bad, actually,”) and then lunch, but no one came to talk to him about his injuries, and by mid-afternoon Joel was bored silly. Finally, he shuffled over to the nurse’s station to tell them he was leaving. A nurse explained that there was a physical therapist coming. “And I tried to keep a straight face,” Joel recalls. “I told her, ‘I got all the therapy at home that I need.’”

Joel knew it was going to hurt the next day and that he was going to be stiff, but morning came and he managed. He walked outside, picked up his brush hook, and started swinging, swearing a blue streak all the while “because I always get mad at myself when I do something stupid, and somehow I did something stupid when that car hit me.” Every day, for four days, Joel hacked away at the woods. By Friday, he was back on his bike: “The pain was gone.” With these words, he stares at me, a tear forming on his lower lid, blued by his iris, fighting the urge to fall.

IX.

We settle inside the car on the way back from the boatyard, driver and passenger. As we steer along Route 124, heading back to his property, Joel describes to me the different types of cancerous cells. In the midst of melanoma, he stops—turning his head to look out the rear window. “That wasn’t a VW bus, was it?” At close to eighty-four-years-old, after his cancer diagnosis, Joel would bike fifteen miles to a doctor’s appointment—two hours to get there and two hours to get home. The only thing he had to complain about—terrible directions.

He is not yet sure if he will be doing chemotherapy, exclaiming, “Those buggers don’t tell me anything.” It occurs to him that he would lose his hair: “That’s a tempting thought! Not a single soul in Brewster will know who I am if I lose this mop around my face. If I can lose this bush in front of me here, I bet I can go all around town and just be a fly on the wall.” He pulls at the strings of his beard with his nails as we turn into his driveway.

We sit in the car for a while. Joel stares out of the sunroof at the empty trees. He was in the west when they began building houses around his property. Neighbors would complain about the birds with blue wings and their blood-curdling screams in the middle of the night. Finally, someone stomped into the woods with a shotgun, destroying every nest he could find. The first night Joel returned, he slept on the screened porch. He could hear the crickets, he could hear the bay, even the faint motor of a passing engine—but there was something missing.

He lifts his bare foot onto his knee. The flat of his foot stares at me.

“Your feet must be tough as nails,” I say. He presses the cushion of his finger along the curve of his foot, treating it like a foreign species, something alive and unattached to his own body. “My feet are in good shape, still soft and beautiful,” he says proudly. “They grow thicker and tougher from the inside out.” He pulls his foot closer to me, urging me to touch it, wiggling his hip out of place. I finally do. The skin is cold and stiff but smooth.

He continues, “I guess this is the reason why I live the way I live, you find out all of these things that nobody else knows anything about—because they are wearing shoes all the time.”

I stare again at the foot I have touched. The earth is spread like a map on his skin. Dirt lines the peaks and valleys; crests of white edge his toe mounds; brown and green grids mark his heel: a topographic representation of everywhere he’s been.

Hide! You're a Woman

by Seetha Anagol

The Jeep tailgates us. I cower further down in the backseat of the taxi. We are in the Bandipur National Forest, bordering the State of Kerala, in South India, on our way to Calicut.

We race past the tall, dry sandalwood and teak trees, blurring browns, yellows and greens. The gray langur's chatter is muffled and the occasional jungle fowl pierces the forest with its shrill *ku kayak kyuk kyuk*. The unexpected drop in temperature makes me shiver, and I cling to the warmth of the setting sun. Pulling the loose ends of my cotton saree over my head and shoulders, I bob up to check on Senthil, the taxi driver. The headlights are on. Senthil glances in the rearview mirror, once, twice, and wipes his forehead with a brown hand-towel. With his free hand, he maneuvers the steering wheel deftly over the dirt road.

"Don't look up, Madam. Please." His thick, deep southern accent annoys me. I am already edgy with the tense situation in which we've found ourselves. I recoil from his warning and sink further into the seat.

The drunken yelling and singing from the jeep gets louder. I no longer hear the monkeys' chatter.

This is the mid-90s. Non-profits working for the empowerment of women are preparing a policy document to present at the United Nations Conference in Beijing. A coordination unit has been set up in New Delhi and in Bangalore to execute the task, with support from several national and international donor agencies.

I have the exciting and critical task of coordinating the effort for non-profits in South India, with the assistance of an able, but small team. The time frame to complete the task is fast approaching. I'm scheduled to reach Calicut by dusk to meet with women's non-profit organizations from neighboring areas, which work to improve the lives of indigenous tribal and rural women inhabiting the region.

Getting plane or train tickets to Calicut on short notice is impossible. The only option is a taxi. The shortest route cuts across the forest, where bandits and hoodlums

haunt the road and rob tourists. I've been warned that to travel here is unsafe for a woman.

The deadline to complete the assignment and my belief in the work we are doing propels me to make the trip despite the danger. Our office checks the taxi rental company's credentials before hiring one. The rental company assures us that they will assign Senthil, a very reliable, safe driver. He often ferries passengers on this route to and from Bangalore to Calicut.

Shrinking down in the resin seat, I stare at the zig-zag patterns on the jute-mat at my feet and pray our tires will not blow out on the mud track.

Senthil hisses under his breath. "Oh, no ... they'll bang our car if they get any closer. I see their side flaps are folded all the way to the roof. The crazy men are waving toddy bottles in the air. Mam, hide! Please. At no cost should they see you."

We are way past the police check post, where Senthil stopped briefly. Two guards snored on aluminum, green chairs, in their creased uniforms, basking in the late afternoon sun. One of the officers inspected the travel documents.

The Jeep was parked behind us at the check post. The men stepped out of the Jeep to smoke beedis. I got a quick peek through the side-view mirror and sighed. Five men in total. One had a baseball cap on, another wore khaki pants and a safari shirt. I assumed the man with the goatee was the driver, who had gone to pee behind the bushes.

"Bad men, bad business." Senthil wrinkled his bulbous nose and turned on the ignition.

I shook my head. "Did you see how they tossed the cigarette butts and plastic bags out by the dirt road? Drinking in a moving vehicle? Tch."

"Bad men, bad business." After a pause he added, "Mam, these men can get nasty when they drink ... um ... toddy. Believe me, I've got into a fight or two with drunks on the road. I don't want them to see you alone in this car ... um ... they even rape women in gangs, you know." Senthil looked at me in the rearview mirror. His face was grim.

I nodded my head and closed my fists in frustration. Why do we women have to watch our backs always, the fear of assault, sexual or otherwise, restricting our

movements at every step? Sighing, I distracted my mind by going over the approaching conference activities: need to get input from women's groups in Hyderabad and Chennai, approve posters and local women's stories to be published by our office, audit of budget for the first quarter, attend forthcoming regional preparatory conferences in Bangladesh and Malaysia

My distraction is interrupted. The Jeep is now next to us, side by side, sharing the narrow jungle path. Senthil is silent, almost in a trance. He maintains a steady pace with his foot on the accelerator. Why can't he slow down and allow the Jeep to pass? Is he afraid that they will go ahead, block our way and force us to stop the vehicle? My heart is racing. My pale fingers clutch the folds of the crumpled saree. My tongue is as dry as sandpaper.

A moment later, our taxi jerks to the left of the road, as Senthil makes room for the Jeep to finally pass us on the right. The tires screech and groan. My elbow knocks hard against the side-door. A numbing tingle runs up my arm. I clench my teeth and choke on the dust in the air, kicked up by the vehicles.

The knots in my shoulders tighten and my legs are asleep. But my mind is hyper-alert. I thank my stars that the doors are locked. Huh, small comfort. Like it would prevent the bad guys from getting to me! I hold my breath. What's next?

Piercing honks. Shrieks. "Woohoo, we did it! You slow idiot." The Jeep zooms ahead. The sounds fade in the distance.

Stunned into silence, we don't speak for the next half-hour. When at last I return to an upright position, I'm a tangled mass, emerging out of the rabbit hole—vertebrae by vertebrae. Stretching my aching limbs, I look out of the window the same time as Senthil does. The Jeep is nowhere in sight.

"Those drunken rascals just wanted to race us." He wipes the sweat off his forehead again with his hand towel. "Whew."

I attempt a weak smile. Both of us reach for our bottles, gulping water down parched throats like thirsty crows.

The women from the non-profit groups in Calicut include several demands in the draft policy document, mainly the immediate closure of toddy shops in Kerala and

measures to stop violence against women. On the return journey, I'm in no hurry to take any short cuts, so I direct Senthil to drive the longer, but safer route.

Wild Cherry Tree

by Gabriella Brand

Mother hated that tree. The messy wild cherries that fell over our bluestone patio, the undisciplined way that the thin branches spread out like unkempt hair, the crookedness of the limbs.

"We should just chop it down," she'd say every spring when yellow-white tentacles of blossoms appeared, then gave way to small, pea-sized fruit.

"But it's beautiful," I'd say.

"We have other trees," Mother would insist.

It was the 1950s. We were living in a historic valley in New Jersey, settled by Dutch colonists in the 17th century, rapidly becoming suburban. Our yard was full of mature maples and oaks, a solid hickory, a couple of weeping willows down by the shallow drainage brook that bordered our property.

In August, when the small reddish-purple cherries ripened, Mother would repeat her threat.

"This year," she'd say, "we're going to get rid of that monstrosity."

Mother liked order. Precision. Cleanliness. Everything that the *Prunus Serotia* was not.

As the wild cherries fell, the air around the tree would smell slightly sour and fermented, like a child's lunch bag left behind in a school locker.

"Couldn't we eat the cherries?" I once asked.

"Of course not," said Mother. "They're barely fit for birds. It's a totally useless tree."

I found that hard to believe. The cherries looked perfectly delicious. Besides, wasn't Mother always talking about how people back in Europe, starving during World War II, had eaten shoe leather and bread made from cellulose? Animal carcasses? Cats, even?

It was odd that she considered wild cherries to have no value.

But Mother had her firm opinions. I knew better than to try to sway her mind. She could give the impression of being steely or cold, but underneath, she was sensitive and emotional, largely ruled by melancholy, not meanness.

Even as a child, I knew that she struggled with inner ghosts. She was estranged from her far-away family of origin, with its traditional codes of honor and shame. Clearly something had happened, maybe during her childhood. There was the uncle whose name she refused to say, the distant cousin whose letters she destroyed.

Nor did her marriage seem to bring her happiness. Although she tried hard to be a dutiful mid-20th century American homemaker, collecting recipes from *Good Housekeeping*, decorating the house for Christmas, her heart clearly wasn't in it.

"I don't belong here," she'd say.

But where was here? In suburban America? In the comfortable house with the cherry tree? In the big double bed she shared with my father, although she never spoke of loving him.

"If it weren't for you kids," she would say, but she would never finish the sentence.

She had lost one of us. One of her children. A little boy, my baby brother. I vaguely remembered his tiny coffin, fitted with brass handles like two half-moons and a smooth satin pillow. Perhaps, because of that loss, she held a personal grudge against the wild cherry tree, so prolific and careless with its bounty.

Fortunately, Mother would always forget about chopping down the tree by the time autumn came around and the leaves had turned a lovely, benign shade of yellow. With the arrival of cold weather and the diminishing light, she would no longer go outside. Like a bear, she would hibernate within the thick walls of the house.

I, on the other hand, loved the outdoors in all kinds of weather, even in the grayness of a late winter afternoon. Out in the fresh air, I could breathe freely and sing silly songs and make snow angels and lie on my back looking up at bare branches creaking in the wind.

In summertime, I remember climbing up that wild cherry tree with a cloth bag slung over my shoulder. The pink bag was supposed to hold ballet shoes, toes shoes actually, the kind with small tufts of rabbit fur inside. A delicate, girly-girly bag, it was.

But I preferred using it as a mountaineer's back pack. I'd twist the bag around, depending on how I needed to maneuver as I climbed. Inside the bag would be a few books, maybe some colored pencils, a sketchpad, and contraband candy such as *Necco Wafers* or a *Bonomo Turkish Taffy*. About half-way up the tree, maybe ten feet or so, after scraping my knee against the coarse bark a couple of times, I'd stop and settle into a sort of seat that my older brother had helped me fashion out of hemp lashed between two limbs.

All morning long, I'd keep my nose in the silence of *The Betsy-Tacy Stories*, but I'd be serenaded by chickadees and warblers. They'd grab the purplish fruit and fly off. Sunlight would dapple the oblong leaves. I'd run my fingers along their fine, serrated edges. The cherry tree was my own cathedral, my sanctuary. Solid, tall, sheltering. Like a protective parent.

Did Mother, burdened with grief and memories, really know where I was? I don't think so. Back in those days, most kids in small towns were largely unsupervised. When I wasn't with friends or at summer camp, I left the house after breakfast and showed up at lunch time. I'd take long bike rides by myself, sometimes stopping at the candy store for fresh supplies of forbidden sweets. Sometimes I'd walk along the brook that bordered our property. But I always made time to sit in the tree, invisible to the rest of the world.

Every day our town blew a whistle at the fire station at twelve noon sharp. The siren would crank up and the German Shepherd who belonged to the neighbors on the other side of the creek would start to howl. That's how I knew to get down from the tree and show up at the lunch table, wiping the traces of *Necco Wafers* and wild cherries off my lips. By then I had discovered, through my own experimentation, that the fruit of the *Prunus Serotia* was perfectly edible.

One night, the year I was eleven, a particularly heavy summer storm blew through our valley. When I woke up in the morning, Mother began talking about storm damage. She had been worried about the brook overflowing and heading towards our house, but now the rain had stopped. I ran outside to explore.

Almost immediately, I saw what was left of my tree.

Lightning had sliced the graceful wild cherry down the middle, leaving a black slash in its wake, like the old movie character, *Zorro*. Higher limbs had fallen onto lower limbs. Branches had flown off, torpedo-like, across the lawn, and ripe cherries had bombed the patio, like small red grenades.

I came rushing back in, breathless.

"But you didn't tell me about the tree!" I said. "The wild cherry tree!"

Mother shrugged. "Nature accomplished what I had meant to do years ago."

I could feel myself on the verge of tears, but I didn't want Mother to see me crying. I ran back outside and stared in shock at the destruction.

In those days our family had a book called *Life's Picture History of World War II*. Black and white photographs of Normandy beaches. Dunkirk. The London Blitz. I sometimes would take down that book and leaf through it. Mother usually discouraged me from staring too long at the wreckage of war.

"It was a horrible time," she'd say.

Now I knew, even as an eleven-year old, that a tree struck by lightning was not in the same league as the bombing of Dresden. I knew that I shouldn't be crying over a tree. A wild cherry tree was not a human being. The loss of one tree was not the same as the loss of a baby or the devastation of an entire city. I wiped my tears and went down to the brook to calm myself down.

A couple of men with chainsaws arrived later that day. They clumped around in their heavy work boots and discussed the best way to clean up the heap of ripped greenery and split bark. Then they started cutting until only a stump remained.

Mother and I never talked about the tree. Eventually she planted herbs where the cherry tree had stood, and the smell of mint and tarragon and rosemary seemed to give her pleasure, but it was hard to tell for sure.

So Long, Promised Land

by Michael Engelhard

Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.

— Ortega y Gasset

As the old year fades from view, I am busy boxing up things for my move to Alaska. Sifting through detritus accumulated over the years, I try to decide what is essential, what is too heavy or bulky, what can be left behind. Stacks of discolored photos quickly distract me from my task. Lost in reveries I shuffle these mementos of a love affair with the Colorado Plateau, an affair that began more than two decades ago.

I was exploring the Southwest in 1982, as a tourist. Smitten with the sublime light, the uncluttered space, the convoluted canyons and silk-and-steel rivers, I decided to live there some day. Life had other plans, but I kept gravitating toward the red rock gardens, where Moab became a haven of sorts. Eventually, I moved there for good. Following my conviction that a perfectly sized town is one in which everything—including wilderness—lies within easy walking or biking distance, I settled in Moab on the tail end of the uranium-mining boom. I felt fortunate, as this muscular and reclusive landscape became not only my home but also my workplace. During summers, I spent more days on the Colorado and its tributaries than in town. My working outfit as a river guide consisted of sandals and shorts. Peoples' faces often lit up with envy when I asked them to step into my "office," the raft.

Too soon, I became aware that the Promised Land—like many other places these days—suffered from industrial encroachment and greed. The West's troubled legacy revealed itself in cattle grazing the canyons inside a National Monument—"Escowlante." Thumper trucks explored for oil, destroying delicate soils and vegetation bordering Canyonlands National Park. Politicians supported proposals to extract and process oil shale along the Green River's marvelous Desolation Canyon. Commerce and people in garish outfits discovered my hideout, pronouncing Moab the Mountain Biking Capital of the West. For the longest time I denied living in a resort town, even

when the annual Jeep Safari forced me and many other residents to flee town for a week to avoid traffic and the attendant mayhem.

In synch with rising visitor numbers, the wealthy started to buy second homes in town. Property prices and taxes rose accordingly, forever placing the dream of a little shack of my own beyond reach. The cost of some frou-frou coffee drinks soon began to equal half the hourly wage dirt bags and river rats like me made in service industry jobs—naturally without benefits. Moab lacked a shoe repair place, affordable health care and housing, a food co-op, noise control . . . Instead it sprouted real estate offices, T-shirt and “art” boutiques, motels and gas stations, jeep, bike, and boat rentals. Mountain and road bikers rubbed sweaty shoulders with hikers, climbers, jeepers, base jumpers, skydivers, kayakers, rafters, golfers, and vintage car lovers. They all rubbed my nerve endings raw. They drank dry the bars, clogged the river and canyons. The off season—welcomed by many locals as a change of pace and reminder of why they had chosen this town in the first place—shrank year by year, cropped at both ends by mountain unicycle festivals and other bogus events. It got harder and harder to escape unwanted company in the Best of Beyond. I often wished my domicile could be famous (if famous it must be) for record-breaking pumpkins or the nation’s oldest hay barn.

Revisiting a favorite haunt in the Escalante watershed the first time in ten years, I was appalled by the changes. Foot trails cut through crypto-biotic soil carpets, betraying people’s laziness, their need to shortcut across canyon meanders. They had not simply trampled single tracks but whole networks into each knobby surface. Some morons had clearly misread the BLM’s plea to leave behind nothing but footprints. At popular campsites, which appeared strangely denuded even for this arid country, wooden signs directed visitors to pit toilets installed—and hopefully emptied—by monument staff. The voices of nearby campers echoed around slickrock bends, undermining the privacy for which I had hoped. Aluminum pull-tabs and charcoal from illegal campfires had replaced the arrowhead fragments, potsherds, and centuries-old corncobs once safe in alcove vaults. On Cedar Mesa, cameras now eyed ruins and rock art, trying to catch vandals in the act. Elsewhere, fences guarded petroglyph panels, and walkways channeled tour groups.

Faced with these changes, I realized for the first time that too many hikers degrade a wild place as easily—and permanently—as do too many cows. While it seems obvious and convenient to point fingers at off-road vehicle drivers, any sentient biped will have to admit that he or she is part of the problem. *Homo ambulans*, too, leaves nothing but traces and often takes peace and quiet from the backcountry.

Even the Four Corners' Navajo reservation, which long had been spared the worst excess—perhaps due to its “Third World feel” and user-unfriendly permit system—now suffers tourism's side effects. A few canyons became accessible with guides only after a flash flood killed eleven visitors, possibly to avoid costly search-and-rescue missions or even more expensive liability suits; about a dozen more canyons were recently closed to all outsiders. Sadly, non-Navajos hiking without permits, harassing livestock, littering, and disturbing archaeological ruins brought on these closures.

For years, I was still content to take paying customers down rivers and canyons. But I slowly realized that many, if not most of them, were only after the glossy skin, not the meat and bones, or—heavens forbid—the soul of a place. They considered wilderness a sort of outdoor gym-cum-tanning salon, a thrill ride with a picnic on the side, pretty scenery to write home about, or perhaps worst of all, just another checkmark on their bucket list of “adventures.” I've since heard of people who try to visit all fifty-nine U.S. national parks in fifty-nine days. My suggestion to them: spend fifty-nine days in one park—Grand Canyon or Gates of the Arctic. You might truly learn something.

One Moab river company did not hire me because I was too outspoken in my “environmental convictions.” Vacationers did not want to hear about mining or overgrazing or hydroelectric dams. They wanted rapids. They wanted fun. They wanted gourmet food, horseshoe games, solar showers, and, if possible, sleeping cots on the riverbank or a little “canyon magic”—to hook up with a blonde river guide. The manager told me I would set a bad example for the younger guides and that his company was “pro-growth.” Later I heard that a luxury tourism conglomerate had swallowed the outfit. The former Moabite and critic of industrial tourism, Edward Abbey, named the spiritual price paid by those who depend on it for their livelihood: “They must learn the automatic

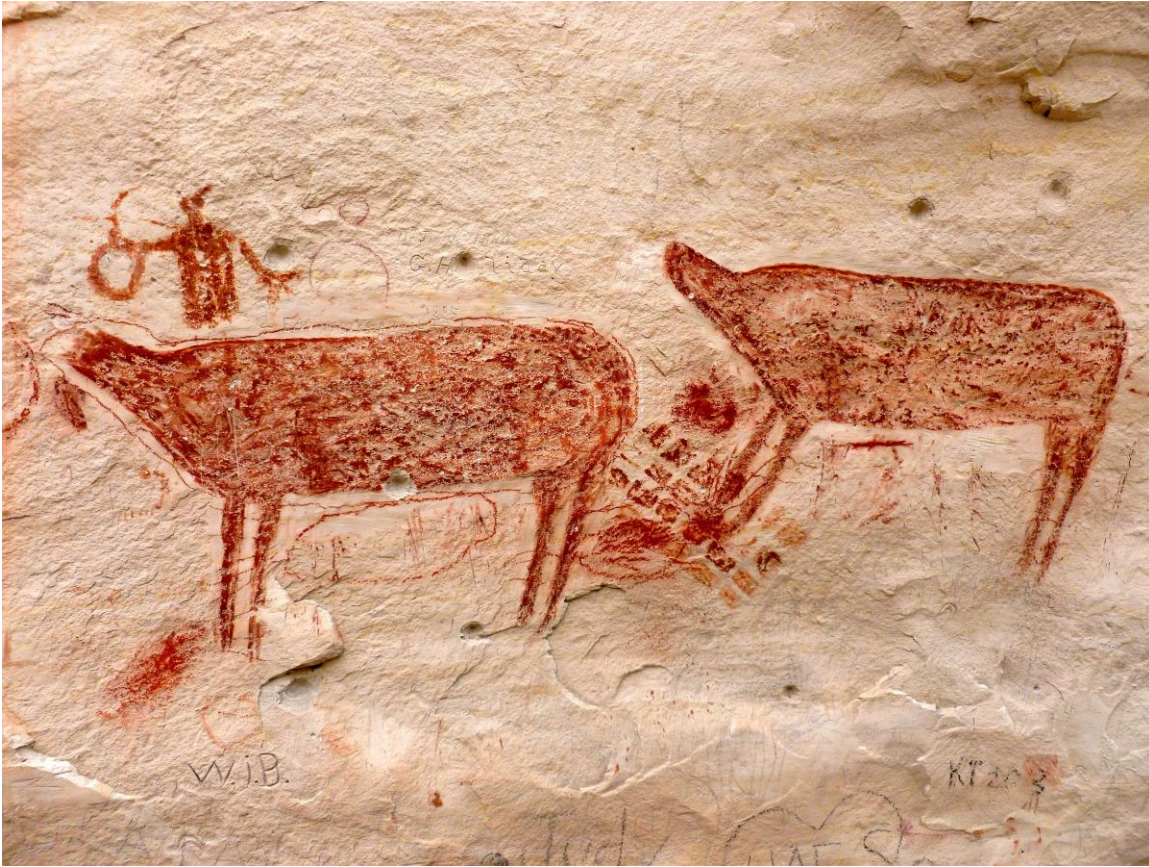
smile.” I had a hard time with that, though it cost me some tips and the goodwill of my boss. [L] [SEP] I reached the low point of my guiding life during a Marlboro Adventure Team trip, an event for winners of a contest to promote smoking and rugged individualism in countries in which advertising for tobacco products was still legal. I prepared myself for trouble when I saw the trip leader remove the motor rig’s spare outboard from its box, which he then filled with ciggies and booze. The organizers wanted us to flip boats in the whitewater to provide the cameramen on shore with footage for commercials aired in South America. Between rapids, they asked the paddle raft guides to tie on to a motor rig that dragged boatloads of macho, hung-over, helmeted conquistadors to the next “cool” spot.

