bioStories

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bio**Stories**

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Naked in Minnesota   by Cathleen Calbert

When I made the trek to Minnesota from Rhode Island, I knew I'd moved to the Land of Introverts. Not only had Garrison Keillor already told me so on the Prairie Home Companion, but I'd also come across a sweetly misguided ad for a self-help group in the local alternative newspaper: "Introverts Unite." Right. Like that was ever going to happen.

Shy and nice: that's how I found Minnesotans. They even had nothing but nice things to say about the East (whereas Easterners regularly turn up our noses at any place farther west than Philly). "Oh, sure, you've got some good Italian food there, don't you?" they said to me.

Good Italian wasn't on the menu in St. Paul. (Canadian Walleye was—in nearly every restaurant, even a perpetually empty Thai dive.) I thought Minnesotans looked like they could use a little more Italian on their menus and in their blood: something to bring a bit of life to the pallid brows and cheeks. They seemed to me a neutral, withdrawn people: temperate and tepid book-lovers and/or healthy outdoorsmen and women.

But I liked them.

If the general vibe of the Twin Cities wasn't effusively friendly or particularly passionate, it also wasn't the "insult culture" of New York or Boston or Providence. No "Hey, I'm talking to my cousin heah." No "Whadda ya want?" "O-key," my hairstylist said to me sans judgment as I blabbed in her chair about my day. "O-key."

And it was among Minnesotans that I learned how to be naked. With others, I mean. Other women, at least.

At the YMCA in St. Paul, I ran in the slow-motion of water and smiled hello at the other ladies in my morning Aqua-Aerobics class. At first, I didn't get much back from them: a brief nod before they turned away. However, after some weeks, I began to receive a few greetings and even a few questions: How nice, Rhode Island! Don't you have good Italian food there?

At my gym back East, as loud-mouthed as we women were fully clothed, we hustled from the pool into individual, clammy shower stalls, dropping towels only to get our street-clothes back on as fast as possible. That's what I did

after class at the Y in Minnesota too, ignoring the less claustrophobic open wall of showers that all the other women used.

I didn't get it. What about the well-known introversion of Midwesterners? Maybe it was a Scandinavian thing? From a heritage of jumping into snow-covered bodies of water after thrashing one's bare limbs with frozen reeds?

All I knew is that the women seemed happy, splashing away and making plans to meet for coffee while I alone bathed in isolation, so one day I braved the shared line of showers. I stood under a nozzle, tugged off my suit, and sudsed up, not looking at anything but the rain of water. Through this blur, I heard the woman next to me say something and realized, with discomfort if not outright horror, that she was speaking to me.

"What?" I said, wiping my eyes.

When I could see, I found that she was washing her armpits and looking into my face at the same time. Introverts unite! Suffering my own fit of shyness, I lowered my eyes and noticed her chest. Nothing was there: no recognizable breasts, that is, just concave scarring from the early days of radical mastectomies.

And this looked…fine to me. Clearly, the woman had been to hell and back, but the furrowed valleys on her body only seemed an altered landscape of skin, not a horror-show, nothing to appall or to merit veiling. My own shame doubly shamed me then. How absurd: being afraid to expose the usual midlife drifts and harmless lumps on my own figure.

"Do you want to join us?" she asked slowly and gently—as if there might be something wrong with me. "For coffee?"

"I'd love to," I said.

About a dozen women, all in their sixties and seventies, greeted me at the café that day as a younger sister. "Two rules," one told me. "We don't say anything bad about each other, and we don't talk about our children."

O-key! I loved those rules, and I loved those women. During my time in Minnesota, I continued to go out for wonderfully strong coffee with them. We talked books and movies, mostly, and food—a lot of thoughts on food, even how to make decent Italian dishes at home. Since then, I have been free of humiliation about how I look, proud of each curve and every…

Of course that’s not true. I still struggle with body-embarrassment as many (most?) women (and men?) do. But I don’t hide behind a germ-filled curtain when a more spacious, shared space is available, and I don’t speak ill of my body: the ladies of the pool in Minnesota taught me how to treat an old friend.

In Passing   by Eric Torgersen

I'm out walking, three quarters of a mile from my house, breaking in the hiking boots I've just bought because, at sixty-five, I've signed on to go backpacking, for the first time since the early 1980's, and almost certainly the last time in my winding-down life, with my daughter Elizabeth, who's forty years younger. We'll be doing just a couple of nights, nothing all that strenuous, on the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, near Munising on the Lake Superior shore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I'm grateful for the opportunity, but one reason I'm going is that Elizabeth says she'd otherwise go alone, and there are sheer cliffs, black bears and unknown human beings up there. I'm in decent shape and have only a couple of minor physical issues (right shoulder, left foot), but the truth is that besides breaking in the boots, which are cheap but seem to have good fit and support, I'm trying to make sure no part of this aging body is going to give out. I haven't started carrying a pack yet, but I'm covering more distance each day.

As I reach the bridge over the Chippewa River, I notice two people coming toward me, on the same side of the road, starting down the hill I'm about to start climbing, almost a half mile ahead. As they come closer I can tell that they're girls, and closer still, they're something like fourteen and wearing only bathing suits. I'm sure they notice soon that I'm an old guy, not the boy they may have imagined, and I'm gray and unshaven and wearing a funny old-person hat no boy would risk being seen by girls in. Reasonably, about then, they cross to the other side of the road, as if they're aware of some possibility or risk or, against all outward signs, want their privacy. Just as the imperative to stop looking—I don't want to embarrass or bother them—overcomes that primary impulse to look, I see that the suit on the one on the left, the taller of the two, is nothing much more than three small patches of cloth over a body lean but ripening, and that the girl's walk is that body-conscious adolescent walk of a girl who's being looked at. As they pass I shoot them, while studiously not looking, a quick, awkward smile, intended to be grandfatherly and benign, which I'm almost sure they don't see because they too are carefully looking away. I keep on climbing the hill and don't look back.

Every couple of minutes, on this country road, a pickup goes by, doing sixty. I imagine some of them slowing down a little as they pass the girls.

And I'm puzzled. They must live up there somewhere where the houses are spread out, not concentrated in anything like a neighborhood, where taking a walk like that wouldn't seem quite so out of place. Some kids go tubing on the river, but no one was there on the bridge to meet them as I crossed, and the girls aren't carrying anything with them. They're just out for a walk in those new bodies, but Jesus, dressed like that? That's flat dangerous out here. As a parent, I wouldn't have allowed it, and if I found out my daughter had snuck out and done that, she'd have been in big trouble. (I was too much of a pushover, to tell the truth, but my wife would have laid down the law.) We had big enough arguments over where she could go out running—we wanted her to go back and forth on our half-mile cul-de-sac, at least when it was either early or late, but she wanted to head out on the road I'm walking now, and a lot of the time, I'm pretty sure, she did.

I remember next that, when my daughter had a sleepover in junior high, five or six friends tenting in our back yard, we learned much later that two of those Catholic school eighth graders had snuck out in the middle of the night and walked to the Soaring Eagle Casino, a couple of miles away. We never did find out what they did there. But there's something about junior high girls I may have forgotten, if I ever knew it.

Then I remember the two girls who used to walk by the house I grew up in, not in bikinis—it was the fifties—but in very tight and very short shorts, with that I-know-you're-looking walk. We, the boys, would watch them as they passed, calling them tramps to ourselves but getting a good look. I think I remember they came over and talked to us once, but I at least was too young for that to go anywhere. But those girls seemed to want to be seen, and there's ordinarily no one at all on this empty stretch of road for these girls to be seen by. Still, I can't quite believe they're unaware of what the world makes, at a certain point which surely they know they've passed, of those bodies when it sees them.

Then I think: Poor kids. They go out for a walk where they live, where possibly in their own minds they're stuck living, and in bodies they're stuck living in too, and even a benevolent old guy like me gets all worked up about it. That's a load they'll carry on their backs for years.

So, okay, it's still kind of puzzling, and making only this much sense so far: the girls in their bikinis were working on how to do fourteen-and-growing-up-fast, making a mistake I still think, that day, as I was working on how to

do sixty-five-and-fading, climbing that hill in hiking boots, getting ready for one last long walk in the beautiful, dangerous world.

There's No Place like a Stranger's Floor   by Heather Rick

I was walking southeast on Milwaukee and my tights were slipping down my legs. It was the kind of winter day that feels like a December without a Christmas. The world was wrapped in cold, damp cotton, the fog stinging my pores and nostrils like rubbing alcohol. The advent of winter in Chicago is always presaged by a weight in your stomach, as though your intestines are processing lead. It's a pressure that makes you hate the scowling streets, makes you want to duck into bars to drink whiskey shoulder-to-shoulder with other denizens of the loosing daylight hours, and to see yourself reflected in the steel walls and concrete bellies of the city, just to know you aren't a ghost in all this grey and ice.

In defiance of the weather and the city-wide depression, I wore a blue flowered dress with a white ribbon around the waist and a long bouncing skirt, something that Alice would have worn to tea in Wonderland. The blue tights were beginning to puddle around the tops of my Doc Martens. I couldn't pull them up because I was carrying my entire life in my arms down a wet, hazy half-mile of Milwaukee.

A blue duffel bag, embroidered with my ex-girlfriend's name and high school volleyball number, bulged with weeks of unwashed socks and panties, crumpled jeans and un-ironed skirts, t-shirts snagged from her closet. They smelled like cigarettes, like her roommates' pot, and the angry rumpled clothes of her bed, all stuffed into the bag on our last morning together. Her apartment had been covered in vomit and beer cans from a party the night before, and I'd had to dig my things from beneath blissfully blacked-out people. The fact that she hadn't even offered me breakfast rankled in my stomach, still uneasy from last night's beer and crying fits. Digging into my hip with each step, a brown paper shopping bag was square with books, records, notebooks, official pieces of paper that had ceased to anchor my life to any semblance of adulthood or normalcy.

I don't know why I didn't just put my bags down on the sidewalk, yank the thin nylon fabric up my stubbly legs, and look at myself reflected over vintage cocktail dresses and pearl-embroidered handbags in a boutique window, to watch the ghost of my blue hips and legs dance in fractured light against the ashy wet street. But I kept walking, letting the crotch of the tights work slowly down toward my knees. The strain in my arms and

shoulders warmed my stiff muscles and limbs. I was cramped from sleeping on the living room floor with my ex, curled into the crescent wasteland of her body, the sound of boys shouting in the kitchen and the ground-into-your-bones-deep sound of the El trains outside sifting into my body through the cracks in the shifting tectonic plates of sleep.

I passed a group of squatter kids sheltering against the raw edges of the mist in the doorway of an abandoned storefront on Honore. They all had white faces the same color as the winter smog, crust punks in black clothes and combat boots, facial piercings bristling. One girl, with a tear-drop pearl of a face and long black hair, asked, "Can you spare a dollar so we can get something to eat?"

Her words made little vapor puffs on a thin babyish voice. I shook my head, panting under my load, almost limping from the rebellious tights and biting boots. Couldn't they see I was walking around with my whole transient existence in my arms—my purse empty but for a CTA pass, a Walgreen's-brand lipstick, and enough change for a coffee? Couldn't they tell from my pallor and my lips the shade of artificially-colored frosting under 24-hour convenience store lights that I'd had nothing to eat all week but Pop-Tarts from vending machines and spoonful's of Skippy peanut butter? I had almost as little as they did.

Maybe that's why she asked me—another poor kid, half-crazy with desperation, would have more sympathy and willingness to split with a dollar than some hipster babe riding through Wicker Park in the diamond-scented arms of a trust fund, to whom shopping was a recreational activity. There was an offer of kinship in the girl's question, a bond of youth and penury that we both suspected might exist.

I could have set my bags down in the slush like so many useless fragments of an old life, easily thrown away into the maw of winter. I could have yanked up my tights and dug out some quarters and a smile for the girl. I could have stayed and talked, told them about my troubles and listened to theirs. Our laughter would have bloomed through the murk, the kind of belly-quaking laughter that chases away hunger pains and warms the body and spirit like a couple shots of tequila, laughter that teases the beauty and humor out of shared misery.

