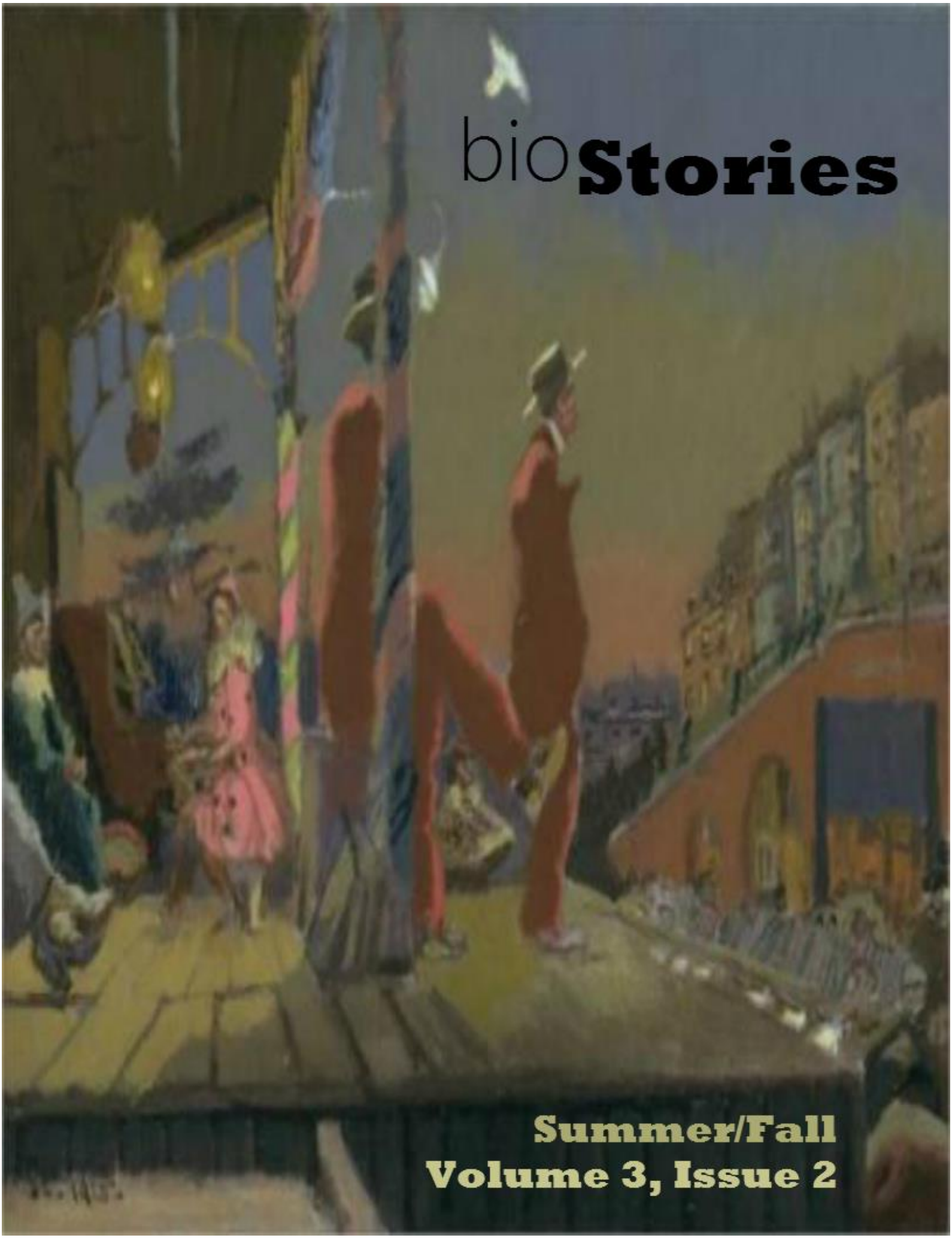

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Cover Art

“Brighton Pierrots” by Walter Sickert 1915

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Why I Love Coffee by Jesse Millner

I didn't start drinking coffee until I was in my early thirties. I'd get up in the morning and brew in an old steel pot, then pour it into a "Virginia Is For Lovers" cup with a bright, red heart on it. The final touch was a shot of Jim Beam, which helped ease the caffeine jitters. After a couple cups of java, I'd be a wide-awake drunk.

There was something really beautiful about those drunken mornings. I lived in Chicago and on those cold winter dawns when everything smoked, when the sky was dark blue and frigid, during those hours the weather outside matched the desolation I felt inside in those frozen fields of my body. I'd sit by a living room window and sip my coffee as my wife slept and an occasional car slipped down Addison Street. I loved the taste of the Maxwell House and bourbon, the bitter burning brew.

By the winter of 1986, the drunken mornings had stretched out for years and the shot of Jim Beam flavoring my coffee had become two shots, but the extra bourbon could not stop my hands from shaking, could not stop my first wife from leaving, could not keep me from losing my job.

In March of 1986, I was admitted to Chicago's Alcoholic Treatment Center, a free program located in an old hospital building next to the Cook County Jail. I shared a cubicle with five other men. I had the cot closest to the north window that overlooked a wall with barbed wire at the top and intermittent guard towers.

The worst thing about treatment was the coffee: it was bourbon-less, for one thing. And worse, they only served decaf in the treatment center cafeteria. I'd sit around with the other lost souls, drinking the bad coffee, talking about the mess we'd made of our lives. One man had shot someone in a drug deal gone bad and had just been released from prison. Another was a Guatemalan man whose union-organizer brother had been killed and who'd believed he would be next. He'd fled to Chicago to escape the murderers but hadn't been able to leave his craving for booze behind. We sat up all night around green, Formica tables drinking decaf. We told our tales of disappointment and despair. And drank more coffee.

After two weeks in treatment, we were allowed our first visit to the outside world. We were taken in vans to a Saturday morning AA meeting on

Milwaukee Avenue. It was held in a big room over a dance studio where aspiring Polka dancers from the surrounding Polish neighborhood perfected their art. It was a breakfast meeting and there was a big buffet offering eggs and bacon, pancakes and the like. But best of all, there was real coffee. I ate a huge breakfast and drank three cups of coffee. I listened to people talk about their struggles with booze and their happiness about being sober. There was also a raffle at the end where several lucky winners won free passes to an upcoming AA dance.

After not having real coffee for two weeks, the effect of the caffeine was miraculous. I felt clear and happy. But my hands shook the whole ride home.

The early days of my sobriety were defined by coffee. Every AA meeting I went to had coffee. It usually tasted pretty awful because it was made by volunteers who were new to sobriety. To this day when I smell a cup of coffee brewing, I think of AA.

Twenty years later, I drink coffee every morning. Good, expensive coffee. Usually organic. My second wife, who's only known me sober, sits at her computer in the next room, sipping a black coffee.

We met because of coffee. When we were both in graduate school in Florida, we attended a writer's conference on the Panhandle, and my future wife was a graduate assistant who received free tuition in exchange for making coffee for the various workshops. The first morning of the conference, I encountered her in the kitchen of the house where my poetry class was to be held; she was looking quizzically at a bag of Starbucks and a coffee filter.

I asked her if she needed help. She said, "Yes, I really do. I've never made coffee before."

I looked at this beautiful woman whom I'd seen around school but never talked to and got really nervous, so I simply poured the coffee into the filter and added the water without measuring it. The coffee turned out really strong. The people in the poetry workshop complained. My future wife and I went out for coffee the next morning at a nearby restaurant that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. It was one of those bright Florida mornings when anything seems possible. We drank coffee and laughed at the "Sunshine State" placemats which showed Disney and mermaids and oranges. A year later at the same writer's conference we got married.

Now I'm remembering the name of the restaurant: The Wheelhouse. And I'm even remembering our waitress' name, Frankie Day. She was having husband trouble—her man was an alcoholic who'd disappear for days at a time, then check in from some small town in Alabama, or Georgia, or somewhere else within the Bible Belt. He'd be broke and hung-over, asking for money to get home with. Wiring money, like ending a sentence on a preposition, is a risky business, and Frankie was fed up with the dude, and I told her I didn't blame her.

My wife had pancakes. She always had pancakes for breakfast. I had pigs in a blanket with a side of hash browns. The coffee was lousy but I enjoyed it anyway. I'd been sober for about a decade and I wanted to tell Frankie that there's always hope. I didn't. Instead I flirted with Lyn, and we laughed about the bad smell in the joint. We came to call it "The Cat Piss Restaurant," instead of The Wheelhouse.

All these years later, I still love coffee. It wakes me up, helps clear away those very tangible cobwebs that linger from sleep. I see a horse running across a Kentucky pasture; I see my first wife crying when they turned off our electricity; I see drunken winters in Chicago, so cold the earth and sky turned blue; I see again the treatment center and taste the decaf; I remember those first sober days when I ran along the lake; I see Florida; I see my second wife, Lyn; and I see the stain and drip of years of coffee on my desk this morning, a sort of tattoo that reminds me of where I've been, where I've dreamed, and the meanings I've made of both.

Rhythm by Russell Reece

Todd was normally an animated three-year-old but that October morning in 1978 he seemed on the verge of falling asleep at the breakfast table.

I shook his arm. "Hey, buddy. Are you feeling okay?"

He smiled at me and wheezed.

"Sounds like he's getting a cold," I said.

Dianne held the back of her hand against his forehead. "I'll give the doctor a call after you leave."

Ten hours later I walked into the crowded children's unit at the hospital. Inside a small room Todd was shirtless under a plastic oxygen tent with sensors pasted to his chest. A monitor rhythmically beeped. Asthma attack.

He smiled at first, but then his lower lip started to tremble. I grabbed his hand under the cover. "Hey, big guy. I'm sure glad to see you."

He gasped a short breath, smiled again.

"His fingernails were blue." Dianne got out of the chair and pulled on her coat. "When I told the doctor he had me rush in here. I don't think I've ever been more scared." She straightened her collar and made a wry expression. "Your trip to Baltimore was perfect timing."

"Sorry, babe. That's always the way, isn't it?" I kissed her hello.

"He's a lot better. They're just keeping an eye on him now; probably go home tomorrow." As she hugged me she whispered, "He's worried about being here by himself tonight."

"Hmm." I nodded. "So is he going to keep having these attacks?"

"The doctor didn't know. Sometimes kids outgrow them." She picked up her purse and bent over the bed. "Mommy will be back first thing in the morning, Honey. I have to go pick up your sister, but Daddy will stay with you until they kick him out." She lifted the tent and gave him a kiss. "You're going to be fine."

She turned to me. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Sure. No problem." I hoped there wouldn't be one. It had been four years.

"They said you could stay till nine."

"Okay. Go on. Get out of here."

She pulled keys from her purse and stopped at the door.

I waved her off. "Shoo! I'll see you in a couple hours."

Smiling, she turned away. As I watched her disappear down the corridor an old feeling of apprehension stirred.

Thankfully, Todd was better. Between the nurse's visits we talked and played a magnetic board game. Then he watched The Dukes of Hazard as I watched his small, wired chest move up and down to the rhythm of the monitor that constantly beeped in the background.

Monitors. Through five terrible months Dad had been connected to dozens. Wires and tubes were everywhere, poked into orifices or attached to sensors or prodding needles thickly taped across his bruised, pallid skin.

I wrung my hands together and shuddered. Todd looked at me. I smiled reassuringly and he turned back to the TV.

It had been a difficult time with Dad. At first there had been hope, and he was strong and determined. Confident doctors minimized the illness; he just needed to tough it out and things would be okay.

But then came long days in the ICU, the frightening drug-induced hallucinations, the diseased, eroded hip bone that snapped apart and was left unattended causing terrible pain with every body movement. And all the tests—the pre-MRI and pre-CT—scan tests that never stopped and were so horrid we couldn't even talk about them without wincing and choking up. In spite of Dad's strength, how could he go on? How could anyone?

During those months Mom rarely left his room and when she did, only for a few hours at a time. Her familiar presence comforted Dad, as did visits from friends and work associates. And he was always happy to see me. I went every day, at first. But after months of watching his body and spirit diminish, my visits dwindled to just one or two a week. I blamed my absence on the 1974 gas crisis, but that's not what stopped me from visiting. Just walking into the hospital petrified me.

Todd shifted in his bed as a gurney rattled past the door.

I still get queasy when I think about the trip from the lobby to Dad's room in the cancer ward. Each time, as the elevator creaked up to the fifth floor, my shoulders tensed and a heartbeat sounded in the back of my neck. The door opened to a hallway cluttered with hospital carts, monitors, wheelchairs, gurneys and assorted tanks and stainless steel contraptions. The busy, hardened staff buzzed around with cheerful, but emotionless smiles. Moving quickly through the blur of people I would stare straight ahead, careful to avoid open doors where wrinkled sheets and thin blankets covered the flaccid arms and legs of gray-haired patients who twisted and moaned or lay perfectly still with sunken cheeks and gaping mouths. Every smell and sound, every nook and cranny of the long corridor seemed draped by the shroud of Dad's diminishing condition. I walked fast, ignoring horrors that seeped from every door and the clusters of somber visitors, who often searched my face with their own red, watery eyes.

A brief period of relief would come when I finally made it to his room, where things were familiar and organized. Mom would explain Dad's current status and what was to happen next. Having a plan always offered a sense of future and provided distance, if only temporary, from the morbid world outside the door.

But then Mom would leave or take a break. I would watch her go as I had watched Dianne earlier, and my heart would sink as she was swallowed up in the congested hallway and I was left to take care of things in the room.

Todd asked for some juice. I held the cup for him as he sucked on the flexible straw. He shook his head affirmatively when he had finished, then settled back against the pillow.

On rare occasions, when Dad was conscious and his old spirit present, I was glad to be there, and thankfully, we said some important things to each other. But most times, he struggled with his illness. And I struggled. Inevitably, the nurses would come into the room to methodically poke, prod, lift and turn, oblivious to anything but the task at hand, and Dad would cry out as his broken hip caused horrible pain. In his anguish and confusion he begged for my help, pleaded with me to do something, but I never knew what to do and was ashamed at being so helpless and weak. I just looked at his drawn terrified face and his frail body and wanted to run away, to blank the image from my mind, to escape.

I could see in his eyes he knew how uncomfortable I was, and that only made things worse. My visits became tense and awkward, not the comforting respites he enjoyed with others. I failed him. Every time I was in the room alone with my dad, I failed him.

He would never have let me down. Never.

"I'm okay now."

I looked up from my wringing hands. Todd stared back at me with a countenance much older than his years. A chill slipped through me. I whispered, "What did you say?"

"I'm okay now. You can go." And then, as if he hadn't spoken at all, he turned back to the TV program.

"But Todd, I'm going to stay with you for as long as I can. There's at least another hour before I have to go."

On the screen, Boss Hogg's arms twirled round and round and his face showed a comical, frightened anticipation as he fell backward, white suit and all, into a mud-puddle. Todd pointed, laughed and wheezed again as the monitor continued to beep.

Later that night, driving through the country toward home, my thoughts churned. Thank God Dianne had been worried enough to call the doctor this morning. And thank God Todd was going to be all right. But, how strange it was the way he had spoken to me. How very strange.

I pulled off the quiet road and stopped the car next to a moonlit field of cut corn. The slow tick, tick of the idling engine sounded against a backdrop of crickets and autumn night sounds. I closed my eyes and listened.

I've always believed that there is something in the ether that surrounds us; a divine energy that connects people, makes strange things seem familiar, and gives us those funny feelings just before something is about to happen. Was that juice flowing a little this evening? And with my emotions stretched so thin, did it somehow color the words from my young son?

I stared at the silver reflection on the corn stubble.

I'm okay now. You can go.

I don't know why, but it seemed a strange thing for a frightened three year old to say to his father, and so authoritatively.

The engine tick, tick, ticked.

It’s more like something a father would say to a frightened son.

I’m okay now…

The evening sounds and the silvery night grew brilliant.

Accordions by Melissa Wiley

An accordion can all too easily take your breath away, and that, of course, is the danger. I was riding the New York subway the other weekend, where air is notoriously scarce, when a dark, stout man, balding though still young, sidled up beside me as I stood mid-car gripping a steel pole at its abdomen and began playing his accordion. At the moment, I was nursing one of those mild a-causal bout of melancholy that come on about a week before my menstrual period, and his music instantly altered my breathing, my own breath deepening with the accordion's exaggerated and noisy inhalations of unaccountably fresh, ample sound waves. I couldn't help staring, down as it happened, because he was about 3 inches shorter than me, at a large, glistening pimple insolently perched atop his left eyebrow. Soon a seat became available, and I sat down, at once perfectly gemütlich in this impromptu underground bier garden, directing my gaze upward now instead of down at the gentleman, though still a little distracted by the purulent mass raising and lowering with his eyebrows in time to the music as he ambled gaily down the car, followed closely by what I reasonably assumed were his wife and son at work collecting money in a brown newspaper cap.

The woman wore a tan sweater with a tight weave and bell sleeves and a long, flowing print skirt. She would have looked completely put together and somewhat lovely even, with her soft olive skin and light green eyes, had she not so conspicuously been not wearing a bra. The abrupt plunge of her small breasts as her nipples pointed askew like confused metal detectors within the taut tan sweater robbed it of its dignity, I couldn't help but think a cheap cross-your-heart for her and some salicylic acid for him would have made all the difference—that and the absence of the shadow of worry on their faces, though I can't imagine having been all open smiles myself were my own unfettered jubblies swaying quite so freely in the tunnel breeze, positioned at eye level with the seated passengers I was soliciting. But these thoughts were quickly silenced as a policeman curtly summoned them off the train at the next stop and escorted them out of the station to the muted jeers of the passengers, the ghost of the reverberating music still lingering like fraying spider silk among the metallic screeching of the train's aging brakes.

Playing the accordion, I have always felt, is not something you can do on the sly, especially not on a crowded subway. It is, above all, an expansive, smiling instrument, a way of widening your chest and your lungs vicariously through its plodding rhythmic compressions. And whether you like its particular timbre doesn't matter much; when it's there, you know it, and you expand along with it to some degree. The fact that the most likely place you'll happen upon one is at a German bier fest, two, three, or four sheets to the wind, only increases the odds of falling under its monochromatic spell. As I said, there's no hiding from this one, and perhaps the man with the greasily climaxing mass of pus on his lower forehead should have known as much.

I had, as it happens, all too frequent encounters with a Burmese accordion during my most impressionable years. Our grammar school priest, a man we called Father John, a refugee of Myanmar, then Burma, would enter our classrooms at will, interrupting our tests in long division and American history to play songs like "Bless Me Jesus" and "This Little Light of Mine," to which we could never sing loudly enough for his partially deafened tastes. While I was fighting against the clock for elusive traces of memory about Nathan Hale and Aaron Burr, Father John's accordion would announce itself a mere two classrooms down, and our teacher, eyes yellowing, would whisper-scream to the class, "You are not retaking this test! If you haven't finished it by the time Father John gets here, automatic fail." Frantically extracting straws of surface knowledge from my hippocampus, the tempo of the encroaching song's refrain accelerating with growing amplitude and the neighboring children's voices metamorphosing into punctuated demonic shouts, the squeezebox-driven pressure was enough to make you throw down your number-two pencil, run screaming into the cafeteria, and drown yourself in Kool-Aid as the only legal precursor to your inevitable incipient career as a perpetually glassy-eyed patron at the local bier garden, where accordions knew their natural place. Just as Father John's light, buoyant step crossed the classroom threshold, however, you'd scratch off the last answer, place your pencil inside its pre-molded slot at the top of your desk, and exhale, your face now a glowing infernal red from holding your breath to stave off the insidious influx of the chivying, caterpillar-like instrument. The accordion had nearly cost you a passing grade in history, not to mention a life of peaceable sobriety. But life, you were told by those who had lived

more of it, was short, and you were prepared to be the bigger person, which even at nine years old I was easily on my way to being, Father John being the wee-est of wee Burmese men.

And in a moment, the accordion pressing its august air against the yellow cinderblocks and inflating the classroom a good 10 square feet beyond its previous test-taking proportions, you were at ease, if slightly deafened with the fresh force of the instrument's arresting propinquity. Like all good sensory overload, however, it had the salutary effect of erasing your more distressing and entangled thoughts, thoughts of violence toward the most amiable of men, a servant of the Christian god and a refugee no less, from a place with much more textured, ethnically layered cuisine, and here he was stuck on a diet of dry cereal and corndogs in small-town Indiana. In any case, you were not supposed to mess with him, and you were glad that your hippocampus kicked in before you were driven to any irrevocable damage.

