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word~river literary review (2010)


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Editor's Note

Our first issue of *worddriver* was a success thanks to all those who worked so hard on the production side and all those who submitted work and became our first contributors. As the Managing Editor, I had hoped that our first effort would make an impact and I am happy to report that it has. This river of words the staff and I envisioned has now flowed further than the United States with this year's submissions coming from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates.

As this is our second issue, some thanks are again in order. First, and foremost, the staff and I, and by extension the contributors, would like to thank Dr. Chris Hudgins, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Dr. Richard Harp, Chair of UNLV's Department of English, for their continued support of the journal. Several others deserve our gratitude, also. Susan Summers has served as Contributing Editor since the beginning of this endeavor and, in addition, has lent her expertise as Budget Technician for our English department to the success of the journal. Olivia Montgomery has continued to act as our graduate assistant assigned to input the data and, once again, she has done an exemplary job for which we are very grateful. Lastly, we want to thank Megan McDonald, who has volunteered for us, creating the cover design for our first two issues and the website for the journal.

Once more, I would like to thank the readers, the staff, and the contributors. Our initial vision became a reality and we now have a second issue in print and a third issue in the planning stages. We have all worked together to create a unique journal and we look forward to many more years of publication.

Managing Editor, Beth E. McDonald
Spring 2010

Bruce Wyse

Mission Statement

we get it
we're good to go

we get going, mad, tough, ready, ahead
we know the news
we count on it

for us, "it" is a noun
and bought implies can
it is because of us

we take charge
we take credit
we take taxis
we spare no expense, feelings, change

we are relativists, absolutely

we are in demand, in short supply,
in fine form and invulnerable,
indecently in the know

we like it big
we make it big
we make it happen – make no mistake about it

we spot crazes
we run like crazy and are driven there
we career
we are occupational hazards
we take risks
to the next level

we work our magic, have our way
check in, cash out

we take stock, not prisoners
we don't ask questions unless we feel like it
we burn bridges, then we burn rivers
we never let well enough alone

we value your business
we welcome your comments
we know who you are if we need to
we take Visa

we like things
we like things to work out
we like things that way

we agree among ourselves
we tend to blur distinctions
our devotion to eros is insincere
we have people who do that
we have epiphanies on phones
we have a number where we can reach ourselves

you pay for our mistakes
if you have enough
but enough is not enough

Do You Think?

At the last minute discretionary funding came through that I could use any way I wanted, three positions. Well, we needed somebody in Early Modern, so that was Harris. And it was Mary's turn for help in Backgrounds, as she'd been reminding us ever since we out-voted her candidate to get that guy from Princeton. When he quit, we lost that whole line, of course, but that didn't alter Mary's calculations any. So I got her Samantha Rollins, who came highly recommended from St. Alban's, which had just combined two whole departments, languages and literatures. I don't know if you heard that Samantha was out over there, but Mary had known her since they were girls in the convent. I didn't know that about Mary, by the way, did you? That she'd gone to a convent? When she mentioned it I said, "No. *You?*" Well, we had a good laugh, because "Yes, yes, I can see it" wouldn't have been so flattering, either. Talk about damned either way.

Anyway, so I had this other position left over. Well, Fred had just the guy. One of the first things you learn as chair is that once you let Fred into your office, he won't leave until you give him what he wants. This guy he suggested had been doing comp for us for years, but Fred said he'd written a book of poems that had made runner-up in one competition and honorable mention in another. Good contests, too, with prize names I recognized myself, and Fred pointed out that if we got him on a one-year, then the next time he won, we'd already have that feather in our cap. So I said OK. He could teach the multi-genre intro course and a workshop, and we'd give him a couple of gen-ed lits, maybe a Lit Methods during Spring.

So on Bastille Day, which of course Suzanne never lets go unobserved around our house, I called these three people up while she was making preparations for our picnic. Never in my life had I heard anybody so glad to answer the phone. It's not every job that gives you an opportunity to feel like you're changing somebody's life -- *saving* it, Samantha Rollins said -- and after about the third week of the semester not even this one does, so I felt better than I had since being pressed into service, as it were, pending our outside search. No, no, I'm glad to do it, of course.

But the good feeling didn't last long. You try, you try not to be an alarmist. You try not to focus on the trouble spots or make mountains out of molehills. But if there's one thing

this whole episode has taught me, it's that nine times out of ten, to overlook a pimple in September is to have to deal with a boil by June. To wit, this guy that Fred thought was going to be such a bargain.

His name was Rippert, Robert Rippert. I must have passed him in the halls many times before, and Fred had described him to me, too, though just by vital stats -- Caucasian, he'd quipped, deadpan; you know Fred -- and I didn't know which one he was until the first day of classes, when everybody was running around trying to change their room assignments and copy their syllabi. And here's this huge guy in the middle of the office in a pair of workman's pants with suspenders and a beard down to his navel, blinking around and chewing what I thought was gum. I mean, I thought he was there to fix the copier!

"Is it down again?" I asked him. "It's right there."

His hand came out so fast I thought he had something sharp in it.

"I'm Robert Rippert."

No expression in his voice or smile on his face that I could tell, just a slow, pale blink behind glasses with outsize red plastic frames. On the phone he'd sounded perfectly normal. His shirt had a picture of a whale on it, as far as I could tell behind his beard, but when he put his hand back in his pocket I saw *two* whales, mating. And this was the first day of the semester!

"You must have a Tuesday-Thursday schedule," I said, but he shook his head. Now he did smile, or rather, his eyes crinkled and a hole appeared in the upper portion of his beard. I smelled tobacco. Not smoke but juice! I was so alarmed I got dizzy, and I went into my office and closed the door. Through the glass I saw him say something to the student help, Nell, an attractive young woman who might have done better in my Joyce and Joyceans had she not incurred some sort of unfortunate family tragedy that semester. Rippert leaned over her in such a way that I made a note to ask Karen to have a talk with her staff about what's appropriate to wear at the front desk and what is not. I mean his eyes were indistinguishable from his huge lenses. "Good luck, fella," I thought, but when he stood back, Nell was laughing, not at him but *with* him. Well, if the man had some sort of

redeeming wit, so much the better. I was still grasping at straws, you see.

The complaints started after mid-term, as I've come to learn they usually do. Rippert's were the first I got.

"He's rude," said the girl, because the first one was a girl. "He called me sloppy. Me!"

She extended her arms. She was not one of these feral kids of the Nez Percé but a nice, clean girl in knee socks, an alpaca sweater, and braces on her teeth. She turned a notebook around so I could see her handwriting and his.

"Which one's better?" she asked, and even before I took the notebook from her we shared a smile, because the whole page was filled with her regular, smooth script, a little on the round side but more than legible -- the penmanship of someone who takes pride in her work and even joy in the swirls and switchbacks of the capital G. Then at an angle in the left-hand margin, leaking into her beautiful script in trembling capital letters like twigs, was the word SLOPPY and, at another angle below that and in purple, since apparently on the first 'P' the red had begun to run out, THINKING.

She could tell she'd scored a point -- I could see that in her eyes. She'd clipped her hair back tight but had left little corkscrews at her temples. I smelled something -- jasmine, maybe -- very pleasant. I pushed the notebook back and promised her I'd speak with Mr. Rippert.

"Oh? So he's *not* a doctor?"

From her inflection I deduced he'd told them that he was, and I made a mental note to ask him about that, too. I told Miss Banks -- she was the daughter of Jennifer Banks over in Records, as I was to learn when I ran into Jennifer that very weekend in Eagan's, in produce -- about the funding limitations under which we of necessity must operate, and I told her, choosing my words carefully, that Mr. Rippert had been with us for a good long time in a lesser capacity, and so I appreciated this feedback on how he was faring at his new post. Well, excessive honesty has always been my problem, but we exchanged another look. Jennifer's daughter left -- on those unfortunate huge shoes, a concession to the fashion of her peers that I hadn't noticed before, hidden as they'd been under my desk -- and I wrote up my notes and buzzed Karen to call Rippert in. It was a Thursday.

“Well, first thing in the morning, then,” I said.

His shirt had the name of a bar on it this time, Pookie’s, and a martini glass tilting in the vicinity of his sternum -- which I could see because he’d *braided* his beard, not once but in two pigtails that he fiddled with as he sat where Jennifer’s daughter had, ankle on knee. I think there’s something in the handbook about collars that I might have been able to point out to him, but it seemed rather pointless in the context of a braided beard. He chewed his nails, I saw, some so deeply that dried blood had caked around his cuticles. I looked away as I summarized the salient points of Jennifer’s daughter’s accusations.

“Margo Banks?” he said, laughing. “Margo came in?”

I failed to understand his reaction, though I honestly did try.

“She’s one of my favorite students!” he said.

“The feeling’s not mutual, apparently.”

“Oh, but it is! Don’t you think?”

The hole in his beard appeared, and I gathered from the squinty look of the milky eyes behind the red frames that he was inviting me to join in some irony he felt -- at a vision of her complaining even more vehemently to her other professors’ chairs, perhaps? I felt that I should remind him of the gravity of even one complaint.

“Grave?” he said, looking around the office as if I’d apologized for how messy it was when it wasn’t (though it was, but I hadn’t). “Look. Margo’s smart, but she’s lazy. You’ve got to jolt her a little. [I had led with his ‘sloppy thinking’ crack.] Actually, coming in here shows how smart she is. She wants to believe what I say, but she’s not going to without checking me out.”

That reminded me of my second point, which did give him pause, if only for a second.

“I never mentioned my degree. I told them to call me Bob, if they want. Sets a friendlier tone. Do you think?”

Bob! *I* didn’t want to call him Bob! In the long term, I didn’t know *what* I was going to do about him, but at that point I knew I didn’t want to see him in my office any longer. Luckily Karen saw me through the glass and buzzed me, in accordance with a system we’d worked out.

“Listen,” I said wearily, my hand over the mouthpiece. “I have to take this call. But I’m glad we’ve had

the opportunity to have this little chat. I think it's been valuable."

