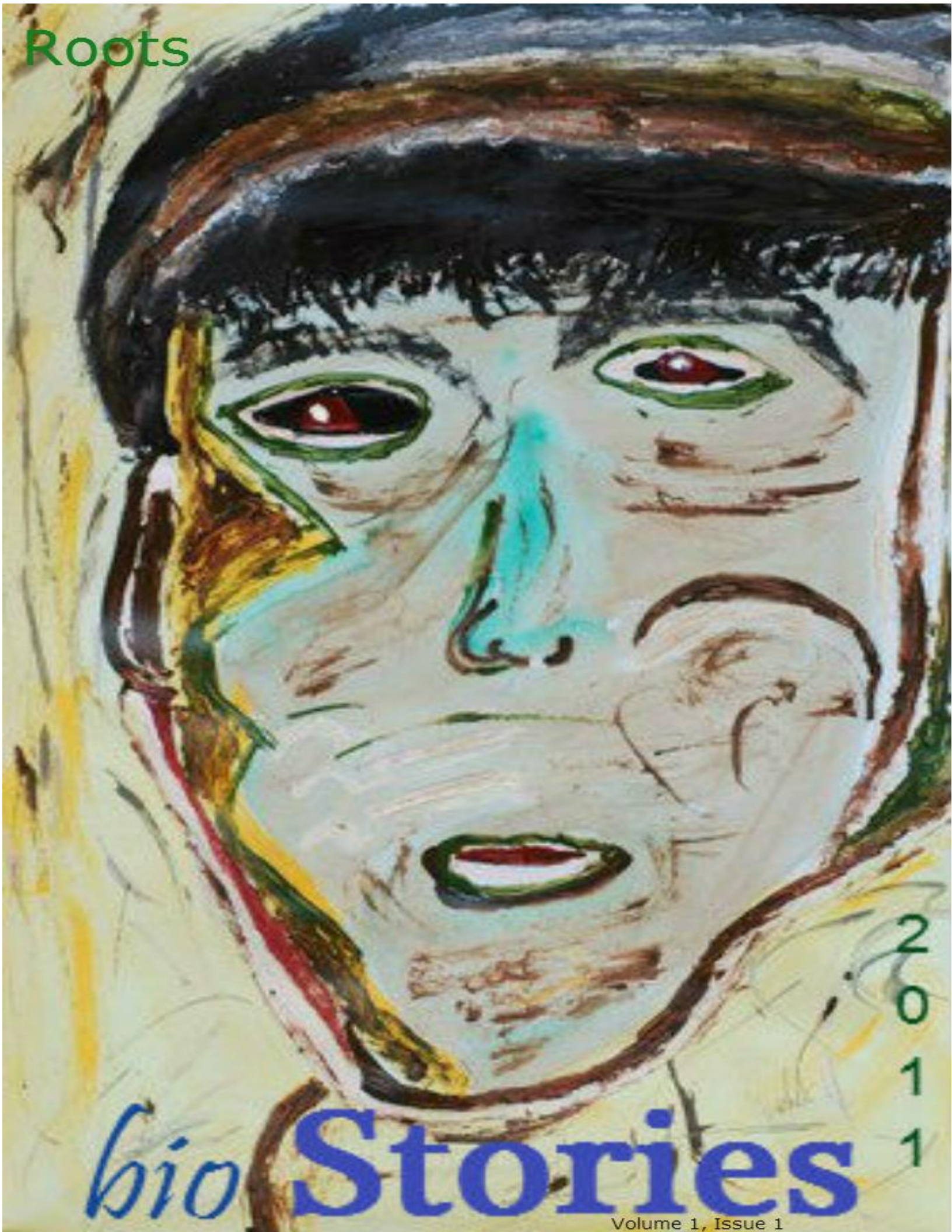
Roots



bio Stories

2011

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*bio*Stories

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Roots

Cover image by Merlin Flowers

2011 **Volume 1, Issue 1**

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Reflections of My Mother

by Wilmer Frey

1.

I wish I could say straightaway that my mother was an original, that she had remarkable insight into the issues of her day, that she served in the Peace Corps and loved to snowshoe, that she once toured the country as a green-eyed ballerina.

But I can't. My mother was not an original. She was born and she grew up. She married, loved her husband, had children, loved her children, grew ill, grew old, died. There is a story in this sequence of events, a worthy and beautiful story, to be sure, but in large part it's the old and often-told story of reflection. For to see my mother was to see who or what she stood next to. Invisibility was my mother's gift. She was a natural. She disappeared as her personality and life journey dictated almost every day of her life.

2.

Janet was my mother's name. She was the second-oldest daughter of Irvin and Mary Martin, late of Pinola, Pennsylvania. Irvin, who died old, was a haphazard Mennonite farmer. He mostly wanted to go fishing. Mary, who died young, walked with a wooden leg. Ruth, the incoming step-mother, made the best of life with Irvin and his kids, and my mother came to respect her for that fact.

My mother had a handful of stories from her childhood that she told over and over. Anecdotes would be a better word for them. Quick snippets about being poor. Like how she and her brother Lester walked to the store for a single piece of gum, which they shared, one chewing for a while, then the other; how her mother sewed burlap feed sacks into school dresses for her and her sisters; or how dreadful it was to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the loose town girls at the dress factory where she went to work at fifteen.

3.

There are two photos in our family photo collection of my mother as a teenager. In each she appears rigid and unhappy: her shoulders are thrust back, her back is unnaturally straight, and her arms push down through to the ends of her fingers as if forced. And because she was a Mennonite girl, her hair is pulled back and gathered under her prayer veiling, and she is wearing a traditional dark-colored Mennonite dress with cape. She wears

glasses. She stares at the camera, but not entirely. Something separates her from the viewer.

As a boy I sometimes went looking for these two photos knowing that they would make me uncomfortable. They seemed invalid, untrue. They made my mother look cold, and I never knew her to be cold. Never once. She was warm and soft, something I knew on account of the countless times I slept on her shoulder during our drives home from church. The heat from the heater would warm my legs, and the soft of her forearm would warm my head. When she softly hummed the hymns we had earlier sung from the pews, I would follow along in the dark and quiet. When I woke, we were home.

4.

My father's name was Adin, and he and my mother were married in 1944. He was 19, a farm boy, she was 18. Their first home was on a farm they rented not far from the farms they grew up on. It took my father two years to buy his own farm, a few more years to buy a bigger one. This second farm featured a tall concrete silo, the tallest of any such silo in the state. My father was proud of his silo. He talked of it his entire life.

My mother, however, never mentioned the silo. But I believe she, too, was proud of it, if in a different way. Because she was proud of my father. She was proud of everything he did and everything he said. My father, who was as short as his silo was tall, had the energy of the sun. And he put his energy into pursuing tall silos, literally and metaphorically, his entire life. My father's energy was the main reason my mother was never seen. She was lost in its glare. The fact that she was two inches taller than he was did little to help her show through.

5.

Life on Adin Frey's second farm through the 1950's was good. The template of Frey/American progress was established and consistently followed. Old barns were pulled down and new ones built, tractors were bought and sold, a straight, white, rail fence ran the length of the farm's lane. There was much procreation—on the farm, turkeys and cows; in the home, children: Eugene, Robert, Linda, Fern, Miriam, Wilmer. And a still-born child never spoken of.

There were many Mennonite farm families in the surrounding area, and on Sunday afternoons directly after church, two or three of these families would often show up at our home for dinner. With the exception of deciding on who

exactly to invite (my father weighed in heavily on this decision and also on who would be asked to give the blessing), my mother managed the entire operation. She and my sisters added additional boards to the table the night before, arranged the fancy plates and silverware, and unfolded my mother's good Sunday apron and hung it from a hook.

As conservative Mennonite farmers eat mostly meat and potatoes, my mother's Sunday dinners featured just that—roast beef and mashed potatoes, with maybe creamed corn or shelled peas as sides. For dessert, she served rice pudding, or molded Jell-O, or something called "Dirt Dessert." It was humble fare by a humble woman for humble people. But then my mother's only real interest in food was that it never be wasted. Food as a means of self-expression was not something she would have understood or appreciated.

When the Sunday meal was almost ready, my mother would call in my father to cut the roast, and, the roast cut, he would call in the men from the living room. And for the length of the meal, my mother refused to sit down. Only in the minutes before dessert was started would she lean over the table and take a bit of roast beef without gravy and sit uncomfortably in her chair.

After dinner, the men gathered again in the living room, and the ladies, having cleaned the kitchen, made their circle there. In good weather, the men and women moved outside to sit separately on the porch. One of my favorite memories of my mother is hearing her Sunday-afternoon laughter coming from the ladies' circle. My mother was always pleased to laugh, and she was good at it. Her contribution rose naturally out from her good-natured disposition like pure tap water. While it never rose significantly above the ladies' collective laughter like Vera Eby's or Ethal Strite's did, it was present. It added. My mother's quick laugh helped our community find and appreciate our home.

6.

The above-mentioned still-born—that child, a girl, was not the only topic that went unmentioned in our home. There were quite a few unmentioned topics. And not surprisingly, the most telling of them was the most disconcerting: The fact of my mother's regular and lifelong seizures. In the kitchen, in the turkey barn, in the church pew, in the shoe section of Newberry's Five and Dime—we Freys would be living our Mennonite lives and suddenly out from my mother's mouth—her tongue. Flat, pink, slowly, slipping out and back like a snake's.

When my mother's tongue appeared, time stopped. My father stopped it. He did this by instinctively reaching for her arm, leading her aside, and then staring dumbly at the floor. He did not move, comment, comfort, request assistance, or look elsewhere. He appeared not to breathe.

But somehow he knew when they were over. My mother's seizures could last sometimes as long as several minutes, yet my father always knew. And when they were over, it was over. My father had erased it. That's why we never talked about my mother's seizures. My father's method of response made it such that there was nothing whatsoever to talk about.

7.

Sometime in the late 1960's, my mother lost control of our car as she was exiting off Pennsylvania Interstate 81. It was mid-afternoon, she was alone, and she was driving 60 mph. As a result of the accident, she was hospitalized for several weeks.

News of the accident spread quickly, of course, and for those who knew of my mother's affliction, the news prompted an immediate question about cause, an either/or question that went as follows:

a) Had Janet fallen asleep?

b) Had Janet had a …?

After time proved that my mother was not only living, but that she was living without any trace of her former seizures, a new either/or question emerged, one that centered on the miraculous. This second question went like this:

Which miracle best exemplifies God's wondrous kindness as manifested in the life of Janet Frey?

a) The fact of her survival.

b) The fact of her seizure-free life.

After the miracle of my mother's survival and healing, it was okay to talk quietly about her seizures. But still, I have no memory of hearing my mother using the word.

8.

The Mennonite tradition into which my mother was born dates to the Reformation. Her family's Mennonite tradition dates to the late 1700's, which is the beginning point of their genealogical record. The Martins were of the

conservative branch of the Mennonite Church, as were the Freys, and when my mother and father married, they continued the tradition as they had inherited it.

Conservative Mennonites are preoccupied with dress. They hold that believers (male and female) should dress in a way that clearly separates them from the world, and that female believers should dress in a way that clearly shows their willful subordination to males and/or their husbands and that eliminates the influence of the female body.

So it was that my mother wore every day and night a white-gauze pray veiling or bonnet with two attending, narrow, ribbon-like strings that fell across her breast; plain, dark-colored dresses (with cape) that dropped to below her knees; dark woolen or nylon hose; and plain dark shoes. A black variation on this theme was worn on Sundays.

My mother never wore socks, pants, jewelry, or make-up. When it was exceedingly cold, she would sometimes wear a pair of my father's pants under her dress.

In the mid-1960's, the Mennonite church that my family attended underwent a congregational split. More liberal-thinking members went one way, more conservative-thinking members another. My parents sided with the liberals (my father served as their leader), a fact that gradually lessened the severity of my mother's dress. The Mennonite look that she presented at the end of her life was quite different from that which she presented when I was a boy.

Years later my mother would say that she and my father had not always been correct about church doctrine. She hinted that they had said words and felt thoughts that they regretted. The experience, the painful experience, of the church's conflict and eventual separation had taught her this, she said.

And in the context of her revelation, she would sometimes quote a verse that my father often quoted: Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

9.

In 1960, my father added an adjoining 150 acre farm to the one he owned, moved my mother and my five siblings into the new farm's old farmhouse, built a few barns, a retail store building, and erected a sign by the road to explain it all. The sign's two lines read: Frey's Farm Dairy. From The Cow To

You. Under the text was a large black and white illustration of a Holstein cow.

Frey's Farm Dairy was a jugging dairy, which means my father pasteurized, bottled, and retailed his cows' milk directly on and from his farm. Neighbors were his first customers, then people from our town, and in a year or so, people from many surrounding towns. My mother helped in the store early on, but fronting the business as clerk or otherwise was something she never understood.

As the dairy grew and expanded, my father grew noticeably proud. He was pleased to see his picture in the local paper. He was pleased to be seen driving a new-model, dark-green Oldsmobile every year. But again, my mother was prouder of her husband then she was of his possessions. When I grew older and often said unpleasant things about him and his dairy, she would always remind me that he was a good manager.

My father was for my mother everything her father was not.

10.

My mother lived the last twenty years of her life with a gradually worsening case of Alzheimer's. Her last twelve years were spent in complete dementia. My father tended to her until he died, as did my sisters and various in-home nurses. Year after year after year she lay in her bed and fidgeted with a corner of her blanket. She lost her mind, her voice, her mobility, her teeth, her hair.

During the early stages of her illness, visitors would regularly call, friends and neighbors from the days when she served Sunday dinners in the farmhouse just across the fields. But as my mother slowly disappeared, so, too, did her visitors. In the end, few people stopped by the house.

My mother, who died at 83, outlived my father by three years, something that secretly pleases me. She could smile at the end, almost chuckle. My daughter, Quetzal, who was three when my mother died, enjoyed helping when my wife and I changed my mother's diaper. Sometimes when we were tending to her, my mother would fix a far-away stare on Quetzal and giggle. When this happened, Quetzal would take the palm of my mother's crooked hand into her own perfect one and massage it with her thumb. Leaning in from the little stool she stood on, she whispered into my mother's ear. She said that everything would be okay.

11.

When Quetzal was two, my wife and I traveled to Pennsylvania for a two-week stay with my mother over Christmas. We wanted the chance to help care for her, and we wanted Quetzal to have the opportunity to know her as her grandmother.

One morning soon after we had fed and changed my mother, Quetzal came into the kitchen with an old rag doll she had found, one I remembered from my childhood. Showing us first the doll and then glancing into the living room where her grandmother lay sleeping, she said:

I can’t wait until grandma is old enough to talk.

The Way Woody Tells It

by Peter Derk

Last spring at work, someone came into my office and said, “There's an old man with a cane here to see you.”

I couldn't think who it might be. I don't make a habit of hanging out with elderly men, and the only person I knew with a cane was my grandmother. Canes are a point of interest for me, so if I had a friend with a cane, I’d know. Some guys stop at scenic overlooks on the highway. I skim the barrel of canes in the Walgreens’ pharmacy.

I made sure my nametag was clipped straight and walked out to find Woody sitting on a bench, a dark brown cane leaning on the wall next to him.

He was fresh off a knee surgery, still tender. He gave me a tight smile like he'd been borrowing my knee and was bringing it back busted up after hot-Roding it the last few years.

He’s never looked like a guy for whom injury is new. He's still holding onto the thick, dorm room fridge of a body he's always had, but his beard was darker years ago when he hurt his arm at the gym, tearing his bicep away from what anchored it and clamping his other hand down to keep the muscle from escaping into his shoulder. He had a little more hair when he broke his neck playing college football. He was only a grade-schooler when a horse kicked him in the face, putting him out for the better part of an hour.