How they ever received an education in Burma, of course I didn't know, what with their evident casual attitude toward the sanctity of the American Revolution, but I felt magnanimous in casting aside my previous frustration and shouting out "Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!" with the preternatural vocal strength of a 10-year-old Mahalia Jackson. And it was the only appropriate response, even if I hadn't finished the test and consequently initiated my decline into the life skills curriculum. Assailed by as big an oaf of an instrument as you're ever likely to come across, I realized, you don't send it and its player packing off the train—you let it dilate into its natural stentorian splendor and uplift the otherwise drab subterranean train ride. You don't wear a bra and you let it shine.

But the authorities eventually caught up with Father John as well. In addition to the accordion, his other, dueling passion was King's Island, a theme park in Ohio a tantalizing two hours away by freeway in his speeding orange-striped station wagon. He would invite up to six lucky children at a time to escape with him there every weekend with clement conditions, when he would forego the more immediate physical thrill of the water slides and roller coasters and even the gentler pleasures of the carousel for the shadier carnival games. For a singularly diminutive man, Father John had quite the arm and tossed brightly painted ping pong balls into goldfish jars as well as heavier dusty orbs into convulsively shifting hoops for six, seven, eight hours on end, crushing his enormous plunder of stiff-limbed stuffed animals into a storage container on top of his vehicle. His personal residence, the

parish rectory, was an opulent three-story house with stippled flesh-colored paint. Anyone without a mania for acquiring life-size Styrofoam-filled panda bears and plush Smurfs with pert pug noses would have easily left at least five rooms hollow and uninhabited. But Father John had adorned them all with the cynosure, the fuzzy, cheap sunlight of every materialistic child's eye. Piled to the ceiling in lamp-less room after room, labyrinthine catacombs of frozen plastic-eyed playfulness that would not decay for centuries, his seraglio of faux fur flesh formed an ever-smiling audience for his accordion practice. I took home dozens of toys at his insistence. One, a peach bear in a navy blue cheer leader costume with a matching bow, I only gave away to the Salvation Army this year, at the age of 33.

When I was in my early-twenties and living in Chicago, my mother told me over the phone one Sunday afternoon that Father John had been accused of stealing tens of thousands of dollars in funds from the parish. Nothing incriminating I believe was ever proved, but it also came to light that, presumably in the months when King's Island closed its gates, he plied his dexterous right arm to the craps table at the local casino, temporarily leaving his accordion and his coterie of stuffed animals behind. His superiors swiftly relocated him to another parish, ostensibly without either a children's theme park or another nearby means of testing his limits with Lady Luck. But may God give them adult acne for ever, evermore if they took away his accordion.

So in my experience at least, playing the accordion and pressing your luck go very much hand in hand. There is a trenchant vulnerability, a mordant plea for gaiety in one who straps a squeeze box onto his chest and commences playing such an instrument, sending out obstreperous cornpone melodies into the ether in a New York subway or from a provincial church altar minutes before transubstantiating a host of bread into the body of Christ. There can be no false starts here with the accordion, however many there may be elsewhere, in the background of life. Whatever drove that man in the subway and his son and braless wife to seek money among strangers for a rousing few bars of "Roll out the Barrel" or whatever similar tune he played, he was not lying low with his volcanic pimple, gripping a steel pole at its abdomen, breathing shallowly in the cloistered, damp air, and keeping his eyes on the gum cemented into the floor grooves. He was making melodic, moronic waves that made me smile. For the few moments he was there,

there was more air in the overcrowded train car as a result. And that's perhaps worth betting on.

When She Sleeps by Shirley Russak Wachtel

I like it best when she sleeps. When she sleeps, I don't have to look at her eyes. Her eyes are remarkable, you see. They are matchless, neither a subtle cornflower, nor the color of a dusky, rolling sea, nor even a silky lazy sky which settles comfortably over apartment buildings as children sit down to their suppers. Nor are they fantastic for the incomprehensible fact that neither of her children managed to inherit the particular shade of blue. No, they are unique because of one irrefutable fact—they speak. Through the years, they have spoken of many things, most predominantly, love. But now, now that they are the only voice she has left, I can't bear to hear them. Yes, definitely sleep is best.

Today the sun is pouring, pushing its way through the closed damask shades, which with little prodding, open. Sunlight, an unabashed intruder, falls upon her face, but her breaths come soft and steady, and her hands are motionless clenched upon her chest. I stare at the face, as I have the last four months, and I realize again how beautiful she is. Not the standard notion of beauty, but the kind accomplished by a mask of quiet serenity achieved only in age. I marvel at its smooth contours, and hope briefly that the powers of heredity bless me with the same fine skin one day. In fact, even with her chin sunken in like that, one can barely believe that she is 83 years old (give or take a year depending on the source).

I walk into the bathroom she never uses and wet a paper towel, which I then gently place over her forehead. She makes a few "puh" sounds pursing her lips, nothing more, as the towel caresses the furrows of her sweaty brow. I move the cloth down the willful nose, and as I take note of the bump in its center, I am surprised that I no longer feel the twang of guilt upon its discovery. The thin lips are expressionless and covered by pathetic little patches of crust. I make a mental reminder to coat them later with Vaseline.

She wouldn't like people seeing her this way, without her dentures, mouth swallowing up the thin lips. Once, she accidentally broke the false teeth, and she cried for a whole day. But they wouldn't allow even the teeth in this place. So I put the dentures away, or maybe I threw them out altogether. At the base of her neck are sprinkled the freckles of childhood along with a couple of moles, to which she is prone, and I lightly cover these too with the cooling wetness. Finally, I squeeze the last of the tap water onto the top of

her head, and with my fingers I comb back the remaining hairs, straight and thin, like my own. She is almost totally gray now. There were times, as recent as a few months ago, when I would squeeze the Clairol Herbal Golden Brown onto her head, as she simultaneously pinched her eyes tightly shut. I can still smell the stinging odor of peroxide in the air. I watch as a single droplet of water, not hair dye, escapes onto her left eyelid which flutters as a petal would when brushed by a spring breeze. Standing back, I watch the rhythmic movements of her breathing, her chest barely rising beneath the sleeveless yellow flowered sundress with buttons (they all have to have buttons) down the back. The dress isn't even hers, having somehow made its way into her closet, not an unusual occurrence. She is too tightly swaddled today beneath the beige flannel blanket, and someone has casually thrown an afghan over all, a patchwork of dancing pinks and grays. In the bed, buoyed by round sacks of air, she is at once a presence and an unimposing picture of fragility. No longer able to look at her, I turn away.

Photographs line the window sill, the TV stand devoid of TV, the dresser, the large bulletin board in the corner. Reminders of a life lived, the pictures are present in almost every one of the rooms. They are all the same, yet each is different. In this room, there is one of my wedding, twenty-five years ago, another, more recent, of her and two brothers, a black and white posed one of me and Jack, he with a striped rubber ball in his hands, I with a gray ribbon, then a scarlet red, wound around a ponytail. Jack's face is round like my mother's, mine long like that of my father. I am missing a tooth. Most of the photographs, though, are of the grandchildren, five in all, and all boys.

"No princesses," she would often say, "only kings." Every so often I hold the largest photo of all five directly in front of her face, and I point to each one.

"See, there's Howie. He's at Georgetown now..." and finally, "little Sammy, remember?" I say, calling him by a Yiddish endearment meaning "lightning bug." As I point to each one, sometimes I think that I see one of the blue eyes begin to willfully tear. But each time, I dismiss the notion, reasoning this is a natural physical reaction to the dryness in the air. And I convince myself, I pray, that she is no longer capable of crying.

Today, there is silence. The creak of the double doors perpendicular to her room is less frequent than usual, and the lighthearted bantering of aides more distant, muted; even the screams, which rattle periodically through the corridors, are quieted now. All silent save for the steady cranking of the cogs

rhythmically churning the liquid, which resembles a kind of noxious chocolate milk, into the plastic tube. Down beneath the crocheted dancing afghan, sneaking further, further underneath the too tightly wound beige flannel and sundress into the soft yellow putty which was once her stomach. Nourishment. Life—no, I correct myself—existence. She exists with every whir of those cranky cogs. To camouflage the sound, I place a cassette into the radio by her bed. Written across the edge it says: Favorite Jewish Melodies. Immediately, the sturdy voices sing out; I visualize young strong Israelis dancing with banners through fruit-laden orchards. "Shane vidila voona, lichtic vee der shtaren...Sweet little one, light as the stars... Fin Gott a mitunah, ost der mer tsi gui brangt...From God a blessing you have brought to me." It is her favorite song, a tune which has always brought tears to her eyes. Now, her eyes are shut.

Yesterday was different. I found myself walking down the hall with its too pristine white tiles, shining golden oak chair rail, sedate salmon-colored wallpaper with the look of suede on which were placed at regular intervals, pictures—a Jewish woman praying over candles, a couple dancing under the chuppah, an abstract of a hillside in Israel. It was all too sanitary, too ordered, and I hated it. My high heels clicked against the tiles as, like radar, I followed the high-pitched whining sound which had reached my ears just as I stepped out of the elevator. My pace quickened as I walked past her room with its neatly made bed. Finally, I saw it. The back of the special narrow wheelchair with the inclined seat, the pole adjacent to it, and one skinny white arm with clenched fingers stretching into the empty air. The whines bore no resemblance to the strong, round tones I knew so well—those comforting tones which even in anger could wrap themselves around you and make you feel that nothing was ever or could ever be bad again. Nothing like this mutant cry which was an unnatural pitch, a hybrid borne of fear, of pain? When I faced her, she looked up at me, straight into me, and then altogether through me. She screamed again.

I stood up straight in front of her, my eyes going to my own skirt, a cotton blend of black and white Swiss dots. Somewhere inside my brain, a small egotistic voice murmured an unspoken question. "Do you like my outfit?" Of course, she had always loved polka dots, and so she would smile appraisingly, check the hem, and have me spin like a teenage ballerina.

"Zaya shein...Very nice," she would say with a smile, and then she'd ask, "Viful?...How much?" She'd have to see the shoes, too. Bright black pumps with very high heels. She certainly would have approved.

Indeed, the voice in my brain is a child's voice—still demanding to be noticed, appreciated—now drowned by an insistent whine. She knows only herself, reasons an older voice, submerging the child.

I approached the nurse's station where I was greeted like an old friend. My tone, lighter than usual, inquired about her last dosage of morphine. I was told that the last supplemental dose was given 45 minutes ago. Her tolerance was building.

The sacral wound, which is delicately often referred to as a "bedsore," rests precariously close to the anus, and is much smaller, I am informed, than when she first came here. Big enough to put a fist through, they had said, yet packed with bullets of pain. The morphine reduces the pain, which is often agonizing, but as her tolerance rises with each day, so does the dosage. It is a horrifying but unavoidable cycle.

Often, walking down the hallways (those further away from where she is stationed), I overhear the familiar banter between mothers and daughters.

"I picked up my new dentures today, ma...See?...How about some more water?" or "Lucille, you should really go to a doctor for that constipation problem." "I'm eating roughage, mom. I'll be all right."

Sometimes, hearing it all brings a momentary smile to my face. I am definitely the youngest offspring here, as far as I can tell. Senior citizens with back pains and canes often drop by to visit their elderly parents. As I walk past, feigning oblivion, I wonder who will care about my dentures, my eating habits, my polka dotted skirts when I get older.

But, even here, you have to laugh. Indeed, emotions always hit highs or lows. There is no moderation, the subtle niceties of time having long fled this place where gentlemen wear diapers which emerge from tweed pant waists, and women go denture-less.

You have to laugh. Once, a woman in a wheelchair took her shirt completely off. And although there was nothing about the old lady's body that could be recognized as womanly, one nurse running toward her joked, "Save it for when you can get paid for that, Sadie." On another occasion, one of the

patients was sitting in the TV room, where none but the attendants pay attention to the flickering screen. She was screaming, "I need something...I need something!" ignored by the overworked staff. "I'll tell you what you need!" screeched a hag with the profile of a baba yagar, the mythical witch which so often scared me in childhood. With raised fist, she ominously wheeled herself, rubber baby doll in hand (many of the patients have these) toward the woman. "You need to be quiet!" she screeched, approaching until a tall aide with mounds of curly black hair promptly wheeled her away.

There are times, though, when the conversation is less dramatic, as when I overheard one patient, sporting a trim white bun, an alligator pocketbook resting on her lap, insist to her friend, "But I do love my husband...It's just that I can't remember his name..." As I said, you have to laugh if you're going to return to the world outside, if you're going to have any kind of normalcy.

When I came back to her, she was calmer; the morphine was beginning to work. I could tell that she was partially awake despite her closed lids, because the tremor in her hand, more distinct of late, was again present. I tried feeding her some applesauce, which she sucked slowly, every so often smacking her lips.

"Remember how you loved to eat apples?" I prodded, recalling the way she would carefully peel away one long circle of skin with the edge of a knife, then slice the white fruit into thin wedges, making sure to core the brown spots and save one thick wedge for the dog.

"I can tell you love this," I said, trying to catch the sauce which had begun to drip down her cheek and onto her bib.

But, that was yesterday. Today is better. And so I wait until the Jewish song ends, and another begins. This one is about someone dear being more precious than all the money in the world. And then, for no reason, I begin to cry.

I place my cool cheek next to her warm one, thinking again how this time with her has become both the worst and best part of my day. My tears cover her cheek, which I kiss, murmuring, "I love you" over and over again, as

if the force of the words could infuse her with some power. A lifetime of unsaid "I love you's" sail up into the air and burst like so many bubbles. But she doesn't wake, and her eyes remain shut, speechless. Sometimes, I wonder if I'll have the heart to leave her, the strength to return. But, of course, I do—I must.

As I look through the window past the front yard into the parking lot where cars are neatly lined in rows, I suddenly remember that I have to get back home. Charlie will be home soon, and he will need a ride to Hebrew school, Brad will be calling for a ride from basketball practice, about thirty student essays needed grading, and a stop has to be made at the butcher shop if there is to be any supper tonight.

I begin to button my coat, and as I bend down to place one last kiss on the forehead of the sleeping woman, suddenly my body is gripped by an old fear. When I leave, no one will know her. No one will know my mother.

Filial by Anthony Santulli

My father knew how to put himself together de rigueur. His smart casual wardrobe consisted of 3-button bespoke jackets, pleated chalk stripe pants, notched lapel blazers, mid-calf Argyle socks, Italian leather belts and Half-Windsor knots. There were, of course, times where a sale too good to pass up could lead to any number of strange purchases: tacky baseball caps, neon colored neckties, the occasional blouse left in the men's department. Poor judgment aside, he always presented himself well; to this day I have never seen him in a pair of jeans. At eight years old, I associated my father's clean-shaven appearance with a precocious notion of what it meant to be an adult and the many luxuries that awaited me in the business world.

He sold his first house at 28. His days as a real estate broker consisted of sporadic commissions, useless partnerships, futile attempts to sell upscale apartments on the waterfront, and paper. Always paper. His filing cabinets overflowed with numbers and letters and useless symbols. When his business went online in 2002, he still asked customers to fax their contracts, mortgage commitments, advertisements, and other information. Anything abstract confused him; he liked the idea of something tangible.

My father had often taken me to see this work when I was a child. His office was just one of many small businesses on Jersey City's Central Avenue: Holey Moley Tattoos & Body Piercings, Central Gold & Diamond, Rumba's Café, $.99 Gallery, and more. Still, it was all his; the fax machine, some tangled telephone wires, the furniture inherited from his father. "One day," he used to say, "This will all be yours." A piece of him, I'm sure, was damaged when he realized that I didn't want to sell houses or inherit my grandfather's furniture.

Maybe it was the basement. Forty years ago, the building served as a retail store that specialized in military apparel, and several shipments of camouflaged inventory as well as a shoebox full of baseball cards from the 1960s had been left behind for my family to collect. After he started his own business there, my father used the same space for his own storage. One of my earliest memories is apocryphal; I remember wandering around that damp, dark room, trapped in a world of sealed Rubbermaids that contained everything from Christmas decorations to vintage Matchbox cars and moldy

posters of Muhammad Ali. On the far wall, the boiler room's heavy steel door was barricaded by chains and locks. Its edges glowed red with chthonic intensity as they whistled and moaned to a demonic rhythm. White heat emanated from the radiators, a contrast to the obsidian and impossible chill of that infernal hall. This, I thought, was what the Catholic boys meant when they spoke of Hell.

My father has switched buildings twice since then, both of them with only one story, yet the vastness of that place remains fresh; it floats idly like a balloon losing air. But it's no longer the basement that I fear—I know now that Hell has moved somewhere else.

When the Take Our Daughters to Work program was expanded to include boys in 2003, most parents were indifferent, perhaps embarrassed by their own jobs. In my class, there were no sons of astronauts or paleontologists, no daughters of doctors or superheroes. "Take Your Child to Work Day", as the elementary teachers called it, soberly reminded most parents of their status as typical middle-class suburbanites holding a 9-to-5 job. The program gave my father a chance to show me around a calculator and explain the stock market; I just looked forward to the day off.

We got to work around eleven. To most people this is late, but my father wanted the entire morning to himself. On most days, he wakes at 5:30 and meanders around the neighborhood, showers and shaves in slow, quiet song, watches the local news, and takes in the cold air and coffee of dawn.

I looked at my assignment sheet, full of prepackaged interview questions, and wrote my name at the top in sloppy script. This year's theme for the program was A New Generation at Work.

"What do you do?" I asked, mechanical pencil in hand. The phone rang with the digital tone of business. In a manner almost rehearsed, he replied,

"I help people buy and sell houses." He picked up the phone as I jotted down his words. "AFS—Yeah, I got the listing right here—Stop by my office tomorrow—Alright, bye." Click. It was funny to think that half of his life had been spent like this. I stared at the certificates hung on the wall. My father dropped out of college before he could earn his associate's degree, and my mother always joked that his epitaph would read "Died with 32 credits."

My mind wandered, so I began to search through the endless supply of records stored in the stainless steel file cabinets. I recited the names of

different buyers and sellers under my breath as I sucked the salt off a pretzel stick. The files went all the way back to 1985; ten years before my father passed his name onto me. Ten years before all the crying and babbling slowly became words. My words. He walked towards the door.

"Come on, we have to go to the car." The housing market was better this year, and an older man had contacted my father a few days earlier to estimate his property's market value.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"An appraisal." I misspelled the word in the margin of my homework for later: Aprasal Aprasal Aprasal.

Outside, the industrial sounds of the city flooded my ears. The warm, urban air smelled of soft pretzels and gasoline. I read everything: license plates, graffiti, 1-800 numbers and street names. Even the cardboard signs of homeless men breathed a drunk, poetic life. At home, these things meant nothing; here they took on a life of their own.

My father's new crystal red Impala, which would one day be mine, was cluttered with Poland Spring bottles and manila folders full of papers that on any other day would have been useless, but now their language fueled my sensory addiction. I indulged in the leathery new car smell, fogged up the back window with my breath, and listened closely to the hymn of klaxons and talk radio as I mused over this new world.

When we arrived at the apartment, my father parked along the curb of the crowded street. He pulled a ring of keys off of his belt loop and scanned the collection of silver and brass for the right fit. He paused for a moment so he could slowly run his fingers along the teeth of the blade that were shaped like shattered piano keys. As the lock turned, the door let out a death rattle as though it hadn't been opened for years.

Our arrival was greeted with filth. The dregs of the earth seemed to collect in puddles around the living room. There was an old Western on the television but the volume was muted. Newspapers assembled in vertical stacks along the couch cushions created a soft gradient of gray to faded yellow. Clothes embalmed the carpet along with scattered pieces of cereal, urine and milk stains, patina pennies, and hairballs. My senses rescinded and eventually succumbed to the house's infinite, endless dissonance: the shrill mewing of cats from the bedroom, the fusillade of a leaky faucet, the

drone of centralized air conditioning, the crunch of broken glass beneath my feet.