You DO? he said with his face as he got up, the insubordinate cur.

And watch your damn handwriting! I said with mine.

By Thanksgiving I had a litany, everything from half a dozen more student complaints to bellowing in the hallways and graham-cracker crumbs on the sofa in the lounge. He and Nell had become fast friends -- I couldn't believe it had gone any further than that -- and he'd stand right there between her desk and the mailboxes and swap stories about other faculty, even as they came in to get their mail.

"Oh, Harding's a pussycat," I heard him say once when I opened my door, which, more and more often as the semester heated up, I was keeping shut. "Aren't you, Harding?"

Caldwell Harding, who did this job for twenty-five years, turned around by degrees, grasping a large mailing envelope that contained the new *Norton Anthology of English Poetry* (which I happened to know because I'd just opened mine). The man looks less feline than any human being I've ever met. His hair is almost gone now, and since the stroke the whole left side of his face has dropped, so the right side of his upper lip seems raised in a perpetual sneer. As Emeritus he comes in only just in time to check his mail on Wednesday evenings before his seminar, during which for the entire three hours he reads aloud. (According to a student evaluation; another chair perk is knowing what everybody does in class.) He turned toward my office with a move like a stumble, that face asking, *And who the hell is this guy?*

But what came out of his mouth was, "Meow."

Hugely, Nell and Rippert both laughed.

"He's so amazing!" she told Rippert as if he'd just sawed a lady in half. "He can still be so funny!" Rippert beamed back at her as if he'd accomplished something himself, rocking up on his toes. Since the first snowfall he'd show up in what Karen told me were logger's boots, then change into what he had on then, red knit booties with plastic soles and a snowflake design on the tips.

With fingers like claws Harding reached out for a girl who was trying to sneak through to the seminar room, her

books clutched to her stomach as if she were smuggling them in. "Class is cancelled," he snapped. "I'm sick."

"Oh!" she said, fairly trembling with awe and concern. She was a skinny and traumatized-looking thing anyway, with pale skin and lifeless hair and a skirt like a slip. "Oh, I'm sorry, Professor!"

"It's not *your* fault," he brayed. "But by next week, I might very well be dead."

I mean, Rippert is just not cut from the same cloth, and what I'd do for more of that old calico. They just don't make them like Harding anymore.

From the litany:

"He smells," said a freckled Delta Sig in a baby-blue sweatshirt she wore with the hood up.

"It's this spoiled vegetably smell," said a friend who'd come in with her, whose add-a-bead necklace was completely full. "Or you go in for your conference and he's farted."

I looked up from my notepad. *Passed gas*, I wrote once they'd left.

"He gave me a C on my screenplay, and it's the best thing I ever wrote."

"It is," guaranteed the friend in the hood. "And I got a C on my poem, which was the best thing I ever wrote."

Forgetting me, they smiled at each other and began mimicking him:

"Do you think?"

"Do you think?"

The conference ended in giggles -- theirs, while I finished my notes, though I recognized his line, all right. *Browbeating*, I added on my own.

From the litany:

"He got up on the desk and barked like a dog," said the darkest complected of three guys in identical buzz haircuts and huge shirts and pants.

"It was actually kind of funny, the first time," said the shortest one, grinning until a look from his buddies silenced him.

"The first time?" I said.

"It's become sort of the theme of the class," said the dark one, apparently the leader. "Somebody'd meant to write

‘higher power,’ but on the worksheet it came out as ‘higher bowwow.’ They’d used Spell-Check.”

“Which can’t tell the difference,” explained the short kid, to the ill-concealed disgust of his friends. “If it’s a legitimate word, I mean, in any context.”

“He’s always telling us to use our brains,” complained the kid who hadn’t said anything yet. He arranged his fingers over his mouth in a fair approximation of Rippert’s jutting beard, speaking through the arch his index fingers formed. “Use your brains, not electronics. What if the power goes out?”

“Or, ‘what if the bow wow goes out,’” the dark kid wrapped up, “and he’s up on the desk again, wagging his arm behind him like a tail.”

From the litany:

“He’ll slap the board with a yardstick? One time I was taking a nap? And I dreamed I was facing a firing squad? And then I woke up and he was making these sounds on the blackboard? And everyone was looking at me?”

“He climbs up on the desk.”

“He thinks he’s a dog.”

“Do you think? ‘Do you think?’”

“You can’t get above a C from him.”

“He won’t give above a C. This from a guy who gets up on all fours on his desk and barks.”

From the litany:

“He calls us ‘Podner,’” said a boy who came in with his mother, a thickset woman in no mood for jokes. “I’m not his *podner*. I’m a poet.”

“Eddie’s going to be the next Phil Donahue,” said his mother with grim admiration. “And I never heard of this Rippert guy.”

“Phil Donahue, the talk-show host?” I said, without thinking. Suzanne used to watch him.

“The poet.” She flashed defensive, then turned grimly admiring again. “The man’s a wizard!”

“Not Donahue, Ma. Donne. And it’s John, not Phil. But you’re right, he’s a wizard. If a little . . .” Eddie winced at the ceiling . . . “old-fashioned, I guess would be the literary term. But he’s only my first influence.”

For the first time, I felt something almost like sympathy for our man with the red slipper socks.

“And what exactly is the nature of your complaint against Mr. Rippert?”

The mother glanced over her shoulder at a stack of *College English* journals dating back to the mid-Fifties as if to see who might be lurking behind it, though I’d closed the door when she’d led her son in.

“Well. . .” Gone was her grimness: she was wide-eyed and confidential, suddenly. “Eddie just doesn’t think the guy’s very *good*.”

Eddie was squinting at the window with a mild smile, as if something puzzling but strangely beautiful had just appeared there. Through my plate glass I saw Karen with her finger poised over her buzzer, waiting for our sign.

I gave it, but it was Mr. Rippert’s final straw.

The handbook stipulates that in order to take action against a faculty member on the grounds of incompetence you have to provide ample warning and opportunity to respond. I had no action in mind beyond nonrenewal, but these are litigious times, as the bailiff said when the judge sat down, and I wanted to do everything correctly. The Eddie Putz episode, as I came to think of it, was no real help, and the odors were hard to substantiate. And Margo Banks had quit school to join a convent, her mother told me during the holidays when I ran into her at Eagan’s, over by cleaning supplies -- she was so embarrassed she could barely look up from the label of a toilet-bowl cleaner she grabbed when I turned down the aisle, but I gave her Mary’s number, and later Mary told me that she, Jennifer, had found it a relief to talk. Anyway. The Harding thing too would have been hard to make a case about, but by March I had more than enough new complaints to choose from, including one so solid that, in conjunction with the barking behavior, I decided to use it.

First, though, I laid my groundwork. Two weeks after mid-term, I had Karen call Rippert in. Nell had left to study in Holland, somebody said, though rumors had her pregnant. At any rate her replacement, a baseball player on scholarship, wasn’t working out too well. Most of the time he showed up when he was supposed to, but in headphones connected to a portable music panel of some sort that made him miss half our phone calls. Therefore, Karen had to keep her eye on her own

phone lights and her back to my door, and naturally I hadn't let the ballplayer in on my signal, though he would have made a better bouncer than Nell, if worse came to worst.

And don't think I wasn't thinking it might, given Rippert's increasingly aberrant behavior. At the first breath of warm weather he'd shaved his head, as many people do nowadays, but his skull seemed exceptionally lumpy, and he hadn't touched his beard. And he wore Bermuda shorts, though we'd had another snowstorm since the thaw of his haircut, and on the Friday I called him in, we were forecast for another. In fact Karen, who lives all the way out in Gibbons, had asked me if she could leave early, so at three-thirty it was just me, the baseball player, and the be-Bermuda-shortsed Rippert. They looked like corduroy.

"They are. Made 'em myself," he said, as if that were why I'd called him in. He pinched a fold in each thigh as he sat down, the way you'd do a pair of tailored dress slacks, then hoisted an ankle on a knee. He had his logger's boots on; I suppose he was on his way home. But he hadn't brought a briefcase or a bookbag or even a gradebook in with him. He laced his fingers behind his waxy-looking head and asked me what was up. *Up!* I chose my words carefully.

"The sky is up," I said. "Clouds are up, and tree branches are, and right here in this office, the ceiling is up. Also, up you will find a higher power."

I was watching his reactions very carefully, you see. At my first words he looked dismayed, somewhat in the manner of the two boys who'd come in with the buddy who embarrassed him. Then he looked almost angry, then puzzled, but by the time I wound up on *higher power*, he was back to his characteristic infuriating levity.

"Bow wow," he said.

"So you *admit* it?"

Somehow, I was on my feet. For the first time all year I saw the flicker of an appropriate seriousness cross his face.

"Admit what?"

I sat down, deciding to change tactics.

"Dahlia Flowers came in to see me, Mr. Rippert."

He blinked at my formal mode of address. Not that I'd ever called him Bob, but he'd never called me anything but Merle. Only Harding had I ever heard him call by anything other than his first name, hardly a move toward respect.

“I know Dahlia,” he said. “Sure. ‘Student’ is pushing it a bit, though.”

I let this pass, though I made a mental note. Respect for students, too, is mentioned in the handbook.

“Mostly she shares with us pages from her diary. One’s labelled ‘poem,’ another ‘story,’ the next ‘essay.’ They’re all in the first person and about her boyfriend.”

His eyes flicked ceilingward in such a way that an awful possibility struck me.

“Maybe you’d like to get your gradebook, Mr. Rippert?”

He shook his head, then tapped a temple just above the start of his beard. “I don’t use one. It’s all up here. She’s gotten a C on everything except her journal, which she’s going to get a C+ on, because she writes a little more often than the others. About her boyfriend. With missing pages for essays and poems.”

“You don’t use a *gradebook*?”

Rippert looked at me, beginning to understand his position. He waited.

“You don’t keep *records*?”