He didn’t stand when I came out. He sat next to his cane and said, “I'm done coaching. Let's have a beer.”

The entire time I've known Woody Wilson, his story has been, “This is my last year coaching distance runners.”

Every year it's the same thing. Then the spring rolls around and he's handing out photocopied calendars, workouts written in by hand.

But this time he really quit. The job posting is open. He closed his little black book, the one filled with a career’s worth of names and race times, the one with tape goo on the front and the cover peeling away to show the cardboard bones underneath.

We had that beer together. A couple, maybe. He told some of his great Woody stories.

Retelling some of Woody's stories feels a little like me picking up Degas' old brush to paint a cheap watercolor house without any sort of texture or depth, maybe not even a front door. While I'm at it, I might as well wear Michael Jordan's jersey while throwing up bricks from a spot on the court he considers slam-dunk territory.

Even though Woody's told them before, I like to goad him into telling them again, listening for how he does it. He's a great coach and a generous man, but more than anything he can tell a story.

One of the best is from his childhood, when he lived near the rail yard. If you've ever lived near a rail yard, dam, creek, quarry, an old mine, or just about anything that would interest a boy, you know that it's forbidden by parents with the same tone they use to warn about windowless vans and doing mushrooms. If you grew up near any of those things, you also know that if you walked down there every day for a summer, every day you'd flush out a clump of boys who would run and scatter like dandelion seeds.

So, of course, that's where Woody went. Even though it wrinkles the skin around his eyes, you can still see the smile that pulled up his face as a boy, the one that took him and his brother down to the tracks.

When Woody tells a story the details change. It’s part of his style, the sort of storytelling that turns a lumberjack into a skyscraper and a dog into a bright blue ox. In this story, the parts that are the same are the rail yard, his brother, and the ending. The part that changes is the bridge.

On one side of a set of tracks was a pole, like a telephone pole with rungs drilled into the sides. On the other side of the tracks, same thing. And connecting these poles, maybe twenty, thirty, fifty feet over the ground, was a plank.

The way Woody tells a story, wood is more like rubber, changing shape and contorting depending on the where he is, who's around him, and how many beers in you are. Most times, the board bridging the two poles is something like a four-by-four. For people not too acquainted with sizes, that's something like a fencepost, somewhere around the width of a kid's sneaker. Maybe even a little thinner.

After he tells the story far enough that the board takes shape, after his brother bets him a nickel that he won't, little Woody Wilson climbs one of the poles, sets a foot on the board, puts his arms out to his sides, and crosses.

The height keeps changing too, but it's never low enough that he could survive the fall. Don't worry. He always makes it across.

The ending is always the same. The story never ends with how dangerous it was, what his parents said, what Woody might have done to his own sons if they pulled something like that. That same mischief smile comes back and Woody says, "My brother, he still never paid me the nickel he bet me."

Most times he'll steer things back around to running, runners, or races. Over decades, he's collected a number of coaching disasters.

He'll talk about the time he had a runner, a girl, who couldn't finish a 3.1-mile race without puking all over herself.

The way Woody tells the story, the mystery builds. They try everything. Eating less, eating earlier, eating different stuff, less water, more water, pink liquids, and just about everything that shares a pharmacy shelf with the pink liquids. Nothing works.

He'll tell that part of the story first because he knows the order of things. It's only after he's told you about this girl, has you convinced that this puking mystery is the entire story, that the real story starts.

He says, "I hired a professional photographer to take pictures of all the kids. Big, professional, 8-by-10's. This was back in the days of film, so it's a big deal, but I thought it would be a nice thing for the parents to have at the end of the season."

The way he puts the story together, you see where it's going.

Of course, the photographer set up his equipment in the perfect spot at the regional meet. Of course, he got a picture of every one of the kids coming around the bend. Perfect light, perfect strides, perfect framing. Of course. And, of course, because this is Woody's story, a perfect shot series of the girl, the puker, captured at the moment when a rush of vomit was leaving her mouth.

Woody looked over her pictures. They were like a flipbook. Thumbing through them fast enough was like watching her vomit in real time.

When he tells the story, he mimics the faces.

The pictures were so bad that he had to scrap the whole idea. He couldn't give pictures to every other kid and not to her.

The way he tells the story, he's not mad at the girl. He's not mad about the wasted money, or that the photographer managed to click the shutter at such a terrible moment. With the patience he has for his runners, he laughs, the pictures tossed away a small price for the story.

There might be another beer, and if Woody has another beer, so will you.

Depending on which way things go, or what you ask, or if someone is putting up the chairs to start sweeping, he might tell a sad story. He might tell you about how he's been afraid of lightning since he was a boy and a bolt from blue sky crushed a tree near the road he was walking, knocking him down and filling the air with a taste like clean rain and campfire.

Depending on how that story goes, he might tell his other lightning story. It has less detail than most of his stories. It's short. He doesn't spend time filling in the names or the places. It's a story about a kid, a runner, speared by lightning on the track. Woody got to the kid and started CPR, pushing and breathing.

He doesn't talk about the paramedics getting there, when he switched from pushing to watching, what happened in the next couple minutes and the next couple days.

He'll tell you enough to know that the kid didn't make it. He won't say anything else about the parents. He doesn't say he went to the funeral or if he wore a tie.

His storytelling is merciful, minimalist in form when that’s what’s needed.

This last time we talked, enough empty glasses on the table that we were figuring who might wake up and give us a ride home, Woody told me a new story. It was from only a little while ago, just before he finished coaching. It was still a little raw, not sanded down and smoothed out the way most of his stories are.

He takes runners on a trip every year. He's got a lifetime of stories that start this way. Kids who've never been on a plane before and sit clutching the airsickness bag in both hands, listening studiously to the safety procedures. Kids who learned all about the ocean in geography but didn’t know how salty

it really was until they dove in open-mouthed. Kids, like the one from this story, who were just damn slow.

Woody has coached a lot of slow runners. He has the patience, the kindness. This runner, though, was especially slow, not to mention a little bit of a social outcast.

The way Woody told the story, even in its unfinished form, was kinder. He sprinkled in details about her way of dressing, about her ears parting the hair on either side like Bette Midler throwing apart curtains when she hits the stage. He had a better way of saying she doesn't have friends.

Her mom thought it would be good for her to go, so she asked. Woody said okay. Then he went straight home to figure out not whether the girl would come in dead last, but how long after the second-to-last place finisher they would have to keep the clock running for her.

The way Woody tells it, the transitions aren't silky yet, and this version cuts to Arizona, to a breakfast Woody and the slow runner eat while the other runners sleep. The way Woody tells it, it's natural that a coach would set an early alarm to have breakfast with his absolute worst runner. The way he tells it, it's normal that he smiles to her and starts his motivational speech by saying, "Life is pain."

This is the part where the listener has to fill in the story a little, the part he hasn't fit together all the way.

He tells the runner that life is pain, that getting old is pain. He doesn't mention to her that he'd gone in for a follow-up from his knee surgery that meant a flush and a catheter. He mentions that growing old is pain, but he doesn't mention the particular pain of spending a week with teenagers in good health while you are pulled aside by airport security, taken to a separate room to show them papers for your metallic knee and to take down your pants.

He says that going through school is pain. He doesn't mention the time he broke his neck playing football. He doesn't talk about going to school the after that horse kicked him in the face.

He says that childbirth is pain, and the runner laughs. He says to her, "When you're out there today, try running in pain. It will get you ready for life. I'm not going to tell you how fast or how slow or how much time you've been running. I'm just going to shout Childbirth at you, and you'll know what I'm talking about."

Like any Woody story, you think it's going to wrap up after his locker room speech, after he's standing on the sides, yelling Childbirth! at a young runner. Then, you think it's over for sure when he says she ran the distance five minutes faster than her previous best. You think it ends when the other kids surround the girl, congratulating her.

Woody always has a little more story.

It ends that night, after the kids go to the mall to unwind, after they decide to give that slowest runner a makeover, after they go back to the hotel and announce "The Unveiling of Emily

It ends after one of the kids introduces Emily, who's too nervous to come out of the bathroom. It ends after a second announcement where Emily is pulled out of the bathroom for everyone to see.

Where the story ends, Woody doesn't tell what she looked like. Of course he doesn't. That's where an amateur storyteller would go. All he talks about is how good it felt that this kid, the one he had better ways of describing, could spend an evening at the center, not the slowest anything. Just Emily.

The story isn't formed yet. He never remembers the part about himself, where he gets a little credit.

Woody could teach anyone a little bit about telling stories. He tells other peoples' stories better than they do, something never clearer than it was at his retirement when people were asked to share their favorite Woody memories.

One runner talked about the time Woody coached a state championship team. She talked about winning, but she forgot all the Woody detail-warping, forgot to mention that he hurt his foot kicking a tree after he mistakenly thought a runner had dropped out.

Another runner mentioned a couple favorite moments. She got a little bit of the pacing Woody uses, telling a long race story that ended with a short, "Also, dancing with Woody at my wedding."

Nobody came to pick us up after we went out for that beer, and by this time neither of us could drive. Just like any other Woody story in the making, it

didn’t end where we thought it would, which is how we ended up at a dance club trying to sweat out enough of the night to drive.

I have a favorite Woody story. It's about the first time I ran a ten-miler. It's a good story, I think, and one that he would like. I could tell it, but the way he tells it is much better.

No More or Less a Man

by Murray Edwards

The salmon-colored scar erupted just below the woman's throat and spilled down her alabaster skin, disappearing into a tasteful silk blouse. Two rows of raised dots paralleled the wound, like a levee channeling a once-angry river. The cashier, years past retirement age, carefully slid my purchases across the scanner, treating the toothpaste and shaving cream as if they were fine china and delicate crystal. "Anything else?" she asked, her manicured fingers gently placing the toiletries in a Walgreens plastic bag.

I grabbed two Tootsie Pops from a display rack. "Better throw these in as well."

She smiled. "You don't look like a Tootsie-Pop kind of man."

"They're for my kids."

"How old are they?" Under the harsh fluorescent lights, her lineless face reminded me of an heirloom doll – a porcelain figurine accidentally dropped and broken, the pieces sutured together at her chest.

"Six and three."

"Great ages." She tapped the cash register's total key. "Three dollars, eighty-four cents, sir."

I glanced behind me. With no other customers in sight, I emptied my pocket change, selecting dimes and pennies for the exact amount. "Didn't get to tuck them in this evening. Guess I'm feeling a little daddy-guilt."

She sighed knowingly. "Enjoy them while you can. They'll be grown before you blink."

Gathering my plastic bag, I acknowledged her grandmotherly advice with a nod. "Yep. Grown up before you blink," I repeated, stealing one final look at the woman's scar, which attracted my curiosity. What caused the wound? Why was a woman of such refinement working the midnight shift in a store that smelled of shampoo and liniment?

The cashier casually traced the raised ridge with her index finger. "Ugly, isn't it?"

"I didn't intend to stare."

"That's all right," she said softy. "Heart surgery."

"How are you doing now?"

She waited a few seconds before answering, the silence of the empty store magnifying the pause. "Well, the truth is I'm not doing all that well, and I'm . . ." Her voice trailed off, as if she had more to say, but felt unsure if she could trust me with such personal information.

"I'm sorry."

Diverting her eyes from mine, the cashier stared at the counter and absentmindedly rearranged the pennies in a take-one-give-one ashtray. "It's just so hard right now. My daughter's in Michigan. Clarence lives in town, but he's too absorbed with his own problems to pay attention to anyone else's."

"Clarence?"

"My . . . my former husband. We were married 39 years." The cashier looked up from the pennies and wrinkled her brow. "Funny, even now I can't say ex-husband, for some reason."

The woman's body language hinted at additional chapters to the story, chapters she seemed desperate to retell. Although it was late, I decided to invest a few moments and hear more of her story. "So, what happened with you and Clarence?"

The cashier slowly shook her head, like a wounded war veteran remembering combat. She told me her husband, a deacon in their church, led the congregational singing during worship services. "They couldn't open the doors to that building without him being there."

"Baptist?"

"Third Street Baptist." Her eyes refocused on the penny ashtray. "And then . . ." She hesitated and softened her voice to a whisper. "And then . . . "

"Go on. I'm listening."

"And then one evening, I noticed a lump in Clarence's groin. At first, he refused to see a doctor, but it kept growing. Eventually, he had no choice but to see a specialist."

"What was it?"

"Advanced testicular cancer," she said bitterly, as if she wanted to punish the very words themselves. "His doctors advised radical surgery, but he

refused the procedure. Clarence said he wouldn't be a man any longer." Her eyes moistened as she reached under the counter for a tissue. "Can you believe that?"

"It's hard to imagine."

She forced a smile. "I told him it didn't matter. He'd be no more or less a man to me."

The cashier's emotional transparency made me feel uncomfortable, as if my mother had revealed a dark secret about my father. But the woman's unvarnished honesty – her trust in me, a stranger – overrode my discomfort. "Did the doctors change his mind?"

"Eventually. But you know the sad part? He never went back to church." She folded the tissue and dabbed her eyes. "He said religion didn't matter to him anymore."

"Sounds like your husband was angry with God."

"I told Clarence he'd been treating God like a rabbit's foot or a lucky charm, but he wouldn't listen. Next thing I knew, he asked for a divorce."

"A divorce?"

"I think he directed his anger at me on some level, maybe because I found the lump. I don't know, really. He couldn't divorce God, so he divorced me."

The automatic doors swooshed open and an elderly couple entered. Wearing a faded housecoat and a flower-print scarf, the woman cradled the arm of her palsied companion, who balanced himself with a walker. The cashier and I paused our conversation, allowing the pair to pass the counter. The thin-faced man, his eyes cloudy with cataracts, relied on his wife for guidance to the correct aisle.

With the couple no longer within hearing range, the cashier continued. "Clarence and I divorced two years ago, but our retirement and social security aren't enough to cover separate households." She gestured to the wall of cigarettes and tobacco behind the counter. "No one would hire me but Walgreens. Thankfully, it's across town from my church. At least I don't see my friends here."

"I'm very sorry." My mind raced for something more profound to say, a few words of encouragement, perhaps. Nothing seemed remotely adequate.

"Then, six months ago, I had open-heart surgery." Her voice quivered. "Clarence was too wrapped up in his own self-pity to visit me in the hospital.

He called and said it would stress him out too much. I said, 'Stress you out? Like it's a walk in the park for me?'"

"You have amazing strength," I said, magnetized again by the river-like scar flowing down this China doll's chest.

The elderly couple shuffled toward the checkout area. I stepped aside, allowing the wife, her hands arthritic, to rest a quart of orange juice and a dozen eggs upon the counter. Shaking, her husband reached for his wallet, but fumbled it to the floor. Bending down, I retrieved the billfold and handed it to the fragile man. He smiled, a "Thank you," evident in his milky eyes, and then struggled to pay for the juice and eggs for his wife.

It seemed a subtle but intentional act of chivalry, a display of manhood having nothing to do with virility or the presence of particular body parts.

After the elderly couple drifted out the door, I turned to the cashier. "You know, I'd better get home before my wife begins to worry."

"Thanks for listening."

"Things will be okay," I said, specifically not using the word you.

"Sometimes I wonder." She handed me two more Tootsie Pops. "Give these to your kids. Tell them they're from a friend of their father."

I thanked her for the candy and gazed directly into the woman's misted eyes, careful to avoid the magnetism of her scar. "And may God bless you," I added. Not normally a religious person, my words—deeply heartfelt words –came as a complete surprise to me.