And the smell. A horrible, animate thing. Not like fresh manure in springtime; or the decomposing body of a deer beneath August heat; or a stagnant, polluted pond. Worse.

"Is anybody here?" My father's usually resonant voice dropped to a whisper. All words lost their music, the airy bounce and rhythm of language reduced to harsh noise. "Hello?"

The walls of the room absorbed all sound, keeping it a secret, while the hallway stretched into an illusory labyrinth. A dizzying blur. I carefully slid my hand along the glass of the picture frames that lined the walls, some of them empty, some of them stuffed with the stock images of anonymous interracial couples kissing on their wedding day in perfect lighting, friends sharing a toast after some untold celebration at a cheap Italian restaurant, and families posing in multiple uncomfortable positions before a bright ocean backdrop. A gaunt, almost skeletal cat brushed against my father's leg and stared at me with innocent eyes.

I looked from the pet to my father. The thick black Mediterranean hair of his youth—identical to my own—that I only knew of in pictures was now gray and receded; his bald, dappled scalp was liver spotted from wistful days at the beach and ultraviolet rays. His clothes, which I had once held in such high regard, suddenly seemed ridiculous. Without warning, I noticed the wear in his cheap penny loafers, the black wool sports coat and matching flat front pants that did nothing to conceal his increased weight, and his white cotton shirt, ruined by tomato stains and bleach. Even his moschate cologne only seemed to add to the intolerable smell.

With a final "Hello?" we left that place. I held my breath to escape the paralyzing odor as I exited and watched my father lock the door of the apartment and proceed to graze his thumb along the key's biting.

After we left, my father took me out to lunch. We ate cheeseburgers, and my father wore a napkin around the collar of his shirt. Later, he took me to see another apartment, this time on foot. I was still in a disgusted, languid stupor from the day's events, and I kept my gaze fixated on the sidewalk, careful not to step on any cracks or fossilized gum. Before I knew it, I had been placed on this customer's doorstep.

My father rang the doorbell and its buzzing swirled in my ears. A tall young man answered the door.

"Come in," he said. He gestured towards the foyer while his daughter, a girl of about my age, clung to his leg like a vice. I saw in her something innocent and familiar. Was there a word for that?

The two men shook hands, their grips brimming with insincerity. My elementary mind took stock of the building's contents. Senses and images had faded into numbers and facts. The guest room was full of bicycles—there must have been at least a dozen—old and new for both children and adults. The living room walls were covered with posters of Beavis and Butt-Head and AC/DC.

"You want me to turn on the TV?" the owner asked me. I nodded and he put on a cartoon. The characters and faces looked familiar, but I was too numb to pay attention. My father's trained and familiar rhetoric was at work in the other room but I could not escape the day's earlier memory and its arresting mayhem of cat piss and rotted meat. It must have been toxic to breathe, the song of a thousand deaths. I didn't speak of it at school the next day and my assignment was left incomplete with no explanation.

The smell, as would later be identified by police, was the scent of a decayed body in another room. Exactly how long the lone resident had been dead I didn't know, but an implacable sense of mortality and oblivion consumed me. My first true death. What happened to his cats? Where were his family and friends? Years later, extensive Internet searches and hours spent studying obituary records have yielded no answers. I never got to see the face of this man, and the images I created of the ugliness and heartache in his mind, an attempt to forge in him sort of new life, only cast a muddied reflection of the foulness in his own home. Recently, I asked my father if he remembered the apartment or its owner.

"I sold the building to someone else, I think," he told me. "Yeah, I must have." More questions produced the same doubtful responses. I was shocked. When it came to the apartment, he couldn't recall a single thing. No rusted faucets giving birth to brown water or ants colonizing an open container of moldy bread. I tried as well to ask him about the basement, but he didn't remember any satanic boiler rooms or guttural whistles. Everything seemed business as usual. All the memories had been locked away in his mind's filing cabinet, the data lost with the amnesia of aging. Within my own

mind, the images encoded themselves as though they had been written down; he catalogued them away, separate from the numbers and dollar signs of his working life. The fact that my father had to handle these situations often enough to be considered normal was sickening and only served to drive me away from the calculated, almost suspicious practices of AFS Hudson Realty Corporation in the years to come.

Several months after the incident, my father contracted a severe case of meningitis that nearly took his life. One morning, he woke with a sudden fever and refused to get out of bed. All that time, the bacteria had been metastasizing inside of him, corroding his mind by the millions. When he tried to shift his body, he couldn't even move his neck. On the drive to the emergency room, he began to hallucinate that he was somewhere else: the northern red oaks and dirty pond water of New Jersey became the lush palm trees and ambrosial beaches of California.

During his stay at the hospital, he didn't even know who I was. For a week, his body lay supine and stiff. The doctors told my family that another day without treatment would have killed him.

The thought of my father hooked up to IV needles and hoses was hard to swallow. At his most vulnerable, I saw in him my own weaknesses, desires, and fears; I, too, wanted to escape to that other world, my California. The delusions went away after a few days and my father soon returned to the pace of work like nothing had ever happened. His days judging homes—the one place where a human is free to sleep, self-loathe, eat, love, and die—were as busy as ever.

It was hard to believe that this was the life that awaited him every morning. Day after day, I felt myself slip away from that banal world void of all sensory pleasure and joy, the only world I had ever known. But the one thing I will never escape, the strangest of them all, was seeing my father stand amidst the chaos of that ruined apartment like a homeowner after a hurricane, dignified in knowing that he was better than the dead, and realizing that this was the place where he had always belonged.

Sky by Richard Ballon

It is that delicate time, when bones are stretching and knees go knobby, the body all elbows and a boy's heart is suddenly nesting in a body trying to be a man. This is fifteen, when the willow of my body leans toward other boys and men who smell of salt that summer on Hampton Beach.

Oh, I chisel out words with my foot on the beach, and Peace signs. I read graffiti of other boys, spray painted on the inside curl of the sea wall, and we all think we are as deep as the curl of our letters that match our running legs, when the waves lap, lap, lap, as the tongue of the tide lashes our legs.

I sneak one night, away from the trailer of women, where my Mom, sisters and cousins giggle and squawk over the fanleaf of fan magazines. I pause to watch the white lip of the surf. Colin is sitting on the sea wall, cross-legged, his goatee shadowing his chin. His long curls blow soft and fringed with the streetlight.

The sea acts more itself at night, he says and the meeting of our eyes is the handshake that seals our friendship and ushers me a summer later to a lake in Maine.

One night, his Aunt Liz and her boyfriend are beyond silly drunk in their trailer and we slip out, barefoot. My soles are pinched by tree roots, and we wear haloes of mosquitoes until the pfffssst of bug spray.

We launch the boat, Colin and I, onto the dark lake, and tumbling in I see the shadow of Colin's arms like tree roots, snaking their stroke as he rows us out into the valley of water that looms beneath us. That stillness cracks with the creak of oar lock and the plip plop plip of the oars, easing the boat along until we drill a hole in the center with the drop plunge of anchor, waiting for the surface to mirror back the sky.

There, he murmurs, is Cassiopeia, and he points at the stars in the water, and I repeat the word like a litany. Cassiopeia. And here is Orion. The Pleiades. The names coat my tongue with the milk of their meaning, and after I learn them, he bids me look up, up, up at the darker lake in which the stars are really nesting.

The Big Dipper, The Drinking Gourd, the Shopping Cart, pour the night over me these, many years, many summers later, and shimmer with what I did not do that night, which was kiss the man whose eyes reflected my longing back at me.

Picking out the Words by Ryan Bradley

Grandpa Luis often told me stories about growing up in Mexico. My family lived in the in-law apartment of his big, white colonial house from the time I was three until the time I was five. He told me how their dogs lived on the roof to guard against intruders; how the government tortured his father to death during the revolution; how his mother sent each of his siblings to the seminary, and out of eleven, only two actually became priests; and how the Brothers at the seminary whispered about how deep in prayer he was as he slept in the pew.

My favorite stories were about his medical school mariachi band, La Tuberculosis. He would sing me the songs in Spanish and translate them into English: I love you my darling, so please accept this lung-chunk. I coughed it up for you.

The story he liked best was how they forgot their permit one night. Permits weren't hard to get, and once they had one, the band could serenade as many girls as they liked. One night, all of them thought that someone else had got the permit, understandable with thirty medical students moonlighting as mariachis. A police officer rounded the corner as they were singing a song my grandfather often sang to me, "Cielito Lindo."

The officer asked to see their permit.

"You know," the officer said when they couldn't show him one, "That's my wife's favorite song, and you play it beautifully."

The officer brought them to his house, and they played it for her. And then another. And another. The officer made them serenade his wife all night, but a day of classes tired from playing music is infinitely better than one tired from a night in jail, not to mention what his mother would have said if she found out.

He kept playing music in America. He would play guitar and sing with my Aunt Debbie when the family got together, especially around Christmas time. He loved music. A lot of people had trouble understanding him because of his accent, but picking out the words was natural for me.

Once I started playing guitar, he and I would play together. Of course, I wasn't good enough to play much of anything at the time, and his sight was going, but we made it work.

Medicine was another one of his loves. He stayed up late at night reading medical journals. He gave the entire Archdioceses of Fairfield free check-ups, and around Christmas time he would send families that he knew were tight with money their medical bills stamped "Paid in Full."

He believed that academics had helped him become what he was: a doctor, the father of six children, and a happy man. He came to all of my academic ceremonies and encouraged me. He said the same thing at all of them: "Learn as much as you can. Knowledge is the only thing that no one can ever take away from you."

When he lost his sight, the state forced him out of practice, so he trained medical students to become doctors. One day he came in slurring words and his trainees caught it. They told us it was probably a stroke, but it was a malignant brain tumor.

After the surgery, they weren't sure if he'd know English or Spanish or any of the five languages he spoke. After the surgery, he seemed like he remembered all of them, but each day a few more words slipped out of his vocabulary. It wasn't bad at first. Who cares what he called a tea cup?

At Thanksgiving the names went. He hugged us, but the names were jumbled. He called Joe "Louis" and Kathy "Annie." He broke down in the kitchen. My Uncle Joe was holding his left arm and my Aunt Kathy his right.

"It's frustrating," he said. "I know your names."

"It's okay, Dad," Uncle Joe said. "It's the disease. No one's getting mad at you."

My Aunt Kathy squeezed his arm in agreement.

None of them saw me, standing at the edge of the kitchen. I wanted to jump in. I couldn't pick out the words to make it better. Instead I walked away. Knowledge is the only thing that no one can take away from you.

Every night a different child stayed the night with my grandparents. My grandmother was going crazy taking care of him and dealing with the pain

from her diabetic foot sore. She wasn't willing to stay in bed so her foot could heal while her husband died.

Wednesdays were my mother's days. She'd take him to get radiation treatments and then back to our house for family dinner.

I'd get out my guitar, and he wouldn't want to play, so I played him song after song while my mother cooked. I showed him the things I thought he would like. The Beatles. Elton John. I didn't sing at the time, so it was all just chords and accompaniment.

The first time, he even got up and danced to "I Want to Hold Your Hand." And after each song, he'd say, "Beautiful, beautiful."

After I exhausted the five or so I thought he would recognize, I'd play the stuff I wanted to play. Joe Satriani. Steve Vai. Yngwie Malmsteen. Speed metal and instrumental guitar songs.

And after each, he'd say, "Beautiful, beautiful."

The last time I saw him, they'd brought a hospital bed into his entertainment room. He'd bought a sixty-inch television right after he went blind, and he'd put his nose on the screen to see the soccer players. His hair and his vocabulary were gone. I didn't know it would be my last time seeing him, but around then, every time I saw him felt like it would be the last.

I hugged him. He didn't say anything. All the words were gone. I squeezed tighter. I looked down at him and felt the sting of dryness before tears form.

"I love you, Grandpa," I said.

He sat up a little bit and tried to speak. I didn't understand him. I rested my head on his chest and hugged him tighter. "What, Grandpa?"

He said it again, but I couldn't pick out the words. I don't know what he said, or if he tried to say it again after I walked out. I couldn't take it. I left him there, mumbling.

I tell myself he was trying to say, "I love you, too." The subject is taboo in my mind. Grief, wrapped into a box somewhere on a shelf near the back wall. I should have stayed. I should have waited for the words that weren't coming.

Two days later, my mother ran down the stairs to my father.

"He passed," she said.

I didn't cry that moment or that day. I held it in until the funeral. The weight of the casket shocked me as I carried it down the aisle. My Aunt Debbie sang beautifully, and he would have loved that. My Grandmother's brother and Luis's best friend Great Uncle Jim delivered a beautiful eulogy. I remember laughing at a joke about how Jim's parents made him chaperone all of Grandpa Luis's dates with Grandma Marie. Then I burst.

I dribbled snot on the sleeve of my new suit. I tried my hardest to stop, but settled for not sobbing more than four or five times. Someone rubbed my back. A priest came off the altar to try and comfort me. None of it helped.

I'll never know what he tried to say to me, but after six years the last words don't seem as important as the ones that came before.

Mr. X, Links Master by Jono Walker

In the mid 1960's, the absolute ruling monarchs of Longshore's weekend golfing set in Westport, Connecticut was a single foursome of men who played together just about every weekend from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The men didn't pal around with the other morning regulars. They were far too classy for that raucous crowd. Each one took a caddy of his choosing, arranged in advance with the Caddy Master to meet with them on the First Tee before their round. They all drove slick cars, wore expensive looking polo shirts, and walked up to the starter's window carrying huge golf bags stuffed with enough gear and personal effects to fill a hotel suite. They had low single-digit handicaps and were far more serious about their game and the money they gambled on it than any of the other men who took caddies. Playing a $10 dollar Nassau and goodness knows how many side bets meant serious money was at stake. After accounting for sandies, greenies, and the inevitable press towards the end of the round, there could be as much as $100 on the line—per guy—which in those days was about the price of a reasonably serviceable used Lincoln.

On the greens these masters of golf crouched down from both sides of the pin to line up their putts. When they weren't sure about an out of bounds stake, they looked to the back of the scorecard for clarification, and they faithfully observed all the correct rules about direct, lateral, and casual hazards. The idea of a mulligan never entered their minds, and no gimmes of any length were ever granted on the greens. Caddying for one of these guys was the ultimate honor. They were the coolest of the cool.

Throughout my final summer as a Longshore caddy I was one of lucky kids anointed to go out with these guys. Everything was perfect until one weekend halfway through the summer when for some reason they couldn't make their usual morning tee time and had to suck it up and go out in the afternoon. They took carts and went out late in the day. I had finished my morning loop and was up in the woods that bordered the Second Hole tending to my golf ball business when they rolled up to the tee.

The second hole at Longshore is 150 yard par three. In those days the trees and underbrush on the ridge along the left side of the fairway were allowed to grow deep and thick. In the long hot and humid afternoons, after getting in from my morning loop, I used to hide in the woods and wait for golfers to

pull their tee shots into the trees. That was the first step in my vertically integrated enterprise. The next step was to build the inventory which led to the sales operation that I set up on the Third Tee, offering barely-used top-sleeve golf balls for a quarter. I had very high ethical business standards. I absolutely never picked up a ball in the woods or the tall grass that curled around the left side of the green until after the guy who hit it had given up looking for it. From my perch deep in the shadows up the slope and behind some rocks I had a clear view of the golfers teeing off. On average, there'd be at least one golfer per group who'd rattle one into the trees, especially during the weekend afternoons when the skill level of the golfers was generally lower than those who booked tee times in the early mornings.

Looking down from the ridge, Longshore's finest foursome looked odd to me. It was so strange seeing them driving in carts with the late day August sun bearing down on them just as harshly as it did on ordinary golfers. The first three guys put their seven irons on the green, but the fourth guy, we'll call him Mr. X, pulled his tee shot into the tall grass over the left side of the green. I could see exactly where his ball landed but knew, because the golfer was blinded from that section of deep rough from the tee box, it would be extremely difficult for Mr. X to find. I sat hidden, waiting.

Mr. X jumped out of the cart to look for his ball while his partner and the other two guys parked on the other side of the green near the next tee. He swished his wedge haphazardly through the tall grass. As I had suspected, he wasn't looking anywhere near where the ball was actually buried. I thought he was probably wishing he had a sharp-eyed caddy in tow when I saw him reach into his pocket and drop another golf ball into the rough in a spot just before the grass got really tall and where he would have a relatively easy chip onto the green. He then continued to give the impression that he was looking for his ball and after a few moments of this charade one of the guys he was partnered against walked up behind him to help out.

"You playing a black Titelist?" he asked.

"With three blue ink dots?" Mr. X replied.

"Yee-up, here it is you lucky bastard …"

I felt sick, but excited too. I mean, this was front page Caddy News. Not only had this exalted master of the golf links cheated, he cheated with such

sly forethought, with such convincing effectiveness without a moment's hesitation or the slightest glimmer of guilt that you knew he had to have done this sort of thing many times before. This man wasn't just a one-time opportunistic cheater, he was a finely tuned expert. When they all finished putting and were walking off the green, I slipped out of the woods and retrieved the ball that nobody else had found. Mr. X was a serial cheater all right, and I had the irrefutable proof.

As they rode in their carts up to the third tee, I ran after them with the intention of setting up my usual sales display even though I realized that this group of purists would never be in the market for used golf balls. While they were hitting their drives I carefully arranged the dozen or so balls I had found in a straight line along the railroad tie at the edge of the tee box right next to their carts. I put Mr. X's black Titleist right smack in the middle with his three signature blue dots turned up for everyone to plainly see. I knew that these guys knew my modus operandi. Everybody was aware of the racket. They'd see Mr. X's ball and would know exactly what had just gone down. This was going to be really, really sweet, but then, for reasons I can't quite explain, just before they turned from the tee markers and started making their way in my direction, I snatched Mr.X's ball away and put it back in my pocket.

The four came over and paused for a look at my display, and while some patronizing jokes were flying around about what sort of rascal had the nerve to sell golf balls back to the sad sacks who had just lost them, Mr. X and I made eye contact. I'll never forget that look, with a hint of raw terror behind his eyes and traces of red creeping out from the corners of his usually perfectly composed face. I knew that he knew I had seen what he did behind the green, and I knew that he knew I had the incriminating evidence hidden on me somewhere. Mr. X sat sullenly in the cart waiting as his partner struggled with getting his head cover back on his driver. The delay must have been agony. It gave me time to reconsider and to come out with the ball, but instead of blowing up their scorecard and ruining Mr. X's reputation, I let the man escape.

I sat on the railroad ties and watched as they rode into the distance up the fairway with Mr. X's golf ball burning a hole in my pocket. They had all hit good drives and from best I could tell they had all gotten their next shots onto the green. It would likely be another push, just like on the previous hole when Mr. X managed to chip up and sink his putt to halve it. From

behind me the sound of the next group making its way up to the tee roused me from my thoughts, and before they came into view I took Mr. X's ball out of my pocket and threw it into the woods as far as I could.

The shame of it was safe with me.

Broken by Kevin Bray

My New Year starts in September and no matter how depressing the final days of the past June were, I possess an expansive naiveté that allows hope to spring in the fall. As a kid I was a numismatist and bought bags of stamps from the Hudson Bay store. I'd pray that in amongst the common and uninteresting ones I might find a rare Canadian stamp, or at least a colorful foreign one. This never happened because Gresham's law, normally applied to pecuniary matters, guaranteed that the bad stamps would drive out the good ones. When I walk into the room where two dozen teens wait, I wonder if one of them is the elusive analogy to a metal-embossed Bhutan stamp that I coveted for years and kept an album page empty in case it appeared in the Bay's grab bag. In some of my classes the bad students have banished the good ones and I am left with the underclass and dross of teenaged society.

I tighten my expectations that a wonderful young person will drop out of the class list and into my memory. The appearance of such a student is infrequent and Az immediately revealed the triumvirate of what Charles Murray (of the "Bell Curve" controversy) calls academic ability: linguistic and verbal skills, logical-reasoning, and mathematical talent. She dropped from the bag with such brilliance that she obliterated my view of the others. She was not overbearing or one of those students who ask so many questions that you begin to suspect they knew the answers all along and only needed a forum to show it.

I don't know everything about Az. I did not get her file from the guidance office and check her life's inventory from kindergarten to grade eleven. I might have applied the accounting traits of teachers (how many suspensions? is there an upward or downward trend in grades?) to decide if she was a worthy investment. The file is gone, all traces of her removed in a bureaucratic expunging. (In the official records, Az has disappeared like the children of Argentina's Dirty War).