“I have samples of their work in my office. And I’ve asked them to keep everything in a portfolio. At the end of the semester I’ll read it all one more time.”

I laughed. “Isn’t that a *huge* amount of needless *work* for you?”

That was not exactly what I’d meant to say. He was waiting again, now with an expression of wonderment. I did not want to see any more of his expressions. Outside the plate glass I saw the baseball player’s head bobbing, his sport-shoed feet beside the keyboard. His eyes were closed, his lips moved, and his arms were spread in an unusual position, one curled hand moving as if he were scratching his stomach with a knitting needle, the other arm extended.

“Dahlia Flowers has suggested that you might be relating to her on other than a professional level, Mr. Rippert.”

This was not strictly true, as her actual complaint had so far addressed only the rudeness I was so familiar with from the litany, but the potential was so obvious to me that I was afraid Rippert wouldn’t see it unless I put it directly to him. No matter that the threat was in direct opposition to what I’d just worried about; Rippert was trouble from any perspective. From my pencil drawer I took the paper Dahlia had left with

me -- not the original, which I'd safely filed, but the copy I'd had Karen make for this interview. "What a Miracle I Was," it was entitled.

Rippert glanced at it.

"Yep," he said, apparently meaning some combination of *Yes, I recognize it, that's my student's paper, that's my handwriting* -- which, when I flipped the page over, began "Miracle you were and treat you are, Dahlia." A full wobbly paragraph followed. My fingernail flicked slightly against the paper, I was trembling so -- not from fear, in spite of that gruesome bumpy skull, but from that urgent desire to do this correctly.

"Yep," he said again. "So?"

Now *I* was waiting.

"*Treat you are?*" I finally shouted at him despite myself. In peripheral vision I saw the baseball player's long legs swivel down from the front desk.

"Look. I've been telling her the same thing all semester. Dahlia's not illiterate, but you can't just spill out your life on the page and call it art. Language doesn't work that way. Even if these kids never write another word as long as they live, I want them to leave my class with a little respect for the endeavor."

In truth, with his last word my own respect level went up a little, for the man's vocabulary if not for the man himself.

"But 'treat you are,' Bob? How is that appropriate?"

Somehow my groundwork was having an unexpected effect. For a split second there I'd thought I could reach him, make him see some principle that in one fell swoop would end all the complaints altogether. It was like taking pity on a hopeless student, which hadn't happened to me in a while. Luckily, the feeling didn't last long.

"I was being sarcastic," Rippert said. "Read the rest of the note."

Well, there you go! Sarcasm is a charge itself, not a defense! What an idiot! Dahlia Flowers was no Nell, but she was attractive, one of the first girls I'd seen on campus that spring without hose, and her little turned-up nose with a barely perceptible spray of freckles across it and an ever-present flush to her cheeks were more than enough to predispose any judge or jury to find some merit in any charge she made about a professor's excessive attention. "You're a treat!" Why didn't

he just jot down his phone number below her grade -- which, by the way, was a C, so question asked and answered.

“I’d like your response in writing, Mr. Rippert.”

He blinked. Then the eyes behind the huge lenses crinkled.

“Response to what, exactly?”

I had it all typed up for him.

“Any particular deadline, Merle?”

The eyes crinkled, one actually more than the other: a wink. Excessive chumminess when the rent comes due, the oldest trick in the book. Nine months of personnel management and already I was a pro. Rippert saw his best way out in getting me to understand that *he* understood I was just doing my job.

“The end of the semester,” I said, “will be fine.”

Before then, of course, other things happened. The most calamitous was that our search collapsed. Our first candidate turned us down, our second withdrew before we could make an offer, and our third choice, who was really substandard anyway, jumped out of an airplane with an improperly packed chute the weekend before our second interviews. Meanwhile, Samantha Rollins was slapped by a boy in her Chaucer to Renaissance and quit. Even before, she’d told Mary that in twenty-five years at St. Alban’s she’d never endured such abuse. Mary herself came down with strep, so I had to raise up two adjuncts in a hurry before the whole Backgrounds program went down the tubes. This time I was more careful: I actually went into 203C and *looked* at them before I had Karen draw their contracts up. And when I heard Fred’s voice in the mailroom, I began shutting my door. Rippert’s students still dropped by with fair regularity, and I still listened, but I didn’t hear anything more useful than the “treat” remark.

Still, by finals week he hadn’t turned in the report I’d requested yet. When our paths had crossed, we’d nodded, frosty but polite enough. But I did hear his bellow less, and as the weather got warmer I noticed he’d changed his corduroy Bermudas for some regular Madras and his logging boots for a pair of leather sandals that must have looked respectable only a few years before. And his hair had grown to a point where he looked less like an escaped mental patient than like a spring bud on some bush, still not quite human but healthy, at least.

Finally, on the last day to turn grades in, during the last hour before Karen was to take them over to the registrar, Rippert comes in with his. Usually it's Karen who checks the bubble work -- sometimes the form doesn't fit the printout correctly and it's easy to skip a line -- but I'd asked her to send Rippert in to me when he came in with his sheets. He was wearing a sailor's cap with a downturned brim and several fishing lures stuck in it at what looked to be random spots. A triple hook hung down over one hinge of his red eyeglass frames. But I wanted to make this last move cleanly. For the first time since the visit of Eddie and Mrs. Putz, I felt a little sorry for the guy.

"Going fishing, Robert?"

I held out my hand for his grade sheets, and he passed them over, the triple hook swinging like a lantern in the hold of a ship.

"Me?" he said finally. "Naw."

So much for pity. The regulation against private firearms in public buildings must have been drawn up especially for this moment. His grades were all Cs. Some plusses, some minuses, a few Bs and Ds and one A -- this is out of four sections, mind you. I hadn't been keeping track, but I was sure they were the lowest grades in the department. It had been forty years since I'd given grades so low; I went through the sheets again and spotted two Fs.

"Those two quit coming," he said with his infuriating timing. I flipped the gradesheets into my out basket.

"Where's my report, Rippert?" *Report?* he was going to ask with an innocence that might have done me in, so I added, "The report about Dahlia Flowers."

"Oh, Dahlia."

He *relaxed*. He *grinned*.

"Dahlia Flowers. Miracle. Treat. What you have to say for yourself."

He *sat down*.

"She was four pounds something when she was born," he said. "She fit in the palm of her mother's hand. She wrote down what her mother told her -- the labor pains, the trip to the hospital, the weeks in an incubator -- and turned it in as nonfiction, with a PS about her source. 'Some of the above I didn't learn until I was much older.' She's a sweet kid, and like I told you she's not illiterate, but I'm glad I'll never

have to read about her life again. Her boyfriend's name is Thom."

He spelled it. But I was reminded of our first talk on the matter, which he seemed to have remembered in more detail than I did, and I realized something else. Dahlia hadn't complained again. At first I felt relief, then panic as I thought of the worst: he'd seduced her. He'd bribed her. He'd -- though surely I'd have heard it on local news -- *killed* her. I looked at the sheet for her section. Beside "Flowers, Dahlia," the "C" bubble had been shinily filled in.

Rippert's hand was out. He was on his feet, milky eyes squinting.

"Good bye, Merle. Thanks for the job. What are the chances for next year, do you think?"

Reluctantly, I took the hand. "Very," I said, composing my face in suitable manner, "Very, very slim."

He wouldn't let go, so I walked him to the door like that. When I opened, Karen was standing over the baseball player's shoulder. They'd been laughing, but at the sudden appearance of the two of us holding hands they froze, their mouths open. What I did then made me feel better than I'd felt in months.

"Son," I said as the athlete swung his feet off the front desk. I'd forgotten his name. "Will you please show Mr. Rippert out? Thank you."

And then I went back in my office and closed my door.

The cruelest month is not April but June, I learned as chair, the month of final- grade contention. Every day, whether by phone or post or email or actual visit from student or parents or other relatives, including some cousins with shirts darker than their ties, I learned something else. Samantha Rollins had made as if to slap the boy first. Mary ate those little crackers shaped like goldfish when she taught, and she never offered any around. Several of the adjuncts had simply announced that they weren't getting paid enough to agonize and let their students pick their own grades; the astounding thing was that the resultant curves weren't off by much. Caldwell Harding, whose seminar was scheduled until nine, was usually fast asleep by eight. So-and-so mumbled. So-and-so spit. Assignments weren't fair. Teachers played favorites or wore distracting clothes. One kid's father claimed

his son had failed *The Epic* because of the seams in Mary's nylons. He was a teacher himself, eighth-grade biology, and he'd brought me articles and photocopies of textbooks to inform me of the extent to which thoughts of sex can intrude upon the mind of an eighteen-year-old boy, as if maybe I had somehow skipped that year myself. And June was also the month in which the dean called me in to make his formal request for me to serve another year as interim chair, a not entirely unexpected request. Nor, judging from his face, was my answer, a humble "OK, fine, I'll do it, thank you."

So we were into July before it struck me -- in bed one night, with Suzanne drawing up a guest list for a picnic on Bastille Day -- that in the whole previous month I had not received a single communication, not one complaint, about Robert Rippert, since end of term.

"Isn't that funny?" I said, looking over at Suzy. We were both against the backboard in our tricolor sleeping caps, a heat spell having just broken. I wear mine like a beret, but she pulls hers down over her ears, the way she says the patriots wore theirs. At any rate, she agreed it was funny about Rippert, since she knew him almost as well as I did, from my conversation at the dinner table.