The cashier nodded in appreciation. "He just did."

Gathering my bag of toiletries and candy, I hurried through the pharmacy doors into the sticky, summer-night air.

Once in my car, I started the ignition, glanced in my rear-view mirror, and noticed the couple from Walgreens. Huddling beside their tired-looking Buick, the woman floundered through her purse, searching for the keys. The man wrestled with his walker, trying to fold it up. Finally unlocking the vehicle, the wife stowed the metal contraption in the back seat and opened the passenger door for her wobbling husband, who latched on to her arm and steadied himself. Bending down to lower himself into the car, the old gentleman hesitated, straightened up, and turned to face the woman. He kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

I reached for the plastic Walgreens bag and touched the rounded shapes of the Tootsie Pops inside. I thought of Clarence. I thought of what it meant to be a man.

Practical Joke

by Murray Edwards

It was the era when swallowing goldfish and sitting atop flagpoles made you a big man on campus. At the height of the Depression, college students struggled to pay for their education and living expenses, leaving little additional cash for extracurricular entertainment. Ever resourceful, the young men and women, who later gained fame as "The Greatest Generation," developed their own inexpensive diversions - dancing in all-night marathons, listening to network radio shows, and playing harmless pranks on one another.

My father, Weldon Edwards, and his best friend, Les Stephenson, learned to swallow goldfish at McMurry College, a tiny Methodist school in West Texas. As famous as that made them around campus, they acquired an even bigger name by mastering the art of the practical joke. Honing their skills on naïve freshmen and should-have-known-better sophomores, these aw-shucks farm boys tested the patience of college faculty and administrators, themselves the victims of periodic tomfoolery.

On one occasion, Weldon and Les borrowed a Holstein cow from a local dairy farmer and stashed her in the backyard of a friend's house near campus. Around midnight, they haltered the compliant bovine and sneaked her into the darkened Administration Building, leading her up the columned stairs and into the college president's office. When the straight-laced administrator opened his oak-paneled door the next morning, he was greeted by a cud-chewing Holstein heeding nature's call on the polished marble floor. Having a good idea who was responsible for the stunt, the president immediately summoned the two farm boys into his office. Without admitting their roles in the caper, they helped clean up the mess and led the Holstein back down the stairs.

Employing animals in an altogether different fashion, incoming freshmen were targets for the pair's signature stunt. Les, the set-up man, warned newly arriving students about the "crazy" senior living upstairs in the dormitory. It was possible the upperclassman had contracted rabies and hydrophobia as the result of a recent skunk bite. Should there be an incident, Les gravely noted, it would be every man for himself. Later in the week, Weldon appeared on the freshmen floor of the dormitory dressed only in his undershorts, with toothpaste foaming from his mouth. Yelling gibberish and brandishing a starter's pistol he liberated from the track team,

the "rabid" senior chased the gullible underclassmen down the hallways and out the front door. Presumably, most of them returned to finish the semester.

Female students also endured their fair share of collegiate high jinks. The farm boys purchased a damaged coffin from a local undertaker and stashed their pine box in the trunk of Les' car. Double dating with two wide-eyed and unsuspecting freshmen, Weldon and Les began the evening by acting the part of sophisticated seniors promising to show the girls around town. Gradually, the boys' All-American demeanor changed into something much more sinister. Over the course of the night, they talked cryptically of "needing to dispose of a problem" and "finding a suitable location." Eventually parking on a secluded country road, Weldon and Les excused themselves to the back of the car, where they dramatically unloaded the coffin and dumped it into the roadside ditch. When the terrified coeds demanded an explanation, the pair reluctantly admitted they worked for gangsters and were disposing of "someone who had double-crossed the boss." It's a safe guess the girls refused a second date with the pseudo hit men.

Somehow amidst the jokes the pair completed their educations, and after graduating with a degree in education, Les became the superintendent of a small country school in Denton Valley, an unincorporated settlement about twenty miles southeast of Abilene. Weldon returned to his family's ranch, also near Denton Valley, and assumed the life of a college-educated rancher, an unusual credential for those days. Although the two remained close friends, their girthy repertoire of practical jokes slimmed down to occasional stunts involving unsuspecting church friends and ranch hands.

In January of 1941, with the country shuffling and mobilizing for war, the Denton Valley School found itself in need of a new English teacher. In those last painful days of the Great Depression, as jobs remained scarce, the local school board limited teacher employment to "heads of households," defined as unmarried women or married men. According to the unenlightened policy of that time, if a single woman chose to marry, her employment immediately terminated in favor of someone deemed "more necessitous" of the position.

As superintendent, Les asked Weldon to accompany him to interview teacher candidates at Howard Payne College, a small liberal arts school about 60 miles away in Brownwood. Aside from being Les's best friend, Weldon's qualifications as an interviewer aren't entirely clear. He wasn't a school

board member or an administrator, and his expertise extended to Herefords, not Shakespeare.

In respecting the Denton Valley School Board's policy, the two college buddies exclusively interviewed unmarried female graduates, with Les introducing Weldon as his "special advisor." One English major in particular caught the attention of both men—Dorothy Jean Soules, an attractive, enthusiastic nineteen-year-old senior from a small community in Central Texas. Decades later, she would remember the handsome interviewers, only five years older than herself, seemed less interested in her transcript and resume, and more focused on how well she filled out her sweater and skirt.

After consulting with his special advisor, Les offered Miss Soules the teaching position on the spot. Her employment was subject to the approval of the school board, he explained, and would require a contract provision that should she marry, her job would immediately terminate.

Before accepting his offer, the senior coed questioned Les about the school, her duties, and responsibilities. Worried that she might seem inconsiderate by leaving Weldon out of the conversation, she asked whether there would be a room or an apartment to rent somewhere in town.

The cowboy-turned-education-expert immediately suggested the president of the school board and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Barton. They boarded teachers on occasion and, coincidentally, lived directly across the road from his family's ranch. Trying his best not to sound too eager, he offered to introduce Miss Soules to his neighbors. Hesitating for a moment, he added that Denton Valley was not really a town, since it no longer had a post office, but was more of a settlement. Weldon hoped she wouldn't be disappointed in living in a rural area.

The prospective teacher knew all about country life, she said, from growing up on a ranch and graduating from a school about the size of Denton Valley. Unfortunately, she didn't own an automobile and would need transportation to and from work. Would she be able to ride the school bus?

After receiving a positive response regarding her transportation, and with no other job prospects in sight, the young lady accepted Les' offer of employment. After all, a paycheck was a paycheck.

A week later, even though she'd never seen her new school, Dorothy Jean Soules packed her bags and moved to West Texas. Delivered by her parents to the intersection of two lonesome gravel roads, and spotting the neglected, weather-beaten signpost that read "Denton Valley," she surely must have

second-guessed her career decision. Besides the cream-colored flagstone school, then comprised of only eleven grades, the settlement consisted of an exhausted cotton gin; two paint-peeled, clap-boarded churches; a long-abandoned blacksmith shop, and a barn-like country store which sold fresh eggs, ammunition, and gasoline. Sadly, the most attractive feature of Denton Valley seemed to be its cemetery, a postcard-worthy patch of land with native post-oak trees randomly interspersed among the uncrowded rows of tombstones.

After the new teacher settled into the Barton family's spare bedroom, Les and Weldon immediately competed for her attention. Both quickly decided against swallowing goldfish or performing other stunts to impress her, because unlike the flighty freshmen of their college days, this woman was different—confident and poised, and although possessing a playful sense of humor, she displayed little regard for sophomoric pranks.

Despite being only a few years older than most of her charges, Miss Soules demanded hard work and exceptional performance. She encouraged the students to broaden their horizons and consider careers that seemed beyond reach. Decades later, these same students—now doctors, lawyers, and prominent business people—would continue to communicate with their favorite teacher, often commenting on her influence on their lives.

During the day at school, Les pressed his advantage of working with the new teacher, but Weldon's proximity to her boarding house gave him the upper hand in the evenings. The courting rivalry, always good-natured, continued throughout early 1941, with the young men agreeing that no matter who won her heart, they would remain close friends. Both admitted it would be a difficult promise to keep.

Gradually, the young teacher's affections favored Weldon; but since Les employed her, she hesitated to suggest he was losing the battle, for fear he would not extend her contract.

Just before the end of the spring semester, the superintendent gathered all the teachers into the school lunchroom and presented them with renewal contracts for the 1941-42 school term. Consistent with prior agreements, it retained the prejudicial clause regarding teachers remaining single. On April 23, 1941, Miss Soules signed her contract, which was approved and counter-signed by the school board president, Mr. Barton, as well as her superintendent, Les.

Then, two days later and barely four months after arriving in Denton Valley, Miss Soules and Weldon eloped to Breckenridge, some 60 miles away, in

what must have been the most dangerous and exhilarating weekend of their lives. Secretly married by the justice of the peace, they kept their nuptials quiet until the end of the school year. Dorothy Jean continued to work for the superintendent and live in the school board president's spare room, as if nothing had happened, but rendezvousing with Weldon whenever possible. Les must have wondered why his favorite teacher's affections toward him suddenly cooled and why she was no longer available for courting.

After the school term ended, the newlyweds revealed their marriage to the flabbergasted superintendent. Hoping Les would honor their commitment to remain buddies, Weldon explained it as a "practical" joke—practical in the sense that Les would have been forced to fire his best friend's bride had he known the facts. Les, heartbroken over losing out to Weldon, was nevertheless a good sport and wished the couple well. He immediately set about recruiting a replacement English teacher—this time without his special advisor.

That fall, Dorothy Jean managed to secure a position at Eula, another country school nearby, but one without the antiquated requirement of teachers having to be the "head of the household." In time, she would retire from education to concentrate on raising three sons, including this writer, and helping Weldon on their cattle ranch. Eventually, the community of Denton Valley, as well as its school, would dissolve into a distant but pleasant memory, memorialized only by a roadside marker at the picturesque country cemetery.

Pearl Harbor would change the Greatest Generation's focus from sitting atop flagpoles and swallowing goldfish to more weighty matters—building thousands of bombers and tanks, retaking the shores of Normandy, and defending obscure Pacific islands.

Shortly after the United States declared war, Les left Denton Valley for service to his country. After the war ended, he settled in Dallas and pursued a career in the natural gas business. He found and married a love of his own, but continued his special relationship with Weldon and Dorothy Jean for the next 60 years. Maintaining an active friendship through those years, the now-mature farm boys continued to play jokes on their friends, and occasionally, even their wives. But none would ever surpass the "practical" joke Weldon and Dorothy Jean played on Les in the spring of 1941.

Handguns and Healing: After twelve years and one bullet to the heart, a friendship attempts renewal

by Jona Jacobson

As there are guns for making war, guns for keeping peace, and guns for unleashing havoc, there are friends with whom you are frequently at war, friends with whom life is peaceful, and friends who join you for a drive to a reservoir in the dark predawn hours of a high school day, sunroof open and cigarettes blazing.

For a long while I knew little of such distinctions and complexities. I had few friends. I was gloomy, put myself down often, and glared my way through whole days to keep others at bay. Through my Junior and Senior High school years, I practiced that glare in the mirror. Few had heard of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) in the 1980s, so the only explanation I could come up with for why I was so terrified of people was that I was a misfit and unworthy of friendship. So I decided, as the teen mind is so uniquely qualified to do, that it would be easier if I scared people away proactively.

But in high school, one person saw through my glare and befriended me. We met our sophomore year. Quickly we became close friends: I was fat, she was slightly plump and we bonded over talks on the front steps of Poky High. Discussions of our fat oozing out to fill cracks in the cement created unification as only two thick girls can achieve. She meant the world to me—which in later years I realized was an unfair position to put someone in—and I happily embraced her as a sister. Neither of us knew I had SAD. I only knew I needed her. She only knew I clung to her like a drunk grasps a bottle.

Over the next few years she lost weight and gained a social life while I clung desperately to a friendship I could feel slipping away. She'd have unsafe sex with someone I disapproved of and my anger resulted in months of not talking. Possessive? A bit. Then we'd start talking again, slipping smoothly back into our routine: me at her house with her family, or in her bedroom, sitting in the open window even in the freezing winter months, smoking. We'd talk. We'd laugh.

We'd go to parties. But my social anxiety would rear up and I'd prop in a corner, glaring, while she laughed and mingled. I hated myself for going. I

hated her for being able to do what I could not. I suspect she hated me. Friendship with me cost too much.

At Idaho State University this pattern of hanging out and not talking would continue for a few years. Then, years later, over one summer break, the month of our ten-year high school reunion, she headed off for vacation with her husband. The day before she left she told me, "I'll call when we get back." This may have been her way of communicating the Hollywood-esque blow-off: "Don't call me, I'll call you."

In the meantime, I went to Seattle for my own mini-vacation. A terrible thing happened there that left me bruised and broken. I wanted nothing more than to cry on the shoulder of the friend I had counted on for so long. When we were both back in Pocatello, however, instead of a friendly shoulder, I had the door to her house closed in my face by her husband with a gruff, "She's not home." A cold shoulder reception if ever there was one.

Silence reigned. I am not proud to admit I called repeatedly and I stopped by repeatedly and I left copious numbers of notes. I was desperate and I stopped just shy of stalking her. Or not, I suppose. Over the next few years of not knowing what had happened, I did what came naturally: I blamed myself. And what blame is complete without punishment? So I cut myself with scalpels and knives and bits of broken mirror. I burned myself with curling irons and sugar caramelized on the stove top.

The more I tried to cling to remnants of our friendship, I suppose the more she may have backed into her home and into the corners of her life, hoping I would go away. Physically, I am intimidating to many, though I never thought I was to her. Perhaps I was wrong. Clearly, I've been mistaken about a number of things. Perhaps with each letter she received, she felt a chill of foreboding.

What could drive a friend to hound another friend so? Desperation. But why? Days before I stood in her entryway and had the door and the friendship shut on me, I was bent over a car on a dark quiet street near Volunteer Park in Seattle and raped. And when I came home, I needed my friend.

I survived. Both the rape and the loss of friendship. But the two events became entwined. No longer can I think of one without thinking of the other. And the blame I heaped on myself for both situations was nearly intolerable.

Eventually I stopped. Stopped the stalking, stopped the self-blame and the punishment. I went so far as to major in anything but English (writing having been my chosen path as a teen), because she was first a student

then a lecturer in the English Department. I wandered from Occupational Therapy to Sociology to Art to Accounting. And the years passed on.

More years passed, some twelve years since that day I knocked on the door looking for support. And then I was shot.

My 17-year-old nephew stood beside me in my mother's home on what would have been my parents' 50th Anniversary had my father not died four months earlier. He was eager to look at his grandfather's handguns. I began checking the weapons for ammunition; something I ought to have done already. But with dinner to be cooked and a symphony to attend after, I was rushed and didn't feel I had a few minutes to spare.

He watched me clear a gun, and picked one up in imitation. When he removed the magazine, I said, "Better be careful, in case Gramps left a round chambered."

He remembers silence. It is possible that speech formed in my mind, but the two puffs of air that hit me prevented it from passing my lips. Instead, I fell back and my world became a thing of fuzzy cold and distant words. Words like, "You've been shot!" and "Does she have a Living will?" And cold like you cannot believe unless you have been "in extremis"—near death.

Then silence. Just as I had not heard the gunshot that rang out in a small room, I stopped hearing the doctors and nurses and family members present in the Critical Care Unit. Silence replaced the disjointed words as shadows moved in the periphery. Silence that reminded me of the silent streets I walked after I was raped. When I pushed myself off the hood of the car I'd been bent over and I walked back to where I'd been staying, not a single dog barked. No tires crunched stones on pavement. No birds tweeted. No cats in romantic interlude yowled. Not even the wind whispered through the myriad drooping rhododendrons and bloom-less magnolias lining the sidewalks I walked without my booted feet making any sound. Silence and cold in Seattle. Silence and cold in the hospital. And a few ghosts wandering about in the shadows.