But I walked on, solitary. It's harder to shoulder through life that way, but it doesn't require a sacrifice of vulnerability, the way trusting somebody

enough to laugh is always like cutting out a length of intestine and tying one end to their wrist, a bloody mockery of the friendship bracelets we might have worn as girls, she and I, when that half-mile of Milwaukee, gray with the winter-beauty of our fractured youth, was as yet unthought-of. Who knows what I would have given to join her, as I made my way down Milwaukee Ave onto Wicker Park Ave into the tangle of residential blocks, cutting the frozen quiet of Ellen Street, to drop my burden on the concrete outside Mike and Stephen's basement apartment. I rapped frost-chapped knuckles against the door and waited for people to wake up inside and let me in so the next phase of this failing decade could begin.

Artisanal Journalism by John Palen

I had my own newspaper for a while, a one-man monthly in a small town halfway between Detroit and the Mackinac Bridge. I exposed racial discrimination in rental housing and the diversion of a third of a million dollars from a local non-profit. I wrote about conversion of landfill gas to electricity, and about a golf course that should have paid its way but didn't. Once I wrote about a school superintendent who used a district truck to move furniture from his house. I wrote a couple thousand stories over 10 years, and then I folded the paper and moved away.

“You must not have a very interesting personal life,” the city engineer commented pityingly one winter evening in the paper's early days. Others were less sympathetic. “I don't want to see that in the paper,” a board member snapped after saying something controversial in a public meeting. “Sorry, Frank,” I told him. “It's too late.” School board members reddened when I walked into a planning retreat in the Mandarin Room of the country club. Legally they couldn't throw me out, so they offered to feed me. I said no, took notes and wrote a story. In ensuing years they never got all the way to transparency, but at least they stopped meeting in the Mandarin Room.

A couple hundred people paid $35 a year to get the 24-page, digest-size paper in the mail each month. There were no ads. I made about $3.25 an hour. But I was able to share fresh accomplishments and frustrations with my college journalism students, and I kept current with how public schools and cities were governed and financed. At the time I started the paper, I had not written a news story for 16 years.

The genesis lay in a rash decision by a popular children's librarian to mail a sarcastic card to her boss. The boss always initialed memos with a squiggle resembling a fish hook, so the librarian taped a hook to the card—a No. 8 or 10 short shank, I believe. She covered the barb safely with tape, but the city manager saw a threatened assault and fired her. The local paper, a daily hollowed out by years of Hearst ownership, did little with the story, so I started researching a letter to the editor. Hours of digging unearthed a sad situation—steady decline in the library's services and circulation, and an angry exodus of trained librarians. I began to wonder why I was doing the local paper's job.

The first issue of my paper went in the mail in December 1999. Page one described a program to build modest homes for low-income families. An inside page reported the library's problems, with a sidebar dashed off after a hugger-mugger board meeting: The boss whose initials resembled a fishhook had resigned! The local daily carried nothing on either story. From that day until it folded, my little paper ran in the black.

The ricky-ticks were the best, the zoning board, park board, housing commission. I learned at aviation board meetings of ballooning subsidies for an airport used by only a few hobbyists. I learned at a neighborhood association gathering of plans to replace low-income housing with a fancy parking lot. Late one night around a table piled with stale pizza, I heard a planning commissioner propose rezoning for property he himself owned.

It was artisanal journalism, and I loved it. Working alone on self-imposed deadlines, I could make the extra phone call, interview the additional source, polish the story until it shone. The only limits were my skill and energy. I scooped the local daily, whose editor knew more about The Book of Revelation than about the city budget, with a regularity that surprised even me.

But I also got under some people's skin, and they didn't like that. Sometimes they reacted with anger; more often they simply pretended I didn't exist. Some of my best stories—about evidence of racial discrimination in rental housing, for example—were largely ignored.

There were other downsides. The paper required a lot of work, often at night after a day of teaching. As time went on, with no one to answer to but myself, I didn’t always go the second mile—sometimes barely the first. My skill and energy had limits. So did my hearing. As it worsened I made mistakes and relied more on written reports, background papers and news releases. With less of the salt and pepper of real speech, my writing lost some of its savor.

Toward the end, the school district hired a search firm to find a new superintendent. The process had a clubby feel, and I mentioned one day that all the finalists were white. “In a community like this,” the head hunter said, “we wouldn't have brought in anyone who didn't fit that profile.” It was a casual, one-on-one response in a hallway, but I could have gone after it. A few years earlier I would have. But I rationalized that I was tired and getting old and nothing would change. I let the story drop.

I kept the paper going a while longer, and then I sought a buyer, for a dollar. “I'm flattered,” one young journalist told me, “but you know, I just don't want to work that hard.” So I refunded outstanding subscriptions, said my goodbyes and shut the paper down. For three months I suffered pounding rebound headaches from self-medication for bruxism. Eventually my teeth stopped aching. I moved 400 miles away, to a larger city that was closer to grandchildren and vibrant with music and literature.

I meant to attend local government meetings in the new place, just to be a good citizen. But I haven't, not a single one. Journalists say you're only as good as your last story. In my case, a story I no longer had the fire to write told me it was time to quit, time to seek that more interesting life in places other than City Hall.

Alachua Autumn   by Carla Charleston

My North Florida world is about to change. Dark billowing clouds suspend above the earth—a cold front is on the way. Hurriedly, I move pots of anthurium from the pool deck to the living room for a warm transition into spring. In Alachua, "Latchuway" according to locals, tropicals don't survive outdoor winters.

A gust of wind rattles the trees and spills handfuls of confetti-colored leaves. Flame red crepe myrtles, magenta dogwoods, and golden oaks. Alachua autumns inspire a Miami girl who grew up thinking such color transformations only happened "up North," in colder climes.

A leaf in salmon shades floats down onto the birdbath. Yellow butterflies circle purple lantana and sip nectar from wine-colored periwinkles. Satsuma branches hang like willows, heavy with mottled orangish fruit awaiting winter's alchemy for transformation into golden oranges. A squirrel darts under a Margarita daisy bush to scavenge long-buried hickory nuts. Fresh sand mounds appear around the armadillo's burrow in a far corner of the yard. Will anyone mind if she remains? Or if during summer drought, the deer munch the daylilies down to their roots?

Ginger leaves, so lush in summer, rustle like brown wrapping paper. I pull up dried stocks of daisies, zinnias, and cockscomb, break off the seed heads, and shake them over upturned soil—the beginnings of next spring's garden.

My friend Wanda will arrive any minute. She can use the seeds, too. I jam desiccated plants and stacks of plastic seedlings pots into a yard bag to await her arrival. I add other garden treasures for Wanda's collection. Amaryllis, epiphyte orchids in baskets and terrestrials in soil pots, a small Meyer lemon, and three knock-out roses.

In the distance I imagine golfers, a ruckus of laughter, curses, and whizzing balls. No fairway chatter today. No games. Course closed. For sale. A sign of the times.

Don't forget Wanda's frangipanis, beautiful flowers in Hawaiian leis. We've had "Whitie," our oldest, for twenty years. Her branches almost fill one side of the pool deck. Last summer, a smaller frangi swelled with multiple shades of pink flowers. In Alachua, whites grow more easily than pinks. This year Whitie won't have her blanket and electric light bulb by the pool. Instead,

we'll pull her in close, under the roof, and wind her branches with sparkling Christmas lights for warmth and color. Will she stay warm?

I set two young frangipanis by the lemon. Overhead, a gaggle of Sandhill cranes stream south in v-formation. Like colorful leaves, Sandhills are part of North Florida autumn. The pomegranate, another long-term survivor, beckons me. Now a collection of caramel-colored sticks with yellow leaf-fringes, in spring he'll sprout orange tissue-paper blossoms.

Wanda's white pick-up truck pulls in the drive. Quickly we load the plants and garden tools from my garage, and then say good-bye. No more annuals or perennials for me. I have no need for tools. I'm moving to a new condo in Jacksonville. Like pomegranate and Sandhill cranes, I must transition. But will I survive there?

Tabloids by Amanda Forbes Silva

I try to cajole myself into thinking that chaperoning the fifth grade's overnight camping trip could be the closest I will ever come to experiencing celebrity. As a traveling teacher, working in four elementary schools, my presence on this trip is something like having a guest spot on a hit television show. My bunkmates, all eight of them, are inexplicably my biggest fans though I don't know them well. This, I assure myself, will not be like the overnight trips when I was in fifth grade. I blanch at the memory of my outward-bound trip to Wales when I came out of the bathroom to find Red-head Raaum waving my new bra out the window for a group of boys to behold. In the center of that crowd stood Lee. Our fathers worked together. Lee was from Alabama and would remain in my mind as the type of boy to avoid when I started high school in Atlanta.

Raaum laughed, one strap dangling from her freckled finger. The stripes of the material caught the breeze in a way that reminded me of static on Gram's television. Mom had bought this bra for me as a surprise before my trip. Although it was of the training bra variety and I pretended to hate it, it was wild in its own way and I secretly loved it. Black and white stripes crossed the camisole as naturally as they would on a zebra and I felt a secret sophistication while wearing it that is not commonly experienced by chubby, frizzy-headed, pre-pubescent girls. I knew after Lee had seen it, I would never wear it again.

Maddie dangled her head over the edge of her bunk, "Boo!" I was reading in the bunk below, trying to set an example that might inspire the girls to do the same. "Did I scare ya, Miss Silva?"

"Lots of things about you scare me, Maddie."

"Ha! Good one. Hey, check this out." She launched an envelope onto my sleeping bag. "Open it!" Maddie's swinging hair zigzagged shadows over my legs. I picked up the envelope and turned it over. "Maddie," a heart dotting the letter i, was written on the front. I recognized it as a mom note.

"She must have tucked it into my bag. So embarrassing."

I nodded and handed the envelope back. "You don't know embarrassing," I said. "When I was in sixth grade, my classmates and I went on a trip to

Stratford-upon-Avon...that's where Shakespeare was born—Madison, your face is turning purple, can you please come down?"

Her head disappeared over the bunk and she swung her legs over the edge, balancing her dingy toes on the stepladder before she hopped down to the floor next to my bunk.

"So what was so embarrassing?"

I propped myself up on one elbow. "When we reached the hostel...that's like a cheap motel for students...the manager welcomed us and called out our room numbers and roommates."

Maddie yawned. "So?"

"Then he asked if there was an Amanda Silva in the group."

"Your name's Amanda?" Students are always surprised to learn their teachers have first names and that those names aren't Mister, Miss, or Mrs.

"Yes. Anyway, I raised my hand and he reached out to hand me three envelopes. 'Fan mail,' he said. Each one of them was from my mother. She had sent them ahead of time."

Maddie gasped. "Are you serious? Did you just want to die?"

"I am serious and I didn't want to die until I opened the second one and this boy I hated, named Lee, read it over my shoulder... 'Hey, Boo-boo!'" Standing there, I had smiled like it didn't bother me, but later on cried in the bathroom, embarrassed at the thrill I had felt seeing the mail, followed by the realization that mom was still the closest friend I had.

Maddie raised an eyebrow, "Boo-boo?"

"Call it a term of endearment, a nickname, whatever. Anyway, once he started calling me that, they all did." I remembered coming home from that trip, embarrassed and annoyed with my mother. I told her what the kids were calling me, thanks to her letter. She laughed. She thought it was cute and she became convinced that Lee had a crush on me.

The next morning the girls came to life early. I played possum while they took turns in the bathroom and packed their bags. When it was finally my turn, I lingered in the shower, the only time I would be

alone for the rest of the day. We were scheduled to leave later that afternoon and be back at Broad Street Elementary by early evening. I toweled off and wrapped myself in my faded bathrobe and twisted the threadbare towel around my head. Reaching for my toothbrush, I gasped at the sudden shrieking coming from the bunks. Toothbrush still in hand, I stepped out of the bathroom and into a throng of girls talking all at once. A few of them had come over from another bunk and seemed to have brought the commotion with them.

"It was so gross! She threw up everywhere. Just all of a sudden—everywhere!"

More shrieks and fake gagging noises as I held up my hands and attempted a "shh." Before I could ask who was sick, I noticed a chaperone from the other cabin marching up the stairs. I had never met her before and assumed she was a parent volunteer. She came in the room, slightly out of breath and smoothed back her hair. "Miss Silva, I understand you're leaving earlier than the rest of us today. Is that right?"

"Yes. I split my time between four elementary schools, and this was all the time I could take away from my regular schedule. So, I'll be leaving after breakfast."

She smiled and her shoulders relaxed. "Wonderful. We have a young lady who has been up since the crack of dawn, vomiting."

"That is so gross!" Maddie shivered.

The woman closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. I had the feeling she had been dealing with this all morning. "Do you think you could drop her off at school so that her mother can collect her sooner than later?"

