Volume 9,
Issue 1
2019

bioStories

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Volume 9, Issue 1

2019

Above and on the cover (detail): “Untitled Concrete Sculpture” by Mario Loprete. This piece is part of a series that transforms actual articles of clothing with concrete, plaster, and resin.

In this issue of bioStories, you will meet the survivors of wars and the survivors of accidents. You will be transported into homeless shelters and hospitals, onto urban campuses and within rural farmhouses. You will live briefly alongside those who occupy cramped Brooklyn apartments and Southwest desert trailer parks and venture into laundromats and churches. You will encounter genius mathematicians, horse handicappers, maids, doctors, and carpenters. You will live through the eyes of teenagers and the elderly. Throughout these pages talented writers will remind you what it means to love, to forgive, to survive, to grow.

All this is to say that the current issue of the magazine gives you what you've come to expect each week on the website—original, gifted writers presenting eclectic stories of people caught in the vulnerable act of being human.

Thanks for reading. Enjoy.

Mark Leichliter, Editor

Table of Contents

A Memory of Smoke

by Stephen Beckwith

From the street, my neighborhood was the perfect post-war collection of starter homes. Boxy ranch houses and faux Cap Cods constructed on large lots among the old growth oaks and sassafras. All fifty-six houses were built in the six years between 1948 and 1954.

Horsebrook Creek ran along the back of our property on the west side of the street. Beyond the creek westward was a land of woods, fallow fields, abandoned orchards, meadows, swamps, ponds, railroad tracks and, farther west, the town's airport runways. Beyond the airport the woods and farmland ran unbroken for sixty miles.

This was not Christopher Robin's tame Hundred Acre Wood populated with sweet, befuddled English countryside creatures. In the winter this was the Yukon, in the spring a muddy battlefield in France. In summer we would dam up the creek and go swimming like Huck and Tom. And in the fall, from just after the start of school, until the first snowfall around Thanksgiving, 'across the crick' was a forbidden world of pheasant and deer, and red-hatted hunters.

I first began to explore these wild lands when I was six, and these fields and woods became my principal reality. Family, home, chores, these were all illusionary when compared to time spent atop old fruit trees aiming wormy apples at fat grey squirrels. My buddies and I would dig foxholes deep into the soft black peat bog and we would lob hand-grenade-shaped quinces at each other.

In the summers' the gang would break for dinner at six, gather in the field behind our house at seven, and, once more, wade the Zambezi into darkest Africa until nine.

Horsebrook School sat atop a small promontory on a bend in the creek three houses south of our backyard. The hill was high enough for sledding in the winter. Every classroom window faced west overlooking the creek and the wild lands beyond.

On those first bleak fall days when the weather still felt like late summer we would gaze longingly out the schoolhouse windows at a world of lost pocket knives, hidden treasures buried in tin cracker boxes, and scrap wood fortresses cobbled together with bent nails and weathered grey two-by-fours, built, twenty-five feet up in the

canopy of the apple trees. All with the precarious surety of an eight-year-old carpenter's confidence that 'dangerous' was a spurious adult concept.

I would, even in the forbidden fall, wander off on my own over the creek and tramp the autumn fields of golden wild grasses. I would walk the old orchards stomping the rotting apples. I would let my imagination gallop free across that landscape as I watched the hunters work their dogs through the fields from my regular perch in the orchard.

But by the end of September our focus on that world across the creek would largely shift to the street. Westwood Avenue was a pretty typical 1950's Midwest neighborhood street, except that there were no sidewalks and several large oaks sat at the very edge of the asphalt.

Every yard on Westwood had eight to ten old growth oaks scattered around the large yards. With this many trees, constant raking was an unavoidable fall ritual. My father would rake every autumn evening after work and all day Saturday. Our job, my brother, sisters and I, would be to load up an old canvas tarp with piles of the moist leaves and drag them across the lawn to the street.

This frenzied raking and hauling would culminate each night with Westwood Avenue ablaze. The street in spring, summer, even winter was wide enough for two cars to pass, but in the fall the street narrowed to one lane and a contiguous boarder of flames lined both sides of the asphalt. My little brother and I would lie on our backs in the front yard and watch the burning leaves lift on the hot air and float toward the treetops.

To this day I can conjure up in my mind the sweet, acrid smoke of burning oak leaves. It is, more than anything, the odor of my youth. I catch myself thinking of it as the singular smell of an entire decade. In my mind this smoky world is inexorably linked to family, and home, and a place and a time where innocence and friendship had a deeper meaning.

As September gave way to October a crispness in the evening air would arrive abruptly and all legacy of summer would be gone. We knew that once the first weeks of November arrived, the grey skies would descend and not lift again until April, but the

October nights were clear, the moon low in the west, and the stars brighter than at any other time of the year.

The leaf smoke would grow thick until Westwood became an odd amalgam of “Father Knows Best” and Dante’s *Inferno*. Each dad manned his fire, rake in hand, while thick grey smoke and flaming leaves rose on the autumn breezes, curling Heavenward.

By mid-October the leaves had been collected and burned each evening in every yard except one. Three quarters of the way down the block, in the only brick house on Westwood Avenue, lived a widow whose husband and son had died in the war. The children of the neighborhood knew her as Aunt Sue. Aunt Sue owned two carefully manicured park-like lots with thirty large oaks, a few maples, and an ancient horse chestnut.

Once or twice a year each child on Westwood would, in turn, spend the night at Aunt Sue’s. It was a long-established tradition by the time my brother and I came along. Aunt Sue did not own a television. You would eat cookies and talk with Aunt Sue in her parlor until eight o’clock. You would go to sleep in her spare bedroom, her son’s old room, and wake to a large country breakfast in the morning.

The weekend before Halloween each year all of the parents, and children old enough to wrangle a rake, would gather to clear Aunt Sue’s property of leaves and dead branches. The resulting pile was as tall as a ten-year-old boy. A torch would be passed down the eighty-foot-long pile of leaves and the conflagration would grow, burning all afternoon and into the evening. Aunt Sue would supply the hot dogs and marshmallows and the neighborhood, parents and children together, would sit on Aunt Sue’s grass, leaning against her stately oaks, eating dinner and laughing until the fires died down and darkness reclaimed the street.

These were the rituals of the season. A time shrouded in swirls of oak leaf smoke, leading up to the climax of fall, All Hallows Eve.

By Halloween the evening smoke had permeated every corner of our small community and hung over the creek bed like spring fog.

Halloween was the culmination of all that childhood should hold for children— the unfettered imagination. The Christmas Season may celebrate children, but it is really an adult holiday. Halloween, however, is not simply about children, it touches the true child

in all of us, and we remember. What I remember are the smells of fall, the fire's warmth on a chill evening outside, and God help me it smells like the earth, and family, and love.

As I grew older my solitary fall walks across the creek became more introspective and, slowly, I lost the ability to see the natural world on an equal footing. I had fallen victim to that arrogance of age; I grew up and became the center of my world, as we unfortunately all do eventually.

The orchard was plowed under for a rail switching yard and the fields became an industrial park. A small copse of trees still stands across the creek behind Aunt Sue's old house. There still are no sidewalks on Westwood. Leaf burning has been banned since the mid-Sixties and the houses, built in the early Fifties, have clearly passed their golden age.

I don't go back to Westwood anymore.

A few years ago I was driving around in the country on a late fall evening. I had my window down and you could smell the snow clouds on the horizon. The crisp cold air had grown heavy with the anticipation of a new season. I caught an old familiar scent on the wind. Jack-o-lanterns leapt to mind, and the sweet, sour, stickiness of a caramel apple. I remembered my father standing in the dark street, coffee mug in hand, watching as my brother and I ran from house to house, across familiar lawns, begging for candy.

I turned down a rutted country road and watched a farmer and his son raking leaves into the space between the lawn and the road. The fire danced over the leaf piles in the dusk. I stopped, got out of my car and climbed up on the hood. I sat there leaning against the windshield smelling the burning leaves for more than an hour. It was pitch black outside except for a few coals glowing Halloween orange when I climbed back behind the wheel and headed for home.

I had children of my own and nurtured them as best I could through the prism of my own selfishness. But once a year, when the harvest was done and the late Fall wheat was cut and stacked, when the long sleep of winter loomed heavy over the now smokeless evenings, I would ask my children who or what they wanted to be for

Halloween. For a few moments each fall as I waited to hear my children's answer I could smell the oak leaves burning and see the sparks jump on the breeze, rise up in true Halloween spirit and pretend in those few seconds to be stars.

This Is Afghanistan

by J. Malcolm Garcia

My colleague, Zabiullah Fazly, picks me up at Kabul International Airport and drives me to the Park Palace, a guest house, near downtown. Stuck in traffic, I adjust the calendar on my watch to accommodate the nine-and-a-half-hour time difference between my Chicago home and here: August 28, 2015. Smoke from kabob grills cloud the sidewalk and young people group together to take selfies as elderly man trudge past them hauling carts of wood. It's hard to believe the country has been at war for decades. I have worked as a reporter in Afghanistan since 2001. On this trip, an editor with *Latterly Magazine* has asked me to write about the rise in violence that has resulted in at least 5,000 civilian casualties. The government, riven by corruption and political rivalries, appears unable to confront it.

I first hired Zabiullah as my translator in 2010. He has a lean face and dark, black hair. He talks in a low voice and likes to wear jeans and polo shirts, and he carries two cell phones he uses to text constantly. He fills each moment of his day with activity, aware his life could be cut short in an instant. At thirty-three, Zabiullah has lived two years longer than his father, who died in 1995, killed by a stray bullet during Afghanistan's civil war. Zabiullah himself almost died from shrapnel that pierced his neck.

When we first started working together, Zabiullah and I drove through Kabul without concern but after I completed a reporting assignment in 2014, the situation changed dramatically. NATO decided to drawdown most of its forces and the Taliban began taking control of wide swaths of the country. Since then, militants have been inflicting severe casualties on Afghan forces, more evidence of the country's struggle to blunt a resilient insurgency despite nearly twenty years of U.S. military engagement. As a consequence, thousands of Afghans have sought sanctuary in Europe. About the same time, Zabiullah started receiving threatening phone calls.

--Why do you work with foreigners? the callers wanted to know. Join the jihad.

Zabiullah asked them if the jihad would pay as well as a foreigner. You will die for your smart mouth, the callers said. Zabiullah hung up. He told his wife, Sweetra, that

should anyone ask where she works, she should tell them she was a nurse or a teacher. The truth, that she translated documents for western officials in the Ministry of Interior, would only create problems. A woman assisting westerners. No. Tell them you do women's work.

After I check into my room, Zabiullah and I eat lunch at a nearby kabob stall. A young woman crosses in front of us in flesh-colored pants that at first glance give the impression she has nothing on.

--What the hell! Zabiullah shouts.

The woman looks at us. She wears lipstick and makeup. She smiles and continues walking.

--Amazing, Zabiullah says. Is this how they dress in the United States?

When the Soviet Union controlled Afghanistan in the 1980s, Zabiullah tells me, women wore miniskirts and loose blouses that exposed their breasts when they leaned forward. He recalls fairs with stalls and clowns and singers and women with their children, everyone wearing Western clothes, especially blue jeans. When he was in the fourth grade, he attended a community center for boys and girls. The gray slab of a building had been built by the Soviets and despite its dour design it bustled with activities. Soviet-trained teachers taught painting and music and coached sports. In those days, Zabiullah didn't see anyone carrying a gun. Even the police didn't have guns. Their uniform alone had value.

An intangible something started to dissolve in Afghanistan after the Soviets left. One day there were Russian uniforms, the next day civil war, and the day after that the black turbans of the Taliban. Then American bombs rocked Kabul. Zabiullah's family put blankets in front of their windows to protect the glass from flying debris. Barbers opened their shops and men lined up to have their beards shaved to celebrate the defeat of the Taliban. Boys collected bullet casings littering the ground and people cheered in the streets.

Zabiullah never suspected that the U.S. would leave Afghanistan. Now, he thinks he should have known but at the time he had seen so much war that he wanted to be happy for a moment and not think of the future. When he considers the decades of fighting, Zabiullah concludes that Afghanistan was better off under the Taliban than at

any other time. It had security. No freedom but it was safe. You could leave your car without locking it and no one would dare touch it because they knew they'd be punished.

Zabiullah thought the U.S. would leave something behind when it began removing troops. Russia left good roads. Zabiullah still uses a drinking glass made by a Russian shopkeeper. The Taliban left moral discipline. What has America left? The roads are shit now. There is no security. People don't have work.

--Do you know what today's date is? he asks me.

--No.

--The eleventh. September 11th.

--I've got jet lag.

--No one in Afghanistan remembers, either. It no longer matters. Nothing here does.

After lunch, we stop by the barbershop of Uresh Jawid, a mutual friend. Magazine photos of posturing young men with stern looks and dark hair pompadoured in the latest fashions —quiff, ducktail, mohawk—fill the walls. Uresh does not resemble any of these models. His mop of unruly hair hangs over his forehead uncombed. A patchy beard leapfrogs down both sides of his face, meeting at his chin in a scraggly goatee.

I've known Uresh since 2003. He was twelve then and polished shoes outside my hotel. His pants and sandals were stained and torn but the shirts, somehow, were always immaculate and I nicknamed him, Mr. Gigolo. He hung out with three other boys his age. I gave Uresh and his friends candy. One morning, Uresh said he'd had nothing to eat and candy would only upset his stomach. I took him and his friends to lunch. Every day after that we all ate lunch together. Then I enrolled them in school. Each evening, I reviewed their lessons in the dingy back room of a pharmacy owned by the brother of my translator at the time.

Now, at twenty-five, a worn smile creases Uresh's face, the smile of a young man proud of his achievements but tired from his own hard-won accomplishments and the hopelessness of his country. When he takes a bus home, he asks himself, Will

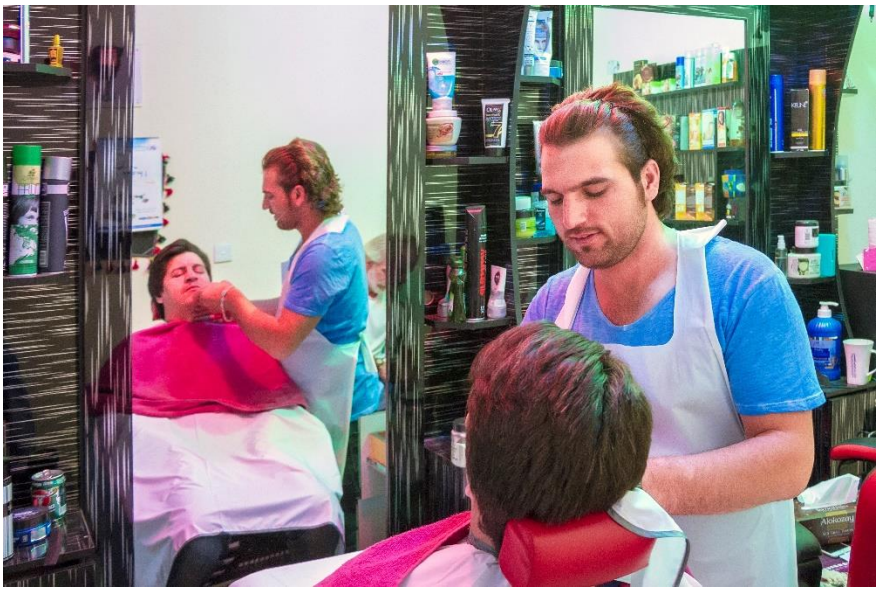
someone shoot me, stab me, blow me up? Will I die? People guess his age to be much older than twenty-five. I'm not even thirty, he tells them but they don't believe him. His mother tells him each wrinkle in his face shows a year of his life.

--If that is true, he responds, then I must be ninety.

He reaches for a can of Red Bull, downs it in several gulps, tosses it in the trash and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He held any number of jobs in mobile phone companies, restaurants, tea and jewelry shops before he became a barber. Then his family moved to Parwan Province outside of Kabul where there was no work. He wondered, What should I do? and decided to return to the city where he apprenticed for a friend of the family, a barber. He slept in the barber's shop beneath a table after the shop closed. He named the cockroaches that scuttled by his face. He spent all of his days and nights there. He watched YouTube videos to learn about modern haircuts the barber refused to teach him because he was a conservative man and disapproved of western fashion. He provided Uresh with a small allowance with which he bought food for his family.

--That was my life. Now I'm twenty-five and I have this shop. but I don't define my life by what I have. I'm not happy.

He looks at me for a long moment before he asks if he can trim my beard.



Uresh Jawid

--You look like the Taliban, he scolds.

He gestures toward a chair. I sit down and he wraps a white cloth around my neck and drapes a black sheet over my chest. Taking an

electric razor, he adjusts the blade before he lifts my chin. I close my eyes and listen to the hum of the razor and Uresh.

After he completed his apprenticeship, he and another student started their own hair style business. Four years later, they sold the shop and Uresh opened this one after a customer offered him the space. He has been here a year and earns from ten dollars to one hundred dollars a day. His mother gets angry with him for not wearing a salwar kameez to work. He tells her he can't. He must look modern for his customers.

His father, he thinks, would be proud of him. He had been a lieutenant in the mujahadeen and died in the civil wars of the 1990s. Men who served under him are now commanders in the Afghan National Army and in Uresh's opinion have grabbed everything of value for themselves. They drive armored cars, live in gated communities. They are happy. They can leave Afghanistan when they want. None of them came to Uresh's house when his father died. None of them offered to help his family. It was left to him to take on the responsibilities of his father.

He shuts off the razor. Looking in the mirror, I see that my once bushy beard has been cut close to the skin. Uresh smiles his weary smile.

--Close your eyes, he tells me.

He flicks a brush over my face, removing stray hair. He wants to live outside of Afghanistan in a country where he'll feel safe, some place he could call a new homeland. He remains in Kabul, however, because of his mother. If she let him go, he would leave this minute. But he can't leave without her permission. He has tried to persuade her to find him a wife outside of Afghanistan. He would marry that girl and become a citizen of her country. Sweden, Germany, somewhere. He would live there legally and send for his mother. But she refuses and he can't go because she depends on him. If he knew someone to look after her, he would take a bus and go to Iran as others have done and from there travel to Turkey and then Europe. Risky, yes, but it would be a chance at a better life. However, Uresh's mother wants him to stay and meet a good Afghan girl. He has not told her he has a girlfriend. If he did, she would want them to get married. Then they'd have children and it would be that much harder for him to escape to Europe.

--You can get up now, Uresh tells me.

I offer to pay but he refuses. Instead, he hugs me and tells me how good it is to see me. I'm happy to see him, too, flattered by his attention but depressed by his sense of hopelessness. My feelings are like an intense, magnified experience of teaching—running into a student I'd mentored at one time, who is doing well, but whose future somehow falls short of what I might have hoped. What difference can any of us make especially when you walk away?

Hours later, after he closes for the night, Uresh catches a bus home. It carries him past the home of Mohammad Qasim Karbalaye, a mender of broken bones. When he was a young man, Mohammad worked as a laborer. Short but powerful, he could do in one hour what it took other men a week to complete. He had never thought of helping people with physical ailments until he assisted a wrestler from Uzbekistan with a dislocated shoulder. He punched it back in place and the Uzbek told him he should go into business and doctor others as he had him. Mohammad opened a shop and the Uzbek would sit with him and people assumed that like the Uzbek he, too, was a wrestler, and they started calling him the Wrestler. Other than his wife and son, Mohammad does not know any other living person who knows his true name. He has been doing this kind of work for almost fifty years and has been called the Wrestler for so long he sometimes doesn't answer his wife when she calls him Mohammad.

On this evening, a woman walks in carrying a boy just twenty days old. His right elbow juts out at an odd angle. Mohammad rubs the arm with car grease. He tells the mother to leave the grease on the child's arm for three days to lubricate the joint. Then come back, he says, and he'll fix it.

The woman departs and an elderly man leaning on a cane enters. A thick bandage swaddles his left hand. Mohammad examines it.

--Leave the bandage on for another week, he says.

The man leaves, his cane making small dents in the dirt floor. Outside, moonlight sweeps the street with a white, shivering glow and Mohammad sips tea and stares through the light at nothing. He has seen with his own eyes how much worse Afghanistan has become. Day by day nothing goes right. In Jalalabad, the wife of a man with five daughters gave birth to a son. The man fired his gun into the air with happiness. A Taliban commander said, Why are you shooting your gun? My wife finally had a son, the man explained. The commander took the two-day-old baby and crushed his head with the butt of his Kalashnikov. Then he shot the father. The father's cousin told Mohammad about this when he came in to see him for back pain. Some people didn't believe him but Mohammad did. He knows these things happen. He doesn't need evidence. Living in Afghanistan is evidence enough. After September 11th, everything was fine and then it wasn't. Nothing is sustainable. That is why everyone skips the country. He thinks of leaving, too, but how can he? Where will he go? Who will pay his expenses? He worries about these things. He'll go if someone pays his way.

Mohammad sits back and rubs his face. Another patient arrives. This time, a young woman and her husband. The woman lifts her swollen right foot. Mohammad examines it with the tips of his fingers. He advises her to put grease on it for three days. Her ankle had become solid, he explains. Grease will loosen it.

Mohammad Qasim Karbalaye, The Wrestler

He watches the couple walk out. If he had money, obviously he would leave Afghanistan, why not? If his patients had money, they would see a doctor and not him. For some people, there are no alternatives.

*

Mohammad's shop recedes in the distance as the bus carrying Uresh continues its journey, the passengers thinning with each stop until Uresh gets off and only a few remain, among them Abdul Malik Bakhytar. He lives in Logar Province a good two-hour drive outside of Kabul. When the bus stops near his house well past the hour for dinner, he gets out and pauses, listening for gunshots and the screams that often follow. On this night, hearing nothing, he hurries home passing through the shadows cast by white, stucco houses and diminished trees. During the day, he fulfills his duties as the director of publications for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. He recognizes the irony of his position. The newsletters of the Ministry of Women's Affairs administered by a man. Men hold all the key positions in the ministry and the Taliban target them for supporting women's rights. That is Afghanistan. In the end, what does it matter? Men and women are leaving the country and would still be leaving even if a woman ran the ministry. Why would any woman or man stay? Abdul is grateful just to have an income.

In Logar, a province with a strong Taliban influence, Abdul doesn't dare say where he works. Life here is fine except at night, when the province belongs to the Taliban. Abdul often wakes up in the middle of the night and hears shouting and fighting and terrified voices begging for mercy. Leave me alone, don't kill me! He stays in his bed, does not move. No one comes to the rescue. Everyone stays inside, prepared to defend themselves. His neighbors all have guns. No one relies on NATO or the government. At night, each family lives in fear. At night, each family is on its own.

Two weeks ago, Abdul saw a policeman return home from work. Eight o'clock at night, not that dark. The policeman lived on a street close to a stream. He used the water to grow a beautiful garden, dark green with bright flowers. Some men approached him, shot him in the head and ransacked the garden. Abdul saw the whole thing from his living room window. He doesn't know how he feels about it. Numb. Not surprised. Grateful it wasn't him. Guilty for these thoughts. He's thought about it a lot.

In Abdul's neighborhood, everyone is related, but outside of it he knows no one and talks to no one. On his days off, Thursdays and Fridays, he stays home. He attended a wedding the other day but he didn't participate in the reception. He does not wear Western suits but dresses traditionally in a salwar kameez. He changes into a suit at work.

A driver takes his two daughters and two sons to school. He calls home four or five times a day to check in with his wife. If he had the money, he'd fly his family out of the country. Many others in the government have sent their wives and children abroad. His friends and in-laws tell him his daughters should not attend school. If they get raped or killed, it will bring shame on all of us, they warn him. People will wonder what they did to deserve their fate. It is my right to educate my daughters, he retorts emphatically.

When he reads stories about boys and girls drowning on their way to Europe from Turkey, he sees the faces of his children and gets emotional. One newspaper photo showed a dead boy on a beach. He resembled his youngest son. Abdul felt ill. He quit reading and shut off the light and tried to sleep, hoping a scream in the night would not awaken him.

The next morning, Uresh catches a bus back into Kabul and calls Zabiullah. A friend telephoned Uresh last night to say he was leaving Kabul for Germany with his pregnant wife in a few days. Uresh thought I'd want to speak to him. He gives us his name, Shekib Younissi, and cell number. Zabiullah calls him and Shekib invites us to his home. We follow Shekib's directions to a narrow alley near the Park Palace. The alley takes us to a road of stone and rubble. We follow uphill and soon have an expansive view of Kabul, and the bare, brown mountains in the distance, and the grainy haze hovering above everything. The road turns and we dip downhill and stop outside a two-story white house on a dead-end street.

Twenty-six-year-old Shekib meets us at the door. He wears a bright blue silk shirt I associate with the disco era, and his skintight jeans show creases where he, or more likely, his wife ironed them. We follow him inside to a room where his wife, mother, and father sit on the floor. The sun shines through a window illuminating the bare walls. I sit down and Shekib's father offers me a plate of nuts and raisins.

For two years, Shekib saved and borrowed money and eventually put aside $4,000. An uncle in Germany who had left Afghanistan during the Taliban years helped with additional funds. However, Shekib still did not have enough money for them all to leave. After a lengthy discussion, the family decided that his father, wife and cousin would go to Iran and hire a smuggler for the long trek to Turkey and beyond into

Europe; Shekib and his mother would stay behind. They hope to leave next year if Shekib raises the money. A quiet despair fills the room, the mute sadness mixed with a stoic resolve not to show it.

Shekib and Yazdi Younissi

Shekib first thought of leaving when his wife became pregnant. Many reasons led to this decision, the welfare of his child and the lack of security being number one. Shekib doesn't know when or where a bomb might go off, when or where a man with a gun might begin shooting. Every day Shekib meets with friends and ask, How are you? Is everyone in your family still alive? Being alive in Afghanistan is a big thing. When insurgents attach magnet bombs to cars, being alive can't be taken for granted.

Shekib's wife, Yazdi, does not want to travel without him. The day when she agreed to leave Kabul, she wept from morning to night. Shekib looked so sad as he explained that it was better for him to stay behind and pay back the loans and then start saving again so he and his mother could leave. He works for Kam Air, an airline headquartered in Kabul. He can save and reimburse people a little bit at a time. Yazdi told him, I know it will be hard but I tell myself I can do it.

--Don't cry, Shekib tells her now. Afghans are very courageous. We don't cry.

--It will be the first time I'll be apart from my family, she says. I am seven months pregnant and I will be without my husband.

Shekib's father, Shaiq Hamid, stares out a window, eyes brimming with tears. He worries and nervously runs his hands through his thinning, gray hair. He has friends stuck in Iran. They have children and children don't run as fast as adults and they may need to run from police, border guards and God knows who else. Like children, a

pregnant woman can't run fast, either. The smuggler will pay the police to look the other way but they have only so much money and there are many police. They can't pay them all.

Shekib's mother, Sham Sad, also struggles to hold back tears. She wears a black, body-length veil and only exposes her face to her family. Wiping her eyes, she stares at the floor to conceal her sorrow. She knows the trip will be long and difficult for Yazdi. That is the way for Afghan women. They must suffer. Carrying a baby and clothes and food. God will be testing her. She should buy sneakers. Better to walk in.

Sham remembers baking bread when rockets fell around their house during the civil war years. She had to run and seek shelter with her children only to return later to finish baking bread; otherwise, they'd have no food. As her grandchild grows, he or she will take care of her one day. That is what women hope for, the love of their children and their grandchildren.

--I have to get you a mobile phone to call me, Shekib tells Yazdi.

--You have to give me some of your clothes to pack.

--I'll need them here.

--No, I'll keep them so that I know one day you will come to me.

Before I return to the States, I meet Uresh one last time at the Herat Restaurant, where I used to take him for lunch every day in 2003. The Herat has changed dramatically since then. The once roughhewn interior with its concrete floor and warped wood tables has been completely remodeled. It now has white, tile floors, glossy glass tables, and bright, glaring lights. Its prices have nearly quadrupled.

--You see improvements like this and you think we're becoming a modern country, Uresh says noticing my open-mouth surprise. Then a bomb explodes. Nothing is certain in Afghanistan.

We take a table and order a plate of beef kabob and two Cokes. As we wait for the food, Uresh shows me photographs of his girlfriend on his cell phone. She has a wide, open face and a generous smile. An orange headscarf covers her hair. Uresh tells me she wants to leave Afghanistan.

--Let’s go, she says, and then we’ll marry in Europe, but he demurs. Her family, he believes, would kill him.

--Why? I ask.

Before he answers, Uresh takes back the phone and deletes her pictures. If he was to lose it and her family found it with her photos, they’d shoot him, he says.

--They believe she should marry within the family, Uresh says. That is the Afghan way. They don’t want their daughter with a poor boy.

--That makes no sense, I tell him.

He puts the phone down, and faces me. The exasperated look on his face suggests I’m the one who doesn’t make sense.

--This is Afghanistan, he says, as if that alone explains everything.

All photographs by Zabiullah Fazly.

A Taste of Freedom

by Jay Bush

James held tight onto ropes I'd added as makeshift Oh Shit! handles while we drifted around a corner in my first car, a 1980 Honda Civic—which had been dubbed "The Nasty" by friends and family. In desperation for my first set of wheels, I bought The Nasty from James—who dressed and acted like a bad hybrid of Hunter Thompson and Neo, from *The Matrix*—for four hundred dollars and an ounce of weed. The exterior of the Civic, when I bought it, was rust covered sky-blue with black rims. I never was one for a sky-blue car and black rims didn't fit my Toontown-esque idea of life. I decked out The Nasty with some adornments and new paint. A few cans of neon blue for the body; blaze orange for the doors; canary yellow for the tires and rims and, with the addition of a bowling trophy (stolen from the local high school) as a hood ornament, the outside of the car was as flashy as a Jr. high girl's Bedazzled purse. The car was ready to take bored kids from point A—wherever that may be—to points B, C, D, and back to A where they can rest quietly after a full day of … yikes, did we actually do that?

The Nasty got its name from the layers of black mold inside the car. When I bought it, the mold was so thick you could scrape it off with a putty knife. The car leaked from every possible opening. Rubber gaskets around the door had dry rotted, the sealant around the windshield was so deteriorated that my mullet fluttered elegantly even with the windows up. Rain poured through the windshield like water through a colander. The hatchback let in water by the gallon. After my exterior modifications, I had to do some interior work to get rid of the mold—for some reason none of my friends wanted to ride around in a clown car that smelled like a trashcan.

Under the wet, rotting carpet I discovered the water had done its damage on The Nasty's floor pans. The holes were so big I could put my hand through them. The jagged edges cut me when I was stupid enough to try. With the addition of a little plywood, I set that safety concern aside.

The next and biggest issue was the rotting back seat. Rain and summer sun had turned the spongy seat medium into one giant, putrid dish scrubber. When I removed the seat, three of the four rusty bolts broke off, leaving sharp, tetanus laced surprises for unknowing passengers. A few dollar store candles super glued to the dashboard had The Nasty smelling better. Free of its black mold and the accompanying city-dump-on-a-hot-summer-day scented air freshener as and looking better. the car was ready to take me and my friends from point A to all points beyond.