The first words to come from the silent darkness were two days later, "I'm going to remove this tube now."

And I was alive again.

Seven days after my fortieth birthday, a .38 hollow point entered my body and split, passing through my left lung. A fragment stayed there, one in my liver, two in my myocardium and the largest plowed in to settle in my interatrial septum. A gun misfiring led to miraculous events: the cross-top

hollow point didn't mushroom out as it should have; the bullet fragmented prior to entering my heart (which wouldn't have survived a whole or exploding missile); and a one-time friend returned to my life.

Out of the depths of darkness that was two days of drug induced amnesia, I awoke to the beeps and bright lights of a Critical Care Unit. I was browsing Facebook in a slight morphine and freshly-infused blood fog, surprised to read a message from my former friend, who wrote, "Good god, woman--I'm astonished by the grit that allows you to (1) survive a bullet wound) and (2) take a self-portrait IN THE ICU and post it on FB—you're an Internet superhero."

She added, "Scary rumors were flying Friday night--I'm glad, very glad, you're still among the living." She asked if she could visit.

Could she come visit? I was in shock, not just from the five bullet fragments lodged in three of my major organs, but from the message and its apparent import. Three fragments in my heart, and there I was in a hospital bed, getting what felt like another shot to the heart. I couldn't tell if this one was good or bad. A cardiologist tells me, "The heart doesn't feel pain." But if you believe you've lost a friend, the hurt is real enough.

Aside from a few passing greetings at the local coffee shop ("Jona," from her; "Morning," from me) since I returned to Idaho in January 2009, we haven't spoken much for a dozen years.

My shooting made top spot on TV news and front page headlines, but perhaps a mutual friend told her. Despite my years of thinking about this potential reunion with prepared responses such as, "Why don't you continue to do what you do best and leave me alone," I typed, "Yes" and hit send.

The next day she stood beside my bed with latte in hand and a mutual friend in tow (could she not face me alone?), saying, "We've only just started talking again and you nearly die on me." We spoke only a few minutes because, well, I was recovering from a gunshot wound and hadn't even sat up on my own yet. We hugged awkwardly when I was too tired to visit longer.

When she left I knew we'd be on shaky ground—and indeed since then our conversations have been stiff and cumbersome—but I was thankful for surviving the bullet that entered my heart, giving me another chance at friendship. One not tainted by clinging neediness.

A few days more passed and I received another Facebook message, this one accompanied by a friend request. In the message she basically said friending

me would be fair, because then I'd have as much access to information about her as she had to me (presumably through mutual acquaintances) but if I didn't want to friend her, that was okay too. She wouldn't be hurt. She's a tough cookie, this one. That, or she just didn't care. But then, why initiate contact after all these years?

Although the pain of the loss of her friendship had faded, it was like a deep bruise that, if I moved just so, would flare up and hurt again. Hoping this would mend the hurt, hoping this would make the rape not have happened, and despite my fear that it would only make things worse, I hit "friend."

That was in April of 2009. We got together once in September of the same year. Other than that, our interactions have been limited to Facebook comments and occasional in-passing greetings at the coffee shop. I invited her to a few functions—not too many, I didn't want her to feel suffocated by me or my friendship. Friendship should not be something one feels is a burden or feels obligated to attend to. So I didn't press.

Over the last several months, however, I admitted to myself that with every status update or comment she made on a mutual friend's wall, but not on my own, I hurt. Each icon and "like" eroded my self worth just a teensy bit and pained me slightly more than the last. Finally the realization came that Facebook would not be the place our friendship might have a chance.

Why did I react in such a hurt manner to this common Facebook activity? With each Facebook post the self-blame returned: My fault I was raped. My fault I lost my friend. My fault. Is it fair to be angry with her because I was raped? No.

Is it fair to be cut off from a friendship without even a "Go Away!"? No. The rapist's parting words were cruel. My friend's lack of parting words, though, somehow cut more deeply. In a moment of determination, I did what in real life is so hard to do, but on Facebook, so easy. I defriended her.

Then she started a knitting group. She sent me a message wondering if I'd defriended her because she'd noticed she couldn't include me directly on the invite list, and if I didn't mind her prying, "Why?" She wondered if she'd done something to hurt me—unintentional as it may be—because she often felt she was hurting me. She commented that our conversations, short and infrequent as they were, always seemed off kilter.

Through Facebook messaging I explained that I felt I was walking on eggshells whenever I saw her, not knowing if it was okay to engage her in conversation or if the standard greeting was the maximum I should employ.

As gently and unobtrusively as I am capable of doing, I intimated that perhaps knowing what I'd done—or what she thought I'd done, years ago would help our interactions now.

I had defriended with hope. Within the social, spatial, and temporal confines (boundaries set by her, for her comfort) of a knitting group, we spent one evening together. Other attendees were shocked to discover we'd known one another well over thirty years. She sat facing forward, I sat slightly twisted away from her—partly to protect myself, partly as an attempt to keep from crowding her. I'd done enough crowding over the years. But I've also done enough evasion.

Within days of this knitting group meeting came a message in response to my delicate probing into what had happened fourteen years ago, my inquiry about what may have brought an end to our friendship. She was not ready, she wrote, to delve into the past. In fact, and in no uncertain terms, I was told that day would probably not come. Ever. Furthermore, Facebook, she wrote, was not the place to discuss such issues. Not that she could think of a place or time such things should or could be discussed. But, she wrote, the relative safe parameters of the knitting group, surrounded by several intelligent women knitting, would be the best I could hope for, as far as interacting with her might go.

Intentionally or not, she hurt my feelings; I'd known it would happen. Heartache had prepared me. But I am not a girl practicing my glare in the mirror anymore. Friendship is more complicated than Facebook allows and defriending isn't as easy as it sounds. Perhaps if we can get past this awkwardness, a knitting group filled with 'neutral' knitters will indeed be a better place to (re)start.

Night Mare

by Kimberly Hamilton

In the interval between wakefulness and sleep, the lavishly embellished animals of my youth go round and round. They are proud and perfect and pristine, treasured for their inspired detail and spirit. There are real animals in my life, but it is the intricate counterfeits that animate my dreams. The ghosts of these charlatans leap and bow before me, begging me to set them free.

The carousel animals haunt me because I know them. When they began their procession through my childhood home, I had known no other animals. My father, intolerant to the messes that came with typical household pets, had declared a moratorium on all things beast before I'd even existed. That is, until he discovered the carousel horse.

As the story goes, he was driving home from work one rainy evening when he stopped to offer assistance to a broken-down tractor-trailer. Tucked beneath a blanket of blue tarps, he saw a tangle of knobby limbs, thick necks, and flowing manes. And thus, the parade began—my father the grand marshal, and the truck driver, a staggeringly talented carver named Daniel, bringing up the rear.

Overnight, our formerly furless home became a menagerie. Elaborately ornamented horses, camels, pigs, giraffes, and even an ostrich or two gilded every room. There was a fierce beauty and a quiet dignity to the creatures; their enviable qualities enchanted the hordes of guests who came to see, and often to buy. With the exception of a few special pieces, the carousel figures came and went.

The house evolved. What had once been a simple roof overhead was now a cross between a ghoulish zoo and a museum. Glassy, unseeing eyes. Legs bent in motion, carrying lean bodies to nowhere. Gaping mouths, gasping for breaths that never came.

They were everything my father wanted out of his animals—beauty and perfection and rigid obedience. They could be repositioned. Admired. Proudly purchased. Easily sold. And as they took up residence in every room in our home, so, too, did my dad's expectations.

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When I turned five, the loft was converted into my very own room, the decorative scheme inspired by a white horse with a deep pink ribbon flowing from its sinewy neck. No one seemed to notice how that pink ribbon angrily clashed with the blood-red shag carpeting.

Every night, my father would slowly climb the stairs to my loft. As horse with the pink ribbons looked on with unseeing eyes, my father would scrutinize the sanguine floors and the furniture and the closets for anything out of place. No matter how hard I would try, I was never quite as immaculate, as utopian, as that horse. And there, throughout my childhood, she stood. The sterile sentinel.

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So many years from horses and blood beneath my feet and daddy's expectations, I am just a dream away from a time when I wished so desperately to be another carousel in his collection. I think, in truth, he wished it too.

Some nights, I allow myself to look closely at those carefully crafted forgeries, and I see my own wild desperation mirrored in their icy eyes. They long to break free of the fetters of familial expectations, and I long to help them. But who am I to lead this parade of wooden souls, I wonder, as I neatly fold my clothes into the drawer and check to see, before I close my eyes, that everything is in its place.

Strange Truths

by Aimee Henkel

We shared a ward together, he and I; the kind of place you find homeless junkies, schizophrenics, shell-shocked wanderers, drug abusers. They called it a dual-diagnosis unit. The hospital complex was in the center of Westchester, NY, across the street from Macy's and the Galleria. I could see it from the windows. It was beautifully kept: emerald lawns, pearly white buildings with bright red roofs, lots of flowers and shrubbery. Inside, our ward was septic, strange. There was a padded cell in detox. The night I arrived, they brought in a pregnant heroin addict who screamed for eight hours straight. No one slept. We stood at the edge of our doorways in the dimmed halogen lights and watched the door, listening to her scream. Every hour or so an orderly or a nurse would go in and through the brief opening we'd see the poor thing on the floor, curved around her belly, her legs kicking.

It was a locked mental ward. Orderlies watched our every move. Doors locked automatically from the outside. There were call buttons on the walls and "take down" lights on the ceilings. There were doctor's rounds each morning: three white coated men asked questions, nodded with the answers, and wrote them down. There were meds, lots and lots of meds. And then there were the people. My roommate was a prostitute from Yonkers who had three kids, all of whom she lost to Child Protective Services. She had no idea where they were. She was on a lot of Thorazine, and she was touchy. The food made us all gassy, and she was particularly offended by the smell of her co-patients on the ward. Other people came and went, some to other parts of the hospital, others just refused treatment.

James wasn't the kind of person who belonged in that kind of rehab, although it was clear he was an alcoholic. He was the kind of guy I liked: jolly, open, friendly. Short and squat, he was Italian and Irish, his face pocked with little scars I assumed were acne or early chicken pox. He wore a moustache and I wondered what his face looked like without it. He was rotund, which I figured was from all the liquor, but then, I didn't know much about his life before he got there.

We connected right away. He smiled and joked with everyone, but we shared a strange sense of humor. Being the only alcoholics on the ward, it was easy to latch on to each other, somewhat like drowning cats to a stick of wood. Outside during smoke breaks, we talked, but he was reserved. He

listened to me, wanted to know what my life had been like before rehab, was I with someone—all that. It was easy to tell him my girlfriend was in the eating disorder ward across the quad and that we had been nude strippers together until she tried to kill me. That I had graduated from NYU summa cum laude, and worked as a corporate writer until the booze got me. My best idea had been to take my clothes off for money so I could drink full time. It was like letting my breath go. The strange part about telling him all of that was he understood. He got that I wanted to drink all the time and that I wanted nothing more to do with men. I told him I wasn't going to drink again ever. Just for that day.

He agreed with me. We had a lot to agree upon. When the Narcotics Anonymous speaker came and admitted he woke up one morning with another man, who said to him: "Good morning, papi," we laughed so hard we cried. And when we had to pretend we were animals in therapy, we egged each other on because someone willing to stay clean and sober "would do anything." And when we were finally allowed out to roam the grounds, he told me about his English bulldog that had to be delivered by Cesarean section because their heads were so big, they couldn't be delivered naturally anymore. I wondered if eventually that would be true of people; would our heads be so big that no one would have vaginal births? He didn't answer.

He and I liked to play trivial pursuit, although he was much better than I. We sat around the day room at night, the summer Olympics blaring, while he beat me over and over. The only questions I got right were entertainment. I was terrible at history, sports, geography. We were inspired that summer, watching the athletes struggle and win. Working as hard as we were during the day, trying to get it right: the steps, the therapy, the family entanglements, the reasons, reasons, reasons; these nights were part of a routine I needed more than anything else. We joked and teased, and nothing got too serious. Until the therapists got serious about us.

I was called into the head counselor's office on a Thursday. I remember because it was AA day, and we always liked their speakers.

"You and James are too close." She said, opening my file. She wrote something in it and I thought for sure I was going to be thrown out. I wondered if it was anything like getting suspended from high school. Would I have to do this all over again if I was? "You two need to separate. His treatment isn't going to work if he can get out of himself with you."

I looked at her as if she had two heads. I thought his treatment was going just fine.

"No. He needs to address what happened."

"What happened?" I asked. This was a new element in our relationship. What hadn't he told me?

"James was married up until a year ago. Then his daughter died."

"You're kidding?" I couldn't believe he wouldn't tell me about this. "How did she die?"

"He and his wife had been out at a party, drinking, and they forgot to close the baby gate all the way. She fell down the stairs and broke her neck. Died instantly."

"He had a daughter?"

The therapist nodded and closed my file. "You two need to separate."

"But I need to talk to him about this. It's not fair he didn't tell me." I think I cried then. "I told him everything."

"Good distraction for him, I guess. Being a stripper and all." She raised an eyebrow at me, kind of smirked. I didn't like that little observation one bit.

I left her office with strict instructions not to talk to him. It seemed strange, to know so much about a person, who they were, what made them laugh, what sports they liked, what they did for a living, and not know about the hole in their lives. It was as if he had danced around it in every conversation. There had always been something but I never knew what it was; words on the edge of his tongue, a thought never expressed. Perhaps he had wanted to tell me, but I hadn't let him get a word in edgewise. I beat myself up for not knowing, not giving him the room to say the words.

That afternoon, he must have gotten his talking to as well. He didn't avoid me at dinner, just sat two seats away instead of next to me. I leaned over and asked to talk to him on the walk back.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"Tell you what?" He smiled and handed me a necklace he'd bought me from the gift shop that morning.

"About your daughter."

He looked crushed. The person I knew disappeared in an instant; his expression collapsed. “She fell.”

“What?”

“She went down the stairs. She was two. Our townhouse had steep stairs. She got up in the middle of the night, fell and broke her neck. I don’t know who forgot to close the gate. I think it was me.”

“Oh my God.” I cried then. At the time, I was sad for him, because of the broken expression, the empty eyes. The jolly man I had known was gone. But later, I realized I had known something else. He would never stop drinking. We knew it then, but neither one of us had the courage to say it.

All of a sudden an orderly was between us. “Let’s get going.”

He was discharged a week later. We tried to laugh, make jokes, but they fell flat. Nothing was funny, now that we had to face the real world. I never saw him again, although fifteen years later I can still see him saying: “I don’t know who forgot to close the gate. I think it was me.” I want to believe he got sober, that it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but I’ll never know. And that’s how it is sometimes when you stay clean this long; you learn to live without knowing.

Finding Henry Miller

by Cathy Roy

"Honey, Clark's here," my mother yelled from the kitchen. The white curtains blew gently over the avocado countertop.

"You didn't tell me he had a van," she said with a concerned voice. My father had just shuffled into the living room. "You know what boys do in vans," my mother said to my father. I wanted to pop up and tell them that Clark and I had sex everyplace in the world but the back of van, but I didn't think they'd appreciate this coming from their 17-year-old daughter. It was disgusting in the back of that van. Too many parties combined with a leaky sunroof left it dank and moldy. At one point, there were so many pot seeds on the floor, some actually started to sprout. The plants never got too big, though, because someone always picked them and tried to smoke them. I never tried it. They gave everyone a headache.