Though I wanted to shiver like Maddie, and dreaded the hour-long mountain drive back to school, I could say nothing besides, "Of course. I'll just get dressed and meet you at the cafeteria."

As she left, the girls looked at each other and then me. Maddie, their unofficial leader, spoke up. "Miss Silva, what if she pukes in your car? It's over an hour back to school and the roads are all windy and...oh, I could puke just thinking about it."

"Well don't." I flipped my head upside down and unwound the towel. Tossing the towel aside, I started raking a comb through my hair. "It's not her fault

she got sick. These things happen. I'm sure she's embarrassed as it is. I know I was."

The girls stopped giggling and zipping their bags. I had their attention.

"Oh, yeah. I threw up on a school trip. It wasn't an overnight trip, but still. I got off the bus and puked in front of everyone-girls and boys. Teachers. Proper British pedestrians, who were just minding their own business."

I smeared moisturizing lotion across my face, spreading my fingers down my neck and over my collarbone.

Eight pairs of eyes watched me in the mirror. I knew that cosmetic rituals fascinated the girls, even the tomboys. But more than that, none of them could believe that I had puked in public. I dabbed tiny dots of concealer under my eyes, and bounced a mascara wand under my lashes. Although we were at camp now, I would be back in one of my other schools by noon and needed to return looking like my professional self.

"You know what the worst part was?"

They shook their heads, as though they were leaves on a single branch.

"It was bright blue."

That snapped them out of their makeup-induced reverie.

"Why?" A quiet voice asked.

"I hadn't eaten anything for breakfast. I had a nervous stomach and not eating can make that sort of thing worse. We got stuck in smoggy, London traffic, and one of my friends offered me a Sweet-tart. Those were my favorite..."

"Mine too!" Maddie interrupted.

"Anyway, the only time we had American candy was when someone's parents brought it back, or a relative sent it over. So, even though I felt queasy I was excited when my friend, Becky, offered me one. I pulled the first bright blue one off the top."

I couldn't remember the last time my students had paid such attention to what I had to say. The girls surrounded me, wide-eyed, as I explained that although I had actually made it to our destination, one of London's many art galleries, I hurried down the bus steps and moved away from my

classmates, breathing deeply as I tried to stop an unstoppable force. I didn't succeed and as disgust met relief, I heard Matt yell, "Amanda is throwing up!" I had an audience, complete with pointing fingers. Matt nudged Lee in the ribs. By the time the regular school bus dropped me off in front of my house, my mother had already heard what had happened. I hadn't planned on telling her, but Lee made it to his house before I made it to mine. He announced the day's highlight to his mother who sat at her kitchen table drinking coffee with mine. "Boo-boo barfs blue!"

Patting a tissue over my lipstick, I turned to face the girls, all in a semi-circle around the vanity. "Now, beat it so I can get dressed and hit the road. I'll see you in the cafeteria."

The girls made a clumsy exit, shouldering sleeping bags and well-worn pillows, stuffed backpacks hunching them over, making them look like aged rag dolls. I zipped up the back of my dress, ignored the run in my hose, stepped into a pair of heels and soon followed after them.

On the way to the cafeteria, I made a detour to my car, tossed my bag in the trunk and cleared the front passenger seat of books and to-go coffee cups. Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I felt something wet stick to my side. The cap of my water bottle had come loose and spilled whatever was left into my bag. I pulled my phone from the bottom, and groaned when I realized it had been marinating in a little puddle for who could say how long.

Evidently, I hadn't whispered my string of obscenities as I had imagined. Mystery Mother had rounded the corner, eyebrows raised. "I thought maybe you were trying to make a clean getaway." She was holding plastic bags in her hand. I assumed they were for my companion to hold at the ready on our drive back.

"No, I somehow spilt water in my bag and it drenched everything-my phone included." I held up the green Envy. She tried to help me dry the phone and all of its components, which I had hastily torn free of each other. I knew it was useless and I would have to factor a trip to Verizon into my day. Maybe if this hadn't been my first phone-death by water, I wouldn't have been so discouraged. I was losing track, but I think I had killed three in such a way thus far. This phone had, in fact, replaced my last waterlogged device.

I noticed when she glanced at her watch. "Well, I better go say goodbye to the girls and find my newest charge." I was still new to the school, and since

it was only one of four that I worked in every week, I didn't know all of the students yet.

"She seems to be feeling much better, just washed out. The nurse seems to think she might have been dehydrated, too much excitement yesterday, and too much sun. Who knows?"

I dropped my beloved, but drenched red leather HOBO bag with the matching wallet-a gift from Mom-on the front seat and waited for the car to chirp, "locked." We started back up the hill, towards the main building. "What's her name, anyway? I'm not sure I've met her." Dusting my sunglass lenses, I realized I still didn't know this volunteer's name. I tripped over an exposed tree root and nearly lost my footing. She gripped my elbow, steadying me.

"Her name is Amanda."

I should have guessed.

Later that afternoon, I stood in line at the Verizon store, clutching my casualty. When I made it to the counter, the clerk took my phone, cradling it as if it could be resuscitated. "What happened here?" His nametag said "Elvis" and he spoke with an Eastern European accent.

"Water damage." I thought it best to keep my story simple. Elvis didn't share that philosophy.

"I can see that. How?" He set the phone to the side and folded his hands.

"I was on a field trip..."

"Aren't you a little old for field trips?" With a name like Elvis, I suppose one needed a sense of humor.

"I was a chaperone."

He leaned back in his chair. "Well, I hope you took better care of the children than your phone." He fell apart on himself, a gangly, balding fit of laughter. My fifth grade self blushed beneath my makeup.

The Woman in the Window   by Jean Venable

It seems odd that at a terrible time in my life, the person who helped me the most was someone I didn't know, someone who was unaware of my existence. She lived in a building across East 76th Street from me in New York City, our windows directly opposite each other. It was on my third night home after visiting my husband in the hospital that I became aware of her.

We had received horrible news. "You have a brain tumor," the doctor told my forty-seven-year-old husband. "It's in the speech center so it's inoperable." As we sat stricken-faced, he proposed a course of radiation that would not eradicate the tumor, but would—as he put it—"shrink the hell out of it," giving my husband more time. The treatment meant that my husband would have to stay in the hospital for five weeks.

I made my way home, the streets a blur, to face the apartment we had so happily moved into the week before. Maneuvering through stacks of boxes to the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of wine and took it into the bedroom, setting up camp on a mattress still wrapped in plastic on the floor, to make the dreaded calls. Hearing myself say the words that the doctor had said made them harder to disbelieve. I gratefully accepted one friend's offer to make some of the calls for me.

As I returned to the kitchen for a refill, I glanced at the window across the street and that's when I noticed her. She appeared to be in her mid-sixties, with neatly cut gray hair, wearing a dark green robe which zipped up the front. She was headed to a table by the living room window, her headquarters, I was to learn, for her habitual evening's reading. It was quite late by now, and few of the other windows in her building were still lighted. As I changed into my nightgown, I found myself appreciating her presence.

The next day my husband started his radiation treatment. We tried not to notice the condition of some of his fellow patients. That night I opted not to call anyone, which would involve reporting things I would rather not think about. I glanced across the street and saw that my anonymous friend had emerged from her bedroom in her reading attire. I

was grateful for a form of companionship that did not require answering questions.

With no appetite, I attempted to eat my dinner, which consisted of a large glass of wine and a linzer torte, the wrapper of which I used as a plate. As I munched, my stomach in knots, I observed the surroundings of my new acquaintance. Her living room was attractive and uncluttered, with dark wooden bookcases on two of the walls. As I looked around my own apartment I realized that the disorder of the unpacked boxes was adding to the grimness of the situation, as was my constant pacing, wineglass in hand, increasingly gravitating back to the bottle of Chardonnay.

At the beginning of the second week, it occurred to me to wonder what was in the glass being refilled periodically across the way. The next time the woman headed to the kitchen I turned out the light and grabbed my binoculars. What she was drinking was ginger ale, and I surmised that she was probably feeling a lot better in the mornings than I was. The next day I made two purchases: a box cutter from a hardware store near the hospital, and on my way home that night, a six-pack of ginger ale from the deli across the street. I began with the box cutter, extricating two table lamps, their warm light an immediate improvement over the glaring ceiling fixture. With the help of the super, I got the mattress out of its plastic shroud and onto the bed frame. At supper, I had one glass of wine and switched to ginger ale.

At the hospital the next morning I tried to describe my new relationship to my husband. He regarded me quizzically at first, but grateful for anything that could be of help, came to appreciate this stranger whose order and serenity I was attempting to emulate. He did not encourage me to share this one-sided relationship with others.

Back at the apartment, I settled into a nightly routine, which began with a call to my husband to report that I was safely home. I had often procrastinated taking my showers in the evening, but I started timing them so that my friend would still be reading when I emerged. I found it helpful, when trying to ward off morbid thoughts, to get into bed and turn out my light while she was still up, revisiting childhood days when I could hear my parents quietly talking after I was put to bed.

My favorite nights were Saturdays, when the woman's doorman would bring her the Sunday Times as soon as it was delivered to the lobby late Saturday night. This was a guarantee that she would be up half the night working on what I figured out was the crossword puzzle. If I were feeling desolate, I could crook up on one elbow in my bed, and no matter how late it was, she would be intently bent over, pen in hand, the light of her lamp enabling her to do her puzzle, and me to fall asleep not feeling alone.

When my husband's treatments were completed, he was discharged with a prognosis of one year and lived six, during which time we had a son. Our life was now centered in the apartment; shades were pulled at night, and I was no longer thinking about the woman in the window.

Several years later, shortly after my husband died, some activity across the way caught my eye and I realized that the furniture was being moved out of the apartment on which I had once been so focused. The next morning when I pointed up to her window, her doorman confirmed that the woman had died. She was never to know the measure of solace felt by an anguished young woman who, one long ago summer, kept company with her across the darkness of East 76th street.

All the Way Through to the End
by Elizabeth Stainton Walker

Years later, sitting in my college physics class, I would learn about Schrödinger's cat, and my thoughts would go immediately to that hour between the time I woke up and the time I found her. That time when my mother was neither alive nor dead.

For as long as I can remember, she had been a night owl. She would stay up reading into the early morning, the light in her room still glowing hours after I had put myself to bed. In the years before I could drive, I would have to wake her up two and three times to get her to take me to school in the morning. So, no, it was not strange. Her room was always quiet in the morning. She was not missed.

When I called 911, the operator told me, "You have to turn her over on her back." I tried to tell him that because of her extreme obesity and her proximity to the edge of the bed, moving her was simply impossible. I could only rock her back and forth. Each time I rocked her, I saw her cheek, blue from lack of circulation, and her swollen mouth. The operator kept telling me how important it was that I roll her over. It turned out not to matter anyway. She had been gone for hours by that time.

The first person I called was Kathy. Red-haired and busty, my mother's best friend had only recently moved back to Little Rock after twenty years in Atlanta. It had been cute to see my mom act like a teenager again. The two of them would spend whole days together, shopping and drinking limeades, the same things I did with my own best friend. Kathy and my mother made sex jokes. They would giggle and talk about men.

Kathy had recently begun online dating, and my mom would help her navigate these new interactions. Because of my mother's weight and her frequent bouts with depression, she had not been on a date in my living memory. It was strange to hear her talk about condoms and penis pumps. Riding in the car with Kathy, with me leaning forward from the back seat, my mom told stories about men from her past. These were anecdotes I had not heard, like the time Jimmy Buffett asked her to a party after one of his concerts. "You never told me that!" I would shriek, squeezing the fat on her upper arm. But then, at sixteen, I had never been on a date or kissed a boy, so I suppose there is no reason the subject would have come up anyway.

It was only after I phoned Kathy that morning that it occurred to me to try to reach my aunts and uncles who lived two hours away, outside of Memphis. It must have been around eight by that time, and while I was on the phone with Uncle Joe, my mother's favorite of her three brothers, the paramedics came and told me my mother was dead. Looking back, I cannot think why Uncle Joe would not have already left for work by this time. As an ophthalmologist, he had his father's habit of getting to his practice hours before he saw the first patient. I am sure if I were to ask him now, he could not tell me why he was still at home when I called. I do know that it was he who was on the other end of the receiver when a female paramedic looked at me and nodded. I am certain that I was speaking to Uncle Joe when my story changed from, "Something's happened to my mother" to "Yes, she is definitely, definitely dead."