What I do know of her was created at the intersection of time and space in the four walls that we shared. I know Az as the girl who stood out from the students who waited for me to give a conductor's sign that it was time to begin ("bring out paper, a pen, a straight edge and then, listen, please"). She wasn't loud or obtrusive or stricken by the preeminent school-house

malady known as Attention Deficit Disorder. She didn't avoid eye contact to protect her from my need to mimic Socrates. When I asked a question for which she had no ready answer, she would smile. In deference to a time-honoured tradition, Az always raised her arm, then spoke eloquently and with much thought about, for example, why the shift of a curve on a graph illustrates war, or why drugs and public transit might both be addictions.

Az was fifteen, an age that reveals much about one's historical milieu. You feel much older at fifteen when you are huddled in a shelter in London while bombs are spat down from the Luftwaffe, or less hopeful, actually just outrageously hopeless, if you are this age and barely living along the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, sniffing solvents melted out of packing pallets used to ship fish from your lake to rich Europeans. For fifteen years-old in our country, at this time in history, in this city and borough, it is a bit like being in a theme park on a brilliant July afternoon with cash in your pocket, headphones plugged into your iPod, while attractive and well-fed friends goad you onto the next greatest thrill ride. Being fifteen and at Canada's Wonderland is about all that is needed to illustrate twenty-first century, first-world adolescence. It is a perfect world, really.

As for me, everything I own is imperfect and broken. Even that which is new is damaged. I bought a car last year and embedded in the "soul of the new machine" was a flaw, not yet heard or felt , that ticked and tocked until the gremlin emerged and sent me to the shop for expensive repairs. My house is never right and the only respite is to forgive and forget and let the mortar crumble and the roof exfoliate, or sell the offensive death-pledge and become a renter. My body is a chimera, its DNA code hobbled together by the equal contributions of my mother and father and each of them has given me flaws—physical and mental—that condemn me to a lifetime of medical tinkering.

We are born broken. The Book of Psalms denies perfection in my soul, but says nothing of the flaws in my body. The Church says I can purge myself of original sin, but no amount of baptismal anointment will obviate the medical sins I have inherited from my parents. No prayer or good deed will stop the genetic code from unleashing its malevolence and crucifying me on the cross of chemotherapy, radiation and radical incision. This is real original sin and the New Testament can only imagine the varieties of pestilence available to modern humans. Age is a vanity we relentlessly pursue and as we approach

the infirmities awaiting us, the original sin of my parents—not Adam and Eve—is revealed with clarity and completeness.

Az was fifteen when she died. I was forty-six. Mortality mathematics clearly states that this combination of dead and alive is improbable. More likely, much more likely, is the converse conclusion. Her death derailed my imagined vista of life: that we are trains moving along a track with a few stops (the planned seminal events in life, like graduation, marriage, parenthood, careers…) and then we reach the end of the line at seventy five or eighty years. A nice journey, one way of course, since there is no turn-table for the train to reverse direction and provide a Benjamin Button transcendence. By dying so young, she twisted and bent the rails before the train even got to full speed.

Young people are naïve: they believe that the scales of justice tip in favour of good over evil. Young people think that problems can be solved and intractability is an awkward word whose meaning is confusing. Indoctrinated with years of character education, "peace circles", talking sticks, and conflict resolution, they think that their will and moxie are enough to conquer cancer, eradicate poverty, and redistribute wealth. Tents and chants and good feelings are talismans, not tools, and this distinction eludes them when they Occupy parks but Conquer nothing. If I think about Az and conjure her now-impossible future, my prejudices crumble because Az would have put her finger on the scale and nudged it in favour of the good. She used words and love to fight sticks and stones. Az debated on our school team and was relentless in her need to help people in Darfur. It was difficult, even for a jaded soul like mine, to ignore this meteoric kid. She occupied a larger amount of psychic space in the school than other students, and when she died the hole in the intellectual fabric was visible and ragged. The EQ of the school dropped, like taking a heavy hitter out of the batting rotation and watching the team stats depreciate.

We found out about her death in an emergency staff meeting. She had died in her sleep the night before and the parents had called the school early to report her permanent absence. (The cause of death was not provided, but sudden cardiac arrhythmia can extinguish teen life in the middle of the night. This was the sin she carried.) There were three other teachers who taught her, but I could not talk to them. I didn't need commiseration or a group hug or any other contrived extension of grief. My lesson plan for the day was useless. Why talk about government interference in housing

markets when the only student in my class who might listen and speak was dead? We were not allowed to discuss her death, so I sat at my desk while the students worked on independent reading and I bubbled the attendance sheet. You can be late you can be absent, but there is no bubble for dead. After school I supervised the debate team where seven adults stood in a line in front of five students sitting in desks, announcing Az's death and offering counseling, support, intervention, accommodations, and an excuse to take tomorrow off. The kids said nothing and I remember one of them made a joke (a faux-pas that demonstrated his immature teen brain rather than bad taste or neglectful parenting).

If God has an assembly line from which new souls and bodies are built, then his rate of failure is higher than Ford's or General Electric's. God needs to improve quality control and review some probabilities, notwithstanding Einstein's assertion that God does not play with dice. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." Was Az born broken and denied a chance for redemption or repair? Did Az lose her life because we are collectively condemned to suffer for sins connected to Adam or Eve by a filament of superstition or faith?

The classroom in which I taught Az is my room again. I had not been in here for six years. I did not purposely avoid the room, and the administration that was present on the day she died is retired or removed to another school. The students sitting in class have never heard her name and know nothing about her. There is no photograph or commemorative plaque for her in the school. Not even a tree was planted (a gesture that many schools use to remember teenagers who most often die on long-weekends in car crashes or swimming misadventures). Her parents endowed three scholarships in her name, one for each of the schools she attended. In an oblique way I have found a few scholarship winners who wrote resumes for me as class assignments and listed their achievements. One of them is sitting in this classroom and I will congratulate them for winning this award and measure their worth against Az. They listen to me while I tell them about her and what a good person she was and what she might have become.

We are all broken and ultimately beyond repair. The biological equivalent of original sin is the hundred broken genes that every one of us carries. Some of these will end our lives far too soon and some might provide benefits not yet discerned. The science is too late for Az, likely for me as well. If the human genome project is able to one day fix us or reduce the defects on the

heavenly assembly line, then maybe no one will ever go to bed at ten and wake up in eternity.

Mamaloo by Debra M. Fox

falling snow…

we sit in lawn chairs

without talking

When the Rover "Curiosity" made an elegant landing on the Martian surface, he did not know. He did not know that the twentieth century's last two decades were the hottest in four hundred years or that there has been an upsurge in extreme weather events. Closer to home, he did not know that his older brother, Alex, graduated from college, has a job as a reporter at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and likely will not live at home again. He is fifteen years old, non-verbal, and severely autistic.

His mother experiences time differently, with him in the world. He continues to grow older, but unlike most people, his awareness of certain events does not grow keener. He hears the phone ring, but doesn't make the connection that he can talk to people who are not in the same location as him. He is aware it is pouring rain outside but not that the cause is a devastating hurricane. He eats waffles and bacon on Sunday mornings, but doesn't understand that bacon comes from a pig and that you have to kill the pig before you eat it. Cole, one of his cousins, was born when he was eleven, and even though Cole is a baby, and he can do things Cole can't, such as walk, and eat solid foods, and ride a bike, it is only a matter of time before Cole will catch up and then exceed him. Put simply, he is not following a conventional time-line.

What do the following people have in common? Irv Zimmerman, Beatrice Bailis, and Gershon Fox. Like Cole and like Alex, they are all related to him. Irv Zimmeran was his grandfather. He was a neurophysiologist who looked like Jerry Garcia and taught medical students. Beatrice Bailis was his great-grandmother who cooked the best sweet and sour meatballs anywhere, and Gershon Fox was his great-grandfather who could sew a man a three-piece suit in an afternoon. What else did they have in common? They all died before he was born. They didn't know they would have a grandson or great grandson who would never talk. They lived their entire lives in a sort of innocence (those are his mother's words). And just as

they would never know him, he can never understand their existence or their relationship to him, no more than he can know about Martian Rovers or cousins who will grow up and change and live lives he cannot know.

There are moments, though, and this is where it gets confusing for his mother on an emotional level, when he appears perfectly normal to her. After dinner for the past three months, he has taken to listening to Mozart sonatas. He turns off the light in the living room and stretches out on the sofa, with his hands folded in his lap, and listens to an entire CD in one sitting. He doesn't like when his parents try to move him along for bedtime. Listening to this music gives him extreme pleasure.

His mother tells his father that the sight of him stretched out in the dark, listening to music makes her think of Pinocchio and how much he wanted to be a "real" boy. She says she is fooled for moments into thinking that he is ordinary, just like any other boy his age. But scenes like this can as easily be flipped around. She has dreams where everybody else in the world is like him, and she is the only one like her. She still struggles to understand who he is.

There's a poem, "Another Summer Begins," by Mary Oliver:

> …The white blossoms of the shad
>
> have opened
>
> because it is their time
>
> to open,
>
> the mockingbird
>
> is raving
>
> in the thornbrush.
>
> How did it come to be
>
> that I am no longer young
>
> and the world
>
> that keeps time

in its own way

has just been born?

I don't have the answers

and anyway I have become suspicious

of such questions…

His mother is suspicious of these questions too. For her there is a weird co-existence of his childhood leaving but all the trappings of innocence remaining. His breath no longer smells like cookies when he wakes up; he has hair under his arms; his cheeks are no longer smooth; his legs are growing hair all the way up and down, and they're beginning to take the shape of his father's. His fingernails aren't soft, and they're becoming square shaped like a man's. When he utters sounds, his voice is deeper, and that's unexpected, because he is not saying anything intelligible.

Like a baby who has not yet learned to speak, he makes rhythmical sounds like "na na na." He is not self-conscious. He simply enjoys the sensory experience of vibrations in his throat, and the sound as it enters his ears, and the repetition satisfies him intensely. His mother thinks of birds that repeat song cycles, over and over, their throats warbling, their bodies relaxed. She sometimes wonders what it would be like if a flock of beings like him gathered into a space, like birds to a tree, and made their repetitive sounds, not all together, but more staggered, to form a multi-faceted whole. People who listened would feel like they were there, but not there, occupied, but not occupied. It's a state that frees the mind.

There is a bed in his room, but he doesn't like to sleep on it. It's too straight, and he likes to burrow and curl when he sleeps. So, he migrates, once the light is off, to a blue loveseat across the room from his bed. He likes to put his head under the pillow where people press their backs, and drape a leg over one of the arms. He likes closed, squeezed places. He wants to be surrounded, and his bed is too straight for that. Besides, his loveseat smells like him in a way that his bed doesn't. It smells

of saliva and shampoo and suntan lotion and dog. When he is surrounded by those smells, he can sleep.

If you walked into his bedroom, you wouldn't know how old he is, and that wouldn't bother him. He has toys on his bookshelf with which he still likes to play, but not for the purpose for which they were intended. Take the wooden ball toy, for instance. He places his head very close to the balls as they roll down the track, and there's an imperceptible interruption of air on his cheek that thrills him. He likes to observe the balls, first red, then blue, out of the corner of his eye—not straight on.

He has a keyboard in his bedroom that plays four tunes, one right after the other, in a continuous loop. He likes to press the keyboard right up to his ear, not just for the sound, but for the feeling of the music running through his body, right into his bloodstream. He can live in that world for a very long time. Only, it disturbs his father if he turns the music on in the middle of the night. He'll tell him to stop, but it's not easy to stop outright. He has to do it in stages, in gradations, the way an airplane doesn't just drop out of the sky, but lowers slowly, losing altitude in steps. A keyboard is a toy even a teenager could have, which is what he is. But the ball toy is for a toddler. His mother knows that, but lets him keep it anyway.

Like the sound of the ball, there is something mesmerizing to him about snow, especially the first snowfall of the season. While some children might run outside and throw snowballs, or build a snowman, he is content to be amongst the snowflakes, watching as they fall from the sky. If it is nighttime, he likes to turn the outside porch light on and stand at the door, watching the snow come down. Just last year, when he was fourteen, his mother and he put their coats on and sat outside on the back porch, watching the snow pile up, without speaking a word. This is not something his mother could have done when he was younger, that is, enter his world fully and not have any other expectations for them than to sit quietly together in the snow.

While change comes very slowly for him, it would be a mistake to say he hasn't matured in some ways. For instance, he knows more things than his now four year old cousin, Cole. He knows how to dive into a swimming pool and retrieve a toy torpedo from the bottom. He knows how to put together a one hundred piece puzzle in less than fifteen minutes. He knows how to direct you to the mall if you don't know how to get there.

Also, it would be inaccurate to say he doesn't talk. He does, but some of the words are made up, even though they have the same meaning for him as words have for anybody else. Recently he's figured out how to make more meaningful utterances. His mother doesn't know why he is able to do this at age fifteen when he couldn't when he was younger. He's chosen a sound he likes better than the word "moon." It has elements of the word "Mama" in it, which is comforting, like looking at the moon is comforting. The word is "mamaloo," with the accent on "loo" because after all, that is the part of the sound that tells you he's talking about the moon.

Here is a poem by Michael Ketchek that his mother imagines he would like if he could understand it. It reminds her of the two of them enjoying the moon together, just like the word "mamaloo" implies.

summer evening

light that touched the moon

touching me

This poem makes his mother feel connected to the world, and the things and people she loves. It is reassuring to her to know there are constants in the universe, and even if her son is wildly different from most people, the light that touches the moon will still touch him, just like it touches everybody else.

Life isn't without its frustrations for him. He can't completely communicate what he is feeling to those he cares about. His mother asks him every day how his day went. She puts up both hands, signaling left means good and right means bad. She asks him to tap the hand that answers the question. He taps, but if she then asks "why?" it becomes very complicated, and his talker and sign language are usually not sufficient. So their "conversations" are often not very long.

Nevertheless, they have other ways of relating to one another. Every day for as long as they can remember, they take walks over the same route. First they walk to the high school, along a busy road, then they meander through the suburban streets of their neighborhood. It is a way of communing, breathing the same air, with no pressure to speak. And it's not as if there's

no communication. He likes to point out whether the moon is out, if the bees have abandoned the dried out lavender, or if the snow is gone. He remembers the gingko berries that fell in the fall, and reminds his mother that she made him walk around them. He remembers where a dog pooped on the sidewalk and tells her jokingly through sign language he wants "more," poop, knowing it will make her laugh.

There is a house that they pass along their walk every day that is of particular interest to him. It is a place where he first learned that bees will sting if you try to catch one with your bare hand. It's a place where stargazer lilies bloom in July for a brief two-week period. It's a place where, when the dried out leaves from the oak tree make an eerie rustling sound, you could swear you are listening to the reed section of the orchestra playing "Peter and the Wolf." It is an infinitely intriguing house, one that is in constant flux from one day to the next, a perfect point of conversation for the two of them, if they're in the mood to talk.

Now that summer is almost over, and he is approaching his sixteenth year, they seek out this house more than ever. He loves this time of year most, when the August sky takes on the color of ripe plums, and the last of the rudbeckia is in bloom. The bees seem fatter and slower as they hover around the clematis, and he has acquired a new respect for them.

They sit on the sidewalk right in front of the house, making it impossible for anybody to pass, not that it matters, as very few people ever do. They watch as gypsy moths quietly flutter to the patio light, recently turned on as a last splash of orange sunset streaks across their faces. He allows his mother to place her fingers on his cheek, and she leaves them there, just a little longer than usual. At times like this, he wishes he could tell her that even if he doesn't understand many things, and even if he is developing differently, that he feels a closeness to her unlike any other person he has ever known. A poem by Stephen A. Peter describes how his mother senses he feels when they are together at this house:

> starry night
>
> the space in me
>
> she fills

He is looking forward to tomorrow morning, because it will be Sunday, the day his mother makes waffles. The word he utters for waffles, would sound like gibberish to most people who don't know him, but his mother and father understand it perfectly well. He cannot say the "w" sound, so he begins with "ah." He then draws out the "ff" sound for as long as he can, because it pleases him to do so. When he gets to the "l" at the end, it sounds like a French song, where at the end of a phrase, the "le" sound is made. He thinks it delights his parents too, to hear him say this word, because they always smile and say, "good talking, Matthew."

When the warm waffles are first placed before him, he savors the moment when the syrup is poured on, when it pools into the holes, and overflows onto the plate. He knows what it is like to be a waffle at that moment, to be crunchy on the outside, but receptive to sticky substances, to welcome the feeling of being filled up. While it is true not every hole is ever filled completely and perfectly, enough are, enough to feel that the world is a good enough place for him.

Not a Shore Thing by Lisa Romeo

I have been to the Jersey Shore about 25 times, and since I am 53 years old, was born in New Jersey, and have lived here for all but five years, that's not a lot.

I'm not, strictly speaking, a shore girl.

So why, on October 29, 2012, when coastal New Jersey buckled beneath the brutal winds and steep sea surge of Hurricane Sandy, did I weep and turn away from the television screen?

I was not bereft over a shore house I feared was destroyed, nor mourning the desecration of a particular beloved beach town where I'd spent summers. I had not lost my virginity, fallen in love, or watched babies nap under an umbrella on a Jersey beach. The Shore was not where my family gathered to laugh and bicker, where I hung out with high school friends, or where I escaped when life closed in on me in swarming, hectic, Essex County 90 miles to the north.

My reaction to losing the Jersey Shore that existed before Sandy was more like losing something that for too long in my life had remained out of reach, was too-late appreciated, a place of promise, more meaningful to me as idea than destination.

When I was about eight, I sashayed about my living room, empty Coke bottle in hand, singing along to the Drifters' sixties classic Under the Boardwalk. I hoped and wondered if I'd be kissed on a warm blanket in the slatted shade, people walking above. Eventually, I was that girl, or at least a version of her, though the kissing all took place right on the Boardwalk: some stringy blond boy whose name I'd forget, a high school boyfriend, my fiancé.

But before any of that, and even during some of that, I was a shore snob.

My parents were to blame—if showing your child the world beyond one's home state has anything to do with blame. When my father, an early polyester manufacturer, wanted to get away, he meant an airplane ride and five-star resort, where the beach was just one of 18 amenities. Boardwalk games, un-air conditioned rentals, motel pools, and waffles and ice cream were something other kids told me about.

For me a beach vacation meant Miami Beach, Bermuda, the French Riviera, San Juan, St. Thomas, Mexico, California. It was all perfectly wonderful. But I wanted to toss towels and magazines and chip bags in a car trunk on a Friday afternoon and shoot down the Parkway, walk barefoot on splintery boardwalks, ride a roller coaster above the surf. When I asked my mother why we never went down the shore like everyone else, she asked why I'd want to do what everyone else did. Once a poverty child during the Depression, she could not understand why a rich kid in a solid middle class suburb would long to do only what her less fortunate peers could manage. But I longed for normal, and normal meant going down the shore.

There were trips to the shore for me, blips. My best friend's family took me along crabbing in Barnegat Bay and to an Elks' convention in Wildwood. Two high school boyfriends showed off boardwalk game skills in Asbury Park and Seaside. Once my mother and I spent an entire day at my aunt's rented shore house somewhere but only because Mom said Aunt Ida shouldn't be alone that day.

By adulthood, the shore for me was something other people did; I was spoiled by then by what I assumed were better beaches, lovelier locales. I absorbed my share of ribbing about not being a Shore lover, but decided a gal could still be genuine Jersey, loving Bruce Springsteen and knowing the answer to "what exit?" without shore cred.

My husband, however, had a thing for the shore, and his sister always had a shore rental, so we went; I was simultaneously eager and wary to see if I could discover the famous magic, late as I was. The charms of the shore, I found, were still on offer. It was not too late. I hadn't, after all, been shut out of a secret only accessible in youth. I did not immediately become a shore lover, but a shore liker, slowly discerning its spell. If slathering on soap under the dimming sun in an outdoor shower for the first time at age 26 could bring out a secret wildness in me, what else might happen between me and the shore?