My mother opened the door. "Clark, how's Stanford going?" she said and winked at me. I think the wink meant he was a keeper. Clark was tall with long blond hair. He looked like a surfer, but he played lacrosse. "The only true American Sport," he would constantly tell everyone, since it originated with the American Indians. I wondered what the American Indians would think of the Stanford team. He definitely had muscles and a tendency to make girls swoon. I couldn't believe he was having this effect on my mother. I was ready to go away to college next year. "Hey, Mom Roy," Clark smiled with his perfectly white teeth. He really belonged with some model in Vogue, not with me. I was cute, but completely insecure. My school was full of beautiful California blondes. I was brunette and curvy.

"There's coffee in the kitchen – you kids be careful driving over to the coast." She and my dad, who mumbled hello to Clark, went out the door.

Clark promptly sat down and pulled open a magazine. He dumped a large amount of green stuff onto the magazine and started rolling joints.

"Can't you use an album cover from my room?" I asked. "My parents read that magazine."

"It's a long trip. We need a few for the road. What did you tell your parents by the way?" He widened his beautiful green eyes.

"I told them we were watching some of your friends surf." I wasn't about to tell my parents we were driving a few hours down the coast to see some author named Henry Miller. Clark was an English/Drama Major at Stanford and had read about the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur. Rumor had it, if you just showed up you could hang out with Henry. I was too embarrassed to admit I hadn't read anything by Henry Miller. At the time, I was struggling with Shakespeare and Homer. But Clark was crazy about meeting Henry Miller, so I just nodded and pretended I knew what he was talking about. I didn't want him to think I was some stupid high-school girl, even though that's what I was. I was completely out of my league dating a Stanford student. What was I thinking?

"You might want to grab a jacket," he told me as we started to leave. "There's a bunch of fog on the coast and the heater is broken again."

"Big surprise," I mumbled under my breath. Maybe I was more like my father than I thought.

Clark had a loud stereo system, so I just sat back and listened to Steve Miller play "Keep on Rockin' Me."

It was only a few months earlier that I had met Clark at the Stanford radio station. I was still in high-school but was a deejay there. We had a station meeting in the new Business School. The room sat 100 people and looked pretty plush compared to any classroom I had ever been in. It smelled new and was filled with loud college students and a few adults in their twenties. A gorgeous blond youth dressed in a three-piece suit with a fedora hat was at the end of one row.

"Who's that?" I asked Barbara in a casual, I'm-not-really-interested way. Barbara was a teacher's aide and one of the few women, besides me, at the radio station.

"That's Clark," Barbara said. "I'll introduce you to him. You guys would get along." Barbara was always trying to fix me up with someone. Her nickname was "the Burnout," so I wasn't really sure I trusted her decision-making skills. Apparently she was a leftover Stanford student who had taken a lot of acid during the Summer of Love.

After the meeting, everyone piled out into the quad for a beer party. Roses were in bloom. Barbara waved me over to where she was standing with Clark. For a fall night, it felt like summer. We perched on a stone bench talking about school, religion, music and travel. The smell of roses combined with beer wafted through the air. It was obvious he was flirting with me.

After a couple of hours I confessed I was still in high-school, but he didn't seem to mind. I was supposed to be home at midnight, but I got home at 2:00 a.m. Trouble. The next day he showed up at the end of my radio show with a few roses and asked me out to coffee. I was hooked. No one had ever brought me flowers or asked me out for coffee. (Years later a friend would tell me he always stole roses for me in the middle of the night from the Stanford Rose Garden). Before I knew it, we were spending all of our time together. Every day he waited in the high-school parking lot for me to get out of class. My friends thought this was cool.

The first time I got a love letter from Clark, he wrote, I think we're still young, you know? It's exciting to be young and in love too. It's a feeling I want to explore with you – and I want to bathe in it with you and play with it and stretch it and then one day look at it and the next let it go like a wound up rubber band and then sing it – and dance too and laugh, of course laugh and smile, smile a sweet smile and it's just love – the name of a feeling we all want to feel. What? I couldn't imagine anything lasting for a long time – except maybe my youth. I was going to college soon and would probably leave the Bay Area. Clark was too good-looking and too smart. It was just a fluke that I got him as a boyfriend.

Now here I was in his van, going only Clark-knows-where down the coast.

Clark had an uncanny sense of knowing when my mind was wandering. He snapped his fingers in front of me "Where are you at?" he asked.

"Nowhere," I replied. "I'm with you." I widened my eyes at him, which I knew had an effect on him.

Usually when I was this stoned, I was paranoid, but something about this day seemed right.

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About an hour later, we were deep in the redwoods. We appeared to be the only car on the road for miles. I had no idea what time it was or even where we were. I stopped smoking and rolled down the window. We continued to drive out of the redwoods when I noticed the ocean view on one side of the car and pointed it out to Clark.

We pulled over and stared at the big expanse of blue. Clark pulled me slowly to him and kissed me with his tongue. I braced myself. Clark kissed liked my neighbor's Saint Bernard. It wasn't like I was expecting Robert Redford, but it seemed like he was a human tongue. Was this is how it was supposed to be? I'd ask my girlfriends, but they were all so envious over Clark, I couldn't

tell them he wasn't nearly as perfect as they thought he was. The first time he had kissed me, a few months earlier, I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I looked for the sponge he had just used on me. Then, when we had sex, I discovered that sex with him was less messy than kissing. He was great at sex. The problem was how to have sex without the kissing part? I hadn't figured it out yet, so I had learned to let my imagination go wild during the kissing part or try to pretend slobber didn't bother me.

I pulled away, demurely wiped my mouth and chin, and told Clark if we started anything we'd miss Henry Miller. He started up the car and focused his high-IQ lacrosse-playing mind back on finding the library.

Clark had aspirations to be a writer. "Maybe one day I'll write a story about this," he said. "I'll call it Finding Henry Miller." Back in the redwoods I spotted a shack and as we drove past I read the sign in front of it: "Henry Miller Library." Clark hit the brakes and pulled in. There were no other cars in the lot. Some books had gone flying from the back to the front seat, so I picked up a copy of The Tropic of Cancer that Clark had brought with us so that Henry Miller could sign it. I looked at the black-and-white book-jacket photo and a young bald man with glasses stared back at me. "He looks studious," I told Clark.

We got out of the van. Redwoods towered over us as sunlight poured through the openings. It reminded me of church. All we could hear were chimes and birds. It felt peaceful. We reeked of smoke. What was Henry Miller going to think? I tried to smooth out my hair and halter dress so that I looked somewhat presentable. I'd smoked way too much and could barely walk. As we came up the stairs, an older gentleman came out the door.

"Hello," he said, and seemed to look me up and down.

"Mr. Miller, such a hon-hon-honor to meet you," Clark said. I must have been really out of it and paranoid, because it appeared that Henry Miller was staring at my breasts. I stuck out my hand for a shake, but instead he gave me a hug. I could have sworn his hand touched my butt. From everything Clark told me, he was a distinguished writer, but I was beginning to think he was a dirty old man. He wore old jeans and a very crumpled shirt. It looked like he wore the same glasses that were in the picture. He had been years ahead of the John Lennon look, I guess.

I looked at Clark to see if he had noticed anything, but Clark just looked happy. Okay, I must have been imagining things.

"I'm just about to close," Henry said, "but I have a few minutes for you two." Then he winked at me. Why was everyone winking at me today? The face that stared back at me was nothing like the picture on the book. I wondered what had happened to that young fellow. Was I too going to get all old and wrinkled-looking – just a ghost of my youthful self? Realistically, how could I avoid it? Unless I died young.

I decided I was pretty out of it by then, so I let Clark take the lead as they talked about authors I didn't know. I let my mind wander out the window and thought about an essay I had due on Shakespeare. I don't remember any of the conversation between Henry and Clark, but Clark did get his book signed.

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Fifteen minutes later we were back in the van, and Clark was bouncing up and down, pounding his fists on the van roof. "Cool. We met Henry Miller. Everyone in class is going to be SO jealous. And you know what? He said I could come back anytime and bring you too!" He was smiling ear to ear.

This time we drove up the coast listening to the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. The sun was setting in hues of orange and pink.

"We should have brought a camera," I blurted out, thinking we should have somehow captured this day, this moment, this time. Clark smiled at me and told me to remember to bring one next time. I just looked out the window at the deep blue ocean.

There would never be a next time. Clark would take a semester in England in another month and then run off to join a religious cult. He wrote me a few letters about his life in Europe, but we lost touch. I fell in love with another Stanford student and never got around to writing back. In college when I read Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer, it confirmed my impression of him– he was a dirty old man.

Over the years I became everything I thought was uncool when I was seventeen. I have a house, a large mortgage and a job in the corporate world. I've travelled to the places Henry Miller wrote about – New York, Los Angeles and Europe. My world, which seemed so limited over thirty years ago, expanded like the opening of an old book. Now I leaf through The Colossus of Maroussi, as if trying to divine the spirit of Henry Miller into my writing. The feel of the book works like a time machine. I write obsessively about California, Stanford boys and rock and roll. With all the sex and drugs

going on back then, maybe Clark and I were more like Henry Miller's characters than we imagined.

Motif

by Cherri Randall

In 1966, my mother works in a wallet factory and my father and I drive around in his Chevy Apache truck. He always has a plan to make some money for us. We go to Lake Murray and have bonfires. He will burn motors to extract the copper wires to sell at a salvage yard. He will always have some kind of junk to take there, and I love prowling through the maze of hulls and remnants and castoffs. I am never afraid of being lost, because I can hear my father's voice carried on the air as he tells stories at the junkyard gate.

I have a Snoopy rod and reel for the lake and we fish from the banks sometimes. Some of his stories are bragging to his friends about how he can't fish because I'm reeling perch in faster than he can keep my hook baited. I like eating fish with ketchup. He has other stories about me, how once while we were home and the phone rang, I told some woman my daddy couldn't talk because he was pottying, and once I decided the pot of soup on the stove didn't look full enough for me and him and Momma, so I added a sliced banana to make it fuller. That night we got to have hamburgers and my favorite food in the world, Dilly Bars.

He has a trotline at the lake, and while it is an ocean to me, it is not so far nor so deep that he cannot walk from one side to the other and check his lines. Because he has had back surgery, he does not like a waistband digging into his scars, so he wears overalls. For checking trotlines, he has an old pair with cut-off legs, and that is how we do it, check the trotlines, him wearing cut-off overalls and me wearing my swimsuit and life vest, clinging to the straps over his shoulders.

We take in the catch going across and bait the lines coming back. A stringer is tied onto his overall's hammer loop. He gives the carp away to old black people who are around the banks fishing and he does this so often that anytime his Apache is parked at the lake, someone black is fishing close by. I love the way they all fuss over my coppery hair in the sunlight, prettier than the wires in old motors they say.

Daddy has six big carp one day and two people wanting them, so they get three each.

"Mr. Owens," (nobody said Owen ever) "I am sho glad you don't like carp," the man says.

"I never could eat 'em," he answers.

"Well you just don't know how to cook 'em," the woman says. "You ever try my carp made in the pressure cooker, you wouldn't be out here giving none of them away no more."

The man laughs. He has a gold tooth and the sun hits it and I wish I had one it is so pretty. "Don't be telling him or he's liable to start keeping them," he warns the woman.

"Nah," my daddy says. "I just like getting them out of the lake. They make the water turbid and uproot the vegetation. Makes it harder on all the fish."

I am listening to this like I listen to all my daddy's conversations and stories, but something is pinching me on the back of my neck and I have to start jerking and crying and I am a little embarrassed because I am peeing myself, but it is only in my swimsuit.

I fling my head around and the woman starts screaming too, because what flings off is a little bitty snake and it hits the rocky bank and starts slithering. My father is right there beside it instantly. I have never seen him move so fast in my life, but he is there stomping the head of the snake and part of its body and still it wriggles senselessly in the sun for a few moments.

The man is over there looking at it.

"Mr. Owens, that's a copperhead. You better check that girl for a bite after it done been tangled up in her hair since you left the water."

"How would I see a bite on her head?" he asks, and the woman comes over, going the long way around the smashed snake on the ground, maybe nine inches long.

"You okay, little darlin'?" she asks me, and I can't help it. My stomach lurches and I vomit but she sidesteps and misses it. When I'm done she cradles my head, smoothing out my hair.

"She got two little fang marks on the back of her neck," the woman says.

"Lord have mercy," the man says. "You better get her home."

My dad tells them to take all the fish, and they throw my life vest and the rest of our stuff in the back of the truck and we take off. When we get home, I get to use all the Mr. Bubble I want in my bath and he stays right there with me to make sure I don't fall asleep and drown in the tub which is kind of funny because it's the middle of the day but I do feel tired and I love the taste of baby aspirin and he lets me chew up about five of them with a Nehi

Strawberry soda and then I have a long nap. He tells me over and over not to tell my mother there was a snake in my hair or she will be mean to us and tell us we can't go to the lake anymore.

When a Wife Just Isn't a Wife

by Julie Whitlow

I will happily celebrate my seventh wedding anniversary next summer. My problem as a married lesbian is the lack of a good all-occasion word to refer to my beloved.

I struggle with the best term to call the person-for-whom-I-live-and-breathe-and-share-my-life-love-joys-sorrows-triumphs-mistakes-hopes-dreams-health care proxy-and-retirement savings. Is she my wife? That term works with an ironic twist among close friends. My wife will pour me that glass of Pinot Noir. Otherwise, the word wife just does not naturally flow from brain to tongue.

Of course, my familiarity with the dictionary tells me that a wife is a married woman. But the historical baggage of my foremothers who were forced into marriage for reasons of political alliance, inheritance, servitude, and depth of dowry also permeates my psyche.

My own mother gave up a successful career in 1958 to become….a wife. She was a darn good one, too. She was lovely and loyal, determined, and divine. Dinner was always on the table at 6, cookies were hot out of the oven, and her devotion to home and hearth is eternal.

And my gal? She can pick up a snake in the woods, use power tools like a pro, raise a bumper crop of arugula, embroider a placemat, and whip up a soufflé in a jiffy. She's just not a wife.

Partner? That's a fine choice. It worked before we were married but ambiguities abound. Man or woman? Business partner? Law partner? Tennis partner? Clarity depends on context and there is plenty of room for confusion.

Spouse? That works for an equity line or a blood transfusion, but just seems too legalistic for daily use. Lover? Not in front of mom. Friend? Cop out. Significant other? Spare me.

My love and I were together 11 years before we could legally wed, and our relationship progressed from a crackling attraction to a few blissful years of adventurous travel and eating at trendy restaurants. We went to graduate school, established careers, and made the decision to adopt two beautiful

children and sign on for a hefty mortgage. Marriage protected us legally and financially.

By marrying, we could also demonstrate to society's skeptics that my love and I were equally capable as straight couples of changing diapers, mowing the grass, and dashing from the schoolyard to the commuter rail.

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So, why can't she just be my wife? The reality is that feminism has influenced my generation, too young to have really been pioneers, too old to not to have benefitted from the dismantling of the notion that a wife is there to obey her husband.

But, another reality is that, despite progress, gays and lesbians routinely face rejection from family members, discrimination in the workplace, and denunciation from the pulpit. We trust others based on specific situations. Using the terms wife and husband forces us to always be out, vulnerable.

There are occasions such as a fundraiser for a favorite liberal candidate where my wedding ring has an aura of clout. Introductions are seamless, easy. There are other times, though, where I have to make a snap decision about the mindset of a stranger and I don't ask or tell about my marital status.