Kathy and her sister Bonnie appeared at the house a few minutes later. Bonnie was shorter and slimmer than Kathy, dark from the tanning bed, and more tightly wound. She had arrived in her bathrobe and wanted me to get her clothes to wear. "You've got to get your Aunt Bonnie something to put on!" Ten years later, this still strikes me as an odd request.

A few minutes after the sisters' arrival, our house phone rang, and it was obviously a telemarketer. She mispronounced our last name when she asked for my mother, and I remember screaming into the phone, "She just died!" and slamming down the receiver. As an adult, I wonder now what the poor salesperson must have thought, if she imagined I was making it up, just a rude teenager who thought death would be a funny thing to joke about.

For the record, it was an arrhythmia. She had died in her sleep and without pain.

In the following hours, I was swept away to Bonnie's house. I have no idea who locked our home after the coroner removed the body. These are the questions you do not think to ask at the time: Who locked the house? Why is Uncle Joe not at work? I can remember so many strange details of the day, like my friend's mother gathering my dirty laundry to wash at her house. But then there are things I cannot remember, like who locked the house. And in thinking about it, I know I must have been the one who locked the house. But I cannot say for sure.

I do remember dialing the number of the boy I liked, the line ringing with hope as I paced around the tree in our yard waiting for him to pick up. His

name was Colin, and even with my only parent now dead, I felt a bit excited I finally had a reason to talk to him.

That evening, I went my friend Anna's house and waited to receive visitors. My high school friends got off work or returned from sporting events and made their way to Anna's living room. The film "Zoolander" was playing. Someone must have brought it over, and to this day, I have never seen it all the way through to the end. I remember looking around the room, thinking, "All my favorite people are here" and "It's nice we can all get together like this." Then I would remember why everyone had gathered in the house in the first place, and my stomach would sink.

Colin arrived around nine. Truthfully, I do not remember what he was wearing, but odds are it was his navy Transformers tee shirt. He wore it most days that year. I walked outside with him, and we sat together on Anna's porch swing.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

I shrugged. I had been asked that question one hundred times and was still without an answer. I was too tired to feel anything. "You know," I told him, "I think everyone is waiting for me to cry."

He smiled warily. I wonder now, knowing what I know about men in general, and young men in particular, if he might have feared I would in fact start sobbing uncontrollably and that he would be left sitting there, unsure of how to get me stop.

We were on the porch for maybe twenty minutes. The warmth from the day was still hanging on, and Anna's mother's lilies combined with the Arkansas humidity to make the air smell heady. The cicadas hummed in the darkness. A grey tabby jumped up on the swing with us. Colin stroked her and told me about his allergy to pet dander. He was on Claritin, he said. It had helped.

When he fell quiet, I put my head on Colin's chest and felt the worn cotton of his Transformers shirt, or whatever tee shirt it was that day. This close, he smelled like chorine. His long arms folded around me. His chin stubble sanded my forehead.

Inside, my school friends talked about what would happen to me now that I was an orphan. Outside, my life was perfect, and still.

The Sounding Board by Natasha Lvovich

> "I looked inside the temple and saw a single monk praying. From his body came several voices…He produced these voices from within his body, offering a sounding board to storytellers who themselves had none…I began to pay attention to these voices as I spoke. Telling stories no longer took the place of listening: rather listening gave rise to stories.
>
> Perhaps the ear is the organ of storytelling, not the mouth. Why else was the poison poured into the ear of Hamlet's father rather than his mouth?"
>
> Yoko Tawada, Storytellers without Souls, in Where Europe Begins (p.111-112)

I am often asked: How did you learn English so well? What's the secret? So for about twenty years, I have been searching for an answer, telling tales of language and immigration, which, like childhood memories, never fade and never end. To my own surprise, an embarrassing story has recently popped out of a dusty memory drawer, and it seemed like the best answer ever.

In the building in Brighton Beach where we rented our first apartment in America, a neighbor befriended us. In his early sixties, tall and athletic, with a thick mustache and a patch of hair combed over his bald head, he was loud and exuberant, just like we imagined true Brooklynites, and he constantly spat out a mish-mash of words we were unable to decipher. Since pretty much all speech was indecipherable anyway, it did not make a difference one way or another. His name was Michael.

Michael would greet us in the lobby with a thunderous "How are you" (which we soon discovered was not a question) and would hold us there forever on our way back from the supermarket, shopping bags painfully hanging from our hands. He occasionally invited us for dinner to neighborhood Chinese restaurants, where he rambled, his mouth full, about still-incomprehensible American topics: baseball, Hollywood, TV, food, money, politics, as well as himself. He would go on and on and would get so worked up, bubbling and boasting, that he seemed on a verge of a nervous breakdown. No comments

or dialogue were expected, so we just sat there and nodded, acting as a sounding board and painfully longing to go home to exhale the tension of our cluelessness.

At some point during these so-called interactions, Michael confessed to us that he was passionately in love with a young Russian woman he had met somewhere in Brighton Beach. The drama included convoluted descriptions of his encounters with her, his elaborate secret fantasies, and recitations of poetry. To us, there were some practical implications to the matter: Michael wanted to learn Russian to speak to the Love of His Life. He wanted to impress her and to understand her down to the core of her very being, from her Pushkin-immersed childhood to her adult Brezhnev stagnation years--in her native tongue. And he was willing to pay for it.

On my meager $12 per hour teaching, we were struggling to pay our rent. A little extra money would certainly help, especially so close to home--quite literally, next door. Always a conscientious teacher, I started preparing my Russian lessons—only to discover in disbelief that tutoring Michael basically meant doing exactly the same thing we had been doing in Chinese restaurants and in the building lobby: being a sounding board. For the first few weeks, Michael promptly paid me for the "lessons," but then problems surfaced with the cash flow from the business that he supposedly managed. Still I faithfully showed up at his door every night.

In the spirit of classic immigrant mythology, my then husband, a former jazz musician, was washing dishes in a Russian restaurant, and this injustice deeply upset Michael. So one evening, he slapped his hand to his forehead, suddenly recalling that he had a great deal of useful contacts in various broadcasting companies and recording studios. He promised to help the "good Russian man" get a foothold in the music business, where he rightfully belonged.

Later in the week, Michael produced a piece of paper with a scribbled name on it. The address? OMG! Get it in the Yellow Pages! Phone number or extension? Are you kidding me? Everyone knows this person there, just go and say the name at reception. And don't forget to mention my name. Wink, wink.

Oh, the comic scene of a heavily gesticulating Russian man, speaking a few English words from the Ray Charles repertoire and showing a crumpled piece of paper to a stunned front desk receptionist at NBC, ready to call security.

Oh, those frantic calls home, even more frantic (unanswered) calls to Michael, and the excruciating return to Brooklyn, filled with the inexhaustible reservoir of Russian dark humor…Michael would reappear, several days later, mumbling excuses and pulling out another piece of paper with a name scribbled on it. The saga, amazingly similar in every detail of immigrant gullibility, would repeat itself several times, with the trips to the city, a bewildered receptionist, and a bitter trip home.

Michael’s next philanthropic action was directed to our friends, Sasha and Irina, frequent guests in our house. Sasha, today a reputable doctor, was then studying for his medical license exams, and his wife's job as a receptionist supported them. Dirt poor, they were renting a tiny decrepit attic. Hearing their story, Michael offered one of his apartments—of which he had plenty, all over the city. Of course, for his Russian friends, he would immediately make a gorgeous one-bedroom available, in a brand-new building, with all new appliances. He even took Sasha for a tour so that he could see for himself the friendly neighborhood and the building, and stare in awe at his dream apartment windows--from the outside! The lease was signed. Sasha and Irina paid Michael the security deposit and the first month rent. They started packing, ready to move in, when it occurred to them to contact the super, just in case. The super had no clue. And Michael was not home.

It was only much later that somebody suggested that Sasha file a complaint about that rent money in small court. By that time, we had moved out of the building and Michael had completely vanished. For the next year or so, as we were emerging out of culture shock, Michael’s case became a taboo in our households. One day an older woman contacted Sasha and paid back his deposit, apologizing profusely. She introduced herself as Michael’s legal guardian and explained that he was severely mentally disabled and not responsible for his actions. She also added that he had to be committed to an assisted living facility, since he couldn’t manage life on his own.

And that is how I learned English.

Just One Summer   by Adrienne Lindholm

I was 26 when I came to Alaska. For just one summer I wanted to be part of something noble that would help preserve one of the wildest places on earth. Though I carried only a backpack and a duffle bag, my confidence was buoyed by a set of life skills I'd acquired in suburban Philadelphia, the academic skills I'd honed at an upscale university in Virginia, and my shiny new graduate degree in Environmental Studies. A couple years dabbling in environmental non-profit organizations fueled the fire in me to crusade for a better world.

As the plane to Fairbanks, Alaska, took off, I rifled through my spiral bound notebook to review the page where I'd scribbled my approach to living:

> Follow your dreams.
>
> Don't let society tell you what to do.
>
> Be skeptical of technology. It creates more stress than it relieves.
>
> Television: evil, obviously.
>
> Dresses and high heels are dumb (you can't hike in them).
>
> Big houses in suburbia: bad.
>
> Living in a cabin: good.

I wasn't shy about espousing these tenets to my friends and family. They either agreed with me or tolerated me, and every one of them, bless their kind souls, supported my quest to find my own true north. They bid me farewell as I headed to Alaska, where I didn't know a single person.

The run-down hostel where I spent my first night fit perfectly into the way I thought my world should be ordered. If only my friends could see me now, I thought. This was a real cabin in Alaska, with log construction, creaky wooden floorboards, and old metal traps and mining equipment tacked to the walls. I was assigned to a room and found my way to an empty bunk. The room was cluttered with backpacks, shower sandals, and drying laundry. They must be true travelers, I thought.

I told the other travelers I was on my way to Denali, which got a nod of approval, but I had nothing else to contribute, so I sat quietly on my bed

and listened to tales of where they'd been and where they were headed. They spoke of towns and mountains and rivers I'd never heard of.

As I climbed into bed, I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag to stay warm. I waited for darkness to set in but it never did, so I put a shirt over my eyes to block the midnight sun. The shirt helped, but my mind raced with thoughts about what the summer would be like.

The next day I took the shuttle down the Parks Highway to Denali National Park, where I'd gotten a non-paying job as a backcountry ranger through the Student Conservation Association. After spending six months thru-hiking the 2,159-mile Appalachian Trail and spending the majority of my post-college free time exploring the Rocky Mountains, I thought I had a fair amount of backcountry experience. So did the rest of the 20-somethings who had come from around the country to spend a summer in Alaska's premier national park, where Denali, the tallest mountain in North America, rises ghostly white to over 20,000 feet and enchants the sea of green tundra that surrounds it.

Most visitors to Denali National Park ride the bus into the park in hopes of glimpsing the great mountain and seeing grizzly bears, wolves, caribou, Dall's sheep, and moose. There is only one road in six million acres and virtually nothing else to interrupt the vast expanse of wilderness: no settlements, developments, or infrastructure that make it easy for people to get there and be there. One of the things I hadn't considered when I applied for the backcountry ranger position was the fact that I'd never traveled through country with no trails, no bridges, no signs, no campgrounds. I'd also never traveled through country with grizzly bears and wolves.

When my supervisor paired us up and assigned us our first backcountry patrol, I found myself matched with the only member of the backcountry ranger staff who actually lived permanently in the area. The other rangers sat with their partners and excitedly pulled out maps, speculating what they might encounter. They decided what gear they would share and how many days of food to plan for. Hoping to make eye contact, I glanced across the room at Jeff, but he seemed to roll his eyes as he looked over the group of rangers that were about half his age. As I walked toward him, he turned his back to put on his jacket. I paused beside the large wall-map of the park and searched for the drainage we'd been assigned to. When Jeff scooped up

his belongings and headed for the door, I sheepishly intercepted him. “So, you know where we’re going?”

“Been going there for decades,” he said with a look that added “how about you?”

“Anything in particular I should bring?” I asked.

“Standard stuff.” he said. “We’ll take the camper bus tomorrow 10am, see you there.”

Part of me could understand his resentment at being an equal member on a team of overly excited kids from the Lower 48, but still, he had no right to treat me like that. How could my supervisor have paired me with him? I returned to my cabin wondering if I’d made the right decision to come here. I threw my bag across the bed and sat down with a sick feeling in my stomach.