WARNING: Candles inside a car may seem like a good idea but if you burn them while driving on curvy roads, and the wax spills onto the dashboard, it will catch on fire.

"I'm riding in front on the way back!" James shouted over The Nasty's brand-new Sony in-dash—the only thing James spent the money to fix when he owned the car. Four new speakers and a black and red Sony stereo complete with digital equalizer display turned nightly excursions into a disco and day rides into melodious mechanical mayhem.

"Not a chance," Jason, my older brother, said as he calmly licked the joint he was rolling and pushed in the car's cigarette lighter.

The road narrowed from a two-lane with fresh gravel to a single lane with grass growing so high in the middle I'd have to mow The Nasty's grill when I got home.

We were getting close to point B.

The Great Snake Migration in LaRue Pine Hills is a yearly event that closes Snake Road—yes, that's what it's called—to drivers from March 15th to May 15th. People come from across the world come to witness something like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*'s snakes-in-the-tomb scene. They expect the bluffs to be dripping with snakes. They expect snakes to be hanging from the trees like Spanish moss from a Georgia oak. They expect to need their knee-high leather boots to protect them from the vicious bites of angry cottonmouths, copperheads, and timber rattlers. Instead, for their expensive plane tickets and rental cars, they typically see a turtle or two, a few bullfrogs, and maybe, if they're lucky, the odd snake. But to three stoners with a freshly painted and mold-free Nasty, two bags of grass, a fifth of rum, a vial of coke, a handful of hot Coors and nothing else to do, a walk down Snake Road seemed like great idea.

The Nasty rattled to a stop and wheezed as its four cylinders slowed. I wondered if it would be the last time my fresh wheels would get me from point A to point B. For luck, I rubbed the bowling trophy mounted front and center to the hood. My pot-infused mind ran through a list of possibilities from: stranded on Snake Road on the one day of the year that it *did* look like a scene from Henry Jones Jr's nightmares to running out of beer before the end of five-mile hike down the crescendo-less tourist attraction.

Jason passed the glowing joint to James who passed the bottle of rum to me. I took a quick sip of the Calypso and nearly spit it back out. "Swill!" I shouted. "Toss me a beer so I can wash this shit out of my mouth."

The Coors assaulted my tongue with hot, frothy vengeance. Too many bumpy back roads in a car with bad shocks and no back seat. We might as well have put the beer in a paint mixer, then microwaved it. I threw the nearly full can at The Nasty, leaving a beer splatter across the driver's side door, and took a long pull from my water bottle.

The joint made its way around the circle by the time I tossed the Coors and, needing to taste something other than hot, cheap liquor and beer, I broke the golden "Puff Puff Give" rule of pot smoking etiquette and smoked it like Snoop Dogg.

Snake Road lies between the LaRue Pine Hills bluffs and a swamp often referred to as "the scatters." Through hundreds of yards of snake infested, mosquito filled yuck, on the other side of the scatters, is the Big Muddy river—a tributary to the Mississippi. In most places, the Big Muddy looks like its name suggests: a big … muddy…river. Local legend gives the river a bit more personality. Some call it the "Big Muddy Monster" others call it the "Murphysboro Mud Monster" but what eye witnesses report is a seven-foot-tall white hair covered, muddy, sasquatch-like monster. It's been said to attack people in campgrounds and leave twelve to fifteen-inch footprints on the river banks.

As the three of us hiked, smoked, and searched for something interesting, our endeavors turned up empty. Five miles through sweltering heat and humidity got us a few million mosquito bites, a couple ticks, sweat soaked t-shirts and forced James to take his leather trench coat off—something that rarely happened even in the humid, Southern heat.

On our return, parked beside The Nasty, a Japanese film crew was unloading a rented cargo van and trying to get directions to the snakes from James who was high and drunk enough by then that his ability to decipher their broken English was no better than his ability to dress appropriately for the heat. Between the three of us, we encouraged the film crew to hike right beside the cliffs where snakes might still be moving. It was as likely for them to see snakes up there as it had been for us to see them on the road.

Sending the film crew on their way, we sat down in The Nasty's sweltering interior, candles still burning, giving the car that "Fresh Linen" scent. James mounted the old, worn-out boat seat I used as a replacement for the original bench. It was a half-torn, camouflage seat with a raised, swiveling center that rocked and rolled on the uneven steel. He wasn't happy about it.

"Where to?" I asked my brother.

Rolling another joint, he said, "Let's go check out the bridge." Jason was conductor of our aimless symphony, director of our stupid teenage movie. The bridge Jason mentioned was about three miles from Snake Road. It was a railroad bridge that traversed the Big Muddy at one of its widest points. Rusty, hot rivets held the ancient bridge together like the old webs of a dying spider. Under the bridge, the river ran through fields and swamps, an enormous, spiny sea serpent with no beginning and no end. Trees that had been uprooted by erosion and engulfed by the river's ever-growing boundaries floated downstream like logs from an old lumber town. Garbage and other drifting monstrosities floated alongside the old logs, turning the river into a flowing superhighway of debris.

Something about the Big Muddy sent shivers up my back. Maybe it was the stories of the Mud Monster I'd heard from the time I was a child. Maybe it was the dying trees that lined the edges of the filthy water. Maybe it was farming run-off that turned the water a diseased looking pearlescent-brown. The sickness that seemed to roll from the Big Muddy's mouth into the vein of the Mississippi was arsenic coursing through the countryside. Nothing grew around its edges and dying fish washed ashore, spreading the odor of death miles around.

Despite my disgust of the Big Muddy, I wasn't opposed to checking out the bridge, as Jason suggested, and God knew we had nothing better to do with our time, so I passed the joint, laughed as the Japanese film crew slid half-chaps over their boots, and turned The Nasty's key. It roared to life—as much as a four-cylinder engine can roar—and I pushed the clutch. With the high-pitched whizzing old manual transmission cars give when shifted into reverse, The Nasty took us from the parking lot to the grassy road. Robert Plant's subtle warning, "When the levee breaks I'll have no place to stay," blasted from the car's best feature. James, Jason, and I felt the music as the rolling joke took us from point B to point C.

I brought The Nasty to a halt in a small turn-out used by fishermen who were brave enough to eat the mercury and pesticide laced piscine meat. Shuddering to death along with Robert Plant's shouts The Nasty had taken us to a serpentine crossroad. Steel tracks crossed liquid poison at the bridge where Jason was leading us.

"You been out there before?" James asked, motioning toward the bridge as Jason mounted the tracks.

"Yeah. Couple times. Never been across, though. Wanna try?"

I had my hesitations, but James and Jason were both game. In the way teenagers often are, I was stuck between common sense and what the group wanted. Of course, being a constant victim of peer pressure, I agreed to journey across the bridge.

The gravel road we'd arrived on was a high banked levee made to keep the Big Muddy at bay during floods. Below it, on both sides, swamps spanned the expanse. The train tracks had also been raised so goods could be shipped through the swamps even during high water. The two raised pathways crossed and spread out like arthritic fingers from a giant's hand. As we stepped away from the road and onto the tracks, gravel changed from small broken limestone to larger chunks of jagged granite. The kind of thing that, if you fell on it, you'd need stitches rather than a Band-Aid.

Chemical-scented wooden ties almost masked the smell of some decaying animal that had been hit by a rushing train. The pelt, which lay between the two steel rails, crawled with insects. I wanted to say, "Think that's meant to be a warning?"

Instead, I kept my mouth shut, held back the vomit that threatened, and ignored my racing heart.

Tossing rocks and railroad spikes off the edge of the bridge into the murky waters below, we paid no attention to anything but our tiny bubble of life. As kids do, especially high and drunk kids, we missed the very obvious signs of upcoming trouble.

When I was small, growing up in tornado alley, my parents warned that tornadoes sound like a rushing train. I had heard trains from our car at railroad crossings, so I knew they were loud. So loud you couldn't talk over them, couldn't even hear the Sony and four new speakers blasting out music in The Nasty.

Stoned, a bit drunk, a little freaked by the river, the Mud Monster, the corpse of whatever animal met its fate on the bridge, I heard a tornado.

"Fuck!" James shouted as he dropped the rock he was about to toss at a dead fish floating in the water some sixty feet below us.

"MOVE!" Jason screamed.

Our responses were different. Jason's was to get off the track ASAMFP. James looked at the train with a sort of mild confusion. He knew it wasn't a good thing that we were standing in the direct path of a steel dragon but didn't know what to do. I took a brief moment to better understand the situation. We were in the middle of the bridge, I knew this because the highest point of the steel framework was almost directly above us. We had no time to go back the way we came, the way from which the train was coming. I looked the other direction, trying to judge the distance, how fast I could run and how fast the train was coming.

The only thing we could do was try.

Jason and I took off at a full sprint, James lagged, trying not to trip over his coat and heavy boots while also trying to keep a good hold on the bottle of rum he'd been nursing.

With my legs moving as fast as they could carry me, after the first fifty meters, I checked over my shoulder to see my progress. I had no chance of outrunning the train. James and Jason were left in a Road Runner-esq dust trail behind me and would be crushed by the train in fifteen, no, ten seconds.

Jason, I noticed, was waving his arms, emphatically, toward one side of the bridge. I thought for sure he meant for me to jump into the chemical stew of the river below. If I had the choice of being smashed by a train or drowning in a log and trash filled, radioactive wasteland, I'd take the train. But when I turned back around, I realized Jason wasn't waving for me to jump, he was waving for me to scoot to the side of the narrow train bridge onto a platform that hung off the edge of the rusting monstrosity. A three-foot by three-foot steel platform had, for whatever reason, been welded to the bridge's architecture. It was out of the way of the train and, I hoped, would hold our weight, if we could squeeze onto it.

I took an ankle twisting, right turn and nearly fell in the monster's path. Recovering, I jumped out onto the rusting platform. It had no handrails and no lip on the edge. The bottom of it was rusting through, like The Nasty's floor pans, allowing a clear view of the river through its holes. The platform gave, just a little, when I stopped on the outside edge. Rusty flakes fell in slow motion to the river below.

Jason was right behind me, almost to the platform, by the time I turned around. But James, clown combat boots and huge leather coat slowing his run, was closer to the train than to the platform. The conductor had been pulling the airhorn for the last twenty seconds but never once hit the brakes.

Jason stood at the edge of the platform, risking his arm as a sacrifice to the dragon as he waved James on shouting something incoherent.

James never made it to the platform.

He dropped to the gravel, elbows first, less than a foot away from the train as it flew past us so fast it pulled my hat from my head. Mullet blowing in the wind, I covered my ears at the screeching and crying of steel on steel. The bridge swayed—back and forth, up and down, as heavy train cars raced by.

When the last car passed, James stood, obviously shaken, but not stirred by what had just happened.

"What the fuck?" Jason asked, glaring at James.

"What?"

"Dude, you couldn't run faster than that?"

"It's this goddamn gravel!"

“Are you hurt?” Jason asked. James took off his drug filled coat, laid it carefully on the ground, checked out his elbows. They were red but had been protected by the thick buffalo leather of his ridiculous trench coat.

I stepped off the platform, loud squeals emitted from the steel as my weight shifted from the edge of death’s diving board to the main bridge. My shaking hands still held the glowing joint we’d been passing before the tornado came. I took another Snoop Dogg puff and handed it off to Jason.

We walked back to The Nasty in silence, each of us ruminating on what happened. James never mentioned it again, nor did Jason for that matter, but on the way home, as I shifted gears from first to second, second to third, third to fourth, I began, as much as a teenager can, to understand the responsibility that came with my choices. Fear, it seemed, was a factor that had the potential to change a life for the better, or, if ignored, the worse. Freedom, say the freedom of one’s first car, was more than just doing whatever we felt like, freedom had consequences. Freedom required responsibility. Responsibility was an adult’s word—a word that didn’t fit in my youthful, stoned lexicon.

I looked in the rearview mirror as James slid from side to side on the uneven boat seat. It occurred to me that if we had an accident, the ropes his white-knuckled hands gripped would be worthless. It wasn’t that I started worrying about everything, overanalyzing everything, it was that I realized, as we drove a rusted-out, mold-filled, shit-box down a gravel road in the middle of nowhere, pockets full of drugs, high and drunk, that my car, among other choices, could kill me. We’d always been careless. We had BB gun fights. When we ran out of BBs, we’d use our wrist rockets and hickory nuts from the trees that lined our property. We jumped off cliffs onto nearby trees and shimmied seventy feet down. We swam in rivers with currents so strong they would overtake fishing boats. We were carless, stupid, and as The Nasty rumbled down the curvy, gravel road, my pot and rum-infused mind realized what carelessness could do.

Point C could have been our last stop. And all the points between C and today could have been lost by a single careless moment. That car took my friends and I on dozens of trips from points A through Z and while it was my first experience of real

freedom—the kind of freedom that requires responsibility—it left a nasty taste in my mouth.

Pre-Med

by Gary Fincke

Whiz Kids

We were Sputnik children, the designated smart ones who had been accelerated in science and math since seventh grade, but by May,1963, we were impatient seniors bored with high school. In Southeast Asia, the United States had begun posting military advisors for a war that was so obscure none of us would ever fight, not nineteen bright boys (and two brilliant girls) taking advanced, progressive physics. Not the shortstop on our advanced physics class softball team, the Coriolis Force, who called in our scores to the *Pittsburgh Press* each time we beat the faculty, the French Club, or even the rest of the senior class minus those who played varsity baseball.

In Problems of Democracy, the map for world policies showed a large blue French Indochina where Miss Ward had hand-painted Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, both North and South. “Maps,” she said, “must last ten years before replacement; this one is two years overdue,” and we snickered like we had when she’d altered Africa as if countries were as temporary as high school.

What was up-to-date in our high school was physics, chemistry, biology, and math, and before 1963 ended, everyone who played for the Coriolis Force expected to be finishing his first college semester at MIT, Chicago, CalTech, or schools with less name recognition, but where, we’d been told, science flourished.

What’s more, the Coriolis Force, despite a battery of eggheads, went undefeated for all nine games we played. The Press printed all of those scores in agate type, but by graduation all of us believed some reporter should have covered us, whiz kids who kept statistics, including batting averages taken to an extra place like the Pi we memorized for math, science all-stars about to march off to discoveries.

Summer

In July, when I turned eighteen and had to register for the draft, a woman at a desk in Pittsburgh’s Federal Building asked me for my eye color. “I don’t know,” I said,

and instead of smiling, she glanced quickly and said “hazel,” something I didn’t bother to debate. I was off to college in less than two months. All I knew about a draft card was that it would admit me into the dingy, downtown Art Cinema to see movies full of naked women or to buy the raunchy magazines that were sealed in plastic on the vendor’s shelves at the bus station. Drinking and voting had to wait until I was twenty-one, but Kennedy seemed like he was going to be President for another five years, and my first beer wasn’t even a fantasy yet. The initial steps to medical school were on the top of my to-do list. That, and making the college basketball and tennis teams, meanwhile trying my luck with whichever girls might be interested in how I saw myself, a scholar-athlete.

All summer, my mother had headaches and what she called “the blahs.” On the days when she stopped holding her head, she often carried canning jars up from the cellar. When she sat at the kitchen table, catching her breath, she sometimes snapped the ends off green beans, using that time to recover, whether the pills she took kicked in or not. Because, she explained, who else would preserve the beans or later, the tomatoes and peaches, arranging the filled, sealed jars for winter? Who else would cook and clean, strip the beds and remake them when her headaches only simmered like soup she reheated, sipping the broth because she could keep that down and work? When she stopped moaning into her pillow. When she came out of her darkened bedroom. When she could do what needed to be done. When she could save things that needed saving.

In August, Joey Reimer became the first one in our graduating class to die, driving his hand-modified old Ford off the road near our high school and into a tree. He hadn’t been a whiz kid, hadn’t even been going to college, but he was my age, something, my father said, to think about.

A few weeks later, during my last Friday night of working in my father’s bakery from 10:30-5:30, my father brought up the story of the night in November, 1950, when fire invaded his bakery where a tangle of wires shorted behind the ancient blue refrigerator. He explained how he had purchased the bakery earlier that year from a baker whose breath had been shortened by the invasion of emphysema. He wanted me to know that he had been lucky his lungs had stayed clear despite the clouds of flour.

My father said it had taken that man a decade to die, that the baker's widow still stopped in to buy a coffee cake every Saturday.

I remembered how he had guided me, age five, through what was salvaged, and now I understood that he was trying to teach me what could be lost and the necessity of rebuilding despite everyday threats. As if he meant me to realize we were always under attack. As if he was reading my mind in order to say, at last, "Use that brain of yours if you don't want to stand on your feet all day to make a living."

First Semester

My first night at college, after enduring hours of orientation sessions, my new roommate and I piled into another freshman's beat-up Plymouth. He lived in town and wanted to drive us around to all of the places he expected to leave behind in four years. He said he knew the disc jockey who was playing rock music on the small, local station, and before we took off, he called the station from our dorm's one hallway phone and requested "Bust Out", what I told him was my current favorite song.

We drove past a factory where railroad cars were produced and one with aluminum in its company name. Except for the college, it was a Western Pennsylvania blue-collar town. The disc jockey said, "This is for the new guys at the college," and I leaned forward, ready for the aggressive guitar and saxophone instrumental I loved. Instead, I heard "Sugar Shack," a sappy, big hit for Jimmy Gilmore and the Fireballs. I was happy that he hadn't mentioned my name.

"I guess he didn't have 'Bust Out,'" my new friend said, and laughed. We drove into the country, picking up speed, but the car didn't seem to handle. "What the hell?" the driver said, and he pulled over to the shoulder. One look at the front, passenger-side tire was enough for him to say, "Whoa." The tire was tilted. He showed us how the lug nuts had come loose or had already fallen off inside the hubcap. For a few minutes, he performed only the last step of tire changing while I tried to laugh like he did.

I registered as pre-med, a first-generation college student with whiz-kid credentials of high SATs and excellent grades, placed, accordingly, in advanced math and advanced composition. All of the twenty in advanced math were freshmen; only one other was a freshman in advanced composition, a discovery I relished.

I had an eight o'clock class every day, three days in French, two in gym, where the former Marine wrestling coach lined us up and gave us the "look-to-your-left, then look-to-your-right" speech, reminding us that one out of three of us wasn't going to graduate and to think about how we could make sure we weren't among them. Terry D, a townie, was to my right. Greg L, who said he'd hated gym since junior high, was to my left. I didn't worry about my chances.

After five weeks, I hitchhiked home with a friend who lived half a dozen miles away, getting in and out of six cars to cover the eighty-five miles. The next-to-last ride was a quick eight miles with my junior high school art teacher. He remembered me because, he said, "You couldn't make yourself draw breasts on your female figures." I squirmed, red-faced.

He chuckled as he dropped us off about ten miles from where I lived. "I hope you got over that," he said. I told my friend that everybody I knew had always thought that teacher was gay.

The last ride was with a guy in his early 20s who quickly accelerated way over the backroad speed limits, cresting a hill where a cemetery entrance lay to our right. There was a line of cars turning in behind a hearse, no chance of us stopping in time. I braced myself, but that driver barely touched the brake as the line parted just enough to let us squeeze through to a variety of horn sounds. "We dodged one back there," he said, and I thought of myself as being as calm as a surgeon, outside of myself somehow rather than wallowing, like I had, in the embarrassment of awkwardly drawing a girl's body at twelve or thirteen.

The weekend was uneventful and boring. All of my whiz-kid friends were away at college. Other graduates who lived at home had jobs or girlfriends. There was nothing to do but sleepwalk through Saturday and wait for church to end on Sunday before swallowing two helpings of Sunday's roast beef dinner and riding in the rear seat as my friend's mother drove us back to school.

I tutored chemistry during the first semester. All the work felt like a rehash of what I'd learned in high school advanced chemistry. For a while I went to parties with one of my students, another freshman. She was happy with the C+ she received on the first test. "I would have failed, for sure," she said, and hugged me. I wanted to tell her I

thought the hardest thing about college was getting up for my daily eight o'clock classes while my roommate slept.

But I loved advanced composition at ten a.m. I wrote and revised and wrote some more. With relish, I tackled all of the long, complicated sentences we were told to diagram. They were puzzles to solve. And their solutions filled me with a sort of academic joy.

Like times tables up to twenty, the math of each weekday's requirements was done in my head. The future wore scrubs. It washed its hands in scalding water and answered the body's questions with blades and thread.

In mid-November, I made the basketball team. Playing time was likely to be infrequent, but I had good news to take home for Thanksgiving. A week later, walking to the dorm after a Studies in the New Testament lecture, I learned that Kennedy had been shot and killed. Every station on my cheap clock radio played solemn music. The news on the television in the basement of the dorm said the country was in shock and mourning, but when I went to basketball practice, the coach ran us for the whole two hours and announced we were scrimmaging another college on Monday at the same time as the funeral, Kennedy already becoming a comma in the long sentence of my first semester.

My mother, forty-three now, tried on three of my aunt's wigs before we drove off to the annual Thanksgiving dinner at my grandfather's house. She made me turn away, eyes closed, until she sported a second shade and style, asking which one I liked and whether she looked good enough to be seen in public. She was modeling like a schoolgirl, eyes meeting mine in the mirror when I stood behind her, a third wig waiting on the dresser, three styles in brown barely different under the dim overhead ceiling light, the drapes pulled shut as if our neighbors might spy her bald head. "Which one," she asked, makes me look as if I'll live?"

At my grandfather's, nobody seemed upset about Kennedy. I watched football with my uncles, my cousins, and my father while my aunts and mother worked in the kitchen. We were separated by the large dining room where we would finally mingle over turkey. My mother wore her wig. She acted as if she didn't mind standing on her feet for a couple of hours.

At half time, my uncles asked about pre-med. They sounded impressed. “That will be something,” one of them said. “We’ve never had a doctor in the family. Another said, “By the time you have a practice, all of us here will be old enough to be regular customers.” My father seemed to glow, but then he said he was going to the kitchen to see if the heart, liver, and gizzard were ready to eat. My mother was waiting for him in the kitchen doorway. They sat together in the dining room until the third quarter was nearly over.

Saturday night I went to my former high school’s senior class play with a friend, something, at least, to escape watching Lawrence Welk and *Perry Mason* with my parents. On the way home, my friend had his father’s car up to sixty on the narrow, two-lane that snaked past the streets where we lived half a mile apart. Less than a mile from my street, a car backed out onto the road, and when my friend punched the brakes hard, the car drifted to the right as I gripped the door handle and watched the world turn green with hedges that shielded a cement wall. Then the car spun, the tires caught, and we rocked to a stop parallel to the other car. “He must have shit himself,” my friend said. “Good thing I knew what to do.” It sounded like he was excited we’d almost died. When I walked inside my house a minute later, my parents were watching the news. I didn’t say anything but “I’m back.”

In my room, the radio on to settle me down, I thought about how, in seventh grade, that friend who was driving hadn’t been chosen to be a whiz kid, but he’d graduated with better grades than I had, just missing salutatorian. He’d always been a better driver, no doubt about that. And I thought I knew why my friend had sounded the way he had. I felt experienced. I had a secret.

I played a few minutes of garbage time in two or three December basketball games. My roommate threw up after a party that offered free beer, one that I missed because of an away game.

Christmas was no different than the ones I’d celebrated before college. Church on Christmas Eve, another dinner at my grandfather’s. A quartet of uncles sang their songs of expectation in unison. My mother wore the same wig as she had at Thanksgiving. I went to a party at the home of one of the two whiz-kid girls. Nobody drank anything but Coke.

New Year's Eve, I rode to the Belmar theater in Homewood with the whiz kid shortstop in his father's Peugeot to see a triple feature of Edgar Allan Poe thrillers. That part of Pittsburgh was what my parents called "a colored neighborhood." Admission was so cheap we expected broken, empty seats, a janitor hobbling the aisle with an early broom and bag while Vincent Price let loose his laugh on the screen.

The Belmar, though, was crowded. We stumbled over sets of feet as we squeezed into a row near the front, entering in mid-feature, half an hour before the House of Usher tumbled. We settled back to watch Monsieur Valdemar melt into phantasmagoric gore. Before the credits rolled for *The Pit and the Pendulum,* the house lights went up, and we saw ourselves whiter than white. The aisle clotted, black and loud, but everyone ignored us. We worked the crowd's rhythm so perfectly into our shoes we managed to bump nobody in that swirl from behind or the side, impeding none of the three hundred black patrons who never seemed to see us. In less than a minute, we walked speechless into the cataract gray of near midnight, snow swirling around the tracks we made toward that foreign car.

Twenty minutes later, my friend's mother made us each what she called a cocktail. "There's no harm in having one," she said. "You should celebrate not running into trouble over that way." I said nothing about the fact that I was swallowing my first drink.

My grades arrived the following week. My mother was pleased. "He won't say so, but your father is happy, too," she said, "but he wanted to know why you had that one B in your math class after being in all those special classes through high school."

"Everybody in the room was in a special class in high school," I said, though I had no idea whether that was true.

Second Semester

The first day of second semester, Terry D wasn't standing beside me in eight a.m. gym. I'd heard, as soon as I'd got back to school, that he'd been killed in a car crash the week before. Someone whose name I didn't know was to my right. After roll was called, I reminded the wrestling coach I was excused from gym because of basketball. "That will be over in a month," he said, "then you're back here at eight

sharp." I decided not to tell him I would be excused again once tennis season started, receiving another one credit of A. I had three cuts, enough time for the courts to shed winter and practice to begin. I'd be on the official roster sent to all the gym teachers by the coach.

The first weekend of the second semester, I attended my first keg party. It was love at first sight. I told myself, only on weekends, a vow I thought I could keep.

The senior chemistry lab assistant told everybody that Ranger VI had hit the moon on Ground Hog Day, but it failed to send back any messages. "We need to get our act together," the lab assistant said. I'd never heard of Ranger VI. I hadn't been in the television room since Kennedy. A few days later I made my way downstairs and stood in a crowd to watch the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. The night before, after my second keg party. I'd thrown up in the bushes behind the dorm, congratulating myself on how discreet I could be.

The professor in charge of chemistry recitation had been raised and educated in the Soviet Union. Each week his tone sounded to me as if it was overstuffed with condescension, asking his questions in a way that showed he expected weak, insufficient answers. One morning, he stopped in front of where I slouched in my chair. "Sit up straight," he said in a voice that made it clear good posture was mandatory, and I did.

"What an asshole," I said to half a dozen classmates after we were dismissed, but I knew that professor controlled the class participation grade that was factored into the semester grade for chemistry. Though bad posture could be considered bad class participation, what I was angry about was how I'd acquiesced to authority.

In advanced calculus, another B in math rapidly became a fantasy. I moved from anxiety and embarrassment to shame and despair. The professor returned the first test in the order, from best to worst, of grades received. Near the end, there were only two of us left without a returned test. He seemed to relish having suspense before he handed a test to a guy seated three rows away from me. It took the professor a few seconds to make his way back to my desk with that last-place exam, a 40% that he mercifully did not announce aloud.

The failure in calculus settled in like a long hangover. French was a hassle to attend at eight a.m. Chemistry had moved past material I was previously familiar with. Arranged alphabetically by our initials, our test grades were posted beside the professor's office door. GWF's first test score was 83. Not only did I have to remind myself nearly every day to study, I struggled just to do laundry and make a my bed. To rise from filthy sheets and attend a lecture, so unprepared for class participation that I kept my head down as if I was about to vomit. "You're becoming a familiar story," a girl I went out with said. While I was trying to make out whether or not she was being sympathetic, she said she'd prefer folk medicine, miracles, and prayer to my future medical care.

I started leaving chemistry lab early. Three hours was exhausting. Sometimes I managed to finish an experiment if a miracle occurred in less than two. Usually I asked a chemistry major who lived just down the hall from me, "What did you get?" as if I were comparing results, as if I wasn't working backwards from his answer to produce a semblance of proper procedure.

Before long, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday became the best days for waking near noon, when calculus and chemistry and French were nearly ended and the gang shower was deserted. Tuesday and Thursday were a relief. I attended history and literature, classes where I did the reading and didn't dread being a fool.

Spring break was a week stuck in Pittsburgh while the weather was still problematic. After I received an F in calculus at mid-terms, the grades arriving home before I could escape, my father asked me if I knew the story of how janitors were once hired in Alamogordo, New Mexico, whether the name of that town meant something or if I'd stopped thinking altogether about anything but my present self.

"The atomic bomb," I said, but he went on as if I hadn't answered.

"If you couldn't read a word, you were hired. They wanted illiterates to do that work in New Mexico."

We were together in a restaurant. I had been born, within a few weeks, of the atom bomb's first test. I was supposed to become a doctor, not clean up after their accomplishments, somebody who'd never know their secrets, a failure sweeping up in ignorance.

“The scientists,” he said, “were creating the end of the world while those janitors, unaware of their secrets, emptied trash.” Lips moving, he calculated a tip before sliding three quarters and two dimes under his plate, waiting for me to stand, leaving my grades open on the table because I needed to understand that anyone, even a busboy, could recognize I was as helpless as those illiterates in New Mexico.

That night, out with two girls and a friend who followed me home in his car, I believed I was being thoughtful as I carefully opened the garage by hand to park my parents’ car inside.

Because we thought it was cool to stay up until sunrise, last beers standing open for more than an hour, I was awake and dressed at five-thirty when my mother called that friend’s house because she needed to be at work. “The driveway and your bed,” she said, “were both empty,” crying because my small kindness, so unexpected, had brought her anger, and then a near-paralysis of fear.

My mother drove off in time, and I walked outside into the same weather my mother felt at the bakery door my father unlocked for her before six each Saturday, returning to doughnuts and eclairs, the most perishable items he sold made last. Outside, the scream inside my ears dialed back to buzz, and I believed I was myself again.

We drove those girls to the houses in which they lived before it was fully light outside, the car’s radio full of the British Invasion. One sat beside me, knees drawn up to her chin like a pouting child. Expectation is the only thing that had happened between us. I followed her under the driveway’s double floodlights to the house I would never be inside. “Next time you’re home,” she said, offering an empty promise, before my friend and I pulled away and drove, a few miles later, past where she would die in another boy’s new sports car the following week. It was a place I’d seen so often, I noticed nothing but oncoming headlights, ones kept on by cautious drivers even as the light improved. I switched the radio in to Marvin Gaye and James Brown, the road so familiar I didn’t worry as he became careless with the speed limit.

“You have the blahs,” my mother said when I saw her later, true enough, since I was already failing one course, scraping by two more with Cs. Even then, before those cautionary grades became final, I couldn’t see why my parents said nothing more than

my father's breakfast veiled warnings about janitors in New Mexico. Why my mother, after working from six to six, made fried chicken and corn that night as if her remission was something to be tested by exhaustion. Why my father read the newspaper while he ate, his plate turning white with coagulated grease beneath bones. Why she washed dishes while I showered and dressed before borrowing the car again as they settled in to watch Lawrence Welk. But mostly why I thought melancholy was a way of life or preparing me for discovery.