When our boys were preschoolers, we purposely began spending time at the shore—once for 10 days in a clean workmanlike motel blocks from the beach. There were scattered long weekends at friends' rented houses, but most often, we'd take over the extra bedrooms at our cousin Sharon's year-round home a half-mile from a gorgeous beach, where, if I closed my eyes

and listened, and let the sand touch my skin, I could almost rewrite history, me as that girl, that Jersey girl at home at the shore.

I should not have been surprised to come to enjoy if not quite love the Jersey Shore, but I was. Even before I understood the appeal, if anyone had asked me about New Jersey's good and beautiful things, right after mentioning the horse farms of Hunterdon County, I would have said the Jersey Shore. Because of course, it was. It is.

In Avalon and Ortley, and at Sea Isle and Long Beach Island, Brigantine and Point Pleasant, in Stone Harbor and Lavalette, our small young family built sand castles, biked beachfront paths, played mini-golf, raced go-karts, rode coasters, ordered the same dinner three nights in a row because once we found a restaurant we all loved, it was ours. What I loved was seeing my husband see his boys loving the Jersey Shore he had always loved, and on each return visit, I noticed again that here was a place of solace and surge, grit and a kind of glitz, a composed wildness.

When they outgrew sandcastles, the older son took root beside me under an umbrella with a book, while Frank and the younger boy plunged far out in the tumbling surf. I read and worried and after about two hours, I walked. Up and down the beach at water's edge. For miles along paved paths or boarded walkways where I could hear and smell and see the ocean or the quietly lapping baywaters on one side, houses or lunch places and surf shops on the other. I'd pretend a multi-million dollar beachfront vacation house was mine, imagine a diminutive rowed cottage had been in my family for generations, fantasize I lived there year-round, protected by dunes, the deep beach, the stalwart boats in the bay, even the towering coasters a kind of protective bulwark.

On a blowsy day in Manasquan six years ago, I was especially buoyant, and lingered longer than usual on the beach, before leaving to walk the town, to stop in random shops for no reason. In the bookstore, what leapt to my hands was a memoir of an uneven suburban girlhood told in poetry and I stood there in my sarong pinned by the arresting narrative, especially the parts about longing for a father's love. I bought it, crossed the street to a café.

I ordered something and settled myself to read in the speckled shade when my cell phone jangled; my father had just had a stroke. I was needed, in Las Vegas. We packed haphazardly, the boys silent and sandy. On the airplane

the next morning, every time I closed my eyes, what I saw was Sharon's guestroom, a decade's worth of old beach badges displayed in a milk glass dish, white chenille bedspread, broom-swept floors, and the words on the pages of that memoir about another Jersey girl who missed her dad. What I heard were my husband's and sons' voices against the music of waves, and the sound of my feet walking the hard-packed sand at water's edge. I was homesick, in so many ways.

Late in August of 2012, Frank and I and our sons—one leaving the next week for college, the other ready for high school—could only manage two nights at Sharon's. We ate in the restaurant we'd discovered 10 years before. In 48 hours, there was biking and the beach, and as for me, I walked, eventually, inevitably, to the bookstore. By then, I'd met the author of the poetry memoir, and my father had been dead for six years. I sat at the same café, my phone silent. The year before, we'd spent a week in California, and while I loved Laguna Beach and Malibu, I couldn't fight a feeling I had there, the Santa Monica Mountains and their stilt-built houses so near my back—that I might somehow fall off the face of the earth. Back in Manasquan, I recall feeling somehow sheltered, cosseted—a kind of home.

Eight weeks later, wind and storm surge leveled the dunes I'd walked beside. The calming baywaters screamed over roads, merging with the tumbling ocean. Some of the houses I imagined living in—well, a friend checking on her Lavalette bungalow told me she saw a beachfront house in the middle of a road a quarter mile inland, lying upside down.

In the first 24 hours after the storm, TV images changed from taciturn Staten Islanders whose only homes were swept from their foundations, to Jerseyans crying over shore houses. I momentarily thought, "It's only a vacation house, get over it." But soon I realized they were not mourning ruined floors and furniture, things that can be tossed and replaced, but grieving things impossible to replicate, things that are not things: ways of being, the seasonal swell of community, a feeling and a place, smells and sounds that surge and merge into one inexplicable something known as The Shore.

In a Springsteen song, "everything's all right at the shore," and he'll be right about that again, one day. But now, the Jersey Shore is more wrecked than the characters on that awful television show of the same name. The Jersey Shore I once longed for and didn't understand, the one I held at arm's

length but came to tentatively embrace and feel at once protective of and protected by, that shore exists now only in collective memory, and I feel about it as I might a favorite aging aunt who I did not visit often enough, just to glow in her presence.

Desire in Miniature: The Mystery of Sarah Goodridge
by Lori Lamothe

This is one story that really does begin on a dark and stormy night. I discovered Sarah Goodridge by candlelight in a century-old colonial, listening to the heartbeat of a summer storm. Considering the nature of Ms. Goodridge, the setting seems uncannily appropriate. Earlier that day I had been walking my dog when I noticed the stone marker on the front lawn of the house next door. I must have passed that stone dozens of times since I had moved to Templeton, Massachusetts a year and a half earlier. But I had never actually bothered to stop and read the plaque bolted to the stone. This time I did:

Goodridge Homestead

Erected in 1775 by Ebenezer Goodridge

Birthplace of Talented Templeton Family

Sarah Goodridge (1788-1853), renowned miniature

portrait painter of Boston, pupil of Gilbert Stuart

William Goodridge (1777-1835), built virtually every

church organ in Boston between 1805 and 1832.

Not exactly riveting stuff, but it was sort of cool to be living next door to the former home of the talented Templeton family. One of the not-so-nice features of my house was that it happened to be next to a chair factory; by that point I was definitely getting tired of the phrase, "I hardly know they're there." A painter and a workaholic organ-maker seemed like a definite improvement.

For the rest of the day I forgot about the plaque and went about my usual routine: changing diapers, making the pretense of cleaning, attempting to get more food into my daughter's mouth than on the dining room floor. So it wasn't until later, after my daughter was asleep and I found myself sitting at my dining room table, that my quest began in earnest. The storm had

knocked the power out about an hour earlier and the table was covered with a cacophony of leftover scented candles. I sat a moment, watching the sheet lightning flash to the east, then booted up my laptop.

"Do you think you should be doing that?" my husband asked.

"Why not?"

Of course, he was probably right. Didn't they say if you could hear the thunder, even from a distance, you still could be struck by lightning? On the other hand, the anonymous they always seemed to err on the side of outlandish caution. Before my husband could protest any further, my desktop screen appeared and I clicked onto Google.

I'm not really sure what I expected to find. Not much, I can assure you. Maybe a line or two on Wikipedia (a guilty pleasure) or the free version of Encyclopedia Britannica. If I were lucky, an image of one of Goodridge's miniatures, which are the eighteenth-century equivalent of the family photos we carry around in our wallets. Without really giving it much thought, I had conjured up a rather dreary portrait of a matronly woman, hair pulled tightly back and lips grimly closed. Or perhaps her stout husband, all jowls and scowls, wearing a comb-over and a pocket watch. So when I clicked on the first Google result I was more than a little shocked.

I found myself staring at a pair of bare breasts.

I'm not talking cleavage—not your standard demure line rising out of a darkish gown. No, what I was ogling was a perfectly matched set of rosy nipples. I checked the top of the page to make sure I had gotten the right Sarah Goodridge. I had. I checked the date she had painted it—1828—and found that just as startling as the fact that she had designated the miniature as a self-portrait. She had titled her piece, "Beauty Revealed" and it was painted on a sliver of ivory that measured just 2 5/8 by 3 1/8 inches. Somehow the diminutive size didn't make the self-portrait any less surprising.

What was a modest 40-year-old painter living in the Jacksonian era doing painting her own breasts? Exactly who was this Sarah Goodridge of the talented Templeton family? I had a fleeting impulse to Google the brother and find out just what his so-called organs looked like. It would be one thing if Goodridge had lived in the twentieth century; one might expect that sort of daring from a female artist. Georgia O'Keeffe comes to mind, or, at a

stretch, Mary Cassatt. But at the time Goodridge painted "Beauty Revealed" women couldn't vote and most didn't even contemplate "making a living" at anything, never mind as artists. Frances Trollope wasn't the only European to remark upon the diminished role of many American women when she said: "It is in vain that 'collegiate institutes' are formed for young ladies, or that 'academic degrees' are conferred upon them. It is after marriage, when these young attempts upon all the sciences are forgotten, that the lamentable insignificance of the American woman appears."

Clearly, Goodridge wasn't like that. Further investigation revealed that not only had she been quite talent at painting miniatures but that she had made a pretty good living doing it. Born the sixth of nine children, Goodridge had taught herself to draw at a young age with few materials. Her family wasn't wealthy, so when she ran out of paper she would use a stick to draw portraits of friends and even farm animals in the sand. Eventually, she set off for Boston and managed to secure lessons with the famous artist Gilbert Stuart. Not long afterward, Goodridge set up her own studio and was so successful that she was able to support herself, as well as her mother and an orphaned niece. She had five exhibitions of her work at the Boston Athenaeum, and for nearly thirty years she painted two to three miniatures a week.

Now perhaps I should clarify that "Beauty Revealed" doesn't represent Goodridge's usual mode of composition. She didn't go around painting married ladies' bare bosoms. "Beauty Revealed" is by far her boldest, most stunning effort. So it was with much curiosity that I scanned the Google file to learn who, if anyone, was the recipient of the miniature.

The answer was just as interesting—and as puzzling—as the miniature itself. Not only had Goodridge painted "Beauty Revealed" for a man, but she had done so for one of the most famous men of her time: Senator Daniel Webster, the handsome lawyer-politician who would run three times for president but never win. Known as "Black Dan" because of his dark hair and fiery personality, Webster had commissioned Goodridge to paint his portrait before and would do so at least a dozen more times. At the time Goodridge presented him with her gift, she was 40 years old and Webster was a widower with three children. He had invited her Washington, D.C. in 1828 to paint his portrait and she had accepted. Less than a year later Webster married a second time—to a wealthy, subdued woman he barely knew—and Goodridge returned to her Boston studio. She never married, nor did she

travel out of state again. The two continued to correspond until her death, and when she died she left her paint box—surely her most valued possession—to Webster. Webster destroyed her letters it seems, but he kept "Beauty Revealed" with him for the rest of his life. After he died relatives discovered the miniature among his belongings and auctioned it off.

Just what was the nature of their relationship? I craved an answer but no answer was to be found. During the next month I visited the Boston Antiquarian Society and read through Webster's letters to Goodridge in an effort to learn more. The 44 letters, written between 1827 and 1851, are brief and to the point. Webster would visit her studio at such and such a time to have his portrait painted. Webster was grateful for her miniature. And so on. Whether other letters exist is a matter for speculation, as is the question of whether the two were lovers. Barring a discovery in a neglected corner of some distant relative's attic, no one may ever know.

Years have passed since that dark and stormy night. I've since moved, divorced and gotten a full-time job. Instead of spending my days changing diapers I'm usually trying to transport her to the right place at approximately the right time. There isn't much time these days to chase down a love story more than two centuries old. But I do find myself thinking of Goodridge and her miniature rather often. In one sense "Beauty Revealed" hides as much as it divulges; at its heart is a mystery. The tiny self-portrait is painted on ivory so thin light shines through it if you hold it up to a window. Yet within this fragility is the key to the puzzle of Goodridge and Webster.

But what is most important to me is my conception of what "Beauty Revealed" represents. Though art critics and others interested parties have tended to agree that the miniature is remarkable, they have interpreted its message in very different ways. According to John Updike, the breasts are saying "We are yours for the taking, in all our ivory loveliness, with our tenderly stippled nipples." Another critic writes that the miniature seduces viewers while celebrating female erotic power. While I tend to agree with the second assessment more than the first (in my opinion Updike makes the miniature sound like the prototype of the personal ad), the miniature's impact on me has more to do with Goodridge's power as an artist and as an individual. At a time when men dominated the field, Goodridge practiced her craft and achieved success. She refused to become anything but the artist she wanted to be and she wasn't afraid to reveal the extent of her artistic

power to Webster. And she wasn't willing to separate her art from her identity—or to accept society's ideas about what a woman should be, what an artist should paint. In his essay on Goodridge's miniature, Updike remarks that it was probably the first nude portrait done from life in American history. Had news of Goodridge's gift to Webster gotten out she would have been vilified by the local gossips. Yet she took the risk, making it clear to Webster that she was a highly talented artist and a woman who refused to hide her desires. Thus a kind of symbiotic relationship between desire and art emerges: Goodridge's desire imbued her art with power, and her power as an artist gave her the courage to reveal herself as a sensual woman. The act of creating art and the act of creating—or perhaps revealing—identity are inextricably linked. Goodridge devoted her life to art and art returned the favor, bestowing upon her the sort of emotional, intellectual and financial freedom that was extremely rare for a woman in the early 1800's.

The idea of art as an act of creating identity has a particular appeal for me. I write poems and continue to struggle with the question of who I am as a person and an artist. A poem is not so unlike one of Goodridge's miniatures: it attempts to capture, in a relatively confined space, an image using a two-dimensional medium. I came late to poetry and when I did I wasn't sure what I was doing. I'm not sure I know even now, but I do believe the act of writing has helped me discover who I am and to create an identity that derives, in part, from my relationship with words.

I can only hope to follow the example set by Goodridge: to use art to reveal the world's hidden beauty, to continue to create an idea of who I am, who I might be. At 40, Goodridge's breasts surely weren't as perky, nor was her skin as creamy, as her present to Webster suggests. Yet she chose not to simply reflect reality, preferring instead to paint a portrait that captured a deeper depiction of her self. It is from that deeper self—and Goodridge's willingness to use her craft to reveal it—that the miniature derives its power. In her journals Mary Shelley once lamented, "What folly is it in me to write trash nobody will read . . . All my many pages—future waste paper—surely I am a fool." Yet like her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley sought a way to be more than what society told her she should be. The art of words offered her the means to do that. For me, all art always holds within it that same promise: the possibility that I can peel away layers of convention and false security to discover the beauty beneath.

"Beauty Revealed", 1828

Sarah Goodridge

(currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Summer Before My Brother Died by Rob Stanley

The first punch hits me in the left ear and it actually feels good, invigorating. I duck around the next few but the second one to connect hits me in the jaw and it hurts a lot. By the time the third one hits me in the forehead the sweat and moisture gathering on the faux leather gloves has a stinging effect, and that, combined with the actual force of the blow through my neck and spine, leaves me reeling.

"You hit like a girl", I mutter as I step back and roll my head low across my chest a couple of times, my chin tucked in a defensive position.

My brother smiles. Even he finds that funny.

We've been combatants like this for most of my thirteen years, but this battle is different than the others. Those were usually fought inside, on our paper-thin carpet during miniature versions of sports we'd seen on TV; knee hockey in the living room, sponge-ball tennis in the upstairs hallway; full-contact mini-hoop basketball against my brother's bedroom door. Those were battles. Sometimes just for fun, but most times they had an undeniable edge that my mother hated seeing in us. This boxing thing today though, this is fun.

"That's enough," my brother says as he extends one of his gloved hands to cup my shoulder. The air is warm and were both sweating.

There in our driveway, perched on a hill amidst a hay field that never seems well kept, we draw deep breaths and eye each other. In years past I might have cringed at the prospect of my brother delivering a sucker punch at this point, but Billy and I had changed a lot recently and the thought of a sneak attack doesn't cross my mind.

I step into his embrace and let my shoulders slump in a sign of respect to my big brother. This male-affection thing is something we do now, ever since he got back.

"You want some more?" I ask with just enough sarcasm in my voice for him to know he shouldn't take me seriously.

He grins again and doesn't even bother responding. We both know his sinewy strength is more than my pudgy frame can bear, especially considering the fact that he's three and a half years older and four inches taller than I am.

To me it seems as if those final inches have been added in the past few months, during the time when Billy was away. That's probably not true, but I'm shocked at how grown up he is now and can't settle in my mind why it is I'm viewing him in that light. It's only been two months since we last saw each other, but it seems like years.

I had been surprised back in the spring when I walked into the kitchen, saw Billy and my parents huddled at our round country table and caught the final hushed syllables of the default advice that my father always seemed to give whenever we asked for help on a topic he didn't really care about.

"Well Billy, I think you should do whatever you think is right."

There was usually a passive-aggressive tinge to Dad when he said stuff like this, a sense of him knowing more than you and not wanting to bother having to share on a topic so menial as one that dealt with emotion or a simple life decision, but this seemed different. This time he seemed to be choking back his true feelings, keeping his heart safe behind a wall of good sound advice.

With my back to the table, pretending to rifle through the cupboard for an elusive glass while I tuned my ear to process the emotion in the room behind me, I sensed a slight waver in Dad's voice, one that he hid it with a quick forced cough, as he probed Billy further

"So, what exactly do you plan on doing in Toronto?"

This being the first I'd heard of my brother in Toronto, or of something as stupid as him willfully leaving me, I dropped my act of lingering over the glasses and quickly turned to face the conversation. All three heads swung toward me, and I was happy to see that none of their faces conveyed malice or annoyance. I took a chance and stepped toward the table, leaving the cupboard door to swing shut behind me, hoping that my presence would be tolerated amongst the adults.

It was.

And it was there, standing beside the table, hovering over a conversation that would ultimately change our family forever, that I heard of Billy's plans for the summer. Mom had family there, and his idea involved heading to one of their homes to enjoy the big city as well as the much larger minimum wage that jobs in Ontario offered. He and I didn't know much about Mom's family; the bare minimum, really. We knew there were lots of aunts and uncles, and that the word "abuse" often got thrown around whenever the

topic of Mom's absent father came up, but the whole scene was sheltered in some urban dream for us.

Obviously, Billy was ready to experience some of that scene for himself. Dreams didn't scare him. There was always a sense of largeness and destiny about him, and most of us knew that he wouldn't be in small-town New Brunswick for long. Back then, he often spoke of travel, of the army, of radio technology school—all large dreams in their own right—but each of them seemed firmly within his reach. He'd always been blessed with an innate sense of accomplishment and likability. Friends gravitated toward him, teachers loved him and young women flocked to him. Even at a young age, he radiated a quiet warmth and a sense of safety that people just found endearing. Listening to his plans to head to Toronto then, wasn't some flight of fancy, it was the first step in an unfolding plan that most of us thought would end very well for him.

Of course had I known more, I would have been better able to identify the strange case of déjà vu at play in the room that day. Unlike my brother, who enjoys playing by the rules and excelling, my father has always majored in challenging authority—a trait I certainly come by honestly—as his means of getting ahead. So, when he was seventeen, Billy's age exactly, Dad had made his own pilgrimage to T.O. Like Billy, it was outwardly because of work, but inwardly a lot more about finding himself. Dad had bounced from job to job until he found what he was looking for while working as a manager at a Kresge's department store downtown. Not only did he come by security and a steady paycheck, he also found a girlfriend, an unexpected twist, and in a very unexpected turn, she was soon pregnant. Dad, sensing that this teenage tryst needed a man to guide it as opposed to a boy to tease it along, forced his own hand and spirited his girlfriend—my mother—back East on the first bus he could find. She soon became his bride, and soon after, she gave birth to William Jr.—Billy.

It was memories of these days of struggle that soaked my father's words with unspoken fear as he listened to my brother's plans at the table that day. He hid them as best he could, but even I could sense the unconvincing tone in his voice as he heard my brother out one last time and offered a final retort, this one even weaker than the last.

"Whatever you think's right."

I know my Dad didn't mean it. I know he wanted to make him stay.

But he didn't.

He let him get on the bus, alone. He let him make money. He let him test he bounds of his overprotective mother's patience. He let him experience whatever he needed to.

He let him go.

And now, standing out of breath beside my brother in the driveway, my face flush with exhaustion and pride, I'm glad that Billy got to go and do all that stuff, but I'm more glad that he's back. Yeah, I know he just beat the shit out of me, but it feels good to be here, alone with my brother again.

Just then, a flicker of movement catches my attention in the windowed porch that runs along the side of our house. The Rorschach-like reflection of the sunlight on the glass makes it hard for me to make anything out, but as the shadowy object moves and takes shape behind the panes, I can see that it is my father. Apparently, he's been the lone spectator of our little battle, and he's stepping out to comment on it.