Our patrol began on a trail that went for only ¼ mile before fading into alders and willows along the river bar. Feeling like I needed to prove my strength, I hiked faster than he could on the trail section, but as soon as we hit the brush, I came to a near halt. I’d never hiked off trail before. Jeff sensed this and blazed ahead, thrashing through the alders and willows, wisely choosing a route through the thinnest branches and keeping us on course. I could barely keep up and had no idea how he knew where to go. I tried to look up out of the brush to get my bearings, but when I looked up, I stumbled over branches and rocks. I powered through as fast as I could and tried not to lose sight of Jeff’s back.

When we got to a point where we had to cross the river, Jeff simply trudged through it. Accustomed to dry Rocky Mountain hiking with few creek crossings, my instinct told me to sit down and take off my boots before wading across in order to keep my feet dry. But after seeing Jeff cross, I wasn’t sure if this was a test to see if I was dumb enough to get my feet wet, or if it was a test to see how well I could ford a river. Jeff looked at me and then looked impatiently at his feet and sighed. Forget wet feet, I thought, I can’t let him leave me. I stepped into the coldest water I’d ever felt, restrained a grimace as the icy water seeped through my hiking boots and socks, and felt my way across. I pretended it didn’t hurt that much as I stepped out of the river with feet that were burning from cold.

Fortunately, I had enough sense after the first day to realize that I didn't know much about this country and that Jeff did. As much as I didn't want to admit it (I'd worked hard to cultivate my confidence and independence), I could probably learn something from him. So I began asking questions. And he began, slowly, in his characteristically gruff style, to let me in. By the last day of our patrol we sat side by side on a grassy hillside above a wide river bar.

"You need to pay attention," he said.

He noticed my confusion. I knew I had to look out for wildlife and make sure no animal surprised me and got any of my food. Our week-long training had established this as the Golden Rule of Denali. It was the only way wild animals will stay wild and safe. I knew this already. I told him I was scanning the river bar for bears.

"You might be looking at the river," he said, "but you gotta look behind you, too, so you can see the wolf coming down the hill. You gotta be alert and look in all directions. All the time."

He wouldn't let me lounge back and take a nap in the sun. "This isn't the Rockies," he sniggered. "There are animals all over the place that want your lunch. And I have to shoot 'em when some goddamn hiker lets 'em get food," he said shaking his head.

"And besides," Jeff told me, "these here are critters people come from all over the world to see. Why you'd want to waste a nap over that…"

"Is that why all these people come then? To see the animals?" I asked.

"No…" he started, "I mean, yeah they do, but…. Look, you could go to a zoo and see every animal out here, right?"

I nodded.

"There are big mountains that are a lot easier to get to. These people are paying huge bucks, spending 15 hours on an airplane, and then cram into a shitty school bus for eight hours into the park." He paused, and said, "No, it ain't just the animals."

I returned from that patrol hungry for more, hungry to understand exactly what Jeff was talking about, and I anxiously awaited my next assignment. It

would be a little while. We earned our patrols only after a week or two working in the visitor center, talking to tourists and helping them plan their trips. It didn't take long to confirm my suspicion: people came long distances at great expense because they believed it was unlike any other place on earth.

One evening an elderly couple with a southern accent returned from a trip into the park. The woman smiled at me and said, "It wasn't just seeing the bear. It was seeing that bear leading her cubs through the tussocks, rooting up ground squirrels, and those snowy mountains behind her. The light, it was early in the morning and the sun was low so her fur was glowing and the yellow light reflected off the side of the mountain." She turned to her husband, "Was that something or what?"

Her husband leaned in and said thoughtfully, "You can imagine that bear doing that for the last thousand years. It's like getting to see where life came from, where we all came from."

"Where are you all from?" I asked.

"North Carolina."

"You came a long way," I said.

"There's not much left in the world like this," she said, contemplating. "We wanted to come for a long time."

We backcountry rangers were proud of our jobs as protectors of one of America's largest, wildest, most special places. We were thrilled to work there and contribute to something we saw as good and noble. We worked hard. We worked long hours. We were polite to every visitor, even when they were impolite to us. We answered all their questions the best we could. We lived together in small, cold cabins with no running water. After dinner, we drank cheap, cold beer and played cards. During the night we peed in milk jugs. Over the course of that summer, those big wild spaces did something to my psyche that I hadn't expected. I had planned to stay just four months. Twelve years later I'm still here.

I now manage the wilderness program for all the national parks in Alaska, and it's still an honor, though I spend more time behind a desk than I'd prefer. Every time I leave the state, I meet people who tell me that Alaska is

on their bucket list. They light up and I wonder what images are filtering through their brains. Perhaps an igloo, a wolf, or snowy mountains. Maybe they're thinking of the American frontier, of independence and freedom, of bigness and greatness, of the world before we messed it up.

Sometimes I think of the wilderness as being comprised of two different things. There's an outward appearance that we can point to and quantify (wildlife, clean air, clean water, rivers and coastlines, cliffs and canyons). These are the things on the glossy brochures and television ads. Secondly, there is what all those things add up to. It's what the tangible things collectively represent. The way a place makes us feel, the mystery, the connection to something larger than ourselves, the inspiration, peace and awe—this is the soul of the wilderness. Like the human soul, it is hard to define and impossible to quantify; and also like the human soul, perhaps what is most compelling is that it has the power to shape a person.

Over the course of a dozen years, just as the rain and wind and ice have continued to shape topography and sustain dynamic ecological systems, this place has filtered into my psyche and sculpted my inner landscape. I get it now, and I believe it is these things, not just the big mountains and bears, that made Ranger Jeff speak with passion. And it is because of these things that places like Denali continue to appear on bucket lists the world over.

Once by Louis Gallo

Grandma told us that it officially began when he said he wanted a little boy sailor suit for his birthday. He said he always got new clothes on his birthday and holidays, like the crinkly seersucker on Easter when he made his communion or the striped flannel pajamas for Christmas. She had noticed signs all along but kept them to herself: he dropped things, forgot what day it was, couldn't find his way to the bank or Southern Radio, where he practically lived. "Not all the time," she said, blowing out some extra air so that her lips buzzed like a small motor, "just every now and then. But enough to worry me. I didn't say anything because it would make him mad. He said he had too much to remember and the days were shorter. 'They're stealing a little more time each day,' he said, shaking his head. 'Who's they?' I asked. He just sighed and told me I knew what he was talking about."

I remember the day of her announcement. We had finished Sunday lunch and were loitering at the table, picking at a little more crumb cake, a little more pecan pie, just sort of making pigs of ourselves. Grandpa left the room suddenly—he looked sort of dazed—and went for his nap. He didn't tell the usual World War I stories or even excuse himself; he stood up, gazed at us as if he had never seen us before, and started out. He looked skinny and fragile and his fingers trembled a little. We all knew something was wrong, except maybe my sister Ruthie, who was still too young. Mom and Dad looked at each other with raised eyebrows. I had seen a few old people get skinny all of a sudden, like Uncle Ambrose, and they didn't last long after that. Grandma came in from the kitchen, where she had taken some dishes, wiped her hands, and sat down in her husband's chair. She had never done that before. Grandpa's chair at the head of the table was sacred.

"I have something to say," she began, "and you're not going to like it."

"I think we know already, Ma," Dad said. He looked sad as an old rag. Dad was devoted to his father.

She ignored him. "Grandpa is sick. His mind's going. It's like he's daft. Yesterday he went out the door in his underwear. He said he was driving up see Alphonse at Southern. When I told him he needed to put on some clothes, he blew up, told me to mind my own business. But he walked back into the bedroom and put on some clothes anyway. He stormed out of the

house and slammed the door like I was his worst enemy. Not ten minutes later he came back.

"'Can't find my keys' is all he said and then sank into this very chair and stared at the wall. I don't think he knew where he was. 'Maybe we ought to see a doctor,' I said. Well, he understood that all right and exploded again. 'I'm all right!' he shouted and pounded the table. Then he belched—you know those big cochons he makes—and smiled and everything seemed normal again. Except his shirt was buttoned up wrong and he wore two different shoes on his feet. 'Jake,' I said, 'I know you're all right, but it wouldn't hurt to see Dr. Mosby. You need to see him about your heart anyway.' Well, he started to rant and rave about how I wanted to get rid of him and how I fed him the wrong food and it wasn't him but the blood pressure medicine. Then he put his head down on the table and went to sleep. Just like that. So what I'm telling you all is that Grandpa is ill, and he needs to see Dr. Mosby, and I can't do it all myself. I'm so stiff as it is."

And then, for the first time in my life, I saw my grandmother cry. She twiddled with a linen napkin and wept softly. "He's getting so old right before my eyes."

"What's the matter, Grandma?" Ruthie asked.

Grandma reached over with her gnarled fingers and patted Ruthie's hand. "It's ok, sweetheart," she said, "your grandpa just needs to go to the doctor."

"Is Grandpa ok?" Ruthie asked. She had not digested a bit of what her grandmother had said.

"I'll make the appointment," Dad said. "He's not going to like it."

"He'll fight you and make you feel like scum," Grandma said.

"Can I come too?" I asked.

Dad smiled. He looked older and seemed beaten down. "No, Jakie," he said, "it's not a fun place to go."

"But I don't want Grandpa to be sick."

"None of us do, Jakie," Grandma said. "He's an old man though. Old people are always sick."

“Are you sick, Grandma?” Ruthie asked, as if suddenly she too knew the family had changed.

“Oh, just my usual rheumatism. You know me. My feet hurt so much.”

And that’s the first time we heard that too. Grandma came from a long line of stalwart forebears who refused to complain about anything. Their hands might be burned to char and they would remain dignified and poised and go on chatting as if valentines throbbed above their heads. If Grandma admitted that her feet hurt, they must have ached in a way none of the rest of us could stand for one minute, much less year after year.

I remember looking at the screen door. One edge of the mesh had come loose and had curled up at the joint. The metal latch hung down like a tiny anchor. Sunlight eased through lace curtains that had begun to dry rot. I felt massive forces at work, forces over which none of us had any control, and I stormed out of the room, out the door and plopped down on the concrete steps of the small porch. I tried to think about everything Grandma had said, but I couldn’t. My mind had gone blank, maybe like my grandfather’s. I heard the bells gong over at St. Rosa de Lima. Honeysuckle and sweet olive wafted in the breezes. The tall wooden fence that separated Grandma’s house and the one next door looked soggy, gray and soft. Only a few years before I had climbed that fence with abandon. It dawned on me that I would never climb it again, nor did I want to climb it. Something new had begun, something I didn’t like and wanted to brush aside as if it didn’t count. But whatever was going on seemed inexorable. We had to live with it. And it would hurt and diminish us all.

Topps 1959 by Garrett Rowlan

On a September night in Los Angeles, 1959, Pittsburgh Pirate pitcher Roy Face lost, and my father fell into the pool. Bill Jones pushed him from behind. We were guests at Bill's house. The two men were drunk, fifties-style, alcoholic expansion in a country tipsy with postwar hubris. Vin Scully announced Dodger baseball on a plastic radio, his voice sailing over the city lights below.

I'll always remember my father's expression as he climbed out of the water, his anger restrained under tight lips. I equate that expression with the Topps' baseball card of 1959 depicting Pittsburgh reliever Roy Face. He's shown poising with his arms lifted and his eyes cut toward some imaginary runner leading off first base. I have that card. A glance at it brings me back to the night of September eleventh, a date later to live in infamy. Roy Face had won eighteen straight games that 1959 season. The Pirates had come to Los Angeles. A heat wave, according to the microfilm of that September edition of the Times, had hit the city. I don't remember the heat in particular, but they had a pool, the Jones's, and I had gone with my parents to their house. Bill was a round-faced man with the sort of ruddy glow you get with sun and alcohol, and who bore a resemblance to the bandleader Phil Harris. His wife Rose was a husky-voiced brunette cut in the same mold as the actress Ruth Roman. They lived on a hillside on the northeast part of Los Angeles. The splash, the lights below, and Vin Scully's voice, the card brings it all back.

I was ten years old in 1959. I was on the cusp of things. We all were. It was about to be a new decade, with a new President, and our family was about to move, choosing a better house uptown. These facts alone make the Roy Face's 1959 card and other Topps' for that year memorable. They set a marker. They look backward and forward. The oval-shaped pictures in the front of the card suggest a window into the past. Turn the card over and you'll see the players' stats. For me those numbers had the allure of the ancient and obscure, and since they include minor league totals, a hint of the American hinterland, of the smell of hay and the taste of corn and small motels like those we'd see or sleep in every summer driving north from Los Angeles to my father's family in Kalispell, Montana. The players, depicted on the front side, steel-eyed and strong-jawed in the sun, strike poses that are almost mythic: pitchers winding up and following through, batters poising to

swing, the bat raised and cocked. Often I'll see behind them some looming stadium from the era when Eisenhower was President, colonnades and stanchions that suggest an imperial reign in its decline, and blues skies beyond without a hint of ozone depletion.