"Maybe they liked him, finally," she suggested after adding another name to her list (the Whalburtons, Edie and Ernie, from History, which got our line when that guy from Princeton quit, but I said OK. Ours is a big yard). "Maybe he taught them something."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, but even I could tell that my voice lacked conviction. And over the next couple of weeks I got, first, a letter from Margo Banks, postmarked from a Carmelite monastery in Los Angeles, asking me to forward to Rippert a sealed envelope in which she said was a request for his recommendation for an application for readmission. Second, an e-mail from one HONKERDONKER84 (né Eddie Putz), another request, this one to me, for information on the best course of study for someone who, like himself, was "enthused about writing but admit I'm not quite ready for greatness yet, as Mr. Robin Ripley finely convinced me of." And, just as I was hanging up the phone from a call with the dean in which he released next year's discretionary funding, Karen appeared with a shoe box she said somebody had left on the doorstep, knocked the knocker, and then vanished. Inside was a small stuffed dog, a terrier of some sort, with a bright

red tongue made of felt. And stuck to its manufacturer's label was a Post-It that read, in even rounder handwriting than Margo Banks's, "Dear Proffesor Ripper. Bow wow. Love, your Delta Sig girls. You'll meet some of our sisters next year."

So on Bastille Day, once again, I made my phone calls while Suzy was tying ribbons around the silverware: red for knives, white for forks, blue for spoons. Harris wasn't home, but I left a message. Samantha Rollins took a good bit of talk, but she agreed to come back. "Robert," I said when he picked up. "What are you doing in the Fall?"

There was a silence, during which I imagined him untangling a fishing lure from electrical wire, perhaps, or adding a twiggy word to a poem he'd been jotting on the back of an envelope. Then I heard the mirth.

"I don't know," he said. "I was just wondering. Working for you, maybe, Merle. Do you think?"

Well, I winced, but I sent him the contract, and he's been one of us ever since.

A Sculpture of Diana

The hunt is over. Do you feel guilty
for your slaughter, the way
you turned him into a stag, then pointed,
your bow unstrung, carrying
the dogs to your prey?

Goddess of childbirth and fertility,
you are only partly beast, hair swept
up in motion, carved in waves
indistinguishable from the dogs' fur

and the grasses your feet barely touch.
Virgin Goddess, your body
gives you away, the divinity
of your skin, your curves unnatural.
Goddess of the moon, Goddess of menses,

Goddess of shedding blood, do not resent us
for sculpting you, shaping and reshaping
until you are balanced and symmetrical,
domesticating your breasts against
our fear of the wilderness.

We only want to hold our
hands above our heads in triumph
as you do, to gaze at the stories
we turn into bronze and words
because they have seen us naked.

The Veiled Goddess

We stood there, my friend Loles and I, shoes in hand, gazing over a sea of red. We must have looked as befuddled as we felt because a gray-haired man in dark slacks and a colorless checkered shirt stepped toward us and, silently, with barely a nod of his head, gestured to a small, raised area, enclosed by a six-foot tall wooden lattice that was open enough to peer through, but, what with its location in the back of the mosque, private and hidden enough not to be noticed. We followed his gesture and, once inside, we felt more like prisoners than women “called” to worship.

We had begun our journey barefoot, at the entry of a mosque in Istanbul, a city, like that of Turkey itself, that bridges the exotic Arab lands of the East with the Western world. We stood, feeling shamed as humiliated captives (I was reminded of Chinese women binding their feet and how that crippled their autonomy and Western images of the “ideal” woman as one who was both “barefoot and pregnant”), while before us, over a hundred men knelt on bright red carpets, their foreheads bent to the floor, facing the *imam*, whose words called out in a surreal cadence, echoing beneath the domed ceiling. Only the two of us represented the “fairer sex.” In Islam, men are called to prayer five times a day, but women don’t have the same duty. In silence we watched, unsettled by our segregation, scarves covering our feminine and “sexually alluring” hair. The lattice interfered with the view, which was no doubt intentional, as if being in a corner behind massive stone pillars hadn’t already made the separation between woman and god quite concrete.

I had made this long journey to the land of the great mother goddess, Kybele, who was later known as Artemis when Anatolia became part of the Hellenistic Empire, because I wanted to touch her, to walk the land she vitalized, to adore her and seek her blessings. I wanted a first-hand experience of the marvel that has drawn pilgrims to this land for millennia. And I wanted to experience the Moslem world, to try to understand how this land whose people once worshiped a Great Mother could now have so completely abandoned her — and all things feminine.

Muted light slanted through long windows behind where we stood. I wanted to cry, but silent screams of outrage held back the tears. In this world where men are everything

and women are something less, the great mother goddess is no longer recognized, which was disturbing, to say the least, with all this divinely inspired beauty surrounding me. Ornate designs in deep browns, oranges, and reds in the patterns so beloved by the Moslem world enlivened the arches and swirled around the windows, adding vibrancy to the whitewashed walls. Suspended from the ceiling a huge chandelier delineated the men's prayer area. Stained glass windows that allowed for only filtered light to ooze through and the high, domed ceiling leant the entire mosque a womb-like feel, not so unlike the great medieval churches of Europe. The only things missing were pews and the crucifix over the altar. When the segregation had gotten to be enough, I nudged Loles and we left, hoping to slip out unnoticed.

Outside the mosque, in the surrounding courtyard, was a group of women. Ah, I thought, this is where they gather rather than experiencing the second-class status they would within the walls. Every one of them wore a long, drab coat even though we were on the verge of spring, their head covered by a scarf in a decorative pattern, though in the same somber colors. The women's eyes were expressionless, as if bearing the burden of their gender for so many centuries had left them fatigued. They chatted easily with each other, apparently content to allow their men to perform their duty to God as they performed theirs to each other. They smiled, sometimes even laughing over, no doubt, some domestic incident, as I had seen my mother and the women of her generation, those confined to that claustrophobic sphere of domesticity, so often do. Their smiles, though, were heavy, reminding me of the ones I had seen years ago on women living under the weighty authority of the Soviet Union. And I thought of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." In it, Aunt Jennifer sits beneath a tapestry of proud tigers prancing "in sleek chivalric certainty ... [t]he massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand."

One younger woman sat alone on a low, stone wall. In her open hands she held the Koran; her lips moved slightly as she read from it, her body rocking slowly back and forth, back and forth, as if responding to a silent rhythm, one perhaps that throbbed in her soul. My eyes began to burn, then they brimmed with tears. Tears that soon warmed my cheeks with tiny rivers. I cried. For her, for the others, for all women

who have been told that they, by virtue of their gender, are not enough. Not smart enough, not strong enough, not wise enough, not worthy enough. And I am not one to cry easily. I am the one who rises in outrage rather than tears at images of injustice and the horrors the world can bring upon itself. But perhaps because I was confronted with the women, with their acceptance of their second-class, unworthy status, and I was one of *them*, that my eyes burned. I was sure my cheeks were red, stinging with a secret shame. This was not the way I envisioned my pilgrimage to the land that once venerated Kybele, who, flanked by her lions, was the giver of life to the land, the creatures upon it, and to us humans as well. How could this goddess, this bearer of life be reduced to shuffling along, eyes cast to the ground before her, arm in arm with another woman, her femininity cloaked? Once so beloved by her people, where was Kybele now? How could she remain, so silently stoic, while men usurped her place?

What I really wanted to visit, having been teased by its massive dome — all earthy orange and radiant — that is suddenly visible when you near, is Hagia Sofia, originally a Christian church first erected in the 4th century CE, but victim of subsequent burning. It was rebuilt in more or less its present form during the 6th century when it was dedicated to Sofia, the Greek goddess who embodied spiritual wisdom. Her totem was the dove. As the Greeks began to embrace Christianity, they could not forget their goddesses. Goddesses they had long adored, such as Artemis, one of the earliest nurturers and mistress of bird and beast, or Athena, whose intellect and loving care helped so many Greek warriors — especially poor Odysseus on his long journey home. Aphrodite, whose beauty promised the awakening of love. Or Isis, who originated in Egypt, but was worshiped in Greece through the 4th century, and was the quintessence of life-giving when she resurrected her husband after his death. Though Osiris never returned to a full life, he bore enough vitality to impregnate Isis with their child, the beloved Horus.

When Christianity finally usurped the earlier religions, Sofia was assimilated as the genderless dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. During the 4th century, these Christians, who until then had been a loose bunch with varying ideas on what it meant to be a follower of Christ, were finally defined — with rules to follow and creeds to swear by — within the new Church doctrine and the Virgin Mary came

to embody the mothering qualities of these earlier goddesses, most notably Isis. Indeed, it is an image of Isis, cradling Horus in her lap, that led to later renderings of Mary clutching the swaddled Jesus.

Hagia Sofia is most closely linked to Artemis through a massive pillar reaching from floor to ceiling that was brought here from the Artemision near today's city of Ephesus. The Artemision was one of the Seven Wonders of the World and it seems only fitting that, as the old religion that worshipped Artemis was replaced by Christianity, one of Artemis' temple pillars should literally, as well as spiritually, lend support to this new religion. The metaphor is not lost, nor is Artemis' grace, which was bequeathed by Christians to Mary, the mother of Jesus, just as Artemis, in her original conception as Kybele, was the divine mother of us all. It's no coincidence that Catholics envision the Church as "Mother Church."

The next day we left Istanbul to make our way along the coast of the Aegean. En route, we passed Mt. Ida; from its peak one can see the island of Lesbos, which reminded me of the remarkable poetry of Sappho and how, she, too, lay forgotten for so long. She once wrote,

Like the very gods in my sight is he who
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him.*

Such words remind us of the wonder of love. Today, though, we don't linger to allow Sappho's life and poetry to take root, as we are eager to make our way to Ephesus.

Before arriving in Ephesus, we stopped to visit the most meticulously rendered statue of Artemis in the museum at Selcuk. A secret smile just touches her lips; her chest is covered with soft, rounded breasts, suggesting her ability to nurture us all. The heads and front legs of animals adorn her body, flowing down her gown. Bees sit in orderly lines down the sides of her dress, so vibrant they almost buzz. The broken bodies of four-legged beasts stand beside her statue, reminiscent of statues of Kybele who was enthroned with lions flanking her. Artemis' arms reach out to us, while images of small bull heads fall from her head in an elaborate headdress.