Before I have a chance to acknowledge him or protest, he quickly covers the five or six strides necessary to reach me and wordlessly lifts one of the boxing gloves off my hand to place it on his own. His eyes are on Billy the whole time, and as he slides the other glove onto his hand I can see that something more primitive than age or ego is fueling this. He circles his son, and they both look like they're relishing what's about to happen.

Billy has Dad's body down to a T, save for the thick padding that years of office work have added to my father's midsection, and they both share quick feet and great eye hand coordination. Right now they also share the same bemused look of concentration and outright fear, part cocky grin and part studied intensity. This appears to be in good fun, yes, but I'm sensing there's a lot more riding on this.

A rush of warmth fills me as I step back from the fray and realize that the grown-ups have again let me be involved. I'm glad I'm here, that no one is telling me to run along, and no one is holding back so I won't be adversely affected in some way. I'm a participant in this, even if it's just as an occasional brow-wiper and potential referee. Just the three boys, mano a mano a mano in the driveway. Hell, Mom isn't even invited.

Before I have time to dwell on things for too long, I'm snapped back to reality by the first wave of punches. Billy and Dad are circling each other and straight right jabs are flying. Only straight right jabs, the safest of all the punches. Each volley is cautious and aggressive at the same time. Skinny arms extending for a quick sting but never venturing too far from a

defensive position. As the seconds roll by, the feeling-out process evaporates into the late summer air and the punches extend. They're longer, a tad slower, but a hint of menace accompanies each one. Adrenaline crackles with every slash, and each one is yearning for some damage.

The cars on the road well below us pass by every so often without even a hint of recognition of what's happening on the hill above. The waves lapping against the shore of the rocky beach just beyond the road continue unabated as well. All is at it should be, yet a seismic shift for our family is happening right here in the open.

A constant patter of nervous laughter and semi-audible grunts fly back and forth, but the punches aren't matching the ferocity of the verbal assaults. No one is really connecting, and I'm rather proud of the fact that my bout with Billy had a lot more action than this. Less emotion, but a lot more action.

Just then, a punch lands. Then another. Then there's a spirited reply that's none too polite. Eyes are now slits and the mood changes. Another punch lands. My adrenaline begins to flow and the warmth of simply being there evaporates. The action spills into my face and I'm forced to recoil to move away from them.

They don't even notice me.

Another punch.

Another.

Soon my hands are flailing in front of me, trying in vain to deflect the action and voice some protest, but nothing stems the tide. My heart pounds and I realize that this is inching toward the danger zone when a shriek pierces the melee and I cringe from its fierceness.

"God, Bill! What are you doing?"

My mother's voice jerks us back to reality, and for a moment we pause awkwardly and by instinct try to look as nonchalant as possible. Our hands fall, our backs straighten and the pained expressions ease from our faces. Frozen in time, we all try our best to deflect the intensity of the past few moments.

Mom though, isn't falling for it. She missed the run-up to the bout because she'd been busying herself inside our house, and now all she has seen is her entire family, all three of us, flailing and spitting at each other in the driveway.

Her shoulders sag incredulously and a look of complete bewilderment causes her mouth to gape wide open. She bores a hole in my father with her knowing gaze, and an elongated blink and a shake of her head is all she leaves him with as she closes the porch door and retreats to the safety of the home she's created for us.

We're still frozen in place. Dad is the first to relent, removing his boxing gloves just as silently as he put them on and handing them to me without even so much as a gaze in my direction. He steps toward the void in the doorway where Mom stood seconds before, knowing that any sort of comment would be fruitless. This is going to warrant a longer conversation than that.

Billy and I stand staring, transfixed on Dad's back as he walks, and wondering if there might be repercussions for us too. As Dad steps up into the doorway he uses the shift in weight as an opportunity to glance back at us over his shoulder. We immediately catch his eye.

A slight grin crosses his face.

It isn't a defiant look, or one that could be misconstrued against Mom in any way. It's simply a man speaking through a look to two other men. Nothing more needs to be said.

Dad disappears into the house. Billy and I shuffle for a second, then realize that we should busy ourselves with something else. We go our separate ways, both filling time with nothing.

I think I ended up listening to Aerosmith, probably "Permanent Vacation", and reading an Archie comic. I don't really remember. For me, the beauty of the day had already been cemented.

Gentleman Farmer by Bill Vernon

Mr. Francis Eustis immediately grabbed my interest when Larry Schmidt introduced himself by saying that his family had just moved onto one of three contiguous farms that Mr. Eustis had bought and joined together. The man himself lived elsewhere, in Indian Hill, an affluent Cincinnati suburb. “Farming’s just a hobby to him. He’s a millionaire."

I pictured a man with dollar bills hanging from his pockets. "I've never met a millionaire."

"Oh, he's pretty much like everyone else. My father managed a herd of Jerseys in Iowa and Mr. Eustis brought him here. They met at a cow auction. See, we raise Jerseys, which give the richest milk of all cows. Mr. Eustis is from New Jersey where his mother owned a Jersey-breeding farm so some of our cows are from there.”

“He raises Jerseys and he comes from New Jersey?”

“Yeah, weird, huh? Mr. Eustis put in the most modern equipment. He uses science in our operation."

Larry seemed proud, and Mr. Eustis sounded intriguing. He was not only rich enough to do what he wanted, but knowledgeable enough to employ modern agricultural principles. Seeing the place when Larry invited me to his house reinforced these thoughts. The big barnyard was impressive. Mr. Eustis had spared no expense. The board fence along the driveway and road and the four large buildings around the barnyard, except for red trimming, were pristine white. The Schmidts' house, set off behind a few trees, struck me too. It was ornate for a farmhouse, almost fancy, a reddish purple brick.

Inside this house was another surprise. The furnishings were comfortable but ordinary things the Schmidts had trucked in, except for two things on the fireplace mantel. Larry said, “Mr. Eustis made those.” Jersey cows, so realistic they seemed about to bellow standing in my hands. Mr. Eustis was also an artist, and from what I could see, a good one. What kind of man bought farms and cows, insisted on using the latest scientific equipment and knowledge, and hired people to do the work while he sculpted models of the animals?

I wasn't obsessed with the question, but for two years I did periodically sniff around to learn more. I rode horses with Larry at the farm, heard a bit more about the man, and alone occasionally walked the fence line of the farm from the town side, hunting in rabbit season, hiking for exercise and adventure, studying from a distance the farm buildings, fields and cows as if they might reveal more about Mr. Eustis. Then, at a goodbye reception for the Schmidts, Larry introduced me to the man, remarking that I was virtually a farm boy myself. I'd baled hay the past two summers at various farms. "Part-time," I said. "I'll work full-time next year during high school vacation."

It was a quick conversation, with Mr. Eustis offering me a full-time job next summer. My heart quickened at the idea. This man was an innovator, an artist, a rich man. I could get to know him and earn full-time pay at the same time. I accepted and we settled on the particulars.

After nearly a year of anticipation, my first dawn of helping to milk Eustis Jerseys came, and my interest in Mr. Eustis immediately increased. That morning he was alongside me on wagons stacking bales of hay in hot, humid weather. In the afternoon, enjoying a cool breeze during a break, he looked at me and said, "Bill, this work is good for your soul. It may not be clean work, but it's by God honest and straight forward. I like it. Baling's my exercise." Baling hay was exercise? Farm animals were subjects for art? He didn't have to work but he did?

I watched the man closely, trying to figure him out. He seemed all-business, consulting daily with the employees who lived on his farm, my immediate bosses, Merle, the Schmidts' replacement, and Wayne. Upon Mr. Eustis' arrival, the three would schedule jobs for that day and if necessary decide future things like how stock was to be treated, calves reared and sold, and dry cows bred. I caught snippets of their conversations by standing close or passing nearby on a chore. Within two weeks I realized that he related to people in a very defined manner. Always, the two employees, as well as outside experts who showed up, like veterinarians, spoke seriously with Mr. Eustis, listened intently, then gave way to his judgments. They may not have kowtowed, if you'll forgive the pun, but I imagined their foreheads would have touched the ground at his feet posthaste if he'd pressured them.

He simply assumed command, and of course we all deferred to Mr. Eustis because of his position as our employer. But there was more. His eastern

accent and manner of speech, which was more formal than ours, set him off as well. Mr. Eustis was an outsider, and perhaps because of this we all talked about him behind his back, often with a tinge of sarcasm inspired by envy. When I caught myself doing it, or listened to the others go on, I felt oddly sorry for the rich man because he didn't fit in very well on a personal level with us.

Another reason for my empathy may have been that he treated me and Jim, my neighbor friend on the baling crew, with greater warmth than he showed his other employees, as if our backgrounds were similar to his own. Alone with us, he inquired about our family and our plans after high school, and he several times urged Jim and me to attend college. "You don't want to end up baling hay or shoveling cow shit all your lives."

"You bale hay yourself," I said, but I knew what he meant. He was one of the few adults, aside from my mother, who urged me to go to college and prepare for the future.

He further separated himself from everyone else by driving his car into the fields instead of riding a wagon with us. He always rode there alone except for the time he invited Jim and me to ride with him, first making us spread newspaper sections to sit on so our clothes wouldn't stain the upholstery. This was his new baby, after all, a Chrysler, and he proceeded to show off its main feature, which had him excited: Powerflite or Torqueflite, an innovative gear-shifting system. "Only push button car on the market," he bragged, ignoring the Edsel, whose advertising mentioned having it. He seemed to like the car's uniqueness as well as his own for possessing it. Jim and I had newly acquired driver's licenses, which had sparked a dreamy interest in automobiles, so we stared at the little square of buttons (in what he called a pod on the dashboard) and compared its shiny array to the drab, standard gear shifts in our parents' cars. "Neat," we said, unable to carry the conversation into any depth.

After his initial spiel of self-congratulations, Mr. Eustis settled into silence, concentrating on avoiding ruts in the path we were taking. As we exited the shiny car—this was just after lunch—Mr. Eustis opened the trunk, bent over to retrieve shoes from it, raised up and passed gas loudly. Jim and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. Mr. Eustis put his hands on his hips. "God damn it, boys, can't a man fart in peace?" This comment increased the volume of our laughter, at which Mr. Eustis smiled and shook his head. He

sat back against his rear bumper, dropped a shiny brown loafer off one foot, revealing skin tight, thin white socks beneath, and pulled on a scuffed black leather tie shoe.

I studied Mr. Eustis like that, as if what he wore or drove might show what kind of person he was. Sporty when he was with his own kind of people, I guessed, noticing in his car's trunk a white shirt, fancy blazer, and sharply creased blue trousers in a plastic dry cleaners' bag. The way I had him figured, he'd return to Cincinnati after baling and, garbed in his trunk-load of spiffy clothes, go to an expensive country club dinner.

Maybe that outfit made me notice the individuality of his baling-hay attire. He wore tan corduroy trousers, not the common denim trousers the rest of us wore, and the wide, straight wales of his trousers emphasized his shape. His body was angular, about five feet ten inches tall, wide shouldered with hairy arms and chest. His square face had a straight jaw, his short black hair was parted on the left side, and his black eyeglass frames held unusually thick lenses, suggesting an eye problem. His posture was so straight, sitting, standing and walking, I wondered if he had a back ailment, but that seemed unlikely because he threw bales so well. These were all clues about his nature, and my youthful nature struggled, trying to combine what I knew into a coherent pattern.

Less acceptable behavior complicated my understanding of him. Jim and I were put to work in the hay barn cleaning out stalls for two horses. Fine, but why there? There was room for more than two horses in the handier stable. These stalls were out of the way, beneath the hay barn's main floor. To reach them from the outside, you had to use back doors that opened at the bottom of the hill whose top was the barn's main floor. A heavy wooden door on the floor of that level hid the inside steps down to these stalls. Adding to the mystery, Mr. Eustis came in as we started working, watched us throw a pitchfork of debris, then said, "Don't tell anyone about the horses we put in here. They'll be our secret. And don't take them outside unless Merle says to."

What was going on? Jim and I let Mr. Eustis walk away, then abandoned our work, hurried over to Merle and asked. Mrs. Eustis, he said, was unhappy about her husband's obsession with useless palominos and had ordered him to sell the two he'd brought to the little farm she owned near Cincinnati. He'd agreed, but instead of selling them, he planned to hide them on this

farm. Jim and I went back to work smiling at the deception. We were sort of the rich man's conspirators, weren't we? There was also the thing about lying to his wife. What should I make of that?

Before the horses arrived, Mr. Eustis personally inspected the stalls and asked us to spread a thicker layer of new straw and wipe down the board enclosures. Then feeding and watering the palominos the next few days, we found him almost always leaning on a gate, feeding them apples. His interest in the horses did seem to be a quirk, and it was a hard thing to put into proper perspective.

Another complication arose three weeks after the horses' arrival. Mrs. Eustis visited the farm, saying her husband was on a business trip and she'd promised to keep an eye on his Lebanon operations. We all thought she was seeking evidence that her husband was harboring animals she didn't want. The evidence, however, eluded her because she telephoned an hour ahead to announce her visit. Merle did escort her around, but only after he'd warned us not to say anything about the palominos. Also after he'd hitched up the horse trailer to the pick-up, loaded the palominos, and transported them to the farthest-away field where he left them and the trailer.

The consequence of such deceptions quickly became evident. Merle was unhappy to be involved in the dishonesty. "That man is something," he complained, and he didn't stay much longer in Mr. Eustis' employment. That fall he moved to his own farm of 135 acres near Clarksville and expressed pleasure at severing his ties with Mr. Eustis, but he also said, "God bless him. He's loyal as an old dog and has a heart of gold. You know he loaned me money to buy this place. Basically, he's really a good man."

What stuck in Merle's craw, as Merle himself might have said, was Mr. Eustis' mockery of Merle's and his wife's religiosity. They were serious about it and Mr. Eustis was not, as shown by his occasional jibes, particularly at our noon meals, which Merle's wife prepared and served. These lunches were often a stage for Mr. Eustis to tell a lengthy story that involved sexual innuendoes. He would laugh at his punch lines, prompting Jim and me to laugh, prompting Merle at the other end of the table to smile and nod, prompting Merle's wife to flit between kitchen and table, working herself into an objection that was never very direct. "Now, Francis, do you really think young boys should hear such things?"

Her objection would prompt a similar reply every time. "Damn right they ought to hear it, Rebecca. They're almost men. If they don't know the facts of life, they ought to. Right, boys?"

We'd nod and grin.

Rebecca's creamy neck and face would flush, she would glance at us as if in despair, then hurry into her kitchen as if for some new serving. Mr. Eustis respected and admired her though, as shown by the fact that she was the only one I ever heard address him by his first name.

The jokes from Mr. Eustis at the noon meal not only titillated but also upset me. They didn't seem appropriate in front of a woman like Rebecca, but I'd always conclude that Mr. Eustis was trying to fit in by entertaining us. However, his actions did take advantage of his employer-employee relationship with Merle. Maybe he felt guilty about that. Maybe quilt led him to loan Merle money to buy a farm.

My connection to this gentleman farmer ended in a bittersweet and odd way, adding to the complicated nature I observed in the man. Our agreement was to pay me in lump sum for the whole summer's work, and he came to my home on a Saturday to do it, having forgotten to bring his checkbook to the farm the day before. He came in our front door, met my mother, and she left us to conduct our business alone. I offered him a seat, which he refused, saying in a serious voice that he'd decided I should receive $35 not $50 per week because I'd left work early, at 4:30 P.M., one or two days each week to play baseball.

My eyes widened. "That was part of our agreement."

He pulled a checkbook from his shirt pocket. “I don't remember talking about it. Now for 10 weeks of working, my calculations make your pay 350 dollars. Right?”

I was about to object when Mom stormed into the living room with a broom in both hands. She'd been in the kitchen, supposedly sweeping the floor but in fact listening. Mr. Eustis had pen poised over his checkbook when she said, "What kind of man are you, trying to cheat a child out of a few dollars? Did you agree to pay him 50 dollars a week?"

"Well, yes, but...."

"Then you owe Bill exactly five hundred dollars, as agreed." She shook the broom to emphasize the amount.

He put pen to checkbook, gave me the check, shook my right hand, thanked me, and left.

As the sound of his footsteps faded along our walkway, confusion surged through me. Mom said, "Bill, you have to develop a backbone and stand up for yourself. Otherwise people will take advantage of you. I won't always be here, you know. You'd better get some gumption."

"Gumption's got nothing to do with it." I hated severing ties with Mr. Eustis that way. I was sure I'd explained to him about getting off early to play ball. He'd probably forgotten that detail in our discussion. I also didn't believe he was trying to cheat me. More likely he was trying to be fair as he saw it. Heck, he might have been trying to teach me a lesson in business. Then again, however, so was Mom.

There was a lot more to the man than I experienced, of course, but I learned no more about him until the Cincinnati Enquirer's August 5, 1996, obituary. Mr. Eustis died 84 years old. He'd been only 46 years old when I'd known him, the age of my father at his death, relatively young although at the time I'd thought of them both as old. He'd graduated from "the Yale School of Fine Arts" and "in the early 1960s" begun "his art career." That was a few years after I'd seen two of his early animal studies. Since those days, his art had become "renowned worldwide," with "a permanent exhibit" of his "finely detailed sculptures...on display in the Netherlands," the Cincinnati Zoo, which houses his sculpture of its "famous gorilla King Tut," and Lexington's International Museum of the Horse at the Kentucky Horse Park, which maintains the Francis Eustis Gallery and "features an exhibit of one of his favorite breeds, the draft horse."

My observations of Mr. Eustis lasted a short part of one summer and involved personal contact with him only at work. But he was a father-figure to me. He had flaws, yes, everyone has flaws. His may have included an aloofness that allowed him to dominate, impose on and even belittle others in an offhanded way. However, these traits seemed minor. His positive side seemed much more important. Mr. Eustis modeled for me several admirable qualities. He was good hearted, generous, talented, aware of the beauty in ordinary things, hardworking, self-directed, and certainly rich in many ways other than money.

"Clydesdale" by Francis W. Eustis

Francis W. Eustis Gallery

Poppies by Lisa Lebduska

Standing in front of a produce wagon on a tree-lined street in Bay Ridge, dazed but smiling, a swarthy teenage boy holding a basket of onions and swiss chard guards my kitchen. He makes an unlikely sepia angel, poised over a junk drawer in Connecticut. Some days he watches me watch chickadees squabble over thistle; on others he listens as I argue with my mother over the phone about why we need to retire her Honda, and with it, though I do not say this, her ability to drive.

Somewhere under the boy's wave of chestnut hair is my grandfather.

Cinched by a belt circling his waist almost twice, Pop's pants jut out above his ankles and dusty broken shoes, inherited from his younger but fatter brother Tony. He holds the bridle of a horse that is wearing blinders. At sixteen he bought the horse without realizing that it could not see, discovering its dark truth in an epiphanic tumble that landed him, the horse, the wagon and twenty-five watermelons in a roadside ditch. Often have I stared at the picture and wondered if my grandfather had yet discovered the animal's secret. He gazes out at me, far into a future that has outlived him, not knowing the woman who would be looking back at him, someone he would know only when he was an old man and she was a child, the granddaughter who had inherited his yellow eyes.

That blind horse, a parable for Poppy's life, served as the center of Thanksgiving conversations that began with my mother's declaration: "Pop never worried. He was no businessman. He bought the horse thinking he was getting a bargain. Women came to buy cucumbers and ended up with free strawberries and carrots. It's a miracle we didn't starve." Whenever she said this, I would look at the ziti trays, roasted turkey and vegetables crowding the table and think the real miracle was that no one had exploded.

Pop left the produce business to drive a taxi. One night, a man approached his cab at a stoplight, and when my grandfather rolled down the window to see what he wanted, the man reached in and tore off shirt pocket loaded with change and bills. The second time he was robbed, a passenger jammed a gun into the back of his neck.

"Pop never worried," my mother says while heaping mashed potatoes on to my Thanksgiving plate.

"Didn't he get held up?"

"Yes, but it didn't faze him. He came home and said he was on the evening news. He never mentioned it again."