The sort of blue that is behind Bud Daley who pitched for the Kansas City Athletics. His 1959 picture shows him captured in his follow-through pose. The photo was taken on the grounds of what I assume to be the old Monarch Stadium in Kansas City, a bit of which is visible in the background while, beside his left hip, juts the spire of some distant building or silo. The suggestion is of a Kansas stretched beyond the grass of the stadium, full of farms and prairie, home of Dorothy come back from Oz and not the slain Clutter family, who would years later be the subject of a groundbreaking book by Truman Capote. The sky is a bright blue.

I recall the splash of chlorinated blue as my father fell into the water. He had been trying to teach my mother how to dive, instructions he gave without demonstrating them himself. (He was hydrophobic. Holiday weekends we would drive up the California coast. On some beach around Santa Barbara he would, if coaxed into the water, stand in the low surf with his hands clasped across his chest and shiver.) Bill Jones, coming up from behind, must have seen the hypocrisy in the moment, and the opportunity. Looking back on that moment, I can't help but see in it a whiff of class warfare, or at least distinction. It set a boundary. We were still lower middle-class. We had a modest house at the end of a cul-de-sac and lived next to the railroad tracks. In retrospect the Jones's hillside house stands with a monochrome elegance, outside of the aqua-colored swimming pool, the sort of static luxury captured in Julius Schulman's architectural photographs, the suggestion of an austere, otherworldly glory.

Otherworldly, like the hull of an abandoned spaceship, is how the batting cage behind Bobby Thomson looks in his 1959 baseball card. The athlete's face is back-dropped by the oddly-shaped structure. On the card's reverse side is a cartoon on the upper right hand corner that shows a smiling figure. It is Thomson being carried on the shoulders of his teammates while the caption reads, "Bobby's homer won the 1951 pennant for the Giants." I had dreamed of some kind of similar glory, some defining career moment culminating in fame, a hillside house, and a swimming pool. I had already projected myself into the future as a baseball star and wrote out complete statistics for a major league career beginning in 1970 or so, by which time,

in reality, I was working for minimum wage. I had written that I would hit fifty-one homers in 1973 and recall thinking, even at age ten or so, that that number was a bit excessive. Remember, this number was projected a couple of years before Roger Maris broke the Babe's record, and well before Sammy Sosa and Mark McGuire began their chemically-enhanced pursuits of Maris's record and its eventual eclipse. I'd like to state now for the record that my fifty-one home runs in 1973 were hit without the use of steroids. They were powered strictly by fantasy.

I still make up statistics about myself, though sometimes I view my career in baseball in retrospection and modesty. My life experiences have imposed upon me a regimen of lowered reverse accomplishments. I still have those fantasies I mentioned earlier, but often now I'm not a star player anymore swatting fifty home runs a year, but a utility player or a pitcher who had parlayed a tricky pitch or modest hitting skills into a brief career. The numbers I give myself are mundane, certainly nothing on the scale of Billy Pierce's 1.97 ERA in 1955, another gleaming statistic from the 1959 Topps' set. Usually I apportion myself a career of some five or six years, ending around 1980, with a batting average in the high two hundreds and, if I'm a pitcher, victories ranging from thirty to sixty in that span of time. What I'm saying is that I stay in pro baseball long enough to get my pension, something I think about in real life. If I'm feeling expansive and consider the fact that I was in the same profession for almost twenty-five years, and have now retired, I extend my modest achievements, lengthening my career to a dozen years and my wins to around one-hundred. I'll even take the record of Pedro Ramos, the Cuban-born pitcher who pitched for fifteen years, from 1955 to 1970, won one-hundred and seventeen games and lost one hundred and sixty.

My father, you might say, had a lifetime record also on the losing side. He'd suffered various disappointments, and often he vented resentment at the stupid and powerful having so much influence. Richard Nixon was always a prominent object of his scorn. As was, I believe, Walter O'Malley, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who brought his team out West in 1958, displacing the residents of Chavez Ravine in order to construct Dodger Stadium.

It was a sort of protest, then, his taking us to see the Los Angeles Angels for their second-ever home game in 1961, the Haloes against the Minnesota Twins on Friday night, April 28, 1961. The newly-formed Angels played in front of a crowd of 9,745. The pitcher that night for the Twins, an expansion

team, was Pedro Ramos. The Angels' lineout consisted of other teams' cast-offs. Among those was Albie Pearson, the diminutive center fielder, a pick-up from the Washington Senators. I doubt if my father wanted to see the five-foot-five Albie Pearson play as much as I did. Still, it would have suited him to support the underdog. He liked the idea of the deprived, the oddball, and those who did the most with what they had. (He would have liked David Eckstein, the Angels' former shortstop.) He was opposed to the waste and prejudices and inefficiencies that he thought characterized American life. While my parents lived in San Francisco before I was born, he was an advocate of Technocracy, a kind of quasi-socialistic form of organization based on managerial expertise. Later on, after we had moved to Los Angeles when I was small, I recall him as being an enthusiast of the writings of Thorstein Veblen, the dour coiner of the term "conspicuous consumption." Even our cars ran toward the offbeat. First it was the Italian Fiat and then the Borgward, a Swedish car, which was ruined after we had an accident, the result of his aggressive driving.

The game went into extra innings before the Angels won, 6-5, in the twelfth, Albie Pearson coming home from third on a hit batter. I don't remember that. We probably left early. The results I got on microfilm. I don't remember much about that night except my mental snapshot of Pedro Ramos releasing a pitch under the bright electric lights, and my feeling of the immensity of the surrounding stadium whose seats seemed magnified in number, so that the domino-like acres of (mostly unfilled) chairs suggest infinity.

Those 1959 cards have an-almost infinite fascination for me. They are consonant with the microfiche copies of old newspapers and photographs and other artifacts that I use to dislodge relics of recollection from the place where my father, other family members, and a few friends have gone. When I turn over a baseball card, it's another time. It's Bud Daley or Ralph Terry, another hurler for the Kansas City Athletics, throwing a pitch against a pristine blue sky, and it's also like Roy Face, looking over his shoulder as if to see what's coming next.

Carts That Go Bump in Life   by Kellie L. Thurman

Back in the day, she was built like a brick shit house. By back in the day, I'm referring to the 80s, when sex, drugs, and stadium rock-n-roll were the norm. We were often mistaken for sisters, two peas in a pod…or like two shoulder pads in an acid-washed jacket.

Standing under the harsh lights at the Wal-Mart, with decades behind us, the shit house had exploded.

We accidently bumped carts in the household section.

"Well, hey there." She smiles, tiny teeth, all gums. I remember this is something she doesn't like about herself.

"Well, hey you!" I smile back.

We were once inseparable, best-friends a long time ago. As adults, when our thirties had reeled us in, wrung us about, and cranked us out on the finished end, we were not.

Only our shopping carts touched now, not our lives.

Time had raced on.

Our paths had forked somewhere along the way.

I took mine.

She took hers.

Nothing bad happened…just life.

The steadfast commonality of our youth didn't exist as adults. The only thing we have in common now is motherhood. It just isn't enough.

My oldest, 20.

Hers, 19.

My youngest, 15.

Hers, 14.

All girls.

Stair steps and pay backs.

And now, here we stood, surrounded by toilet brushes and soap dishes.

I hold on to my cart; she holds on to hers.

Her mom jeans are pulled high over her belly, which was once washboard, but now a resting place for her once impressive D cups. My jeans are in style, low on my waist, thanks to thousands of crunches in the gym and high fiber/low fat in the fridge. There's enough padding in my bra to stop a bullet. I know she remembers this is something I don't like about myself.

All women have these self-proclaimed flaws.

We're no different.

Yet, we are.

Her sweatshirt covers her bulkiness. My blazer accentuates my curves, curves that are so damn hard to maintain as the kids grow up and the years grow wide.

Her shoes…house slippers. My wedges are cobalt blue, this fall's trendy color.

Once so big, auburn and full of Aqua Net, her hair is now limp and dead, home hair color on the ends, gray at the roots. My edgy pixie cut is clipped neat.

With no makeup, her face is tired, wrinkled.

I've spent an hour putting on my face, and a fortune on anti-wrinkle creams.

I think of how old she looks and wonder if I look just as old. I know that I am tediously trying to hold back the inevitable. I wonder if she realized that in herself, and just gave in. Did she think I was a fool and she the smart one? Or, am I the smart one and she the fool?

"How are your girls?" I ask, trying to see the girl in the woman standing before me.

"Good. Yours?" she asks…fidgeting. She was always the hyper one. I smile because I catch a glimpse of the past in her.

"Good."

“How are you getting along since your dad passed?” She shows concern, but toys with her hair, pulling it back in a make believe pony tail, letting it go…pulling it back…letting it go.

“It’s hard; you know that.” I now understand the void she has always felt. Her dad has been gone over 20 years. Our dads have both died from cancer, but decades apart.

“Mom’s birthday is tomorrow. I’m looking for towels to match her bathroom,” she adds.

“Aaaaw. Your mama is a sweetie.”

The woman was a genuine saint in my book, especially dealing with us as teenagers.

“How old is she?”

“72.”

“I had forgotten that our moms were the same age.” I smile like a dope… at one time we knew this, and now, I’m remembering it again.

I wonder if the wrinkles around my mouth are just as pronounced as hers. When I look at myself in the mirror every day, do I not see what others can spot right away, especially if they haven’t seen me in awhile? Was she seeing in me right now, what I was seeing in her?

Surely not.

But I make a mental note to buy more creams, stay out of the sun.

Another pair of shoppers shuffle through our aisle. The old lady in orthopedic shoes is complaining to her husband that she can’t find a damn thing. We smile at them. They ignore us. The man seems miserable and the woman is on a mission to find a new toilet seat, there’s no time for pleasantries.

We continue on, chatting about our girls. Our youngest both made honor-roll. Her oldest is still trying to ‘find herself’; mine is struggling through nursing school.

“Bub’s still outta work.” She sighs. I know that Bub is always in and out of work.

“Times are hard. I’m sorry,” I console, but I need to end our bump in. Time, and little of it in the day, is still rushing on, pushing me further away from my then and knee deep into my now.

“It was good seeing you, but I gotta get. Good luck with your towel search; tell your mom happy birthday! We’ll get together!”

I know we will never get together.

“Good seeing you! Yes, we’ll get together.”

I know that she doesn’t really want to get together either.

We part.

She heads toward the bath towel section.

I head toward the check out.

I am not sure why we won’t get together; we just won’t.

It’s complex, but simple at the same time, as adult life tends to be.

Are we each proof to the other that the past is as lost as our youth, which was supposed to rock out and party on dude, forever? Or is the effort too much? Is it too overwhelming for each of us…that we are what the other one cannot, or will not be?

Our worlds are different now. Back in the day, our roles as best friends were set in that proverbial stone, and as solid as our hard, tall hair. Our bestie bond was built on who we were at that time. And who we were, is gone.

I want to quickly glance over my shoulder and take one last peek of who I was back then, because seeing her does that for me, no matter what she looks like now. She is my portal back to the me before the me now.

But I don’t.

I continue on…pushing my cart one way while she pushes her cart another.

Pneumagraphia   by Dreama Pritt

"Simone Weil was right; there are only two things that pierce the human heart: beauty and affliction. Moments we wish would last forever and moments we wish had never begun."

~John Eldredge, Desire

The marks on my son's skin were ugly. At least a dozen red, raised welts, long and thin, covered the right side of his neck. I rushed over to him.

"Oh, my goodness! What happened?" I'm sure my voice was shaking.

He looked up at me after pausing his video game, puzzled, with no sign of discomfort or pain in his bright blue eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"This, on your neck," I said, gently touching one of the welts. "How did you get these marks?"

Still looking confused, he lifted his hand to his injury. "I dunno, Mom. I had a little itch and I scratched it," he said. "Why are you freaking out?"

I couldn't believe the angry lines were from the normal scratching of a normal itch, but within ten minutes, all the marks were gone. My son insisted that he hadn't been in any pain. Later, he was diagnosed with a fairly innocuous autoimmune disease called dermatographia.