And then we reached Ephesus, the city of the Great Mother, who was known by many names throughout not only the Mediterranean, but also Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Greece. In the Phrygian language, she was Kybele (Cybele in her Latinized form). Later, Kybele was assimilated into the Greek pantheon as Artemis with Ephesus the city dedicated to her beneficence. The name Ephesus may have derived from *Apasas*, which was the name of a city in the Kingdom of Arzawa, which translates as “City of the Mother Goddess.”

Ephesus was rewarding at first sight: when I entered the city and was greeted by a relief of a smiling Nike, the goddess of victory, that once stood at the gate of Heracles. Its placement today at the entrance to Ephesus is an appropriate invitation.

For such an ancient city, Ephesus is impressively intact. I strolled down the main street, which was paved with stone. Intricate mosaics make up the sidewalks in front of what were once thriving businesses. The gymnasium was dedicated to Artemis; in addition to her other aspects, she also embodied qualities the Greeks and Romans so admired in the human body — one honed to an illustrious image of strength and beauty. A Women’s Gymnasium once contained several statues of young women, evidence that even females were invited to partake of both physical training and education when Artemis embodied the divine.

During the early years of Christianity, St. Paul came to Ephesus, hoping to convert those who worshiped the great goddess to a worship of Jesus and the monotheism of Christianity. However, the story goes that he was stoned and driven from the city amidst cries of, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Other stories claim that St. John escorted the Virgin Mary to Ephesus. Some believe it was in Ephesus that John wrote his gospel and where Mary lived out the remaining years of her life.

Artemis was great and powerful, nature in its most intimate and unrelenting form. As the Great Mother, Artemis was recognized as the earth itself, fertile and able to bear new life every spring. Artemis was also mistress of the beasts that inhabited both field and forest and, in a wonderful story of her first act as a nurturer, even helped her mother give birth to her twin, Apollo, just minutes after her own arrival in this world.

Christianity never really abandoned her; she was simply renamed the Virgin Mary as Mary does, indeed, bear many of Artemis' traits. Mary is the nurturing mother, never bereft of food or the gifts of the spirit, always with an ear open to hear those who call on her, ready to grant their requests for comfort and security. What has been stripped from Mary is her aspect as nurturer of the land, not honored as she who brought abundance to the land, ensuring the crops would continue to grow in their seasons, ever turning the wheel from life to death and to rebirth. Only Artemis' name has been forgotten, which must be the inspiration for the enigmatic smile on Nike's face.

Farther along, the Temple of Hadrian includes a relief of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and another of Artemis. The wall framing the back of the temple is adorned with an image of Medusa, one of the gorgons whose gaze would turn a man to stone. This made me smile. Here, at least, was a woman who held her own against men. A statue of Aphrodite adorns a fountain that once spouted water in a cascade of glistening droplets, reminding us of Aphrodite's birth from the foam of the sea. Her eyes soft and wide, her head tilted just so; maybe she too wonders where the reverence for love and beauty has gone.

Surrounded by all these images of women, each powerful in their own right and collectively portraying every attribute to be desired, one question kept pounding in my head: What happened? How did these traits once recognized as inherent in a woman and essential to survival both practical and spiritual, become those to be admonished, hidden, usurped by her male counterparts? Was it that, as men came to power in the Church they feared both the power innate in the female as well as their inability to control both it and the reverence the populace gave it? Perhaps.

The Prytaneion was a place reserved exclusively to worship Artemis. An altar within includes a statue of Hestia, goddess of the hearth and home, while in the garden, Athena oversees the bounty of the earth where the eternal (maybe not so *eternal* after all, though the hope remains) flame burned, in honor of the eternal life of the city, protected day and night by these powerful goddesses.

I sat on the rough ground to contemplate these ideas of the female. I also thought about my own nature as a woman and what that means to me, both personally and in view of cultural ideas of gender. What if these goddesses were

venerated today? What if one could choose a temple to Artemis as easily as one could enter a church or a synagogue? Would there be fewer rapes? Or battered women? Would a woman sit in the White House as leader of the land? How different the world would be. For women. For men.

In the Agora, where politics were debated, are the remains of the foundation of a temple from the 1st century dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis. She was the original “mother of god,” having given birth to the divine child, Horus. Statues of her holding the tiny infant on her lap, suckling him at her breast, were the inspiration for later images of the Virgin coddling her own divine child. Isis was not only mother extraordinaire, but also she who resurrected her husband-brother, Osiris. Like other goddesses of such great spiritual wisdom, Isis is frequently depicted with bird-like features, wings outspread, inviting anyone who sought comfort at her breast. To bring her husband back to life, at least long enough to conceive a child, she lay on him in her bird form, her wings embracing his lifeless one until he stirred with life once again.

As I let that thought turn around in my head, I couldn't quite grasp the magnitude of such an act of love. To bring someone back from the dead? Through the power of love? Not a literal death, of course. But a spiritual one. When we lose someone we love, they are never completely dead as long as they live in our hearts and our memory. As one becomes consumed with this temporal, material world, the spirit — along with its ability to perceive beauty and experience love — withers. We become dead, without heart or soul. If one could meditate on Isis' bestowing such love upon her husband, then there is hope for each of us to be resurrected by the love pouring as free as rain from the heart of the divine — or spewing from the fountain of Aphrodite, wafting from the feathers of Isis, or roaring from Kybele's lions. That Romans continued to worship Isis into their own era of gods and goddesses for another 300 years into Christianity speaks of the adulation she evoked.

A short distance from Ephesus is the ancient Artemision, or Temple of Artemis, and the site that I had been waiting for, anxious to see what had once been a monument to the glory of the goddess. On this day, under a china blue sky, tufted clouds like happy cherubs watched over us, dusty gravel twisting beneath my feet as I followed the steps many before me had traversed when Artemis' temple was revered as a

place of pilgrimage for those who sought her blessings; the church of St. John built later on the hill overlooking the Artemision became such a site for Christians, though I imagine the path was well-trodden by then.

The temple was originally built in 625 BCE, though it was rebuilt nine times altogether. One built around 550 BCE was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, which says a lot about the veneration of Artemis. The temple was destroyed by the Goths (those pesky invaders that also brought down the Roman Empire). What was left fell to ruin, its stone being quarried for use in other buildings, finding a new life, just like Artemis did through Mary, in churches such as Hagia Sofia.

Though the Artemision has long been abandoned and Artemis forgotten as a source of comfort and spiritual wisdom, she has not disappeared from the minds of those knowing that only the power of a great mother could give birth to all the life and magnificence of the world. Not far from her temple, overlooking the ancient city from the top of a small hill, is the house where legend has it that the Virgin Mary spent the final years of her life. It is tucked within a shady grove, a small cottage made of stone and wood, unassuming in its presence, but offering a view of the fertile plain below and the great span of heaven above. A stream trickles by, gentle as a mother's kiss. A statue of the Virgin welcomes with arms open in a posture so like that of Artemis it is clear Mary has assimilated those traits once attributed to Artemis. Though the multitude of breasts are gone, along with the beasts and bees, her dress flowing in soft, wave-like folds instead, there is no mistaking her invitation to grant solace. Instead of the towering crown of Artemis, Mary's is small, yet clearly symbolizes her status as "divine mother." Whether she actually lived here or not, no one can say with certainty, though the importance may lie in the simple desire to think it so. The presence of a great mother can surely sanctify a site, whether her name is Kybele, Sofia, Artemis, Isis, or Mary. The eternal mother can never be truly forgotten; she will always be reborn, with a new name perhaps, but one that resonates with the people to whom she belongs.

Can we find this great mother in a mosque, in the men's cold stares as women in Western clothes stroll along their streets? Could the breath of the divine so beloved by Moslems that it infuses their spiritual places actually be the

goddess whispering in the ears of those who will hear that she has not disappeared, but lives on, rising with the buds of spring, flourishing in the summer's crops, falling to the earth — her own tomb, her own womb — to rise once again in spring? Is it she who shyly strolls the streets of Istanbul, hidden behind the veil?

* Richard Lattimore, ed. (1960)

Fimbulwinter*

Not a *feeble*-winter, throwing a quick layer of snow and running to make way for the heat of spring. Not a *thimble*-winter, small and manageable. No, Fimbulwinter, *great*-winter, after the myths died the name sticks on the lips of the North when the cold makes a liar out of the almanacs and the clouds

swallow the sun. Chattered when it feels like ice is the only surface the world knows, when birth and life are little cruel ideas — a stubborn nut that refuses to fall from the branch, a gaunt

dog pawing at the backdoor. When logic cracks, and words like *thaw* and *harvest* are as likely as a rainbow bridge or a mountain troll. When the wind drags tears from the eyes and freezes them as tribute. When snow claims every shoulder, field, and rooftop. When winter can only lead to winter, when the season is too harsh for even gods to survive.

*In Norse mythology, fimbulwinter, or *fimbulvetr*, is defined as three consecutive winter seasons uninterrupted by summer. This phenomenon is believed to portend Ragnarok, the end of the gods.

Daily Bread

Hungary, the late 50s

At night you keep to yourself you cover
your windows with wrapping paper indigo blue so
no one can see the light of the single
light bulb over your mother's knitting machine

everything is communal – you are told –
even your grandfather's blacksmithing workshop
where the State lets him keep working
because it is a wing of his house
and the State lets his only son work there too
until the State promotes the son, your father,
to a foreman of gypsies who enamel
white and avocado green pots and pans and stove
pipes but he makes so little money that your mother needs
to work too so we can buy
bread and milk in the fourth week of the month
with her *Gymnasium* education
and a dream on hold for college the knitting machine stowed
in a box labeled "rags" she drags
into the house from the sawdust shed and tapes up
all the windows in the room where you
and your sister sleep and rare parties are held
and hundreds of books make the shelf sag
and the piano stood there too until it had to be sold
she takes the same indigo blue paper everybody uses
to wrap school books and notebooks or to complement
the blue smocks every schoolchild wears
over tattered clothes for *a nice unified look* and she turns on
the radio to drown out the clicking and whooshing
of the machine that first unravels clients' nylon stockings with runs
then from the same shimmery tan thread miraculously knits
knee highs with a little looser pattern the ladies pick up
in small brown bags as if they were
seeds and the money is slipped
into her hands in envelopes like birthday cards
she cranks up the radio again and you fall asleep
to Callas and Caruso by the light of the 100W bulb over her bowed
head and shoulders so there's
bread again the next day and you watch
your mother draw
the cross above the brilliant brown steaming crust
you know this is another thing you should
never tell the neighbors.