Worst of all, though, I sensed, no, I *knew* I was part of the problem. My writing about the Four Corners’ besieged landscapes seemed to make little positive difference; simply educating the public would never provide a cure. As my Coyote Gulch visit had shown, the lofty goal of educating backcountry users about wilderness ethics and etiquette is based upon optimism with regards to human nature. Defaced rock art, scorched campfire rings, torn-out Wilderness Study Area markers, and fouled waterholes in even the most remote quarter quickly put dampers on such enthusiasm. I could not rid myself of the feeling that, by publicizing this region, I ultimately contributed to its defilement and destruction.

An argument can be made that public lands need to be used recreationally to ensure their continued protection and funding, to keep them from rapacious developers or corrupt politicians. On the other hand, more than three million visitors per year might easily enjoy the Grand Canyon to death. There are no easy solutions to this dilemma.

Some of the boxes that will hold desert keepsakes still have old addresses on them; I think half of all my belongings must be in transit or storage at any given time. When I see the labels, more bittersweet memories come rushing in. I’m reliving the anticipation and reluctance I felt when shipping these boxes off. Disenchanted with academic life at the postgraduate level, unwilling to objectify cultures, and unable to secure grant money for my Ph.D. project, I’d dropped out of school. There were few guide openings at the time for someone with limited experience and a great deal of competition for them. Opportunity called elsewhere, seconded by the desert’s siren

song—I'd been offered an outdoor instructor position in a youth program in Arizona. With my moorings already cut, I followed the current. The rest is river history.



Vandalized rock art panel in SE Utah (photo by author)

I am aware that moving to Alaska—the destination for these packed boxes—is not a solution. The political climate in the Last Frontier State closely resembles that of the Beehive State. As a latter-day itinerant, I will become part of the problem there—it can't be avoided. But approaching middle age, I feel that time is running out. To paraphrase Aldo Leopold, I simply don't wish to grow old without wild country to be old in.

While moving to Alaska in mid-winter seems unwise, I cannot think of a better place to start the New Year—or a new chapter in life. Let it be cold. Let it be dark. Let summers be buggy. And let us hope we can keep some places wild.

This House Burns Blue

by Gabby Vachon

My mother wears so much blue, it's fucking ridiculous.

Her whole house is decorated in blue, so much so that she has a room called “the red room” because it lacks the hegemony of blue of its neighboring kitchen and laundry room.

People—like her sisters, her personal trainer, and the cashiers at the local grocery store—often remark upon the blue, even poke fun at it. But their criticism never bothers her.

She just smiles her famous tight smile and lets out a light suburban-mom laugh.

I don't know for sure why she's so attached to the color blue, but I have a few theories:

1. Blue may remind her of her childhood, as her parents were ardent Quebec separatists. If you don't know much about Quebec politics, here's a very basic overview of the Sovereignty movement, or at least my version of it, keeping in mind I am a pure-bred French Canadian who grew up in Montreal: French Canadian people made up most of Quebec, a large Canadian province; English people made up most of the rest of Canada. The Quebec provincial government was pissed at Canada's federal government for a multitude of reasons (some rational, some lunatic) and decided to make the Quebec people vote twice, in 1980 and 1995, about separating the province of Quebec from Canada, making Quebec its own country. The vote failed both times, but the periods between 1970 and 1995 were wrought with aggressive discourse, xenophobia, and even terrorism.

My mom was born into a house with a big blue Fleur de Lys flag (the official Quebec flag) planted on its lawn. She had been cradled in this flag; it was her first toy, her first friend, her first truth. My grandparents made phone calls for the Separation party, hosted events, and were even investigated in relation to terrorist acts on federal representatives. The big blue flag, separated into four corners, represented a people she could call her own, through childhood all the way through young adulthood. She was proud Separatist.

Then she moved to Toronto to study. She met my dad, an anti-Separatist to the core of his being. She learned English. She got a good job. She read more than what was available in her childhood home and French Catholic convent high school. And slowly but surely, she changed her mind.

This house that was once unified by Separatism had fragmented. She fought brutal political wars with her parents and siblings, with whom she remained, despite the political divide, very close. These fights hinged on identity, on the very idea of belonging, on the very notion that the family had come from the same blue roots and beliefs, yet couldn't agree to the same nation state.

The Canadian political climate calmed after 1995, the year I was born, and my parents moved back to Quebec. They settled in a nice English neighborhood. They raised a nice bilingual family. They held nice Christmases with my mother's family, tiptoeing around the glass shards of a once unified familial political belief.

I know she would deny it if confronted, but there is still a fragmentation inside my mother's heart. There were nights of endless fights that don't escape nightmares even for fifty-year-old women with blue yoga mats and blue Mercedes SUVs.

A river runs through my mother's heart when politicians mention a third referendum, and that river, though thin and filled with old rotten sticks and stones, runs blue.

2. Blue may remind her of my teenage years. When I was sixteen-years-old, I was admitted to a children's psychiatric hospital. I was bulimic, depressed, a nervous wreck, and saw myself at the edge of something. I wasn't sure what that something was, but it felt violent. It's as much as you'd expect from any sixteen-year-old, really, but I was empty, and lonely, and suicidal, so the hospital, after I'd called an emergency hotline and met with their team a few times, decided I should be admitted for a week's worth of treatment. They called my mother into a small blue room filled with many chairs. She sat in the one furthest from me, closest to the doctor. The psychiatrist then explained how my mother, because I was a minor, would have to go downstairs, sign me over to the hospital's custody, and pack a few of my things from home, like homework, pajamas, and toothbrush.

My mother paused for a short time, though it seemed like forever, until she said: “What if I don’t sign her over? What happens then?” I couldn’t believe her reaction at first, but with thought, I could. My mother came from a generation that found disgrace in therapy, shame in weakness, and secrecy in suicide. There was no “sixteen-year-old girl who lives in a nice house with a nice family who goes to a nice school with her nice friends and gets nice grades” who was also suicidal. Whatever the problem, it wasn’t something a little bit of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps couldn’t fix. She believed that these doctors, with their sharp teeth and parent-shaming, would seek to destroy her blue-blood beliefs.

I saw my mother not as angry, but as scared. Scared of the small blue room that separated us, mother and daughter, blood and flesh, alive and, well, less alive. There were too many chairs. I could see it in her eyes, that she thought there were too many chairs. There were too many chairs for too many therapists and counselors and psychiatrists with their Pfizer checks and pernicious hands. She didn’t want to believe this team of strangers could do a better job repairing me than she could, the one who had birthed me in a room not unlike this one.

The doctor answered her, looking at me directly: “Well, we are keeping her, whether you sign her off or not. We will take custody, but it is up to you how peacefully it is done.” And that was that. I stayed a week. My mother came during visiting hours and brought me awkward hugs and bowls of fruit.

That wasn’t my last time in a mental hospital, not by a long shot, and my mom has gotten better at handling the devastation each time. But I know in retrospect that it was in that moment when my mother understood she couldn’t contain my sanity in a clean Tupperware container. There was always going to be too much blue inside my heart for her to warm with her burnt banana bread or long heat-curved eyelashes. I was born a red-blooded girl, but numbed to a pale blue shade as I grew older; and though my mother wears her blue proudly, she also knows the color to be bigger than what any mother can fix.

3. Blue may remind her of the eyes of those she loves.

We are truly the whitest family on the block. We have light blond hair and alabaster skin, and, yes, blue eyes (except my dad, but we really have a hard time believing he's actually physically related to us).

All my cousins have eyes like sapphire engagement rings, so bright and faceted you could neglect the possibility of divorce with one hefty check at Kay jewelers. My aunts have eyes like Pillsbury chocolate chip cookie dough packaging, warm and sweet and definitely in danger of sugar rush and/or salmonella, depending on their mood.

My brother has eyes like an airy blue sky, free of trouble.

My grandparents have eyes like the Caribbean Sea, clear and distinct and free of pollution.

I have eyes like an angry lake, dark and moody.

And my mother, my mother has eyes so vibrant blue you can see the embrace of her safety.

You can't slip on the blue carpeting in my house.

You can't spill juice on the blue tablecloth.

You can't hurt your back sleeping on the expensive blue mattress in the guest room.

You can try to escape it, certainly, but my mother possesses blue so potent you can see yourself in its reflection. You see yourself, and your family, and the cracks in your skins, and your smile lines, and your stress wrinkles, and your veins.

Those blue veins that unite us all: separatist, mentally ill.

Those bulging lines in our arms that trace our heritage from France to this home in the suburbs where my mother paints the walls in our honor.

For our sake, she wears her blue parka when it's cold and her blue Speedo one-piece when it's hot. For our sake, she is monochromatic.

And maybe also for her sake.

After all, a dark blue Mercedes SUV is so much easier to clean.

Step Over

by John McCaffrey

The best year of Allen Iverson's life was my worst. Determined to shed a "me-first" image, Al had bought into a team concept under new coach Larry Brown and propelled the underdog 76ers into the 2001 NBA Championship series against the star-powered Los Angeles Lakers. On the way, he had won the All-Star and League MVP trophies, dazzling fans and fellow players with his mercurial quickness and relentless offensive attack. He was relentless and fearless going to the basket against much larger foes, flinging his tat-laden, skinny body into thick seven-footers, finding a sliver of an angle to arch the ball up and under massive arms, taking the invariable hit, and falling, his cornrows glinting in the arena light, like a spent bottle-rocket. The miracle was never that the ball went in, which it almost always did that year, but that he got up off the floor after such a beating. But he did, every time.

For a while that year, I wasn't sure I'd get up. Not literally, but emotionally. The hit I took was my wife leaving me, and while it might not have been as breathtaking as an Al swoop to the hoop, it had still been a six-year journey together as a married couple, and it hurt to have it end. Basketball helped to relieve the pain: watching, as well as playing. Like Al, I was a guard, and while I held none of his absurd athleticism, I could move well, dribble well, and shoot, I must admit, very well. I excelled in pick-up games, or at least held my own, and while I had never stopped playing once I got married, my forays to the court multiplied, and intensified, after my separation. I literally wore sneakers out, and nearly my knees and feet, but the game, the competition, the sweating and striving, helped me let go of tension, ease depression, and forget my troubles for a while.

Nights were spent scouring the television for games, and, as I had gone to school in Philadelphia (Villanova University) I gravitated toward the Sixers, and, naturally, Al. He was an underdog and so was the team that year, overachieving and winning games in bunches. I identified with them and felt inspired by them—if they could beat the odds and make a run for a championship, I could surely overcome my grief and feel good again. But like an NBA season, it was a long haul—feeling good again, that is.

There were times when the grief was overwhelming, and with it came doubt and insecurity. Bouts of sadness led to fits of anger, tears produced clenched fists. I hardly ever felt comfortable, or at peace. I had trouble enjoying things I always enjoyed: reading, writing, even day-dreaming. About the last thing I wanted to do was spend time in my head, but that's the only place I seemed to dwell, deep inside, a dark place. It was like a self-inflicted prison sentence, and my pain was the warden. Break time from this metaphorical cell came from hoops. The basketball court was "my yard," a place where I could breathe fresh air, even if it smelled of sweat, where I could loosen my limbs, release anxiety and let go of aggression, where I could feel like myself again, or at least as long as I held "winners."

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About the same time the Sixers made it to the NBA championship that year, I was taking steps forward, small, incremental movements of progress, moments when my shoulders would release tension and I would take a whole breath in, rather than just an anxious sip. The growing sense of ease encouraged me to take chances, to be less isolated, to think again about a life lived and not hidden from. To this end, my family had a vacation house out in the Hamptons, in the bucolic town of Wainscott, just a mile from a beautiful beach and the Atlantic Ocean. It was just after Memorial Day, the start of the summer season, and I had a hankering to go there and spend the weekend away from City life. I also was looking forward to playing basketball.

Wainscott, at that time, contained in its small confines one of the few remaining one-room school houses in the country (it since has added a separate building to accommodate an increase in students), and on the grounds was a sun-bleached (and cracked) concrete basketball court. It was here that an evening hoops game was played every evening during the summer. There were no lights on the court, but from early June to late August games would last until darkness, or until the players gave up from exhaustion. I was a habituate of the game, considered it my home court, and must have launched thousands and thousands of jump shots (during contests and alone) at those two rusted rims over the years. There were others who were regulars, but none as regular as me. I lived for the game throughout my high school and college years, never too tired from a summer job or from having too much fun the night before to be first on

the court. Graduation from college, moving to Hoboken, getting a full-time job, and, eventually, getting married, limited my time in the Hamptons. But I still put in enough weekends to maintain a presence at the evening game, gaining comfort in its continuance and my place in its history.

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That Memorial Day weekend, 2001, I left New York City on a Friday afternoon, taking as a mode of transportation the Hampton Jitney, a bus by any name, but one jazzed up, perhaps, by its destination, the haughtiness of the mostly wealthy riders, and the provision of free orange juice and peanuts for the just-over-reasonable fee. The Jitney was good for me because it dropped me in Wainscott, and I could walk to my house. It was something my ex-wife and I liked to do, that walk, easing the transition from the cacophony of the City, the long bus ride (always traffic on the Long Island Expressway), enjoying, finally, the quiet calm of passing under a tree-lined, non-lighted street and, when conditions were right, the distant sound of ocean waves finding the shore. This was the first time in years I had done the trip solo, and, truthfully, the first time I would be at the house alone for such a long weekend. It was a bit daunting, but I comforted myself that it would be good for me, give me time to reflect, and, mostly, play lots of basketball.

Unfortunately, for the first part of the evening, time alone was not good for me. I paced the house as the sun dipped in the sky, starting to feel sorry for myself, thinking about my ex-wife, feeling sad and lonely. I finally called my parents, not wanting to worry them about my state, but to connect and let them know I was safe. Of course, I worried them. I wept openly to my mom and dad, telling them all my struggles. They showed their support for me, let me know they loved me and that I would be okay, and my mother, in infinite maternal wisdom, told me there was a casserole dish of baked ziti in the freezer. I hung up and felt better. It was enough to give me an urge to take a jog. I laced on sneaks, shorts, T, and with headset on, took off.

I had never run so hard and for so long in my life, not before, and not after. Sweat and fury poured out of me, and when that was extinguished, out came all the other emotions I was holding. By the time I made it back to the house, more than an

hour later, covering at least ten miles, what was left inside me, what I felt, was one thing: relief.

I was also starving. Remembering my mother's suggestion, I took out the ziti and popped it into the microwave. Then I turned on the TV. About the time the ziti was ready to eat, Game One of the Lakers vs. 76ers was starting. According to the announcers, and just about anyone who followed the game, it was going to be rout. So dominant were the Lakers that season (they had won twenty games in a row), and so stellar was the play of their two stars, Shaq and Kobe, and so steady their coach, the renowned Zen-Master, Phil Jackson, that few, if any, gave the 76'ers a chance to win even one game. A sweep, it seemed, was inevitable.

Which was what the LA faithful, including Jack Nicholson and other Hollywood glitterati, were standing and chanting in unison before the opening tip that night at the newly-opened Staples Center: "Sweep, Sweep, Sweep!" The sound of their chanting reverberated throughout the arena, like a Roman Coliseum crowd calling for a fallen gladiator's head. But as I gorged on ziti, still clad in my sweat-drenched shorts and shirt, it was clear the 76'ers had not gotten the message, were not defeated yet, at least not that night.

And it was all because of AI. Basically, he played out-of-his-mind, doing everything he did all season and more, taking it to the rack with fearlessness, ball-hawking on defense, breaking down defenders and causing uncontrolled chaos on offense. His brilliance willed them to overtime, where he hit the shot that has been since called the "Step Over," a far-right baseline corner juke of a "j" over a fallen, "ankle-broke" Tyron Lue, the then back-up point guard for the Lakers, and now head coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers. They were just two of the forty-eight points AI scored that night, but the most memorable. Sportsmanlike or not, what AI had done, after hitting the j, was take a giant monster-truck stomp over Lue's prostate body. I saw it not as bravado, but defiance, an unwillingness to concede to a more powerful enemy, a David vs. Goliath triumph (even though Lue was shorter). I stood, and with ziti sauce caked to my mouth, cheered like a maniac. Then I cried. I cried and cried and cried. And at the end, just like my run, what I felt was one thing: relief.

~ ~ ~

I finally did clean up that night: showered, went to bed, and set my alarm. There was supposed to be a special game the next morning, at nine am, and I planned to get there early, to warm up and be ready. But when I got there, and waited and waited, no one showed up. My information had been wrong. There was no game that morning. Rather than go back home and risk feeling depressed again, I ventured to the far right baseline corner and started to shoot jumpers, and, whenever one hit the mark, I emulated AI, lifting my leg up and stomping over my imaginary, but very real foe, feeling, at least for that moment, defiant and in control.

This Is a Dickie Lee Song

by Maria Trombetta

Dammit, Dickie Lee, you were supposed to live forever. You always said to me, “No way, uhn uhn, not me. I’m never gonna die. I’m gonna live forever. I’m stayin alive, like John Travolta. Stayin aliiiiive, iiiiiiv—ah!”

He used to say he was born in the Sonoma State Hospital on March 6th, 1948. I can’t find any records of anyone being born there, no doubt his parents brought him there when he was a baby, less than two years old, after they realized he was blind. Albert says that Dickie Lee was on the little kid unit with him, Baine Cottage. When I met Dickie Lee he asked me my name, date of birth and place of birth. Vital facts that he stored in his mind for years. The fever that made him lose his eyesight may have pushed another part of his brain into overdrive, because he had a thing for dates and for music, an incredible memory bank that held lyrics and birthdays. He could tell anyone what day their birthday was going to fall on this year and next year. When I saw him in last April, he told me that in 2015, my birthday would be on a Friday.

“Your name is Maria Trombetta and you were born on January 30th in Santa Rosa, right? You are married to Jonathan Palmer and his birthday is September 9th and he was born in Baltimore. Is his sister still Diane Bowcher and her birthday is March 31st?”

~ ~ ~

The first time I saw him at the Neighborhood House day program, he was sitting scrunched up in a corner next to a CD player, grumbling about having to listen to the Beach Boys over and over again. His head was folded down to his chest and his arms were wrapped protectively over his red lunch bag that hung from a black strap around his neck. He was small, slight, with dark short hair. I was stationed on a chair in the hallway, doing my “observation”—a week long training that consisted of sitting and watching what was going on, watching the dramas of thirty-five unique lives play out on a six-hour stage. Dickie Lee was in the art room, the room designated for quieter work, which also seemed to hold the people who were able to retreat out of the main room’s

chaos without drawing attention from the staff. So most of these folks were either napping or doing mosaics with dried beans and glitter glue. Once in a while, usually on their way to take someone else to the bathroom, a staff person would pop in to the art room and press play on the CD player. I don't know how long the Beach Boys were in there before I started my "observation" but it was on repeat for two days at least before Dickie Lee freaked out. The Boss was taking him upstairs to the van, arms linked together to guide him, when he turned his face up towards hers and let her have it.

"I don't wanna listen to the same goddam songs over and over! I'm gonna blow this place up! I'm gonna blow all you up!" He pulled away from her, elbows out and free and stretched himself taller.

"I'm going to blow it up!"

The Boss hustled him into the elevator, promising new music tomorrow in a syrupy voice. I heard her start humming a song and by the time they reached the lobby Dickie Lee was singing, "Sitting on the dock of the bay, wasting time ..." with gusto.

I made a mental note to change the CD every hour. At the end of the week I was allowed to go in the art room. Dickie Lee refused to move out of his chair, but while I was painting with Albert or helping Monica with her magazines, we would sing with each other. Mostly Beatles at first, because those songs I knew well. Then after a few months, we branched out to Creedence and the Rolling Stones and by then he would stand up and paint with me.

~ ~ ~

Do you remember when we went on the summer trip to Santa Cruz and I convinced you to ride on the Merry-Go-Round? You got stuck getting off the horse and kept shouting that your leg was going to break? I had to lift you up in the air and wiggle you off the horse and heave you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. You said I saved your life.

~ ~ ~

The doctors say cancer has spread to his brain and he has maybe two months, maybe less. I have to go see him. I don't want to go. He is receiving hospice care at his group home. My impression of group homes is that they are one step up from nursing homes, with plastic covers on the furniture and a lingering smell of pee. I don't want to

see him hurting and angry and belligerent. I don't want to see him dying the way I saw Bill dying in SF General, shriveling up in the bed, or Albert, lost in his own mind and furious at everyone in the world. I dread calling his home. But when the phone rings, a really nice woman answers. She says yes, of course I can come visit and is this Maria Trombetta? I answer her, sounding I'm sure, confused.

"He talks about you all the time. My name is Maria too. He always says to me, 'But you're not Maria Trombetta'."

~ ~ ~

I cry when she hangs up. Even after I've been gone for five years, you must talk about me the way I talk about you. Telling small legends of our lives to other people.

~ ~ ~

When I introduce myself, people either forget my name instantly or start singing one of the songs associated with it. "Maria" from *West Side Story* is the most common for men between the ages of fifty and seventy, "Ave Maria" for the older folks who fancy that they can really sing, "Take a Letter, Maria" by a few obnoxious people, once the Blondie song by a slightly blitzed bartender, but the most common and horrible, from *The Sound of Music*, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?".

This song was my sister's weapon of choice for many years. She was clever with her forms of torture and as siblings do, knew what drove me to tears. The brown plastic Fisher Price record player placed just above my head on the dresser. She held the record like a trophy out in front of her, just out of my reach. One, two, three waltzing twirls around our bedroom she spun, pretending she was Julie Andrews on the mountaintop. Green shag carpet tickling my feet as I jumped for it, trying to swat it away from her.

"Nooo!" I wailed.

Laughter. Evil sibling laughter.

And as a child, I didn't know that the nuns in the movie were worried about her free-spiritedness, or really why the nuns would care. All I heard was a nasty, mocking voice telling me that I was flighty and stupid and a big pain in the ass. When people sing it to me now, I have to stand there with a forced smile on my face and wait until they get through four or five lines before they forget the rest of it. Then they finish and I am still

standing there, wanting to flee, and they always, always laugh a shrill little laugh. Like the song was a really funny inside joke.

~ ~ ~

I had been working at the Neighborhood House with Dickie Lee for two years when *The Sound of Music* appeared in a pile of videos after a trip to the library. I cringed and put *Ben-Hur* on top, hoping it would disappear. But, one movie day, somebody slipped it into the VHS machine. A great, green whirling Julie Andrews started singing before I could stop her, and Dickie Lee sat right next to the speaker on the T.V. I made a point to clean the bathrooms for a long time that day to avoid it.