When I used my first away tennis match as an excuse for taking a test late and the professor gave me the same test that a friend provided to sample problems he had solved, I managed only a 55. All that was left was the chance I might get above a 70 on the final.

One morning, the present felt crumpled like scratch paper after an exam. That wadded ball unfolded wrinkled and smaller and whimpering until I smothered it in my fist. All day I was leery of numbers that chattered like reunion relatives: square roots and functions, molecular weights of compounds. Already the slide rule was a set of footprints that ended in a steep drop into water. The day I gave up medicine, Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, but I didn't learn that until the semester ended because I didn't read a newspaper or hadn't watched television since that night with the Beatles.

Later that day, a girl I wanted to have sex with said I should be tested for the name of my problems, sounding like a family doctor handing me off to an expensive specialist. I slipped my hand under her blouse, thinking nothing about the medical terms for arousal, intent upon the anatomy of desire. Whatever she felt for the next few minutes, our separation had already begun.

Easter came early in 1964, Good Friday on the 27th of March. As always, my father closed the bakery from 12-3, and I, home again, was expected to sit through all seven words of the cross. Nearly every churchgoer came and went between the words, spending anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. Except for me and my parents. We lasted through "I thirst," "Why have you forsaken me," and "It is finished" as if Good Friday service was the equivalent of chemistry lab. We sang the doleful hymns. The minister worked seven variations on sacrifice and martyrdom before he released us to

blink in the late March sun. My mother, at three p.m., reopened the bakery for workers whose shifts were never adjusted for God. My father slept and ate and drove me back to sugar, salt, flour and grease by seven because my mid-term failure made me feel obligated to pitch in and help until midnight for some sort of atonement.

We were side by side at 9:26 EST in Etna, Pennsylvania, the work room filled with the smell of yeast, my father, because it was still Good Friday, refusing the red radio until midnight, instead humming the old hymns, keeping the last hours holy, when an extraordinary earthquake struck Alaska. Though neither of us knew anything about it until five minutes of news came on the radio at midnight just as he turned it on as a signal I was excused.

The next night, as I was leaving the house, I told my parents that I'd changed my major to English. I came home late enough to be certain they were asleep.

My father didn't talk to me at breakfast or on the way to church. My mother passed my news along to a couple of aunts after the service. She took me aside to confirm what I already knew. "Your father is disappointed," she said. "He doesn't know what he's paying for now."

At my grandfather's, while we ate ham and scalloped potatoes, one uncle said, "I hear you're an English major now. What's that all about—pre-law?"

My father looked stricken. "Maybe," I started in, then decided against lying and added, "probably not."

An aunt said, "I know. You want to be a teacher."

"No," I said at once, sure of myself on that guess.

A moment passed. "What else is there?" my uncle said.

"That's what I'll find out, I guess," I said.

My uncle looked at my father. "Sounds like you're paying for a mighty expensive scavenger hunt." I knew what my father was thinking: English is fuzzy and feminine, an easy major that means his son is an academic coward.

Once basketball had ended, I had begun drinking a few weekday evenings a week in a townie bar that served underage. Like nearly everyone, I ordered Iron City drafts that came in ten-ounce glasses for fifteen cents each. Alone sometimes, head down, I listened to men my father's age complain about politics and work.

I was always waiting for a story to tell, and one night, before I finished three beers, it came in the shape of a man who stumbled down the backroom's flight of stairs holding a knife anybody could tell he'd been stabbed with. Ashen and sweating, he mumbled his way to a booth and performed the dead-man's drop. Like me, the men seated nearby watched him in the mirror above a sculpture of bottles while the bartender dialed the phone beside the cash register.

For three minutes, no one ordered or spoke. Siren wailing, an ambulance arrived seconds after two bellied policemen. As if he'd been summoned, a shirtless man came down the stairs to surrender. "Stop me," one cop said, "if you've heard this one before," and from both sides of me stories started about an earlier upstairs stabbing, one from the year before.

Weeks went by, nothing worth retelling except the night that stabbing victim, apparently recovered, sat at the bar and nobody asked him about anything but high school football and basketball. His assailant sat beside him, and I felt older knowing men returned to habits as easily as swallowing beer, that they could even fall asleep in the same room while jukebox rock and roll rose through the floor, and I sat infatuated with small experiments in self-destruction.

All that protected me was silence and quarters. I slotted one after the other like a townie who wanted to be liked by playing Fifties music, someone whose father surely worked with steel or coal.

At the spring honors convocation in mid-April, I was announced as the male recipient of the freshman scholarship. The award was for the combination of first semester grade point and a multiple-choice test that reminded me of the verbal SAT, the test that the school had used to place me in advanced composition.

The donor wanted to meet me and the female recipient. I recognized her. She was the only other freshman who had been placed in advanced composition first semester. I'd never spoken to her. My calculus professor walked past in his academic regalia and seemed to squint when he saw me.

In May, in a low-budget Cleveland hotel, I watched my doubles partner snap the arms off both chairs in the room of another doubles team from our college. Drunk, he'd decided he wanted them to witness a show of force, sitting to flex his arms. Hiroshima,

he said, triumphant, and as if they needed to understand, he reseated himself for Nagasaki, laughing and leaving them to wonder. For two days, he had been my ally in a college conference tournament we hadn't won. The following week, I'd receive my first F and learned, when I moved back in with my parents for the summer, that my father would continue his Easter break refusal to speak.

My second day at home, borrowing the car while my father slept after his night shift at the bakery, I noticed a neighbor at the bus stop at the end of our street. He was older than my father, but now he looked ancient, stooped and fragile, and I offered him a ride. He sat beside me and said he was going grocery shopping at the Giant Eagle along the highway a couple of miles away, that he didn't drive anymore, launching into his colostomy story, his liver cancer sequel, ending "I'm still here today," he said. "I'm buying food." He smiled as I dropped him off at the grocery. "Maybe you'll be the one discovers a cure for this mess," he said.

I didn't tell him I was no longer pre-med. I said, "Sure thing," driving off to a factory job interview daydreaming about my F of calculus, his F of tumors, and what seemed to be the passing grade my mother had received, all of them assigned by the hit and miss of luck. Though I thought, finally, that all of my ambition had suffered a form of congestive failure.

"Go to work," my mother said at ten o'clock. "It's his last night. Surprise him." Her hair had returned. She'd given those wigs back to my aunt. She knew that my father wasn't about to tell me that he had decided to close the bakery. "He got himself a job as janitor at the high school," she said. "He says it's because it's too hard to make ends meet, but I know it's because of what's been going on with me this last year."

My father nodded when I walked in. He turned the radio on. In Etna, that last night of baking, he marked the early hours with the same scheduled hand-work as always—bread and sandwich buns being readied or already baking. When my father spoke to me for the first time since March, I knew my mother had been working on him since Easter. He told me to go home and sleep, and then, as if it was an afterthought, he said he needed me the next afternoon, so be around.

The next afternoon, in the day's full heat, there was one wedding cake, three tiers, the bride and groom standing in a white gazebo that needed to fit inside a circle of

sugar roses and loops of icing. My father ordered me to drive so he could balance that beauty nine miles, three of them to avoid the cobblestones of a neighborhood called Cabbage Hill to the Cherry City Fire Hall where women were preparing golabkies, pierogies, and kielbasa, sweating in a windowless small kitchen.

He retouched those swirls of icing and laid that white gazebo just right, erasing the dot of icing that reminded him which part of those circles faced front. Those women praised the cake and offered beer, Iron City on tap, but my father waved his spatula until one of them fished out a bottle of cherry soda from a cooler packed with ice. She looked at me, and I nodded, accepting the same, able to wait three hours to drink myself stupid with a girl I planned to never marry, allowing my father to take his time with the end of baking, standing beside the cake until he decided to drive back to the bakery where my mother, near closing, would be offering everything for half price.

“I could have kept this going,” he said as soon as we were in the car. “You understand what I mean by that?”

I nodded. And I did. It would kill my mother, maybe, and because hiring a full-time salesperson would erase the thin margin of profit. Because, feeling useless, my mother would refuse to quit until she dropped or her still-unspoken “health problems” returned. Or what would never be said, because it would take his legs out from under him or cloud his lungs and, unlike the janitor position, there was no safety net of social security or medical insurance or retirement plan and never had been.

“Get up for church tomorrow,” he said then. He didn’t say anything else, but that one extra sentence felt like acknowledgement by indirection, that beginning the next day he’d return to a few comments about sports and church, leaving unspoken that janitor was a job that suggested failure as much as the English major did, that we both had something to prove. He wasn’t self-sufficient, my mother was mortal, and “whiz-kid” was a name more appropriate for those who hadn’t yet been tested.

Sunday night I drove to a high school graduation party for a girl I’d been out with a few times. After it ended, as I approached the railroad tracks that crossed the highway a block from my father’s bakery, the red lights began flashing and the crossing gates lowered. I could see there was no train coming from the south. Impatient, I slowed and glanced up the tracks to the north, noticing the train seemed far enough away to beat.

“Here we go,” I said, like I’d done it before, pulling around the gate and bouncing over two sets of tracks, the train, running downhill, something I hadn’t fully considered, flashing behind us a second later.

That girl caught her breath as if she were resurfacing from a minute underwater. Neither of us spoke, not even when she left the car and hurried up the driveway to her house without waiting for me to walk beside her. I idled at the curb like a taxi driver who believed he was protecting the vulnerable from possible harm. She never looked back.

She's Married

by Barbara Altamirano

You could call it the first time I could have cheated on my husband. You could call it a bad idea. Or you could call it being a good friend. It's all a matter of perspective, I guess.

Carrie dragged me to the Halloween party that night. The party was thrown by Eric, her former boyfriend's roommate. What would I do at that kind of party? Although not a college party, Eric was single with mostly single guy friends. I feared a Jim Belushi style drunk-fest where Carrie would disappear with some guy and I'd be stuck in a corner, alone, drinking out of a stove pot because they'd run out of cups. I didn't want to go. I was married for God's sake.

I knew I'd be alone because I wasn't going to do something I'd regret. I might have married young, but I was devoted to my husband. But what would these bachelors do with me, the only married girl in a sea of drunks? All the usual alternatives would be out of the question.

Still, I went because of old habits—when Carrie said, "Jump," I answered, "Yes, ma'am." My husband was away for the weekend, conveniently, if I'd been someone who's vows meant nothing to them.

We knocked on the door and a nerd answered: Eric, our host, and let's just say the costume suited him way too well. Soon after arriving, a hideous monster shoved his horribly disfigured face just inches from my chest. I finally realized he was attempting to read the tag around my neck. The tags were the only part of our lame, last-minute costume. Carrie and I, along with a third friend, were the three stooges. However, the third one had to leave ridiculously early for some career test the next day, so we were down to two in short order.

We went with Eric to find the keg and get away from the monster. After several beers and chatting up a skeleton with Carrie in tow, I met the Arabian gas attendant, or the Sheik, as Carrie christened him.

He stepped next to me, a mysterious look on his face. "I have something for you in my pocket."

Maybe it was the beers. Maybe it was the drinking straight out of a bottle of some unidentifiable liquid earlier in Eric's room. Or maybe it was the stupidity of a woman married too young.

I reached my hand into his pocket, touching his bare leg.

"Ooo, I like you."

I ran away to find Carrie, amazed at my stupidity. Some time later—time moves differently when you're drunk, speeding up insanely at times and dragging at others—a bunch of us were sitting on a large sofa. The sheik announced that everyone in the general area was doing shots. A guy to my right crept toward me. He was the loudest chanter when it was my turn to drink. Then he was right next to me, our legs almost touching, and his arm along the back of the sofa. I realized his pants looked familiar, a strange red/orange combo that I'd seen somewhere before. Then it hit me. It was scary monster guy, minus the mask. It was tempting to make a joke about how he looked scarier without the mask, but unfortunately for me, he was cute.

Eric stood directly in front of me. His look said, "You want I take care of this guy?" This look was totally at odds with the whole nerd thing he had going on. I shook my head because A) I could handle it and B) maybe I enjoyed the attention even though I shouldn't have and C) maybe there was no maybe.

Finally, Eric couldn't stand it anymore, reaching a hand out to me that I took without thinking. Standing around soon after with Eric, Carrie somewhere in the vicinity, we chatted with the grim reaper and his girlfriend. Someone suddenly blasted Donna Summer and Carrie got her groove on. Carrie, the cool drunk. Me—the boring one.

Grim eyed my stiff and unmoving frame. "You're a wet blanket."

I might have responded, "Because I refuse to get my groove on to Donna Summer?" Or "I'm really more of a rock and roll girl." Or even, "I don't exactly see you getting down, Grim."

But I'm a writer for a reason. I need time to process before I can come out with lame comebacks. I threw my drink at him instead.

His expression didn't change. "You're evil."

An evil wet blanket? No wonder I was so popular in high school. I wondered if there's a special place in hell for people who throw beer at the grim reaper.

Then the bomb dropped, detonated by my own best friend.

Carrie turned toward me, saying the words I'd meant to keep safely buried for the night. "Well, she's married."

I don't know why she said it or to whom. I only know the effect of those words. It was as if she'd said, "Well, she has leprosy." Or "Well, she hasn't bathed since last year."

Suddenly anyone within a few feet sprang away from me with an agility I wouldn't have thought possible of badly drunk people. Around Carrie there was now a circle of guys at least three deep.

Only Eric was still within earshot. I laughed without much humor. "It's like she's giving away Iron Maiden tickets."

Eric shrugged. "You're married."

I tried to clarify, at least in my own mind, what I'd meant. I was just commenting on the ridiculous scene. I wasn't, for God's sake, jealous.

Was I?

Anyway, the cat was out of the bag, might as well let the whole scene play out, like I'd always known it would. I wandered away, looking for a suitable corner. I found one and sat down, eyeing the only guy in my area. He was drinking out of a pot. Damn, he probably got the last one. Now, I couldn't even cry into my pot of beer.

Within a minute or two, Eric found me. "I'm not letting you sit in a corner." It was my, "Nobody puts baby in a corner" moment. Everyone should have at least one in their lifetime.

The poor guy was stuck with the married chick for the rest of the night, until I briefly chatted with an alligator. I assumed he was unaware of my eligibility-challenged state until he surprised me, saying, "You're the married one, right?"

There was really no getting away from that fact.

Carrie showed up with a guy who had no visible costume except for the knife. He was a serial killer. Carrie was going home with him. So, it seemed, was I.

I might have tried to talk some sense into her but A) the serial killer was smart, never giving me time to talk to her alone and B) Carrie and I had a long history of doing stupid things together and C) well, there really was no C.

I drove to his place, Carrie rode shotgun, serial killer, AKA Jake, in the back. A car shot in front of me and I caught a glimpse of a turban.

“Oh, did I tell you? Brian is Jake’s roommate.”

“And Brian is?” I feared I already knew this answer.

“The Sheik.”

So. I was going to an apartment with a guy dressed as a serial killer and a guy in whose pants I’d placed my hand. But if I’d had some preconceived idea of what would take place at said apartment, I would have been completely wrong.

Here’s what we did. Had milk and cookies. Really. Talked. Blew bubbles.

The Sheik said at one point, “That nerd was really protective of you guys.”

Thank God for nerds.

But now that we were out of his protection, Carrie went for alone time with Jake. Meanwhile, Brian struggled to entertain me. I felt bad for the guy. Clearly, he had no idea how to entertain a woman when you took sex out of the equation.

Two of Brian’s comments made strong impressions. One was when I caught him looking at me thoughtfully. “You’re a good friend.” His simple words touched me, helping me remember why I was there.

His second comment was actually a question. “What’s it like being married?”

Later I was reminded of the movie “Sex, Lies, and Videotape”. It’s about a young wife who is in a bad marriage—her husband is cheating on her with her sister. When this wife, played by Andie MacDowell, is asked that question, she struggles to find an answer, finally saying, “Well, we have the house.”

I’m not saying my marriage was like hers. Mine wasn’t and isn’t bad. My husband isn’t the cheating type and luckily, I don’t have a sister. Yet, I understand her confusion in answering such a deceivingly simple question, especially to someone for whom the idea of marriage is so foreign.

Brian’s question felt like an alien asking, “What’s life like on your planet?” Like Andie MacDowell, I had no good answer. I knew no answer of mine would make him eager to join my world. In fact, I was tempted to go back to his.

Cutting Words

by Tracy Youngblom

You know, he begins, *an older person or someone in worse physical condition wouldn't have survived.*

Yes? I say, hesitant to pursue this line of thinking.

It's better that it happened to me. I was strong and in good shape, so I didn't die. Someone else would have died.

We are seated in the waiting area of his therapist in vinyl armchairs, hemmed in by a door on one side and a small water cooler and white-noise machine on the other. We have barely made it up the stairs.

You sound like you're saying you're glad it happened to you? This is supposed to sound neutral, but it comes out as a question.

As soon as we'd entered the building, I'd remembered clearly: no elevator. I ought to have remembered, since Dan had been my sons' therapist for years; he'd saved at least one of their lives. Defeated, I pushed Elias in his wheelchair to the foot of the stairs.

Can we do this? I asked. *Do you want to reschedule*?

I felt worse than stupid: barely two months post-accident, and it was my idea to start therapy. Now I'd done it. He'd been ready to talk, but now we had no way to get to the second floor. He'd been taking a few steps at a time from his bed to a chair in his hospital room, but after months in bed, he had little strength to spare. I had introduced an impossibility.

No, I'll just use the stairs.

I helped him stand and pivot, then lower his body backward onto the lowest step. He hoisted himself upward with his arms, pushing off his stronger right leg, one painful step at a time. I climbed behind, carrying the collapsed chair.

We made it—he made it. Now we sit chatting, waiting for the appointment. We have no life outside recovery, so we discuss the accident and its aftermath.

He is upbeat today; maybe the triumph of the stairs. We are recalling the details of his salvation at the hands of the many, the impeccable timing of it all. The first

bystanders on the scene (one of them an EMT) removed the windshield so his bleeding would slow down in the brisk March air; the First Responders extracted him from the car in less than 20 minutes; the helicopter transport the State Trooper had called was waiting. Everything lined up perfectly. Maybe the miracle was simple: his life was saved by the timing.

Besides miracles, I am always aware of a severe irony: the drunk driver who ran into my son head-on escaped unscathed. She was on a joy-ride, going the wrong direction on the freeway, at 2:00 in the afternoon. Her injuries were minor: a broken ankle (a lifetime of addiction?).

It's true he survived when he shouldn't have, but recently we learned he was not so lucky; because of the force of the impact and the consequent swelling, he has been struck blind.

I am grateful for his life, but when he suggests it was better for him to have been hit than someone else, the conversation turns serious.

That's hard for me to hear.

I know.

This honesty and get-to-the-truth-fearlessly tone is one gift in the midst of much challenge. We have thrillingly deep, intimate conversations almost every day—every parent's dream. But I am not thrilled to hear this.

Then the door opens, and I wheel him in and wait in the white noise until the session is over and he can sit facing forward this time and bump down the stairs to my waiting car (down is much easier, we discover).

Later I tell myself, forcefully, that I cannot be expected to be glad my son was in this accident. I cannot be expected to accept his conclusion, on top of everything else I'm expected to accept. I tell it to myself so vehemently, it almost sounds like I'm telling someone else, like God.

More than two years post-accident, Elias is himself full-force: tough, funny, uncompromising. He lives alone, brooks no objection. We don't have daily interactions—more like weekly. I have had to abandon the worries that used to keep me up at night, have had to ward off vivid fears: of fire, of burglars, of knives and guns, of

hit-and-runs, of evil-intentioned strangers. Of another unexpected call, this time the death of me (him).

I think I have done well and deserve some recognition. My son thinks otherwise. Or, he doesn't think of me that way—as a stand-up, an example. Someone to praise, protect.

Maybe that's why today, as we are driving, talking as we often do about the arc of this strange experience, he does it again: stops my heart with his casual observations.

I think I'm a different person since the accident.

I cringe; I think I know where this is going. Sensing my doubt, he gives a few general examples: less arrogant, more grateful.

Well, you don't know what would have happened without the accident, I offer. *Probably you would have turned out the same.*

No, he says, certain. *No, I'm better. I've turned out better.*

Do you mean you needed to change? And there wasn't any other way?

Now it's his turn to hesitate.

I've grown up, he says. *I'm less self-involved. Less. . .* his voice trails off.

I don't push it, though I want to stamp out this line of thinking, stop this smoldering mess before it spreads, engulfs both of us. I am not as shocked as I was two years ago, however, hearing him suggest it was better that this accident happened to him. Now he's just pondering unforeseen benefits. I don't like the implications, though I understand his eagerness to express gratitude for this life he's been given.

But I am still surprised at the suggestion that this was our Fate. I don't accept it with the brightest face possible. He can't see my face, so he doesn't know that I grimace often, my eyes cloud with mist, that I shake my head sadly, almost unbidden.

It's the damn accompanying emotions that always stymy me. They lurk under my sunny surface, threaten to erupt in bouts of cursing: *Jesus. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Almighty.*

Recently, I confessed to Elias that I swear more—too much—these days.

What do you say? he asked.

I told him, and he laughed.

Mom, that's not swearing. If you're going to swear, make it count.

I stay quiet in the car, listening. I can see he's also grappling with emotions, half-surprised at these insights that are just words—but words, words: all we have to invoke peace, to ward off fury and fear.

To pray, if we choose.

Noise

by Zach Reichert

“Why’s it gotta be so loud?” the patient in Room 2 groaned. “I’m going crazy in here.”

A high-pitched alarm chirped beside his head, slicing through the room with each tone. He covered his ears.

I reached to mute the noise. “How’s that?” I asked.

He paused and looked around the room. Sounds echoed from every corner of the hospital, building to a volume that was impossible to ignore. He looked back at me, his eyes half-closed against the glare of the sun in the window.

“Still sucks,” he answered. “Any idea what it’s like trying to sleep with all this noise?”

I can’t speak on sleeping in hospitals, but I know enough about the noise to sympathize. I think of the alarms and monitors, the voices of nurses and doctors, the cries and moans of the injured and sick filling hospital rooms like smoke. Many patients get lost in this cloud of noise, left to cope with their illness in loud and crowded rooms.

Unlike my patient in Room 2, Gloria was accustomed to coping. At only twenty-one, she was already a hospital regular. She had her favorite rooms and meals: the seventh floor was best, where the rooms were brightest and the food was warm. She knew that she needed exactly two blankets and four pillows to rest comfortably.

“I’m telling you, man, I could write *Being a Patient for Dummies*. I’d strike it rich,” she told me.

We met during Gloria’s second hospital admission of the month. Not a personal record, according to her. Not even the worst month in recent history. She looked at me and shrugged. “I’ve been sicker than this,” she said.

Gloria was born with spina bifida, a defect in her spinal column that damaged the nerves feeding her entire lower body. She told me that, as a child, she often sat in her wheelchair at the park, watching her brothers race from tree to tree. They dodged

leaves and branches, jumped over rocks and fences, and zig-zagged through rows of swings.

“I watched them, then looked at my own feet and wondered how it felt to move them. To feel the ground. I dreamed about it all the time.” She glanced at her legs. “I even wanted to fall and scrape my knee, just to see how it felt.”

Bladder control was another dream. Every few hours she catheterized herself to prevent her bladder from overflowing, and wore diapers, just in case. She had frequent urinary tract infections and took antibiotics like daily multivitamins. It made her feel dependent, old, abnormal. Either that, or “normal” meant fevers, chills, and nausea. It meant relying on others to help her bathe and living with greasy hair and dandruff when they couldn’t. It meant days filled with shots, pills, IVs, and surgeries.

“I’ve seen some pretty old and sick people around, and I think, yep, I’m just like them. Fine in the morning, but in the ICU by night.” She stopped, her jaw set, eyes still on mine. “But I’m not the only one here. Others have it worse.”

There was her older cousin with Down syndrome and severe heart problems, a friend who was orphaned after a tragic accident, a hospital roommate who died in bed only ten feet away. And then, there was her father, who had spent the past twenty years downing plastic bottles of whiskey and vodka, who came home for a few days at a time before wandering off again, leaving her mom and two brothers alone for weeks.

“Maybe he lived with another family,” she thought, “one that was easy to care for.”

But this wasn’t where it ended for Gloria. Her father was more than just a disheveled, absent alcoholic. He was aggressive and violent.

“When we were kids, we could almost feel it, my brothers and I,” Gloria said. “After he drank, his voice would get loud and he’d start walking and stumbling all over the place. He’d yell at Mom, and that’s when we went to the other room. We had a piano in there that my older brother could play. He’d start playing and tell me to sing. I sang and cried and sang until Mom came back.”

“You sang?” I asked.

“It was all I could do,” she answered. “There was nothing else. It helped me get out of that house. Took me somewhere else until it was safe to come back. I did the same thing when I was bullied at school. I do it here, too.”

Gloria’s eyes drifted away from mine. For the first time, the room was silent. She shifted in bed and began to fidget with a pair of headphones that rested on her legs. After a minute, she sniffed and took a deep breath.

“You know I learned to sing first, before I spoke. That’s why it’s so special. As a kid, I just couldn’t put words together. My brain worked faster than my mouth. So, the speech therapist had me sing everything first.” She smiled down at the cords tangled between her fingers. “Now I’m at the community college studying music. I have to take the year off, though, because, well, you know.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I’ll go back though. And someday I’ll teach other people how to sing.”

Later on, after Gloria had left, as I walked from bed to bed seeing other patients, I heard something new. It began with what sounded like a faint, rhythmic tap of the foot, like a marching band far in the distance. The sound grew louder as I moved closer. Voices rose, with notes pitched high and low. In a room near the end of the hall, a group of four swayed back and forth over an old lady’s bed, singing spirituals like any other day in church. An old man tapped his foot and leaned on his cane for balance. The rest held hands and sang.

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve been through
Nobody knows my sorrow
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen
Glory hallelujah!

The music carried through the room and into the hall, where alarms kept ringing and patients kept moaning. Voices interrupted over the intercom. Phones rang nearby. The old lady’s infusion pump clicked out of rhythm. I wondered if she noticed the chaos still filling the hospital as the choir sang from trouble to hallelujah—if she felt bothered at all as she took a breath, filled her tired lungs, and joined in song.

I pictured Gloria smiling at my question. “I doubt it,” she’d tell me, and sing along.

Heartworm

by Devorah Uriel

A shrill whistle cuts through the warm summer air and I spin to follow the sound, my mouth suddenly dry. Fear takes up residence in the heart like a writhing thing. The mother of all worms, it grows plump and comfortable. Some people believe the heart is the place where love resides. I'm not so sure. The sharp snap of a twig, and my worm begins to thrash.

A brindle hound leaps through the tall tow-colored grass responding to the call of its owner. Releasing a gust of air, I bend to kiss the head of my own four-legged companion, who is sniffing the ground near my feet. The off-leash dog park is spacious, an open place where the breeze can flow between sounds, where internal alarms can quiet, where panic can be more easily soothed.

Countless things can activate my fear. Car brakes screeching. A child screaming. Fireworks. My partner's angry scowl. Someone, anyone running. Thunder. Arguments. Light coming from under a door into a dark room. Shadows. Men with large hands. Not having correct change. Baths. The dark. Closets. Rope. Women with straight, black hair. Anything sharp.

There was no singular event. My fear was nurtured day-to-day, in tedious, predicable moments. I survived being locked in a closet and being bound by twine to my bedposts. I survived the rhythmic lashings of the belt, and the creeping touch of my grandfather's hands. I didn't survive the scorn and disapproval in my mother's eyes. She continues to influence my thoughts. I know how to not believe everything I think; I don't know how not to feel everything I feel. And I feel too much.

I feel my clammy hands, my pounding heart, and the urge to run. I feel unable to breathe, and the dull pain from pinching myself. I feel my lips stuttering and unresponsive, the cold sweat dripping down my spine, and the need to pee. I feel bound to the knots in my stomach. I feel disoriented and angry. I feel alert, watchful, and exhausted. I feel crazy. Mostly, I feel afraid.

It turns out fear is fertile ground for worms. I've learned to confine mine to my left ventricle, to refuse it room to spread. When it's sleeping there where I have confined it, I

get a taste of another life: my skin can warm to my lover's touch, my heart to the affection of friends. But the worm will awaken, and I can't know if it will be in the middle of the night or in the middle of the grocery aisle.

Every spring I take my dog to be tested for Heartworm, then we go to the dog park. Bounding across the fields and jumping to kiss me when he returns, I know that his heart is clear. I take comfort in giving him the preventative, understanding that my worm is a lifelong companion, that my fear has burrowed too deep.

My life depends on vigilance and a kind of perverse caretaking. When my body clamors in distress, my mind must counter with calm denial. I must acknowledge fear's power but deny it control. I must simultaneously soothe it and starve it. I must not let it own me. The worm is resilient, but I am strong. I will fight for my life.

I startle at a cracked twig. "Shhhh, it's not real." I coo to myself. "Nothing is going to hurt you anymore."

The Drive Between Homes

by Chris Davis

The red Miata behind us slams on its horn, letting my dad know—in the rudest way possible—he hadn't merged quickly enough. The speed limit on Central Expressway is only 45mph, but people always seem to treat it like a freeway. Buildings fly by the window in a blur: Fry's electronics, where my mom took me to buy my first iPod; St. John's Bar and Grill, where my Dad and I used to get burgers and watch Sharks games; Fair Oaks Skatepark, where I'd split my chin open and the only witness had decided to leave, rather than make sure I was all right. It all seems insignificant as we now cruise comfortably down the road. The car behind us may have been in a hurry, but somehow my dad never was, even though he knew my mom would yell at him if he dropped me late at her house again.

"Make sure you bring those pants back next weekend," my dad says.

Not again. I close my eyes to the buildings outside the window. What is it about the short drive from his house to my mom's that makes my dad think I need to hear all about how my mom's the worst person ever? *His* parents divorced—shouldn't *he* know how it feels? Who's the adult, here?

"Your mom always complains about me never buying you clothes, but every time I do, they go to her house and she sends you back with ratty ones. She's manipulative like that, your mom."

I scoff under my breath. My mom says the same exact thing, ironically, on this exact drive, but in reverse. I count the lines on the road as they blip by, trying to count them. Anything to distract me until we get there.

"Did she ever tell you I used to come over all the time and fix things for her? She'd call me up and demand that I fix the washing machine or change the oil in her car, and I'd always do it."

I try not to picture the scene, but the frustration of hearing contradicting sides of these stories mounts again. I remember him coming over and fixing the fridge, the dishwasher, her car. And I believe him when he says he did it just so he could spend a little more time with my brother and me. But my mom tells me one thing and my dad

tells another. Somewhere, the details are frayed, and each of them describes themselves in saint-like recollection, while the other acted out of unprovoked malice and genuine ill-will.

"She'd never say thank you or try and pay me for helping her out. It was always, 'Louis, you need to fix the refrigerator,' or 'Louis, the air conditioning isn't working.' Never even a hint of gratitude."