A few weeks ago, I bought a car form a dealer on the Lynnway. Ronnie, the salesman, and I had to wait around for the usual approvals and reams of paperwork. During that time, Ronnie showed me pictures of his own lovely wife and daughter. I learned a lot about their trip to Aruba, and how tough it was to pay the college tuition bills.

At noon Ronnie broke his sandwich in half, a fresh mozzarella and prosciutto sub from Bianchi's in Revere. I told Ronnie about my girls, how they love spaghetti Bolognese. He said, "That's my favorite, too. Your husband's a lucky guy." I produced a fake chuckle. Ronnie was kind, funny. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to tell him that it was my wife that was the lucky one. I just can't use that word. Any gender-neutral alternate would have been all wrong. So, I changed the subject. My language had failed me.

Or was it me that had failed Ronnie?

Would the easy banter between Ronnie and me have evaporated had I mentioned my wife? Would he have been supportive? Did he prescribe to mean spirited talk radio? Given the chance, would he vote to take away my right to marry? I'll never know. I hedged.

After almost seven years of marriage and 18 years together, my commitment to the love of my life is strong. Maybe someday, I will be able to make her my wife.

Pre-Med Primer: 1960

by Claude Clayton Smith

I turned sixteen during March of my sophomore year in high school and several days later began searching for a summer job. I needed to save money for college. I intended to become a doctor. So I put on a coat and tie, brushed back my crew cut, and caught a bus downtown to Bridgeport Hospital, where I soon found myself in the narrow, out-of-the-way office of the Housekeeper, Mrs. Ogilvie.

"Mrs. O.," as she was called, was a short, trim woman in her fifties, who dressed all in white like a nurse but wore no nurse's cap. Her small mouth was a perfect oval of bright red lipstick. She studied me for a moment with her piercing dark eyes, before quietly informing me that there was currently an opening in her department for a wall-washer, and if the position were still open when school let out, it would be mine. It was only after several weeks on the job that I realized why the position had not been filled—Housekeeping was the lowest department in the hospital, and wall-washer was the lowest job in Housekeeping.

But it was mine—my very first job, the gateway to my future—six days a week, eight hours a day, a dollar and five cents an hour.

When I reported for work, Mrs. O. showed me how to punch the time-clock, then sent me to the laundry for a uniform—a khaki shirt with long sleeves and a pair of khaki pants with wide cuffs, folded flat and starched as stiff as cardboard. The uniform was to be exchanged for a fresh one every Monday and Thursday, just when it had become comfortable enough to work in.

Then I was sent to the foreman, "Mr. Steve," an immigrant or refugee from behind the Iron Curtain, whose long last name hardly contained a single vowel. He was a thin, anxious man with thick-framed black glasses offset by a tidy white moustache. In what he called "the old country" he'd been a lawyer, but the difficulty of learning English at an advanced age—he appeared much older than Mrs. O.—had kept him from practicing law in America. I later learned that when he began working at the hospital, Mr. Steve had been twice his present weight. A heart attack, plus the strain of supervising the men of the Housekeeping Department, had reduced him to a nervous wisp.

Mr. Steve prefaced all announcements, orders, or small talk with a quick "Ahem, ahem …," a verbal tic more throat-clearing than intelligible. He wore

khaki, as did all the male housekeepers, but his pace was triple that of anyone's. Except mine. I kept right up as he escorted me down the long corridors and flights of stairs to the men's locker room, a cramped area in the very bowels of the old hospital, where I had to duck beneath the heavily bandaged pipes.

And as he assigned me one of the battered green lockers, Mr. Steve somehow discovered that I was studying Latin in high school. "Arma virumque cano," he recited proudly, lifting his eyes to the insulated pipes. I would need two more years of high school before I could quote Virgil to Mr. Steve in return, but he seemed more than satisfied with my sophomoric offering from Caesar: "Gallia est omnis divisa in tres partes." Latin, Mr. Steve reminded me, was the language of the legal profession.

"And medicine," I added brightly.

The dingy locker room had a few benches and half a dozen barroom-style chairs at a round wooden table in the corner. As I was putting on my uniform these quarters suddenly filled with the Housekeeping crew—African-Americans (then called Negroes), Puerto Ricans, and a contingent of short, sullen, broad-faced men whom I soon labeled the "Mushka-Pushka Men," for that is how their language sounded to me: "Mushka-Pushka! Mushka-Pushka!"

It was 9:15. Time for a coffee break.

Very quickly, as if it were understood, the Mushka-Pushka Men occupied the table in the corner, and from their wooden circle came only one word I ever understood, a word that rose heatedly during every coffee break: "CommuNEEST! CommunNEEST!" The Mushka-Pushka Men—Mr. Steve spoke their language—came from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, perhaps Poland. But my geography was weak, my interest in history even weaker.

Then Mr. Steve was standing at the door, tapping his finger on his wristwatch. "Ahem, ahem … Gentlemen." Coffee break was over. Time to get back to work.

As the locker room emptied—more slowly than it had filled—I lagged behind to wait for Mr. Steve, who was always the last to exit. I had been on the job since 7:00 a.m. and was yet to lift a finger. Before long, however, I found myself in a dim, windowless corner of the basement in which rows and rows of Venetian blinds were suspended from the ceiling like so many room dividers. Mr. Steve neatly rolled back his sleeves, drew a pail of hot water from the sink on the wall, added liquid detergent like a waiter pouring wine,

and demonstrated how to wash the blinds on both sides, dampening the rag just so, careful not to get the drawstrings wet. When he returned at noon I had completed the job—had been standing around, in fact, for an hour, watching the Venetian blinds dry—and Mr. Steve seemed confused by my efficiency. I think he had expected the task to take me all day. Now he was stuck with finding something else for me to do.

"So this is what it's like to work in a hospital," I remember telling myself. But what about wall-washing? I had been hired as a wall-washer.

As we returned to the locker room for lunch—I had to be shown the way, still disoriented by the hospital's subterranean maze—Mr. Steve muttered something about seeing Mrs. O., then he'd get back to me.

I took my lunch, as became my habit, upstairs. The cigarette smoke in the locker room burned my eyes, the African-Americans frightened me, and the Spanish of the Puerto Ricans was as annoying as the chatter of the Mushka-Pushka Men. Any laughter, I assumed, was at my expense, so I trotted my brown bag (two peanut butter sandwiches, one apple) to the cafeteria, a room as big and bright as our high school gymnasium. Here a hundred or more diamond-shaped tables hummed with the conversation of the staff—nurses all in white (except for the rims of their caps, which, I later learned, identified the place of their training), technicians in long lab coats, Operating Room personnel in loose-fitting green coveralls, silver-haired volunteers in pink pinafores, and their counterparts, the young candy-stripers, as pert and pretty as cheerleaders. And then there were the doctors—haughty and harried—in green surgical garb or, on certain days, Madras sport coats, bright pants, narrow ties.

At a far table I noticed Mrs. O. in animated dialogue with a nurse twice her size. I noticed, too, that I was the only one in the cafeteria wearing khaki. Fortunately, Mr. Steve came through the cafeteria line and, catching my eye, joined me. "Ahem, ahem …."

Picking at his lunch, he began talking about his wife, Bronislava, whom I imagined as a short, square woman with a babushka and dust mop. Apparently she was seriously ill. Then he talked of his coming day off, which he planned to spend at the local park, a pathetic patch of green not far from the hospital that had once been the showplace of Bridgeport. But before our allotted half-hour was over, Mr. Steve excused himself, emptied his tray, and hurried off. He had to rouse the men from the locker room at exactly 12:30. On his way out, however, he stopped for a brief word with Mrs. O.

Later that afternoon, relieved of Venetian blind duty, I followed Mr. Steve out a rear door of the hospital and across a narrow parking lot to a row of duplexes—housing for the resident doctors and their families. Several units were empty, awaiting new tenants, and I was to clean them in the meanwhile.

"This is more like it," I told myself. There was room to move—kitchens, hallways, bedrooms, baths—and windows to open for looking about. Mr. Steve issued me a scrub brush, pail, sponge, and jug of detergent, and demonstrated how to do the walls. I was not to touch the floors. The Mushka-Pushka Men would do the floors.

After Mr. Steve left, my euphoria turned to depression. The apartments were filthy—grease on the ceilings, stains on the walls—and this was where the doctors lived! Bridgeport Hospital, as I would learn, was a teaching hospital, but unlike Massachusetts General and similar institutions, it could attract only foreign doctors for residencies and much of its staff. They came from Latin America, India, Turkey—the educated elite of their respective homelands—but if these empty apartments bore accurate witness, they had brought the squalor of their homelands with them.

Later that summer I was sent to clean the dormitory of the unmarried male interns, a barracks-like arrangement on the hospital roof, where unshaven young men of all colors lay about on narrow cots, thick textbooks propped about them, small electric fans riffling the hot air. Not many were American, and it saddened me to see how they lived. But I was earning money for my own education, so … scrub, scrub, scrub.

By the end of my second week in Housekeeping I had finished the apartments and returned my scrub brush to Mr. Steve, its bristles worn to the nub. He showed it, in turn, to Mrs. O. as she inspected the apartments, shaking her head and smiling sadly as if there were something I didn't understand. She had given me that same sad smile my first day on the job when I answered "Yes" to her initial question: "Well, did you make all A's?"

What I didn't understand was why the men of Housekeeping (the men of the world?) hardly worked at all, but spent their days hiding in broom closets and toilet stalls, listening for the click of Mr. Steve's heels. I had discovered that time passed quickly when I was busy, so I stood there like a soldier awaiting my next order.

The following week Mrs. O. herself took me to an old, high-ceilinged ward that had been out of service for years. Removing the padlock from the heavy

swinging doors, we pushed our way in. “This,” Mrs. O. announced in a rare moment of drama, “is going to be the new ICU.”

Intensive Care Unit. Even with the initials translated, I couldn’t imagine anything in that ward except a flophouse for the homeless. The yellowed shades were drawn on the tall, narrow windows, cobwebs laced the overhead pipes like camouflage netting, U-shaped metal rails, like shower-curtain rods, arched from the walls at head level, above empty spaces once occupied by beds. These rails were tilted and bent, the metal rusty.

At the far end of the ward a rickety scaffold of boards and pipes rose to the ceiling.

The abandoned ward was the cause of the vacancy that I’d filled. The former wallwasher had flatly refused to work there. But, Mrs. O. informed me quietly, as if to prevent my own defection, she was hiring a second wallwasher to help me. We were to “have at the ward,” and once we finished, the painters and plumbers would follow. It was a job that would take the rest of the summer.

The new wallwasher—Roberto—was a Puerto Rican about my own age. Born in Bridgeport, he knew English as well as Spanish, and he laughed readily when I told him the old joke about a Spaniard hearing the national anthem at his first baseball game: “José, can you see?” And suddenly I had a pal in Housekeeping.

Short and slim, Roberto was deceptively strong, and a good worker. He was trying hard to grow a moustache—“to impress the señoritas”—and had a ripe sense of fun. Once, when I was perched on the very top of that rickety scaffold of boards and pipes, snapping a wet rag at cobwebs in the corner of the ceiling, a soapy sponge smacked the back of my neck. Ten minutes of wet warfare followed, after which—the boredom of our enormous task dispelled—we returned to work with renewed vigor.

Roberto made it easy for me to be in the locker room, which made the coffee breaks, finally, enjoyable. The turning point came soon after he was hired, at the expense of Lester Mirfin, the oldest man in Housekeeping, and, except for the Mushka-Pushka Men, one of the few whites. “Leslie,” as he was called, was a frail specimen whose job was to sweep the stairs about the hospital, which he did with a broom and long-handled shovel. I used to think that, if he ever had to bend over to do his job, he would never straighten up.

One day during the coffee break, slipping into the locker room after the crush of men that would have otherwise trampled him, Lester leaned against the doorframe and lit a cigarette as if it were his last.

"Hey, Leslie," I called out, surprised by my own boldness. "Does your mother know you smoke?"

Roberto translated and the Puerto Ricans exploded with laughter, silencing the Mushka-Pushka Men at the table in the corner. The African-Americans laughed, too, confirming my status as one of the crew. . . .

I spent two more summers at Bridgeport Hospital, getting myself promoted to oxygen technician in Inhalation Therapy, where I wore a smart gray tunic and white duck trousers and assisted a doctor with pulmonary function tests. As it turned out, however, I would abandon pre-med during my sophomore year of college, discovering that I had no real love for the requisite sciences. But I did return to Bridgeport Hospital a few years later, driving in a panic all the way to Connecticut from Washington, D.C. to visit my father in the ICU—the very unit I had helped to establish as a wall-washer—where he'd been admitted with a blood clot on the lung.

I found him in an oxygen tent, looking shrunken and immensely old. And suddenly the hospital and everything to do with it seemed utterly foreign.

Of Faith and Hope

by Sheila Morris

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." —Hebrews, Chapter XI, Verse 1

Whenever I speak on social justice issues, someone invariably asks me about my religious beliefs. Some people opt for a subtle approach and others want to make sure I clearly understand their perspective. Last year I participated in a panel discussion on memoir at a book festival in South Carolina, and the moderator called attention to the three authors' different backgrounds, including a remark about my life as a lesbian activist. Following our discussion, the audience was invited to ask questions.

We took turns responding to typical inquiries regarding memoir as a genre, difficulties in the publishing world, and whether our books provided cathartic experiences for unresolved issues in our lives. It was a lively interchange, and I enjoyed the questions and listening to the other panelists while I added my own opinions. As time for our session was about to run out, the moderator asked for one final question for any author. I saw a hand raised in the back of the auditorium, and a microphone was passed to a man who stood up and reached for it.

I sensed this was my question before he said anything. He was a tall man with vanishing silver hair and nicely dressed in dark pants, white shirt, and a tie that was an indistinguishable color from my seat onstage. He did, indeed, direct his remarks to me.

"Miss Morris, I was wondering how you reconcile your life with what the Bible says about homosexuality. I know that God loves you, but He hates what you do. Why don't you change?"

I was prepared for the question since it was a familiar one to me, but I paused to assess the restlessness of the audience before I spoke. Yep, everyone was ready to move on.

"The few Bible passages that refer to homosexuality are typically taken out of context and require deeper discussions than we have time for here," I said. "Change is a word that implies choosing. My life has involved many

choices, but my being a lesbian is not one of them. I'm not sure that anyone really knows how God feels about my life—including me."

You get the picture. For those of you who ask these questions, and I think you know who you are, I want you to know that I appreciate your concerns. I usually answer with as much candor and humor as time allows and direct the conversations to other topics.

In real life, when time is not an excuse and levity and brevity beg the deeper questions, my journey of faith has no glib explanations. I am surrounded by the ghosts of generations of family members who relied on their convictions about God during the difficulties they faced throughout their lives. One of my eighty-three-year-old mother's favorite sayings to this day is, "God is on His throne. No matter what comes, we know that God is on His throne." This phrase comforts her in the confines of the Memory Care Unit where she lives and assures her that everyday problems are temporary and serve some greater purpose. It also relieves her of any personal responsibility for outcomes that aren't suitable. It's an expression she's used frequently in her life when someone contradicts her opinions and she wants to end discussion. After all, what else is there to say when she declares that an omnipresent and omnipotent Deity reigns over us? In some deep inner place, my mother's faith sustains her.

Certainly this core belief system came partially from her mother, who lived a life of constant struggle as a single mother in the Great Depression. Left with four children when her husband died, my grandmother waged wars against poverty and, ultimately, herself when she fought the more difficult battles of loneliness and depression. A letter to her sister in 1954 following the death of their father illustrates her convictions that surely passed to my mother: "I know Papa has gone to heaven, and that is where I want to meet him. The Old Devil gets a hold of me sometime. I slap him off—and pray harder for the Lord to help me be a better Christian. I realize more that I need the Lord every day, and I want to love the Lord more and try to serve Him better. He alone can take away these heartaches of mine. I want to have more faith in Him. I have been so burdened, and I want to be happy. Serving God and living for Him is the only plan."