When the movie was over (well, we decided it was over after the goatherd puppet performance, since everyone but Dickie Lee and Rene had fallen asleep), Dickie Lee started humming the soundtrack. Days of humming, humming, humming. Songs that he had not heard in years, songs that had been displaced by Phil Collins and Elton John, they all came back. He hummed them all in a loop, until one stuck. The Maria song. Patting my arm, he hummed it. Coloring his sunrise pictures, he hummed it. It wormed its way around his brain and dug in. And then, after about a week of this, a week of me dreading that it would happen, it happened. He started singing. Quiet at first and then loud enough for the room to hear.

“DA DADA DU DA DU DA DUUDO!”

Oh no. Oh no.

“DA DA DU DU DU DA DU DOOO!”

I felt my face turn red hot, an instant sunburn. I wanted to hide. I wanted my name to be Julia, Rhonda, Sarah, anything but Maria.

But this is what came out of his mouth.

“NOBODY solves a problem like MA--RIA! NOBODY can catch a cloud and pin it down! NOBODY SOLVES A PROBLEM LIKE MA—RIA! Nobody holds a moonbeam in her hand.”

He lurched out of his seat and stood in the middle of the room, reaching his hands out for me, wobbling back and forth as he sang. I grabbed his hands and he pulled me in real close, arms crooking around my neck, chin stubble scraping my ear.

“Nobody! Nobody solves a problem like Maria Trombetta!”

~ ~ ~

Were you the first person who made me feel loved?

~ ~ ~

I ring the bell on Tuesday and the other Maria opens the door. She is just as nice in person and the home is clean and beautiful, thank god. She brings me into his room and hooks him up to the oxygen tank so he can talk and breathe at the same time. He is in a reclining hospital bed, eyes open. I sit next to him and he doesn't turn towards me. He looks smaller, face shaved, stubbly black hair cut short, a small sixty-six-year-old man sinking in to himself. I see the postcard of the Skunk Train I sent on the floor next to the bed, so someone must have read it to him. I rest my hand on his upper arm and try to think of something to say.

"I heard a Billy Joel song on the radio today."

"Which one?" He rolls his head slightly back and forth towards me.

"Piano Man." Which is not true, it was "Only the Good Die Young", my least favorite and too real for this moment. I suddenly can't think of anything to talk about. I feel awkward and sad. His white t-shirt has a tiny spot of dried blood on it, right under his ear. I look at his dresser and the CD's stacked up on it in desperation for a song. Journey? Is it possible that I will cry now every time Journey comes on the radio? He saves me by belting out Tina Turner unprompted. We sing "What's Love Got to Do with It" and move on to "True Colors" and "Joy to the World" and "Stand by Me". He tries to whistle "Can't Get No Satisfaction," but the oxygen tube is in the way and he starts clawing at it. I hold his hand and convince him to leave it in. We talk about when I came to San Francisco, and he remembers that I worked at the café in Noe Valley with our friend Max, who later got a job at the Neighborhood House after I put in a good word for him with the Boss.

"Max Doyle was born on October 5th in Washington D.C."

"You are right, Dickie Lee. When I started working with Max, he was only nineteen."

"He is thirty-three now. Just turned thirty-three."

I notice the tiny hairs on his scalp and how they have thinned over the years. I suddenly see an image of my father in a hospital bed, hair falling out, skin yellow,

propped up on pillows and me by the side, rails digging into my arms. What will I sing to my father when it is his time? “Blackbird”? “I’ve Just Seen a Face”? The fear of that day hits my stomach and I feel like I can’t breathe. This is coming for everyone, everyone I know and love and it is my job to watch and hold their hands and then be left all alone.

An hour goes by of us singing and talking and by the end of it I feel like no time has passed. We were right where we always started. But I know I should go now. His breathing is off and he seems tired. I say that I will come back next Tuesday to visit. The other Maria adjusts his oxygen and looks at me with big eyes and tells me to please come back next week, that he will look forward to it so much.

~ ~ ~

I was ready to come visit you on Tuesday, October 14th. I made plans to leave early and my bag was packed. I called your home and Maria answered again. She said she was sorry. It was fast. You died on October 10th, a Friday.

The Places They Could Go

by Rebecca Potter

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go . . .”

—Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You'll Go*

I have a lump in my throat as soon as *Pomp and Circumstance* begins and the graduates file in. I sit with other robed teachers on one side of the graduating class, so close I can smell Ethan's too-strong cologne and read the glittery inscription painted on Olivia's mortar board: *I applied to Hogwarts but was accepted at UK. Go Wildcats!* Family and friends of the graduates surround us in stadium seating. Some wear suits and ties and others wear plaid button-down shirts tucked into khaki shorts. Several parents carry bouquets and gift bags. Phones out and ready. Now and then someone yells something like “You go, girl!” or “We love you, Matt!” For a moment or two I put myself in the place of one of those parents watching a ceremony that officially says my child is grown and will be leaving me soon. I exhale deeply to prevent myself from crying.

The ceremony begins the way it does every year, with welcome addresses and speeches. Along with worn-out admonitions about always remembering the good times of high school and dreaming big and going far, the Valedictorian and Salutatorian both mention me in their speeches. They say kind words about the difference I have made in their lives. Colleagues sitting near me slap my back, graduates turn and smile and pump fists at me. These speeches are gifts. Teachers don't get bonuses or merit raises; this is it right here—public recognition from former students. I am honored and humbled. But it's not their speeches or the mention of my name that causes the lump in my throat to finally dislodge and the tears to come.

It's the names. Nearly three hundred of them. With each name, a student crosses the stage, and so does a story. Mia went with the softball team to the state championship two years in a row. Alex has a 4.0 and scored well on several AP exams.

Erin will be the first in her family to go to college. Ruby's parents emigrated from Uzbekistan; she is the oldest of eleven children. Jessica is a Mormon, the only one in our school. Chris is going to a college thousands of miles away on a wrestling scholarship. Josh shot a buck with a beautiful set of antlers last fall. Andre wants to be a musician; his mom wants him to be a doctor. Missy hates school. Jeremiah is gay and is concerned about people in our small town not liking him because of it. Troy entered my class with a second-grade reading level. Beth is pregnant; her belly is big enough to cause the graduation gown to billow out. Hannah lived with her aunt and uncle until they were divorced this year. Logan broke his foot in the first football game of his senior year. Crystal's parents spent their inheritance on drugs; she moved out. Ethan has a drug problem; he's been arrested several times. Kayla's boyfriend beat her up so her parents put a restraining order on him. Hailey's mother passed away just three years ago, and she is constantly searching for someone to be her mom.

And on and on they go. Some dream of becoming doctors or pilots or lawyers or teachers or business owners. Some are going to travel. Others will join the military. Some of them will become engineers, welders, cosmetologists, or mechanics. They will go on to pursue careers, start families, and generally do good things in their community. But other names whisper failure. Some of them have no dreams. They don't know they are allowed to dream, or they can't. They are doomed before they have even really begun. They will jump from dead-end job to dead-end job, toxic relationship to toxic relationship, never settling down or finding contentment. They will abandon their kids, end up poor, lonely, and addicted to something. Or they will live in their parents' basement far too long. Maybe they'll end up in jail. Some will die too young.

As they graduate, their paths split and splinter. No matter what they do or where they go, they take part of me with them. They take what they have learned in my classroom and leave me behind to question if they will make it and to wonder what kinds of places they will go. It is this—having cared about these people so much and knowing only echoes of my voice go with them from this point—that makes me cry at graduation.

I think about this when Michael crosses the stage. There is no one there to clap for him. His celebration is his own. His dusty brown work boots and jeans peak from

below his graduation gown. He towers over the principal as he heartily shakes his hand and receives his diploma, then gives a sideways smile for the camera. He lumbers off the stage, his tassel getting stuck on his lip.

I had Michael in class his sophomore and junior years. When he was a junior, he broke his ankle and then caught his mother stealing his pain medicine. I can see his mom, dirty and small, short brown hair and sunken eyes. I imagine her rummaging through his drawers, under his bed, searching for parts of him to steal—his privacy, his trust, his love.

He confronted her about it. She denied it, accused him of lying, and called him ungrateful. She said he was a terrible son. And then she kicked him out with nothing but a duffel bag, a broken ankle, and memories of growing up with a mother who needed to be high more than she cared about her child and a father who was never there. Eighteen and homeless, Michael went from one friend's house to another's, holding down a full-time job. He slept in most of his classes. When he was awake, his eyes were red and his attention somewhere else. But he was different in my class.

"Well, what do you think, Mrs. Potter?" His speech was slow and drawn out, very Southern and very kind. He constantly asked for approval, to make sure he was doing the work right, to know what he needed to do better.

"Michael, it's great." I returned to him the crumpled, scribbled-on notebook paper that was his rough draft. He had finished the assignment a full three days before anyone else and wanted feedback on the spot. Written expression was a real struggle for him because of a learning disability. I knew he had worked hard on this assignment. "I would give it a B. Well done!"

"What do I need to do to get an A?" I knew he would ask that; he always did. After a few more drafts, he did get the A. And he continued to work hard for me for all the time I had him in class. After one classroom observation, the principal expressed shock that Michael, whom he knew well, participated and worked so much. He wondered if he was always on task. Of course he was.

"You know why he works for you?" My principal didn't give me a chance to answer. "He knows you care about him, and he loves you for it."

Now Michael is graduating and will soon be starting community college. I think when Michael is in class this fall, he will hear my voice telling him he is capable. He will remember the story that Cheever wrote about a boy meeting his father at a train station. He will feel that anger again and vow to never be that person. He will be better than his father, better than his mother. He will hear me tell him how proud I am of him, as I have done dozens of times, because maybe no one else has done so. In class when he gets sleepy, he will hear me tell him, “Wake up, Michael. You got this, buddy.”

I clap hard when Michael crosses the stage at graduation. I do not even follow directions and wait for all the graduates’ names to be called before I do so.

When I first started teaching, when I cared about my job but before I knew how to really love my students, I wondered what the point really was, especially for the kids not going to college, those who will be working on a farm or in auto shop or on a factory line. Those kids will likely work hard and lead good lives, but they won’t need to know how the final chapter of *The Great Gatsby* is soaked in rich irony or how point of view affects our understanding of poor Miss Emily and her rose. Why did it matter if they knew the plot of *The Crucible* or if they had read anything by Hawthorne? I wondered why I should teach them how to explicate a poem or write an academic essay. If they couldn’t identify a preposition in a sentence, would it really make a difference in their quality of life? These questions in my early years came from a concern for efficiency and effectiveness. I did not see the point of wasting time and resources on teaching skills and material students would never use.

Now that I know what it means to love my students, my concerns have changed. What skills and content do they need to be successful beyond the classroom, whether they are going to college or not? How can I be sure to reach all of them? Am I doing enough? Am I doing it right? More difficult, what do I do about the students who will go nowhere no matter what I teach them? Teaching these stories and skills won’t save many of my students from failure. It’s more than just a possibility that some of my students will fail. So many already have.

Like Justin. Justin should be at graduation tonight. He should casually stroll across the stage, the way he used to walk the hallways, nod his head as he accepts his diploma, then with a slight, shy smile leave the stage, diploma in hand—ready to go. But

while his friends and classmates are celebrating and moving on, Justin is sitting in a jail cell writing me a letter, apologizing for letting me down, asking me to help him make his life matter.

Justin was never in trouble in school. He never caused problems. He came to class with his muddy shoes, Carhartt jacket, and a back pocket with a faded circle where he kept his can of dip. His hair was unkempt and his voice quiet. He punctuated his sentences with “Ma’am” and always looked me in the eye when I spoke to him. He was quiet and uninterested, but he did his work and was respectful.

Much of his life was a blank for me. His parents were divorced. I imagine his father wasn’t there for much of his childhood. And when he was there, they were working together in the tobacco field or under a truck. His mom probably worked a shift job, so she couldn’t help him with his homework or ask about his day or give him kisses which he would pretend annoyed him. I think he grew up in an empty house where he filled his loneliness with mischief. I think he was expected to be a man before he knew how.

Now this barely-man is alone in jail because he committed armed robbery. He and two other of my former students robbed a local convenience store. They stole beer and cash. Maybe Justin was the one holding the gun, sticking it in the cashier’s face. I hear his soft voice, the polite tones turned to quiet threats, “Give me the money.” He wouldn’t yell. He wouldn’t even sound mean. That’s not who Justin is, at least not in my classroom. It would be only the gun and the mask that would scare the cashier as he hurriedly and with shaking hands gathered the cash from the drawer for the boy who thought he was a man.

I reluctantly think about what kind of life Justin will have once he is out of jail—in a few months or possibly several years. The consequences of his mistakes will always be with him, defining who he is and limiting what he can become. And I wonder what parts of my voice Justin has taken with him to jail. Which of my words did he remember as he wrote his letter? I imagine him sitting on a bed in a gray jail cell, writing to me. He probably did not think about the O’Brien story when he wrote he was sorry. He was not considering the Longfellow poem when he scribbled about wanting to get his life

straight. He didn't care about subject-verb agreement or parallel structure or comma splices.

It was my voice telling him he was worth so much more than he understood about himself when he told me he thought he might not pass my class. It was the times I told him he was preparing to be a husband and a father. As he wrote his letter, he remembered me smiling at the classroom door he used to enter every day, telling him how glad I was he was here today and meaning it. Oh, how I wish he were here tonight with his classmates.

While I know Justin hears me, even from behind bars, I can't help but wonder what I could have done differently, done better, to keep him out of jail. More stories, more lectures, more encouragement, more rebuke, more smiling, more pleading. Even as I wonder this, I know that no matter what I did or how strong and loud my voice was, Justin would have followed his own path. He is just like so many others who will fail no matter how much I beg them not to.

Even though many will not succeed, I still teach each one with all I have. Their lives matter, even the ones who go to jail, and there is always hope for redemption. My job is not solely to prepare students for college and careers. My job is also to care and show kindness.

Just like I care about Breanna. As she crosses the stage now, her make-up is thick, so much so that her face is lost behind it. She covers herself with fake eyelashes, thick penciled eyebrows, lipstick that extends above and below her lips. She has a septum piercing and an eyebrow piercing. Tattoos and other piercings are covered by her robe. Underneath all the make-up and piercings is a beautiful young woman with a sad story.

Last year, she shoplifted a purse. Just because she wanted to. Just because she was a rebellious teenager pushing the limits of what she could get away with. But she got caught. She told me this in the quiet of my classroom during my planning period. She sat in one of the small student desks, me at my teacher desk. The space between us was wide enough and narrow enough to make Breanna feel comfortable to share. Her parents had separated years ago, her father absent for much of her childhood. Her mom always had money problems. This past summer she and her mom had been

evicted. Breanna faced foster care or moving in with her dad. While living with her dad was probably the better option, it wasn't easy. He yelled and cursed a lot and loved and encouraged very little. When Breanna had been caught stealing the purse, her mom picked her up from the police station. They decided to keep it a secret from her dad. But he found out. Yesterday.

Breanna said he yelled and cursed and yelled some more. I imagine Breanna sitting on the couch with her father standing over her, his words falling on her head with a heaviness that told her she couldn't be any better than this, with a coldness that said no matter how good she was after today, he would never see her as valuable. I imagine her pushing against his angry words, struggling to leave the room and his condemnation sentencing her to a lifetime of thinking she was destined only to make mistakes and let people down. She crouched below his yelling and made it to the door. After she left, her dad called the police. The officers found Breanna, took her home, and told her to sit down and have a rational conversation with her father or face more serious consequences.

Breanna and her dad sat at the kitchen table in silence.

She was telling me all of this because she just needed someone to listen, she said. And I was there. But then it struck me that she needed something else, too. "Breanna, do you need me to talk to you the way a mom talks to her daughter?" She nodded and let out a quiet yes. So I began. I spoke to Breanna the same way I would had it been my child who stole the purse, the same inflection I use when one of my sons has really, really messed up and I am beyond yelling, with the same intensity of motherly affection.

"You are worth too much, you are far too valuable, you are way too important to be making such bad decisions." My words were quiet and solid, slow and separated. I looked her in the eyes when I spoke, watching to be sure she heard the love behind my rebuke. "I love you too much to allow you to ruin your life by making stupid mistakes. You are better than this."

Head dropped and shoulders hunched over, this tough girl in front of me sobbed. I thought maybe I'd said too much. Maybe I had overstepped my place as a teacher. Through her crying she muttered, "I wish my own mom would talk to me like that."

I left the separation provided by my big teacher desk and went to this child. How I ached for her in that moment. How I wished I could do more and be more for her. Just like any mother, I wanted so much to take her hurt away and protect her from ever getting hurt again. Just like any mother, I wanted this child to be happy and good and safe, and I felt the desperation that came from knowing she was none of those things right then. I held her while she continued to sob. I knew she was not crying because she had stolen a purse.

Now at graduation, she winks at me after she is off the stage and returning to her seat. I study her as she walks by. I am concerned about her future, about her getting hurt, about how hard her life will be. She has no plans for college or work. I doubt her parents will offer much guidance. She is stepping forth into the grown-up world equipped with so many strengths and abilities but also with so much against her. I wonder where she will go. Maybe she will end up working in a salon in a big city making people look and feel beautiful. Or in the post-partum unit of a hospital. Perhaps in a real estate agency or a bank here in town.

But I know she could just as easily end up homeless. Or in jail. Or on drugs. Or worse.

Wherever she goes, I hope she will recall me telling her how beautiful she is, how valuable she is. Years from now when she is hurting because someone's ugly words are pouring down on her, I pray my voice will rise above the other and it will give her strength. While I might never see her again, I will tell her in remembered conversations that she is better than her mistakes, that grace is thick and all-covering, that it is never too late to do good things in this world. I don't know what kind of story she is going to write with her life after today, but I am so glad to be a part of it.

I love graduation because it represents the exciting edge of adulthood. These now-adults can do whatever they want, go wherever they want. Become whoever they want. So at graduation, I dream of the places they could go. And even though I will miss them and worry about them, I am satisfied in the hope that maybe one day, weeks or years from now, in some moment of their life when they need me they will hear my voice and, though faded with time, it will be clear and full of love.

A colleague of mine once talked about the lie that graduation is. All these graduates, smiling as they wait for their happy future to be handed to them. A huge stadium filled with family and friends cheering and clapping as these teenagers file one-by-one quickly crossing a stage to receive a flimsy, nearly meaningless piece of paper. We tease the kids with promises of the good things that await them and the amazing things they will do because they have graduated. But for many of these students, this graduation marks the highest achievement they will earn for the entirety of their lives. This is it. The pinnacle of their greatness: walking across a stage that millions of other people walk across every year while their family is asked to hold their applause until all the graduates' names have been called.

I see graduation differently than my colleague. Yes, for many, this is it. Yes, this might be the best thing they ever accomplish. And, yes, it hurts that so many will amount to so little. But they are here. They have accomplished something, even if it seems small to us. So let's clap. Let's celebrate. It might be our only chance. I clap for the many who will continue to rise to new levels of success. But I cheer just as mightily for the ones for whom this is it. Because *this is it*. Why not cheer? These people have value beyond their destiny.

So I cheer and clap and cry.

Papi and Me

by Ricardo José González-Rothi

A sixteen-degree forecast for North Florida was about the only type of day one would dare wear a herring bone wool sports coat and not look out of place. As I peeled the plastic bag off the hanger and pulled it from the closet, I noticed the handkerchief in the breast pocket.

The prior summer, I had found myself consoling a despondent mother, making funeral arrangements, and sorting through my dead father's belongings. He had owned the jacket for over thirty years, probably only wearing it three or four times. Sporting hand-crafted leather buttons, wide lapels, and stitched lining, Papi boasted about "the thick and precise weave, that it was handmade in Scotland . . ." He had bought it on sale at Schlessinger's, paying cash. It was the only nice thing my father ever bought for himself since we came to America.

Forty-five years earlier we had become steeped in a not unfamiliar trajectory for refugees, ten adults and six cousins crammed into "the uncle's house in New Jersey" and cozily sharing a single bathroom—one sink, one toilet. Since our having left Cuba, Papi worked temporarily as a dishwasher at Steak-n-Shake, then leveraging his thirty years' experience as a grocer, he was hired as head cashier and bag boy in someone's Latin market. We had no car. Every day, he stood at the bus stop at Bergenline and 85th. He opened Kiko's six days a week, worked on his feet twelve or thirteen hours each day for a not-to-boast-about hourly wage. The owner made good money. My mother, a former school principal in Cuba, worked the graveyard shift cleaning bedpans and surgical instruments in a community hospital. She and Papi saw each other during the week like passing ships, and it was during weekends that we spent time together as a family. That would be the rhythm our lives in New Jersey for several years.

My father thrived on the simplicity of life. I remember a few months after we arrived in the US, when on a bus to southern New Jersey, we passed a cornfield. He stood up from his seat marveling at the orderly rows, the tall stalks, the deep green leaves. I think it reminded him of the remote farm where he grew up with four younger brothers and two sisters whom he left behind when we came to the United States. He

was mortified and greatly embarrassed, when in his excitement while looking out the back window, the bus driver barked in New-Joisish English “Hey, you! Sit down bac dare!” Papi didn’t understand what the man was saying and was greatly embarrassed and offended as other passengers looked up. It wouldn’t be the last time he would be embarrassed about not speaking or understanding English. Despite efforts by me and my brother to teach him, he struggled. It was hard for a man in his mid-fifties with barely an eighth-grade education to learn a new language. He couldn’t understand why people would become frustrated when he struggled with his “Inglich”, which made him that much more self-conscious. For almost ten years he depended on one of us to accompany him to the bank to translate when he deposited his paychecks.

My father had immaculate handwriting, and even with a disabling lack of sensation in his fingers such that he could no longer button his shirts, he wrote monthly to our family back home. We, in turn, rarely heard from them. When I would inquire, Papi would propose that the mail delivery in Cuba was poor or that they couldn’t afford the stamps or that the government intercepted the letters. There was probably some truth in all his explanations, but I suspect these were in part a justification, his way of coping with unrequited replies. I think he felt responsible that they stayed behind and that he left, duty-bound, with his immediate family. I recall him sitting pensively by a window one evening, with a paper pad on his lap, while he wrote to his siblings in Cuba. It was before Christmas, an urban-grey New Jersey day, and it was snowing heavily. It must have been painful for him to be away from his siblings, longing for the Cuban sun, and knowing he might never see them again.

Papi was ecstatic one day when early in my senior year of high school he approached me with a proposal that if he could save enough money, I could partner with him and buy “our own grocery store.” Dreading the effects of my response, I had to be frank and told him that what I really wanted was to go to college and eventually study medicine. Facial muscles betrayed his disappointment, and with a forced smile and a deflated nod, he acknowledged my response, never to bring up the topic again.

My father continued to work until he was seventy-two, when his knees no longer allowed him to stand for long periods of time. He helped me through college, and then through medical school. Several years ago he stood beside me for a photo when I was

honored by students I taught as Professor of Medicine at a school where I would eventually establish myself as a senior faculty member.

The summer he died, I had sorted through his personal belongings. I folded the herring bone jacket and put it in my suitcase along with his old wallet and his penknife. Inside a well-creased envelope, postmarked May 1973, was a five-page letter I had written him thirty-four years earlier upon graduating from college. Written longhand in Spanish, I had detailed how much I appreciated him and all the sacrifices he made for me and for our family. I told him that I loved him, that I hoped I could make him proud of me some day. I also let him know that every time I wrote out my middle name (his first name), I would remember to think of him. It was the only letter I found in his belongings. I flew back to Florida.