I roll my window down in an attempt to drown out the rest of his annoyingly calm ranting. The warm summer air beats my hair around my forehead, but my dad's voice somehow permeates the cab of the truck like smoke. The thing is, I have my theories. I can make a pretty safe guess who was "at fault" from hearing both sides of the stories. But truthfully, does that matter? At all? And how exactly did *I* become the judge?

"And that's another thing, she always claims I owe her more child support. I don't know where she gets this stuff. I pay the agreed-on amount every month—I even keep records of it—and she *still* tries to weasel more out of me."

I clench my eyes shut, trying to just get through this stupid car ride, but I can't shut out the memories in my head: my mom stirring a pot in the kitchen to the crackle of my dad's record player, while my dad, my brother and I race slot cars in the living room of what used to be called "our house," before it became "my dad's house." I open my eyes to the passing scenery, begging it to stop the mental films playing in my mind—I just want them to stop. I don't care about who was right or who acted vindictively or who said or did or claimed what. Whoever's in the wrong—I still love both of them, but I just can't do it anymore.

"Did you know she told all of her family not to talk to me anymore? As if the divorce was *my* fault? The whole reason we divorced is because *she*—"

"You can't do this anymore!" I burst out, addressing the window, rather than my dad. My voice cracks as I say it. I hadn't meant to shout, but the tears muddying my vision tell me it's far too late for restraint. This isn't a thought-out, well-prepared speech—this is unspoken, unrealized torment spilling out of me for the first time. "I don't want to hear it anymore."

I can feel my dad's eyes on the back of my head as I look out the window, not seeing. I can feel his confusion Looking away from him can't hide the fact that I'm crying

in earnest and shaking as I speak. I feel the truck turn off the expressway as more sporadic revelation pours out of me. “I don’t care if she’s the worst person ever or what she’s done, you can’t talk about her like that. Do you know what it’s like? Do you have *any* idea what it’s like to have your parents tear each other down all the time? To have the two people you care about the *most* in the world tell you what a horrible person the other one is?”

The truck stops at the far end of the parking lot and my dad places a hand on my back that helps me ease my breathing.

“I just can’t do it anymore,” I sigh, and there’s a sense of finality in the words. All of what had been holding inside for years was out, and I knew there was nothing else to say.

Wiping my eyes, I see we’re in front of the Home Depot my dad and I frequent on weekends for his work. Memories surface in my head: riding on the flat platform truck as my dad speeds around the store, loading it with lumber that I then hid under; being rolled up by my brother in the giant hanging carpet samples; putting on every piece of protective equipment I could find to pretend I was a superhero. I wish I could be rid of them.

“I’m sorry,” my dad says, and I comprehend a lot more than just the two words.

Good Works

by Kirk Boys

The room is sharp with mildew, tomato sauce, melted cheese, days-old urine, and sweat. It is an all too human smell, not disguised by deodorant spray or scented soap, but one of grit with hard notes of melancholy. My wife and I have arrived here after years of conversation about doing good works. Here where our talking about wanting to do something good for someone else finally takes form.

The “here” is a church hall filled with people most of us only glimpse in the shadows of an alley, huddled under a blue tarp in a makeshift campsite, or sitting under a freeway bridge. Here at St. James Community Hall, well over a hundred homeless people stare at us. They are like ghosts, sitting on folding chairs that line the walls, their looks of distress or anger or resignation haunts me. They are intimidating. They dare us not to feel something. We have only walked through the front door, yet we are stopped, held hostage by those eyes. I do my best to disappear.

The door we have entered is dwarfed by St. James’ twin spires, which reach up into a cold, endless, gray Seattle sky. The bells within those spires peal across a city whose soul is being put to the test by a fast-growing homeless population. The city appears both disgusted and seemingly helpless to deal with the problem. More and more people show up on the city’s streets and there is no escaping their impact.

“Why don’t they just get a job at McDonald’s?” my friend tells me after a trip into the city from his manicured, suburban home. He sees no reason they can’t find work, but he makes his judgement from afar. He is not here. He has no idea, has not been held hostage by those eyes.

It is obvious to me standing within the reach of their eyes, there are no simple answers to their swelling numbers. Not money or rehab or housing or good intentions can, alone, solve this plague of desperation that crushes the human spirit. I wonder what these men and women think seeing us with our clean clothes and our haircuts? Do they hate us? Do they hate people who have nice homes, safe places to sleep, food, cars while they have only what they can carry in a pack or bag or push up the sidewalk in a shopping cart? Do they hate us or only wish to be us?

Here at the cathedral hall they receive a small red ticket like you or I might use for a spin on the Merry-go-round or the chance to win a cake at a bake sale. This is not the County Fair. The ticket gets them a hot meal and shelter for a couple hours.

The hall has a low hum of activity as people shuffle in. There is the occasional scrape of a folding chair on the tile floor or the sharp clang of metal on metal punctuated by random shouts or an angry rant. A napkin and fork make a place setting on long tables for eight. There will be nearly 200 here tonight when all is said and done.

A tall, bearded man with glasses stands at the entrance handing out the tickets to anyone who walks in the door. He hands us a ticket. “We’re here to volunteer as companions,” I tell him. He points a crooked finger toward the kitchen. It is day one of our attempt at good work, and we have little idea what we are supposed to do beyond making conversation with those congregated, to make them, for a couple hours at least, feel as though someone cares. Or so we were told.

We are overwhelmed by the crush of bodies, the sheer physicality of their hardship and need. The same people I would have previously gone to great lengths to avoid on a city sidewalk I am now face to face with. It would be a lie to say that I am not frightened.

The kitchen at St. James is separated by walls and metal doors and it is a beehive of activity. Ten volunteers maneuver in the cramped space preparing the evening meal. It is hard work in the kitchen, but it is also a refuge, walled off from the harsh reality of what exists just outside. In the kitchen you can escape the vacant looks. In the kitchen you can exhaust yourself with food prep and cleanup. In the kitchen you are not surrounded by the smell of down-and-out of broken lives.

The kitchen is not our mission.

We are tasked, if only for a couple of hours, to build a bridge between their reality and ours: to witness their suffering, to acknowledge their humanity, to let them know, if only with a glance or a smile, that they are seen, that they are heard. We can’t save anyone, but we can acknowledge them. Such bearing witness sounded noble and good from the safety of our home or in a sermon, but now, faced with them, we want instead to stay safe in the kitchen away from that responsibility. There is just the two of us for

two hundred. It is impossible to know where to start. I want to take my wife's hand and walk back out the door, away from this. No one would think worse of us. No one we know cares if we do this little thing. We have nothing to prove, yet there is something inside that pushes me forward.

We put on blue serving aprons which will designate us as "companions". We walk back out into the hall, like tentative swimmers heading away from shore for the other side. Uncertainty wraps itself around me as tightly as the smell of tonight's spaghetti casserole meal. I put on a smile, stroll between tables into all those watchful eyes.

My wife plants her hands firmly in her apron pockets and does the same. I fear for all five-two of her. Her courage inspires me. Most of the diners are men There are so many. I try hard not to see them as menacing and dangerous. What if one of them were to lose it, to lash out in frustration or psychosis? If she were to be hurt, I would never forgive myself. Anxiety steals up my spine. There are patients just released from the psyche ward at Harborview regional trauma center two blocks away dealing with serious mental health disease. There are substance abusers and petty drug dealers. Fortune has not smiled on those gathered in St. James Cathedral hall for dinner. There are veterans left to fight their own battles or people who've hit tough times or had a run of bad luck a lost job a divorce. They are all colors, races, and ages and have nowhere to come but here. They all have red tickets in their hand.

"Talk to them, help them get their meal if they need help, talk if they want to talk. Let them know we see them as people, individuals blessed by God's grace," we were told by our volunteer supervisor, but it is hard to imagine God here. There is no cloud of incense, no gold crosses, no choir singing hymns, no sense of well-being or of grace, just survival. We must find the commonality we share.

We are frightened glad-handers hoping to feel better about ourselves by braving the misery that surrounds us and with which we must come to terms.

"Trouble, a fight or someone gets agitated, don't get involved, call 911," the kitchen supervisor hurriedly walks out to tell me.

My wife has set off on her own, drawn to a tiny woman with white hair and lipstick smeared on her cheeks in a small circle. She appears to be well past seventy. She has a kind face. How can she be here? She should be baking cookies, playing cards with

her friends, or surrounded by grandchildren. A tall young woman with “PINK” written across her butt brushes past and moves quickly to take a seat in a darkened stairwell. Her long, red hair pushed over her shoulder, she seems lost to the world. I watch as more people continue to pour through the door, take their ticket, and line up along the wall.

The hum of humanity has escalated to a low roar, as more flood through the front door with dirty packs, sleeping bags, and plastic bags stuffed full. A thin black man smiles at me from a chair and I decide to venture over. “The food smells good,” I say. I can see, “How’s it going” doesn’t cut it here. I scramble to bring on conversation, but I am inadequate. I tell him my name, and he tells me his, James. James has a warm smile; he’s painfully thin and has kind eyes. He reaches out a hand to shake.

“That’s Gomez,” James tells me pointing at a stout Hispanic man across the table. I reach to shake Gomez’s hand. He offers a weak smile.

“Gomez carries pieces of metal and rocks stuffed in the lining of his coat. From where he comes they believe it gives them energy. I heard the cops talking about him, how they wouldn’t let him into his court hearing. He set off the metal detector.” James laughs, “It’s a trip, man. Right, Gomez? A trip?” Gomez smiles, but it is unclear if he understands.

It feels good to talk with James. He lightens the mood, gets me out of my head. I feel the rush of connection to James and Gomez too. I realize I am up to the task, that they aren’t so different than me, only our circumstance.

Behind me the metal serving doors rattle open revealing servers, eight of them, like actors at the end of a play, they hold serving spoons and tongs. A curtain of steam rises from the spaghetti casserole. There is a slow march to the food, tables fill, and the high-pitch ting of forks on plates fills the room.

A tall, painfully thin man with scruffy black hair sits near the front reading a book, in no hurry to get his dinner.

“What are you reading?” I ask him.

He looks up slowly and turns the book’s cover toward me, a rat-eared copy of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*.

“Wow,” I say. I am shocked to find a Vonnegut reader. “He’s my favorite author,” I tell him.

“He reads just as delightfully when I am stoned as he does when I am not,” he says.

“I feel the same way,” I tell him and we laugh.

A man using a walker and wearing an Army Ranger hat asks if I will get him his meal and hands me his red ticket.

“Where are you from?”

“It would take too long to tell you,” he says. “Can you just get my food?”

I get in line with the others. My anxiety is beginning to ease. I scan the room for my wife, who is still talking to the lady with lipstick on her cheeks. I see my wife grin. I shuffle through the line and take in the smell of coffee, the feeling of gratitude, the spirit of humanity. It hits me like a sledge hammer how lightly I regard the conveniences those here aspire to and I take completely for granted daily.

We are all at St. James for a reason. I can’t say what the reason is for anyone else, but for me it is to find something in me that I have secretly feared I did not possess, a courage, a willingness to get involved. I want to believe that if there is a God, that I will see him in the face of a stranger. I want to believe there is an innate good in everyone, but more selfishly I am actually looking for it in myself.

“I like those glasses,” a man covered in tattoos tells me as he passes. “Makes you look smart.”

“Hey, thanks,” I say. I get the man with the Ranger hat his casserole and a slice of pie and deliver it to him. “Thank you for your service.” I tell him as I carefully slide the tray in front of him. “There might be enough for seconds.”

“This is plenty,” he says, waving me off.

Two hours passes, two hundred faces, give or take, have passed by and the hall is nearly empty. I’m not sure what we accomplished. Witnessing the hopelessness of life on the street, serving trays of food, small talk and smiles.

It’s enough for our first time.

I think about the whole of it on our silent drive home. Nerves have been replaced by exhaustion. I imagine it will get easier. We are not going to solve any problems, but maybe we offered a human touch if only for a moment.

Maybe a flicker of good intention starts a small fire? I feel a sense of pride I didn't feel the day before. I saw the depth of my wife's heart, how caring she is, how she stood toe to toe with fear.

We got more than we gave.

We'll be back to Cathedral Hall in a week, wiser for our effort, fears tamped down, hearts in hand.

Senior-Citizen Discount

by Patrick Dobson

Lucy liked bad music, had a dog everyone but she could smell, and owned her own fixer-upper in an up-and-coming neighborhood south of the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus. Narcissism and/or alcoholism marked former husbands with whom she had bad marriages and no children. She'd had three different last names other than her maiden name.

Lucy had a penchant for celebrity and had spent much of her youth as a rock-n-roll band groupie. She stayed more than one night in jail for various petty crimes, not the least of which was a disturbing-the-peace charge where she'd thrown a shot glass through the street window of The Gate, a third-rate tavern in Northeast Kansas City that convicts and steelworkers from the nearby mill frequented.

By the time I met Lucy, she'd tended bar and cocktail-waitressed at numerous lounges of low repute all around Kansas City. But she'd gone on a self-improvement binge and put herself through nursing school. Along with nursing at a large hospital, she worked a succession of bar jobs, each better than the last. She'd climbed up out of smoky no-name taverns to the rooftop of the Ritz and was making $400 a night serving drinks to out-of-town corporate executives and wealthy adulterers hiding in the dark corners of the bar—after her shifts at the hospital. Her fellow employees at the hotel and the hospital admired her strong will and devil-may-care attitude work and life.

I fell for Lucy the first time we both stepped on the hotel service elevator to the rooftop bar and restaurant. She was getting ready for a shift and straightened her skirt and showed me her teeth. "Anything in them?" she asked. My eyes wandered from her teeth. I had a close look at her fake-blond hair. I saw an anger, vulnerability, and sadness beneath the makeup she used to hide her age that tugged at my heart and stoked visceral desire. She'd been around, something I found deeply attractive.

I told her no.

"I'm Lucy," she said. She stretched up to her full height, which was a couple inches over my five-foot-ten. "I've seen you around. You're the guy who takes care of the furniture, aren't you? What's your name?"

“Patrick,” I said. “I repair and refinish all the antique and reproduction furniture here at the hotel.”

“You do a helluva job,” she said. “It’s about as fancy as a place gets. How much are these things worth?”

“Sometimes tens of thousands of dollars. I have a book with the insurance-replacement values in them.”

“Must make fabulous reading,” she said as she stepped off the elevator into the rooftop kitchen.

She turned and smiled and waved. She made her way around the large standing refrigerators and between the stainless-steel prep tables. “Maybe I’ll see you sometime,” she said.

I was thirty and dumb and just sober after nineteen years of hard drinking. I’d been drinking seriously before my teens—sneaking from my parent’s stash and sopping up leftovers from parties. It got worse from there. Having missed the lessons sober people get out of their teens and young adulthood, I fumbled when it came to relationships with women. But her savage beauty and age did things to my insides. I discovered through the hotel grapevine—a vibrant avenue of falsehood and truth—that she was forty-four years old. I had a thing for older women. My heart melted.

After I met Lucy on the elevator, I moved my attention to the rooftop furniture, refinishing sideboards and armoires that years, hands, and banquets had ravaged. During my days, I wheeled them down to my basement workroom in the engineering department and stripped off the finishes and made them look almost new. I’d wait until the staff was starting to head up to the restaurant for the night shift to return the pieces, hoping to see Lucy again.

Around the same time, she started showing up to work early to take dinner in the employee lunchroom, where I’d see her on my coffee breaks. One day, I made an excuse to eat late and sit at her table. We made small talk and learned a few things about each other. Over the course of a couple of months, she told me of her humble beginnings and how she’d come to work at the Ritz.

“You get sick of feeling dirty all the time,” she said. “I mean, bar sitters only hold your interest so long, you know. After a couple of years, you’ve heard all the stories. The money was all right but hardly anything that would keep a person like me in a mortgage. Renovating a house costs money, you know. The hospital pays well, but since I don’t have a family you can speak of, just a daughter who’s twenty-two now, the Ritz fills in my free time and gives me enough to make me comfortable.

“Plus, I own a little land on the Klamath River in northern California, just five acres, but it’s mountainside and backs up to the national forest. I want to build a place up there where I can retire. I have a pile I’ve put away. The house here will be worth something when I get done fixing it up. Altogether, I figure I have a couple of years on my feet before I can get out of here and find a job at a little hospital or clinic up there in the wilderness.”

She asked over the months what my story was. I told her quite honestly that I’d been drunk most of my life and had sobered up a couple of years before. I had gone to grad school in Wyoming and had a three-year-old whose mom I never married. All I ever wanted to be, I told her, was a writer.

“Now that’s interesting,” she said. “A scholar who fixes expensive furniture and wants to be a writer. Keep your mind to it and you’ll make it someday.”

We came to have a standing date at the employee lunchroom every Friday. She worked Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays at the hospital. She caught up on her rest and read detective novels until time to go work on Fridays and Saturday nights in the bar. She worked in the restaurant on Sunday during brunch.

I became fond of Lucy, her drive and determination. I was scared to ask her out, unsure of myself and still getting over the relationship I’d had with my daughter’s mom. For a couple of years, my main concerns had been single-fatherhood and child support. I was broke nearly all the time. Some weekends when I was to spend with my daughter Sydney, I filched food from the employee lunchroom for our dinners on Saturdays and Sundays.

My mates in the engineering department noticed Lucy and I spent time together in the lunchroom. The hotel was like a little village that way. Rumor spread through the hallways and rooms, through the departments and offices like rivulets running to a river.

While everyone didn't exactly know everyone's business, everyone got a taste for what was going on here and there. Most of us knew, for instance, that the GM was having an affair with the front-desk manager. She, on the other hand, was carrying on with the concierge, who was also close—very, very close—with the day waiter in the lobby bar.

One of my coworkers was a stout mechanic by the name of Bruce. He hated me for reasons I'd never understand, though it appeared he didn't like the way I directed my own job and kept my own hours. He approached me one day at my workbench. I was repairing a glass end table a guest had broken by sitting on it.

"So, you and the nurse lady's getting along just fine, I hear." He stood across the workbench from me, the fluorescent fixture above lighting his body but leaving his head in darkness.

"You mean Lucy?" I said, looking up from the joint I was gluing.

"You know she sleeps around a lot."

"I didn't know that," I said. "That's kind of her business, isn't it?"

"You just ought to know what you're into, kid."

"Don't call me kid," I said.

"She's way out of your league, anyway," he said. "You know she hangs out with all the big-wigs that come to the hotel, and you know we got a lot of them. What's she want with you?"

"Nothing," I said. "We have lunch once in a while."

"Yeah, my ass," he said. "You got a thing for old ladies?"

"Old ladies?"

"She's elderly, man. What're you after? The senior-citizens' discount at the movies?"

I finally asked Lucy out as fall began to throw its chill over Kansas City's streets. We had just finished eating on Friday and she was headed up to her shift in the bar. My day was about to end and I was going to pick up Sydney that night. I stopped her at the service elevator. No one was around. She gave me a deep kiss. "I wondered when you were going to ask," she said. "I was getting sick of waiting and was going to do it myself if you didn't make a move soon."

We went to a movie the following Thursday night. She started holding my hand about halfway through the picture. That night, I stayed over at her house and had to get up early to make it home to change before my shift. I rushed through coffee and headed out the door.

I felt light and good. Something special had happened and I felt like my life was turning around. At least now, in my single-fatherhood, I had something to look forward to besides weekends with my daughter Sydney. Possibilities opened up for me. I began to think of taking a long walk across the country. I needed adventure. I wanted to test my legs in my new, sober life. I needed something to write about.

Before long, Lucy and I had become the talk of the hotel. Wherever I went about my business hauling furniture about the public spaces, I'd hear people talk behind my back. It wasn't mean or spiteful, just whispers. "He's with Lucy now," I heard a houseman say to one of his mates one afternoon. "Apparently, they're pretty hot and heavy."

A banquet server, a tall, broad shouldered Palestinian by the name of Simon, caught me in the foyer of the main lobby one day. "Say, man, you're going with that tall woman in the bar, aren't you?"

"Yeah, you can say we're dating."

"Lucky," he said, and slapped me on the back. "She's real good lookin' for an old lady."

"She's not old, Simon. She's forty-four."

"That's a lot older than you. You got a mommy thing, don't you?"

"I suppose I do."

Meanwhile, Lucy and I spent many nights together. Her busy schedule limited our time together to Thursday nights. We went to the movies and watched more on the VCR. We ate out at late-night diners. We cooked dinner at her house. I even coaxed her into walking the dog, which got us out into the neighborhood after dark. We made love every chance we could.

After a few months, I fell into a kind of comfort with the relationship. This wasn't love. We were very different people. She liked clubs and enjoyed nightlife after her shifts at the rooftop bar. I preferred to stay home. She read different books than I did.

Our talk revolved mostly around the hotel and movies, and even then, we liked different kinds of films. She really fell for blockbusters and chick flicks. I was more a classic-movie kind of guy. I drifted toward art-house flicks and complicated stories. The domestic aspect of our affair satisfied me. I liked the lovemaking and laying around and watching movies I never would have looked at on my own. Nights with her gave me time to think. My thought of walking across the country moved to determination.

But Lucy wanted more from me than I was willing to give. I liked sitting around the house. I wanted quiet and domestic. I loved the walks and breezy conversation. But things were changing. I was becoming more my own person, less willing to go along with whatever happened to me. I wanted to steer my future. I'd fallen in for Lucy and our relationship had become convenient.

She seemed to go along with the program. At least, I thought so. I was content, why shouldn't she? We went for a walk one night in Loose Park in the early spring. There was still a chill in the air. The trees had just begun to bud and you could smell the green. While we were walking, she said she wanted to take me to a concert.

"I just love the Eagles," she said. "They're touring for the first time in fourteen years. It's called the 'Hell Freezes Over Tour.' They once said they'd get together again when hell freezes over. The tickets are $110 each and I'm buying yours."

"That's too much money for a concert. I can't let you spend that."

"Why not? I'm flush. I'm buying."

I was stuck. I hated the Eagles and always had, even in my high school years when they were all the rage among my classmates. Moreover, I thought it obscene to spend $110 for a ticket to any concert.

"I have a conscience thing about spending that much money on a concert," I said.

"But I'm buying. You won't have to spend a dime.

"Besides the money, Lucy, I hate the Eagles."

"You've got to be joking. They're one of the greatest rock bands ever. Everyone likes the Eagles."

"Maybe everyone you know likes the Eagles, but I don't."

"Come on. You are joking, aren't you?"

“I’m not joking and you’re not spending $110 on a ticket for me. I would have a terrible time.”

“I can’t believe it. You have to like the Eagles.”

“I don’t have to, Lucy, and I don’t.”

“You have to, they’re great.”

“Listen, I’m not going to that concert with you.”

This went on for some time. I’d never had a fight with a girlfriend before. Previously, whenever things turned sour with someone I dated, I left and didn’t look back. Things were different now that I was sober. I was trying to be a good guy and stick with something. Our relationship had turned into a routine, which I didn’t mind. I could have kept it up for a long time.

The conversation turned into a shouting match in the middle of the empty park. She accused me of only wanting to be with her for the sex. I retorted that there was more than that, that I liked her for more than her body. She kept at it and wouldn’t let it go. I became resentful. I told her I hated the way her dog made her whole house smell like a dirty kennel. She shouted that I was a bum who didn’t know how to have a social life and that maybe I should start drinking again. It would make me more interesting. She made sport of the kinds of movies I liked and said I was a snob.

She became so angry with me that we left the park and drove home in silence.

“If this is the way you’re going to be . . .” she said when we arrived at her house.

“What do you mean? Standing up when I don’t want to do something?”

“You could at least do it for me, goddammit.”

“But I don’t want to do it for you or anyone else,” I said.

“Well, that’s it,” she said as she climbed out of the car. “You can just forget about us then. Don’t call anymore. I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Fine,” I said as I slammed her door for her and sped away.

I saw her occasionally in the hotel hallways and service elevators over the next couple of months and she was cordial. Within weeks, we started to talk like old friends. Before I knew it, we were again sitting down together for coffee on Friday afternoons.

We fell into routine almost right away. I'd show up at her house on Thursday, we'd make love, order in a pizza, and watch movies. I'd go home and not see her for another week.

In the meantime, I started to notice a woman who worked in the HR Department. Kristi wasn't as tall as Lucy but was as slender and fit. She was pretty in a severe sort of way with sharp, angular features and bleach-blond hair. Her face twitched with a nervous tic that interested me. She, too, was older than me but only by five years. We began to have coffee in the lunchroom during the day, before Lucy came to work. Lucy saw me talking to Kristi in the way I had once talked to her. I went to Lucy's less often. Soon, weeks went by between our visits.

One day, Lucy stopped me at the service elevator where she had first asked me to look at her teeth.

"So, you're with the HR woman these days," she said. "I've heard you and her are going steady."

"It's nothing like that, Lucy."

"Sure, it is. I know you. You're on to the next good thing."

"I suppose you're right."

"Are you coming over this week?" she asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"Until you start sleeping with that woman, I want you to come over."

I had a first date with Kristi. She was a swimmer and liked basketball more than having a stimulating conversation or any conversation at all when her favorite teams and players were on television. She lived in an apartment that, coincidentally, a friend of mine had lived in years before. She had a cat, Scout, that more or less regulated Kristi's comings and goings when she wasn't at work.

At the time, I was getting ready for the long trip I'd been thinking about since soon after I started dating Lucy. I planned to walk to Helena, Montana, with a backpack and sleeping bag and then canoe back to Kansas City on the Missouri River. The preparations were intense. I took on double shifts at the hotel, working the day in the engineering department and then changing into a banquet uniform at night. Between

work and weekends with Sydney, I spent time with Lucy on Thursday nights and with evenings with Kristi on Friday.

The relationship with Lucy sputtered along for a few more months. Lovemaking. Pizza. Movies. I liked the way we didn't have to talk to each other. We spoke of mundane topics, as we really never had that much to say to each other anyway.

Soon, I did start sleeping with Kristi and stopped going to Lucy's. It wasn't long before I missed the routine I had with Lucy. Except for that one altercation, we never crossed words again. Kristi was a different story, a much different relationship. We rode bikes together and went camping. The bonds that held Kristi and me together grew stronger. Our relationship began to bud about the time it was time for me to leave for Montana on May 1, 1995. I'd spent about a year and a half with Lucy but now found myself as deeply infatuated with Kristi as I had once been with Lucy.

Still, on the way to Montana, on those lonely nights in town parks and in the backyards of people I met along the way, on couches in living rooms and in the woods of Wyoming, and during the solitary days on the river, I thought of Lucy, what she must have been up to, how she was pursuing her goal of one day retreating to her land on the Klamath River.

Kristi came to visit me once on my trip. She drove 350 miles to Lexington, Nebraska to stay with me overnight in a swampy hotel room on the outskirts of town. That night, she asked me about Lucy. We were laying in each other's arms on the bed. She wanted to know what my time with Lucy had been like.

"It was like an old coat," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"About the time it gets comfortable, you need a new one," I replied, realizing what I was saying and hoping that Kristi wouldn't get offended. She elbowed her way out of bed and stood in the center of the room. "But you keep the old coat around because it fits well and means something to you," I continued. "You've lived an important part of your life in it. You can't throw it away. It sits in the closet until you find it again the next winter and you remember that part of your life again."

"So, you're saying I'm going to wear out on you someday too?"

"To tell you the truth, Kristi, you're nothing like an old coat."

“But I will be.”

“Maybe someday,” I said and paused. Who knew where we were going or what was going to happen to us. The 350 miles I’d walked toward Montana were already changing me. I was becoming a new person—more confident, more adventuresome. “But I don’t see it happening anytime soon. After all, you thought enough to come all the way to Nebraska to see me. I’ve talked to you about every other day on the phone. You’ve given me encouragement when I needed it. Plus, we have things to talk about. Lucy and I never had much to talk about.”

“You still think about Lucy?”

“When I’m not thinking of you, and I think about you most of the time.”

“Well, you better get over this Lucy thing pretty damn soon.”

To tell you the truth, twenty-three years later, I’m not sure I’m over the Lucy thing. When I remember that time, I think about Lucy and not Kristi. Sometimes I imagine Lucy in a log house on the banks of the Klamath. The wind sighs in the pines and the snow is just beginning. She’s lit a fire in the wood stove and is sitting in her favorite chair next to an end table with a lamp, the only light in the otherwise dark room. The house smells faintly of old dog and pine resin. She would be seventy now.

Lucy sticks with me, this person I let into my interior and treated so shabbily. I’m not sure I’ll ever get rid of that old coat. Though it was gone, thrown or given away, I remembered it. And Lucy wasn’t an old coat. She did more for me in our time together than keep me warm. She was a catalyst, an agent of change, and in being so, became part of me. I wouldn’t be who I am without Lucy. I’ve become a better man, in part, because of her. My memory of her makes me wish to become a better man still.

“Untitled Concrete Sculpture” by Mario Loprete

Sugar Run Wild

by Dennis “Suge” Thompson

Red lies in bed at Israel Hospice. On Christmas Eve morning, he talks in semi-conscious lucidity about Keats and Emerson, Man-O-War and Secretariat, his speech affected by the intravenous pain medications. A self-educated person and my friend for twenty-five years, Red is the best horse handicapper I’ve met and will likely ever meet, which is one of the reasons I love him. A polymath, he could pick a horse by its gait, its speed breaks, and its shift in class, all the while making some obscure reference to *Leda and the Swan* by Yeats.

Red and I met at Fairgrounds Park in New Orleans. I was an unemployed letter carrier and a novice handicapper. He was a hot walker for the biggest trainer at the thoroughbred meet that spring in ‘89. On that day I’d paced the paddock, trying to figure the form and get a clue as to which horse would make me money. Living on a broke man’s budget, I knew I had to lay off most races and could only play the ones that would produce a payoff. I watched a large red-haired man lead the nine horse during the post parade, giving the jockey a one-leg lift into the irons before coming out onto the apron to watch the race at the fence.

He stood next me, and without taking his eyes off the nine horse, he asked, “You bet this race yet, bud?”

“Not yet. Still working the numbers.”

“You’d be smart to go twenty across the board on Dante’s Devil Dog. Way underplayed at 20/1.”

“Your horse?”

“I work him. He’s fit and ready. I’m just telling you the smart bet, friend.”

I thought about his tip and watched the chestnut gelding stretch well with each forward step. A big-boned horse with straight legs and well-sprung ribs, his overall confirmation showed endurance and late speed.

“Why is he at long odds?” I asked.

“Hasn’t been raced for nine months. He finished seventh his last outing; lung bleeding slowed him in that race. He’s on Lasix now. Had a bullet workout three weeks ago. I’m not sure why no one’s picked up on that. He’ll run well.”

“Bet big or go home,” I said.