My grandmother's belief that faith was the only solution to the multitude of problems she faced and that there were higher levels of faith beyond her grasp was reinforced by the teachings of the little Southern Baptist church she attended every Sunday. The sweat, and often, tears of pleading

preachers for more trust and more commitment stirred their listeners' emotions and created an environment of permanent unworthiness, or as Paul writes in the New Testament, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans, Chapter III, Verse 23). My grandmother's efforts to "have more faith" included a daily ritual of reading Bible passages using the rudimentary skills she acquired during a schooling that was limited to a third-grade education. I can still see the outline of her sagging body framed in light through the thin partition separating the kitchen from the enclosed porch that served as our bedroom while she sat at a small table and I lay in the darkness wishing she wouldn't get up so early. But, there she would be, struggling to read godly guidance in the ungodly hours before dawn so she could be dressed and ready to walk to work by 7:30 a.m. six days a week.

Shockingly, my grandmother on my daddy's side glossed over the deeper issues of faith in favor of a focus on hope. You may remember the famous quotation from the Bible in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians: "In a word, there are three things that last forever, faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them is love." For this paternal grandmother, the greatest "thing" that lasted forever was hope. She wasn't concerned with the intricacies of faith nor did she exhibit excessive "love" toward others outside of her immediate family, but she attended the same Southern Baptist church faithfully every Sunday. Her hope was for humor, however. Her belief was that in every Sunday church service she could find something or someone—or, preferably, both—that she could use to entertain her family at the dinner table later.

The preacher was irreverently skewered on a regular basis. "Brother Latham is such a handsome man, but his sermons bore me to tears. Same old talk about sin every Sunday. Everybody knows he's against it by now. He needs to come up with a new position or a new topic. And, did you see those poor little children of his? They look just like their mother, bless their hearts. God didn't answer any prayers there, if you ask me." The pious friends who seemed to take church so seriously were open season for my grandmother as well. "Did you see old lady Shead? Her face was twisted in such a tight knot it looked just like all that hair she has wadded up on her head. She must have fifty hairpins holding it together. She looked like God gave her some secret bad news this week, or maybe He put a burr up her butt." And she was off and running as my grandfather and I laughed hysterically at her assessment of our churchgoing experience. No one, and nothing, was sacred at that table. She was a woman in charge of her home and family and most of the conversations that took place within both. I worshipped her.

And so, this was the faith of my mothers. The church was the teacher, the Bible the textbook, and the interpretations ranged from the holy to the inadvertently profane. I listened and watched these women for as long as they lived and, throughout my childhood, absorbed their diverse values that blended with the Sunday school teachings and preaching of the Southern Baptist churches my family attended. I learned to sift the messages and keep the ones that appeared to lessen my likelihood of going to hell when I died.

Since I knew from the age of five or six that I had what the Bible called "unnatural affections," I also understood the threat of eternal damnation that could be my fate, unless God wrought a miracle and transformed me from my evil thoughts and desires. During my teen years I felt particularly wicked as I lusted after the girls in church and after my favorite female high school teachers. In 1963, when I was seventeen and felt the flames of hell licking around me, I read a small pamphlet called a Statement of the Baptist Faith and Message. I thought I had discovered my saving grace, a distinctive Baptist teaching called "the priesthood of the believer." While this doctrine produced volumes of theological intrigue, my simplistic interpretation at that point in my life was that no one stood between God and me. What a relief. No need for confessions to a priest or, necessarily, to trust the ravings of Baptist preachers. I was redeemed. It was a doctrine that kept me tied to the church and allowed me to censor its bad tidings for more than forty years.

It carried me to a Southern Baptist Seminary where I, rather ironically, had my first lesbian relationship when I was twenty-three years old, a seven-year relationship mired in our guilt and my infidelity. It carried me to a small Southern Baptist church where I had a lesbian affair with a married woman who was the Youth Director and another one with the preacher's wife. God and I didn't consider this to be adultery.

To say that my faith odyssey took a zigzag somewhere during the past fifty years is an understatement. With a genealogy of six generations of Southern Baptists and a family tree that includes a great-great-great-grandfather who was a minister during the Civil War in a rural North Carolina Baptist church, it's no surprise that I surrendered wholeheartedly to the faith of my forefathers. I served as a minister of music and youth for five years in two Southern Baptist churches in South Carolina in the 1970s. Even after leaving the ministry, I continued my membership in the church and its music programs for more than twenty years. As the Southern Baptist denomination

abandoned the doctrine that supported direct communication between the believer and Creator in favor of a collective acquiescence to a pervasive ultra-conservative leadership that led to the restructuring of its institutions of higher learning in the 1970s and '80s, I stayed. When the boundaries between church and state blurred and the denomination took right-wing political bent, I stayed. When the sermons of the ministers in the churches became a royal proclamation of morality as they and their leaders deemed it in the 1980s and '90s, I knew my favorite doctrine was in trouble, but I stayed. Yet, eventually, that faith turned to heretical unorthodoxy—a seismic shift in my core belief system. Why?

My work as a paid staff person exposed me to the inner power struggles of church leaders and the budget requirements of doing "something great for God," as one minister explained to me in the midst of a burgeoning capital campaign. I overlooked the hypocrisy of rancorous Wednesday night business meetings with the harmonious Sunday worship services. After all, the music was what God and I had in common. I didn't forgive the preachers for their tirades against homosexuals, but I ignored them because God and I knew better. The "priesthood of the believer" was such a comfort—until it wasn't. I was forever changed by a personnel matter, a blip on the radar screen of Important Events. When the church pianist, a close personal friend, was fired for being gay, I ran out of excuses for God and me. If God didn't want my friend, I was sure He didn't want me, and the feeling was mutual. I was done.

Charting that journey on a blackboard entails an array of colored chalk that begins with white for the innocence of childish trust to green for the color of money in the church to red for the anger of betrayal by believers to gray for the edges of doubt and disbelief in the Deity of my mother. "God" and "throne" are words that summon visions of clouds and enormous golden chairs from a Cleopatra movie in the '60s—not a bad image, but not a convincing one either. My maternal grandmother's duel with the Devil also evokes strong feelings for me, but they are feelings of sadness for her inability to achieve that higher level of trust she desperately wanted. She never could be quite good enough, and I can't believe in a Deity that inspires fear and irrational guilt. As for my dad's mother, her irreverence was an early confirmation for me of my introduction to the doctrine of "the priesthood of the believer" and gave me permission to begin to overcome feelings of shame when I faced the puzzles of sexual identity that were my life. My grandmother definitely had a unique relationship with her God. Her words and sense of humor helped free me from the somber sermons of

damnation in my youth and encouraged me to think for myself. I wonder if she knew.

All paths lead somewhere, and mine returns to where the journey began. My faith is in the rising and setting of the sun each day—with hope that I'll live to see them, and with love for the laughter that makes each day worth living.

Perimenopause and Scanned Documents

by KJ Hannah Greenberg

I've reached that time of life when my new experiences are beginning to insist on entwining with my more familiar ones. Two important examples of this phenomenon are: the changes caused by the monthly sloughing off of my uterine lining and the changes caused by my weekly attempts to update my understanding of computer accessories.

Per the former, I'm now, in a good eye, part of the "over fifty" crowd. That certain differences would occur, in my physical function, was expected. Early adolescence, young adulthood, pregnancy, the post partum years, lactation spans, as well as the middle of midlife all brought with them anticipated variations in my reproductive tendencies. Some things got bigger, others smaller. Some energies intensified, others diminished. Women's bodies, mine included, are anything but static.

Per the latter, whereas I remain an unwilling participant in the media revolution, I allowed myself, for the reasons of earnings and sanity, first to be dragged through the conveyances of mass media and then to be pulled along the shoots and ladders of convergent media. The liminal stages of those explorations, all the same, were disagreeable despite the fact that they wrought necessary transformations.

In the first instance, somehow, although I had previously experienced many corporeal alterations, perimenopause surprised me. Wellness, at its best, is a free fall that creates no G's worth of health challenges. Yet, as honest older gals will testify, the mid decades' fluxes frustrate order, hindering even those economies of time, space, money or energy that have been in place for just a brief measure. More specifically, simultaneous with my accepting that nooky would never again generate progeny, I found myself facing multiple false alarms.

In the second instance, my word count, font issues, and efforts to avoid hincty language, aside, nothing equaled the equilibrium problems I stumbled upon when interacting with machines that buzz, click, or burp. All of a sudden, editors were insisting on electronic connections. If I wouldn't or couldn't Skype or to IM, I stood to lose contracts.

My husband and I exhaled a lot, counted to twenty-five, and otherwise made do with my erratic hormones. My inner chemicals pinged and ponged more than they had during my premenarch years, my fecund years, and the

occasions when I lapsed in my exercise routine. Like New Englanders who accept the inevitability of northerly winds, we braced ourselves during my shifting patterns.

I, personally, also attempted to get along with the more popular new conduits for broadcasting ideas. While remembering to format my works according to submission sheet instructions and making sure to trim my pages' size according to individual outlet's strictures stymied my creative process, decades of experimenting with not abiding by publication fads proved, in balance, that any urgings I manifested to resist the winds of the media might as well, alongside my writing aspirations, be flushed. Without a means to cultivate an audience, an author has few reasons to generate manuscripts.

The upshot of going along with, instead of fighting against, my physical changes is that my husband and I smiled and still smile more. Loving, in the sixth decade, seems to be an agreeable matter.

The most singular result of my retrofitting my instruments for offering up my work has been my ongoing enjoyment of having my name in print. Other benefits have included my intermittent pleasure in learning to place dark backgrounds behind pictures meant to be scanned, my periodic delight in developing a website, and my seasonal joy in learning to differentiate among data storage devices (albeit, I've still not tried parking my information caches on multiple viral servers, i.e. on cloud storage devices).

I never would have believed, had someone bothered to predict for me, that my perimenopausal years would be juicy, invigorating and downright fun. There continues to be a great discrepancy between my lived days and nights, and the concepts floated out by our information sources about the physicality of middle-aged women.

Similarly, if anyone would have suggested, twenty or thirty years ago, that I would be tolerant of, if not somewhat comfortable with electronic publications, audio publications, print-on-demand vetting, or other extremely contemporary aspects of getting writing to readers and to listeners, I would have laughed. I am an old school, palpable card catalog, Big Six publisher, footnotes 'til ya drop, sort of person. Clicks and whirs never figured on my professional horizon.

Nonetheless, change can bring unexpected goodness. In determining that I will have to remain obsequious to my body's rhyme and rhythm, similar to determining that the nature of publishing's progression is beyond my control, I find myself freed. Explicitly, instead of fretting over my long past

youth, I celebrate my matronly methods. Equally, instead of getting unsettled about the shrinking numbers of readers that bother with paper-delivered notions, I glean my satisfaction from wider, more diverse, and often younger groups of respondees than my traditionally transmitted writing ever scraped together.

At the same time that having to empty the dishwasher, having to take out the trash, and having to feed any and all visiting, though invisible, dragons remain constants, my ways of having to transport my exuberance to others, whether in intimate climes or for the public eye, have fluctuated a large amount. In all, I'd espouse that my sudden weaving together of comfortable manners of acting with new forms of being present is serving me well.

Traveling Salesman

by Loukia Borrell

I've had sex with nine guys. There were others, with nudity and some kind of sexual act, but no intercourse. If I include everyone, sex and almost sex, I might be closer to twenty men.

I began my sexual resume at age nineteen, with a mild-mannered college guy from Richmond. I moved on to newspaper people and cops, and retired at age thirty-two with my second husband, an ambitious, edgy, green-eyed Philadelphian whose hands are always warm and comforting.

The one person I didn't really know was the second guy. Our paths crossed when he was in town on business and after spending a grand total of two hours with him, he left town. I felt the itch and motivated myself to follow him across the country for sex.

It was 1985, and we met when I was working as a waitress during my summer break from college. He came in for dinner and caught my attention right away. I thought he was very handsome. He reminded me of Kurt Russell, the way he looked in "Escape From New York," except without the eye patch. He took notice of me and carried on about how I looked like Anne Bancroft. He loved the dark hair and bedroom eyes. He told me he was in computer sales and in Virginia for a convention. He asked me to guess his age and it turned out he was ten years older than I. Cool.

During his two-hour stay at the restaurant, he was like a wave. He flirted outrageously, as did I. Before he left, he gave me his business card. On the back side, he wrote his home address and phone number. He asked me to meet him at his hotel the next day, so we could get to know each other.

The next morning, I arrived wearing crisp, white shorts and my matching sorority shirt. I walked into the lobby like I was a movie starlet on set. We sat on a sofa and talked. I giggled constantly. I went back the next day, carrying flowers, and hoping my hair looked the way Madonna's did that year–messy, sexy, and unlike a virgin. He kissed me on the bed in his hotel room. I felt his body through his clothes. We made plans to meet at his house in San Diego before I went back to college for the fall.

He flew home and within days, wrote to me. His letters were filled with adventure stories: Biking trips, watching a mesmerizing city skyline, eating lobster and drinking beer in Mexico, driving along endless miles of beach on

Pacific Coast Highway.

The frequency and detail of his letters depended on how sure I was about making the trip. The more anxious I sounded on the phone, the more letters came. He told me to make a stand for myself, not to miss a chance for closeness and fun. He thanked me for making him feel things he hadn't felt in a long time.

I spent my summer working and shopping for nice clothes. Everyone at the restaurant knew what was going on. They all thought I was crazy, especially Big John, the owner. One afternoon before my shift started, he asked me into his office.

"I hear you are planning something crazy for a guy you don't know," he said.

"Yes?" I said.

"Do you really need to go all the way across the country to get a boyfriend? There are guys working here," he said.

"The busboys?" I shifted my weight and leaned up against a filing cabinet. "I can get those at college," I said. "This guy is different, older. He's got a life."

He stopped counting money and looked at me. The office was quiet.

"You're crazy. After you have sex with him, he's going to drop you. If he likes you so damn much, he'd walk back here from California. Tell him to come here to get to know you and your family," he said.

I knew that would never happen. I adjusted my cummerbund.

"Well, I know what I'm doing," I said, "It'll be fine."

All of this was happening as I tried to forge my own way and make decisions for myself. My older brother didn't say anything. My father took an observer's position, but my mother was outspoken and furious. She fumed whenever I got a letter or call. She complained that I was tying up the phone too much. She threatened to disinherit me. At least once, she called him at 3 a.m. Pacific Time, so he implemented the "Mother Project," urging me to find ways to manage her until my departure. She finally stopped talking.

It was the summer of 1985. I was just realizing that AIDS was something that could threaten me. Before that year, I thought it was a disease for

gays, hemophiliacs and people who spent their time shooting heroin. Then, I woke up when Life magazine did a cover story on AIDS and the headline said something like, "Now No One Is Safe from AIDS." About a week before I went, I called him.

"Do you have any diseases?"

"No, no way." I didn't ask him to prove it.

"Jesus Christ. I'm sorry. I just have to stop listening to everyone and thinking so much."

"Good girl."

His place was up on a hill. It was a small, bungalow-style house with two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom and kitchen. I felt like I was in Beverly Hills or something. The floors were hardwood, the furniture well-placed and neat. There were a lot of windows that you could sit in front of and see the city's lights at night. We slept with T-shirts on and were naked from the waist down. I used a spermicidal diaphragm I hoped would kill any viruses he might have. I didn't have any orgasms but I felt close to him, anyway. I daydreamed about transferring from my North Carolina college to a university near him. We could live together, get married and have kids.