On this cold February morning, months later, while getting dressed to make hospital rounds with my residents, I slipped on Papi's wool jacket. It fit, looked and felt right. I noted a small, hard bulge over the breast pocket. When I pulled the handkerchief from the pocket, a peppermint wrapped in plastic fell onto the bed.

Standing in front of the mirror, wearing my father's jacket and holding peppermint and handkerchief in each hand, I chuckled. Papi always insisted that it was impolite to cough in public, and he never forgot to remind us that if we went out, we should always take a mint in case we felt the urge to cough ... and yes, in the event we coughed, we should always have a handkerchief to cover our mouth.

Being a lung specialist, many of my patients struggle with incessant coughs. How ironic was it to have found myself, so ensconced in the academia of it all, that I had forgotten all about peppermint and cough.

My father had simple likes, but he was also a complex man. He carried his emotions deeply and quietly. Complaining about the hardness of life was never part of his vocabulary. He was well-liked by the countless customers he served as a grocer and businessman for over sixty years of his profession, both in Cuba and in Kiko's market. It was not unusual for me to see my father interact with strangers over the years, even those who could not understand his broken English, and universally they always seemed to find my father likeable. At home, Papi rarely showed exuberance in his emotions, except for those times his granddaughters would tickle him mercilessly. In my

fifty-seven years around him I never actually saw my father cry. I am sure he cried, but if he did, it was not in his nature to shed tears publicly. This was not something I would inherit from him. I wonder sometimes if things between Papi and me might have been different. We might have had a great father-and-son grocery business.

As I stepped into my car on the way to work, I conjured a hint of his Old Spice aftershave ... and I could almost feel the warmth and familiar grip of his two muscular arms wrapped around me from behind, just like he used to do when I was little.

I approached the on-ramp on the highway. Looking on the rearview mirror, I thought about my middle name.

TV Dads

by John Repp

One of the raising-a-kid pieties to which my wife and I felt most committed before our son's birth went like this: "No Television 'Til He's Two." Not for our child that mindlessness. He'd have engaged parents, not zombies slumped in front of a screen. He'd grow up with actual people using actual language, not an upholstered purple dinosaur singing idiotic songs. He'd make his own make-believe, and we'd help. Why, we'd scarcely miss the tube, what with all the exciting and educational adventures new parenthood would bring.

After all, we'd lived four thriving years in a valley that defeated all but a few of our occasional attempts—even my prayerful antenna adjustments during the late stages of the NBA playoffs—to attract a viewable picture from the one network affiliate whose signal reached us. Despite being confirmed addicts, we usually felt better off for the lack, but whenever conversation, music, and reading seemed too much like work, we fed our jones with rented videos. On those stupefied nights, we'd lie contented in the rural dark, the twenty-five-year-old set with the Flash Gordon remote flickering its soothing light into the living room.

Then, in a span of three hallucinatory weeks, we moved to the city; had a baby shower; piled up the baby supplies the shower hadn't supplied; sterilized and stocked the baby's room; ran up heart-palpitating sums of consumer debt to replace appliances, tweak the plumbing, and fix an electric service box that resembled something in a Tim Burton film; laid in two week's worth of post-birth food; and, just past dawn on an unforgettable day, careened to the hospital, where, ninety minutes after his parents staggered into the birthing room, Dylan swooped out and screamed for the first thirty minutes of his life.

This proved a portent. For three months, he caterwauled, screeched, howled, and shrieked whenever he wasn't asleep or making his daily, five-millisecond visit to the "quiet alert" state. "Day" and "night" lost all meaning. We shopped at 1:00 a.m., ate breakfast at noon and dinner at ten, began doing laundry long before dawn. We crawled toward sleep like castaways inching up an infinite pumice beach, only to realize again

and again we'd landed on an island without fresh water or edible fruit. We tried every colic "cure" known to science or folklore, for a time resorting to a homeopathic concoction that stained our teeth green as it failed to calm the urge to toss The Beast into the nearest snowdrift.

I exaggerate, of course, but any veteran of colic would tell you I exaggerate only a little. Though teamwork, willpower, music, and near-despairing prayer helped most during our ninety-day trial in the wilderness, the gift Dylan's grandparents made of a new Sony did provide some welcome sedation along the way. As hysteria ever-so-slowly gave way to occasional crankiness, we evolved an evening ritual that answered our needs for the next few years: Dinner at six; kitchen and Dylan clean-up until the Pennsylvania Lottery drawing at seven (the kid loves the jingle and the studio's array of institutional blues and greens); *Frasier* and *King of the Hill* reruns; bed for everyone at eight.

Not only did an hour a day of non-cable television generate no guilt, cause our son no discernible harm, and intermittently relieve my wife of the baby's simian demands, but, to my abashed surprise, it also provided me images of fatherhood resonant enough to appear now and then in a dream. I refer not to Hank Hill, the good-hearted, yet profoundly damaged protagonist of *King of the Hill*, the best animated television series this side of *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, but to Martin Crane, *Frasier* and Niles Crane's gruff, retired-cop father.

Though loneliness and self-deception bedevil the father as much as the sons, Martin displays several times during a typical *Frasier* episode his (and the show's) saving graces: common sense, a talent for cutting to the chase, a willingness to laugh at his own flaws, and a clear-eyed love for offspring so hyper-cultured they may as well be aliens. "Why do you make everything so complicated?" he'll say with a bemused shake of the head, and I chuckle as a lump rises to my throat. Almost to the day he died, I played *Frasier*/Niles to my father's Martin countless times, usually taking his bemusement as reproach, his "I'm just a simple man" as self-pity when he was more likely so baffled with love and confusion there was nothing more to be said. It infuriates me and shames me and breaks my heart that nothing I could ever say—and, like the

Crane boys, I said a lot—had any chance of changing how little we understood one another.

In my recurring dream, I'm Martin Crane's son. We climb a steep, treeless hill covered by dead grass. The low, grayish-black clouds threaten snow. He's a hundred yards or so ahead of me, half-hopping along with the help of his four-legged cane. Stumbling as I try to keep up, I'm so convinced "they're" about to pounce I spin around every few steps to face "them." Every time I do, I see nothing but the frozen slope behind us and the unmarked plain beyond. When I resume climbing, he's further away, though just when I think I'll never catch up—this happens over and over again—he turns and waves a "Come on! This is *great!*" wave, a crinkly, regular-guy grin brightening his face.

Each time I've had the dream, it ended with one of those waves, leaving me filled with love and longing and the desire that Dylan always look for me on his climb. I'll wave him along, even the tiniest detail of my bearing telling him he can *do* it, it's OK, despite the harm any "they" might try to do. I want both of us to live the Martin Crane philosophy: "Do you're best. If you screw up, try to make it right, then move on. Learn to laugh at yourself. Let go of the past. And above all, have fun!"

That's the dream, anyway, a far more demanding dream than No-TV-'Til-He's-Two, for this one means believing there's a chance my son and I will love *and* understand one another, at least some of the time. It also means admitting my father and I may not have been the strangers I need to think we were. Large and dogged and mysterious, he *did* help me get here, after all, his callused hand reaching back for mine at the most unexpected moments.

Lost and Found

by Toti O'Brien

There is death, and there is untimely death. They are different. Twenty years after your passing I still wonder about the appropriateness of your early call. About its legitimacy. I think of these two decades apparently stolen from you—an expanse of days, weeks, months, inexorably attached, marching forward without hesitation. They did not stop and wait to see if you'd catch up, when you slipped off board. No. Time didn't look back.

I do. When I glance behind my shoulder I see an intricate, colorful landscape you might have enjoyed exploring . . . I wonder why you weren't given a chance. Is there any ratio to life's diverse spans? Any reason beyond erratic sentencing? Any justice?

~ ~ ~

During your last summer, you became obsessed with the murder of a college student. I knew about it but I didn't pay attention. I was too preoccupied by your illness, though I didn't imagine how imminent the end was. Cancer was galloping, causing parts of you to break down in rapid succession. I was painfully aware my massage couldn't soothe the aches in your disintegrating bones. Still, every day we went through the motions. You quietly complained. I massaged, then I asked if you felt better. A little, you said. You didn't lie very well.

Once, you asked me to give you a ride into town. Too weak, you couldn't drive any more. But you needed a better radio in order to follow the news. Something your arm could hold up to your ear, in spite of its weariness. Something powerful, for you to capture each word.

I was consternated by how fast your hearing had gone, by the fact you could no more enjoy music. But you had zero interest in music, or anything else. You only cared about that murder on campus, in our town's oldest and most famous university. You were listening non-stop, eager for the next update.

Curiosity wasn't like you. Had my mind been in its normal state, I would have caught the incongruity. You could have been found with a book of poetry in hand—or art history—a good novel, perhaps—rather than the daily paper. Politics and crime had

never been on your menu. But that summer I remember you muttering to yourself: “This is very important. Extremely. I need to understand.”

Could the reason of your fascination have been not the crime (and the impenetrable mystery surrounding it) but the setting? You were a college professor. And you deemed your role precious, essential, almost sacred. Your devotion towards your students surpassed routine obligations. Now, while the news unfolded, it appeared as if faculty was involved. A department director was charged with obstructing the inquiry. Two teaching assistants would soon become the defendants.

There was more. Your daughters were about to start college. Did you worry about them? Were you aware you might be leaving them soon?

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She was twenty-two. The shot was so sudden, so silent, her friend thought Marta had simply passed out. She had dropped to the ground like a rag doll, like a string-less puppet. Then her girlfriend saw the small hole concealed by her thin blond hair. She started screaming. A passerby called for an ambulance. People rushed out from the adjacent building, hosting classrooms and offices of the school of Jurisprudence. The campus police arrived promptly. Marta was transported to a nearby polyclinic, where she died five days later. In fact, she was dead already, at least cerebrally. She never awoke from the coma into which she had instantaneously fallen.

Her life came to an arrest a bit before noon, sun reaching the zenith, in a hallway trapped between massive buildings hosting some of the most praised academia of our town—including the Law Library. Marta was a law student herself, and a good one at that.

A few steps and she would have entered the main plaza where Minerva stood—the university navel, hub, meeting point, main landmark—the statue of Athena, symbol of human wisdom and knowledge.

The truth about Marta’s murder was never found.

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But this you don’t know. When you died at the end of November—seven months after the bullet was shot—the authorities were still in the dark about the murder of Marta. And I wonder if their speculations (in absence of tangible proofs) kept you

occupied during the confinement of many hospital beds. Could you have guessed the case would remain unsolved? Could you have resigned to the gratuitousness of a severed life? I don't know. You were a splendid researcher. One whose patience defied all frustration. One of those who dig until they find water, or gold.

In spite of your inclination for humanities, you had been trained as an engineer. Unreflectively, you had followed your father's directions. Young and docile, you had complied out of discipline and meekness. Then you had bitterly regretted your choice, yet developed excellent skills, specializing in earthquake prevention. You had taught for decades in the Architecture department of the college where Marta was killed. Your students adored you.

Still, when mid-life crisis hit you, you gave your career a brisk turn. You pursued a totally different path, switching to the study of old monuments and ancient towns. You spent months questioning ruins until you understood how they were originally built, in order to remake their whole structure from the inside. A work of keen observation, fine detection, rigorous deduction. The new discipline you created for yourself, then scholarly formalized—founding an original school of thought—befitted you. You felt realized, fulfilled by your labor. Rapidly, your goals shifted from restoration to vulnerability. You focused on preventing the loss of architectural heritage—especially if belonging to endangered cultures.

On your deathbed, you oscillated between awareness of the end and plans for the future. "It is very important," you said—your eyes bright, animated. "Extremely." You were talking of a book you wanted to write, one you had drafted already. About vulnerability.

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You must have read, of course, about the projectile. You might have seen pictures of the CAT scan. There is something haunting about how lead was split in eleven fragments, each acting like a tiny separate bomb. Like an earthquake, simultaneously and irreparably damaging many areas of the victim's brain. Private Hiroshima. The shell, never found, became one of many controversial elements of the case. It should have fallen in the street, unless it were shot from far within the building, in which case it could have been recovered and then disposed of. But the inquiry firmly

settled on a window partly obstructed by an air-conditioner. Thus, the shooter's arm must have been stretched out to bypass the obstacle, and the shell must have necessarily dropped to the pavement. Like the gun, it was never located.

Firearms were discovered on campus—a variety of them. Some real, some modified toy guns. Some hidden and rusted, some in perfect shape. Some with shells trapped within. Indiscretions of improvised shooting parties—for fun, after work, in various facilities—reached the press. But the gun killing Marta wasn't identified.

The projectile might have exploded in small lethal shards, multiplying its destructive potential, because it was handcrafted, belonging to the amateurish arsenal the police was bringing to light. But homemade or manufactured is irrelevant. Brains are vulnerable anyway.

Was the intriguing fauna of weapons—sprouting like mushrooms at the core of academia—preoccupying you? I wouldn't be surprised, but I didn't ask. I was worried about you.

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Were you instead fascinated with the calculations—based on painstaking simulations, drawings, reconstructions—meant to determine the trajectory of the bullet, thus defining its probable point of origins? Everything conjured against credible results. Because Marta was hospitalized for five days, her wound had been dressed and had somehow healed. Therefore, during the autopsy it had been impossible to accurately assess its shape. In addition, no ballistic expert was present. Later, they had to be contented with the insufficient evidence of photographs.

Also, establishing the posture of Marta's head when she was hit was impossible. She was walking and animatedly talking with her friend. She might have lowered her eyes to avoid the sun—she was approaching the plaza. She might have looked up, turned back, shook her head for a yes or no.

Certainly, she wasn't shot at close range. Not from the street, which was empty. From the buildings, then. The projectile had entered above her left ear. Since she didn't walk backward, it could only have come from the premises at her left. Jurisprudence.

Straight left. Left and behind. Left and front. Same level. Higher. Higher still. Up high. Fifty windows. By all means, police experts tried to reduce such number. Frantic

computations—is it what enthralled you? Were you trying to follow those desperate attempts, taking a maddening number of days, while fingerprints or other possible evidence faded away? After all, it was your field of expertise—calculating angles of incidence, fall trajectories, velocity, impact. Hadn't you done just that for your entire life? All the Sanskrit must have been no more than a crossword to you. Did the puzzle keep you occupied? Did you form an opinion? Come to a conclusion?

Buildings were live entities to you. You treated them like persons. You had feelings for them. You could perceive their soul. Did you foresee the absurdity? Twenty years later—past an endless trial neither acquitting nor condemning, settling out of despair for ambiguous compromise—the only ascertained culprit of the crime is the building.

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I told you the inquiry had focused on a particular window, one blocked by an air conditioner—on the basis of a chemical particle found on its sill, maybe a trace of gun powder, although the same residue, probably caused by pollution, was then found elsewhere. I mentioned how such a bulky item would have forced the shooter to lean far out of the window. Otherwise the bullet would have hit the appliance, crashed into the opposite wall, or gone upwards, ending god-knows-where after some kind of parabola. But it couldn't have reached the street unless the shooter's arm had bypassed the obstacle. Whoever killed Marta saw her, if the shot—as it was decided—came from that particular point. Yet the crime was judged unintentional, which could only be true if the shooter thought the pistol was empty. An old relic, a toy.

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You, of course, must have seen her picture. You must have known it by heart. I didn't until twenty years later, when the months preceding your death briskly came to mind, and I dared taking a look at what I had previously ignored. Meaning, why you were so enthralled by a news item while you should have focused on your cancer, your pain, your imminent death.

Her face startled me, changing my preexistent feelings.

She was a casual victim—press, police, and law concurred on this topic. Her extraneousness to all sorts of troubles was stated beyond doubt (arbitrary as such

conclusion might be). A plain girl, no-nonsense, a good student, not involved in politics. Her romantic life, straight-forward and pristine. Just a faithful boyfriend, no jealousy involved. No drugs. Thus, she was described. The shot being intended for her was out of the question. The projectile had accidentally met her. Those later accused of pulling the trigger didn't know her, therefore couldn't have premeditated her killing. She had never met them (arbitrary as such conclusion may be).

These assumptions informed my perception of the events while I kept perusing the literature. A plethora of articles—even books—all regard the inquiry, trials, prosecutors, defendants, and witnesses. They comment about clumsiness and delays in the investigations, prosecutors' irregular ways with the witnesses and following legal claims against the prosecutors, witnesses' contradictions, reversals, obstructive behaviors, and sheer absence of evidence. They describe a public opinion split between those believing the defendants' guilt and those swearing for their innocence, persuaded that a terrible error was being made. Medias found a mine of diamonds in the murder of a twenty-two-year-old, but the focus of all that clamor wasn't Marta. Her life had very little to offer. In fact, nothing at all.

Her face startled me. Something seemed wrong with the picture ... the entire picture I mean. See, the girl staring from the papers is uncannily beautiful—her gaze almost disturbingly smart, deep, and pure. If her life was as unexceptional as reported, *she* wasn't. Honestly, it is hard to believe she hadn't been chosen. Or chased.

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It occurred to me you had lost a daughter about three decades earlier. You had just married—she was your first girl. Not yet three years old, she died of a rare, sudden, incurable illness. Sparse symptoms had started in late summer, but she lasted until the beginning of May. For nine months you struggled, trying all sorts of cures, bringing her into whatever clinic offered a fistful of hope. I remember you at the airport, coming back from the foreign town where she had finally passed—the doctors being unable to keep her destiny in check. You brought back a doll you gave me as a gift, a cute little nurse. You said your daughter had sent it.

Nothing the nurse could do now. Not for your girl. But you brought it as a concluding memento. Did it mean something still could be fixed after someone dies? Or was she intended for prevention? To be aware of future vulnerabilities.

It occurred to me that Marta died shortly after the date of your daughter's passing. Had you observed the recurrence? You never talked about it. You had had four more daughters, a good marriage, a good life.

I recalled a black and white picture of your little girl. I had found it between the pages of a journal I had left unattended. You might have put it there. Your child looked very smart, uncommonly beautiful. In the photo, her gaze has the same uncomfortable depth I saw in Marta's. Is it just afterthought? Do these eyes seem to reflect the imponderable, just because we know they are irreversibly shut? Because they have seen their last vision? I am not sure.

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Once the crime scene was determined (in a quasi-random manner), the inquiry only had to find out who was behind the window at the crucial moment. Luckily, the timing had been properly documented. Initially, all denied having entered that particular room, that morning. But a telephone was inside it, near the door, from which calls had been dialed a minute after the shot. Getting ahold of the caller wasn't hard. She was faculty, an assistant to the Department Head. The entire case started to take shape around this first witness as she slowly articulated her memories. Contradictory, vague. Then sharper. Convolutioned, baroque. Then suddenly lucid. Like a Master of Ceremonies, the first witness named other witnesses in a non-linear progression, subject to rectifications, erasures, and changes. The new witnesses, as they came on stage from the wings, proceeded quite similarly. They also dug out of memory names, faces, events—a slow and complicated delivery, punctuated by dramatic reversals.

The case, instead of unraveling, built itself. Strange construction—partly a maze, partly a castle of cards. Hocus-pocus.

Two young teaching assistants were accused, one of the actual killing, the other of abetting. Both were promising scholars. They had no motive, but their alibis were confused and porous. Still no proof was found—they were judged upon witnesses' declarations. They claimed innocence. All verdicts (the case was reopened a number of

times) were unavoidably ambiguous, due to the inherent weakness of the inquiry. The case had poor foundations, flimsy structures. It reposed on mud. The defendants were found guilty each time, but charged with negligible penalties. A few years of prison for the shooter, then transformed into house arrest. Only house arrest for the accomplice.

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I am wondering if you were also trapped in the spider web, stilled by the unsolvable question. Did they do it or not? Are they criminals—those twenty-and-some who could be your students, your children, those well-bred middleclass boys? Are they clear? Are we burning vampires? Are we sacrificing lambs? I wonder if you entered the maze, if you played the guessing game. If you did, you would have told no one. You would have kept your deductions for yourself.

Twenty years later, I certainly brooded about it. Had I been called to be part of the jury in one of those trials, I should have necessarily formed an opinion. Based on facts? Facts were missing, still are. Based on what? If I look at pictures (the papers abounded with them) what do I see in the defendants' eyes? Tough question.

I am glad I wasn't part of the jury. I am glad I missed the case altogether, in 1997. Because now it brought back—like an unwanted echo—a similar one I had followed in 1975. I was a teenager. It was spring. Together with other protesters I had sat in the courtroom and demonstrated in front of it, on occasion of the infamous Circeo massacre. Two girls from the outskirts were abducted by a trio of upper-class boys—very wealthy, a bit older—brought into one of their empty vacation houses, abused, and raped. One of them was killed, the other left in critical condition in the locked trunk of a car.

I knew one of the boys by sight. Some of those rich guys hung on their pricey motorbikes in front of girls' schools. They mated with girls of their own milieu, but didn't disdain borrowing less fortunate ones for fun, or to make fun of them.

The trial called attention both for gender and class-related issues. The accused were known for their extreme-right beliefs. Nazi. Nihilistic. Amoral. Deep contempt for their victims' social status admittedly informed the crime, otherwise explained by machismo, bravado, and ennui. Guilt was proved without a doubt. The three got life, but two managed successful escapes. Interestingly, the defendants didn't seem affected by

the trial. Neither did they show remorse, nor attempt to justify themselves. Of course, claiming innocence was impossible, yet their supreme indifference was eerie and disquieting. As if what had occurred was irrelevant. As if the machinery of justice had befallen them by an unfortunate, unforeseen error. As if, truly, the trial didn't regard them. I remember the guys' faces, all over the news. I recall them quite well—their rubbery surface, vacuous impenetrability.

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Of course, the two crimes have nothing in common. Under certain angles, they are perfectly opposite. There, evidence was blatant. Here, facts vanish into thin air. Even the bullet hole goes unnoticed, until the CAT scan reveals what's hiding in Marta's brain. Yet there are subliminal echoes. For example, the difference of status between accused and victim. The gratuitousness also resonates—the appalling hypothesis that whoever killed did it for fun, toying with weapons in order to fill listless moments. To prove something, perhaps? Both cases seem to imply boys sharpening tools in hopes to become men, using innocuous girls as living targets. And the bold look on the perpetrators' face—both for those claiming non-involvement, in Marta's case (yet somehow unworried, uncaring of alibis), and for those impassively admitting their guilt, as if it were a minor annoyance.

Looking in the eyes of Marta's supposed killers isn't recommended. Not a healthy exercise. I would not trust my impartiality. I wouldn't dare casting a judgment. I'm sure you didn't either.

Did you blame the building? The school of Jurisprudence, the Law Library, the corridors through which maybe a shooter escaped, the bathrooms where a murderer might have flushed a weapon. Did you condemn those walls? You might have interrogated them, repeatedly. Ask every stone, brick, and tile.

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When I moved a bit farther from your bed, to give someone else a chance, I switched from a side position to a frontal one. Accidentally, I lowered my gaze and I spotted the buckets. Until then I had concentrated on your face, your intermittent smiles, especially the words you proffered with great effort. Unbelieving, confused, shocked, I saw a mass of purple and brown percolating, slowly filling those containers. No, they

weren't excrements—I hoped so for a minute. I asked, later on. Those collapsing pieces were your intestines and liver—they were your organs, surrendering. At least this is what a nurse said to the uncouth relative. Clearly, everything could be said by then. You wouldn't survive the night. You, of course, were spared the vision of your disintegration. It happened under cover. Did you sense it?