He looked at me and smiled as I walked to the betting window. I dropped twenty across the board on the nine. Sweat from my palm made the ticket damp as I watched the nine horse load. We stood there together not saying a word as the steel slammed shut and the bell rang out the madness racing into the wind. Dante’s Devil Dog broke clean but slowly on the outside, cutting to the inside rail on the turn. He trailed the field through the backstretch, and I could feel anger welling up. Red said nothing. At the ¾ pole, he raised his hand like he was pulling a trigger, and the nine horse made a move, weaving through traffic until he cut away into center track. Head up and full stride, Shane Romero moved him from off the pace to the three spot. Seventy yards from the wire without lifting the whip, Dante’s Devil Dog won with a head bob across the finish. I screamed and hugged the big man standing next to me who’d made my paycheck for the week. We became partners that day.

During the following months at Fair Grounds Park, Red and I spent time talking horses and his life. I learned he’d been born in New York and moved to a farm in Iowa at age eleven. He’d spent his early years around horses and learned to trust them more than people. After a stint in the Navy and a tour in Vietnam, he settled in Mobile, Alabama, where he married a young woman, Cassie LeBlanc, from Slidell, Louisiana.

He and Cassie lived a quiet life, moving to a small house on the corner of N. Dupre and Castiglione Street, a few blocks from the racetrack. He said their time together was the happiest in his life. She worked at a department store on North Broad Street, and he began training a small field of local horses. Together, they made a modest income and had plenty of time to live and love. Red’s life changed one foggy morning when a police cruiser pulled up outside the stable on the backside of the track. Two officers and the racing secretary met him in his tack room. He said he could tell by the look on their faces that something bad had happened. His wife Cassie had been struck broadside during her drive to work. That morning was the start of what he called his missing years.

In December 1986, after sixteen years of marriage, Red packed his pickup camper and everything he planned to carry with him, heading east on I-90 across the South. He spent the next two years bumming through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. He worked day labor in fruit groves and fishing boats, saving up enough money to get by until the next opportunity came along. He worked hard when he worked, drank hard when he didn't. His life took a turn when he showed up at Tampa Downs outside of Tampa, Florida.

Red pulled up at Tampa Downs in January 1988. He had been given a work lead by a friend on a fishing boat in Tarpon Springs. When he walked into the racing secretary's office to inquire about a job as a hot walker, he was met at the door by an old trainer he'd known at Fair Grounds Race Track. They talked for over an hour, and Red walked away with a job working throughout the upcoming meet in Tampa. Being back around horses centered him, settling him and his desire to roam. He returned to New Orleans in the fall of '88

After we met that spring of '89, I was rehired in the summer to work as a mail handler at the Bulk Mail Center in New Orleans. I worked the night shift, leaving plenty of time to handicap the matinees and the early evening race cards. In the fall, Red moved into an apartment with me in Metairie. Twenty years my senior, Red and I lived like brothers, sharing expenses and life experiences. After ten years together in New Orleans, we decided to move to Phoenix and take up horse training at Turf Paradise. Red built a strong stable of competitive thoroughbreds. We spent the next thirteen years living in Phoenix during the winter and spring, then travelling to Canterbury Park in Shakopee, Minnesota, for the summer and fall.

The week before Labor Day in 2013, Red came home from the track exhausted and running a low-grade fever. After several days, he turned jaundiced and ached in his abdomen and ribs. I took him to the doctor where he underwent a battery of tests and an MRI. The results came back positive for pancreatic cancer. We spent the next months in and out Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, and in early December, the doctor shared the news. Red was terminal. His final request was to travel back to Iowa to live out his last days.

Christmas morning, I'm reading "A Child's Christmas in Wales*"* to Red. He stares out the window, having not eaten for three days. The nurse had told me that he'll soon stop taking fluids as his body shuts down. When I stop, he tells me he'd heard Dylan Thomas perform the piece at one of his last readings in New York in 1953, shortly before his death. Even though he was only eight years old when he heard Thomas read, Red recites the opening lines, impersonating Thomas's melancholy Welsh accent. I stroke his thinning red hair, his forehead warm with fever.

"Can I get you anything? Some water?"

He smiles a toothless grin. He whispers, "Do you remember the bridge jumper at Turf Paradise?"

"How could I forget," I say. "I damn near killed you for that hot tip."

"Tell me the story the way you remember it, Suge."

Betting a bridge jumper is betting against the big money at a track. Every so often, a gambler will put big money down on a "sure bet" horse, say $200,000 to show on the favorite. It's called a bridge jumper because if the bet doesn't pay, the gambler is likely to jump off a bridge. The bridge jumper bet throws the pari-mutuel board for a crazy run with the odds on all other horses going through the roof. The smart bettor will play the high odds horses to show, hoping the "sure bet" will finish fourth and out of the money.

"We were sitting under an umbrella table on the apron. You'd taken the day off and were sipping a pina colada."

"Mai Tai," he says, "By the way, I've never taken a day off."

I hold his hand and feel him squeeze it. He winks and smiles.

"Sorry, Suge. Go on."

"I was ready to bet the horse Sugar Run Wild when the board dropped on it."

Red grins. "You just liked her name. You didn't even know her speed breaks or class."

"I remember sitting down disgusted and pissed. You rechecked the form and told me to go three hundred to show on the five horse Gotanaceupersleeve. You said that filly was my ace."

"That's how I remember it," he says. "Keep going."

“An ace my ass.”

“Now you’re getting worked up,” he says with a grin.

“I jumped up, trotted to the window with one minute to post. Stood in line behind some old bastard reading his bets off a crib sheet. I dropped three bills on your pick as the bell rang, then turned to watch the five stumble from the gate.”

“Oh shit. Here it comes.” Red sighs, still smiling.

“You spilled your drink standing up to watch, then shook your head before sitting back down. This all sounding familiar?”

He nods. I feel his grip strengthen, then relax.

“You wanted to push me off the bridge when Sugar Run Wild came across in first.”

“Yeah. Damn right. Gotanaceupersleeve had quite the neck stretch at the finish. Too bad she was dead last.”

He laughs and coughs. “You stuck with me, even after the loss.”

I smile. “What choice did I have? You drove that day.”

“True.”

“Like you always said, three hundred bucks is running money between friends. You slipped three bills in my pocket and told me to bet the nine across the board in the next race.”

“And how did that turn out?”

“Friendsinlowplaces paid across the board at 5-1. We were solid again.”

Red’s head rolls to the side. His gentle eyes stare out the window. His grip loosens. His breath a whisper.

“We still solid, Suge?

He closes his eyes. His breathing becomes faint, stops, then starts with a gasp. I lean forward, kiss his sunken cheek.

“Always, buddy. All the way to the wire.”

Tangled

by Flo Gelo

Nella, my forty-eight-year-old mother, sits at the edge of the bed. Her legs hang over the side, her feet cool as she likes them. The white, shiny, threadbare bed sheet, aged from hundreds of hot-water washes in steam boilers, lays tangled across her lap. Her dry callused feet reveal the circular indentation on the right side of her heel. I want to lift her, embrace her tightly and carry her from this bed to another time, before.

A similar late summer day, forty-two years earlier, the air is hot and humid. There are no ceiling fans to circulate the air in this Brooklyn row house. Nella, age six, hugs her beloved "Dr. Seuss" and lifts herself onto the pillow that her mother uses to cushion her elbows when she leans out on the windowsill to talk with neighborhood friends. Nella clumsily lifts her legs over the pillow to face outward, sliding down and turning to sit on the fire escape balcony. Admonished that she should not lean against the open crate of ripe red plum tomatoes that sits on the floor of the fire escape, she defies all warning, as is her nature. She leans too far, her body tipping. Her tiny arm reaches but her fingertips slip from the iron step ladder that leads upward to the next landing. She begins to fall, grabs instead the edge of the wooden crate. Time stops. The child falls through the well-hole opening in the balcony floor and plummets past the grape arbor—two flights until impact.

A tangled bundle lays in a heap on the hot cement. The slender canopy of Elm, motionless against a cloudless sky, provides scant shade for the fire rescue team that lifts and transports Nella to the Brooklyn Hospital Center that will be her home for many months to come. What is blood and flesh and what is plum tomato are indistinguishable. The child does not open her eyes. The nurse quickly removes Nella's clothing and washes away both blood and tomatoes to reveal cuts and bruises to her right side and swelling on her forehead and eye. Her knee has a large, deep gash. They clean her wounds with saline gauze and disinfect with iodine. A limp and twisted foot dangles from her tiny ankle.

Nella's mother sits in the waiting room. She learns that her daughter will survive this fall but may never walk again unaided. Nella's right knee is dislocated. Her right

ankle is broken, she has a growth plate fracture extending to the lower end of the tibia and her heel bone is shattered. She is in surgery. The doctor will maneuver the broken bones into approximate alignment and cast her leg and foot in place to hold the bones in their correct position. Nella will remain in the hospital for several months so that her doctor can monitor her recuperation, treat inflammation and prevent infection.

Months later a flood lamp brightens the center of a large amphitheater as Nella awkwardly stands, assisted by wooden crutches. News reporters are present and flashbulbs pop as Dr. G describes in detail the innovative surgical procedures that allowed this young child to bear weight and possibly walk again. I imagine her then, anxious and weary but happy to be in the spotlight on this day of her seventh birthday—happier still when a large round frosted cake is carried into the room. The cake is held by young nurses wearing white hats and holding multicolor balloons. The next day, Nella's wide eyes and smile are captured on the front page of *The Brooklyn Beacon*. In a smaller photograph, Dr. G. accepts an award in recognition of this monumental surgical success.

Today, I see my mother as she sits on her bed tangled in sheets and fear. No photographer seeks her picture, no doctor stands in the bright light of triumph. Ten years of living with and fighting cancer are coming to an end. A miracle no longer awaits her, only fleeting moments of comfort and fragile hope. Now I am the child falling through an opening, plunging from a great height, waiting for the impact.

The Drive

by Peyton Vance

“Now, you just have to be easy with it.” I say. Eli looks at the buttons and levers.

“OK.”

“What are you forgetting?” I ask.

“Oh.” There's a click and he disengages the emergency brake. “Reverse?” He asks.

“Yes.”

“Okay … reverse.” He lets the ER drag out this mouth. “The ‘D’?” he asks.

“What? Oh, yeah, put it in drive.”

It takes him seven seconds to pull back the lever. He's timid. He thinks that if he presses or pulls the wrong thing the car will explode. Part of me doesn't blame him. My friend’s brother slammed into a car so hard his body was scrambled like eggs. It took six months for him to learn to walk again. Eli pulls forward.

“Where do I go?” he asks.

“Where do you want to go?” That question wasn't good enough for him. He looks at me then back at the road then back at me again.

“Just tell me where to go.”

“Drive to the gas station by Food City. Do you know where that is?” He lets out an “uh” that lasts a lot longer than it should.

“I think so,” he says.

“Ok, drive and I’ll tell you where to turn.” I’m thinking about Colton. His friend drove too fast over a pile of leaves and wrapped the car around a stump. It turned Colton and his friend into red pulp. Some of my friends who saw the pictures said “Goddamn, that stump was hungry. Gobbled them right up.” Eli speeds up.

“How fast?” He asks.

“What did the sign say?” He pauses, then answers like he was asked a math question.

“Forty five?”

“Yes, but go whatever speed you’re comfortable with.” Austin was rough. In the car with his buddy and drove over black ice. They went off road and whiplash caused them to headbutt each other. When the cops showed up Austin’s buddy was stumbling around in the road while Austin lay dead in the car. His brain was squished in his skull like a firefly in a kid’s hand. Eli jerks the wheel.

“Sorry,” he says, “Thought that was a bird on the road.” He’s hunched over. His shoulders almost touch his ears. It looks like if it wasn’t for the seatbelt he’d be twisted in a knot.

“You’re fine. Sometimes you’ll dodge ’em. Sometimes you won’t.” He looks at me then back on the road. He goes a little faster.

“How do you stay so calm?” he asks. I’m thinking about the kid who drove into a lake and drowned himself. They didn’t find him until the next morning.

“There’s nothing to worry about.” I say.

Mixed Emotion Family

by Susan D. Bernstein

"My mama is mean," Ruth used to say. I couldn't see this myself. Miss Cora, as Ruth insisted her mother liked to be called, seemed a benign old woman to me. She had traveled to suburban New York from Georgia by bus to spend six weeks of the summer with her daughter. Miss Cora hardly spoke to me. I might say, "Good morning," and she'd wince a smile or murmur some slight recognition. I found her puzzling, but since she was Ruth's mother, I accepted her presence without asking questions.

When I was an infant my parents hired Ruth to cook and clean and to care for my brother and me. She remained in this job for over forty years until each of my parents died in the same house where Ruth had dusted, swept, and managed the kitchen work. She witnessed everything, from first days of school to arguments and holiday celebrations. She not only washed the dirty laundry, she saw and heard it. But while she knew everything about us, it seemed, what did we know of her family and her life beyond our house?

We knew Ruth had grown up in Georgia where her mother still lived. At Christmas each year, Ruth journeyed south to Cordele, Georgia to see Miss Cora and other family whose names I never kept straight, and occasionally Miss Cora came north in summers. In 1979, the last time Miss Cora visited her daughter, she was closing in on eighty, her sight was gone, and cancer rambled through her body. She sat silently in the folding chair by the back door for hours, sucking the juice out of an orange through a straw Ruth had inserted. She wore heavy cotton socks rolled up at her ankles, and my blue gingham shirt from my high school years underneath a sleeveless dress with a faded floral print. Although her eyes did not work, Miss Cora wore heavy black-rimmed glasses. Ruth dressed her mother every day and fixed the elastic in the waist of the slip because Miss Cora liked wearing a slip, but objected if it drooped below her hemline.

"Why does Miss Cora wear glasses if she can't see?" I asked. I was home for a visit a few years after I'd graduated from college. Ruth peeled potatoes into the sink, her back hunched over as she supported much of her weight on her forearms, which were massive, as if they belonged on a bigger, athletic body. Due to childhood polio, Ruth's

legs looked like skeleton bones, thin envelopes of flesh wrapped around them.

“I put them on to keep her from picking at her eyes. She don’t care anymore.” Ruth's low voice hushed the room as she watched Miss Cora from the kitchen window. “She about given up and is just passing time.”

My mother walked in from the front hall. For many years I’d watched her passing time. “Ruth, did you see my book? I was reading it at lunch, but now I can’t find it anywhere.”

I hugged Ruth from behind, circling her broad back with my arms. Then I turned on my mother. “Why should Ruth know where your book is? She’s busy taking care of her mother, who can’t see at all.” I was in a stage of belligerence towards my mother and protective of Ruth. Eventually I outgrew my pugnaciousness like the gingham shirt Miss Cora wore.

My mother sighed, “Oh, leave me be! I didn’t say Ruth should know—I only asked a question. Is that a crime?” Not waiting for a reply, my mother walked out of the room, and I heard her climb the stairs to her bedroom, where she often soothed herself with rounds of solitaire.

Ruth patted my cheek. “Hear her and don’t hear her. That’s what I do. She only talking to hear herself talk.” Ruth had little tolerance for what she called “chin music” or “jaw dancing,” whether aimless chatter or in this case my mother's mumblings of despair.

“Where do you sleep when Miss Cora is here?”

“In there,” Ruth gestured toward her cubby of a room adjacent to the kitchen. but her eyes caught mine as she turned from the sink. Ruth was the mistress of the ironic, “you-fool” glance.

As a child, I had loved Ruth’s room because it was small, a coziness that I thought had to do with the size and walls, but it was Ruth’s presence that made her room a safe hideaway. I had tried to get Ruth to switch rooms with me at one point when I was five or six, but she told me I had to sleep upstairs, she downstairs. Ruth’s room was warm in winter, cool in summer, as if it had its own thermostat that adjusted to seasonal weather. The shoe-box room held a cot, two feet wide, a bureau, a desk, and a sink. The black and white checkered bedspread, from my brother’s bedroom

years ago, was tucked neatly around the mattress. In clumps everywhere were food coupons, prescription drug bottles with the pharmacy labels peeling away, spools of colored thread for crochet projects, plastic bags of assorted shades piled high on top of newspapers and stacks of *Ebony* and *Jet* and outdated *TV Guides*. Miniature china animals and faded hard candies sat on the glass top of the desk along with rolls of pennies, safety pins, and baseball cards. On the bureau, along with the coupons and scraps of papers with Ruth's handwriting—addresses and phone numbers, stray shopping lists—was a Gideon Bible, like the ones in hotel bedside table drawers. From the array of improvised bookmarks protruding beyond the gilt and crimson edges, it looked as if Ruth read from all the Gospels simultaneously. Once she showed me a dried flower pressed into the pages near a crucifixion scene. "That's my orchid for Good Friday. Your mama gets me one every year."

My mother gave Ruth corsages twice a year, one for Easter and one on the day of Yom Kippur Eve. The first was for Ruth to wear to services at the African Methodist Episcopal Church she attended in Harlem. The other commemorated Ruth's anniversary with our family. I was three months old when Ruth arrived at our house to take care of my brother and me during the evening while my parents went to Kol Nidre services.

Ruth proved ecumenical in her religious practices. She fasted with my father on Yom Kippur and ate matzah during Passover, entirely without my mother's lapses into bread. Still, she was a dedicated Christian and went to her church Sundays and read daily spiritual texts from a worn pamphlet she carried in her apron pocket. More than anyone else in my family, Ruth was the religious enthusiast, and took to any kind of ritual or prayer. "It all goes to the same God," she liked to say.

During those years, the little I did know about Ruth's past came from her occasional revelations or from my mother. Ruth was evasive about her age and her background. My mother told me that Miss Cora was thirteen when Ruth was born in Georgia, but Ruth never confirmed this hearsay. Ruth's surname was Stedman before she married, then Greene. When I knew Miss Cora, her last name was Smith. I thought that nearly everyone Ruth knew seemed to be related to her, and I could never follow

the familial lines, as they seemed to run in a more circuitous fashion than what I understood about my own more limited store of relatives. Although Ruth didn't have anyone she claimed for siblings, she had countless aunts, uncles, and cousins. I grew up with these scattered bits of knowledge about Ruth's life, but later I tried to learn more.

In August 1996 when Ruth was eighty years old, I interviewed her, and then didn't play the video recording for a dozen years, some four years after Ruth had died in a nursing home in central Georgia in 2004. I had asked predictable questions, prompted by the outline of a life my mother had fed me about Ruth, leading questions Ruth either evaded or flat-out contradicted. Like the woman I knew and didn't know from infancy, Ruth's answers were elusive, skewed, as if she'd heeded Emily Dickinson's advice: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—/Success in Circuit lies." Take her reply when I asked where she was born.

"Now, that is a very big question. I was born on the county line of two places, Dooly and Pulaski—half the house in Dooly, half in Pulaski." This would be central Georgia, just after the First World War. If her birthplace was suspended across county lines, her family was equally dispersed across many names.

"Oh, I'm the sum total of a mixed emotion family," This meant four names: McIntire, Brown, Anderson, and Marshall. I don't know where Stedman or Smith fit in, and Ruth didn't elaborate. She was adept at redirecting my follow-up questions. Cora's name was McIntire until she married, but whether she married Stedman first, or Smith, or either one, remains a mystery.

Some of the naming in Ruth's family had a more legible genealogy. Her maternal grandmother was Minnie Brown. Minnie married twice. The first marriage produced Mary, Carrie, and Cora, and the second marriage to Joe Brown resulted in a couple of boys, and six girls: Margaret, Lula Bell, Willie Mae, Minnie, Thelma, and Anne. These children from her marriage with Joe were more like siblings for Ruth because they were close to her in age even though they were her aunts.

"My mother was about one generation, and they and the rest of them another generation. They all came out the same hole. Let's say it that way. They all by the same woman, so the same little place." Ruth waxed graphic here, maybe a flashpoint of

irritation over my repeated questions to ascertain the exact relationship between Ruth and Thelma and Minnie. I gradually comprehended that precise bloodlines were a contrivance that didn't have much traction in Ruth's sense of her world. "We all related" summed up her view.

Those patterns of generation fueled my persistent questions to know her family constellation. Joe Brown was Miss Cora's stepfather; he was a farmer, probably a sharecropper, although Ruth didn't use this word. "He raised corn, cotton, stuff like that, and peanuts for the house." During my childhood, Ruth regularly roasted peanuts in papery red skins which fell off in brittle flakes.

My mental images of Joe Brown with his cash crop harvests of cotton and corn, the peanuts a treat for the family, are nourished by a different documentation. My quest to understand Ruth led me to photographs by Dorothea Lange, which show Southern tenant farmer families, with children in raggedy clothes in the cotton fields, many of these from the 1920s and 30s when Ruth would have been a child or teenager. This sharecropper system of exploitation, with its legacy in serfdom and slavery, fell apart under the New Deal in the 1930s when union organizing and strikes brought to wider attention the abuses landless farmers and their families—many African Americans in the South before the Great Migration northward—experienced. This public history offered a narrative arc for Ruth's account of how she and many of her relatives moved north.

Other details about Ruth's childhood in Georgia came through in unexpected ways. When my daughter was eight years old, she had a school assignment to interview someone "old." Her class had developed a set of questions to find out what life was like when their subjects were children. Flora immediately thought of Ruth and phoned her with her class query in hand. Ruth was past eighty by then.

"What kind of board games did you like to play?" was one of the questions the third graders had come up with.

"We didn't have no games like that!" Ruth laughed at the question. "We played in the dirt, and with sticks and stones. That's the only board games we all had."

"Where did your family go on vacations?" Flora wanted to know, again referring to the class assignment.

“Vacation? What you talking about, baby? Well, let me see. Maybe we go up to Valdosta a piece, if we in Cordele, or to Cordele or maybe Sibley when we lived down by Sylvester. We visited our family—aunts and uncles or cousins—or sometimes my mother. That’s about the size of it, the sum total of the family vacation we had!”

“What restaurants did your family like to go to when you were little?” And that’s how the interview went, a limping affair with most every question totally out of key with the chords of Ruth’s childhood.

Flora’s questions were molded from the same narrow vision of the ones I asked Ruth in my interview only a few years before. I kept trying to find out how the ages of people at certain milestones fit in her narrative of her early years. My aim was to work out Ruth’s age and the chronological difference between her and her mother. I tried to confirm without saying so the unwed teen mother story I’d heard. But Ruth seemed downright annoyed.

“So your grandmother must’ve had those children with Joe Brown later on,” I fished for some ages.

”What you call later on?”

“Thirty-five? Forty?”

“I don’t know how old my grandmother was. She had these three kids, became a widow, married this man, and had those kids. If your husband died, wouldn’t *you* marry again, if you was a beautiful lady?” Ruth gave me that signature arch look of hers, her voice edgy with impatience. “I called him Papa like his children did. I never said ‘Grandpa’ or ‘Grandma’ neither.”

After her father died, Ruth recalled moving around, even living apart from her mother whose work took her to Sibley, Georgia. “I stayed with my Aunt Mary quite a spell when I went to a public school.” I was very interested in learning more about her father, but Ruth yielded little other than his name was Nathan.

I reached for fiction to parse this shadowy father. In his short story “Cora Unashamed,” Langston Hughes juxtaposes two out-of-wedlock pregnancies, one of a white teen named Jessie, the other of Cora, the family maid. While Cora’s response to her condition is announced in the title, Jessie’s parents force her to have an abortion from which she dies. My own mother had told me the tale of Miss Cora, a mother while

she was still a child, but there was not a hint of difficulties in Ruth's recollection of her origins. Instead, Ruth talked about a father she knew and loved. "He was a turpentine man in Sylvester."

Again, I resorted to public images to fill in gaps. I found a 1912 postcard of the "turpentine industry" in Florida, with the added caption, "Dipping and scraping pine trees." The image shows two black men in overalls stripping the bark. Turpentine vapors are health hazards, solvents that burn the skin and eyes, and can even damage the lungs and the central nervous system. Was occupational harm responsible for Nathan's too early death? Dorothea Lange's 1937 photographs gave more visual clues: "Turpentine Workers, Georgia, July 1937" shows a group of black men in a field fringed with pine trees.

As she had with Flora's school assignment, Ruth pushed against the preconceptions that prompted my line of questions about her parents. She didn't remember why or when Nathan died, but that it was when she was too young to go to school. "My father I was very fond of—when I saw him coming down the road, no matter who I was playing with, I would leave them. I'd jump up and meet him, and he would pick me up, put me around his neck, and bring me home. I adored my father, and then he died."

"Was your mother living with him at the time?"

"I said he was my father!"

"But not all parents live together."

"Well, this one did." Ruth's emphasis on "this one" couldn't have been sharper, a resolute rejection of my insinuating narrative of a poor single black mother and child. "That's how I know he died. And after that, my Aunt Mary and her husband came and moved us to Cordele."

Ruth explained that her mother worked as a cook in those days "for ladies in their homes," first in Sibley and Sylvester, and then in Cordele. "Why did she have that job, and not another kind of job?" I asked, again wanting Ruth to say that African American women had scant employment opportunities, and that domestic labor was better than other alternatives. I had remembered when I was a child hearing Ruth's Aunt Thelma declare she didn't want to cook and clean for anyone but herself in her own home. How

Thelma's insinuation about her relatives' employment "for ladies in their homes" sat with Ruth, I didn't know.

During this interview, Ruth had another quick retort to my question. "She had to do something, so she must've got a job being somebody's cook." Ruth offered a logic about her mother's work in white people's homes that she thought was self-evident.

"Now, my mother was a wonderful cook." About Miss Cora's culinary skills, Ruth elaborated, "I hear people she worked for rave about what a wonderful cook she was, and if you want something good, let her cook it. I know she made something I loved—that was pork chops. Seemed like they melt away in your mouth."

Ruth cooked everything our family ate—from brisket and matzo ball soup and chopped chicken liver to vichyssoise and layer cakes with caramel frosting. My mother would find recipes in the newspaper or *Ladies Home Journal* for Ruth to prepare. I was astonished to learn from Ruth that she didn't consider herself much of a cook. I had heard the family legend that when my mother interviewed Ruth about the job, she had asked Ruth if she knew how to cook. When Ruth said she didn't, my mother replied, "I don't either, and one of us will have to learn how, and it won't be me." Ruth's own account of this encounter didn't contradict my mother's story; rather, she played up her own side of it. "She say, you know how to cook? I say, no. You ask me today, I'll tell you the same thing. I don't tell nobody I know how to cook. I just don't." It was clear that a job cooking for "ladies in their homes," as Ruth had described Miss Cora's employment, was nothing Ruth relished.

Ruth and Cora had other jobs in the food industry. When Ruth was a very young woman in Georgia, she had followed her mother to a canning factory called Liberty MacNeil. "I worked in tomatoes, my mother worked in beans and pickles." Some sixty years later, Ruth was telling me about grating tomatoes "near a machine where they'd pull the rotten tomatoes off, and the rest went into a boiler to make canned tomatoes, tomato juice, tomato ketchup, or what have you." This position seemed to suit Ruth at the time. "If I worked every day, I had a nice check—once they took income taxes out of it. I think they closed that factory. I'm not sure, but maybe they didn't have peoples to come to work there like when I was working there. My mother worked there year round."

For Ruth, this canning factory was a summer job. About her youthful attitude on

work back then she mused, “I was a spoiled brat. I wanted to work with the other kids picking tomatoes or tobacco, but they wouldn’t let me go, and I had to stay in the restaurant to help, but then there was nothing to do there.” Ruth didn’t elaborate on this restaurant, nor did she provide background about Liberty MacNeil. These narratives assumed I knew the broader contexts of places and people. I was too uncomfortable to ask outright about the teen mother and other buried bits of Ruth’s story. Maybe it was none of my business.

During that humid summer morning in 1996 when I videotaped our conversation, I pursued the kinds of life stages most familiar to me. I remember once, when in high school I was struggling to translate Caesar’s Gallic War feats, Ruth said she had studied Latin. But I didn’t hear about classical language classes so many years later when she told me about moving from school to school as a young child. Speaking of the time following her father’s death when her mother moved for work and Ruth lived with her Aunt Mary in Cordele, she said, “I went to public school then. Sometimes I visited my mother in Sibley and went to school there too one term, but then went home to Cordele, and went into boarding school at Gillespie Selden Institute and finished high school there.” Gillespie cast a certain glow in Ruth's recollections. The school was established in Cordele in 1933 when it merged with Selden Normal and Industrial Institute in Brunswick, originally opened in the first decade of the twentieth century to offer vocational training to African American students. When Ruth attended Gillespie-Selden, most likely during its initial decade, it offered the state’s first nursing program for black women. Although Ruth didn't mention subjects related to health or anatomy when she talked about her school days, she had told me she was once a nurse in Cordele. Ruth linked this work to surgery on her legs while she was at Gillespie. “They chopped up the bones and then pieced them back together,” Ruth had explained to me once when I was a child and I asked about her bone-thin legs. My mother had told me that Ruth had polio and lived where she didn’t receive proper medical care.

Ruth had a different take on this chapter of her life. “I had quite a few operations—don’t know why.” When I mentioned polio as the reason, she countered, “Rickets too, some doctor once told me. All I know is my legs musta been weak. There was a problem from the time I was little, so they did operations to make me walk a bit

better.” A nurse by Ruth’s measure, I gathered, meant taking care of children. “I hung around the hospital as a teenager and everyone thought I was a nurse. A lady, a teacher, wanted me to be a nurse, but I said I had to go back to school to get along with my mother.” Ruth paused here and laughed, “You had to go to school to get along with your mother too because she sent you.” School was a filial obligation, and Ruth made clear that she had finished high school despite interruptions from surgery and work.

Then Ruth left Georgia for wider horizons up north. “I went to Washington and took a change of plans and came to New York. I had two or three relatives there, Lula Bell and Margaret.”

In a photo booth image taken in the late 1940s when Ruth was in Washington DC in her early twenties, she’s posing with Miss Cora. They look like sisters, although Ruth is the glamorous one, with glossy lipstick, and a spirited smile in contrast to Cora’s mild, wistful expression. Ruth sports the fancier hairstyle, with waves cresting over her forehead, and she wears a double-strand pearl necklace and shiny ring earrings, while Cora has a dark dress with a white collar, reminiscent of the uniforms Ruth wore at our house. Although Ruth did not elaborate on the "change of plans," she did pause in her prescient way, in her response to my question about why she continued on to New York.

Ruth and Cora

She leveled her gaze squarely at me. “I was looking for you.”

I learned “phlegmatic” and "laconic" from my mother who dwelled on these three-syllable words as the epitome of Ruth’s sensibility. “She doesn’t show much emotion,” my mother often said when describing Ruth, who did not go in for chin music or jaw dancing. To me Ruth revealed a firm belief that our meeting was fate and that she had sought me even before knowing me. I didn't feel I needed more explanation for feelings that cut through the dross of my reportage-style interview.

Then she supplied the ordinary answer: “I came to New York to see Thelma. She was a housekeeper for Peanut Cole.” Here I interjected that I’d remembered Thelma

saying she didn't want to clean or cook for other people. "After that job," Ruth continued, "Thelma came from the mail-packing place. Then she started at some school, a Catholic school, a hospital where chirrens are, where kids come from broken homes. You know, where your mother got mail sometimes asking her to help."