"It literally means 'to write on the skin,'" his pediatrician said. She confirmed the diagnosis by tracing on his arm with a tongue depressor, recreating one of the inflamed lines we'd seen before.

The Mayo Clinic's web site says that dermatographia "leaves no lasting marks." My son, always the performer, is not above masking the dysfunction by using the effect on his skin as a party trick, turning his problem into a talent. Since learning of this disorder, I've seen images of people who use its effects for art. After drawing designs on their skin, they photograph the results, preserving the short-lived pictures raised on their reusable canvases.

I wonder, though, about the things in our lives that do leave lasting marks. Certainly, some physical injuries leave lasting scars, but I'm thinking about a deeper impact, marks that cannot be seen. Not skin-deep, but soul-deep. Not derma-deep, but pneuma-deep.

The experiences that stay with us the longest are those that prick the heart, whether sharpened by beauty or affliction. What sticks in the memory? What details won't leave? What bits do we grasp tightly, desperate to not lose? The answers to these questions define us. Shape us. Our perspectives shift, as new experiences come, as new lines and couplets are etched into our often pierced hearts. Light and dark entwined write on the soul.

Yes.

To write on the soul. That's it exactly.

Pneumagraphia.

Sunlight bounces off blonde curls. The front porch is hers alone for the moment; her mother is just inside the open door. The toddler is content, curiously looking down as her bare toes explore the cool, rough surface of the concrete. An unexpected wind catches the storm door, and it swings wildly toward the blissfully unaware baby girl. As the door reaches the apex of its swing, the glass pane, adjustable to let in or keep out the fresh air, loses its hold on the door. Her mother gasps and speeds toward her daughter, even then knowing there's no way she can make it in time. The storm door swings back into place, but the glass falls directly over the little girl's head. It crashes. Splintering. Shattering. The girl's mother, fear and adrenaline at full blast, rushes to her daughter's side. Instead of cuts and blood, tears and pain, the little girl looks up unscathed. The broken glass has fallen around her in a perfect circle.

My mother always tells me that I have "blonde skin." It is still fair, though my blonde curls deepened to chestnut before I left elementary school. A myriad of scars, both faint and dark, chase stories—wrecking a bike shoved a tooth through my lip there, taking a kitchen knife from my four-year old niece opened my pinkie here, surgeries, falls, and no idea where I got those—around my body. I love them, really.

Like shadows in a painting, memories—even of pain—grant an air of character to my past.

I was protected, that day on the porch. Supernaturally, I think. But I can't really explain why. And I don't remember it for myself; I was too young to hold onto any memories, good or bad. When I see it in my mind, it is from my mother's perspective, a soundless video, insulated from noise and fear and speed. I don't remember the first time I heard the story; I don't remember how many times I've heard the story; but I do know that it is a beginning in my story. A marker of who I will be. A marker of who I will become. Shards of glass not touching my body, but engraving my soul.

I wonder at the scars I have, and I wonder at the scars I don't.

My first memory comes to me, sieve-sifted through years of shame, of shadow, of light, of love. That day, too, was a mixture of light and darkness. The sun outside was bright, but inside my Daddy's workshop, the light was murky at best; sunlight only peeking through the cracks, illuminating dust motes and sawdust in the air. The walls were corrugated tin—dull metal corduroy encasing, enclosing. I was only three or maybe four, without the words to understand, without the words to tell.

"Do you want to see what makes babies?" my uncle said.

I backed away slowly, my arms at my sides, palms behind me, fingers splayed. I shook my head side-to-side timidly, terror-stricken. My eyes must have been as wide and full of fear as they felt.

"Don't worry," he said, with a note of amusement in his voice. "I won't do it to you."

The images that followed are engraved in my mind, though I didn't know the words. His hand on his penis. The color of his ejaculate. I knew only that I was afraid. I don't remember how I escaped, although I was standing by the door. I imagine he was laughing as the door closed behind me.

He didn't touch me that day.

He would.

Some of my stories, I wish I could unread. Can you call a wound that never completely heals a scar? Words of pain weep bloody tears, staining my face, my hands, my life. That unhealed little girl's heart still beats in my chest, and I wonder why I was protected from falling glass only to be damaged in other ways. Still, I've found divine grace in which to rest, and I find compassion written on my soul alongside the uglier words.

The Easter sun shone in through the gauzy white curtains and the French doors leading out to the patio on the river. Five days—two more than doctors said we'd have—had passed since my father's devastating stroke, and most of our immediate family was gathered to spend the day together at Hospice. The beauty of the facility and the graciousness of the staff gave us much comfort during those uncertain days, but my Mom and I had been there—and at the hospital, too, before he was transferred—nearly every minute. We were tired. Dad, proving himself once again to be the biggest, strongest, most contrary man in the world, had defied the medical establishment—never regain use of his right side, never speak or understand any language—by moving the arm and leg on the damaged side of his body (even standing up with assistance), communicating with gestures and spoken words. He still refused food and drinks, though, and his Living Will prevented any nutrition or fluid except by mouth. He seemed to be improving, but even though he had far exceeded the best case scenario presented by his doctors, we didn't know if it would be enough. He hadn't had any fluids since the first day in the hospital. Dehydration was taking its toll. Hope and despair kept trading places.

On Easter, though, the world looked brighter. The sun was shining. My brothers scared up a wheelchair and helped Dad into it. He pointed which way he wanted them to take him, and he put his foot down so that the wheelchair wouldn't budge until he was ready to move. They spent a couple of hours outside in the sunshine, surrounded by trees and flowers. Dad was in a hospital gown, his own pajama pants, and socks with no shoes. The ensemble was topped off with my oldest brother's bright white Adidas ball cap. Dad was full of personality that day—more himself than he'd been since the stroke. He played jokes on grandkids and visitors; we even heard him laugh—a jagged, rough, broken, joyful laugh.

While the boys had him occupied outside, I took a shower and tried to rest. Nights alone with only me, Mom, and Dad were difficult, even with the Hospice staff a call button away. I was sleeping, when I slept, on a pullout couch. Dad was restless, and even with half his body not working, he was stronger than we were. He'd fallen more than once trying to get up by himself, and he fought us when we tried to help him. The constant struggle was stressful.

When Dad was ready to come back inside, Mom took pictures as each family member gave him a hug. Dad had always been famous for his bear hugs—hugs that found your feet floorless, your back cracked, and your breath uncatchable. He hugged everyone, all the time—I don't think I ever saw him without being wrapped up in his safe embrace.

When it was my turn, I walked over to his wheelchair with my arms extended and a big smile on my face.

"Can I have a hug, Daddy?"

He stopped smiling. He set his jaw, and he shook his head, side-to-side.

He said no.

I laughed—a fake laugh—and put my arms around him anyway. But my heart was pierced. Broken.

I was already putting off my grief. I didn't want to mourn him while he was still breathing. I shoved the unexpected hurt of that moment and its unshed tears into the compartment in my mind alongside the fathomless loss of my father. I hid myself in busyness, taking care of little things. Taking care of other people.

Every moment of my life, I knew unquestionably that my father loved me. I knew that I could count on him. I had seen him drop everything and drive six hours just because I called and said I needed his help. But on that day, in that moment, he rejected me. He couldn't speak well enough to explain—and I was afraid to ask.

The unexpected hurt of that moment still holds me. I'm haunted. He's gone now, and I will never know why he withheld that hug.

I remember when I was a little girl, and Daddy and I were playing a game. I remember that, somehow, I got hurt. I remember crying while he held me. I remember him saying that he was sorry. I remember that he said, “I love you. I would never hurt you on purpose.”

As Easter waned, Dad was stretched out in the too-small hospital bed, his six-foot, six-inch height exactly matching the length of the mattress. The light through the window was softer now, the blue walls almost smoky gray in the evening light. The room felt hushed after all the excitement and visitors of the day, and it was just my Dad and me.

I knelt by the bed. After the first night when he fell out of it, the Hospice nurses lowered it as close to the floor as it would go. I looked into my Dad’s eyes, and the tears I’d been suppressing came unbidden. I saw love and compassion in his face. I laid my head on his chest, and I wept. His left hand, the one he could control, smoothed my hair until my tears stopped.

Shirley? by Chelsey Clammer

My first sponsor was a four-foot-two black woman who used to be a police officer. I do not remember her name. She would sit in meetings and knit sweaters for her grandchildren, pink and yellow cotton yarn twisting around her knobby knuckles. She asked one day if the theme of the meeting could be forgiveness. Her reasoning, she said, was because "I need y'all to forgive me because I forgot to take my medication this morning." Immediately upon her confession about her mental instability I wanted her to be my sponsor. I could connect with that.

I want to say her name was Shirley. This was two years ago in Chicago, where I first got sober. I was in those meetings because I was trying to stick to my sobriety, trying to make it a permanent thing in my life.

I was fresh out of the psych ward where I spent the days sitting in group therapy and learning about my "hot thoughts." The lot of us patients sat around in a circle, our common element that we were a bunch of suicidal people trying to understand what made us tick. What was making me tick was that I was drinking too much and was always wallowing in the thoughts of my dad who died of alcohol poisoning. I didn't want to say this in any of the psych ward group therapy sessions because then I would have to talk about my own drinking habits.

One day, though, a social worker called me into her office because she wanted to "assess" me.

"How much do you drink?" The social worker asked. She had a plump, chalky face and crisp blonde highlights. Gray streaks showed through. She looked tired, bored as she assessed my drinking habits.

"Oh just a few beers every other night," I lied.

"That's almost a lot."

Fuck, I thought. Even my lie sounded like too much. If only she knew how much I really drank—two bottles of wine a night, along with some start-the-night-right shots of whiskey—then she would probably throw my ass into rehab.

“Most people only drink a few times a week. But if you're drinking, let's say four times a week, then there is a chance you might have a problem with alcohol.”

Hell yeah I do, I wanted to say. I drank every night, and it wasn't only beer. I had my nightly habit of wine and whiskey, my 3pm starting time with happy hour Margaritas, and my morning hangover cure of a Bloody Mary. But I kept quiet in her psych ward office, stared at the yellow walls stuffed with our bodies.

She turned on her computer and went to an Alcoholics Anonymous page.

“Let's get you set up to go to a meeting when you are released.”

“I'm an atheist,” I said flatly. I knew that AA was all about god and spirituality, and I wanted none of it. I possibly had a desire to stop drinking, but only because I wanted to stop being hung-over. But I still wanted to drink, could not even fathom what my life would be like without it.

“It's okay,” she said, as if my atheism were a flaw. “There are AA meetings for atheists, too.” She made a couple of clicks on the computer, and printed a list of meetings I could go to. “Here, keep this and go to a meeting when you are released.”

“Sure. Thanks,” I said and pushed out of the chair. I returned to the group therapy room and stuffed the list into the trashcan before anyone could see it. I did not want to be an alcoholic like my father. I believed it was a despicable thing to be, and no matter how much I knew I should stop drinking, how much I knew the drinking was ruining my life, I would not admit this. I did not want to be like him.

But I am like him.

When I was released from the psych ward a week later, I did, in fact, get my ass to an AA meeting. The hangovers became too much for me to handle, as well as the morning depression caused by them and the way I could not stop thinking about my dead, alcoholic father. At my first AA meeting, I met Shirley, or whatever her name was. Her squat little body sat across from mine, and I peered into her face after her “I forgot to take my medication this morning” confession. She didn't say anything else during that meeting, but I walked up to her afterward and asked if she

wanted to be my sponsor. I thought that's what alcoholics do. They go to meetings and they get a sponsor.

“Well sure, honey!” she said in her sprightly little grandmotherly voice and gave me a hug. I could see the top of her head, see the gray wiry streaks that were sticking up above a mass of black hair that was slowly turning gray as well. She had glasses that swallowed her face, thick lenses amplifying the wrinkles around her eyes.

After the meeting we went across the street to a Mediterranean restaurant. I did not have anything to eat as I was trying to lose weight, because I did not know what else to do with my time. I used to consume my time with drinking, with the obsession over the drink. Without that in my life, I turned to trying to control my body, to obsess over my physical form. Shirley had a pita sandwich. In between bites in which tahini and bits of falafel dripped down her brown chin, she asked me to tell her about my life.

I didn't know where to start, what to say about my life. Most of the time I described myself by saying I worked at such-and-such place, or that I was a runner and interested in writing. I couldn't tell if she wanted to know about my drinking habits or just what kind of a person I was. I decided to not talk about myself.

“My dad was an alcoholic,” I said. “He used to get drunk and threaten suicide.”