Quiver

Aoife's mammy started to have problems with her mouth in the weeks after Eamonn Kelly was shot by the Brits. It started as a tingle, she told the doctor, like a cold sore forming at the corner of her lip, then it began to scour at her gums as though she was teething. It was when it started to burn, though, like taking a gulp of scalding tea and swilling it around; it was when it began to feel like it had left the inside of her mouth and throat as nothing more than a raw and bleeding flesh wound; when every morsel of food or sip of water felt like swallowing a razor blade, a writhing agony that only got worse when she stretched it into a scream; it was only then that Cathy Brennan phoned for the doctor.

In those weeks, as the pain intensified, she'd call Aoife or Damian over to her with a wee wave of the hand and reach into her apron pocket for a five-penny piece. Tucking it into Aoife's school pinafore or into the torn remnants of Damian's shirt pocket, she'd send one or the other scampering down the street to McGrath's on the corner to buy her an ice-pop. All different colours they were: blue, purple, green, orange, yellow, pink even. Aoife liked the purple ones best, whilst Damian favoured the green ones. Neither of them would ever even think to buy an orange one. Once they'd bought the ice-pop, they would race home and give it to their mammy, who would clamp it, unopened, between her thin lips – lengthways, like the flutes played during the Twelfth Parades. It would be kept there, between closed lips and beneath closed eyes, until all of the white frost had melted and the inside of it had turned to brightly coloured juice. Then, opening her eyes and letting out a wee sigh, Aoife's mammy would stand, snip the end of the ice-pop with the kitchen scissors and hand it to whichever of her children had run the message – either Aoife or Damian – so as they could squeeze the sugary slush out with their fingers and suck on the end of it like a babby.

'How come mammy needs ice?' Aoife asked her daddy.

'Her mouth burns her, love.'

'Why?'

Shay Brennan lifted his daughter onto his knee. 'It's what happens, wee girl,' he whispered. 'When you go touting to the peelers.' Then he grinned that grin that seemed to split

his face in two and built himself up to the rolling thunder of his gallery laugh by way of a chuckle and a cough or two.

‘Is that right?’ Aoife asked.

‘Not a word of a lie. It’s what happens when you turn on your friends and neighbours.’

Eamonn Kelly had been a neighbour of the Brennans for as long as Aoife – with all of her eleven years and ten months on this earth – could remember, but as far as she knew he’d never been a friend to either her mammy or her daddy. In fact, she’d have sworn by all that was good and holy that she’d heard her daddy talking of Eamonn as ‘nothing more than Provo scum’ after Mass one Sunday when he was having the craic with big Gerry from down the way.

Still, it had fair shook her mammy when the Army raided the house, two doors down, where Eamonn was living. Aoife had seen it as well, even though Cathy had pinned her daughter’s head in against the silver cross at her chest and kept it pinned there with a firm hand. By lifting her chin a wee bit, so that the bulk of her mammy’s chest was beneath her eye-line, Aoife managed to squint out and see the whole thing. She’d seen the soldiers shoulder in the door without so much as a knock, even though Sister Beatrice at school said it was rude not to. She’d seen Eamonn squeezing out of the upstairs window, as the soldiers crashed and shouted inside, and jumping from the sill – feet first like Hong Kong Phooey – onto the tiny square lawn below. She’d seen him landing, with his right leg part-buckled beneath him, and then springing up and hobbling out the garden gate. She’d seen the Saracen then, from further down the street, speeding down towards Eamonn and she’d heard the shout, in an unfamiliar accent, of ‘get your hands up, you bastard!’ She’d heard the shout, seen him limp on for a pace with his gacky half-run, and then heard the shot. Then she’d felt her mammy’s flinch as Eamonn crumpled to the ground.

‘Did you like Eamonn then, daddy?’ Aoife asked.

‘Ach,’ he bounced his knee beneath her, so that she felt as though she was on a juddering bus. ‘It’s not that I liked him, love, or liked what he was doing, but he was a member of this community, is all.’

Aoife paused at that, her arm up around her daddy’s shoulder and her hand nestled in at his neck. She didn’t look him in the eye, as unsure of her footing now as Eamonn had been when he left those two footprints – one deep and straight,

the other shallow and slanted – in the tiny square lawn, two doors down.

‘Joanne from school said,’ she started. ‘I tell a lie, Joanne’s brother said to her, and she says to me, that Eamonn was making bombs in that house.’

Her daddy shrugged. Aoife felt it up the length of her arm.

‘If he was making bombs, though,’ she continued, her thoughts stumbling on ahead of her. ‘Is it not right for mammy to be telling on him?’

Another shrug and a settling of the bouncing knee. ‘There were other people she could’ve gone to, Aoife,’ her daddy said. ‘If she had worries. Other people, other than the peelers.’

‘What if the bombs had blown up, but?’

‘Eamonn was being careful, love.’

‘What if - ’

‘I’ll tell you this,’ her daddy lifted her down then, and cradled her cheek with the roughness of his hand. ‘These houses we’ve got, these wee houses – all in a row – they’re near enough bomb-proof, so they are. Remember what your mammy told you about them windows: triple-glazed. As long as you’re under this roof, you’ll be protected rightly, ok?’

Aoife nodded.

‘Besides, a wee girl like you shouldn’t be concerning herself with bombs or any of that there,’ he smiled. ‘You and your mammy both, you’re too fond of the gossip.’

It had been to the lady from the social work that Aoife’s mammy had said about Eamonn. A week or so before the shooting, it was. Out on the doorstep, as the woman from the social came out from seeing young Sinead O’Brien and her two fatherless children. Aoife had been there as well, with her shoulder against the door-jamb, watching Damien as he plucked the black and orange striped caterpillars from the bush near the gate and set them down on the windowsill. He collected a brave amount of them, as the two women nattered, all slithering slowly across the sill and clambering over one another as though they’d a notion to make it to the other side before Damien’s grubby fingers could scoop them up again.

Aoife’s mammy hadn’t even said that much. It wasn’t like she’d come out and gone, ‘That Kelly lad on the other side of Sinead is making bombs for the IRA’. If she’d said that then there’d have been cause for all the ructions that had taken

place since. Instead, though, all she'd said was that there was a powerful smell coming out of Eamonn's house sometimes and that the windows, from time to time, did steam up like the wee window in the kitchen did when the dishes were getting washed after dinner. That was all she said, Aoife's mammy, and every word of it the truth.

Still, the woman from the social had taken away her wee nugget of information that day and she'd told someone else, and that someone else had told someone else in turn, until it reached the stage where – nine days later – Eamonn Kelly was spread out across the concrete with his arms splayed out to the side, as though he was trying to make a snow - angel and hadn't realised that it was springtime and that there was no snow. He'd have waited there, Aoife reckoned, until the snow came. Then his arms would have started to frantically flap, up and down on the whitened pavement, until he'd formed himself a set of wings. He'd have waited there, if the ambulance - men hadn't come and taken him away.

'She works for the Brits,' her daddy said to her mammy. 'She's a Prod and she works for the Brits and she's from East Belfast. Come on to fuck, Cathy, you know that if you tell them the time of day, then they're liable to take the watch from your wrist.'

Aoife wasn't meant to hear this. She'd been sent upstairs to mind Damien after all the commotion had died down. She'd crept back down the stairs, though, because Damien's room faced the road. As she sat on his bed and read to him from his Roald Dahl book – about George stirring in one quart of dark brown gloss paint to change the medicine to the right colour – her eye kept being drawn to the bloodstain, out in the middle of the pavement. Further down the road, beside the peeler's meat wagon, was another patch of liquid. It was as slick as the blood, but darker and with a swirl of colour at its centre.

'That's it over and done with, though,' her daddy continued. 'Enough with the waterworks. You're not to be blamed for what the wee spide was up to, Cathy, so don't be beating yourself up over it.'

He'd looked up then, Aoife's daddy, and seen her standing in the doorway, staring beyond him to her mammy, staring at the eyes that were rimmed with the red of blood and the make - up tracks that were scarred with the black of oil. Her mammy lurched to her feet, screwing her eyes so tightly

shut that the blue of them disappeared and they were all black and red, and felt her way across to the sink, using the worktop as a handrail. She set the tap running and twisted her neck in beneath it, making a bucket of her mouth. As the water passed her lips, Aoife could have sworn she heard a sizzle, like the first rasher of bacon hitting a hot frying pan.

‘What are you doing downstairs, love?’ her daddy asked.

‘These windows face out towards the back,’ Aoife replied, in a whisper.

After that, Cathy Brennan had started with the ice-pops. Aoife and Damien took to racing home from school, in the hope of getting the five pence piece to run down to McGrath’s with. Aoife’s school – the convent – was closer to the family home, but Damien was the faster runner, so there were quite a few times when it was a photo-finish. Aoife didn’t even know what a photo-finish was, but she’d heard her daddy use the phrase a couple of times when he came out of the bog buckling his belt after hopping, half-cut, from foot to foot as he waited for Aoife or her mammy to finish in the bathroom.

Aoife and Damien were about equal with the ice-pop runs, purple versus green, when the steady supply of five-penny pieces stopped. It was Aoife that made it home first that day, near clattering into her mammy as she slid around the lino-corner into the kitchen. Her mammy wasn’t in the usual place, over by the sink, but instead was on her knees in front of the fridge. The butter and milk and all was spread out across the floor, taken out to give her enough space to get her head right in. Taking in the scene at a glance, Aoife caught on to what was happening and gave a panicked squeak. Rushing forwards, she clawed at her mammy’s cardigan until the hair-netted head came out of the fridge.