I wanted to get back to the narrative about Ruth and my parents. "So you came to New York to see Thelma, and then what happened?"

"I found *you*." Again that prophetic-ironic voice.

I hung onto a journalist role. "How did you find me?"

"I found you through Aunt Florence." We were back to the often-recited tale. Florence was my father's brother's wife. Ruth continued, "Well, Aunt Florence was looking for a housekeeper, and Peanut told her—Mrs. Cole told her—that Thelma's niece was here, and maybe she could get me to work for her." This alternating between formal and familiar names, between—in reference to my father—"Papa" and "Mr. B," was indicative of Ruth's not-quite status, as family member in some respects, yet an outsider in most. The rest of the story had to do with housekeeper-swapping. Aunt Florence was visiting my mother when someone my parents were considering hiring came over. "Aunt Florence liketed her, or she liketed Aunt Florence better than she did your mama." Ruth injected an element of mistress-trading too. "So Aunt Florence said, 'I'll take her, and you take Ruth, you take who Mrs. Cole have visiting.' And that's the way it went."

According to my mother, Ruth was supposed to go to Aunt Florence's house, but in the end, another young woman arrived earlier to take the position when Ruth's arrival in New York was delayed by her stopover to visit relatives in Washington. Florence convinced my mother to "try out" Ruth on a temporary basis. "She was very serious and had a beautiful face," my mother told me regarding her first impressions of Ruth.

"What was the job like?" I asked Ruth, as if I were conducting a survey for an employment agency.

"Well, from what I see, I was to take care of her whole house—do her cooking, do her washing, do her ironing, do her cleaning. She had a cleaning lady for a while, but then that stopped. And then take care of you and Jonny, and have off Thursdays and every other Sunday." When I asked her what she thought of this "job," her hired position

in the life of my family, after all the variety of work she'd had before, she said, "Not too much of nothing. It was something to do and put a little change in my pocket, or I'd have to go back to Liberty MacNeil."

Ruth's retrospective on this employment reminded me of a story my mother had told about her uneasiness that Ruth seemed "unhappy" in our home at first. After Ruth had worked for a few months, my mother considered asking her to leave. "She never smiled and I worried that her disposition wasn't good for young children." My mother put my father up to the task of sacking Ruth, but that backfired, as my mother relayed to me. "Your father said to Ruth that she didn't seem happy and thought maybe she would prefer a different family or a different job. Ruth didn't flinch, just looked at him, and said calmly, 'Everyone who gets to know me, loves me. You all will too.'" This is the tale I heard often from my mother about how Ruth ended up part—and not part—of our family for these multiple decades. Ruth's words clarified that this was a menial job, "doing" for others in their Northern homes, barely preferable to the factory assembly line in the South. And yet the value of Ruth's labor was not the polished silver or holiday pot roast, but in the lasting—and loving—entanglements with this cluster of people.

"What was I like as a baby?"

"Didn't want to drink your milk! Didn't care too much about eating! Jonny kind of clicked with me right away, and everything he had was mine. I wonder why?" Ruth laughed ruminatively. "I guess kids are like that if they see something in you they like."

My very earliest memories put me in a high chair in the kitchen with Ruth listening to a noontime gospel radio hour, with Mahalia Jackson, the Queen of Gospel, belting out "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." In memory, all the white of the kitchen merges like the days, each into the next and back again, Proustian style. The white of tile and appliances bleeds into the white of the smelly white fish I could not stand. "Now you eat that up—it's brain food. Your mama done paid a lot of money for that fish."

During the interview, Ruth offered a wry summary of her job. "Life around your house was just a bowl of cherries. Yesssss … you and Jonny would mash the cherries, and I drinked the juice!" There's a compressed metaphor swirling in that bowl.

Much to my parents' discomfort, Ruth announced, "I'm voting for George

Wallace," the Alabama racist who tried to undermine the effects of the 1964 Civil Rights Act when he ran for U.S. president that same year and again in 1972 and '76. Perhaps there was some undercurrent of irony in Ruth's insistence that she could vote for whomever she pleased, whether she intended to cast this vote, or whether she liked provoking my parents' predictable reaction.

She demonstrated this slippery humor even when it came to her annual vacation. Since my family was dependent on Ruth's presence, and planned all travels accordingly, my mother would ask Ruth when she was going to Georgia to visit Miss Cora, or if she was going to take any other trips. "Well," Ruth would sometimes smile, "I'm going to see the Queen real soon!" Maybe she'd elaborate that she had plans to travel around the world, or go to France, but this was her way of joking and the effect was that my mother's anxiety about travel plans increased. My mother used to say, "It's hard to know where you are with Ruth." Ruth's evasions weren't calculated exactly, yet all told, I see her dodges as something other than narrative allergy. Except for Ruth's hysterectomy when I was twelve when she was unable to work for a month, she never left me for long.

While I was in high school Ruth called me into her room one evening, and said she had an important secret to tell me. "Walter and I got married last week, but I don't want your mama or daddy to know." Her reason for this secrecy was that Ruth didn't intend to live full-time with Walter until I left home. "When you go off to college, there will be time enough. I'm not leaving you until I see you through to the other side."

Walter Greene was a chef at a restaurant in White Plains. Ruth loved to take my brother and me to visit Walter's kitchen where he'd ply us with our favorite menu items. He knew all our dietary delights from Ruth. "French fries?" he'd ask. "I know you love spaghetti, Susie," and he heaped up a plate with pasta. Ruth added to her ironing basket Walter's uniforms and I'd see her prop up with starch those white toques. Although I enjoyed his generosity as a professional cook, so different from the domestic version his wife halfheartedly held, Walter remained a shadowy person to me. In death, Walter became more vivid, as did Ruth's world outside our home.

It was after eleven at night when my mother phoned from New York to tell me

Walter had died two days earlier from lung cancer. At six the next morning I called Ruth to say I'd be in New York in time for Walter's funeral.

"Really?" Ruth sounded almost excited and almost like herself, except for a slight hollowness in her voice. "You really goin' be here?"

My parents and I arrived at the funeral home before Walter's family. In the front hallway was a black glass-enclosed announcement offering the day's event: 11 o'clock. Monday February 23, 1981. Services for Walter G. Greene. The three of us went uneasily from the entrance hall to the chapel where the coffin was on display in the front of the room. I saw Walter's head propped up, his black eyeglasses on his face although his eyes were closed.

Two days earlier Ruth had asked my parents to drive her to the funeral home, "the undertaker's," as she put it. "You can see Greene's body. They did a real good job on him. I made sure they put on his glasses. No one would even know it's Greene without his glasses."

I asked my mother, "Was it hard to look at him?"

"Actually, it wasn't so bad. Your father took one look in the coffin and whispered, 'That's my suit he's wearing!'" We had entered Ruth's world by proxy only, through castoff clothing, even while she lived in ours. We were making our debut at Walter's funeral.

After I greeted Ruth's cousin Agnes who had taken a seat up front, I turned back to the third row where my parents had rooted themselves into gray folding chairs. "We better move back, since the front rows are all for Ruth's family."

"Don't worry, dear," my mother quickly parried. "We'll be conspicuous no matter where we sit."

When the seats were nearly filled, two young men helped Miss Cora, who had traveled in a car from Georgia for thirty hours, in through a side door to the front of the room.

Suddenly a hush descended on the dim hum of chatter, and behind me was a terrible sound, a chillingly painful gasp. Everyone turned toward the main entrance, and there was Ruth as the chief mourner, like the bride at the back of a procession. Going down the aisle ahead of Ruth were Walter's daughter Patricia from Jacksonville, his

brother Charles from Miami, and his sister Anne from Chattanooga.

Transfixed with fear I watched Ruth, her hands covering her face as she sobbed loudly. I had never witnessed this pitch of emotion from her in all my life. My mother's view of Ruth as stolid may have had more to do with our particular domestic dynamics. A woman dressed in a nurse's uniform supported Ruth as she limped toward Walter's coffin. She held Ruth around her shoulders as they moved down the aisle.

When Ruth reached Walter's body, she leaned over it and cried out, her voice piercing the still room, "Why did you leave me, Greene?" My fingernails reflexively pressed into my palm. On one side of me, my father seemed to shudder, and said beneath his breath, "Gee!" On my other side, my mother did not flinch.

Once Ruth had been led to her seat in the front row, Reverend John Jackson, the minister from Ruth's AME Church in Harlem, stood at the pulpit to address the mourners. He was a large man with impressive presence, his voice like a full sunset, streaked with a symphonic range of emotion. He began his eulogy, his eyes trained on the audience before him.

"Sometimes, sometimes, my brothers and sisters, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. We have the suffering with the living, and then more suffering with the dying, and then the ache of hell when they are dead. And we cry out in our pain and in our rage, 'Why Lawd, why?'"

The minister's head bent down as if under a huge weight, a pendulum suddenly struck still in the clock of life. Slowly he lifted his head. I was mesmerized by the drama of him, the room's fragile quiet. Now his voice was a low, deep wave, gathering force as it grew.

"And you ask yourselves, brothers and sisters, 'Why did my brother Walter Greene die? Why Lawd? Why Lawd? Why now? We're not finished with him, Lawd! Why now? Why did you take him from me, Lawd? Why?'"

After the graveside services when we were walking back down the path to the row of parked cars, Ruth introduced me to Charles, Walter's brother. "This here's my baby." She appeared tired and, as usual, walked with a lame gait. I was relieved to hear Ruth speak without that pitch of powerful feeling, her cries still pinned to my brain.

Charles put his hand out and I shook his. "Nice to meet you, m'am."

I was Ruth's baby. She told me this, she told other people this. But was there another baby? Did I replace another lost baby, like Jessie replaces Cora's Josephine in the Langston Hughes story? Did I displace Ruth's own story of other babies, narratives buried, forever lost? Twice I heard that doctors had pronounced Ruth's body bearing the traces of childbirth.

When I was in seventh grade, Ruth suddenly became ill and had to have a hysterectomy. My father's cousin Eugene was a gynecologist, and so my parents arranged for Eugene's partner to perform the surgery. I only remember visiting her in the hospital the night after her operation. She looked small and helpless, not at all the Ruth who protected me from my brother's punches, my mother's depression, my father's mild-mannered oblivion. Her face was drenched, and I could tell she was in terrible pain.

"There's my baby," her attempt at smiling more a grimace as she saw me at the foot of her bed.

My mother tried to reassure me when we left the hospital. "Of course, Ruth isn't dying! She just had major surgery. She'll be fine in no time." We spent a month eating most dinners at restaurants, or my mother made tuna salad sandwiches. I learned to make spaghetti sauce from a mix. During that period, I overheard that the doctor said Ruth once had a child.

Many years later I heard a similar story when Ruth was crazy with senility, and no longer knew me even by name. That failure of memory was so painful to bear that I stopped phoning her at the Pinehill Nursing Center in Byronville, Georgia. Her cousin Jean Smith, who lived in Cordele and looked after Ruth when she moved back there a few years after my parents died, would phone me from time to time with updates about Ruth's condition. I hadn't caught Jean's place in Ruth's sketch of her family tree, but Jean told me she'd known Ruth forever. This time she told me that Ruth had some bleeding, and that the doctors said she had cancer of the uterus.

"That can't be! I know Ruth had a hysterectomy a long time ago, when she was maybe forty years old."

"I'm just telling you what the doctors say. And they say she had one baby, maybe two." If Ruth had given birth, what happened to the baby? Dead or surrendered or

something else? In the part of Ruth's life that overlapped with mine, so much was unspoken, so much of the past unshared, that baby was as good as dead.

Ruth liked to talk to the dead, and that's what she did when I took her to visit Walter's grave. As if paralleling our peculiar family, The Jewish cemetery, Sharon Gardens, where my family has a plot, and a Christian cemetery, Gates of Heaven, lie side by side in Valhalla, New York. Ruth made wreaths for Walter's grave with different colors of plastic newspaper and supermarket bags which she balled up in some fashion and then attached to wire clothes hangers. Once I suggested I could get some cut flowers from a florist for her to leave by the gravestone, but Ruth declined. "My flowers look fresh a lot longer than those ones you spend your money on." She had a point.

I envied Ruth's camaraderie with the dead. When we approached Walter's plot, she'd call out, "Look who's here, Greene! I brought Susie to see you!" Then she'd give a quick update about relatives or friends, the change of ownership of a restaurant where he'd worked.

Some months after my mother's Aunt Fredda died in a nursing home, her body willed for scientific research, a special delivery package of the rest of Aunt Fredda, now reduced to smooth sand, arrived at my parents' front door. My mother and Ruth took Aunt Fredda's box to our local Valhalla. As they approached Walter's grave, my mother held the open box while Ruth called out, "Greene! I've brought Aunt Fredda to stay with you now! You remember Aunt Fredda! She's the lady who basted the turkey every Thanksgiving!" Ruth scooped up the substance of Aunt Fredda's remains, and dispersed the grains like fairy dust onto Walter's plot.

Ruth's own death, like her life in some ways, felt painfully remote to me. I had not seen her in several years since she'd returned to Georgia and I had not spoken to her in over a year since she didn't seem to know who I was anymore. Still, I was some variety of next of kin and received the news before dawn one September morning.

"She gone," I heard a voice say. "She gone now. Susie, this is Jean. Ruth passed in the night, around one o'clock."

A week later and a thousand miles away, Ruth's funeral took place at the New

Oak Grove Baptist Church in Cordele. Jean sent me the program from the service, a six-page foldout with a large color photo of Ruth on the front. The image of Ruth came from another photo which appeared inside, one I'd taken at my brother's rental home on Martha's Vineyard the summer of 1996 when I'd interviewed Ruth. In the original picture, Ruth sits in a tee-shirt on a lawn chair in the company of two toddlers, my brother's daughter Jenna and my Flora next to her. Flora is hamming it up, Jenna is studying something on her hands, Ruth is looking at the camera. Her expression seems distraught, but perhaps she was in the middle of saying something, and the shutter caught her face at an odd angle.

The program came to me like a long-distance notice of the framework of Ruth's story, her early and final years in Cordele, which became legible on my mental map when I learned the city was forty miles east of Jimmy Carter's hometown of Plains. Unlike Walter Greene's funeral in White Plains, NY, Ruth had the royal treatment with escorts courtesy of the city of Cordele, including the chief of the police department, the city manager, and the sheriff of Dooly County. The order of the service includes two selections of songs by "The Gospel Ensemble" and a eulogy from the Minister Charles Perry. Ruth's body didn't make it to Walter's Valhalla resting-home; she was buried in "Pleasant Valley". Toward the back of the funeral program is a poem titled "Come and Rest":

> God said you were getting weary
> So he did what he thought best,
> He came and stood beside you
> And whispered, "Come and Rest."

If there were any "Why Lawds" at Ruth's funeral, the answer might have been this, that she was "getting weary." Arranged around the poem at the center of the page are several photos including one of Flora and Jenna, a few of Ruth as a much younger woman. In one she's in a kitchen, although I don't recognize it. In another, she wears a uniform with an apron, and another shows Ruth with her arm linked through Walter's. Although neither my parents nor my brother and I appear in any photo, there is one of

Ruth at the Hartsdale train station, with her hand resting on the back of my parents' 1960s Cadillac convertible. Ruth was likely heading to her church in Harlem.

A short obituary begins: "Mrs. Ruth Steadman Greene, daughter of the late Mrs. Cora Smith born on January 1, 1916 in Sylvester, Worth County, Georgia." Finally, I learn Ruth's age, and marvel that she died at eighty-eight, a year older than my father had lived, and thirteen years longer than my mother. She was less than two years younger than my mother. Why had I assumed my mother was at least a decade older? Neither woman was forthright about her age. In addition to her mother's name, this version of Ruth's biography mentions two aunts and seven cousins, again a glaring contrast with Ruth's own account of an adored father. Then, this: "She moved to New York where she lived and worked for many years. She was employed by a very loving and caring family, The Barntine Family."

Something was garbled in the translation here, from "Bernstein" to "Barntine," but no matter. Like a photo negative, Ruth's many decades in New York working for our family for most of her adult life was a shadowy detail for the people at her funeral in Cordele. What she told me about her childhood and family in Georgia, an account colliding with my mother's version, was more a sketch than the thick description I sought. From each perspective, her Cordele community of her childhood and final years, and her workplace people like me, Ruth was a strong presence, known in some respects, and not known in others, the very marvel and mystery of herself, as she had told me, a sum total of a mixed emotion family.

Faded Memory

by Rosanne Trost

It was another bitterly cold, dreary January day. Unseasonably cold. No sun for days. My mind and spirit matched the weather. I was going through the motions as "they" say. Bogged down in grief—my husband had recently died—I was filled with fear about raising our daughters by myself.

A dry cleaner had opened near my home. Clutching a new customer coupon, I brought in a small stack of clothes. Standing at the counter, I glanced at the coupon again, and realized it was for men's' dress shirts. I wadded the coupon in my purse and forced myself not to cry. Men's shirts. Oh, how I wanted to have use of that coupon.

The dry cleaners was new, but everything looked old. Dirty-looking gray walls. No warmth. Was the heat even on? The place was so gloomy it looked as if no one was behind the counter. Then off to the side, I saw a woman get up from her chair. She was sitting next to an old radio, listening to Dvorak's Ninth Symphony. The music seemed so foreign in this austere setting.

I saw her name tag. June looked haggard and frail. She picked up my items, asked for my name. We exchanged minimal words, but no smiles. June gave me a receipt and I left.

I visited the cleaners several times over the next months. Each encounter was the same. Always classical music playing. June in the background. On sunny days, the place still remained cold and uninviting. The beautiful music provided a modicum of serenity. June's expression was always sad. She always wore the same drab brown, frayed sweater.

Once I dreamed about her. The dream was fragmented and illusive, like a fading pencil sketch, but we were both smiling. We exchanged no words.

Eventually and surprisingly, I began experiencing some days with glimmers of hope. The number of hopeful days continued to increase. *Maybe I could survive.* Still, there were many days shadowed with sadness. I missed my husband. Over time the loss became routine. Almost ordinary.

Thoughts of June often came to my mind. Because I had moments of something almost like happiness, I wondered about her. Was she lonely? Did she have family, friends, anybody? I hoped she did.

I decided the next time I encountered June, I would greet her by name and wish her a good day. Unfortunately, on my next trip to the dry cleaner an obnoxious customer was arguing with her, yelling about a missing shirt. June calmly referred to his receipt, indicating the items were all there. I dropped off my clothes and left. The other customer continued shouting.

The following week, on my way to the cleaners, I thought about what I might say to June. I decided to ask her a question. Something that would require a response. Nothing deep. Just two people having a light conversation.

The door to the cleaners was open; loud unrecognizable music blared from it. A young girl, chewing gum, stood behind the counter.

“Is June off today?” I asked.

“Who? Oh, she doesn’t work here. I think she moved.”

Another customer walked in. I left.

I was overcome with disappointment. Why had I waited so long to show any interest in June? I could have been friendly, maybe even offered compassion.

Through the years, on occasion, I have thought of June. Sometimes I find myself listening for classical music even in the grimmest of places.

Brush with Greatness

by J.D. Scrimgeour

At the end of summer in 1982, my family drove me from our home in New Milford, Connecticut, a town of 20,000 in the southern Berkshires and helped me unload my meager belongings—a few bags of clothes—in Carman Hall, the freshman dorm at Columbia University. While I had been to the city a few times, living in the frenzy of Manhattan was an adjustment. One time that first year my family joined me in the city to watch a basketball game, and when they returned to their car, they discovered that someone had broken into it. The thieves had stolen a couple ratty sleeping bags and a few of my siblings' high school textbooks. The following year, two students in Carman Hall found a rolled-up rug in a dumpster and carried it back to their room. When they unrolled it, they discovered a corpse inside, a man who had been shot twice.

It wasn't just the grittiness of New York in the 1980s that left me disoriented; I had to adjust to being around so many people who had lived lives so different from what I had known. As someone who had attended public schools, I was fascinated by all my classmates who had attended private boarding schools, places I'd only read about in *The Catcher in the Rye*. And Columbia was cosmopolitan. I remember going for ice cream during orientation week with students from Italy and France, hearing languages and accents that were foreign to my ears.

Another adjustment was that there were so few women. My class, the class of 1986, was the last all-male class at Columbia, a fact that I'd hardly registered when I decided to attend. I knew that Barnard was just across the street, and I had assumed that the students all took the same classes. They didn't. In order to meet the women from Barnard, I would go with friends to the campus pub where we'd drink pitchers of beer. At some point, I'd muster courage to saunter up to a stranger and ask her to dance. She usually said no, and I'd slink back to my table and pour another into my plastic cup. It seemed simply impossible to meet a woman. Even if a conversation were to begin amid the too-loud music, what was I supposed to say?

I was adrift, and even the routines that I developed were those of someone who was lonely: playing hours of pick-up basketball in Levien Gymnasium and watching

David Letterman's late-night show in the TV lounge at the end of our floor. I got a kick out of Letterman's sardonic humor, his stupid pet tricks, and his "Brush with Greatness" segments, in which members of the studio audience shared comic stories about how they crossed paths with celebrities. Having a brush with greatness may have been one of the reasons I chose to attend Columbia. Being in New York held the possibility of seeing famous people, and, in fact, I walked past Letterman himself in Midtown one afternoon as he was filming on the street.

That first semester I'd take *The Odyssey* or Euripides' plays out to the campus lawn and lie reading in the sun, hardly registering the words, dozing off more often than not. My classes all went well enough, except for the class in my declared major, Math. Before the semester started, I met with an advisor to help choose my classes. "Wouldn't you like to take a class with a world-famous mathematician?" he asked, and so I decided to take the test to place into a theoretical calculus course taught by a professor named Lipman Bers. The test was like the SAT, and I did well enough to get in.

Lipman Bers was old, from eastern Europe, with a thick moustache and a thick accent. He had us buy a book with more equations than words. Unlike my math classes in high school, we never had to turn in homework. It wasn't always clear what our homework was.

It was a small class, a dozen students in a musty room. Although a seminar table filled the space, we didn't sit around it exactly. A blackboard ran along one side of the room, and Bers would lecture in front of it, so we would sit in two rows on either side of the table, facing the board. I sat in the back corner, the table in front of me. In the front center sat Daniel, the thirteen-year-old with a bowl cut of black hair and just visible fine dark hair above his lip, the beginnings of a mustache. Daniel was, I'd heard, the captain of the U.S. math team, whatever that meant. I don't think he was enrolled at Columbia; he was just taking this one class.

It seemed like Daniel was the only person, besides Bers, who spoke in class. He'd raise a scrawny arm and ask a question that I didn't understand. Bers' eyes would light up. "That's a very interesting question, Daniel," he'd say, and the two of them would engage in a long dialogue while the rest of us—or maybe it was just me—sat in

befuddlement. Eventually, I began doodling in my notebook, rehashing my stats from my senior year baseball season or reviewing possible starting line-ups for the Knicks. I passed that class with a gentleman's C, dropped down to a more standard Calculus class the next semester, and dropped that after I bombed my first test. I wasn't going to be a math major.

I've told the story of that math class many times. It seemed a story about discovering one's limits, though, to be honest, it involved pumping my ego, too—I was good enough in math to place into that class, after all. And the audience always got a kick out of my embellished description of how lost most of us were while Daniel and Bers held their abstruse conversations.

But recently, while writing about this event, I began to wonder about Lipman Bers. He really was, of course, a world-famous mathematician. He was born in a Jewish family in Riga, Latvia, at the beginning of World War I, and his early life was colored by the political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. He spent time in St. Petersburg and Berlin. While studying math at the University in Riga, he became a political activist who argued for human rights, an orator and columnist for an underground newspaper, defending democracy in the face of Latvia's dictator. A warrant was issued for his arrest, but he escaped to Prague. He fled from Prague to Paris with his family, and then, just ahead of the Germans, he fled to the United States. Living as a refugee, he continued to work on mathematics. He eventually did math work assisting the allied war effort, and then went on to write many important papers in the field, known for their elegance and clarity.

He was admired by his students and fellow mathematicians, and a recent book, *Lipman Bers: A Life in Mathematics,* celebrates his achievements. Mathematician William Abikoff writes this about Bers:

> Lipa possessed a joy of life and an optimism that is difficult to find at this time and that is sorely missed. Those of us who experienced it directly have felt an obligation to pass it on. That, in addition to the beauty of his own work, is Lipa's enduring gift to us.

Bers had a way not just with numbers, but with words. I laughed aloud when I came across his line that “Mathematics is a collection of cheap tricks and dirty jokes,” though I don’t know enough about math to really understand it. Throughout his career, he also continued to advocate for human rights. Here’s Bers himself, speaking about human rights in 1984, when he was awarded an honorary degree from SUNY-Stonybrook:

> By becoming a human rights activist ... you do take upon yourself certain difficult obligations. ... I believe that only a truly even-handed approach can lead to an honest, morally convincing, and effective human rights policy. A human rights activist who hates and fears communism must also care about the human rights of Latin American leftists. A human rights activist who sympathizes with the revolutionary movement in Latin America must also be concerned about human rights abuses in Cuba and Nicaragua. A devout Muslim must also care about human rights of the Bahai in Iran and of the small Jewish community in Syria, while a Jew devoted to Israel must also worry about the human rights of Palestinian Arabs. And we American citizens must be particularly sensitive to human rights violations for which our government is directly or indirectly responsible, as well as to the human rights violations that occur in our own country, as they do.

Bers retired from teaching at Columbia in 1982. The class I took with him may have been the last he ever taught.

I wish I could claim that Bers and his vision, expressed so eloquently above, had an impact on me, but it’s only through the lens of time that I see more than myself in that room—those other students may have been getting a lot more from the class than I imagined. And, having learned a bit about him, I can better see Bers, a man brilliant and committed, see the spark between him and Daniel. What did I know?

It was my first semester, and I was a lost boy. I needed grounding myself to see others. I went on find circles of friends at Columbia, to find a girlfriend when I lived in

Barnard dorms my sophomore year. Eventually, I no longer needed David Letterman's late-night company. And my junior year, I started to put my own words down. I took classes with the poet Kenneth Koch and legendary literature professor Wallace Gray, early steps on the path to becoming a writer.

That same year, I took to the cold March nights to join students who blocked the doors to Hamilton Hall, a main classroom building, demanding that the University divest its financial holdings in South Africa and South African companies. Some of my friends scoffed at the protests, and their cynicism made me doubt my conviction, but, ultimately, I could do the math.

I was usually alone those nights, one of the crowd. Many of those around me were people who, I had been taught, did not look like me. I sat among them all and listened to the speeches, the music, the drumming.

I took in the world, and the world took me in.

Writing this essay, I became curious about Daniel. Perhaps discovering Bers' words, his insistence on being aware of all others, made me wonder about Daniel and his life. I googled "Daniel, mathematician, born 1970," and I discovered Daniel, a mathematician at an Ivy League university. I thought the thin face, something about the nose, looked familiar, and so I sent an email. Sure enough, it was him. He read the essay and was gracious and self-depreciating. He confirmed the bowl haircut; he didn't recall the table. He said he had read some of Bers' papers and built on his work. I hope that in my own way I'm building on Bers' work as well.

Empty Windows

by Sara Birch

"You know, Short here saw angels in his window one night. They were floating around outside, lookin' in at him. He said they were beautiful."

My stepfather came closer. I shrank back and peered at the little man he'd brought into the house. They both smelled like liquor, old sweat, and something else. Something sinister.

Short lived up to his name. A tiny man, his face, whiskers and clothes were gray, a wraith who rose from the desert floor and seeped under our door like fog. He was beaming, a pilgrim who had seen the face of God and lived to tell about it. Short was a believer, right down to his scuffed shoes and empty wallet.

We had recently moved to a rental house in Phoenix. Our living room had a television set balanced on a wobbly metal stand and two faded chaise lounges we found in the backyard. The house was dusty, battered. There were spiders in corners and stains on the walls.

The sliding glass doors were fly-spotted, greasy with fingerprints, cracked at the bottom. Beyond the doors, the lawn had turned to straw long ago, bleached by the sun. Far from my friends, my only visitors were jet streams, white billowing lines that shattered the blue as people left the desert for somewhere else.

I was seventeen years old that summer. A high school graduate, I had barely earned my diploma. A career truant, I was steeped in too much trauma to tolerate the normalcy of school. When my mother and step-father announced they were venturing west again, I had reluctantly signed on. There were no other options.

So, two months before, I had helped push an old washing machine up the ramp of a U-Haul trailer, along with beds, lamps, and clothes, the detritus of a tattered life. Cardboard boxes, once filled with memorabilia, were a reminder of a past when things weren't as crazy. We had fallen on hard times. My step-father was a drunk and a cruel man. My mother was confused, depressed, and strapped with a toddler. Her boxes held a lifetime of broken dreams. They'd decide where to go in the morning. A flip of a coin. All I knew was we were heading west. Maybe California or Arizona.

The sun rose, and it was off on another trip down Route 66 in the back of a pickup truck. I hung on to my old cat in her crate. We careened through mountain passes and across bridges that spanned canyons so vast, it was tempting to jump from the truck and fling myself over the guardrail to see if I could fly somewhere better, where men weren't cruel, mothers didn't cry, a place where hope might guide us into something brighter. The frightened cat urinated. It seeped out of the crate and into my clothes. I reeked of urine. The wind across the bow of the truck bed was chilling, stiffening my jeans.

We drove all day and into the night. Overhead were a million stars, chips in the ragged night as though it wore sequins. "At least there's that," I thought. The stars didn't care who I was, or where I was going. They danced for me the way they did years ago, when I was a little girl and wondered what hid in the folds of darkness.

When I was four years old, teachers at my Sunday School gave me a picture of Jesus in Sunday School. His likeness fit in the palm of my hand, and it glowed in the dark. I huddled deep in the closet among the shoes and dirty clothes, staring at his serene face, which was bathed in a greenish light.

When I was seven, I wrote letters to God and tossed them in the fireplace, hoping He read the smoke signals as my words rose from the chimney and into the universe.

My mother re-married when I was twelve. I left Jesus behind on the closet floor. We journeyed down empty roads with the Devil at our backs. But sometimes, the Devil walked through the front door with a guest.

Short got the extra bedroom. He slept on the floor in a blanket. I did my best to avoid him, but he'd corner me, sharing stories of angels. He saw himself as a missionary for a celestial realm, there to guide us on a pathway to Heaven. Foul breath breached yellowed teeth and struck my face in clouds. Recalling the picture of Jesus in the closet, a thirsty space in me wanted to believe in Short’s angels. I carried his words into my room like a disciple and unpacked them on my pillow each night. Nothing appeared in the windows, nor did I hear heavenly music. The only sounds were a dog

barking at dawn, and the furtive noises in a slumbering house. Nights were disappointing, and the days glared in the desert sun.

One afternoon, Short and my step-dad staggered in, beer burps tangling with onions and peanuts. They had been on a bender, days spent at the nearby Elbow Room, a hollowed-out nest for drunks and vipers.