Marta's parents donated her organs, in order to respect a will she had previously expressed. You must have read it in the news. Her heart, liver, both of her kidneys, saved four lives. Her eyes granted two persons' vision. Six in total.

I am thinking of the little doll you brought back from Zurich after your daughter died. I remember you pulling it out of your pocket at the airport. I reflect, now, upon the kindness and care carried by your gesture. I remembered tears in your eyes, the crack in your voice. Uncle dear, what did you want to say? Please. Can something still be repaired after someone's death?

I remember when they pulled a sheet over your face, then they rolled the cot through the corridor. It was night. Relatives sat on metal chairs. The bulbs cast a green light. Farewell.

~ ~ ~

Did you wonder, during the fall—you spent many weeks alone, sent like an uncomfortable parcel from hospital to clinic to hospital, all over Europe—why the witnesses of Marta's murder (those who at the fatal moment were in the incriminated room, originally empty then filling up, slowly, like a Swiss clock animated by mechanic figurines) built their Byzantine soap opera? If the crime still screams for a motive, so do those conflicting memories, affirmed then denied, reaffirmed then denied again.

Why would several people lie about something so grave? For grave reasons would be the obvious answer. Such as covering up their own guilt. Or the guilt of someone close. Someone powerful perhaps, capable of revenge. Only these kinds of reasons would explain incriminating scapegoats extraneous to the facts. Unless the scapegoats were the target of pointed retaliation, and thus had been damaged by design. Once again, no background justified such hypotheses. Yes—the testimonials were full of incongruities, repeatedly denied, then reaffirmed. But a purpose for the entire fabrication (if such) was never detected. It seemed aimless—a self-fed nightmare,

pulling the dreamers ever deeper, adrift in a labyrinth, unable to backtrack and find a way out.

The overall impression is that many had something to hide. Routine institutional corruption. Maybe each witness knew a fragment of uncomfortable truth. All started with a partial lie, then got lost in translation. Individual lies conflicted with one another, leading to more confusion. All feared all at some point. The compass needle went crazy, then it randomly stopped, pointing no matter where. As for a game of musical chairs, someone was left standing.

Maybe a number of personnel and faculty were involved, each for some kind of irregularity. Those firearms circulating in the building might have been a minefield, implying serious responsibilities. Maybe all knew how Marta was killed. The institution then attempted to do what institutions do: shield itself, fight for its own survival, crushing a few unfortunate members au passage.

~ ~ ~

Ask the stones.

Isn't it vertiginous? Someone shoots a bullet, hits a college student calmly strolling from one lesson to the next, on a sunny day. The sky is clear and cloudless. Whoever shot knows what happened.

Let's say it was an accident. A projectile escaped. The shooter didn't even see where it went. Let's say he or she was on the first floor, perhaps in a bathroom, and immediately ran to the street, dumped the gun, jumped on a bus, forgot. Hard to believe—wherever escaped, the killer would have learned about Marta's death soon enough. Someone killed the girl and lived with it. If no one else, the murderer knows. Maybe the killer died, in which case also the truth is gone.

Yet— isn't it vertiginous—a perspective must exist, a vantage point, a location, from where all has been visible. The hand and the gun. The moment of taking aim. The trajectory of the bullet. Marta's fall. The weapon disposal. The killer's escape. A perspective exists from where these actions formed a readable pattern. It's a matter of distance, of angle. Should the viewer have climbed on Minerva's shoulders? Ask the statue. The university church's dome could have been the spot. Ask the pigeons. Some

walls, some roofs should have been removed in order to properly observe. Not unthinkable. Utilize vellum paper, trace dotted lines instead of solid ones.

I remember when you told me about the Birds. What an ancient memory unburied. I was a little kid. What you said sounded like a fairy tale, your voice both enticing and dreamy while you explained about these students of yours, revolting against things I didn't understand. You weren't sure either ... but I detected pride in your voice—admiration and a tinge of stronger emotion. Could it have been longing? Those students did things strange and amusing. For instance, they imitated birdcalls instead of talking. More exciting, once they climbed the very top of a dome, perching there for a long time, night and day. They had chosen a magnificent church in the very middle of town. I imagined them nestled in the heights, stars at reach, but I also imagined them running, arms extended, in harmonious formations. In my mind, I saw them coasting sidewalks, brushing facades, elegant, supple, wild. And I pictured them blue, head to toe. I was a young kid. It was nineteen sixty-eight. At the time when Marta was shot, the Birds were obsolete memories. No one perched nowhere. No human I mean. And I do not believe in gods.

~ ~ ~

During your last summer, I had the chance to spend time with you, give you a daily massage good for nothing, maybe honoring the doll-nurse you brought me decades before. Sometimes I gave you a ride, or we had a talk, commenting about what was mostly on your mind. The murder of Marta Russo.

In the fall, you frequently called me overseas, where I lived, from various countries where you were receiving useless treatment. You never sounded hopeless, always cheerful, as if just wanting to chat. Yet I slowly realized something was incongruous with your calls. You were sending a message. Time was narrowing. I should come.

I kept postponing. Flying to see you in emergency meant I was admitting the end. I showed up eventually, and I caught your last twenty-four hours. Then I took a couple planes back—a long journey. I sat by the window and of course cried non-stop. I didn't try holding it. Hours later, I noticed the landscape was visible. We had lost altitude while flying over Canada.

I remember how intricate and beautiful the earth looked. Everything. Mountains, rivers, lakes, meadows. Streets, towns, hamlets. I remember how each fragment seemed to have fallen in place, carefully disposed, perfectly designed. A kind of peace came my way. Do you hear me?

A kind of forgiveness.

**Marta Russo, a twenty-two-year-old student of Law, was shot on May 9th, 1997, within the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.*

***In the last years of his life, professor Antonino Giuffré devoted his rich academic and cultural experience to the preservation of historical architectural landmarks, especially ancient towns. His efforts were interrupted by his premature passing*

Valediction

by Terry Richard Bazes

Although we were strangers when I was a young man, in time my father and I became very good friends. It was, I think, the experience of being business partners that did it—an unlikely circumstance since neither of us knew anything about real estate. But somehow, we got caught up, knee-deep in the subdivision of a one hundred-year-old Chappaqua estate where we were decidedly the interlopers. In that improbable heyday of our time together, we bought stock, bartered and schemed. I navigated the politics of a fractious stepfamily, and he lent money that he couldn't afford to lose—and worried so much that he lived on Tums. Eventually he got his money back and we made our profit—and our friendship. “I didn't think you had it in you,” he said.

After that—when I lived far away and had sons of my own—my father and I spoke mostly on the phone. At first, in that shy way of his, he wouldn't quite know what to say, and so there'd be a moment's silence until I would find a way to begin. But there were always all the things we didn't say—not because they couldn't be said, but because there was something more articulate in the noiseless depth of feeling between us. And so, when I went down to Florida to visit him, I always sat beside him and it never really mattered what we talked about.

Like so many of his generation, my father had never entirely recovered from the terrors of the Great Depression. Although he had succeeded admirably—financially and as a surgeon—the fear of poverty that had seemed so close when he was seventeen still haunted him in his nineties. Mostly because he had been so generous and made my life so comfortable, I never completely understood what had terrified him so.

But I did understand that, although his family had never lost everything, he had felt that they were on the brink of ruin—and the panic he had felt had driven him to succeed. This indelible fear, even in his prosperous old age, lay behind the way he obsessively focused all his brilliance on the stock market—and behind the urgency of his insistence that I count my change and that I keep my wallet in my front pocket. Of course, I knew that he was thinking of his own father then.

~ ~ ~

At the height of the Depression, my grandfather, Sam, lost a hundred-dollar bill. It was my father who found it again, lying in a gutter.

This one episode of my father's young manhood seems to sum up the saga of my grandfather's bad luck and of my father's life-long drive to get back what had been lost. I never knew my grandfather because he died long before I was born. But I've heard stories about him—that he was a *bon vivant* who owned a racehorse, that he loved to gamble, that he lifted weights with his teeth, and that he was (according to our cousin Rosette) "the most generous man I ever knew." I've never been able to reconcile these stories with the photo I have of him standing between his two boys, in a cardigan sweater, with the eyes of a broken old man. This picture must have been taken after the crash of '29, after his fur business went bust.

By the time my father needed to pay the tuition for medical school, my grandfather had no money to offer. When my father started selling his own blood to raise cash, I know that my grandfather was heartsick. But I also know that it was from his father that my father learned his excessive generosity—that he always gave me too much so that I would never suffer the terror he had felt. Maybe it was because his own father had been unable to provide for him that my father became, for those of us who loved him, such a bastion of capability and brilliance. Gambling was another of my grandfather's legacies to him. For my father, in his own way, was a gambler too—yet never improvident like his own father, but with a shrewd, poker player's instinct for how to play his hand.

He made so much money from playing poker in the army that he had enough to open his first medical office. That was because he had an extremely intuitive practicality, an uncanny ability to grasp the facts of a situation and find a solution. Even my mother's father—that impossible old man who had been my father's professor in medical school—conceded that he was the finest diagnostician he had ever known. For he was, quintessentially, the doctor. I will always remember him, when I was little and

he came to kiss me good night after surgery, with the smell of ether on his face. He belonged to the last generation that still made house-calls, and my memories of what he was to me in my childhood—when I rode in the backseat with his black leather bag—are infused with the security of his quiet strength. When, as a little boy, I fell and cut my lip, he was there to sew me up. When I nearly died from pneumonia, he was there to heal me. He was doubly the giver of my life, both my father and my doctor.

His penetrating intellect and enormous resourcefulness somewhat oddly coexisted with his occasionally awkward shyness. But as a doctor he had a way with people and would take the time to explain what they needed to hear.

For he had a faith in human worth: it was an integral part of his optimism. He traveled all over the world, as soon as he could afford it—and gave up a lucrative medical practice in order to donate his skills in Afghanistan.

Any kind of trip would put him in one of his expansive moods, when all things seemed possible, an effusive excitement that there was something more to be seen that would gratify his curiosity and hope. He was never happier than when he was moving. “All will be well,” he often said.

But then, even to him, it happened—the failing eyesight, then the blindness, then the hallucinations which—at first—he knew weren’t real.

And then came the broken legs, the frailty and his falling asleep even in the middle of a sentence.

One afternoon I got the call that he’d be dead within a day and that I’d better fly down if I ever wanted to see him again. So I got on a plane and, by the time I arrived in Florida, he was unconscious and breathing only two or three times a minute. But by that



Dr. Leonard Bases

night he was sitting in a chair and talking: he had come back from the brink of death. And when I told him how infrequently he'd been breathing, he diagnosed himself—in that dispassionate, scientific way of his—saying that it sounded like “Cheyne-Stokes respiration” and adding that he “must have been far gone.”

And for those few, precious hours he was altogether himself again and we talked and talked and talked late into the night. We spoke of many things, but, beneath the surface of the words we spoke, the real subject was the understanding we had reached—and in his own quiet, deep, understated way, he blessed me.

And when he lay dying, I sat beside his bed and asked him questions so I could hear him tell me all the old stories one last time. He told me again how his first memory was of walking up the Grand Concourse with his Uncle Max and buying a newspaper that announced the end of World War One. And he told me again that his father had never allowed him to work with him as a flesher in the fur factory, but had saved him for something better, and fulfilling his father's prediction he had been the young prince, the prodigy who'd skipped so many grades that he graduated first in his class from Columbia College when he was just nineteen. Thinking of when the family lived on Fox Street, I asked where had Grandma's sisters lived, and where was Uncle Rome's store? And what was the name of his first-grade teacher who had complained about him to Grandma because he was too defiant? And did he remember the street address of the elegant Emperor apartment building on Riverside Drive where the family had lived when they were plush? Because I knew I was losing him forever, I made him tell me again about our crazy Brenner cousins, who'd cornered the karakul trade and been held for ransom by Chinese bandits, and about the troop plane he was on that nearly went down in a storm when he was stationed up in Gander, and about how in the army he'd made a bundle playing poker and caught so many lobsters that he only ate the tails. But there was one story I needed to hear more than all the others.

And so, though he could barely talk, I asked him to tell me again how, during the Depression, when the family had lost all their money and couldn't afford to send him to medical school, he and his brother Joe had gone to the races and bet everything they had on a long shot. For the very last time, he told me how the miracle had happened, how the horses in the lead had fallen but their long shot had kept driving on. Lying there

on his pillow with his eyes closed he told me how, when—against all odds—their horse had come in first, he'd stuffed the winnings in his jacket pocket. And then he and his brother Joe had walked out through the crowd together, side by side, pressed close against one another to keep the money safe.

“How many horses fell?” I asked him.

“Every one but ours.”

From Snitch to Scab

by Richard LeBlond

I began my newspaper career as a snitch, age nine, in 1950. We lived on the northern edge of Portland, Oregon, only three blocks from the cut-over bottomlands between the city and the Columbia River. This intermittently flooded wasteland had been partially filled by railroad beds, stockyards, and disposal areas for industrial waste. To a boy of nine, it was a frontier with high potential for treasure (some of it toxic), and one afternoon I found it. Down at the foot of a railroad embankment were hundreds of advertising circulars all rolled up like small newspapers.

There was no value in the circulars themselves. The treasure lay in how they got there. They were supposed to have been delivered house to house by a boy on a bicycle. I figured he had tossed them like a dead body into the early morning miasma. Delivering advertising circulars was a coveted job, one of the few a child could legally do. I took home a piece of the evidence, and dad called the distributor. I was quickly rewarded with the miscreant's job.

The circulars were supposed to be delivered in the early morning once a week. Some guy in a truck dumped a large bale of them on our front porch after midnight. Mom had to get up an hour before me to start rolling the hundreds of circulars so I could toss them on porches like the professional paperboys did. But even with her help there was not enough time to complete the deliveries before breakfast and school.

I wasn't about to devote another morning to the task, let alone a precious afternoon, so it wasn't long before I realized the practicality of the snitched-on boy's method. I began to deliver to as many houses as time allowed, then hid the overburden in more secluded areas of the wasteland. The bodies were never found, so I continued distribution of the circulars to the local neighborhood and bottomlands until I finally got a job delivering real newspapers at age eleven.

(There is a parallel between the start of my newspaper career and the beginning for a politician—tear down the unscrupulous incumbent, then discover the job can't be done by scruple alone. "Politics," observed socialist Oscar Ameringer, "is the gentle art

of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich, by promising to protect each from the other.”)

In the early 1950s, Portland had two dailies, the morning *Oregonian* and the evening *Oregon Journal*. My first newspaper job was delivering the *Journal* in late afternoon, after school. The paperboys gathered at the newspaper’s district distribution center, a sturdy shack at the back of a supermarket parking lot. We had to be there before the newspaper truck arrived, so there was always time to kill, and the favorite place to kill it was in the supermarket’s candy section. Our goal was to shoplift as many candy bars as possible under the ruse of the purchase of one or two. Once outside, we tallied and compared the sweet ephemera.

The nickel-and-dime thievery was of course perilous, and every now and then one of us was caught. But for my group of pre-teen boys in the early 1950s, shoplifting was only a risky option, not the beginning of a wasted life. Better behavior had to compete with peer pressure, unenlightened self-interest, and the inherent goodness of a Baby Ruth candy bar. Most importantly, shoplifting reduced the drawdown of wealth I was acquiring for a bicycle upgrade.

(At the time, I was only interested in the money I was making, and gave no thought to the economic system newspaper delivery represents. We were little franchises. The newspapers themselves were actually being sold to the paperboys, not to the subscribers. Once a month the company handed us a bill, and we collected from the subscribers to pay it. The remainder was ours. Any account unpaid was the paperboy’s problem. He not only received no profit on those accounts, but had to pay the company for the papers he had delivered to the scofflaws. Yet even with the economic assistance of eleven-year-old boys, printed newspapers appear headed for oblivion.)

I became a newspaperman during my senior year of high school, when I discovered that calculus and girls couldn’t be studied at the same time. Getting girls to make out requires effort and focus when competition, pursuit, and anxiety are factored in. I abandoned my dream of becoming a geologist exploring for oil in Venezuela, and amended my curriculum by replacing lonely and cerebral calculus with a very sociable course in journalism. The journalism class was responsible for writing and publishing

the school newspaper. I loved sports and got the plum job of sports editor, even though I wasn't much of an athlete, breaking my arm the first time I tried to swing on rings.

One of my responsibilities after a varsity game was to call the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal* to relate the score and a few highlights. That year our football team was very good, and I had kept track of statistics for each player. I began getting phone calls from the *Oregonian* reporter who covered high school athletics. He wanted those statistics for his weekly column. After a couple of months, he asked me if I would be interested in the most stupendous offer anyone had ever made to me: a one-night-a-week job as a bottom-rung copy writer at the downtown *Oregonian* building itself, in the exalted sports department.

At first, I just worked Friday evenings. That was game night. Several of us were there to answer phone calls from informants, record the scores and highlights, *and write a two- or three-sentence account of the game*. My literary career was airborne.

Following high school, I enrolled as a journalism major at Pacific University in Forest Grove, about thirty miles west of Portland. I kept working part-time for the *Oregonian*, adding Tuesday and Saturday nights to my schedule.

Thanks to the business world's chronic cost cutting, I was about to get even more work. The newspapers had recently automated another part of the printing process, causing a seventy-five percent reduction in the number of workers needed among members of the Stereotypers Union. In November 1959, the stereotypers went on strike, and members of other unions refused to cross the picket lines.

Managers of both newspapers huddled in the *Oregonian* building and attempted to print their dailies with non-union help. Tempers flared when non-union workers crossed the picket lines. There were fights. A newspaper delivery van was blown up. Then the managing editor of the sports department called and asked me to be part of the non-union publishing team, with a full-time job. I crossed the picket line with a bodyguard: Dad. My career had entered the scab phase.

"After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, and the vampire, he had some awful substance left with which he made a scab. A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water brain, a combination backbone of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, he carries a tumor of rotten principles. When a scab comes down the

street, men turn their backs and Angels weep in Heaven, and the devil shuts the gates of hell to keep him out.” – attributed to Jack London, probably erroneously.

Whoever wrote it, they were wrong about my having rotten principles. I had no principles, and no politics either, so by default was a Republican like my dad. I had been convinced that crossing the picket line was the right thing to do, even though I felt guilty for it. I continued crossing the line uneasily for another two years. (The strike lasted five years before the unions finally gave up.)

Every now and then, as I crossed the picket line, I would see the reporter who had recruited me from high school. He never spoke to me, but his gaze conveyed admonishment and deep disappointment. It is a gaze that still haunts me, and in my own mythology, it was the beginning of another way to view the world.

In the Matter of My Law Degree

by Barb Howard

We are moving. Packing must begin. But, first, a weeding out of the things that should not be packed. The junk. I bravely start in our ersatz storage space—known as the crap closet. In the closet, along with ski boots that don't fit anyone in our house, a loosely-strung badminton racket, a ball pump, and a clothes iron (so that's where it was!), there are certificates of education of the type that one might hang on an office wall if one didn't work primarily in one's kitchen. Among them is my law degree. Roughly three times larger than the others—making it about the height of a beer fridge—the law degree stands out from the pack. There it is: ironic (given its relative size and how little law I practiced), non-reflective (figuratively, but also literally because I paid for non-reflective glass), and, frankly, with all its self-importance and Latin curlicue-ness, kind of goofy. I won't go so far as to say the degree looks like a joke.

How many lawyers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

I practiced law in the late '80s and early '90s. The tasks I was given as an articling student and junior associate kept me busy and in lawyer clothes (it was the no-shoulder-pad-is-too-big era). By setting up small companies, closing down small companies, and telling individuals why they should become small companies, I thought I was successfully doing what downtown people did. Company stuff! I had only worked in an office once in my life—at a summer job where my main responsibility was to write tiny words on tabs for file folders and which I quit spur-of-the-moment when I got offered a job as a canoeing instructor. In any event, at the law firm I didn't trouble myself with the larger picture of what I was accomplishing or about how much law I was actually practicing. I was twenty-five years old and making money. In one performance review I was told that I smiled a lot. Too late, I realized that was a tip-off, a hint that I wasn't going to be smiling for much longer.

The managing partner, the guy with the manicured hands and perpetual ski tan, soon invited me to his office to tell me, essentially, to take my smiling face, my shoulder

pads, and briefcase, home for good. He said I seemed nice but that I never seemed to “get it” (“it” being the practice of a law, I guess) and suggested another profession, really any other profession, might be a better fit for me. He said, recalling the recent firm ski trip, that he hoped that we would cross paths on the slopes sometime. On my walk home I imagined how we might cross paths on the ski hill and the managing partner did not fare well in any of the scenarios.

“Let go” was the euphemism for firing in those days—the odd implication being that there was new-found freedom involved, that it was a fine thing to be let go from your salary. If I was smiling when I got let go, it was just out of bad habit. Mostly I was wishing I had been plain fired, not let go. Being fired sounded like chutzpah and moral outrage were involved. Like I stood up for something. (Smiling?)

Hey, I don’t know how many lawyers it takes to screw in a light bulb. I didn’t practice long enough. But I do know they should all go about it very very seriously. No smiling. And I also know that skiing skills won’t necessarily keep them on the lightbulb team.

What do you call ten law students buried up to their necks in sand?

I arrived at my legal training through an indirect path. I liked the outdoors and so, after high school, I enrolled in the faculty of Forestry at a west coast university. To the eighteen-year-old me, that was a logical move. (I didn’t learn about logic until law school, and I didn’t pretend to be logical until I had children.) My parents seemed doubtful. My dad started referring to me as Smokey the Bear. He was a lawyer, which at first glance may seem highly significant to me and my law degree. And I suppose that it was. However, and I know this will be unbelievable to anyone who, unlike me, grew up in a “tell us about your day” type of family, I had no idea what being a lawyer meant or what my dad did at work. He never talked about it other than to refer to it generically as “the office” or “work.” As in, “I’m going to the office” or “some of us have to work.” Certainly, because my dad was a lawyer, I knew that there were such things as lawyers. But I’d like to think I could have figured that much out myself.

My mother, a woman of quiet wit and uber calm, and with the power to crush any ill-conceived dream with a single practical observation, suggested I shouldn't feel pressured to go to university just because my older siblings were degree holders. She said there were other options for people like me. Like me? You know, she said, outdoorsy types. Sporty types. I should have given her words more thought but, at the time, with my teenage chip on one shoulder and my teenage ego on the other shoulder, it felt like she was calling me that old cliché—the dumb jock. Come to think of it, she probably was calling me that.

So, of course, being eighteen, I ignored everyone's input and forged ahead with my Forestry plan and, of course, soon discovered that hiking in the woods was not the same thing as identifying the woods, understanding the woods or, for that matter, cutting down the woods. This was long enough ago that, even though the course content no longer reflected it, the hearty refrain to my faculty song was "cut, burn, and pave!" I learned a few things about nurse logs, cork boots, and waterproof pencils. Still, there was a problem. I liked the words dendrology and silviculture more than I liked studying dendrology and silviculture. While I was in Forestry, I was also taking English courses. In Forestry, we could only read good books in our spare time, whereas in English we read good books as part of our course work. And, full disclosure, I got better marks in English.

One night, at a gathering of the woodchoppers at the university pub, I confessed to a Forestry prof that I was thinking of switching to the faculty of English. He said, do it. Then he bought me a beer by way of celebration. I never was sure if we were celebrating me or celebrating the fact that Forestry would be rid (let go!) of me. (In fact, they weren't rid of me—for years I stayed on their intramural teams and hung around their parties like an invasive species.)