‘What are you at, Aoife?’ her mammy asked, a frown on her face like she’d caught Aoife at the biscuits before dinner was on the table.

‘You’re looking for a goose!’ Aoife shouted.

‘A goose?’ the frown deepened.

‘A chicken, then.’ Aoife didn’t know if a chicken could kill you like a goose could, but surely it was the same basic difference.

‘What are you on about?’

‘It was how big Gerry’s sister committed sue-side.’

‘Suicide,’ the frown disappeared. ‘She’d her head in the oven, love.’

‘And she died, mammy.’

‘That she did, Aoife,’ a smile creased the forehead now. ‘But a fridge wouldn’t do that to you, now.’

‘Well, why did you have your head in there then?’

‘Because my mouth’s near burnt off my face, so it is.’

‘You wanting me to run for an ice - pop then?’

‘No, love,’ her mammy shook her head, but she was laughing at the same time. ‘I’ll call for the doctor, maybe.’

It had been Aoife’s daddy that had told her about Caoimhe McGreevy – big Gerry’s sister – one Saturday afternoon when he had the smell of drink on him. She’d had to wrinkle her nose against the whisky breath as her daddy told her how Caoimhe’s husband had been put in the Maze prison for planting a bomb down near Newry somewhere, then how Caoimhe had got herself blocked on the gin and put her head in the oven so as she didn’t have to live the life of a prisoner’s wife.

‘Why’d she put her head in the oven, though, daddy?’ Aoife had asked.

‘Why?’ her daddy thought for a moment, then chuckled. ‘She needed to see if her goose was cooked.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘And was it?’

‘It was and she passed on up to Heaven, love.’

‘Can a goose do that to you, but?’

‘If it’s cooked, love, then it can. Only if it’s cooked.’

The doctor came during the day when Aoife and Damien were out at school and gave Cathy Brennan a wee white tub of pills that had her name neatly typed across the side. Their daddy warned them not to be touching them, said they were only for mummies and that if Aoife or Damien ate one then they’d find themselves frozen stiff and still, unable to move even their arms and legs.

‘Is that why mammy takes them?’ Aoife asked. ‘Because she likes ice?’

‘What d’you mean, Aoife?’

‘Like, she says her mouth burns her, so are these pills to cool it down?’

‘Aye, that’s exactly it, so it is. Exactly.’

The pills certainly seemed to work for her mammy, anyway. In the late afternoon, Aoife and Damien would come home from school and run into the kitchen to find her at her old station by the sink. She'd just stand there, with her back to them and with her hands plunged up to the wrist in the soapy water. For hours she'd stand, staring out of the wee steamed-up window, moving only to top - up the basin from the hot tap every now and then. Aoife reached up to dip her wee finger in the water once, after it had just been drained and refilled, and it was scaldingly hot. Her mammy's hands stayed in there though, getting all folded and wrinkly like her granny's skin. It seemed to Aoife that her mammy had real problems getting herself to the right temperature: before the pills she'd been roasted and was always trying to cool herself down, and after the pills she was baltic and was constantly trying to warm herself up.

The benefit of having their mammy tied to the sink was that Aoife and Damien had free rein. They'd sprint from room to room of the terraced house, playing at chases or hide-and-seek. Damien took to carrying the bow-and-quiver set that he'd been given for his eighth birthday wherever he went and firing the plastic arrows at anything that moved, whether that be the neighbourhood cats in the garden outside or Aoife as she made her way from her bedroom to the bathroom. For her part, after her mammy had been taking the pills for two days, Aoife realised that she could reach up and take the biscuits from the cupboard beside the stove without it even being noticed. Their daddy was working on a garden out near Hillsborough and wasn't back at night until darkness had taken control of the streets outside. By the time he trudged in, Aoife and Damien were both bated to the ropes and would be sprawled out on the sofa in the living room, watching the telly and nibbling on biscuits. Their mammy would still be stood in the kitchen, with her hands deep in the warm water, until her husband put his dirt-stained hands on her hips and walked her, dripping down onto the lino, across to the dining table.

It took about a week of this new way of things before Aoife started to grow scundered of it. The days slid by and the dishes piled up by the side of her mammy's misused dishwasher. The mountain of clothes began to spill over the top of the laundry basket like a saucepan boiling over and the floor around the telly became littered with biscuit wrappers and mugs of half-finished tea with floating islands of

congealing milk at the centre. Damien came in from school with a mucky blazer and Aoife needed to scrub at it with the nailbrush. The newspaper boy came knocking and she had to root through her mammy's pockets for enough change to pay him with. Her daddy dandered in with the smell of whisky on him and asked her to wet the tea leaves and put the chip pan on for their dinner. It took all of this, and more, for Aoife to grow scundered of it.

Then, that second weekend, between putting on the wash, running out to McGrath's for the messages, taking the dirty dishes up the stairs to the bathroom sink for washing, and scrubbing at the tomato ketchup stain her daddy had left on the sofa after he came in blocked, Aoife stood in the doorway of the kitchen and picked up Damien's bow-and-quiver from where it lay on the worktop. Stretching out the string, she imagined aiming at her mammy's back. She imagined pulling it back as far as it would go and then calling out in a loud voice, with an unfamiliar accent, 'get your hands up, you bastard!' She could see her mammy's head twisting, then, to look over her shoulder as Eamonn had; could hear the *twang* from the taut string as it was released, a second noise coming just moments after the shout of warning; the arms lifting up, raising themselves as Eamonn's had; suds flying up and around, splattering the lino like blood against concrete.

Instead, she soundlessly set the bow down on the side and leant against the door jamb to stare at her mammy's back. The shoulders of Cathy Brennan, either because the water had gone cold or because she caught the arrow of her daughter's hatred, shuddered and then were still.

Gina Vallis

in memorabilia

begin an inventory:

one box, listing, cardboard
crushed from above, disturbing
three pressed blooms more
dust than velvet

rattling at the bottom,
one dull-colored stone collected in passing

*that knock-me-down sunset under the shadow
of piedra blanca, the horizon still seared with blood-colored light*

so fragile in our fingers, these magics —
one coin flattened on the railroad track, one ticket
never punched,
one empty pouch still smelling of

his old muttering leather skin

smoking tobacco,
fishing line, scars, smear of recipes, the
crack that broke your mother's back, and holding
it in my hand — *oh, yes:*

*you pushed her around the zoo in a wheelchair
creaking with the just one more thing she had to bring
leaving gashes in the manicured habitat
absolutely tearing it up, while the keepers winced and
the baboons shrieked with jealousy*

for body parts:

six children's teeth, two clips infant hair,
and, shuddering, one dried umbilical cord rattling
in a plastic hospital jar, fumbled and dropped,
rolling away and brought up against
old woman's shoes

*his heart attack dashing him to the floor
she's crying out and making them run*

My Daughter, John Updike, and Me

It was a Tuesday morning, and I was blow drying my hair in the bathroom as my six-year-old daughter called for at least the fifth time in ten minutes, “Mom!” She began to talk outside the door, but naturally I couldn’t hear her, so I turned off the dryer for the second time.

“You have to give me money for the book today.”

“What book, honey?” There had been so many books in my head those past few weeks since I’d been preparing to interview John Updike for a local magazine.

“The one the lady is coming to sign.”

This was enough explanation to remind me that a children’s author was signing books that day at the elementary school. I told Kyra that I’d write a check as soon as I was done my hair.

But when I came out of the bathroom, I found that despite several reminders, she still had not brushed her hair and put on her socks.

“Come on, sweetie,” I said. The words “come on” escaped my mouth as if from a reflex triggered deep in the brain, like breathing or my heart beat. “Get your socks and shoes.”

I tried to run a brush over her moving head while she attempted to pull her sock over the stubborn part of her heel. She yowled as I pulled her hair, and then, of course, the sock, having twisted on her foot, had to be done over again. I tried to put the arm that wasn’t adjusting her shoe buckle into her coat sleeve, but she immediately pulled it out to buckle the other shoe.

“Come on.” I herded her toward the apartment door. “Mommy can’t be late for class.”

“But the book money!” she protested.

“Oh, my god,” I sighed. Turning around, I charged back up the stairs and grabbed the form off the table. Holding the checkbook in my hand, I scribbled an illegible check before we headed for the door again.

Finally in the car, Kyra was quieted by the trance of motion, and John Updike appeared in the passenger seat beside me. For at least a week, I’d been conversing with him in my head. Translucent but distinct, he went everywhere with me. We talked about his stories as I listened to them on tape in

my car. Over lunch, while I read interviews with him, I barraged him with questions of my own. And yes, we even chatted in bed while I skimmed one book after another on his life and career.

Born in Shillington, Pennsylvania in 1932, Updike seemed sure of his success from the beginning. His promise as an artist was apparent already in kindergarten when he published a collage in the magazine *Children's Activities*. He went on to contribute 285 cartoons, articles, and poems to his high school newspaper, *The Chatterbox*. At Harvard, he crafted art and poems for the *Harvard Lampoon*, which he also eventually edited. Just four years after receiving his bachelor's degree, Updike published his first book of poetry, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*, in 1958. Since then, barely a year went by without the release of a new Updike volume — novels, story collections, poetry, essays, and criticism. He had everything short of a Nobel Prize, and many pulled for him to get that too.

"You've written more books than many Americans own," I said to him with a sideways glance. "I'm thirty-four and I haven't written one."

He wore tailored wool pants and a gray, crew neck sweater. From a widely published 1960's photo, this is what I called his Beatles look. Sitting with his long legs extended beneath the dashboard, he told me that I could still apply to MFA programs when Kyra was grown. I told him that probably seemed easier to envision from his perspective than from mine.

All my life I've had two literary heroes — not entirely for their writing, oddly, but for where they were born — John O'Hara and John Updike, both Pennsylvania authors. O'Hara spent his early years in a house six blocks from my own childhood home in Pottsville, and Updike's boyhood residence is a short drive from the Reading suburb where I now reside. These two stars formed the guiding constellation of my teenage years. They were two bright spots in an upbringing otherwise devoid of culture, and I grew up believing that if I navigated carefully, maybe I could follow them to bigger places.