Pop made Camels his daily passengers. Thoughts of his passengers' vagaries may have played a role in his decision to smoke; likewise, careening cars, buses, trucks and other taxis, along with his need to support a growing family. Despite regular prodding by my mother and grandmother, he refused to quit. More evidence, my mother said, that he didn't have a care, though sometimes she provided a denouement to his smoking tale in the form of a nurse who showed him an x-ray of blackened lungs. The next day he traded his Camels for sourballs.

In his later years, Poppy resembled a smooth-shaven Italian Santa Claus: a prodigious belly braced by suspenders, full cheeks of baby skin and a twinkle in his cat's eyes. He would eat a whole chicken in one sitting, smiling contentedly until the cannoli platter appeared, when he would announce he had "just enough room for dessert" and request two tablets of saccharin for his coffee.

Another picture, imprisoned in a Gimbel's shopping bag at my mother's house, once told a story similar to my sepia angel's. I had not seen this picture in over a decade, but last month I rediscovered it during a search for the powder blue Dearfoam slippers my mother had bought but could not find. There's a horse in this one, too, but it's a pony, and a tiny girl, banana curls framing her face, sits upon its back, beaming. I recognize her, but I need my mother to tell me. I tell myself that if she can identify the girl, she will be more whole than not, more present than gone. If she passes the quiz, I tell myself, she will be happy and I am doing the right thing leaving her in this house with the wobbling toilet bowl and the crumbling roof, where she wants to be, with the mice and her memories.

When she sees the picture, my mother pipes up, "What a day that was. Aunt Aida was giving birth to Tony. They wanted to get me out of the house, so Grandpa brought me to Prospect Park. Just the two of us. We ate charlotte russe." She smiles, satisfied with the joy that only the deep past now brings. She knows this story, where it will go, who the heroes will be, how it will end. It is all hers.

"I was so excited. I had never been on a pony. Pop spent a week's salary to have my picture taken. Grandma almost killed him." I imagine my grandmother, renowned for her ability to cut any size cake into enough slices for seventeen people, asking her husband how they would pay their bills. On this particular day, I do not want to go there with my mother, so I return to the photo that I have studied on and off for the last forty years, hoping that it will save me, save us from that dark alley.

"Mom, what is that?" I ask, pointing to her girl self.

"That was my party dress. Grandma made it for me. I was so proud. It was yellow and edged in lace, and she did my hair. Those were the first pair of shoes I got that hadn't been handed down from Aunt Susie. I loved those shoes."

"No, not the dress," I say. "Over there, down by the saddle."

She reaches for the magnifying glass and squints. There, where the back of my mother's frilly dress meets the worn saddle, is a man's roughened thumb, the sole trace of a vigilant father in heroic contortion to avoid the camera.

"Is that Poppy's hand?"

My mother presses the photo close to her face. "Oh yes. That's right. Pop was holding me up. He was absolutely terrified that I was going to fall off."

Her memory belly full of sweet sponge and raspberry, she smiles. "I remember now."

Me and My Pseudonyms by Mike Ekunno

I have had occasions in the past and present to dissemble. I hide Mike Ekunno and go for something more or less cryptic depending on what I assess to be the risks. In situations where there is likelihood of a future reward like the recent literary contest I entered, I take a pseudonym that is closer to the real thing. You never can tell when a prize would come calling and you'd need to prove your identity. Not that it'd be a difficult thing, all things being equal. There is after all, the email address, phone number and bio details that can be matched. But all things are not equal in my society. The anti-corruption agency once laid hold on some laundered funds and dared its genuine owner to come forth and take the rap. A slew of claimants answered the call. The dollar amount was much. So in such circumstances where a potential benefit is in view, I choose something close to "the name my papa gave me." It was Chukx Michaels in one such recent contest with pecuniary benefits for the winner. Chukx comes from my Igbo middle name which is hardly in the public domain. As for Michaels, its Hebrew etymology is almost a give-away that the bearer couldn't be for real as surnames go in my society. But it is a better risk because the society boasts a tiny demographic that bear English/Hebrew surnames led by no less a figure than Mr. President himself, Goodluck Jonathan. Above all, the name maintains fidelity with the adage of my people that a lie is better told in English (read foreign language). How I came about submitting with a pseudonym in that contest is another story.

A contentious issue had arisen in the Yahoo group of literary minds where I hold membership. I dived into the fray and aired my views carpeting some other viewpoints and, by extension, egos. Not long after this comes the contest in which some of my victims wield judicial influence and I couldn't resist applying. I had to play it safe with a pseudonym just in case somebody wants to be vindictive. I'm not as foolhardy as I am outspoken.

There are times I have come up with pseudonyms that are simply unrelated to my name. One such occasion was when I had to comment on a disgraceful conduct by a high public office holder. As a public servant, the rules bar me from critical media interventions. But the pull of polemics did not prove resistible. Not when aberrant conducts suffuse the public space on a daily basis. So I penned a shooting-from-the-hips piece to the newspapers under a pseudonym unrelated to the real name. I've not got another job,

you know. It was when the piece appeared in the dailies that a round of regret overtook me. Reading one of the outings and seeing the huge support on the comments thread, I rued not being able to blow my cover. The opinions I canvassed in the piece were nothing to be ashamed of. Neither were they libellous (if not, the editors wouldn't have dared). But here was I, the "author and finisher" of those germane viewpoints not able to bask in the glory of their potential to advance the cause of humanity in one little area. Vanity? Maybe.

We who trade in ideas and words find ourselves holding on to our creations as the capitalist entrepreneur would his bank account. In a way, our ideas and the peculiar ways we put them together represent our capital in a world of other capitals of a more gross material hue. To watch such vital accumulation being credited to a phantom figure must be akin to a woman having to give up her adorable baby for adoption and worse, knowing that the adoptive parents are non-existent.

Using a pseudonym is a form of anonymity. But not all forms of anonymity oppress my sense of identity. As speechwriter to a cabinet minister, I have sat in on engagements where my boss's speech elicited ovation. At none of such times did I feel any tinge of possessiveness or jealousy at not being the one on the podium. You could say I was duty-bound to craft those speeches or that I couldn't be minister, anyway (don't bet on it). Whatever, but I never begrudged my boss the glory from any of my applauded lines. This also happens with ghost writing. We can argue that the fees have effectively extinguished the ghost writer's claim to any emotional affinity with his creation. Or has it? Legal rights can be bought off but emotional ties with spores are not necessarily extinguished thereby. Ask the Michael Jackson estate, if you doubt.

Parsing on matters of identity recently got me thinking of this pull to hide as well as be known at the same time. What could inform this ambivalence among writers who blow their covers yet keep the pen names? Could they be suffering from the same tension I suffered over my loss of proprietary rights on quality that is lost to anonymity? What motivates an artiste to be anonymous or take a pen name can be varied. Circumventing conflict of interest (or, at least, not letting the public know) is one. Being free to bring candour to freedom of expression is another. However, these excuses have to battle the pull for credits for writers and artistes who have done exceptional work. And this is where a different form of conflict of interest

takes over—between the real identity and the faux. When the false identity begins to garner accolades which do not redound to the true owner, can pseudonyms be sustained?

It was not this pull that caused the unmasking of JK Rowling, the Harry Potter author who became Robert Galbraith in her second novel, *The Cuckoo's Calling*. Rowling's cover was blown via investigative journalism by Britain's *Sunday Times*. Her motivation for the cover up was "to publish without hype or expectation and...get feedback under a different name." That feedback had been largely positive before Rowling's true identity was revealed and the book's sales on Amazon went bullish. Which raises the question of what would have happened if it had been otherwise. The glee with which Rowling took her outing would be different if *The Cuckoo's Calling* had been a failure whose association with the Rowling brand would bring erosion of brand capital.

Only few artistes whose false identities have done well in the market place have been able to resist the pull to out. They deserve canonisation for resisting the vainglorious urge for recognition. Rene Brabazon Raymond (1906-1985) remained James Hardly Chase to all in my generation for whom he and his crime fiction novels achieved cult followership. In Nigeria, one Afro jazz recording artiste maintains both the anonymity of the person and the name. Lagbaja—his brand is eponymous for his masked identity. Only his male gender seeps out of this anonymity. I am in vicarious distress for his achieving so much fame and not being able to even be waved on in traffic on that account.

Newspapers make a show of having columnists writing under pen names but whose identities are known either within a select, in-house group or among the readers. Those are the instances of pretend anonymities that baffle and sicken. Eating one's cake and having it only exists in fiction and ostrich hiding is used in the pejorative sense.

On the comments thread of online platforms, I have never felt the urge to hide my identity. That is not to say that while disclosing who I am, I do not still remain anonymous. Without the surname, anyone of a million Mikes could have been the one commenting. This partial disclosure is a halfway house that enables me maintain some integrity in nomenclature without fully unveiling the cloak of anonymity. Online discussions in fractious societies can be, and often do get, bigoted and highly vituperative. Comments are

profiled using the names behind them to know who is Christian, Muslim, or to know their ethnic affiliations. While I scroll down the trolling for academic reasons, I try mostly not to join, not even with a pseudonym.

Bliss by Tom Liskey

When I was ten we lived in a narrow two-story clapboard that had been converted from a funeral home into low-rent housing. The place was a real dump. But there had been no single stroke of bad luck that drove us to this place. It was just the unforgiving calculus of divorce and bankruptcy.

The house's owners got out of the funeral business shortly before they retired. That happened at a time when more modern, larger establishments with plenty of room for parking were being built close to the highway. They didn't put much money into the conversion and the work that was done was shoddy. But we got a good deal and leased the bottom floor. There was only one room there—and it was mine. My mother thought a growing boy needed some privacy.

The place must have been something grand in its heyday when this Mississippi River town was booming with commerce and industry. By the time we moved in, lead mining and rock quarrying had gone bust. The house, like our town, had fallen on hard times. The once ornate woodwork of the eaves had gaps in them, each empty space looking like a busted-out tooth. An iron smelter was only a few blocks away and the greasy sheen of smokestack grime covered the gable windows.

The owners had sealed the cellar off in my bedroom during the conversion from funeral home to rental unit with a wooden door. At night that six paneled door loomed large and terrible in my imagination. For some reason I believed that behind the door was where the dead had been washed and dressed for their final viewing.

We only lived in the duplex for the summer and part of the fall before my mom found work in a bigger city. All we had to cook on was a hotplate. So we only ate stuff like hamburgers, fried baloney, and hotdogs. Junk food. We didn't have a fridge either and we kept quarts of milk in an ice cooler.

Before we moved into the duplex we had lived in a pretty little house near a lake beyond the town limits. Our neighbors—two elderly brothers who ran a small fishing camp on its banks—wore ironed overalls and trucker caps pulled low over their eyes.

A hand-painted sign on the side of the road near their property promised pristine waters brimming with overstocked bass just down the bend. But the brothers' mucky water hole was barely a pond. They charged you by the pound if you caught anything. I went fishing there a couple of times, but all I remember getting was piddly looking perch.

We lost the house near the lake after my mom divorced my stepdad, a man from Georgia. She first met him when he called to offer his condolences when my dad died when I was five. He said he read about his death in the local obituary. That man from Georgia could spin a good yarn. The story he told her was that he knew my dad from his time working on a river tug. My mom and the man from Georgia only spoke a few times on the phone, but he swept her off her feet.

The first time I saw him he was clean shaven with a splash of cologne on his cheek. When he spoke, he always seemed to have a ready Bible verse on the tip of his tongue. The kind of things a churchgoing woman like my mother looked for in a suitor.

After a short courtship they married. But the man from Georgia started drinking again after the wedding. Back in the day in Missouri you called people like him 'a six-pack charlie' or 'bottle-jockey.' The thing was the man from Georgia couldn't handle his liquor. He'd hit mom when he was drunk.

The last time I saw him was the year of the divorce. We heard he had been fired from the smelter and was living in a rooming house in town. But my stepdad was friends with a dispatcher and was hired on as a bus driver for the school district. He didn't work my bus route, but I saw him at school once. He was eating in the cafeteria with some of the other drivers and janitors.

I got permission from a teacher and went to speak to him. When he saw me he didn't say a word. He just nodded for me to sit down. He had the red, puffy eyes of a man still nursing a hangover. Maybe the others didn't notice it, but I did.

We were both uncomfortable and I regretted approaching him. The strained father-and-son pretense had already crumbled. He asked about my mom as he slowly picked at his school lunch, looking past me most of the time. I didn't tell him we had lost the house by the bass pond or that we were living in a rundown funeral home.

He kind of snickered when I mentioned that she had a new job. I felt heated because of it. When it was time for me to go back to my class, he slid two quarters across the tabletop to me. It was his change left over from lunch. The meal cost school workers $1.50.

"Get yourself a haircut."

That's all he said. I pocketed the coins.

I wanted that money to buy candy. I had a terrible sweet tooth back then. That's just what I did. It was still hot for September and the chocolate melted on my tongue, but then turned sour in my stomach. I leaned against the building and barfed the chocolate up. I bawled my eyes out with snot and thin chocolaty streams of vomit running down my chin. I felt sick because I took those two coins from the man who had ruined us, from the man who broke my mother's heart.

My mom never found out about my taking the money, and I doubt she would have cared even if she had known. She would have probably made a joke about them being wooden nickels.

I almost told her once, about using the coins to buy candy that made me sick, but I never did. She's dead now. She died shortly after my daughter was born. But something did happen to me the night I took the coins. I stopped being afraid of what was on the other side of the cellar door. It just didn't scare me anymore.

Writing Matters by Kristi DiLallo

Writing matters because it's the only thing I have in common with my parents. "Dear Mom," I write, sitting on my bedroom floor where no one can ask me why I don't just email her. I try not to imagine how it looks when she writes me; when I do, I pretend her cell is nicer than it probably is. I pretend it's an apartment in a nice neighborhood where the guards are not watching her, making sure her pen does not become a weapon with which they fear she might take another life.

Writing matters to the guards, because they open every envelope I've sealed and sent to her, and vice versa. I imagine them checking for nail files or blueprints for an escape, their fingers tearing the fold on the back of each envelope and intercepting the closest thing to a kiss on the cheek between mother and daughter. This has been their routine for five years, and it will go on for another ten while I struggle to remember the touch of her hand or the smell of her hair.

Writing matters because it's the only thing we do together anymore. "I miss you past the world," she writes, and I try to hear it through the paper, but I can hardly remember how her voice sounded before we had to miss each other. Writing matters because it keeps her alive. The collection of letters and cards and photos beneath her bunk are the only things keeping her connected to my world.

Writing matters because it's how I got to know my dad, who went away before my mother did. "Dear daddy," I wrote, on the bus ride home from first, second, and third grade, and many years after that. Writing matters because at recess I could say, "I practice cursive with my daddy, too," but Sally and Rachel would never know what that really meant, no more than they could imagine the "I love you so much" in almost illegible script on yellow construction paper hanging inside of his cell.

Writing matters because of the shoe boxes in the bottom drawer of my dresser: one marked Dad's Letters, and the other, Mom's. Writing matters because it helped me survive the first box, whose contents accumulated over seven painful years. Writing matters because it's getting me through the second one, as the letters pile up alongside the stolen years they represent.

Writing matters because of the world that fiction allowed me to create: one where my dad taught me how to ride a bike and my mother watched me graduate high school. As much as writing matters, still, I know what it cannot do. I cannot write and rewrite the past until it looks the way I want it to. I cannot create characters to take the place of my mother and father. No matter how many times I revise, I cannot use writing to erase the miles or years or events that have separated me from the people who made me a writer.

Ghost Story by Rick Bailey

She follows me back to my office. Her name is Donna.

She wears jeans like all the other girls. Only hers are the baggy kind, the comfortable fit for a woman in her thirties. She sits in the front row, one leg crossed over the other. It bounces, this leg, like she's a piece of machinery that's idling. It's the sixth week of class, and I know this about her: She hasn't been to college in fourteen years. She has two boys. She has a husband whom she has left but who refuses to leave her. Whatever we read in class she reads as if her life depended on it. This week it's Ibsen. To most students, reading "Ghosts" is like swallowing a horse tranquillizer. To her, the play is like liquid light, and she chugs it. Sitting there in class, two students over from my desk, she is a presence.

I unlock my office door and let myself in. "What's up?" I say, dropping my books on the desk.

"I just wanted to tell you I may have to miss class." She leans against the door frame and tells me what I was afraid of. It's the husband. He's hanging around. She's fears he is going to take her kids. She's afraid.

"It shouldn't be a problem," I say, "if you have to miss." I tell her I can work with her.

"It's just that I'm enjoying this so much."

I tell her we're glad to have her in class. "That Paster Manders," she says, referring to the Ibsen. "When he tells Mrs. Alving: "'We're not put on this earth to be happy.' How can he say that to her?" She shakes her head. "Those people are so miserable."

"Just wait," I say.

She laughs. "I saw 'Ghosts' on the syllabus, you know what I thought of?"

It's my turn to laugh. "Patrick Swayze?"

"In school, like in ninth grade, we did this thing called levitation." She gives me an embarrassed look. "Did you ever levitate?"

Did I ever.

My first time was tenth grade. I was at Sandra Bremer's house. I guess it was a party, boys and girls together on a Saturday night, not couples, just six or seven unattached kids together, and someone said we should play "Let's pick him up."

"You lie on the floor," Sandra said, "and everyone gathers around the person. You say these words together, and then, using just your fingertips, you can pick the person up."

We moved furniture out of the way. Someone shut off the lights. Then we took turns volunteering to lie on the floor, pretending we were dead, while the others gathered around, looking down at the dark form on the floor. It was a very solemn ceremony.

The first person said, He is dead. One after another, going around the circle, we took turns repeating that line and those that followed.

> Gone from the earth.
>
> Stiff as a board.
>
> Light as a feather.

At this point we bent down and slipped two fingers of each hand under the person's body.

The leader said, Let's pick him up.

And we did.

It worked every time. The dead person, no matter how big, would practically fly up to the ceiling, where we held him for a split second, before lowering him back down to the floor. We would gasp and scream for a minute or two, terrified and amazed by this mystery in the dark, then ask for another volunteer. No one tried to understand what was happening. We didn't want to understand it. It pure joy. It was like direct contact with the supernatural.

When there were no more volunteers, we switched the lights back on, put the furniture back in place, and turned on Cat Stevens. If there was a scary movie on TV, we'd watch that.

There's a reference to levitation as a party trick in The Magician's Own Book, or the Whole Art of Conjuring by Arnold George & Frank Cahill, published in 1862. The authors describe it as "one of the most remarkable and inexplicable experiments relative to the strength of the human frame." In their description, they emphasize that it is a "heavy man" who is lifted when his lungs and the lungs of those lifting are fully inflated with air. The authors trace this magic back to an American Navy captain doing a demonstration in Venice. The critical detail, according to George and Cahill, is the breathing: "On several occasions [we] have observed that when one of the bearers performs his part ill, by making the inhalation out of time, the part of the body which he tries to raise is left, as it were, behind."

Two centuries earlier, Samuel Pepys refers to levitation in his diary entry on July 31, 1665. He provides an account of leaving London to attend a wedding, noting in that week alone, some 1700 or 1800 people had died of plague (one tenth of the London population died that year). Pepys and his party arrive too late for the ceremony, but in time for dinner, cards, talk, and prayers. After helping put the newlyweds to bed ("I kissed the bride in bed, and so the curtaines drawne with the greatest gravity that could be, and so good night..."), he goes to a bed which, consistent with customs of the time, he shares with another guest.

Before sleep, the two men have a chat. "We did here all get good beds, and I lay in the same I did before with Mr. Brisband, who is a good scholler and sober man; and we lay in bed, getting him to give me an account of home, which is the most delightfull talke a man can have of any traveller." In the course of their conversation, Mr. Brisband speaks of "enchantments and spells" he has recently witnessed in Bourdeaux, France: "He saw four little girles," Pepys writes, "very young ones, all kneeling, each of them, upon one knee; and one begun the first line, whispering in the eare of the next, and the second to the third, and the third to the fourth, and she to the first." They whisper these words:

Voyci un Corps mort (Behold, a dead body)

Roy comme un Baston (Still as a stone)

Froid comme Marbre (Cold as marble)

Leger comme un esprit (Light as a spirit)

> Levons te au nom de Jesus Christ (We lift you in the name of Jesus Christ).