So I finished in English. And then, like thousands of uncreative Arts students before and after me, saw no way to make a living other than by attending that privileged temporary haven from the working world: law school. Long story short: I did not distinguish myself in law school (except perhaps that one night on the broomball rink) but I did graduate and obtain the large certificate that ended up in my crap closet.

What would I call ten law students buried up to their necks in sand? Drunk. Once your gut is full of beer and law student comradery, burying yourself in sand might seem like a grand idea. A funny photo op. I came home from my first year of law school so bloated with boozing that I looked like a puffer fish. In my graduation photo, two years later, there is no visible improvement. Maybe a better question would be to ask how many law students of that era became full blown alcoholics during or after law school. That's a stat that should be kept. Still, from what little I remember, it was super fun. I was probably smiling the whole time.

How do you save a drowning lawyer?

I articulated and practiced briefly at the aforementioned firm, and then, after being let go by said firm, I got a job at a big-ass oil company. What let-go Calgary lawyer from my era didn't work at an oil company? Oil companies were welcoming and, in those days, didn't seem to expect too much from workers at my level. No nights or weekends, every third Friday off, and a helluva Stampede party. At the oil company it seemed no one ever missed lunch. Lunch was important. I spent mine on a bench in the Devonian Gardens—writing stories. I wrote fiction. But, sure, a few law colleagues, barely disguised, might have ended up on the page. Some as heroes and heroines, some as ski-tanned nutbars. The oil patch job wasn't exactly drowning me, but the writing certainly buoyed me. More writing, I decided, would be a good thing.

I left the oil company for a legal writing job that I could do mostly from home. I wrote case summaries at a publishing company that was a de facto holding pen for pregnant lawyers, female lawyers with preschool children, and female lawyers who did not "get" the profession. I fit all those categories. Although lawyers are typically portrayed as being long winded, the women in the holding pen were efficient with words. They didn't have time to fuss around. They knew their shit. They didn't take shit. That was impressive. However, in the world beyond the holding pen, the job was seen as lower grade. Women's work. Once tainted with a case summaries job, it was a rare lawyer who could claw their way back to private practice.

When I worked for the legal publisher, I did my summaries at home and, once a week, I put on some shoulder pads (smaller ones than I wore in the '80s) and drove a floppy, yet succinct, disk of my words to the downtown office. Email was newfangled and considered too risky a conduit for this type of groundbreaking information. While working from home, with no overlord to keep track of how I was using my time, I began writing fiction during the daylight time when my kids were at daycare--which is when I was, in theory, supposed to be writing the case summaries. I also began a lifelong practice of rationalizing my outdoor activity time as the same as working out in a downtown gym over lunch. This all led to a panicked writing of the case summaries in the middle of the night when my kids were asleep. I learned this skill of burning the candle at both ends at law school, and am thankful to have it. Others might call it time mismanagement.

I quit the legal summaries job, my last law-ish job, when the publishing company decided they wanted everyone to work in the office. That would have thrown a wrench into my fiction-by-day, law-by-night, outdoor-activity-whenever-I-felt-like-it system. I began calling myself a writer even though most people rolled their eyes. Twenty years ago I wrote a contest-winning story (loosely linking a beekeeper and a kid I threw up with in elementary school after we binged on powdered Kool-Aid) in *Canadian Lawyer* and established—at least to the five or six people who read it—that I did indeed do some writing. I was no John Grisham. No William Deverell, although their names were, and are still, mentioned to me at every turn. In any event, with that resounding one-story success and an unhinged optimistic view of how fast my literary star would rise (still waiting on that ...), I settled into my writing life.

How do you save a drowning lawyer? One answer might be: send her to a legal publisher where, outside of the traditional legal pools, she is able to envision writing as a career. Throw her a life ring and let her kick to a different shore.

A lawyer, a writer, and a marriage commissioner walk into a bar.

Over the decades I've gone through various phases in my relationship with my lawyer-past. My bios, supplied for stories and books and events and in courses I teach, illustrate a shaky progression. When I first declared myself as a writer I didn't have any

publications and so I used my lawyer-past to flesh out an otherwise empty bio. I felt it said, hey, give me time, I was busy before this run at writing. And, I was proud I had made it through law school, albeit without flying colours. I only practiced for a few years but I did have that oversized degree as tangible proof that I graduated. Then, about fifteen years ago, after a few publications and around the time I was working on an MA in Creative Writing, I entered a phase of embarrassment that I ever was a lawyer. I met a few established writers who told me they could have gone to law school but they didn't because they knew it would suck out their souls. One writer told me she went to law school for one year and then dropped out because it was conformist and restricting. They all indicated they were SO not lawyer material, and I understood it, as I believe it was intended, to mean that lawyer material was a bad thing. I took "lawyer" out of my bio and entered a period of pretending that I had no educational or working past, that I emerged fully-formed from a creative writing petri dish. I did a fine job of deleting from my bio not just the lawyer aspects but all the traditional and comfortable trappings in my life, including my husband, my kids, my proclivity for (and free time for) outdoor activities. I assumed "lawyer," and all my other life accoutrements, made me look too mainstream and shoulder-padded to possess any creative abilities.

More recently, I have re-introduced "former lawyer" into my bios, in part because I have been digging around in my lawyer past, and in law in general, and I am exploring the interface between law and writing. Many individuals participate in both professions. In the creative writing classes I teach there is usually at least one lawyer enrolled. One obvious overlap is that lawyers and writers draft, edit and nitpick over written words. In my experience, both lawyers and writers tend to read widely beyond their job requirements. Of more interest to me, though, is the way both professions are based on narrative. In law, the story—the "what happened" or the "what if this happened"—underlies everything. The five w's (who, what, where, when, why) of storytelling could form an outline for any lawyer interviewing a client, building a case, or drafting a contract.

Lawyers and writers are trained to look at scenarios from every angle. Writers call those angles Points of View and while they might only choose one or two through which to tell a story, an experienced writer will consider all the Points of View, the

mindset of all the main characters, in order to create a rounded text. Similarly, a lawyer must study a legal situation from the perspective of all the stakeholders, or characters, in order to not leave holes in a contract or court case.

In a civil suit, the parties are usually called the plaintiff and the defendant. In Canadian criminal cases, the parties are usually called the accused and the Crown. In contractual documents, the sides are often called the something-or and the something-ee. In writing, similarly, the parties to the story are often called protagonists and antagonists. In real-life law and in most good writing, the sides are rarely as clear and dichotomous as the models suggest. Perhaps someone is withholding information, perhaps someone's backstory makes unreasonable actions seem more reasonable, perhaps a third party, a secondary character, arises and throws a wrench into the expected narrative. It's the grey areas that make both law and literature interesting. Arguably, it's the grey areas that make literature, well, literature.

There are also commonalities in the nature of the relationship between lawyers/writers and their clients/readers. That is, the very relationships that are the source of their incomes. Just as there is a contract between a lawyer and her client, there is an implied contract between an author and her reader. A client expects a lawyer to handle their narrative situation. A contract is formed when the client pays the consideration of a retainer or fee. Similarly, be it fiction or nonfiction, a reader expects the author to handle and deliver a story. Arguably, a contract is formed when the reader buys a book. Arguably, a contract is formed when any reader, not just the book purchaser, opens a book and puts their trust in the author to spin a story. If you open my book and fall asleep after two pages, I probably have not upheld my writer-end of the contract. I haven't delivered the goods.

And, finally, lawyers and writers provide checks and balances on each other. Through stories, writers remind lawyers that they could be as upstanding as Harper Lee's Atticus Finch ("upstanding" in the way he is generally viewed to be in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as opposed to recent deconstructions and his portrayal in *Go Set a Watchman*) or as vile as Charles Dickens' Mr. Vholes (the name says it all). Writers create works that warn lawyers that if they don't take care of the institution of law they

could produce folly or unfairness or worse. The term kafka-esque would not have arisen without a writer (and, as it happens, an insurance lawyer) named Franz Kafka.

Lawyers provide assistance and legal balance for writers. Most writers can't afford a lawyer but, when a situation goes really bad, who you gonna call? Maybe a publisher or a writing organization who calls a lawyer on your behalf? Maybe a friend of friend of a guy who used to date your neighbor is a lawyer who feels the need to address copyright breaches, disappearing publishers, libel suits, and the Will your famous writer-spouse forgot to draw up? When they are available and affordable, lawyers can be useful. And at the highest level of the law, the union between lawyers and writers is forever sealed because lawyers are integral to maintaining that key Charter right for writers: freedom of expression.

What's the difference between a dead skunk and a lapsed lawyer?

Perhaps I'm dreaming, but I'd like to think that there are many differences between a dead skunk and a lapsed lawyer. At the very least, there seem to be some obvious physical differences like, say, the number of legs.

A similarity between the dead skunk and this lapsed lawyer is that neither of us can practice law. I had one short phase of thinking I might re-write the Bar exams and re-enter the legal world. But, like the skunk, that phase died. The process would cost too much money, take too much time, and I had too little interest. It galls me to say it, but maybe that managing partner who said I didn't "get it" was right.

Back to the crap closet and my law degree. I decide to keep the iron, thinking I will try a few sessions with it but feeling pretty sure that I don't own enough iron-able clothes to make it a serious pastime. I fill a garbage bag with fossilized runners, hazy swim goggles, and all the other items that will never be used or re-used by anyone, and I drive to the local dump. Among the things I toss in? My law degree. I never missed it when it was in the closet and it's just too big for where I'm headed. I don't know if I "get" what I am doing now, or if I am better at it than I would have been as a lawyer, but I do know that I am enjoying the direction. I have no regrets about getting that degree and no regrets about dumping the physical representation of it.

A few more differences between a dead skunk and this lapsed lawyer? Okay, one of them is alive. And that one is still smiling, not at the dead skunk or at a joke, but at how things have a way of working out over time.

Deceptive

by James Hanna

Those who say the truth will set you free have probably never been polygraphed. I had the experience in my early thirties during a campaign of self-renewal, leading inevitably to the West Coast. After spending a decade as a counselor at the Indiana Penal Farm, a provincial Midwest prison, I felt like a bastard at a family reunion. Was it because I built on my education instead of boozing with good ol' boy guards? I had attended a nearby state university under a blind assumption: the patented belief that a master's degree would open the door to promotions. Sadly, the reverse proved true. Organizations will stigmatize overachievers as surely as they flag the fuckups. (If you doubt this, watch any season of *Survivor*.) And so I was deemed overqualified when I faced the promotion boards. One of the inmates summed it up well when I told him I was leaving. "Sounds like a plan," he said. "Do it soon. You don't need to be hanging around Podunk, Indiana."

I relocated to the Golden State and submitted a job application to the Santa Clara Department of Corrections. California has always been an innovator in the field of criminal justice, so I was more than confident I would soon take my place among the learned elite. I applied for the position of deputy jailor, a menial job, but one from which I intended to soar like a butterfly shedding its cocoon. Before long, I would be devising programs, publishing in correctional journals, and initiating critical reforms.

I reported to the Santa Clara Government Center to take the written test. The questions struck me as wholly redundant, and I scored in the high nineties. The oral interview, which took place at the Santa Clara County Jail, was also an effortless challenge. One of the board members, a plump correctional lieutenant with a goatee, simply shook his head. "Ten years as a counselor," he said. "A master's in criminology. And you want to work as a deputy jailor?" I told him I needed a change and he laughed. "I see," he snorted. "Are ya gonna take up surfing?" The board gave me a ringing endorsement, which left me with one final obstacle. To wear the uniform of a deputy jailor, I would have to pass a polygraph examination.

I received a letter from the Santa Clara Human Resources Department, instructing me to report to the Government Center, Room 101, to take the polygraph test. I was advised to allow three hours for the test and to bring a number two pencil. I chuckled at the irony of the location. Room 101—wasn't that the chamber of horrors in Orwell's *1984*? The place where aberrant Winston Smith was reduced to a quivering pulp? Convinced I would fare better than poor Winston, I showed up early on the day of the test.

Armed with my number two pencil, I entered Room 101. The room was utterly barren except for a desk and a chair. No carpet cushioned the floor, no flowered plants scented the air, not even a requisite landscape painting hung from the drab green walls. Behind a second door, in what must have been the testing chamber, I could hear a couple of voices. Voices so strained and muffled that they seemed to belong to ghosts.

I sat by the desk and waited, my pencil as sharp as a tack. After ten minutes, the second door opened and I felt my muscles tense. The man who entered the room was so fleshless that he appeared to be carved from bone. His nose was sharp and hawkish, his smile was frozen in place, and a thick pair of horn-rimmed glasses expanded his muddy brown eyes. He looked at me incuriously and handed me a booklet. He smelled of cheap aftershave.

"Answer these questions, pardner," he muttered. "Answer 'em truthfully."

He vanished back into the testing room in a lingering wave of Old Spice.

I broke the seal to the booklet and began to read the questions. There were approximately two hundred of them and they made me feel like a freak. *Have you ever exposed your anus or genitals for sexual gratification? Have you ever been married to two persons at the same time? Have you ever had sex with animals?*

Indignant, I cruised through the questions and marked almost all of them no. Only a few gave me pause. *Have you ever engaged in drug use?* Well, I smoked pot a few times in college. And once I sampled a dab of meth. *Better check yes,* I decided. *I don't want to make the scrolls flutter.*

Have you ever been referred to a collection agency? another question read. Once, I remembered. When I didn't pay a medical bill because I had been overcharged.

Do they really need to know that? I wondered. I gritted my teeth and marked the yes box.

Have you ever abused, struck, or injured any person under fifteen? I remembered spanking my toddler brother after he crapped on the living room rug. Did I have to put *that* down? I shrugged and checked the yes box once again.

You'll be given a chance to explain your answers, the last section of the booklet advised. I signed and printed my name in this section, acknowledging the terms of the test. I then pocketed my pencil and waited for Ichabod Crane.

An hour passed. No one came. *Has he forgotten me?* I wondered. Eventually, the voices grew louder—they seemed to be at odds. “If you’ve stolen a car we’ll find out!” boomed Ichabod when the inner door finally opened.

The woman who dashed across the room looked angry and harassed. “Do I look like a car thief?” she shouted back as she opened the door to the hallway. Glancing at me, she held her nose, then hurried from the room.

A practical soul may have seen this incident as a portent of pending doom. But my instincts were akin to Don Quixote, not savvy Sancho Panza. *One less rival for the job*, I thought as I rose from the chair. It was my turn now. I held my head high, like a bird drinking water, and entered the testing room.

~ ~ ~

As I sat by a desk where the polygraph was perched, my palms began to sweat. I felt more like a patient on life support than a pilgrim on a mission. A blood pressure cuff, plump with air, gripped my upper arm like a hall monitor; a couple of rubber tubes, also tightly inflated, hugged my chest and abdomen; and a pair of electrodes pinched two of my fingers like dime store rings. The cuff was to measure my heart rate, the tubes were to record my breathing, and the electrodes were to pick up whatever perspiration my fingers might produce.

I tried to chat with Ichabod, but his focus was on the machine. Clearly, he had no interest in whatever I had to say. “Answer the questions truthfully,” he mumbled. “Don’t be making stuff up.”

Activating the polygraph, he asked me some baseline questions.

“Your name is James Hanna?”

"Yes," I replied, and the scrolls began to nod.

"Are you sitting down?"

"Yes," I said.

"Have you got a bachelor's degree?" he inquired.

"I have a master's," I said.

Ichabod shut off the polygraph as though he was swatting a fly. "That's *not* what I asked you, pardner," he muttered. "Stick to yes or no answers."

I felt familiar anger as he turned the machine back on. How many times was I going to be penalized for advancing my education?

"Have you ever stolen from an employer?" he asked.

"No," I sarcastically said.

"Have you ever lied to someone who trusted you?"

"No," I fibbed.

"Have you ever driven a car when you had too much to drink?"

I knew enough about polygraph tests to know that these were control questions. Who hasn't taken a pen from work, lied to a friend, or driven a car after having a sip too many? I was expected to lie on these questions, which would provide a comparative response. If the scrolls fluttered less on the relevant questions, that meant I would pass the test.

"Ever committed a sex crime?" he asked.

"No," I proudly replied.

"Ever been addicted to drugs or alcohol."

"No," I triumphantly chirped.

"Ever stolen an automobile?"

"No," I crowed with glee.

The questioning continued for another minute then he turned the polygraph off.

"How'd I do?"

He scratched his jaw. "The results are inconclusive."

"What does inconclusive mean?"

He sighed. "Shall we try it again?"

He asked another series of questions, this time intermingling the control questions with the relevant ones. Whenever I was asked about job theft or drunk driving, I dug my fingernails into the palm of my free hand. If I spiked on the control questions, I reasoned, I would surely pass this damn test.

When the questioning was done, he turned off the machine and gave me the final verdict. “*Deceptive*,” he snapped.

I looked at him incredulously; I felt as though I had been slugged. “Just where was I deceptive?” I asked.

“Alcoholism, drug addiction, sex crimes, and car theft.”

“You’re kidding,” I stammered. “I’ve done all that? When would I have found time to go to work?”

He folded his arms then stared at me with the air of a hanging judge. “Ya may as well come clean, Tom Hemmings. Whaddya trying to hide?”

“Nothing,” I snapped.

“Horse turds,” he answered. “Whaddya trying to hide?”

I knew my anger was showing when he opened the drawer to the desk. The drawer contained a handgun and several ammo clips. As I looked at the gun, he pushed the drawer shut; he was only warning me to calm down. But the sight of the weapon did not dissuade me from taking a shot of my own.

“Ask me if I killed John Kennedy,” I said. “I’d like to see the result.”

He looked at me so piously that I felt like a Salem witch. “Whaddya trying to hide?” he repeated. “Whaddya trying to hide?”

Arguing was useless; his mind was as closed as a tomb. *What have I done to deserve this?* I wondered. *What is my unavowed crime?* Whatever the sin, I would never forget that unforgiving gaze.

I unhooked myself from the tubes and wires. “Have a good day,” I said. I could feel his eyes boring into my back as I walked out of the room.

Only when I stood in the hallway did I feel the full weight of my anger. I had a crime coming to me, I reasoned, and vandalism would do.

I whipped out my number two pencil as though I were drawing a sword. And I scrawled a single word on the door to Room 101.

Deceptive

Birds and Beatles

by Rick Bailey

I'm reading a *New Yorker* article about Paul McCartney at the breakfast table one morning. At the top of the page there's a black and white photo of him and John Lennon, circa 1965. It's the year, the caption tells us, of *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*.

My wife and I are leaving for Italy in a week. I've been downloading stuff to my Kindle to read while we're away. I've got enough to last me quite a while, some novels (a few trashy ones, a few edifying ones), Clive James' *Poetry Notebook*, a bunch of articles from the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Republic*. (I guess I'm keeping it New this spring.) When language fatigue sets in over there, and I know it will, with the constant strain of trying to listen very fast to decode flights of Italian, it's a pleasure to lie down in silence and read in my own language.

"Photo by David Bailey," I say to my wife. Our son's name. "How about that?"

"What?"

"This article about Paul McCartney. It has a photo by David Bailey."

Hmmm.

I give her a minute, then ask, "Who's your favorite Beatle?"

"Don't start."

She's reading a book called *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth Century Mediterranean World*. The bibliography is forty pages. Good lord.

"Are you taking that thing on the plane?"

"Maybe." She pushes a small taste of eggs onto her espresso spoon.

"It's a brick."

"Jesuits," she says. "I love the Jesuits."

I hum a few bars of "When I'm Sixty-Four." Two pals and I turn sixty-four within a few months of each other this year. I've suggested, more than a few times, that we should have a "when I'm sixty-four party" sometime this summer, to celebrate ourselves.

Later this day I will drive ninety minutes north to visit my old friend Brian. His caretaker Sheila has told me he's not quite himself. Listening to music in the car, piped from my iPhone into the radio, I make a mental note of oldies I'd like to play for him. "I've Got Friday on My Mind," by the Easybeats; Cyrle's "It's a Turn Down Day"; The Beatles' "Dr. Robert," so we can hear that scratchy guitar and lush chorus. I'd like to see him react to the organ solo in Bonnie Raitt's "We Used to Rule the World." In the car I play the music loud, today even louder than usual. I know I probably shouldn't. My wife and kids tell me I'm getting a little deaf. (A little?) These days the car and treadmill are the only places I listen to music. I can't help myself. I want it loud.

He'll be sitting in his wheelchair at the kitchen table, his back to the doorway I walk through. I rehearse the scene in the mind. "Remember this?" Sitting across from him, I'll play part of a song. I'll wait to see the look of recognition, watch him travel back in time. "How about this?" When my mother was sick and I made this drive, I listened to podcasts, for reflection and for laughs. For these visits, I want bang and bash. I want nostalgia.

~ ~ ~

We bought every Beatle album as soon as it hit the store. This was, of course, back in the vinyl days. The first three or four lps, in mono, cost less than five dollars. We took them home, put them on the turntable, and sat down to listen. It was "close listening," almost like the close reading of a poem advocated by the New Critics. In the front bedroom of Brian's house on 3rd Street, we sat on the floor and played the records over and over, holding the album covers, like holy objects, in our laps. There was a photo or two to look at; on the back, a song list. You listened, and you looked. "Meet the Beatles," headshots of four young guys in partial shadow; twelve songs, the longest of which was "I Saw Her Standing There" (2:50), the shortest, incredibly short by today's standards, "Little Child" (1:46), produced by George Martin, for Capitol Records.

Years later, my kids went totally digital. They bought CDs and queued up the songs they wanted to hear. On some CDs they listened to only one or two songs; that was it. Back in the vinyl days, we listened to the whole album, every track all the way through, even the songs we didn't particularly like. Ringo singing "Act Naturally." Really?

To lift the needle, move it to the song you liked, and set it down, aiming for the barely visible gap between tracks, was to risk scratching the record.

A scratch would last forever. That was the thing about vinyl.

And now it's back.

I have purist friends who could explain why vinyl is better: the sound profiles you get in analog are richer, far superior to the sterile precision of digital. I guess I get that. I'm still kind of an analog guy. I look at the clock and say "a quarter to" and "a little after," it bothers me that soon kids will no longer be able to decode the face of a clock and tell time, the way many of them will never learn to write in cursive. I remember moving the needle to tune in an AM radio station in the car. I like a speedometer needle. I go *about* seventy mph (not sixty-seven) when I drive up to visit Brian.

I should ask him, What do you think about the vinyl craze these days?

I know what he would say.

Who gives a fuck?

~ ~ ~

He's sitting in his wheelchair with his back to the door. The dogs bark when I walk in. There are seven of them. It takes a minute to calm them down. Brian gives me a crooked smile and says, "How the hell are you?" It's his usual greeting. He has a full beard, a lot more salt than pepper, and he's wearing a hat. It occurs to me that in all the recent pictures of him I've seen, he has that hat on. When I ask him how the hell *he's* doing, he turns his head and points to his hair, slate gray, wisps of what's left of it hanging down. It's the radiation, he says.

I figure we'll get a few basics out of the way, before getting down to basics.

Sleep?

He says he sleeps just fine.

Appetite?

He says he's an eating machine.

Pain?

Not even a headache. If the doctor didn't tell him he was sick, he wouldn't even know it.

I ask if he's ever had a beard before.

Couple times.

He's sixty-four years old, a September birthday, a year older than me. Three months ago Sheila organized a benefit. It went from noon to nine at the Elks Club bar in Bay City, all music all the time, played by over forty years of musician friends in the area. Brian packed the place.

I tell him I'm thinking about a "when I'm sixty-four party" for me and a few pals this summer. What does he think?