“What?!?” she said. As she was an old woman, I couldn't tell if she said this because she couldn't believe it or because she couldn't hear me.

“Well, he died from alcohol poisoning six years ago, and now I'm starting to accept the fact that I'm like him, that I'm an alcoholic, too.”

“That's good, honey.”

She finished eating quickly enough so I didn't have to spill my soul to her that day.

We never met again.

But we did exchange phone numbers, and I would call her in the mornings on my way to work. We would say the serenity prayer over the phone together while I sat on the train. It felt awkward, but also a little comforting. With so much loneliness I was feeling now that I had lost my drinking

buddies, it was good to have someone who would sit and talk with me, even if we were just saying a prayer together, saying the same memorized words at the same time. It was not a conversation, but a belief in the fact that you do not have to be alone, that even when two people are so vastly different you can find your connections—like being an alcoholic—and go forward with it.

I do not know what type of drinker Shirley was. But what I did come to understand was that she hadn't given up on life. She had come to accept that her life had become unmanageable when she was drinking, and so she turned her life over to the will of some higher power and said the serenity prayer every morning. During our Mediterranean restaurant meeting, as I kept quiet and watched her eat, Shirley did tell me a little bit about herself, a little bit about the traumatic events she had gone through—a runaway son, a horrible divorce, health problems—and was able to get sober and stay sober after all of them.

That is what I wanted.

I soon moved to Minneapolis to get out of the city in which I had so many drunk memories. I never told Shirley I moved, never spoke to her again, never said that prayer with her again.

Ninety-Six Hours of Catholic TV by Rachel Dovey

The Hail Mary was coming from my grandmother's television, and I tried to pay attention.

"Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death," a priest with a crew cut repeated, in the tone of studied concern often used by weathermen.

My 87-year-old grandmother had just suffered a stroke so severe she couldn't talk or roll over, but every time my mom or I picked up the remote to navigate away from her beloved Catholic TV, she would do the one thing she still could—open her milky green eyes and glare at us.

Catholic TV is exactly what it sounds like. There are programs where church leaders interview conservative pundits about their pro-life stance and adolescent boys explain "Treasures of the Church," like the Eucharist through silver braces, their monotonous voices raising only when they break. There's a Merv Griffin-style variety show where 70-year-old clergymen sing old-timey pop standards backed by the Catholic TV Orchestra, and at 10am and 6:30pm, a priest or cardinal prays the rosary, inviting viewers to join in at home.

My grandmother is very Catholic. My mom, a long-out lesbian who'd left this Irish neighborhood in Buffalo, New York for Northern California 30 years ago, is not. I'm not either, but the scent of religion still clings to me, thick and lingering as incense. Raised in a Russian Orthodox Church by my dad and an apartment full of Buddha statues and Georgia O'Keeffe prints by my mom, I had struck an uneasy compromise between their conflicting worldviews by 23. I no longer went to church, but I did still pray, and as the clean-shaven priest repeated his ancient invocation—flat, staged and artificially lit as it was—I focused on his words, hoping at best for some kind of transcendence, and at least for a little distraction.

It didn't work.

From the hospital bed that had been set up in her living room, my grandmother let out a loud groan. It could have been a word, or a sentence, but her voice was so garbled after the stroke that each utterance sounded like it was filtered through gravel. The smell of shit filled the room.

My mom jumped up from the plastic-covered couch where we'd been sitting and ran over to my grandmother, across a TV-lit living room that had started to lose the immaculate shine it wore when its owner swept and polished several times a day. Houseplants were beginning to wither, crucifixes and yellowed photos collected a thin layer of dust and unopened mail was strewn around the coffee and end tables, displacing the lacy doilies my grandmother had endlessly rearranged.

My mom bent down over her and quickly straightened up.

"We need to change her," she said, her voice dipping as she tried not cry.

I got up and walked reluctantly over to the bed to stand opposite my mother, over this 90-lb woman who was responsible for both of us, but whom neither of us really liked. She looked up at me through a face unusually bare of lipstick and bright pink rouge, her hair white, her jaw and cheek muscles so relaxed I would have thought she looked peaceful if I didn't know her better, didn't know that this newly acquired softness was just paralysis from the stroke.

Together, my mom and I lifted and rolled my grandmother out of her diaper and I held her brittle hip and shoulder, trying not to watch. But as my mom ran a wet washcloth up and down her withered thighs and placed a clean diaper underneath her, I accidently looked down, noticing that her naked crotch now sprouted nothing but a few wispy ghosts of hair.

I looked away quickly, embarrassed for her and ashamed of myself. I was ashamed of so many things that day—of being here for the first time in nearly six years, of planning to stay only four days, of being glad that our visit would be so short. And I was ashamed because, though I didn't like to admit it, I'd thought this deathbed visit would be something with more meaning or profundity, something that might just bring about those great Catholic terms like "epiphany" or "forgiveness," or even just bind my grandmother, mom and myself a little closer together. A recent college grad with little experience of loss, I wanted something more than this—more than disposable diapers and the jumbled noise coming from my grandmother's throat, sounding like a distant cousin of "sorry."

Across the doily-strewn room, under a dying plant, the TV still broadcast the rosary. When the camera wasn't focusing on the priest, it would pan up the marble-and-gold walls of the tall cathedral where he stood. I remembered

something I'd learned in my junior-year art history class, that the narrow basilica and tall, pointed spires of a traditional Catholic church are constructed to draw your attention skyward, up and away from this suffering world. I watched the lens ascend to a dome full of weightless clouds and floating angels and wished my mind could follow them, to hover peacefully above this mess.

"Can you grab me a towel?"

My mom was trying to spoon feed her mother broth, but the clear liquid kept pouring back out of her drooping mouth—a process I'd been trying not to watch. Instead, because it was 10am the next day, I listened to the same clean-shaven priest sermonize on TV, now in the middle of a comparison between the glory of God and extra-strength laundry detergent.

I went to the hall linen closet, finding rigid stacks of towels that had been color coded and cross-referenced according to type—hand, bath, wash cloth—by my grandmother, once a librarian, before the stroke. I wasn't surprised; this was, after all, a woman who'd dreaded leaving her home for an apartment not for sentimental reasons, but because she couldn't stand the thought of a communal laundry room.

"And then he was transfigured. His clothes became whiter than any bleach could make them," I heard from the TV.

I brought the towel reluctantly over to my mom and then hurried back to the couch, wary of catching my grandmother's half-shut eye. Once safely back on the plastic surface, I began rifling through a box of old photos that was stowed nearby, picking memories out of their faded depths. There was the vacation cottage on Lake Ontario where my grandmother had always insisted that I sleep downstairs, in case the house caught fire. There I was in a pink two-piece during the first months of my 14-year-old anorexia, when she'd surveyed my gaunt physique approvingly, but still told me that she weighed less at my age. There, in a dim snapshot from the distant past, she stood on her wedding day beside my grandfather, years before the five children, the drinking and the unspeakable things to come.

My mom interrupted me.

“Your cousin isn’t coming,” she said in the same tone she always uses to talk about her brother’s family, who live in South Carolina and namedrop Jesus like he’s everyone’s friend.

“She says she doesn’t want to see her like this. She wants to remember her like she was.”

I continued sorting photos, pretending to be surprised. My mom’s implication was what it usually is—that I was the better cousin—and letting her paint me as the family’s model child never failed to comfort both of us when we were around her relatives. They might see her as the rebellious San Francisco ex-pat, but I was different. Instead of getting slapped by Sister Mary Edith and smoking pot in school, I’d gotten college scholarships and straight A’s. Instead of a string of failed romances (with women!), I’d been in a nice, traditional relationship with a penis-owner for nearly six years. With our blonde hair and green eyes, my mom and I might look nearly identical, but we both knew very well that, here, I functioned as an atonement for her many sins.

But while I would never admit it, I envied my cousin, who was at least honest. Sure, I’d made the big grand gesture, bought the plane ticket, flown to this dreary corner of upstate New York, but now that I was here, what was I actually doing? My mom busied herself with a thousand things—sponge baths, feedings, coordinating Hospice care—the anxiety lodged deep in her DNA spurring something nearly identical to love. But I tried my best to stay back, “out of the way,” I told myself, but really just as far across this small dark room from my dying grandmother as I could get. Something about her twisted body and croaking voice was too glaringly real, blinding as newly bleached whites, and in that age-old gesture Fr. Crew Cut had just been talking about on TV, I hid my face.

On our third day in Buffalo, I sat on my grandmother’s cement driveway and pulled a hidden box of Camels out of a tear in the cloth lining of my purse. My mom knew I smoked, just as I knew she’d been trying to kick the habit since I was ten, but it was one of the things, like her early childhood, that we didn’t talk about.

I blew a white cloud out into the muggy morning. Through the thin walls of the 1940s cottage behind me, I could still hear my grandmother moaning—

her guttural cries escaping with the frequent intensity of crashing waves. The Hospice nurse had assured us that this new development wasn't serious, that she was just sore from being unable to roll or stretch, but coming from a woman who likely had kept resolutely silent while birthing twins, the sounds were alarming. My mom had responded by frantically fluffing pillows and crushing Tylenol when I finally left the house, doing anything, and ultimately nothing, to calm her.

I looked around. This was a neighborhood my grandfather had hated because of its confluence of first-generation Italian and Irish immigrants. With his German pride and taste for expensive martinis, he'd never been happy about raising his family on Buffalo's industrial border, but he'd have suffered a second heart attack if he saw the neighborhood where his widow eventually moved. The green, tan and white cottages with plastic window awnings and carports lined this pothole-dented street with none of the usual signifiers of suburban wealth—no white picket fences, no sprawling lawns. Though I couldn't see it from the driveway, I knew that the Catholic school and church my mom had attended were only blocks away, as were the homes of her cousins on my grandmother's side, raising their second-and-third generation Irish families in the Sunday schools and pleated uniforms my mom had long since left.

This fading rust belt city, with its abandoned railroad terminals and crumbling factories, was the backdrop of things that happened to my mom in her early childhood that she'd only told me about once. I was six, just beginning to retain memories myself, and had walked in on her picking each of the blue-and-white plates her parents had given her out of our kitchen cupboard and hurling them against the wall. She told me then, as she crumpled into a heap of broken china, about the thin strands of half-formed memory that were starting to come back to her, about the things that sometimes happened to children, and about the fact that her own mother had quietly, politely, resolutely looked the other way. She told me, in detail far too great for a six-year-old to comprehend, about the whimpers that had been hushed half a century before, creating a silence that would roll and drift through our family like heavy smoke for years to come.

I inhaled again, starting to feel the nicotine's calming buzz. My grandmother was dying 30 feet from where I sat, and there was nothing spiritual about it—no meaningful glances, no warming embraces, and, on my part at least, no forgiveness for what she'd never done. I knew my mom shouldn't have

told me what she did, but at least I understood why she'd done it, her words "You can always talk to me" a desperate attempt to clear the muteness that had echoed through her life. I looked over my shoulder at the living room window, which flickered like a votive with the light of Catholic TV.

I remembered, then, a novella by Tolstoy I'd read in High School, "The Death of Ivan Iyllch," an experience which, I realized, that was the closest I'd come to death until today. Like most things written by Russians, it doesn't shy away from the gory details—we see the protagonist's naked, skeletal thighs, feel his exhaustion after shitting, smell the odd, rotten odor that follows him everywhere he goes. It's a story, like most things written by Russians, that only tiptoes cautiously around the edge of redemption—there's half a page of lines in twelve chapters that hint at anything beyond what seems like painful, meaningless death. And when they come, those lines don't call on the usual image of floating bodiless, free, up toward the light. The image Tolstoy uses is a strange one—instead of going up, Ivan has to follow the light down, through a soft, dark, earthy sack.

I realized that it was one of a host of images I'd encountered on my Russian dad's side that was overtly sensual—round and womb-like as that country's low-domed churches, and so very different from the ascetic angles and needle-thin towers of my grandmother's self-abnegating faith. For me, this image conjured something like reality, something like acknowledging that we're here for a while and may as well do what we can to cope. And I had just spent the last three days doing the opposite, like my grandmother—a woman who wouldn't look down at the life falling to pieces around her, but always stood like the statue of the Virgin I'd seen on TV that morning, frozen white and silent in the hope of deliverance, looking up at the sky.

I rubbed my cigarette against the cement, feeling the springy give of its fleshy softness as the sparks went black. We still had one day in Buffalo, so I did the only thing I could—I went to inside to see my grandmother and help my mom.

Contributors

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