With one finger each, they raise the boy as high as they can reach. Brisband is "afeard to see it," and disbelieving, calls for the cook to come, "a very lusty fellow," meaning large, and, in like manner, they lift him as well.

For a while, every time that group of friends got together, at Sandra Bremer's or wherever, we shut off the lights and played dead, picking each other up. We reveled in the mystery of levitation. Like those little French girls, what we were enjoying was essentially child's play, like telling ghost stories, though, in our case, we didn't have bubonic plague adding spice to the experience. Looking back now, I marvel at the fact that we never dropped anyone. What were the chances? But no one banged his head on an end table. No one fell and broke an arm. I'm pretty sure my preferred role in the game was the dead guy. Lying on the floor, eyes closed, listening to the chant, then feeling myself lifted into the air was a rush, not so much out of body as an in-the-body experience. Some nights, along with levitation, there was talk of séances and hypnosis. I remember seeing kids bent over a Ouija board. Wouldn't it be freaky, someone said, to see into the future?

Sure, but what if you had to see all of it?

If there's any wisdom in becoming an adult, it's knowing that you don't want to know. We grow up. We marry and have children. We divorce and find ourselves alone again. In search of ourselves we fly off to faraway places and then come back home, still searching. Our parents, spouses, and friends, sometimes even our children, sicken and die. Between these events, there are the levitations, moments of genuine sweetness and mystery you share with other people. Lying in bed with Mr. Brisband, Pepys observes, "I have spent the greatest part of my life with abundance of joy, and honour, and pleasant journeys, and brave entertainments," thinking of the wedding, the time with friends, as "greatest glut of content that ever I had; only under some difficulty because of the plague."

Seeing Donna in class, reading and thinking and sharing, was like witnessing a levitation.

A week passed before I heard from her. She called me to apologize for missing class. She was in a shelter. She said she couldn't talk long. She said he didn't know where she was and that her safety, and the safety of her children, depended on keeping her whereabouts a secret. I told her to take care of herself, we were just finishing "Ghosts", she could come back anytime, write the paper, pick up where she left off.

When we hung up, I knew I would never see her again. A week passed, then another. Nothing. That was it.

Stupid by Kat Mueller

We usually ride in silence. Sometimes we listen to talk radio. Or more like he listens to talk radio and I daydream out the window. There's never music, always junk food. When I was a child I'd sleep in the back of the Suburban in dim twilight or dark night, with the smell of wet dog and the flicker of headlights, as he listened to talk radio. The drive is always long. Always. Coming and going in the dark. I have to ask to stop to pee, because he'll drive forever.

This trip is no different. The drive is long. The air silent. But my heart is heavy and he knows it. My gazing out the window is different now than when I was a kid. I have the eyes of a refugee.

We stop in Cheyenne. We stop in Casper. Buffalo. And again in Sheridan—because I had coffee in Buffalo. I ask to stop, so we stop. We eat gummy orange slices and Boston Baked Beans. I hate them. But they're there, stashed in the console like they have been forever. So I eat them. He listens to talk radio as I watch the countryside speed by the window and I feel like

I'm standing still.

It's nearly sunset when we arrive and our legs are stiff. We stretch and unload and he starts a fire. It's not cold, but he starts a fire. He always starts a fire. The country is beautiful and quiet, just as I remember it from the fall. The grass is green now, the crisp wind replaced by a pleasant warm breeze. The tall cottonwoods line the water, pure green against the clear sky that is now taking a hint of pink. Bighorns push up mighty in the far-off southwest. In their shadow a mountain that looks like a Bundt cake. The bugs are noisy. Grasshoppers. Crickets. What-have-you. The red winged black birds are busy complaining about something, as always, racing from tree to tree. I sit in stillness. He joins me after a while. It is perfectly peaceful and it's making me start to feel my skin again. Begin to feel like I live in this body as the sun disappears beyond the Bundt cake.

We rise early the next morning. I pack the food; he rigs the rods. It's always this way. My job is easy, because neither of us eat much when we fish. Cheese. Coffee. Boston Baked Beans. The same ice chest. The same Stanley thermos. The morning is clear and perfectly spring. The bugs and birds are at it again. As I make my way to load the boat, hoppers leap from beneath

my feet. It makes me think of the river and I get a little foreign quiver inside; something that feels like excitement. We fold the cover back on the boat. One fold at a time. Another, and another, the way we've always done it. Fold the cover to the bow. It takes no discussion. The rods are rigged and ready with whatever he has chosen. I slide them into place. Push rain coats up under the bow. Tuck the ice chest.

We drive in wading boots through the grassland. Pheasant make narrow escapes. Wild dogs bark. The boat click-clacks behind us. We let in at the dam. As I hold the boat the power of the water coming out of the dam makes me feel small.

We push off. I take to the front as he rows. He begins, as he does. Just as I expect him to.

"Get your rod."

I do it.

"Cast at ten o'clock."

I do it.

"Mend."

"More."

"Mend again. Just put a bunch of line out there." he says.

I do it.

"Get ready. A fish is going to eat that."

I get ready. It starts to drag so I pick it up.

"Too much line. Take in some. You can't cast all that line."

I do it. I cast. He wants ten. I give him ten.

"You gotta wait on the back cast. Let it straighten out. You're gonna make a mess."

I do it. I wait.

"Wait longer."

I throw some line back on the water. Mend. Mend again. He slows the boat.

The rig is drifting smooth. I hear him telling me in my head, but he doesn't say it. A fish is going to eat. I'm ready. Wait. Wait ... The indicator drops and I lift my rod tip. It's on. The fish takes off to the right. I let him run and begin to assess in horror the quantity of fly line at my feet. I frantically start putting it back on the reel. It's under my left foot. It's wrapped around my forceps. My pack. I'm getting panicky and fumbling with my left hand as I hold tight on my right, hoping my index finger has a better idea of appropriate pressure than my mind does. This requires a level of grace and coordination I don't have. Even as a girl. But I continue to put line on the reel until the fish turns and starts heading straight at the boat. At me. So my left hand goes from the reel back to stripping handfuls of yellow line. The boat is turning a bit, as they do, and I can't get this fish on the reel. My heart is pounding and I'm starting to feel like a circus act, with the line, and the turning, and the fumbling. My father's eyes on my back. His mouth silent. But I do. I get the fish on the reel. Finally. And I fight him like a girl. Fight him to the right side of the boat as my dad prepares the net. The fish resists, as fish do, and I'm afraid to push him. Don't rush him... I can hear my dad saying in my head, so I let him run again. I bring him back to the left of the boat, this time,now turned almost horizontal to the river. The fish gives. He comes in, with my arm burning and my heart racing, right to the net that my father has outstretched. A beautiful fat Montana rainbow.

"Good," he says, and I smile.

We continue downstream and I cast at ten o'clock to the boat. Sometimes nine. Sometimes eleven, but I pick up and put it back out at ten. The rod is heavy and big for me, so I struggle a little until I find my groove. He watches me from behind and I wonder how ugly my cast is. How nauseated he is to witness it. Farther downstream we take to shore on an island. We always stop here. It's a good spot. He instructs me again.

"Head 20 yards up. The fish are three feet out. Don't walk into them. They're shallow. Get a long drift. Let it tail out."

I do it. I've taken many fish out of this hole on my own, but I do it. I do what he says. Because he knows. And it's how we do it. I head up—guessing at what 20 yards might look like—find my spot, and cast. I get a fish on immediately.

He calls up from below. "What you got goin' on there?"

I smile.

I bring the fish right up in the shallows of the bank as my father has taught me to do with no net. It's slimy and flopping around. I set him free after a moment and he rushes away. It feels good. I get my line out again and get another fish. Just like that. My father is below me still, fiddling with something. He's standing in his stance. The way he always stands. His silhouette only that of my father.

He calls to me again without looking up, "Don't show off now."

I laugh.

The fishing we experience is what we've come to call "stupid fishing". And when you say it, you have to smile. It's part of the effect. I fish all the way down the run as my father fishes the back side of the island and up to the top. I catch as many fish as I miss. It seems like a lot. I fight a seriously pissed and seriously strong fish for quite a while, with my heart racing and my hands fumbling, until the delicate balance of too much pressure and not enough screws me. I lose him in heavy water. I break off to the split-shot and tie all the shit back on. Tippet, fly, tippet, fly. I stab my finger. My tongue. My finger again. Who hooks their tongue? I think. I can hear the sound of a thrashing fish from where my father exists somewhere beyond the bushes. I think about the fish I lost. My flies in its mouth. My inner soundtrack plays circus music in my head. My father comes around the bend smiling.

"Stupid," he says.

We make our way down the river as the sun moves across the sky. From island to bank to wherever. He drops the anchor. I pull us to shore. In silence, for the most part, we do this. My father watches me fish. Directs me. Then he goes above or below and absolutely murders it.

"Keep your rod up. Keep him out of that heavy water!" he yells to me.

"Keep your rod up!"

I do it. I don't respond.

He comes down to me from time to time to net a fish when the shore is too far. A big Brown breaks off at the net during a fumble.

"Don't ever let anyone net your fish." he tells me.

He always tells me this when he breaks off my fish. I put the rod down for a while and pick up feathers that blow across the shore. As a girl it was rocks.

Now it's feathers. I sit in the shadow of old cottonwoods on a log chomped by a beaver. I watch my father fish. We listen to the sounds of the river. Wave at passing anglers. In silence for the most part.

"We're going to get a hatch at sunset," he says, as we travel to the next spot.

I nod, mouth full of Boston Baked Beans.

I remember as a teenage girl wondering what he was thinking in this silence. If he was thinking I was doing drugs. If he was thinking I was having sex. If he was waiting for the right time to ask. And I wanted him to ask me, because I wanted to tell him that no, I wasn't. That I was good. That he could be proud of me. But he never asked. Now, as an adult, I know why he never asked. Why we never spoke of such things. It's because it's not what he was thinking in those times of silence. He's not sizing me up, nor waiting for an optimal time to drop an atom bomb of a question. He's thinking about fish. Only fish. And I know this now, because it's what I'm thinking. The only thing I'm thinking. Occasionally my mind drifts to home. To my shambles of a marriage that waits for me there. What the family I have made are doing right now in my abrupt absence, but a rising fish is enough to snap the thought away. And we both hear the sip and watch it. And we're both wondering what the bugs are doing.

Yesterday, not even 24 hours ago, my father and I sat across from each other at Chuck E. Cheese. I wore my smile, as I always do, but my eyes couldn't hold it up. I'm weary and my age is showing in my face from stress and crying. This stress. Birthday cakes, in-laws and friends, presents and noise. My precious child who has no idea what is about to happen to his life.

Everyone looking at me. And my father's heart that's aching for this boy who has become the apple of his crystal blue eye. His heart aching for the boy and for me: his baby girl.

"You wanna go fishing?" He asks me.

"Yeah," I reply, "I'd like to go fishing. I'd love to go fishing. But I can't. Not now."

I dole out coins from a plastic cup to my excited birthday boy. He squeals something about guns and runs back into the madness. I smile again at my dad. But I want to cry, deeply ashamed that I can't seem to hold it together for these people. These lovely people whom I adore.

"Let's just go," he says. "Now. After this. Just go grab your gear and we'll leave. Be there by sunset."

I shake my head. No, I can't.

I turn and watch the two grandmas talking. Being cordial. My mother graceful and kind, as always. And I have to get the hell out of here.

"Okay," I say, "let's go."

And we are here now on this river that seems like a million miles away from the ringing games, screaming children, and five-hundred-pound stone on my chest. My family, my child, my husband: watching me lace up running shoes. All of them wondering if I have the guts to go. All of them with an opinion why I shouldn't. And the judgment is suffocating. I need this day. On this river. I need to breathe. And my father is handing it to me like a life raft.

As dusk comes, we approach the hole we've been planning for. Anticipating the sunset hatch. We set anchor below a butte in a turn of the river that runs slow and deep. We watch. The water is just about black now in the shadow of the butte and the temperature is dropping. I put on my jacket. Warm up my coffee as my father is tying on something. Biting line in his teeth. Flipping through boxes. Tying knots with his eyes on the water. I wait, getting a chill. A little mouth breaks the surface. Then another a few feet away. And another. We say nothing. Bugs are landing across the dark water. Floating like little mini sailboats on the sea. He hands me the rod.

"Okay. Get it out there."

I do it.

I pick the line up and shoot for a fish that's rising up above the boat. I miss.

By a long shot. I attempt again.

"To the left. Out more. Do you see that? Do you see that fish?" he says.

I see a black mouth on black water. It's popping up intermittently. I don't see this fish that my father speaks of. I don't possess, among other

attributes such as grace and coordination, my father's X-ray fish vision. What I see could be one fish, could be five.

"Yeah. I see it," I lie.

I false cast and try to avoid the Russian Olives that tangle themselves up the butte behind me. I try to count in my head how many times he unhooked me from the bushes today. How many flies he tied back on. My thoughts come back to focus on my cast. I search deep for rhythm. Timing. Grace. I wonder what I look like to him. To anyone. My one girl circus. I cast out over the location of this feeding fish. I cast several times until I nail my distance.

I set it softly on the water. It drifts with the rest of the sailboats. I can't even tell the difference. A nose rises and sips it in. I lift my rod. The line goes tight. The air is quiet and cool. I let the fish tire out and then bring him quietly to the boat. Touch him. Release him.

"Your cast is excellent," my father tells me.

My heart swells. A midge lands on my face.

The rises are getting more frequent and the bugs thick. We exit the boat quietly and wade waist deep into them. I hold onto my father's shoulder. The fish are rising now in such numbers it's creating an effect that makes me think of a hot tub. I have never seen anything like it. I cast to them as my dad stands at my side. I set the fly on the water. Soft drift. Quiet take. And then the fish goes bonkers. Jumps. Runs. Runs some more the other way until I bring him in. My dad nets my fish. We smile at each other in this silence. My dad heads off to fish below just as I hook another fish. He returns again, sighing with a smile. As I fight the fish, my dad hooks his net to my back.

"Here. Just take it," he says, and he heads down to partake in this bubbling madness of noses.

The light is almost gone and the water to my waist is cold. I'm starting to shiver. If we had people waiting at the takeout for us, we'd be in big trouble tonight. But it's just me and my dad and this ridiculous wet dream of a midge hatch. We've got nowhere else to be. I wade slowly back to the boat with my arm burning a burn I'd never complain about. I get back in the boat and bundle up to my neck for warmth. I watch my father in his stance, his black silhouette against the water, fishing with precision and grace. I think

about him at my age. In my situation. If he was as confused and ashamed as I. If he still is. If any of this ever goes away. And a fish rises to his fly. His line goes tight. I smile and think ... *stupid*. And for the first time in my entire life I realize: I am him. I am my father's daughter. Through and through.

Contributors

Rick Bailey's essays have appeared in *The Writer's Workshop Review, Drunk Monkeys, Ragazine.cc*, and *Defenestration*. He lives in Detroit and teaches writing at a local community college.

Richard Ballon's work has been performed in New York City at Manhattan Theater Source's Sola Voces/Estrogenius Festival, Stage Left's Women at Work, MamaDrama and Left Out Festivals, Emerging Artist Theater's One Man Talking and One Woman Standing, and NativeAlien's Short Stories 5. Other work has been performed at The Shea Theater, Turners Falls; Universal Theater, Provincetown; UMass, Amherst; Out of the Blue Gallery, Cambridge; Devanaughan Theater, Boston; Last Frontier Theater Conference, Valdez; Dylan Thomas Festival, Chicago; Walking the Wire Festival; Iowa City, Fells Point Corner Theater; Baltimore, and ArtHotel, Montreal. Richard is a member of the Dramatist's Guild.

Ryan Bradley graduated from the University of Hartford with a B.A. in English with an emphasis on creative writing in May 2012. He has published work in the *Missouri Review, Sundog Lit Blog*, and at winningwriters.com. He will start work toward an MFA in Fiction at Emerson College in the fall.

Kevin Bray is a writer and teacher in Toronto, Canada. His essays frequently appear in the *Globe and Mail* (Canada's "national" newspaper) and can be found in *The Healing Muse, Airplane Reading*, and *The Barnstormer.* His essay about fatherhood is contained in the anthology *How to Expect What You're Not Expecting* (Touchwood Editions, Fall 2013).

Kristi DiLallo is an undergraduate Creative Writing major at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida. She works as a Mentor Writing Consultant at the UCF Writing Center. After completing her BA in English, she plans to pursue a Creative Writing MFA. Her writing life is a tribute to her grandmother, who introduced her to the world of literature and encouraged her to find meaning in everything she reads and writes.

Mike Ekunno comes from a background in real estate where he consulted before switching to writing, his first love. He now works in film classification after working as senior speechwriter to Nigeria's last Information and Communications Minister. He freelances as copy editor and proof-reader and likes reading Old Testament stories in his spare time. His short fiction,

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Debra Fox's poems have been accepted for publication in various haiku journals. In addition, her short stories and essays have been accepted for publication in *Hyperlexia Journal, Blue Lyra Review, Squalorly, Embodied Effigies, Chamber 4 Literary Magazine, Burrows Press*, and *The Meadow*. She is a lawyer and the director of an adoption agency. In her spare time she loves to dance. She lives just outside Philadelphia with her family.

Lori Lamothe has published poems, reviews, interviews and stories in various magazines, including *42opus, Blackbird, The Nervous Breakdown, Notre Dame Review, Seattle Review* and others. She has poems forthcoming in *Brevity, 5 Quarterly* and *Joy, Interrupted: An Anthology on Motherhood and Loss*.

Lisa Lebduska teaches writing and directs the college writing program at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, where her students bring lives to words. She has published work in such journals as *Narrative, 4'33"* and *Writing on the Edge*. With her husband, she grows prodigious imaginary vegetables for neighborhood chipmunks and deer, with the hope that one day they will stop settling for real-life seedlings and sprouts and she will be able to enjoy the first true tomato of her adult life.

Tom Darin Liskey lives in Texas but spent nearly a decade in Latin America.

Jesse Millner's poems and prose have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Florida Review, upstreet, Conte, River Styx, Pearl, The Prose Poem Project, Tinge, The New Poet, Cider Press Review, Real South, The Best American Poetry 2013* and numerous other literary magazines. He has published six poetry chapbooks and two full-length collections, most recently *Dispatches from the Department of Supernatural Explanation* (Kitsune Books, 2012). Jesse teaches writing courses at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers.

Kat Mueller is a photographer, writer, and third-generation flyfisher. As a little girl, she dove into the wrong race and beat a pool of boys at 25 yard freestyle. She never lost her love for the water. She lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, with her son Sam, husband Geoff, and wild dingo Mike.

Russell Reece has had stories and essays published in *Memoir(and), Crimespree Magazine, Delaware Beach Life, Sliver of Stone, The Fox Chase Review* and other print and on-line journals. His work has also appeared in anthologies including *Remembrances of Wars Past: A War Veterans Anthology*. Russ is a University of Delaware alumnus. He lives in Bethel, Delaware in rural Sussex County along the beautiful Broad Creek.

Lisa Romeo teaches in the Rutgers University Writing Program and at The Writers Circle. Her nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Times* and *O-The Oprah Magazine*; in literary journals, including *Sweet, Quay, Barnstorm*, *Sport Literate*, and *Lunch Ticket*; and in essay collections and anthologies. She has work forthcoming in *Under the Sun* and *Pithead Chapel*. Lisa holds an MFA from Stonecoast and is working on a memoir of linked narrative lyric essays about grief and midlife. She lives in northern New Jersey with her husband and sons.

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Bill Vernon served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, and then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. Five Star Mysteries published his novel *Old Town* in 2005, and his poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies. Recent publications include two other Gentleman Farmer stories at *The Circle Review* and *Quarterlife Quarterly*.

Shirley Russak Wachtel is a college English professor living in New Jersey. She holds a Doctor of Letters Degree from Drew University. She is the author of a book of poetry, *In the Mellow Light*, several books for children, and a series, *Spotlight on Reading*, a college-level text. Her personal essays have been published in *The New York Times* OpEd section. Her short stories and poems have appeared in *Middlesex, Haiku Journal, emerge, Leaves of Ink, Whisper*, and other literary journals. Her memoir, *My Mother's Shoes*, follows her mother's journey during the Holocaust and as a new citizen in America. "When She Sleeps" is the introduction to *My Mother's Shoes*.

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