"Short's going back home. I'm gonna put him on a Greyhound." my step-father announced.

Nodding, I went back to reading a book, feigning indifference. I figured I'd never know if angels peered in the windows now that Short would take his crusade elsewhere.

Short said goodbye, rheumy eyes dancing in his head. He left under the guidance of my step-father. They leaned inwards towards each other, shuffled out to the pick-up truck, an ark in a sea of sand.

The next day I walked four blocks to a pay phone and waited. At four o'clock, it rang.

"Hi," I said.

My boyfriend's voice was far away. About fifteen hundred miles as the crow flies. He was a nice boy who came from a good family. He had no idea what I had gone through for years. None of my friends did. In my family, we wore our secrets well.

He held me tight the night before I left. We stood on the front steps at midnight. The porch light had burned out long ago. The truck and trailer crouched in the driveway like mongrels who hungered for the road.

"I'll miss you," he whispered. A chilling wind blew through our clothes, ruffled our hair. I saw his silhouette in the dark, placed my head on his chest.

"I'll miss you, too," I said, then stepped across the threshold and closed the door on normal.

Every week, on Sunday afternoon, I stood in the phone booth, cooking in the heat. A few cars honked as they passed. I closed the door and turned my back. Wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice warm and concerned.

"Good," I lied, knowing I'd never see him again. I held the dirty phone to my mouth as we talked, wondered who else spoke into it, or thumbed through the ripped pages of the directory. What other nomads had stood here tethered to a cord that reached across the miles?

Years later, a man would follow me home from a train station in the Midwest. He'd write a song about me and the angels Short had promised. We'd sing in coffee houses, then dance in empty boxcars by the railroad tracks.

By then the angels would be just part of a story, a chapter in a life spent counting telephone poles along empty highways.

But on that day, in the summer of my seventeenth year, I opened the phone booth and stepped onto an uneven sidewalk. Looking down, I noticed weeds pushing through the cement. Weeds that would survive long after the sidewalk crumbled under the cruel sun. Weeds that flourished and never gave up, no matter how often they were stepped on.

That night, I parted the curtains in the bedroom, pretended the tears on my cheeks were milk from the moon etching stars on my face. I wondered if I looked like an angel through the pane to seekers who passed in the darkness.

Dinner 1959

by Robert D. Kirvel

Dinner is at 6 p.m. sharp. That doesn't mean 6:05.

Having your dinner requires sitting at the big table in your designated chair. Otherwise no food until tomorrow morning. Period.

Table rules are few but firm. Eat your vegetables. Clean your plate. Sit still until you are excused.

No one says anything when Mother cooks liver and onions for dinner. No one likes liver and onions, but Mother says a doctor tells in a magazine how liver and onions are good for you, so hush and eat what's on your plate.

Anyone still having questions about dinner rules, go read that *Reader's Digest*® article on benefits—for young'uns (sic) especially—when American Families eat together at the table. Unless you have something against family unity, sticking to a schedule, manners, improved communication, and greater respect for others? Very well then.

No one is worried when Mother first announces Aunt Cee-Cee, regarded as the toughest nut in the family tree, will be arriving for dinner. At least no one says out loud he or she is upset because, looking on the bright side, it's a chance for everybody to work on improved communication with an elder, isn't it? Cee-Cee is driving all the way from Chicago by herself and will be spending a few days and nights, so everybody just relax.

One person is uncomfortable after realizing Aunt Cee-Cee and Uncle Walter—who drives his big, new car about ninety miles an hour on back roads and often shows up for dinner just in the nick of time—will likely be sharing a meal at the same table tonight. The two have not spoken to one another for "eons." So, we'll just have to see.

If Cee-Cee is a tough nut, her opinion of brother Walter is hard to fault. She thinks Walter is a loud and obnoxious jerk who is uninformed to the point of ignorance and is also a sexist, arrogant, egotistical, bigoted womanizer. Cee-Cee is sometimes wrong, but not always.

Yes, Aunt Cee-Cee and Uncle Walter both make it to the table in time for dinner. They take their chairs but do not look at one another. Bad sign.

At least one person at the dinner table is uncomfortable when Uncle Walter starts in on “them boogies” again at dinnertime, describing for the umpteenth time how those people is always sucking on cigarettes and slurping sickening-sweet bottles of coca cola through straws for lunch at the lunch counter during lunch break at the factory where Uncle Walter works as a security guard. Uncle Walter does not consider cigarettes and cokes a proper lunch for people, and he wishes there were a law, but then them boogies aren’t normal people, so ….

One person at the table, the youngest family member who adores his fourth-grade teacher, wonders what his teacher, an articulate black woman in her forties, would say if she were present at the family dinner table tonight and heard Uncle Walter talk about “boogies” in 1959 America.

Two people at the dinner table squirm when Uncle Walter tells his two young nephews at the table how he intends to teach them how to “walk like an Indian” through the woods. Walking silently on the forest floor out back behind the house, he means, so as not to scare animals away you want to hunt. Like an Indian. Because Uncle Walter claims he is descended from silent-walking Indians, though no one in the family other than Uncle Walter wants to hunt or has ever heard anything about, or makes claims to, Native American lineage resulting in a predisposition to slip silently through the woods. Still, Uncle Walter swears loudly he is one-seventh Indian. Not one fourth or one eighth. One seventh.

Three people at the dinner table become fretful when Aunt Cee-Cee directs a question to her brother, Uncle Walter, a question that changes the subject. “Are you still humping that spic squaw?” This is a triple-loaded question calculated to get a reaction because it is pregnant with not-so-subtle references to Walter’s life-long promiscuity, problematic claim to Indian blood, and racism directed at persons with ancestry other than his own, but especially at people of color, other than Native Americans, whom Walter has never thought of as people of color.

Many adults at the table are afraid Uncle Walter will answer Aunt Cee-Cee by bringing up one of several whispered-about facts concerning her lifestyle. This is fertile

territory. For instance, Cee-Cee sells illegal but highly profitable French postcards (you know, porn, some whisper) from behind the counter of her smoke-shop cubicle on a high-traffic downtown Chicago street corner located in a high-crime neighborhood. Also, her shop is the only one on the street that has never been robbed, a remarkable immunity to crime that is not luck but owing to the watchful eyes of Men in Blue with whom Cee-Cee is on the most familiar personal terms and to whom she regularly makes “cash donations.”

No one in the family brings up Sputnik. No one brings up Cee-Cee’s “mobster” boyfriend connections, or Walter’s crazy driving habits in his brand-new, green, Pontiac Bonneville coup, which will not remain pristine for long plus he can’t afford it on his piddling salary, but don’t ask, or how Dad gets peevish after spending time around Uncle Walter or Aunt Cee-Cee, let alone both, or Mother’s inclinations to strictly Biblical (nonmetaphorical) interpretations of Jonah and the Whale and The Last Supper.

All at the table, kids included, are relieved when Mother stands up before Uncle Walter or Aunt Cee-Cee can say another word and announces, “That’s enough!” while excusing the young ones from the dinner table even before dessert is served, though the kids will get their dessert later. Dessert is a chocolate-frosted, triple-layer, made-from-scratch, marble cake over which Uncle Walter, remaining at the table, will ladle cold gravy while eyeing Cee-Cee and claiming he loves gravy on cake—*always* has—just to get Cee-Cee’s goat.

Contracts

by J. Malcolm Garcia

Johnny wants to slam his burrito in my face. Wants to, will do—hard to read—but I'm leaning toward will do.

You took my job. Why don't you take my lunch, too? Johnny says.

He's drunk, voice slurring in an ocean of saliva, jaws loose on their hinges. I just wanted a quick lunch. This little burrito joint on the corner of Leavenworth and Ellis, its grimed windows steamed and marked with the finger drawings of the owner's small children, usually provides me a relaxed place to take a mid-day breather from work. Until Johnny showed up, I'd sat blissfully by myself.

He always drank but I never knew him to get this wound up. Of course, I'd not fired him before. We sat in my office two days ago, his eyes bloodshot and rheumy, pigeons on the window sill, pacing back and forth in their cooing, head-bobbing way, witnesses to the hammer coming down on a guy I'd lied for and promoted.

Johnny, I said, you know how this works. When state budget cuts come down, I have to lay off staff. My way of doing things is to let go those people I think can find work. You can find work. You can get another job if you chill out on the drinking.

In the last three years, I've laid off more staff than I want to think about. Fired. That's how it feels to them. The look in their eyes. The sense of betrayal. The tears. All the self-respect they had clawed back into their lives gone in the two or three sentences it takes for me to tell them. What did someone who had spent years on the street have other than the minimum-wage job I gave them? A room at a residential hotel, no kitchen, bathroom down the hall, and a tab at some restaurant that extended them credit, that's what. I laid them off and saw them back on the street in no time, back to what they'd known, back to the sidewalks, the doorways, the homeless shelters, in line with everyone else for whatever benefit they might be eligible, general assistance, SSI, unemployment, blending in with one another in an undistinguished mass of ill-fitting thrift-store clothes in a poor version of a nine-to-five routine, as if they'd never left. In a way, I suppose, they hadn't.

This because of yesterday? Johnny asked.

Yes, I thought, it is. But instead I lied one more time to spare him the truth and to spare me his denials.

No, it's about the budget. It's about who I think can find a job, I said.

I extended my hand. He wiped his eyes and ignored it. He didn't look at me. I knew he didn't believe me. Too bad for him he ran into Tim McGraw, the guy I answer to. McGraw talked to me and now here we are. However, the state had cut a homeless grant. That was no lie.

Is that it? Johnny asked.

I nodded and he left.

I'm the program director of the men's homeless shelter for Out of the Rain, a social services agency in San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

I answer to McGraw, the executive director. The shelter stands on a block of Leavenworth Street beside boarded store fronts, convenience stores stockpiled with cheap wine and cans of Dinty Moore beef stew, residential hotels and other social service agencies. On the first of each month, I see guys in need of booze to silence the voices inside their heads standing alongside your average, no-voices homeless alcoholics shelling out 99 cents for half-gallon jugs of Thunderbird while the speed freaks do the jitterbug, fried-nerves tweak on the sidewalks, day-tripping out-of-control marionettes fumbling for their crack pipes. Police cars coast their slow, bored, welfare-check-payday-crawl as officers glance over people—who are all suddenly hands visible or hands and arms at their sides or hurriedly walking away, message: I'm clean officer, I'm clean—looking for a drug dealer, an informant, someone in the middle of a score, whoever they can find. Fuck the drunks, that's just a vagrancy rap. Drug busts mean promotion.

Guys, young and old, their hair askew as if charged with electricity, scratch their arms raw, and they're not displaying their latest prison tattoos, no, they're showing dealers their track marks, their need. Slick as slick, unruffled in fake leather jackets, the dealers at first pretend not to see the scratchers or the black lines etched down their arms like bruised highways. No, the dealers wait to see if 5 O circles back. Then they motion to the scratchers, digging into their shirt pockets for bags of the white stuff.

When the high wears off, the drunks, the voice hearers and the scratchers lurch and stagger to my shelter, like dead people risen from the sidewalks, broke and hallucinating, until they piss themselves and fall asleep or start a fight and we throw them out only to see them come back five minutes later begging for mercy, begging for money, flying off the handle again in a stream of invective and threats, a kind of poetic assault with the word motherfucker as the driving force.

My contract requires me to hire the homeless, the idea being that people with problems can help other people with problems. I select my staff from the few among them who get clean, or, short of that, like Johnny, keep it together despite their vices. If nothing else, they know their world.

One time, on my way to a meeting, I saw a shelter client holding a knife to a volunteer's throat. Johnny was on duty. I paused, considered the knife. Serrated edge. Maybe a Gerber, I didn't know. The volunteer's eyes were so wide I half expected to see planets orbiting around them. He stayed in the shelter and was guaranteed a bed if he worked a few hours signing people in for the night. He had his hands raised above his head and sweat waxed his face and he could not have sat stiller if he tried.

What's going on? I asked.

Nothing, Johnny said.

Monday afternoon mood swing?

Something like that.

You got this covered?

Yeah, Johnny said.

Do I know you? I asked the guy with the knife.

He looked at me, eyebrows puckered in thought.

I don't think so.

We're good here, Johnny said.

OK, I said and left for my meeting.

When I returned an hour later, the guy with the knife was gone. The volunteer, Johnny told me, had quit. I wonder why, I said, and we both laughed. I thought of asking again what that had been about but I wasn't in the mood to give credence to an answer I knew would make no sense. Johnny handled it, no one died, all good.

So, months later, when the state of California relieved me of funds that covered much of my staff's salaries, I had choices to make. The way I saw it, if a drinker like Johnny who, no matter how lit he gets can still make it to work on time, supervise the shelter and chill-out a guy with a knife, well then he has a chance—I'm not saying a great one—of finding another job. That person, according to the skewed logic I engage in, should be laid off.

I want you to have my burrito, Johnny says again.

I'm trying to keep calm but I'm getting a little PO'd. How many times did Johnny show up to work smelling of booze? How many times did I talk to him about it? He used mouthwash like that'd fool anyone. I looked the other way. I considered his drinking a perk I let him have because no matter what I could rely on him. He kept the train running, so to speak. But staff and clients all knew he drank. They didn't say anything but they knew, and they knew I knew and when I caught people nursing a bottle of Thunderbird in the shelter and told them to toss it or leave, they'd say, rightfully, What about Johnny? I had no good answer.

Johnny came to Out of the Rain a year ago for a clothing referral. He wore an army fatigue jacket too big for his slim body. His graying hair hadn't been combed in a while and his missing front teeth left a gap in his mouth that made him hard to understand when he spoke. He told me he'd been in the Army, stationed in the Philippines. One morning, he was called into the office of his CO and told he was being discharged. The base was closing, he was no longer needed, the CO said. Johnny caught a flight out that night with nothing but his duffel bag. Twenty-four hours later, he landed in San Francisco, the closest U.S. airport to the Philippines, or so he claimed.

I didn't believe a word. The Army doesn't discharge soldiers because a base closes. Johnny screwed up somehow. Maybe it was his drinking, I don't know. If I've learned anything, I've learned this: Don't believe what anyone on the street tells you. They have their secrets. They're not all bad or all crazy or all addicts. I've met more than a few who are homeless only because they need a job, that's it. But even they have their secrets, their unbelievable tales to fill in the blanks of what they don't want you to know. I let Johnny have his story. I presumed he'd lost everything else.

While he stayed at the shelter, Johnny volunteered. He put mats on the floor, mopped the bathrooms, made coffee. When one of the shelter staff quit, I offered Johnny the job.

I really want you to have it, Johnny says again, tossing the burrito from hand-to-hand as if it were too hot to hold. I'll give you a fork and everything so you don't mess yourself.

Johnny takes a step toward me, trips, regains his balance. I hope something will distract him. People coming in for lunch. An announcement that someone's order is ready. Something. To think that only a few months ago, I lied my way to hell to get Johnny the shelter supervisor job. At the time, the supervisor had been a guy from Texas we all called Tex. He seemed as normal and middle class as a bank teller until one day he decided to resume his crack habit and I never saw him again. That created a job opening. I wanted Johnny to fill it.

However, I had hoops to jump through. The contract didn't allow me to appoint people to administrative jobs. Johnny and anyone else interested in the supervisor position had to appear before a three-member hiring committee made up of homeless men and women elected by people in the shelter to, the contract read, give the homeless served by the agency a say in staffing. That in turn, or so the thinking went, would teach them responsibility. They'd be, in contract-speak, "invested" in the program and their own "outcomes." The contract emphasized that the director could in no way influence the committee. I could sit in on interviews and help facilitate but I could not participate in discussions about the applicants or vote.

I posted the position and asked a homeless volunteer, a guy named Ross Hitchcock, to coordinate the election of a hiring committee. Ross grew up in Boston and had a thick, New England accent. He had no teeth and when he wasn't talking, his mouth flattened into a thin line above his chin. He schemed and had a racket unique to anyone I knew. For several hours a day, he'd stand beside a parking meter and flag drivers searching for a parking space. He'd then offer to get them an hour on the meter in exchange for a quarter. If they agreed, he'd withdraw a popsicle stick from his pocket, jam it in the meter, crank it up and down and watch the numbers flip until they reached

sixty minutes. Pleased and amused by his ingenuity, drivers would often give Ross additional change. Within a few hours, he'd make $100.

Ross announced the election that night at the shelter. Whoever wanted to run wrote their name on a piece of paper tacked by the front door. More than a few people thought the candidate sheet was the sign-in list for a bed. As a result, we had many clients unaware they were running for the committee. Three days later, I left ballots with the names of dozens of candidates by the front desk. Completed ballots were put in a box. The three candidates who received the most votes won. If they showed up for the interviews, we had a hiring committee. If they didn't, we held another election.

The day of the vote, I called Johnny into my office and told him I wanted him to be the new super.

You can't go before the hiring committee with alcohol on your breath, I warned him.

I don't drink when I'm working.

You drink and everyone knows it, period. If you want the job, don't come here smelling of booze.

At first, only Johnny put in for the job. Then the day before the application deadline, one other staffer applied. Billy White. He came to the shelter about the same time as Johnny. He had a wide, open face with a mole on his right eyelid that seemed not to bother him but always distracted me when we spoke. Guys would hit him up for money and he'd give what little he had and then act surprised when no one paid him back. If someone said, Hey, Billy, I like that sweater, he'd lend it to them but of course he never got it back, and I'd see him at night in line waiting for the shelter to open, his arms crossed, shivering, the hurt expression of a child who knew he had been taken advantage but didn't understand how or why writ large across his face. I hired Billy to get him away from the piranhas feeding off him.

He did not make my life easy. He never got to work on time because he insisted on standing up to the indignities of his life as if now that he had a job he could finally assert himself against those who had abused his trust. One time, he blamed his tardiness on his landlord. That morning, he refused to pay rent after he complained about the halls being dirty. The landlord threatened to evict him. Billy then called

lawyers to sue the owner. Then he asked other lawyers to sue those lawyers for not taking his case. When they refused, he walked to the *San Francisco Chronicle* to ask a reporter to write about the dirty halls. He demanded a meeting with the editor. He waited a long time before his request was denied. Had they not made him wait, he explained, he wouldn't have been late.

I kept him. Firing Billy would have been like kicking a puppy. Out of the Rain existed for the Billys of the world, and the Johnnys and Texs too; people who, we should concede, will never fit into the five-day workweek. Unless, of course, our work ethic changes and allows for people who talk to other people none of us can see, people with 24-7 drinking and drug problems, people like Billy who obsess on the smallest slight, people with college degrees who look good on paper, but have troubles, too, and have ended up on the street among all the other dispossessed in an equal-opportunity smorgasbord of triaged men and women, unable to pass the entrance exam to the American Dream.

About two weeks after Tex vanished, Johnny and Billy appeared before a hiring committee made up of clients I knew well:

Oscar, a speed freak, a tall, lean man in his late thirties, was on one of his periodic sober runs. He could sing like nothing else mattered in a voice that should have had Barry Gordy knocking at our door.

Gill Harlee, a guy with a barrel-chest laugh and a round, bowling-ball stomach, and an explosive temper. A meaningless disagreement on something as simple as the weather could set him off. Good mood or bad, he always shouted as if he was trying to make himself heard above insurmountable noise.

Marcela Brooks, an elderly woman who came in every morning for coffee and whom we all called Granny. Depending on the day, she'd tell us she was 78 or 90. She wrapped herself in at least three coats and used a wheelchair like a walker, hobbling behind it and pausing every so often to catch her breath, her lined face canyoned with exhaustion.

On a Wednesday afternoon, the committee interviewed Johnny first. We sat in a circle by a closet where we stored the mats. We held a list of ten questions. The sun shone and I could see seagulls circling above a YMCA at the corner of Golden Gate and Leavenworth. Johnny took a chair next to mine. I smelled the alcohol on his breath.

First question:

Oscar: What would you do if the shelter was full and someone needed a place to stay at two in the morning? Would you turn them away?

No, Johnny answered. He'd find them a spot even if it meant sitting in a chair. Granny asked a similar question about a family that showed up in the middle of the night. Johnny said he wouldn't bother calling other shelters. He understood we weren't a family shelter but at that hour a family would need rest, especially the kids. He'd take them in, too.

God bless the children, Granny said, and then launched into a story about how she was denied shelter by Salvation Army because she refused to take a shower.

That wasn't right, she said. A shelter's not supposed to turn people away. I'm an old woman.

After we finish here, Granny, you and I will talk about it, I said.

It wasn't right what happened to me, Granny insisted.

I turned to Oscar and Gill.

Let's continue, I said.

What about me? Granny asked.

We'll talk, I said.

Second question:

Gill: What would you do if. . .Gill stopped and put the list of questions aside. Instead, he asked Johnny if he'd kick someone out of the shelter if they were caught drinking or using. Before he could answer, Gill demanded, What about you? Would you 86 yourself?

What do you mean?

You come to work drunk.

I don't drink here, Johnny said.

Gill smirked.

Do you attend AA, Johnny? Oscar asked.

No, Johnny said.

Would you go to AA if you get this job?

I don't see why I would, Johnny said. I don't drink at work.

Let's stick to the questions, I said, raising the list.

Gill made a face and his hand shook with mounting anger but he didn't explode. I appreciated his self-control. Still, he'd done some damage.

Billy showed up fifteen minutes late. He couldn't find his keys, he explained. As excuses went, that was so acceptably mainstream, he left me speechless.

First question:

Oscar: If it's raining outside, would you open the shelter earlier than usual?

Billy pondered. He wanted to now the situation of each person seeking shelter. Had they ever been 86'd? Were they intoxicated? Were other shelters available to them? The committee made up answers to his hypotheticals until I intervened, contract be damned.

Billy, just answer. It's a yes or no question.

Then yes, he said, although I think these questions need to be more specific.

When we finished interviewing Billy, I walked him to the door, closing it behind him.

What do you all think? I said.

Johnny, the committee agreed, was the better applicant. He answered the questions with common sense. They'd seen him on the job. They knew he was reliable. Billy, they worried, would complicate the simplest problem. They worried he'd obsess over one task at the expense of others. However, Johnny's drinking disturbed them more. Whatever else could be said about Billy, he wouldn't be drunk when he enforced the rules about alcohol and drugs.

Why do you allow Johnny to work with alcohol on his breath? Oscar asked me.

I've always wondered that myself, Gill said.

I didn't answer. My overriding principle: make a bad situation less bad. Johnny was my less bad.

Because we're here for people with problems and despite his he works out better than most.

They didn't disagree. However, whatever their own problems, Oscar, Gill and Granny understood hypocrisy. They voted for Billy.

Now, are we going to talk about me getting thrown out of Salvation Army? Granny asked.

Billy, I knew, would be a disaster. I needed a plan. Crisis fueled quick thinking. I reminded the committee that according to the contract, the Executive Director had to sign off on all new hires. I knew McGraw wouldn't care who I hired. I just had to tell him.

I didn't. Not yet. Instead, I called the committee back for a meeting the next day and I bald-faced lied to them. I told them that I'd met with McGraw and he had recommended hiring both Billy and Johnny. He wanted one of them to supervise the day program, the other the night shelter. It would provide for better coverage to split the position into two.

Granny and Gill liked the idea. Only Oscar objected.

What's the point of having a hiring committee if McGraw's just going to make his own decision? he asked.

He didn't decide, I said. He just gave us another idea. Think about. This will open up two staff positions.

Oscar, I knew, wanted a job. It served my purpose to dangle the possibility now. I couldn't tell if he picked up on my not so subtle hint, but he didn't push his objection. The contract could talk about homeless people "participating in decision making" all it wanted but everyone knew who was in charge—McGraw. The committee had its say. By channeling McGraw and offering a bribe, I had mine.

As I knew, McGraw didn't care. He thought it was a little cumbersome having two supervisors but if that's what I wanted, fine. I gave him some mumbo jumbo about how it was an example of the agency taking a job opening and creating more than just one opportunity. He gave that laugh again and slapped me on the shoulder. He liked how

that sounded. Funders would eat it up. McGraw got his talking point. The committee got Billy. I got Johnny. Win-win-win.

I gave Johnny days and Billy nights. There wouldn't be much to do at night once the lights went out at eight, which I thought would suit Billy best. Johnny worked out as I knew he would. Boozy breath but fine. Billy, however, was Billy.

I'm sorry I'm late, Billy would apologize to me. The bus was running behind schedule. And I talked to the driver about how that wasn't right, and he talked back to me. So, I wouldn't get off until he apologized.

I'd listen. I always listened. I found Billy's outrage at the everyday insults the rest of us take for granted somehow endearing. Soon, however, the tardiness got out of hand and I suspended him for two days, but it didn't make an impression. Finally, I dropped him down to shelter staff again. He didn't object. OK, he said. The dejected look on his face told me he didn't understand how I couldn't appreciate his need to confront every disparaging moment. I didn't.

He was so preoccupied with standing up for his wounded dignity that the demands of being a supervisor had, I think, become just one more humiliation. Whatever he felt didn't matter. I got what I'd wanted all along. Johnny was now in charge. No one asked me about filling Billy's position.

About two weeks later, McGraw called me into his office. He sat at a long table strewn with files and spreadsheets, glasses perched at the tip of noise. A computer blinked on and off behind him and a shelf behind his head held books about time management. I knocked on his open door. He looked at me, dragged a hand through his mop of blonde hair and laughed a-here-we-are-in-the-shit-storm laugh that I knew couldn't be good. He had been an advocate for welfare recipients when he first got into social work. Then, he earned a master's degree in public administration. Now, in his mid-thirties, he ran an agency with a million-dollar budget. His time now was consumed with grant writing. Advocacy through fundraising, he often said.

He pointed to a chair. I sat down. Then he got to it. Another budget cut. This time the state had decided not to renew a homeless adult program grant that, among other

things, covered some of my staff's salaries. I'd have to cut some positions and combine others.

Start at the top, McGraw said. Higher the salary the better.

I knew what that meant. In the pecking order of high salaries I was first, Johnny second. Well, I knew I wasn't going to lay myself off. McGraw looked at me over his glasses and gave that laugh again.

I saw Johnny this morning. He smelled like a brewery. You have to draw some lines.

If I draw lines, I'll fire everybody.

Johnny came to work drunk. There's your line.

In the burrito joint, Johnny takes another unsteady step toward my table. I look at the guy behind the register. He's adding up receipts and doesn't notice a thing. Whatever's going to happen I guess, will happen. I push back in my chair but remain seated. If I stand, Johnny might think I'm gearing up for fight. Don't be the aggressor. De-escalate. Where'd I learn that? Some workshop for staff development. Strange what goes through your head when you think a burrito is about to wallpaper your face.

I don't want it, Johnny, I say again.

He sways and grabs the back of a chair. He drops the burrito on a table and sits sloppily in the chair. Stares at the floor, chin against his chest, arms loose at his sides as if something essential has left him. Saliva hangs off his mouth in a thin line and he closes his eyes until I assume he's nodded out.

Johnny, I say. Johnny.

I smell it before I notice Johnny pissing himself, a slow, wet stain unfurling across his crotch.

Johnny, Jesus, wake up!

I get up and shake his shoulder. He opens his eyes slowly, looks lost, confused. He closes them again and I keep shaking him.

Johnny.

He turns his head and stares bleary-eyed, sagging deeper in his chair.

What? he says, his voice burdened by the effort to speak, rising out of his throat in a cracked whisper.

Before I can say anything, he presses a hand against the table and rises seemingly half asleep. He reels over the table like a bop bag, turns slowly and walks out stiff-legged, arms out for balance, angling through the open door to the street. Through the fogged windows, I see the outline of his body pass in staggering steps. The odor of piss rises off his chair. I was sure I'd take a burrito to the face. I hadn't expected it to end this way. In the words of my contract, a positive outcome. Staring out the door, I remind myself that Johnny was just another layoff, nothing personal. He brought it on himself. I covered for him until I no longer could but as much as I want to, I can't rationalize away the guilt I feel wrapped tight and tucked away deep inside me and out of reach most days. I stand beside his chair a moment longer, then reach for the burrito and drop it into my coat pocket. Someone in the shelter will eat it.

*Author's note: The names of people and the agency have been changed to protect privacy.

Colonus

by John Donaghy

After Father died, Mother did not pine away; hers was not that kind of desolation. She lived for twenty-four more years. During that quarter century she elaborated a glittering vision of her marriage and fixed it in a set of canonical anecdotes which she told us over and over. We were to understand that she and Father enjoyed a passion that could only have developed long ago among people who were more vital and closer to the source of life than our own anemic generation with its provisional, little loves.

On her kitchen table she kept a pile of old letters in tattered and yellowing envelopes: they were all the letters she and my father had exchanged from their courtship onwards. "I don't know what to do with all these," she would always say, "I don't know *who* would be interested in them," and I always said, who knows why, "I'd love to take care of them for you." And she: "I don't know. There's awfully personal stuff in here. Some of these are the letters of a man who is totally *gone* on a woman. Maybe I'll have them cremated with me. And yet I hate to do that, someone might find them very *interesting*."

Within that pile of letters there was a smaller bundle bound with a purple ribbon. These were the letters that chronicled The Argument. The Argument was the central story in the canon, the one that she told us more often than any other: She had been head of pediatric nursing at the Mass General. He was doing his residency there. They had been going together for months. She did not drink and flirt like the other girls. He was crazy about her, and she was crazy about him. He would call her every night at ten. When he was away, he would write to her every day. Sometimes twice. He had to go away for three weeks. He was resting; he had been overworking. But he missed her. He had to give a lecture in Montreal. He had arranged to take her with him; he had arranged for them to share a hotel room. He had acted as though it were a *fait accompli*. He had assumed and had not asked. Well, she was *furious*. She wanted to know if this was his habit. She wanted to know if he thought she was like other girls. She would most certainly *not* go with him to Montreal or anywhere else for that matter. He was hurt. He behaved as though he were angry. She would have none of *that*. She

would not listen to him. They were estranged for days, oh, it might have been two weeks; she heard not one word. Then one night at ten o'clock, the phone call came. She had won. It was a glorious love affair. It lasted a lifetime.

In advanced old age when the multiplying frailties of nature send most people collapsing into themselves, Mother's vigor seemed divorced from her flesh. In her eighties and nineties she became tiny, bowed, seamed with wrinkles, dry as a cricket, but she stacked her own wood and pushed her own reel mower and took as many trips to the landfill as she could. She amazed people with her wit and her activity, and she took so much pride in their amazement that she developed a kind of geriatric bravado. At ninety-three she stood on the very top of her step ladder—the "This Is Not A Step" step—in order to prune her lilacs. The ladder was on uneven ground and it began to tip, "It was going to take me through the kitchen window," she said, "So I jumped." She hit the ground and rolled, breaking nothing but straining her coccyx. She refused the doctor. It only hurt, she said, whenever she tried to lift something heavier than thirty pounds.