Yup.

Next to the kitchen table, a tv set displays weekday afternoon programming. He watches it while I ask more questions, about his sister, son, nephew, a pal we call Easy Eddie. I'm thinking about my song list when he wonders, Hey, what're we going to eat?

~ ~ ~

In this *New Yorker* article, published in 2007, Paul McCartney confesses to dyeing his hair. He also confesses to being freaked out about actually being sixty-four. "The thought is somewhat horrifying," he tells the interviewer. "It's like 'Well, no, this can't be me.'" The article is contemporaneous with the release of an album called "Memory Almost Full," which the interviewer describes as "up-tempo rock songs ... tinged with melancholy." I know the album. When it came out, I listened to thirty seconds of each track at the iTunes Store, bought one song, "Dance Tonight," for \$1.29, and downloaded it. It's a jaunty piece with a kazoo solo in the bridge.

The writer mentions the famous deaths: Lennon, Harrison, Linda.

McCartney, I learn, was sixteen when he wrote "When I'm Sixty-Four."

When Brian and I were that age, we had begun to realize we were not going to be the next Lennon and McCartney. We had written exactly one song together, called "If I Could Dream," which some years later he managed to get recorded with a band he was in, graciously crediting "Bailey and Bennett" in parentheses beneath the song title as the composers.

~ ~ ~

I come back from Mulligans with two bar burgers, mushrooms and mayo on his, and French fries. The dogs bark. Four or five of them eventually settle under the table. We eat our burgers, watch a little more tv, and I think again about my song list. Maybe I

won't play the songs after all. Who wants to listen music on a phone, anyway? In the kitchen it will sound like a cheap transistor radio.

I say, "Hey, remember 'It's a Turn Down Day'?"

He looks at the tv for a bit, then turns my way. "The Cyrcler," he says. "They were a good band."

The show we're listening to is called The Doctor. It's talk. Two men, two women. One of the men is dressed like a doctor. They're discussing castration as a way of punishing rapists. Or maybe it's a preventative measure. The man dressed as a doctor explains that there is both surgical and chemical castration. The two women agree that, either way, it's an extreme measure. They are both against it.

I try another one: "Remember 'I've Got Friday on My Mind'?"

It takes a minute. He turns away from the tv and gives me a partial crooked smile and a nod. "Good song," he says.

I know the nod.

Sheila says, "Getting tired, Brian?"

It's for me. Well, okay, I think, that's enough.

We sit together for a while longer, through the rest of my fries. Brian takes a bite or two from his burger, gazes at the tv. Before going to commercial, the doctor previews the next segment of the show. They're going to talk about a woman's cancer treatment. The woman on screen looks familiar.

"Is that Bruce Jenner?" I say.

Sheila says it's not Bruce Jenner. It's a real woman.

"Goddam," Brian says.

We watch a few more minutes in silence. I get up to go. The dogs rouse and congregate around my feet. I tell Brian see you in a month or so, shake his hand, and lean down for a long hug. "You hang in there now," I say. "I'll be back the middle of next month."

He nods, says thanks for coming, Richard.

"See you, right?"

He nods. I'm pretty sure he nods.

About the time I get to the freeway, which takes ten minutes or so, my iPhone shuffles to a favorite Beatle song. I play it loud and sing along: "You say you've seen certain wonders, and your bird can sing." That would be another song to mention, on another visit.

~ ~ ~

A few days later, my wife and I are upstairs packing. It's mid-morning. I'm tossing power cords for my phone and Kindle and laptop into a carry-on when I realize I'm not wearing any pants. What happened to my pants?

"Have you seen my black sweater?" my wife says.

When did I take off my pants? For a while now I've been walking into rooms only to find I can't remember why I'm there. I'm used to that. Like tinnitus, it comes with age. Losing my pants is new.

"Did you hear me?" my wife says.

"I heard you." I look around the room, feeling mild panic. No pants, anywhere. "Which black sweater?"

I stand there, marveling at this altered state. Then I remember: I took them off in the other room, in front of the closet, so I could try on another pair I had fitted a while back.

"I'm losing it," she says.

There they are, the pants I tried on, in the carry-on. So the other ones are over there?

"Can you hear anything I'm saying?" she says.

"I hear you fine."

We're all losing it.

One of these days I'll have to get my hearing checked. I sort of don't want to know. I think about my parents growing old, my father and all his hearing aids. There were owls in the woods a half a mile away from their house. My parents almost always slept with a window open. For years they said they heard owls all night. One day my wife and I were up for a visit. When I asked about them, my mother said yes, the owls were still there. Then she added, "Your dad can't hear them anymore." I think he took it in stride. What choice did he have? Still, it broke my heart.

One day it will happen to me. I'll wake up, look for my pants, and I won't be able to hear the birds and the Beatles. I'll have to remember to consider myself lucky.

Mizungo

by Sophia McGovern

Kampala is a hive. Streets teem with cold, dark faces that turn to land on me from everywhere—from the backs of motorbikes, from inside vans bursting with strangers. From police officers wearing semi-automatic rifles like sashes. These faces stare at my white skin that reeks of money and a life in an America that more closely resembles the lost Eden.

Strange hands brush over my skin, and quickly take hold of my soft hair. The one familiar hand I cling to leads gently. It wards off propositions and proposals from men who can't see past my female form and pale skin.

I am coveted.

My body is all they want because it is wrapped in a promise of a better life. I am *mizungo*. I have no identity besides my lack of color. It is a sign of the poverty that has passed over me, but clings to this air and sprawls out all around me, possessing this crazy city.

I am untouched, blessed and desired.

~ ~ ~

The leisurely days in Lyantonde show me that I can fly. I grip the back of the motorbike as it grumbles under me, lugging us up the infinitely orange hills and into the rural villages three hours west of Kampala where our project lies. Our goal is to provide housing and sanitation for a family still grieving the loss of a husband and father.

As we continue to climb, my host's brother guides the bike around the potholes. His grip on the handlebars, like his brother's, protects me. The jungle snakes. Children weave in and out of trees flashing smiles, waves and shouts of "*mizungo!*" The wind that promises rain twists and frees my hair from its elastic. It pulls hidden music, smells and orange dust—"fufu"—through my flying hair. I am powerful in our partnership.

~ ~ ~

The haunted nights in Lyantonde remind me that I am running. Instead of children flashing waves and smiles, my mother, nearly a skeleton, breaks into my thoughts. She stares ahead with hollow eyes in a yellow nightgown that hasn't been

washed in weeks.

I see my sister and me, mere children, hiding her notes and the kitchen knives. Anything she could cut away her life with so that the younger ones don't wake up motherless.

I can barely sleep in this world so far from my own. I spend the nights living the nightmares and counting the minutes until morning. I am relieved she finally tried and ended her empty threats, but even more relieved she failed and that I escaped.

~ ~ ~

"You should be scared. It is not natural to jump off a seventy-five-foot drop."

A man jokes and laughs as he ties my ankles together, trying to make me smile. Instead, the flashing reflection of the sun off the water of the Nile below me demands my attention.

I sit on a tribal throne as he works. Below me is the veranda. The Dutch couple I have befriended promised to watch. We *mizungos* have a bond. I smile and wave to their distant faces knowing they can only see my gleaming white t-shirt.

I stand at the edge of the drop forcing myself to look straight ahead.

"The trick is to jump out not down, and at the count of three you'll do it."

Fear is blocking nearly every thought, sound, and smell, but I trust his voice. I inhale.

One...

My knees weaken as I stare out across the miles of treetops.

Two...

My lungs contract as my gut clenches.

Three...

My arms pull above my head, and my knees bend and launch my body over the emptiness. I hang in the air, weightless, and feel as if I belong there. That second stretches and I am invincible.

My stomach turns as gravity catches up to me, pulling me by the gut toward the flashing water. I am close to bursting with fear before it rips out of me in a horrified scream. The water zooms closer until it is a foot from my fingertips. I can see my dangling form reflected in the surface. All I need is to hold that bold girl's hand.

The bungee tugs me back before I break the surface, bouncing me into the air five or six more times. Each time I am farther and farther from the water, until I am released by two men bobbing in a raft below me.

The countdown man meets me at the shore as I crouch, trying to catch my breath. He scoops me into a hug.

“My dear! What a beautiful jump. You are much braver than you think.”

~ ~ ~

My bags dig into my shoulders, and my knees buckle from exhaustion as I knock on the door in Tempe I’ve missed for the past month and a half.

“Hey, you at the door, go away for a second. I don’t want you home yet!”

The minutes stretch as I hear my roommate scurrying around inside, the frantic shadow of a tall woman etched on the blinds of the kitchen door. Since I have seen her last, a death has crippled her, and I’ve searched the entire flight for what to say.

When the door flings open, I’m engulfed in her hug.

“You smell like a hippie.”

On our scavenged kitchen table is a bouquet of roses and baby’s breath and a casserole dish. The dish, never before used, is filled with goopy brownies and an entire box of lit candles melting onto them.

In the next few hours, nothing is said about death or anything we are running from. We devour the brownies on our hand-me-down futon and watch our favorite show until the sun rises.

~ ~ ~

It is the second finals week of my college career. Instead of studying, I have burned through way too many hours of Netflix. The familiar Facebook ding draws me away from manly biker adventures.

A message from my sister pulses on the screen.

“Mom and the kids are in the hospital.”

My breath catches.

“There was a car crash. I don’t know what happened. The cops just showed up and took my dad to the hospital. Grandma and Grandpa are there too.”

~ ~ ~

"The stories don't match up, honey. No one knows exactly what happened." My grandma's voice is tired, careful, and comforting. It's the voice I always wish my mother had.

"Your mom says there were other cars, your sister says there weren't any."

My dorm room feels smaller and farther away than it ever has.

We both know what I was really asking.

My youngest sister fractured a vertebra, my brother's face was sliced, and my mother's nose smashed against the windshield as the car rolled. She wasn't wearing a seatbelt, but somehow, she didn't fly through the glass. A miracle, they said.

~ ~ ~

The permanent breeze plays with the leaves of the mango trees, pawpaw trees, and banana plants. The sun beats at a constant eighty degrees, bouncing off the endless green. Gospel music blares from the speakers, fenced in by scrap metal. The whole town is mingling in the tiny yard thanking Jesus for the heaping plates of food and endless love. It is Sunday and a Day of Thanks. Everyone is full of smiles.

Children with their hair shaved short bounce and weave in and out of the crowd. For hours they laugh and sprint and play with one another. They pose for my camera, sure they will be famous, captured by the rare *mizungu*. They feel my skin, wondering if the white can be washed away.

A hand lightly touches my shoulder, pulling me away from the children. "That one in the blue dress is a boy. He likes to wear dresses and his stubborn mother lets him."

Inside, the World News constantly plays, showing bright politicians chanting about shooting gays and bisexuals on the street. International lawyers fight to kill the law supporting homosexuals' and bisexuals' imprisonment and torture.

The people laugh and words of hate float up behind the Gospel music, mixed in with words of love from my new family.

"His mother is stubborn. She is teaching him to defy God."

The children continue to bounce and play under the sun, posing for my camera as my hands shake.

~ ~ ~

The big Utah backyard bursts with cousins I hardly see. The green grass combs

my long skirt as I mingle, and my brother tells them about the bags of candy from that week's parade.

My grandparents sit in the shade, holding hands. My mother sits next to them.
Removed.

At the end of the night I gather my things from inside my aunt's home. Shoes of every size clutter the entryway, and the happy shrieks of childhood games filter through the screen door. The living room is dark and almost hides them.

I'm watching a secret.

My grandmother holds her daughter. Tears illuminate her face as the words tumble out. They are too far away for me to hear, and my mother's expression is cast in shadows, but I can feel the words I want to say to her grounded in that embrace.

I slip away not ready to say them.

~ ~ ~

Back in Tempe, my girlfriend holds my hand as we sit in an outdoor loveseat in an open-air market. The sun reflects off her Ray Bans as it sinks lower into blue dusk.

We sit for an hour while the meaningless legs of strangers drift by at eye level. The familiar prick of stares coats us. A man points.

A family of six walks by, each child the same bright shade of blonde. The baby smiles at us. My girlfriend's face lights up with hope for her own clan of curly-haired little babies.

The second youngest boy stops to look at us.

It is a look of curiosity, unthreatening. I wave to him, and he smiles, looking over his shoulder as he catches up with his family, waving goodbye to the two women in love, sitting in the setting sun.

~ ~ ~

This room is my space. My new family added a lock to the door and bars to the window to keep unwanted people out. To keep my American skin and valuables safe. Sometimes it is a sanctuary, other times it is a hiding place for my other self.

I have made it across the world on my own. At times I feel utterly alone. My body has come to crave the touch of those I cannot have. I have loved men, but it is she I crave in the darkness thousands of miles away. Her fingers slide into me; her hair falls

to my chest as she kisses my neck.

A carnal moan rips from my mouth.

The house is silent.

I hear someone shift in his bed.

No one moves, and I start to breathe again.

~ ~ ~

Piles of freshly printed photographs of Uganda overtake my bed in Tempe. I add these pictures to the twine that zigzags across my walls and documents milestones. My girlfriend watches me work, lying at my feet. She listens as the stories seep from me. Ugandan children caked in dirt stare back. Theirs are some of the voices muted by poverty in Lyantonde, the town I grew to love. I stand on my bed, arranging the photos so the colors flow, but those eyes, pinned back by clothespins, cannot blend in with the rest of my American life. I have made these children decorations.

My guilt haunts me as I tell her their stories, and about my group's goal to provide them with water tanks so they can strive for more than basic survival. I tell her how beautiful those children are, but how little one water tank can do. So much more needs to be done; so many more families need clean water in that green land. I wish I could show her that beautiful country. I wish that I had not taken these photos, but I keep them as a reminder of my power.

Ugliness and danger would await our love on those green hills and orange roads. But we are *mizungos*. We have cameras and the power to turn a nation into wall hangings as children serenade us.

~ ~ ~

It is midnight, and my plane sits in the Entebbe Airport. There is nothing but blackness outside, and only the double-paned glass keeping it out. I feel submerged. I am exhausted, and the cabin's fluorescent lighting is offensive.

The screen on the back of the seat in front of me flashes, tracking my location. The plane straddles the Equator, resting after the ten-hour flight from Schiphol.

My ears are numb from straining to hear the outside world.

Everything I know fits into two small backpacks that cling to my sides and throw me off balance. I step out of the plane. Every part of me, every exhausted pore feels

that small step.

The linoleum is scuffed and gray. Ads wrap around everything in sight, reminding travelers that this is the Pearl of Africa. The fluorescent lighting flickers. Bulbs, like so many things need replacing.

I can't bring myself to make eye contact with the woman who stamps my passport.

I'm supposed to meet my host outside.

The doors slide open and noise envelops me, rushing in after ten hours of absence. The night air is chilly, commandeering my lungs, which are almost used to the recycled junk.

Men crowd together, dressed in plaid button-downs, jeans, and leather shoes. Some sit on motorbikes, most wave, all call out to me.

I am ashamed.

The faces blend and meld together. I only know his from photographs, but I cannot find him.

~ ~ ~

The car with slashed leather seats weaves in and out of the others. None are new, and none adhere to the sloppily painted lanes lit up only by dim headlights.

My bags fill the seat next to me.

No streetlights give meaning to the looming shapes in the darkness. With concentration, my eyes begin to adjust as the cool night air rushes in and around me.

We speed to an abrupt halt behind a pickup riding low to the ground. "POLICE" is spray painted on the side, barely visible in the headlights. Men with rifles slung across their chests stand in the bed, their eyes scanning the landscape in all directions.

Ramshackle steel structures, decorated with Christmas lights instead of neon, blast music that whips through the car as we zoom past the policemen. The silhouettes of dancing people are etched behind my eyelids. A few of the policemen see my face, their eyes following mine before distance robs them of me.

The buildings get closer and closer together. I have not missed a single tree, smell, or woman in a long skirt walking on the side of the road.

The car leaves us, and we walk for a few minutes weaving through identical

turns, and a few staring men. The hotel surprises me. In the midst of crumbling cement, the marble floors of the lobby gleam.

He checks me in and tours the room, examining every corner, every drawer with his hands.

The bed looks like someone just left it, and I try not to wonder what secrets it keeps.

He pulls the curtain shut and makes sure I can lock the door. I am warned not to answer for anyone.

We will meet at eleven in the morning.

I turn the lock and it echoes through the floor.

~ ~ ~

The bus from Kampala to Lyantonde bounces and screeches across three hours of green. Vendors with baskets balanced on their heads shove chunks of meat and bright fruit through my open window at each stop, hoping to pierce my American wallet and feed their families. I am told not to buy anything; my stomach was not made to handle these things.

The bus is overcrowded. It's the only way to get to rural Uganda from crazy Kampala. People spill into the aisle. His tight grip never slides off of my bags as exhaustion pulls me under.

Lyantonde emerges. As we clamber off, all eyes stick to me, and the fact that this is home for the next six weeks begins to settle on my rumpled clothes along with the dust.

His worn expression dissolves into a huge grin as I reposition my things into a thief-proof hold. "Drop your bags, and stretch, sister. This is your new home. We are so happy to have you."

The air here is calm. Music and scents of roasting meat lazily make their way to me as huge trucks bumble by on one of the only paved roads outside of Kampala. They lug goods from Kenya or Tanzania, places I never thought could be closer than a news story. The people walk slowly. Time gets stuck somewhere on the way to town and doesn't translate well. Their looks, instead of dissecting me from my skin and valuables, are curious and friendly. "Hello, my mizungu friend" a man in a tattered suit jacket

beams while strolling by.

We weave in and out of tiny shops and houses. Nearly everyone greets me. We duck through a gate, and a lovely house with carefully kept flowers and grass jumps into view. I enter the front door, and an old man whose smile is bigger than any I've seen, stands up from the couch. "Welcome to your new home. I am your new father!" My breath catches as he hugs me, and I realize he means everything he says. I am now a part of this family.

~ ~ ~

The Internet café's roof is an unfinished, cool private space where the town of Lyantonde sprawls below me. Dusk casts a light blue tint on the buildings with their scrap metal roofs, some of which are decorated with worn bike tires and warped from the rain.

As the sun sinks lower, brightly dressed women crop up in the corners of streets and blossom in the entrances to winding alleys. Truck drivers stuck for the night slink after them into the shadows.

I watch the town's nightlife bloom, and revel in our work. That day, I was actually of use. We talked for hours with past beneficiaries and designed programs meant to foster opportunity. After a week in the tropical sun, the mother of last year's project's family had cleared an entire hectare of jungle, ready to harvest potatoes. On her own she had reclaimed land from the green, slashing and burning hope. She only needed the seed.

With our funding, she could yield seven times what we would invest in her. Her children wouldn't be forced to leave school because she couldn't afford uniforms. She could be independent and teach them to thrive instead of struggling to survive. I am satisfied instead of aching from my uselessness in the face of the intense poverty that grips so many.

~ ~ ~

I see death. They see life, and we are worlds apart.

The screams pierce my mind, and my thoughts go numb. My head is filled only with the cries of the goat as the butcher hacks at its throat. The cries turn into huffs as the blunt knife hacks the vocal chords into shreds. Its kicks turn from desperate to

hopeless as it sags, its life deflating in the red pool surrounding it, filling the jagged cement of the courtyard.

I've been snapping pictures. My friends here wanted me to see the slaughter. This is the first meat they've eaten in weeks. Family members from all over the country have come to celebrate Eid.

Here, the Muslim and Christian populations flow seamlessly. "We worship the same God, what is there to hate?"

The goat is strung up in an outside doorway. A bucket below its head fills with its draining blood. Its tongue lolls to the side looking no different than it did before the slaughter. The knife slides in and out of the creature mechanically. The butcher's face does not change. A barefoot toddler dressed in tiny jeans waddles by sucking his fingers, and staring at the carved goat, not blinking as its fur is separated from the meat, and the meat from the bones.

The camera shutter continues to click. I try to capture the moment when this creature morphs from a living thing to chunks of lifeless meat, but all I can hear is its screams.

The flesh is passed to another man. He has laid out banana leaves and is surrounded by sliced fruit, vegetables and huge pots boiling and bubbling with bits of chicken and sauces. He is armed with a machete, and sits cross-legged staring blankly at the meat before him. With no signal he starts hacking at the tough goat meat. He keeps on for ten minutes, looking like a perverse wind-up toy.

The family around me sings and celebrates. The courtyard, usually filled with gray, is bursting with the brightness of the chopped fruit and vegetables, the headscarves of the women, the white tunics of the men, and the brightly printed clothes of the children.

~ ~ ~

Later in the evening of Eid, I sit in the courtyard.

The sky opens and it pours. The colors of Eid are stripped from outside and stuffed into the many rooms of the complex.

The celebration remains vibrant, but becomes more subdued with the filling of bellies. Earlier that morning, my new family offered well wishes to their friends. "We

have no bad blood, they worship the same God. If He is happy with them, it will rain.”

It rains for hours. God is happy.

I am still shaken from the slaughtering. Apparently, worlds cannot be left behind with travel, no matter how far or for how long. We carry them with us from place to place.

~ ~ ~

For the first time in over a month, I am not the only *mizungu*.

The river churns and attempts to swallow everything. Our raft bounces and wriggles shooting along the Nile’s rapids. My host is in the front and the rest of our crew paddles in sync with him. With one last tug at the water, we fly forward into calmer water, the adrenaline still numbing everything but the pounding of blood and pride in our ears.

A couple from Amsterdam speaks Dutch then slips into English to include me in the conversation. We share sunscreen and laugh at our burning skin and oily white noses.

That night we stay in a lodge in Jinja overlooking the Nile squeezed in between miles of trees filled with monkeys and wildlife I have only ever seen caged. My host goes to sleep, but I choose to stay with the other *mizungos*. We talk until we are the only ones left on the veranda hanging over the dark jungle night.

They too are haunted by the intense poverty that warps the children’s stomachs, swelling their starving bellies, and by the hate that lies behind the most genuine smiles. They too are shocked by the love that passes between Muslims and Christians in Uganda, yet has caused thousands of years of war and misunderstanding in the Western world and the Middle East. They too are enchanted yet horrified by this wonderful world.

~ ~ ~

When I first arrived in Lyantonde, it seemed to be a place of the past. Power wasn’t guaranteed, I bathed from a bucket, and flush-toilets were an unattainable luxury. But looking again, I see the future developing alongside tradition. I see culture translating opportunity. Women in their seventies swathed in bright traditional dress talk on cellphones, even though running water is scarce. Teenagers constantly update

Facebook at the Internet café. Children head back from school in immaculate uniforms speaking near perfect English with dreams of becoming world leaders and doctors.

The days are filled with hope for the future while the nights are filled with power play. They are an escape from the past and present where women bloom in the alleyways, and children complete their homework in candlelight with strength that my hands never needed to know.

~ ~ ~

It rains, earlier and harder than ever before, and the farmers worry about the fate of their crops, and ultimately their families. The roads are too dangerous to travel by motorbike. We have no connection to our project or the beneficiaries.

Instead we wait.

It rains for three days. The smell of rain is different here. It is stitched with worry and destruction instead of hope and life. The sky churns into a formidable indigo instead of the deep purple coated with pink clouds that usher green change into my beautiful desert.

~ ~ ~

When the sky clears, the real world is beckoned back with the flip of a switch. The workers have fixed the power line somewhere between here and Tanzania. "One break in the line and the whole countryside goes dark."