He worked during the days and I rode a bike to the waterfront or walked around his neighborhood. I cooked meals, dusted furniture, and shopped at a corner market. Everything seemed brighter, bigger. The plants seemed huge, the flowers tremendous. The trees seemed taller. The sky was always blue and the nights were cool. Some days he took off work and we went places together. We drank wine by the ocean, took a ferry to Catalina Island for the weekend, and drove to hole-in-the-wall restaurants for great Mexican dinners. I called my mother and told her she was wrong.

About a week into the trip, I met some members of his family. We planned a cookout for them. When they arrived, I could tell his parents were money. They wore nice clothes and jewelry, spoke of their travels and easy lifestyle. They were nice people, but I felt awkward around them. They knew he picked me up in a restaurant and that I came out without knowing him. I felt embarrassed, thinking they might know something I didn't. While I was in the bathroom, I overheard his mother talking about how I was still in college. She kept telling him I was too young. After I told his father how much of a struggle it was for me to get there, and that people had tried to

stop me, he looked at me point blank and said: "If you were my daughter, I would have chained you to the bedpost."

The next day, we fought. He wanted me to leave a week earlier than I planned.

"Change it. Call American and tell them you had a death in the family and have to be back sooner," he said.

He was impatient and distant.

"OK," I said.

He left for work. I sat in his living room, by the computer, and spent most of the morning on the phone trying to convince a supervisor for American Airlines that someone in my family was dead. He made the change and I apologized for the trouble. When I hung up, I sat and stared at the furniture. I began to look through cabinets, drawers and closets, for papers, bills, proof. I found a lot of pictures of girls in the back of the guest room closet. Most of them were dark-haired, like me. A lot of Latina and Hawaiian girls. There were letters in his desk. One of them was from a girl who was coming over from Vegas to see him for his birthday. I studied the postmark on another letter, and then opened the envelope. It was from someone he met during the same trip he met me.

I confronted him. He said I had no business going through his things. He was angry. I relented. The trip was ending and I didn't want to leave on a bad note. The morning I left, he dropped me off at the airport curb. He gave me some cash to cover the ticket I had purchased to visit him. He told me it was a thank you gift for helping him prove to his friends he could get me out there.

My brother picked me up. My parents didn't want to talk to me or know anything about the trip. About a week after I got back, he sent me picture prints, but no negatives. He said he needed to keep them in case I got mad at him someday. There were no nude shots, but I did let him take pictures of me in my underwear. I was too sad to argue with him. I planned to buy a photo album, but ended up putting my pictures in a brown envelope with his letters.

The next week, I went back to college. I felt safe there, away from the summer's disappointment and my mother's silence. I called him a few times during those months, and there were some letters exchanged between us. Our contact was infrequent, impersonal and brief. His letters were thin,

double-spaced and written on small pieces of paper. I graduated in December and got an internship that put me in a new city.

About a year after I went to California, I started getting sick. I was renting a room from an elderly couple, working at a newspaper near Washington, D.C., and feeling tired all the time. I got different things: Urinary tract infections, respiratory illnesses, fatigue, weight loss. I was working a lot of hours and put down my poor health to stress. I also wondered if it might be AIDS, which by now, with Rock Hudson dead, was the biggest story out there. I told the doctor about my trip and asked for an AIDS test. During those months, I would stand in front of the mirror every morning, naked, and look for unexplained rashes and lesions. I looked at my reflection and imagined thorns all over me. What a dumb broad.

After the second negative test, I stopped taking them and tried harder to put that summer behind me. That trip hurt me and ruptured my relationship with my mother. She took it personally and was ashamed at the lengths I went to for a man. Eventually, I moved on, but I wasn't the same girl. I was different. I had less faith in people and viewed them skeptically.

The last time I called him was in 1989. I don't know why I did. I think I was just making sure he was alive and that his life wasn't too different from when I visited him. He talked to me and said he was serious with a girl. He said something about getting married. I told him I was a journalist. He said he was sorry for acting the way he did toward me. I told him he was fine.

I never spoke to him again. Years went by and bigger things happened. My brother died of cancer. My mother got dementia and quit life. I married my second husband and we had three children. My husband tells me the same things every week: I am beautiful, entertaining, and interesting. He is obsessed with his wife, he says. He says the first time he ever saw me, he felt a cord unravel itself from deep inside him and attach itself to me.

He does silly things. He'll go grocery shopping with me and wander into different aisles, waiting for me to come around. He likes to pretend he has never seen me before and imagines what he could do to introduce himself. He writes letters to me, on his way somewhere, 30,000 feet above the United States, telling me about his incredible life. He says he could live in meager surroundings, in any city in the world, as long as I live there, too. Things get bumpy from time to time, but we have great passion, mutual understanding and a good life together.

Now and then, I think about my trip to California. It comes to me the same way you think about being in a car accident. You were there and it

happened, but as time goes on, it fades, and you don't want to bring it into focus anymore. But I can. I can bring it back, razor sharp, anytime. I can find the pictures and the letters. They are valuable to me because I have daughters and a son, and you know, life moves around in circles.

Childhood Concrete

by Ruth Lehrer

Squatting on New York City pavement, I was queen of jacks. Onsies, twosies, my red ball bounced until it cracked white and crumbled. We huddled in little girl packs, sitting tirelessly on school playground rock. We hop-scotched up the numbers and back. We sang slapping, smacking songs until they were ground into our brains like multiplication tables. I still know seven times six, and one middle-aged clap still triggers every word of "Miss Lucy had a Steamboat," dirty parts and all.

How did chants about asses and shards of glasses get past the recess monitors? Maybe schools cared less back then, the real world in such a turmoil—Vietnam and Malcolm X and Nixon saying it wasn't him. Maybe the teacher's aide was worrying about her draft-evading son in Canada and she didn't notice we were singing about steamboats bound for hell.

I have visceral memory of failing at double-dutch—a twist, a slap, a fall. I was teacher-less, since all the great double-dutch masters were black girls in fourth grade and I was only in second, my friends only white or Puerto Rican. I could skip to one hundred, but the flip-flip of two ropes evaded me. Something about turning your knees in and your feet out.

Boys didn't play jacks and didn't clap songs. I think they played marbles but I didn't care about boys. I just wished I could be hopping double-dutch, up by the chain-link fence where girls sucked on cigarettes that friends poked through crisscross metal mesh.

Then we moved upstate and there was only green grass and no concrete. No one cared I was queen of jacks. My hopscotch skills withered without chalk and cement. There were no double-dutch athletes.

Now, I am almost fifty, still double-dutchless. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, when I drive out of the hills, down the north-south highway to a concrete urban school, I will look and see—do they still twist ropes on city pavement?

Maybe a ten-year-old girl will notice me, watching, and take the time to teach what I missed the first time around.

In Formation

by Nancy Graham

Four thousand Air Force cadets stand at parade rest in sky blue and navy rows on a cloudless August day. On the emerald grass behind them, a handful of men and women in desert camouflage lounge next to large backpacks. From my vantage point among the tourists, the contrasts in uniform and posture are striking. Are the slouching soldiers being sent home in disgrace? Are they meant to remind us how wars are really fought these days?

When I was a little girl, I dreamed of standing in formation dressed in a crisp uniform. I picked up recruiting brochures at the post office and pestered my father while he polished his National Guard boots and brass bars. His weekends with the Guard seemed to my child's mind like exotic trips. While he was gone, I practiced my marching skills.

Was it on one those weekends he first thought of leaving us? I imagine my father slumped on a folding cot after a day of drills, taking deep drags on a Camel. Perhaps there was some joshing in the barracks about the burdens back home. He was not much older than the airmen-in-training below me.

My musing is interrupted when two of the camouflaged figures take off at a dead run toward the ranks of cadets and pull one of them back out of formation. For a hazing ritual? A special assignment? Because a response hadn't been barked with sufficient enthusiasm?

When the trio arrives at the backpack, the camouflaged figures lower the cadet to the grass and hand him a bottle of water. The woman in camo waits until he takes a deep drink, and then pushes the cadet's head down between his knees. Once he is in the desired position, she snaps back up. Her weight shifts onto the forward leg; she is ready to run.

A female voice comes from behind us. "The people in camouflage are EMTs. Sometimes if you lock your knees, even if you stay hydrated . . ." I turn to see the shrug. The speaker is a cadet in the same sky blue and navy uniform. She has been assigned to answer our questions but no one has had any.

A tourist finds his voice, "Do the cadets get in trouble? For fainting?"

Our cadet smiles. "Not anymore."

Her shoulders are squared, but there is sweetness in her voice. She seems, for lack of a better word, nice. Standing there in her uniform, this young woman appears to be both confident and compassionate, just the sort of person who should command troops and weapons someday. I can see why she was chosen for this public relations assignment.

My father started leaving us for traveling jobs when my younger sister was born. Eventually, his visits home came at greater and greater intervals. My mother retreated back to her hometown. But she was a husbandless woman and we were fatherless children and we were not greeted with open arms.

Down below, more cadets are swaying. The EMTs prowl like coyotes around a herd of cattle, eager to cull the weak. Soon there are five or six cadets reclining on the green lawn. Will they suffer punishment later at the hands of their peers? Or will the shamed cadets just cry silently in the shower tonight?

I thought I could win my father back. I just needed to march with more crispness, earn more Girl Scout badges, capture more academic awards, read more impressive books, create more order in the world, and be more charming and witty. He would see my accomplishments and reward them with his presence. The family would be miraculously reassembled.

The cadets below are raising and lowering flags on command. A parade. That's what this type of military assembly is called, I remember. The word we use for the passage of clowns and convertibles has military origins.

Until recently I thought my father's leaving was selfish; he was too absorbed in his own search for happiness to give a thought to ours. If so, it didn't work. He was never satisfied with his life and deeply disappointed to have been born too late for the real wars. He drifted and then he died at a young age.

Now I see that his departure must have been an act of desperation. My parents were too young when they married; they were certainly too young to be parents. Deserted, my mother, sister, and I loved each other as much as we could. My father dropped by from time to time. We were all permanently shaken, but I now think that he paid the highest price. Perhaps with time this insight can become forgiveness.

The tops of my shoulders are burning. I have no cardigan, no sunscreen, and no parasol to shield me from the Colorado summer sun. Visiting the Academy had been a whim, the parade a surprise. While I do not feel faint like the cadets sprawled on the grass, I will bear physical evidence of being here even for a short time.

This year I left my husband after a twenty-eight year marriage. Our tall, confident daughters will never be fatherless or motherless. But we are no longer in the same formation. Do I begin to see my father's path as courageous because I want to view my own departure in the same light? Or do I think I earned the right to go by staying so long? I don't know; I was merely certain that it was time to leave.

The tourists who flank me on the viewing platform seem determined to stay until all four thousand cadets march past on their way to the dining hall and the brass band lowers its instruments. But I am thirsty and turn away from the spectacle. I've seen enough. I smile at the young woman cadet as I pass and she smiles back.

Contributor Notes

Loukia Borrell's work has appeared in *The Washington Post, The Virginian-Pilot, St. Petersburg Times, New York Times Regional Newspapers*, and in various other magazines and newspapers. She has authored a book, *Raping Aphrodite*, a fictional work based, in part, on the 1974 invasion and division of Cyprus. A native of Ohio, Borrell was raised in Virginia, where she lives with her husband and their three children.

Peter Derk lives, writes, and works as a librarian in Northern Colorado. By his estimate, he's doing a passable job on two out of those three things.

Murray Edwards pretends to be an agricultural commodity trader when he's not pretending to be a West Texas rancher. His first book of short fiction, *Looking for Lucy Gilligan*, won a silver quill award and was named one of the ten best Texas books for 2009.

Merlin Flower is an independent artist and writer. (Cover image)

Wilmer Frey lives on a small farm in New Hampshire.

Nancy Graham lives in Colorado. Employed for many years in corporate America, she now writes full time, mentors a high-risk high school student, and serves on the board of the Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver. Graham has degrees in English and Political Science.

KJ Hannah Greenberg has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times. She helps out as an Associate Editor at *Bound Off* and at *Bewildering Stories.* Her most recent books include *The Immediacy of Emotional Kerfluffles* (Bards and Sage Publishing) and *Citrus-Inspired Ceramics* (Aldrich Press).

Kimberly Hamilton lives in the beautiful Gunnison Valley of Colorado. When her dogs and husband aren't vying for her attention (food), she does laundry. And writes, from time to time. She is a student in the mainstream and genre fiction graduate program at Western State College.

Aimee Henkel studied fiction and poetry at New York University, Manhattanville's MFA program, and the Sleepy Hollow Writer's project. In a previous life she was a corporate communications professional, published anonymously in national and local newspapers and trade journals. In her current incarnation as a writer of fiction and poetry, she has been published in *Poetry Motel, Beginnings*, and most recently, *Sleet.com*.

A substitute teacher in Blackfoot, Idaho, **Jona Jacobson** is known at one school as "Avatar" and at another as "The Teacher Formerly Known to Have Tattoos." Due to one parental protest ("She'll recruit our children into tattooed legions!"), she now has to cover up from head to toe and teaches in "white-face." When she isn't dealing with cosmetics or children, Jona lives with her Non-Husband of fifteen years, two cats, and hordes of tree-eating elk and deer.

Ruth Lehrer is a writer and sign language interpreter living in western Massachusetts. Her poems and fiction have been published in *Meat for Tea* and *Wordgathering*. She received third prize in the 2009 Hampshire Life Short Story Contest and Honorable Mention in The Binnacle 8th Annual Ultra Short Competition. She is currently seeking a publisher for her first novel, *I Love You More Than Cinnamon Toast*.

Sheila Morris was born and raised in rural Grimes County, Texas and describes herself as an essayist with humorist tendencies. She is the author of two memoirs, *Deep in the Heart-A Memoir of Love and Longing* and *Not Quite the Same*. She and her partner Teresa live with their four dogs in South Carolina and Texas.

Cherri Randall is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown. She has a PhD in English Literature from the University of Arkansas where she also holds an MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in *Mid-America Poetry Review, Lake Effect, Paper Street Press, Permafrost Review, Paddlefish, The Potomac Review, storySouth,* and *Sojourn.* An essay will be published in the anthology *Impact*, (Telling Our Stories Press) and a novel, *The Memory of Orchids*, (Cyber Wit) in winter 2011. She has green eyes, fiery red hair, and arms spattered with freckles. She lives with two daughters, a Chihuahua named Zora, and high hopes for the future.

Cathy Roy grew up in Northern California and now resides in Colorado. Her first novel *Tasty Girl*, about the mythical San Francisco radio station KTST (a.k.a. - Tasty), came out in the summer of 2010. She writes humor, paranormal, and food reviews.

Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University, **Claude Clayton Smith** is the author of a novel, two children's books, and four books of creative nonfiction. He is co-editor/translator of *The Way of Kinship*, an anthology of Native Siberian literature (University of Minnesota, 2010). His latest book is *Ohio Outback: Learning to Love the Great Black Swamp* (Kent State University Press, 2010). A native of Stratford, Connecticut, he holds a

BA from Wesleyan, an MAT from Yale, an MFA from the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and a DA from Carnegie-Mellon. His work has been translated into five languages.

Julie Whitlow is a professor in the English Department at Salem State University. She was raised in New Orleans and now lives in Salem, MA with her partner, Olga, and their two daughters. Her academic specialty is ESL/Applied Linguistics and she has been working on research about how gays and lesbians refer to and introduce themselves in a variety of social situations.