I could not help thinking that she might grow in energy as she shriveled in mass until eventually, a century from now perhaps, she'd whirl up into the hungry vortex of herself and disappear. But at the age of ninety-seven she began to fail. Her eyesight grew worse; her hearing began to go; her gait became unsteady; her driving became lethal. She tore out the undercarriage of her car by driving, at speed, into a ditch. She emerged from that accident unscathed, angry and, she claimed, blameless. It would never have happened had the town made that ditch more visible. As soon as the car was fixed, she visited my brother's law offices for a quick consultation. Leaving his parking lot, she stomped on the accelerator rather than the brake. She shot across the road, over the sidewalk and down a stretch of lawn before coming to rest wedged under someone's front porch. Again she was unhurt though this time she conceded that the incident had quite taken her breath away. Still, it was the sort of thing that could happen to *anyone.*

My brother appropriated her car keys. One of her neighbors, an extraordinarily kind woman, offered to drive her whenever she needed a ride. But Mother did not want

to be driven. She did not like the neighbor who seemed to want to become a *friend.* She had gone so far as to send a *birthday* card. God. Mother was *not* going to saddle herself with *that* bit of inanity*.* Her errands were her own damned business, and she could do them *herself*. She discovered a spare set of car keys, and after a few weeks, when the car had been repaired from its collision with the porch, she drove it to the grocery store.

She left early in the morning so that she would arrive while the parking lot was still empty. She did not like parking lots. When they were busy, they confused her, and because she feared that by the time she was ready to leave, the store lot would be swarming with other vehicles, she parked strategically—nose up to a short, ornamental hedge beyond which she could see, reassuringly, the sidewalk and the street. It was clever of her to do so, she told us later, for when she emerged with her groceries, the parking lot had become a *madhouse*. Cars were pulling *into* spaces and pulling *out* of spaces and driving around *looking* for spaces, bumper to bumper like *salmon* in a *stream.* There were people everywhere walking as though they hadn't a care in the world right where she had to drive. She didn't think it would be quite *safe* to back out into all that confusion. Instead, she put the car in drive and bulled her way through the shrubbery, across the sidewalk, and into two cars which were parallel parked in the street. These were an unexpected impediment. They had not been there when she had chosen her parking space, but she found that if she applied the gas, she could push them slowly outward, and so force her way between them and gain the open road and freedom and, eventually, home.

She suspected that some busybody might have seen her and assumed she was breaking the law. She was preemptive. She called the grocery store. "Hello," she said, "This is Frances Donaghy. I'm afraid I may have damaged some of your lovely plantings as I was leaving your parking lot." When the police showed up on Horn of the Moon, she was a very fragile, very old lady. "The officer was a *woman* and she was *very nice*. She asked if she could bring my car keys to anyone who might keep them for me. I didn't want to argue, and I won't go into it now, but *apparently* I did more damage than I had *thought*. I told her that it was all right and that I wouldn't drive again."

*

She never did. She stopped going out. She had no friends to visit and none who would visit her. Occasionally my brother drove her to the doctor, but otherwise she occupied herself at home as she always had when we were young—reading, listening to the CBC, cleaning the house, and brooding on her children. We were the mediators of her image and the guardians of her legacy, and yet, she knew, we were not true believers. She tried and tried to set us straight. She explained to each one of us, many, many times, that we were Superior People because everything she had ever done had been for *us*. Our childhood had been an idyll, really, the rococo dream of Watteau or Fragonard. She painted it for us. She put herself in the foreground as a set of allegorical figures: Wisdom, Discipline, and Benignity in stately dance, draperies billowing under a sky piled high with summer clouds. Her children were two happy little shepherds and two happy little shepherdesses piping on a distant hillside. We, the perfect offspring of a perfect union, had enjoyed a perfect upbringing.

The hardest point to revise was my sister Peigi. Mother had scrubbed and scrubbed her conscience, but some shadow of Peigi's childhood years—years of unbroken rancor and derision, of slaps and blows and hair-pulling and starvation—returned and returned like Lady M's damned spot. Part of the problem was that Peigi, who now lived far away in Oregon, had become very gracious. She had kept in touch. She called regularly. She did her best to see that Mother was as comfortable as she could be, that she was on the right amount of the right medications, that she would be able, if she chose, to die in her own home. Whenever she visited the east coast, Peigi stayed for a day or two on the Horn of the Moon even though the proximity of all those childhood artifacts could give her spells of dizziness and nausea which made Mother worry that she might be in ill *health.* Mother couldn't *understand* it. Peigi had always been such a *robust* child. In fact, we all had been *ridiculously* healthy. We were never sick at *all.*

"Well," Mother said to me one day, "your sister is just a *fantastic* mother, and she has worked very, very hard. Her *boys* are doing well; she has a great reputation where she works. *Wherever* she's worked. She's really *done* something with her life." This was delivered earnestly, reproachfully, as though she suspected I wanted to accuse Peigi of sloth and bad parenting. "I know," I said. She was silent for a moment of dramatic

consideration and then: “You know, I think she must have been bi-polar when she was in high school.”

It did no good to point out that bi-polar disorder is not like mono or that Peigi is essentially the same person she always was. “Oh, come *on*. She is absolutely *not* the same person. She is *completely* different. *No* one could have predicted how she would turn out. She needed a *very* firm hand. She calls me every day. I don’t know *why*. I suspect it’s *good* for her.”

This Grand Revision was somewhat undermined by the way she sought, as her widowhood advanced, to reclaim her ancient powers of command. Increasing frailty gave her a leverage she had not enjoyed for decades. She called us more and more frequently asking us to drive up to Horn of the Moon and help her with one thing or another.

We always went, and when we arrived, we discovered that help consisted not so much in accomplishing anything practical as in doing exactly what we were told. She was particular and insistent. She could take over a minute explaining *exactly* how to empty a barrel of weeds over the pasture fence. We were to do what we were asked and not one thing more; we were absolutely *not* to freelance. One late August day, after I had stacked a couple of cords of wood for her, I noticed that the catch on her wood stove door had rusted and seized up over the summer. I got a hammer and was just about to tap it free when she came into the room and asked, “What are you *doing*?” in a tone that suggested she had caught me with my hand in the till.

“I’m fixing your stove,” I said.

“That’s Pede’s job.”

“I’m right here. It’ll take less than a second.”

“You will *not* touch my stove with that hammer. You’ll shatter the whole damned thing.”

“Fuck you,” I thought graciously and tapped it anyway. Immediately the catch released and the handle was freed.

“See?” I said. “All better.”

“Thank-you,” she said crisply.

Gradually we became specialists, performing only those tasks she suspected we found most irksome. For me it was driving her places, especially to her hairdresser who lived forty minutes away and who, as he worked on her wisps, flattered her so relentlessly that she was compelled to disavow every unctuous word of it with breathless, elaborately artificial modesty all the way home. For Pede she reserved requests that were irritatingly vague or burdensomely trivial or which frustrated action. She might call him late at night to inform him that she thought she was having a medical emergency but that she didn't want to go to the hospital; he was not to worry, and could be bring her more hand cream in the morning? But it was Betsy who stirred up Mother's old blood lust. Betsy had always been the most responsible of us, the most easily moved to guilt; her vulnerability made her irresistible.

Mother wanted Betsy to touch her, to bathe her, to drive up to Vermont from Massachusetts to wash her hair. I once arrived at the Horn of the Moon unannounced in the middle of one of these shampooing sessions. Mother was standing at the kitchen sink and Betsy stood over her, gently massaging suds into her scalp, a pitcher of lukewarm water at her elbow. It sounded as though Mother were directing her own waterboarding. She groaned and spluttered, nothing Betsy did was *right:* she was being too *rough*; she was *missing* places; she wasn't getting all the soap *out;* she wasn't using enough water; she was using too *much* water; couldn't she see she was getting soap in her eyes? Did Betsy think Mother had asked her to come all this way to *drown* her in her own *sink*?

Betsy looked at me over the top of Mother's head and rolled her eyes. Mother did not immediately notice me; she was too lost in whatever was going on between the two of them. It wasn't until Betsy was gently patting her hair dry with a towel, that she saw me, and then she lifted her head and stared like a lioness disturbed on a carcass. "Now," she said to Betsy, "Upstairs for a bath."

Mother's hunger for attention was terrible. She could not find nourishment in the world as it is. She wanted us near her all the time, but as soon as we got close, she erased us. She could eat only the promise-crammed air of her own fantasies. She conjured an illusory empire out of darkness visible: Pandæmonium, palace and city,

seat of power to rival the towers of Heaven, the trickster kingdom of narcissism, the old fabric of wind and shadow and wish and denial.

It is a week before Thanksgiving 2012. Mother is ninety-eight years old. It is early in the morning and the sun has not yet risen. The month has been unseasonably warm, but today is raw and windy up in the hills on Horn of the Moon. Overnight the ruts have frozen in the narrow road that runs by her place and gusts of snow sweep down the mountain, through the stunted upland orchards and over her little farmhouse. Today she is paying her bills. She works at the little kitchen table under a dim lamp writing checks and addressing envelopes in her quivery hand. She has boiled a sauce pan of coffee for herself on the woodstove, the door of which she leaves precariously open because she "likes to keep an eye on it". A tinkling mound of coals throws a red warmth across the cobbled hearth and up the back of her chair. By the time the sun has come up she is ready to go to the mailbox down at the end of the drive. She does not bother with her overcoat or her blackthorn stick because they are a bother and because the stick makes her look like a crone.

She goes out the back door because both the heavy front door and the glass storm door stick. She has been having dizzy spells recently. Something the doctor has put her on, something that was intended to keep her heart from racing, makes the damned thing stutter and stop instead. When it stops, she faints. It always gets going again, but when it does, she generally finds herself on the ground. She is crossing through the woodshed with its uneven gravel floor when she loses consciousness, pitches forward and lands hard. When she comes to, she knows she has broken something and she appears to be bleeding from deep cuts on her forearms. Her knees too feel sticky with blood. She gathers the bills from where they have scattered, crawls to the woodpile, hauls herself upright and keeps going. Bleeding, in pain, with the world and its snow whirling around her, she makes her way down the driveway through the brown and blowing weeds to her mailbox. "They were *bills*", she explained later, "I was *going* to mail them."

A neighbor is driving up the hill in his pickup truck. When he sees her, he slows. She's not dressed warmly enough; she appears to be staggering, and the sleeves of her

sweat shirt are soaked with blood. He stops. He puts her in the warm cab, goes inside and gets a jacket for her and then takes her to the hospital. She has a broken pelvis and extensive lacerations on her arms and legs.

Within a few days she is in a rehabilitation facility. It's actually quite a nice place. It does not smell like a nursing home. It's quiet, with broad corridors and large, sunny rooms. When I drop in to see her, she is alone. It is odd to see her name plate on the door like a secret that should not be exposed: "Frances Donaghy." She is lying on her bed before a big window; she looks as though she has been dropped there by a careless hand. Her head is thrown back, canted off to one side. Her mouth is open and dark, the upper lip drawn back from long, ochre teeth. I have never seen this woman before. That scant nimbus of gray hair. That small, high-shouldered bone-cage of torso. The arms loose jointed and thin like the arms of a child or a marionette, the palms upward, a final shrug. The old feeing again; it is not her, it is something else, it is uncanny, it's a doll, a fetish; it is feathers and bones and leather and baboon-blood paste and teeth of old cowrie shells. "Mom", I say, and then louder, "Mom." Incredibly she stirs, shifts. Her sleep has been deep and she is confused, "Pete?" she asks. "No," I say. "John". "Oh," she says, "John." She struggles into a sitting position and finds her glasses.

She looks at me, and fills up with herself. "I'm glad I have lived so long," she says even before she is all the way back, as though she were taking up a conversation we had been having when she nodded off. "It has given me a chance to review my life." I wait and say nothing. "I've always been *frugal.* I've never asked for a *thing.* I never even asked for a *job*. I would *never* have asked for a job, but they wanted to give me one. And then my nursing classmates made me a class officer. Well, I was *no* more interested in that kind of thing than in . . . " she pauses, unable to think of anything in which she could have comparably little interest. "Even with your father. I *never* pursued him. I was crazy about him of course but I *never* pursued. He pursued *me.* I count myself very lucky. And here. My God, *any* little thing I happen to say they think is the height of cleverness. The nurses, of course. And the psychologist was in here the other day testing my cognitive function. He gave me three words at the beginning of our conversation and told me to remember them because at the end he was going to ask

me what they were—I remembered all but one, and that one I recalled immediately with a hint. He seemed to think *that* was extraordinary. Well, afterwards, he was no sooner gone than he was back again. 'I forgot my clipboard,' he said. 'Ah,' I said, '*forgot*.' Well, he laughed and he said, 'Give me a high-five. I guess there are no problems *here*.'"

I have reviewed my life and discovered that from the day I was born everybody has loved me, wanted me. An offering from Pandæmonium; an exact untruth.

Thus Mother announces herself to herself, standing at the entrance to the shack she imagines, in her terrible weakness and her terrible strength, is a palace. She is a plucky five-year-old in outsized livery—knee breaches with silk stockings, a frogged and brocaded coat, a cocked hat that comes down over her eyes. "Her most high and puissant majesty," she declaims "Empress of Life, Queen of all Knowledge and of all Virtue; Singular and Flawless, Tower of Ivory," and she ushers in something dark and bent, something with crooked little horns, with shit in its burlap pants and lice crawling under its blackened scales.

She died at the age of one hundred and one. When she went into hospice, I found myself afflicted with a kind of tenderness for what had never been. I wanted to read to her. I *needed* to read to her—a compulsive return, perhaps, to the best part of childhood, to the only intimacy that had not been dangerous. I found one of her favorite books—*Cider with Rosie*—a too-charming-to be-quite-true account of a rural English childhood by the poet Laurie Lee. I thought it might turn her mind fondly backwards. I tried to read to her several times, but she would have none of it. "What?" she'd say. "I can't make heads nor tails of what you're saying." Why did she resist? That she *could* have listened if she chose is certain. After she died, when we were clearing out her room, the nurse—a big, gentle man with a full beard—came to me and said, "I want you to know how much I enjoyed taking care of your mother. Such an extraordinary woman. You know, I read to her almost every evening. It was so peaceful. She'd listen very carefully and say the most intelligent things."

In her last two months she began to pass in and out of a terrible dementia that whittled her all the way down to her essential hunger. It was a madness that came upon her in fits. When she was in its grip, she'd call us from her hospice room. She wanted us

to come visit. It did no good to remind her that one of us had been there earlier in the day or to reassure her that another of us would be there tomorrow; she lived only in the starving *now*. She saw no reason we could not sit by her in shifts, one after another for twenty-four hours every day. She wanted us to bring her things: Kleenex because “They told me here that they will charge me more if they supply it,” shampoo because “the stuff here makes my hair fall out,” clocks with extra-large numerals because “nothing you’ve given me is large enough.” She could be wheedling and tearful in one moment and choking with fury in the next. Sometimes she would fall into the very center of herself. Then she would believe, as I have always believed in my heart, that someone was missing. She did not know who it was. She was desperate to know, and she wanted us to find out. At the peak of these fits the calls would come every three minutes for an hour or more until the facility, at our request, replaced her room phone with one that had no keypad.

Two days before Mother slipped into her final coma, Pede and I visited her. Her thoughts lay, like Ozymandias, in blocky ruins that communicated a message she did not intend. Pede had brought her a new talking clock, a small box that spoke the time when you pushed a button on top of it. She had broken the old one in her palsied impatience; the new one was bigger and easier to operate; the button on top was so big and so red that it looked like it might launch missiles.

"What's this?" Mother asked when she saw it.

"It's your new talking clock," Pede said.

"Where's the old one?"

"It's broken."

"Oh, it's *broken*?" she looked at the new clock as if it were a large spider. “Then why give it to *me*?”

"No, the *old* one is broken."

"But this *isn't* the old one."

"No".

"Well where *is* the old one?"

"I took it. It was broken. I threw it out"

"It's in my bag."

"No, I *took* it," Pede said. "It didn't *work.* I tried to get you one just like it, but the Society for the Blind doesn't have them anymore. They have *these* instead. They're *better.*"

"My bag is on the floor," she said "It's in there. Get it for me."

"I took it home and threw it *out*. It's not there."

We are all silent for a moment and then with an angry bounce she said, "Just get me my *god*damned bag!"

There was no clock in the bag, and her anger had exhausted her. "Wait a moment," she said, "I have to catch my breath. I can't be talking *all* the time although I know it's good for you." Pede and I looked at one another and kept still.

At last she said, "That *other* grandmother was *quite* a foul-mouthed old lady."

"What other grandmother?" I asked.

"*You* know. *Annie's* mother. *Tay*. That's what I *heard.* I hope I may never stoop to such a low expediency."

Another long silence while we all considered this. Pede grinned at me. Anne's mother, Tay, was widely acknowledged as a kind of saint. At last Mother said, "I was always a *leader*."

"A leader of what?" I ask.

"A leader of mankind," she said and fell asleep as though someone had hit a switch. When she woke up some twenty minutes later, she said, "I am about to deliver my last sermon. I will be dead in *this* many weeks," she held up three fingers and looked first at Pede and then at me over the top of her glasses. "Then I will be alone, alone, alone—flat on my back, staring into the sky with open eyes, seeing nothing. Strangers will walk by me all day long."

*

One night a few weeks before her one hundredth birthday Mother was seized by twelve violent hours of vomiting and diarrhea. She soiled her nightgown, her bedding, her bedroom carpet. She staggered to the bathroom where she lay until dawn, cold, filthy and wet, huddled on the floor next to the toilet. When the sun rose, she called my brother and asked him to come. She told him it was very important, but she did not tell

him exactly what the problem was. When he was done cleaning up, he bought her a new nightgown and some new sheets and blankets, and when he put her to bed, she enjoined secrecy on him. He must tell *no one*, especially not his wife. Then she called Peigi to complain. No one has *ever* passed such a night. She had been *dizzy*; she had had *no* control of her bowels; she had been in *pain*; she had been *dying*. Peigi must not tell a *soul*.

Betsy, hearing of the episode from Peigi, drove up from Massachusetts the next afternoon to see how Mother was doing. She noticed the wood box was empty and offered to fill it. “No. Just leave it,” Mother said.

“Why?” Betsy asked, “It’s going to get cold again. You need it filled and I’m not sure you can manage it yet. I’m here and happy to do it.”

“Ne-ver mind. I have my reasons. You are not to touch a *stick* of that wood.”

When Betsy had gone, Mother called me. She told me that she felt fantastic. She had just awoken from the longest sleep of her life—almost eighteen hours. She asked me to come and fill her wood box for her. I was concerned. She had always taken great pride in filling the wood box by herself, but now she told me that, curiously, she seemed to have lost the strength of her hands. I imagined she was far worse off than she was letting me know. I imagined she feared the approaching cold snap, that she had no stove wood in the kitchen and no strength to fetch it from the shed. I imagined she was nearing the end.

But when, on the following day, I got to her house, I saw that she had not weakened in the least. There was a heavy, dark, antique bureau in her kitchen full of linens and old silver and candles and papers and photographs. It weighed considerably more than she did, but she had dragged it across the lumpy friction of braided rugs in order to get at the dust underneath it and in order to remove a heavy picture that had hung on the wall behind it. I saw that she had removed another large picture as well from an awkward spot over the sink, and she appeared to have carried them both off to some other room to dust them under better light. I was impressed: Stonehenge, the pyramids, the mysterious power of the ancients.

“Hello?” I called, doubting that she could hear me, but she emerged from the dim interior of the house, swaying stiff-legged into the kitchen doorway. She was very

upright, barely five feet tall, and weighing considerably less than one hundred pounds. She was wearing black trousers and a short woolen coat with brass buttons that gave her a tin-soldier, military look. I thought of Hoffmann's nutcracker.

"Who's that?" she said.

"It's me," I said.

"Who? John? You're early."

"Did you move the bureau by yourself?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It wasn't much. It was harder getting those pictures down."

"Good Lord" I said, "Like an ant carrying a cricket's carcass. For all your faults you're the strongest damned centenarian that ever lived."

"For all my what?" she asked. She was deaf, but she also feigned deafness.

"Faults," I said.

"*What?"*

"I said, *faults*."

"Oh, *faults*". She assumed the arch expression that signaled she was about to make a serious joke. "I *have* no faults."

When I had filled the wood box and rehung the pictures and moved the bureau back against the wall, she said, "Okay, now. For God's sake sit down and talk to me." I removed a copy of the *Times* from a chair and sat at the table. She had something particular to say, and she wasted no time in saying it:

"Your father and I always took such delight in you," she says. "And we were *proud* of you. You never *had* to go to medical school, you know."

This again. "Mother, please," I said, "drop it."

But she would not drop it. "You said such *funny* things when you were small and you were such a *character* all through high school. You made us laugh and whether you believe it or not we were *proud* of you."

A one-hundred-year old great-grandmother gaslighting a sixty-year old grandfather about events from forty-five years ago. There was something utterly unclean in the way she so relentlessly pried, though more and more weakly, at the heavy stonework of what was and is. And there was something utterly infantile and hopeless in the rage and exhaustion I felt when she did it.

Let it go, I told myself. But I said, “You didn’t *seem* all that proud. Do you remember not going to my high school graduation because I wasn’t valedictorian? Do you remember asking, ‘How did it feel to sit among the idiots?’ when I got home?”

“You didn’t need us to keep *telling* you we were proud of you did you?” she pursued. And when I didn’t answer, she tried a new line of attack—“You gave up an awful lot for Jesus.”

“Well, I should get home,” I said and stood up.

“Are you going so soon?” she said. And immediately she was no longer confiding and superior. She may have been acting, and she may not have been, but she seemed frightened. She did not want to be left alone. “Wait a minute,” she said, “there’s something else I’d like you to do for me. These things are driving me crazy.” She held up her thumbs; the nails were long and broken and notched. “They keep snagging on things,” she said, “I have an appointment next week with a podiatrist who will cut *all* my nails, but I can’t wait that long with these.” Her neediness felt like cobwebs in my hair.

She had no nail clippers and so I went into the pantry where she kept her first aid kit in a dim corner under some cupboards and next to an old-fashioned breadbox. I carried it to the window and rummaged through the bandages and rolls of gauze and antibacterial creams and discovered the same small, curved pair of scissors with which, when I was a child, she had cut *my* nails. She moved a standing lamp over next to the rocker on the hearth. “Do it over here,” she said, “where there is light.”

I would have rather not. I did not want to touch her, but I sat next to her. Through the window I could see the falling snow turning the afternoon to twilight. The woods were growing invisible along the far edges of the fields, and the old house was fading into its hillside. We were an aging man and an ancient woman bending our heads together under the yellow light of a small lamp. We were on opposite sides of the same void; we were infiltrated by the same dread. Her hand was small and parched, spotted and bruised, wrinkled as a sparrow’s claw. It was very strange, that dying flesh—twisted, stained,, halfway to mummification. But when I held her hand against my knee to suppress its tremor, there was a sudden bustling far off in the back of my mind—doors opening and closing, running footfalls in the corridors, hurried whispers, heads craning over the banister to see who it was who had returned after all those years.

Her flesh was full of many voices calling to me from many places: memories beyond memory, ghosts of the ancient needs and terrors too faint for words. There in that dim kitchen was the dark stream, the lustral basin, the brazen threshold and the downward stair. Mother wanted me to take her nails down as far as I could, but she feared I would cut her. She was on blood thinners and would not be able to stop bleeding. With each snip she flinched and hissed as though I were hurting her, but when I was done, she kept finding rough places and asking me to cut more. I insisted that I'd taken her nails down to the quick and could not safely go any further, but she did not want me to stop *touching* her. And when at last, desperate for the upper air, I stood and put the scissors away and shrugged on my coat she asked, "When will you be back?"

"Not for a couple of weeks," I said.

"No," she said, "You'll come back sooner. You cannot get away so easily."

Contributors

Barbara Altamirano been a finalist in *Writer's Digest's* annual contest and her work has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor, Indiana Voice Journal, Pittsburgh Parent, Wow-womenonwriting.com, Guideposts Magazine* and other publications.

She's Married

Stephen Beckwith's parents met in a writer's group. The die was certainly cast. He has worked in words most of his life, first as a copywriter, then as a creative director, and finally as a writing instructor. He taught writing at Grand Valley State University and has, for the last twenty years, taught fiction workshops at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. Beckwith has published five nonfiction books on communications, written eight novels, two books of noir-ish short stories, three volumes of poetry, and a historical biography of Louis Campau. He continues to teach workshops and write. There are too many stories to tell and never enough time. **A Memory of Smoke**

Susan D. Bernstein moved a few years ago to Boston from Madison, Wisconsin where she spent twenty-eight years as a professor of English with a focus on Victorian literature and gender studies. She now teaches in the English Department at Boston University including a course on life writing. In addition to scholarly books and articles, she has published literary nonfiction essays and short fiction, and is writing a novel.

Mixed Emotion Family

Sara Birch writes about growing up in an unconventional family. As a young girl, Sara moved multiple times throughout the United States. Her dream was to stay in one place long enough to find her way around in the dark. She currently lives between the mountains and the sea, with rain as her muse. **Empty Windows**

Kirk Boys' personal essays have been featured in *The Chaos Journal, Gravel Magazine and bioStories*. His fiction has been featured in *Per Contra, Thrice Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine,* and *Storie-all write #57/58* and *Storie.it/ English Department*

and in *High Shelf Press*. He has a Certificate in Literary Fiction from the University of Washington. He was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* New Writers contest. He has two novels for which he is currently seeking representation. He lives outside Seattle with his wife and a tiny dog. **Good Works**

Jay Bush is an English Professor at the University of Wisconsin—Stout. He has written and published multiple short stories, memoirs, and poems and is currently searching for homes for his first two novels. Jay lives on a small farm in Spring Valley, Wisconsin with his wife, dogs, horse, and three ornery cats. **A Taste of Freedom**

Chris Davis earned the title of "least prepared person to ever enter space" by NASA, farmed exotic guinea pigs in Peru, and was once bit by a goat. His interests include above-ground spelunking and writing fake bios. He recently graduated the fourth grade and owns over seven houseplants." **The Drive Between Homes**

Dr. Patrick Dobson has worked as a journalist, book editor, and union ironworker in Kansas City, MO. The University of Nebraska Press published his two travel memoirs, *Seldom Seen: A Journey into the Great Plains* (2009) and *Canoeing the Great Plains: A Missouri River Summer* (2015). He teaches American History, Latin American History, and Western Civilization at Johnson County Community College in nearby Overland Park, KS. His essays and poems have appeared in *New Letters*, *bioStories*, *White Wall Review, Kansas City Star*, and dozens of other newspapers, scholarly journals, and literary magazines. His essays and travel pieces can be viewed at http://patrickdobson.com. **Senior Citizen Discount**

John Donaghy spent twelve years teaching and coaching at a secondary school and twenty-six more serving as an adjunct in both the English Department and Institute for Writing and Rhetoric at Dartmouth College before he mustered the courage to drop it all and become a writer. At the age of sixty-seven he received his MFA from the Rainier Writers Workshop in Tacoma, WA. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife who is also a writer. **Colonus**

Gary Fincke's latest collection of personal essays *The Darkness Call* won the 2017 Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose and was published in early 2018 by Pleiades Press. His collections of stories have won the Flannery O'Connor Prize and the Elixir Press Fiction Prize, and earlier nonfiction books were published by Michigan State and Stephen F. Austin. **Pre-Med**

J. Malcolm Garcia is a freelance writer. His most recent books are *Riding Through Katrina With the Red Baron's Ghost* (Skyhorse) and *The Fruit of All My Grief: Lives in the Shadows of the American Dream* (Seven Stories Press 2019).
This Is Afghanistan and **Contracts**

Flo Gelo was born in Brooklyn, New York where she lived until her early teens. She has published a series of stories about growing up on Madison Street. This story reflects on the last days of her mother's life. In hindsight, Flo's mother's illness and dying were formative and influenced Flo's professional life. She has published numerous articles in professional journals about illness, death, and dying. **Tangled**

Robert D. Kirvel is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story, and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and Germany; in translation and anthologies; and in dozens of U.S. literary journals. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, was published in August 2019 by Eyewear Publishing Ltd., London. Most of his literary publications are linked on https://twitter.com/Rkirvel. **Dinner 1959**

Mario Loprete (Cover Art—"Untitled Concrete Sculpture") is an artist from Catanzaro, Italy. This untitled piece is part of a series that transforms actual articles of clothing with concrete, plaster, and resin. Loprete says of the work, "The reinforced cement, has . . . a millenary story" used throughout the world in "amphitheaters, bridges, and roads that have conquered the ancient and modern world. Now it's a synonym of modernity." Because each sculpture starts with his personal clothing, he says, "My memory, my

DNA, my memories remain concreted inside, transforming the person who looks at the artwork a type of post-modern archeologist that studies my work as if they were urban artifacts." His work has been featured in individual and group exhibitions throughout Europe. To see more of his work and learn about his process, visit him on Instagram, where you will also find a link to his website.

Zach Reichert is currently a medical student in southern California. He plans to eventually practice Emergency Medicine as he continues writing fiction and non-fiction pieces rooted in his experience both in and out of the hospital. **Noise**

J.D. Scrimgeour is the author of three books of poetry and two of nonfiction, including *Themes for English B: A Professor's Education In & Out of Class*, which won the AWP Award for Nonfiction. Recent essays have appeared in *blackbird*, *Solstice, Sport Literate,* and *The Woven Tale Press*. **A Brush with Greatness**

Dennis "Suge" Thompson is a former U. S. Postal Service letter carrier and horse handicapper. He now teaches writing and film at Des Moines Area Community College. His work has appeared in *Mississippi Review, Colere Literary Review, Out of Line: Writings on Peace and Social Justice, Birch Gang Review,* and *Literary Orphans*. His fiction "Jesus in the Eighth Race" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. **Sugar Run Wild**

Rosanne Trost is a retired registered nurse. After retirement, she found the perfect creative writing class, and has realized her passion for writing. Her work has been published in a variety of online and print journals, including *Chicken Soup for The Soul*, *Commuter Lit*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, and *Learning to Heal*. **Faded Memory**

Devorah Uriel is a retired family therapist and teacher. She's worked with families at risk of losing custody of their children and with young children with attachment disorders. She now lives and writes in Denver, Colorado. Her stories have been published in *Write Denver* and *Dime Show Review*. She recently completed her memoir, *Mama Dama Doozy,* about growing up in a crazy house. **Heartworm**

Peyton Vance is a senior at the University of Tennessee majoring in English, so primarily he is focused on trying not to become homeless. Interested in writing across all genres, he's had three previous works published within the last year. **The Drive**

Tracy Youngblom earned an MA in English and an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College. She has published three books of poems, most recently *One Bird a Day* (2018), along with essays and fiction. Her individual poems, stories, and essays have been published in journals including *Shenandoah, Wallace Stevens Journal, Big Muddy, Briar Cliff Review, Potomac Review, Cumberland River Review, Cortland Review, Ruminate, Foliate Oak, St. Katherine's Review, Westview*, and many other places. Her work has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives and works near Minneapolis, teaching English at a community college and working with adult writers in the community. **Cutting Words**