The World News flickers on. I am more informed here in rural Africa than in the developed world. Here, there is no option to look the other way. I watch with my host family as people continue to die by the hundreds. Palestinians and Israelis. Children in Syria. Hospitals and schools bombed. Each night the death count rises. The whole globe gripped by the same rain. A village in India completely reclaimed. Buried. Loved ones beg for help and more search parties.

"God has a plan and reason. We are His people and His instruments, and God is good."

I can't see a God or a power to call upon, and I can't see a reason. Especially not a good one. I am isolated from the people I live with who have opened up their home, and welcomed me into their family.

The loss and death all seems so distant, held back by the secure electricity and

plumbing of my world—until it isn't.

~ ~ ~

The desert I miss is worlds away and filled with those I love. Our apartment seems even farther, and I want nothing more right now than to hold my roommate's hand. To have her know that I was there for her, really, and that her friend's death was not her fault. People break. Some pull others down with them, and some pick up the fallen. She was stronger, and for that she must suffer. I just need her to know that she has a right—no matter how far off it seems—to be happy. She can and will carry pain, but she has chosen, unlike him, to *live*, and she must do that. She has a right to move forward, which is not moving on or forgetting. It is accepting.

This is life. This is our world. Like Lyantonde, it's beautiful, it's ugly, and it's honest.

~ ~ ~

Each night the death count rises everywhere in the world, but death only holds the fringes of my life. I hurt from my roommate's grief, but it is borrowed pain.

"Everyone here has lost a child, a brother, a sister, an aunt. People here know death well, so we understand your loss, and we pray for you and your friend."

~ ~ ~

I am hardly unpacked, and my roommate is in a world warped by the horrors of an acid trip. She pleads with me to join her, but sleep is a higher priority, something that won't happen tonight.

"I'm in Hell."

She stands on the bed that's pushed against the wall, arms outstretched, her tongue twisting so only her demons can understand. Her eyes roll back. For a moment, she is serene.

She falls back, shattering the window above the bed and the silence of three AM.

I yank her away from the shards as she screams, clinging to me. Somehow there is no blood. I pull her to her room, needing her to feel safe.

Her body is taken by the trip. She flings herself into every sharp corner, finally convulsing on the floor. I hold her shoulders down as she claws at me, and her teeth break my skin.

When her body grows limp, a cry fills the room—her lost love's name.

The darkest hours of the night are filled with her grief until her demons release her, and she slips into sleep.

~ ~ ~

Clapping hands, harmonized voices, and swaying bodies in their best clothes fill my host family's church. A young woman next to me holds a worn bible, which has been pieced back together with newspaper. In the row of uncomfortable wooden benches in front of me, a child is squeezed in between her parents, yet stands facing me, the *mizungu*, and stares without blinking. The hymns bounce off the walls and all around me, filling what little space isn't taken by bodies too close to understand the concept of Western space.

The hymns and sermon are in Luganda. The broken windows behind the pastor take my attention, while the child and some grown men continue to stare at me. From my seat I can see directly into somebody's room in the house next to the church. This person skulks back and forth in front of the window, yet never faces us.

My host sister hands me her bible and tells me which passages to flip to. I read, holding it between us as she scribbles notes in what little space is left in the margins. The words I'm supposed to be absorbing are squeezed out by the feeling of the eyes boring into my skin.

The service ends, and my host mother steps up to the center of the aisle. She is dressed in bright orange and holds the basket out for the tithing. People pile into the aisle. They sing as they drop money into the basket. Each offering is at least ten percent of what they've made that week. Some give more than the bill that is crinkled in my hand. All are proud. The money piles higher, and as I step up to the basket, she locks eyes with me, beaming.

Those who could not offer cash leave the building and wait outside. They march in with bushels of bananas, stocks of sugar cane, live hens, eggs, grain, and seeds. One man drags a bleating stubborn goat.

They stand in front and face everyone. These are the poorest of the poor, yet they give all that they can.

The pastor begins to auction off the items. "What good is a hen to a church?" he

asks. "Do we not care enough for our God?"

People then offer more money. The pastor's smile widens and his accusations get sharper until everything is sold.

My host mother neatly counts and packs the money into an envelope and hands it to the pastor.

A young girl in the choir cleans up the goat shit.

My legs are grateful for the walk home, happy to shed the eyes of the clergy, and replace them with orange dust. It clings to my toes and the white hem of my skirt.

My host sister walks beside me and asks questions about my strange world.

They all lead back to divorce.

"In our country it is unacceptable. It doesn't happen. How can it be so common in yours?"

There was a time when I asked why, but eventually I understood, even if I wished I didn't.

Here in Lyantonde, life without poverty is a blessing, and marriage is the only way to live. It is a way of combatting hardships. Back home we have options. We have the choice to marry unhappily, and we have the option to end it.

"When you say your parents had 'problems' I assumed you meant hunger, disease, poverty. Real problems. Depression isn't reason enough."

~ ~ ~

The Utah sun beats down, contending with the infamous sun of the Sonoran. My siblings and I are lined up on the driveway in four foldable chairs, waiting for the parade, while our mother stays inside, hiding from my questions. I count the browning weeds cropping up in the cracks, as my brother, the youngest, bounces in and out of his chair. He is armed with a grocery bag and the impatience of an eight-year-old, and demands to know where the parade and his candy are. Hoping to tire him out and shut him up, I tell him the faster he dances, the faster the parade will come.

My sisters and I laugh as he bounces and smiles, his mouth pulling at the jagged scar running down his cheek.

It has been one year since my mother's hospitalization. The parade continues,

and they jump and race for the fallen pieces, snatching them up before I can.

The scar on his face tugs at the moment, adding an aching for the mother we almost lost, now inside, missing another memory.

~ ~ ~

“I think she tried to kill herself. No one will tell me what happened.”

I read the message from my sister again and again as the phone rings to depletion.

No one answers, and the line grows cold.

Days go by. Mother fills the silence haunting every mirror. Every step seems lost and packed with lines, phrases, lyrics. They pour out of me onto every surface and thought.

How long before her fall?

My grandpa’s calm voice ends the silence as the sun slips underground, pulling the campus into blue.

“She said she was calling to say goodbye.”

He kept her on the line. She told him with slurred words about the pills she took and the liquor she drank. He kept her talking. He kept her conscious. My grandma phoned the police on the other line. He heard them break through the door. She cursed him.

We beg to know the woman who was free.

It is dark. My legs begin to ache from the huge boulder I’m sitting on with no recollection of the numb steps they took to get there. Fellow students’ laughter and chatter slowly start to filter back into my consciousness.

“That call was a cry for help. There’s a chance this is not the end of her tries. Hope for the best, and prepare for the worst.”

How do we make this woman stay?

No visible disease or virus threatens my family. But there are still threats.

~ ~ ~

My brother and sisters jab at the car windows, ecstatic about the desert's red rock, which is so new to them. Our mother jumps in, begging my stepdad to pull over so that we can explore the red sand dunes of Snow Canyon.

When the car slows, we fling off our seatbelts and run into the desert. Our laughter fills the empty canyon, fading into the towering sandstone.

Our mother pulls off her combat boots and peels off her socks, tumbling into the sand with my youngest siblings. She makes a sand angel beside my brother, the scar still pulling at his face. Her dancer's body is graceful against the red sand. Floating in the colors of the desert, she is filled with life.

~ ~ ~

The police chief's uniform is so white it almost hurts my eyes. His beret has the perfect tilt, and his manners are impeccable, though hardened. We walk through the station past the lower ranking officers who salute him with their shiny rifles swept across their chests.

The women's cell is pitch black at midday. It is an eighty-square-foot metal shanty with a padlock. The door stands wide open. One empty bucket for bathing sits in the center of the cell with a dirty rag slopped over the side. There is no latrine. The tropical sun beats at the cell and I can only imagine how stifling it must be behind that locked door.

I know nothing about the criminal justice system here, only that there is no record system across districts and towns. There are hardly any roads to transport people, let alone information. I wonder how national law finds its way or if it gets tangled up in all of the green.

Laughing voices drift to me from inside a brick structure slightly bigger than the women's cell. It has pane-less barred windows and a bulb swings lightly in the breeze, illuminating the brick.

"These are the men's quarters."

We make our way to his office where a worn fan lazily disrupts piles of paperwork that crowd his desk. He tells me Lyantonde is “blessed” to have me, and he will answer any of my questions.

I wonder what crimes the chatting men inside have committed. I wonder how long they have had to sit in that tiny cell, and how much more time they have in that block. I wonder if anyone’s crimes involve a love their beautiful country cannot understand.

~ ~ ~

Every meal is stitched with the World News. I yearn for one story in particular, rationing out my meal so that it will last until it airs, the challenging of Uganda’s homophobic law.

The colorful heaps of food pile before me as the stories unfold. I wait and swallow. Mashed and steamed banana known as *matoke*; fish; Irish potatoes; steamed pumpkin; rice with my favorite purple ground nut sauce; greens, including a sour eggplant; and a plate of the most sensuous pineapple and watermelon. This feast of a lunch would fill the barren fridge in my college apartment and last me a week.

Outside, next to the goat’s pen, where the stories are mere murmurs, sits a garbage heap. Anything I don’t consume is left to rot.

The story flashes, my ears strain, my chewing stops. International lawyers joined forces to strike down the homophobic law designed to imprison gays, bisexuals, and “accomplices,” those who do not turn them in, for life. A pastor becomes a national hero, denouncing and damning anyone who pardons such crimes against God.

It is time for Parliament to make their decision.

The tiny screen sits across the room, yet is all I see and hear.

Someone has entered the house and sits beside me. He leans toward the T.V. too. I chew again, forcing back the nerves.

The lawyers have found a loophole. I exhale.

Members of Parliament were not present when the law was voted in.

It is invalid.

My fist clenches with the celebration I must keep hidden. Against the waves of hate coursing through the region, with the whole world watching, the law is struck down.

My host's protective hands clasp mine, and my fist relaxes. "My dear sister," he says, "this is a great victory."

~ ~ ~

We sit on our raft letting the water of the Nile drift by. I talk about the sun and the Mexican food that I miss, and the Dutch couple asks which parts of my beautiful desert they must see. Wildflowers bloom in my mind's eye, and my skin aches, missing the sun's blast.

The shore is a bouncing wave of children shouting "*Mizungu* bye!" They run after our raft as we smile and wave back until they fade from sight, their cries lingering on the surface of the river. The lazy water laps at the raft and the breeze alleviates the slow burn of the sun.

"What does *mizungu* actually mean?" my new friend asks our guide.

At the back of the raft he looks up from the river he knows so well. His dreadlocks frame his face perfectly and he folds his toned arms across his chest and smiles.

"It is an old word from the time of colonization. It means 'explorer.'"

Contributors

Seetha Anagol lives in Annapolis, Maryland with her husband and daughter. Her short stories and personal essays have been published in newspapers in India and the U.S. She has just completed writing her first novel. "Hide! You're a Woman"

Richard Ault has been a participant-observer in changing the culture of large organizational systems for most of his working life. Previously he was a teacher and principal at the secondary school level and taught undergraduate and graduate level courses at the university level. He was principal author of a book on change management called *What Works* and has published articles, poetry, and short fiction. He is currently working on a novel about reinventing our political and governance systems. He and his wife Pennie live on Torch Lake in northern lower Michigan. Dick is convinced that he is the youngest eighty-year old, minus an esophagus, on the planet. "Living in the Nut House"

Rick Bailey writes about family, food, travel, current events, what he reads and what he remembers. The University of Nebraska Press will publish a collection of his essays, *American English, Italian Chocolate* in summer 2017. He and his wife divide their time between Michigan and the Republic of San Marino. "Birds and Beatles"

Malado Francine Baldwin (cover art) is a Los Angeles based multi-media artist, known for her work in text and image. Recent projects include artwork for "Bring back what you can find" at the Torrance Art Museum for 7x7.LA, drawings and paintings for "Modern Oracles" at Trestle Projects Brooklyn, a screening of "Lux/Nox" at the Feminist Film project of FAIR Miami, and "Gallery Tally" at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Her work is in public and private collections, including Bard College, Getty Research Institute, William Louis-Dreyfus collection, and Kean University. She received her BA from Swarthmore College and an MFA from the New York Studio School.

Terry Richard Bazes is the author of *Lizard World* and of *Goldsmith's Return*. His personal essays and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, including *The Washington Post Book World*, *Newsday*, *Columbia Magazine*, *Travelers' Tales: Spain*, *Lost Magazine*, and *the Evergreen Review*. "Valediction"

Atticus Benight is an emerging "undercover writer of words." His creative works have appeared most recently in *The MacGuffin* and *Sediments Literary-Arts Journal*. A native of western Pennsylvania, Atticus currently lives and writes near St. Paul, MN. "Furry Felonies".

Gabriella Brand's writing has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The First Line*, *Room Magazine*, *The Citron Review*, and dozens of other publications. Her poetry has been featured in the series "District Lines" from the Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington D.C. One of her short stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2014. Gabriella divides her time between Connecticut, where she teaches foreign languages, and the Eastern Townships of Quebec, where she is learning to paddle board on Lac Massawippi. "Wild Cherry Tree"

John Chavers is an artist and photographer. Most recently, his work has been accepted at *3Elements Review*, *Birch Gang Review*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, and the *New England Review*, among others. John's residency fellowships include Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. John lives in Austin, where he has a fascination for the diminutive, works of art on paper, and the desert. "Chairs at Rest" (photograph)

Skye Davis recently graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with an MFA in Creative Nonfiction and works as a Culture Editor for an internet media company based in Brooklyn. She was awarded a work-study scholarship from Breadloaf Writers' Conference, and her nonfiction has appeared in *WoodenBoat* and *Life on the Coast Magazines*. She is currently working on a series of profiles featuring Cape Cod locals, as she seeks to shed light on the economic and environmental changes occurring on the Massachusetts peninsula. "Walk like a Bear"

Michael Engelhard is the author of the essay collection *American Wild: Explorations from the Grand Canyon to the Arctic Ocean* and of *Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon*. He lives in Fairbanks, Alaska and works as a wilderness guide in the Arctic. "So Long, Promised Land"

An academic physician for over three decades with a primary emphasis on scientific writing, **Ricardo José González-Rothi** is a relative newcomer to creative writing. Silver hair and a busy career have not deterred him from his love of the written word and the magic of the tale. He has had fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry featured in *Acentos Review*, *Heal Literary Magazine*, *Gainesville Magazine*, and the journal *Chest*. "Papi and Me"

James Hanna worked as a counselor in the Indiana Department of Corrections and recently retired from the San Francisco Probation Department, where he was assigned to a domestic violence and stalking unit. His debut novel, *The Siege*, depicts a hostage standoff in a penal facility. *Call Me Pomeroy*, James' second book, chronicles the

madcap tales of a street musician on parole who joins Occupy Oakland and its sister movements in England and France. Hanna's stories and essays have appeared in many journals and have received three Pushcart nominations. Many of his stories are included in his third book: *A Second, Less Capable Head*, which was designated a Distinguished Favorite by The Independent Press Awards. "Deceptive"

Barb Howard is the author of the short story collection *Western Taxidermy*, which was a finalist at the High Plains Book Awards and a winner of the Canadian Authors Association Exporting Alberta Award. She has won the Howard O'Hagan Award for short story, published three novels, and is currently writing, at a snail's pace, on a book about law and literature. Barb lives in Calgary. "In the Matter of My Law Degree"

Leonard Kogan lives in Baltimore, MD. The compositional structure in his works represents fragmentary set-stages and painterly encounters of bodies and organisms. Kogan's works are synthesis of the ubiquitous, trivial, marginal, and dislocated. The paintings are saturated with associative flashbacks, emotional and social references. His work has been featured in a number of literary and art magazines. "Farcical Play" (oil on paper; 22 x 30 in.; 2011 – 2016)

Richard LeBlond is a retired biologist living in North Carolina. Since 2014, his essays and photographs have appeared in numerous U.S. and international journals, including *Montreal Review*, *High Country News*, *Compose*, *New Theory*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Concis*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. His work has been nominated for *Best American Travel Writing* and *Best of the Net*. "From Snitch to Scab"

Miriam Mandel Levi's essays have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction's* anthology, *Same Time Next Week*, *Brain Child*, *Literary Mama*, *Under the Sun*, *Poetica*, *Sleet* and *Tablet*. She lives in Israel. "The Witch".

John A. McCaffrey grew up in Rochester, attended Villanova University in Philadelphia, and received his MA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York. His stories, essays, and book reviews have appeared regularly in literary journals, newspapers, and anthologies. His debut novel, *The Book of Ash*, was released in 2013. His collection of short stories, *Two Syllable Men*, was published by Vine Leaves Press in 2016. John is also a Development Director for a non-profit organization in New York City and teaches creative writing at the College of New Rochelle's Rosa Parks Campus in Harlem. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey. "Step Over"

Sophia McGovern has Bachelor's degrees in Creative writing and Global Studies from Arizona State University. After global health internships in Uganda and India through

GlobeMed and the International Alliance for the Prevention of AIDS, she found the advocacy and literary communities in Phoenix. She splits her time between editing for rinky dink press, assisting in a high school classroom, and running the ESL program for the Immigration Center at CASE. Her work has been published by *Four Chambers Press*, *Downtown*, and *Lux: The Undergraduate Creative Writing Review*. “Mizungu”

Toti O'Brien was born in Rome and lives in Los Angeles. Her work has most recently appeared in *Lotus-Eaters*, *Masque & Spectacle*, *Feminine Inquiry*, and *Indiana Voices*. “Lost and Found”

Rebecca Potter is an English teacher at a rural high school in central Kentucky. She is currently working on an MFA in the Bluegrass Writers Studio at Eastern Kentucky University. She is working on a collection of essays that focus on how environment and relationships affect education. Rebecca lives with her husband, three sons, and two bulldogs. “The Places They Could Go”

A native of the Pine Barrens region of southern New Jersey, **John Repp** is a widely-published poet, fiction writer, essayist, and book critic. His latest book is *Fat Jersey Blues*, winner of the 2013 Akron Poetry Prize from the University of Akron Press. “TV Dads”

Amy Kathleen Ryan is the author of six young adult novels, most notably *The Sky Chasers* series from St. Martin's Press. She lives in Jackson, WY with her husband and three beautiful daughters. “Vanished”.

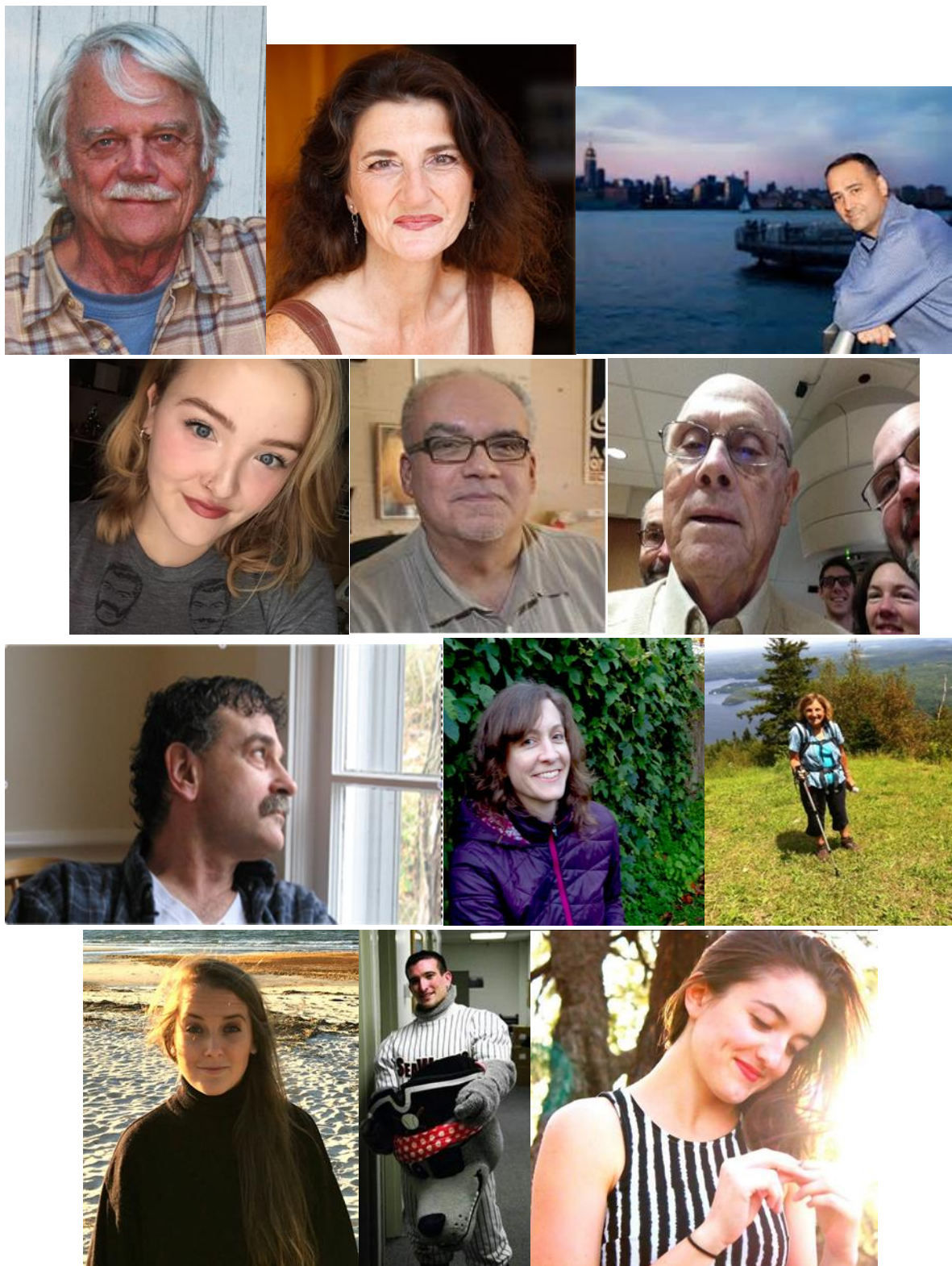
Tessa Torgeson is a social worker by day and writer by night who lives and freezes in Fargo, North Dakota. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Oregon Humanities Magazine*, *Role/Reboot*, *Rkvry Quarterly Literary Journal*, and *Doll Hospital*, among others. She is currently working on a memoir. “Reverse Bartending and Wilted Wings”.

Maria Trombetta is a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at San Francisco State University. She is currently working on a nonfiction book about the Sonoma Developmental Center, one of the last institutions in California that houses people with developmental disabilities. She received her B.A. in Journalism from San Francisco State University and has written stories for the *Oakland Tribune* and the *Sonoma Index-Tribune*. She abandoned the city for the country and now lives with her family three hours from civilization, on the wild coast of Northern California. “This Is a Dickie Lee Song”

Gabby Vachon is a writer and artist from Montreal. She has been published or has work forthcoming in *Tiny Tim*, *Ink in Thirds* and *The Corvus Review*, among other publications. She is an editor for *Soliloquies Anthology*. Her favorite food is the skin around her cuticles, and she is happily and forever married to her true love. “This House Burns Blue”



Tessa Torgeson, Rick Bailey, Seetha Anagol (top row, left to right); James Hanna, Rebecca Potter, Ricardo José González-Rothi; Amy Kathleen Ryan, Michael Engelhard, Barb Howard.



Richard LeBlond, Toti O'Brien, John McCaffrey (top row, left to right); Gabby Vachon, John Repp, Richard Ault; Terry Richard Bazes; Maria Trombetta, Gabriella Brand; Skye Davis, Atticus Benight, Sophia McGovern