I began writing stories in the second grade. When I was the only student in my elementary school to qualify for the gifted program, the Intermediate Unit sent a teacher to work with me once a week. Sitting side-by-side with me on

blue plastic chairs in a little used school library, she noted with what relish I carefully penciled my fables of jungle animals and portraits of 18th century ladies ascending staircases drawn in perspective. Watching me, she apparently abandoned whatever lesson plans she may have had and instead let me write and draw with free reign. In a few years, I was winning trophies in county art contests and having a poem published in the local newspaper. In high school, I took my first creative writing class, where in an exercise on metaphors, I wrote, "Motherhood is immortality." I can't remember wanting to be anything in my life but a writer and a mom. But I had no idea how hard it would prove to be both.

After dropping Kyra off at school, I spent the rest of my half-hour drive to work recounting the events that led to where I was.

"The key for you, "I told my imaginary companion, "was Harvard. Don't you think?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. He had said that he never could have become the writer he was if he had stayed in Pennsylvania. He needed the literary culture of New England and the freedom of being away from a home where people are expected to do whatever their parents and grandparents did down to the millionth generation. "I couldn't go to Harvard," I said. "Coming from Pottsville, it was too big a jump for me. I may have had the grades, but I didn't have the confidence."

"So you stayed in Pennsylvania for college ... "

"An hour from my house," I nodded. "And then I came home and got married. I spent more time ironing and cooking than writing." My head feeling heavy with the weight of past mistakes, I propped it on my left hand with my elbow on the car door.

"It wasn't until we divorced that I finally got around to grad school, and by then I had a daughter. I couldn't run off, to New England or anywhere. So it's taken me this long just to get a teaching job where I can even *think* about writing."

"You must have had other choices," my companion said.

"Yes, other choices," I absent-mindedly echoed. As we waited at a red light, I watched the cross traffic flow smoothly in both directions in front of me. Somehow the sun glinting off the passing cars ignited an epiphany.

“It’s different for women,” I said. “I know a lot has changed, but still to this day, I think it’s different.” I raised my head and placed both hands on the wheel. “Women are always looking after someone else’s goals in place of their own. The one thing that you and O’Hara had in common, that I don’t have, is that you’re men.”

* * *

When my composition classes were done, I sat down to grade papers for an hour. I wrote “fragment” and “run-on” in margins about thirty times and inserted possibly a hundred commas, in spite of the fact that we had just covered these issues in class. Then I got in the car to pick Kyra up from school. All the way home, she bubbled over with chatter about the book signing, the song she learned in music class, what happened at recess. As I pulled into the grocery store, the stream of talk kept flowing.

“Mom, I want to play violin.”

I took her smooth, chubby hand and led her through the parking lot.

“You remember when Jessica babysat me and she played her violin for me? I want to play violin.”

“That’s good, sweetie,” I said. “Let’s get a basket.”

“So, can I start taking lessons?” she asked as we entered the produce section.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“They even have a little orchestra at school. I see the kids coming in all the time with their instruments.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t know how old you have to be to start lessons.”

“I’m old enough,” she asserted. “I even know how a violin works.” She held out one hand and drew an imaginary bow over her shoulder with the other.

“I know you do, honey. But the teacher may only take students who are a certain age, you know.” I put a couple of ripe bananas into the basket. “Like you have to be five years old to go to kindergarten.”

“This isn’t kindergarten, mom. This is violin lessons. You don’t have to be a certain age.” She followed me to the bins of potatoes.

“Well, yes, honey. But violin lessons cost money, and I’m not sure whether we have enough to —”

“I’ll help pay for it,” she chimed, “with my allowance.”

All the way through the grocery store, I tried to help her see that violin lessons might not be possible as immediately as she would have liked. In the end, I felt that my efforts were useless, as the conversation turned to whether I would buy her a candy bar at the checkout and let her eat it right away.

After dinner, there was the homework battle, in which she claimed to be too tired to do her addition problems and write her spelling words. But when she finally got it done, the homework was all correct, as it nearly always was. I looked down a page of words printed in handwriting that could be neater than my own at that age.

After a quick bath and a couple of bedtime stories, she was tucked in at last. I had to ask myself, as I lay beside her, smoothing her baby fine hair as she drifted off, if I would trade this for anything.

Back in my room, I pulled the covers over my bent knees and balanced on them yet another book on Updike. That night, I was reading about his mom, Linda Hoyer Updike, born just outside Shillington in 1904, who aspired to write fiction herself between keeping house and raising her only child. She achieved one of her lifelong dreams in 1945 when she and her husband Wesley, a high school mathematics teacher, reinstalled her family on the farm where she had been born. The Hoyers had been forced to sell their land during the Depression, but Linda succeeded in buying it back. Educated at Ursinus College and Cornell University, she worked at a local department store after John was born, until one day when she reportedly announced, "I'm going to stay home — and become a writer."

That dream, however, would prove more elusive. Though she wrote as prolifically as her famous son, leaving behind over two hundred stories and six novels when she died in 1989, very little of her work would see publication. It was not until the age of 61 that she finally sold a story to *The New Yorker*, to which she had been a subscriber since 1944. It is said of Linda Updike that she was confident her son would be a success. But when she was interviewed about his fame, she said, "I'd rather it had been me," an honest statement if a bitter one.

Looking up from the book, I stared at the darkened window. When I looked back, Updike was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I know why you were able to go to Harvard,” I told him softly. His eyes found mine, but I looked to the window again. “Your mom.”

“I owe a lot to her.”

“You owe her everything,” I corrected. I fingered the edge of the book in my lap. “Everything you’ve done wouldn’t have been possible without her. She’s the one who got off the farm and went to college.” I looked at him watching me quietly. “It takes two generations to raise a family to a new level,” I say, “one to begin the change and one to complete it. Your mom was that first generation.” Sitting upright, I put the book down where my companion had been sitting.

Linda Hoyer Updike, I thought, was the bridge that John Updike was able to walk across to reach his destiny. She wouldn’t have heard of him going anywhere but an Ivy League school. Her little Johnny was meant for bigger things than the farm, and she would see to it that he achieved them.

I was the first in my family ever to go to college. The *Pottsville Republican* and a shelf of Collier’s encyclopedias were all the reading material offered in my parents’ home, and I never saw my mom touch either. I have no memory of her writing more than a note to my teacher to explain an absence. But Linda Updike was a writer herself. It was her subscription to *The New Yorker* that introduced her son to the magazine that would publish so much of his work.

I didn’t have a bridge like that. At first, this realization depressed me. But then I felt strangely invigorated.

The next morning I dodged buses, vans, and double parked cars to pull into a space in front of Kyra’s school. Most parents just dropped off their kids and drove away, but our habit was for me to walk Kyra into the lobby where I got my ritual kiss and hug.

“Now, honey,” I said with my arms around her, “I put that note you asked for in your study folder, okay?”

Pulling back, she gave me a puzzled look.

“You remember, the note for the librarian to let you have the accelerated readers?”

“Oohhh.” She nodded.

“It’s in your study folder.” I kissed the top of her smooth, blonde head.

“What did you pack me for dessert?”

“Chocolate pudding.”

“Did you remember to put in a spoon?”

“Yes, I remembered the spoon.” I smiled. “And I’m going to call your music teacher today about violin lessons.”

“Oh, thank you, mommy, thank you.” With a big smile, she came back to nuzzle her head against my stomach.

Walking back to the car, I felt like a good bridge.

As I pulled away from the school, John Updike was again sitting beside me.

“I won’t have fifty books, hundreds of short stories, a Pulitzer Prize, and a page - long list of awards and fellowships,” I told him. “All I’m going to have is one daughter. And she’s going to have the world.”

Dawn

The first boat
out in the water bobs along in the breaking up
of the surface
and holds the course loosely, battered by waves
but still seems to have as its end a movement
toward sunrise:
orange-yellow, flat, plate-like recurrence of light
on the water
encrusted with mist. The sky has not even
started to yellow
or blue, but retains its dull grayish wall-like
plaster of fog
the light cuts through, so seeming to come from nowhere
if not sudden. These boaters have brought with them
the expectation and the non-expectation, the gear
and knowledge that somewhere beneath this, something or
nothing
and even non-directing is an aspect of life
as singing is a reversal for fish, as lovely as drowning,
but one never thinks of that —
The father is talking to his boys
with a fog of cigarette smoke as haze-bound as the sun.
His gear is as netted and intricate as the mess
he must work through every morning, and so brings survival
into this instant of not really looking forward,
for the boat moves by happenstance, water buffets it
into a continuous resetting of non-direction
which relies upon the sameness and the generosity of the sea.
What after all are destinations for the entangling
schools of fish or wheeling, eyeing gulls
except the next moment of eating
in the mediocre waters?

In Late October

“respice finem” (“Regard the end”)
— engraved on Ivan Ilyich’s fob chain

for Deana

the maple near our backdoor stoop
yawns and celebrates in reds
and yellows months of rest to come,
while hemlock lies in low patches
of lacy green burgeoning
scattered along Paint Lick Pike
pretending Spring — whispering,
“See? Don’t worry — there’s only sleep.”

(An earlier version of this poem was published in *The Journal of Kentucky Studies*.)

Saplings

In a small, wooden boat with Andy, James, and Chris, he navigates through an estuary. The boat approaches a heavy, wooden gate—a gate rife with timbers of the hardest lot and craftsmanship that can only tell outsiders to stay away: two moveable walls of wood situated above smoothly moving water. The left, not unlike the right, serving a master unknown and forbidding entrance to those unwanted. A group of saplings — he doesn't know why the orbs are called saplings, only that they are — hover around the boat; thousands of ethereal little orbs with luminescent cores of reds, purples, and blues that leave tiny tails behind them as they flutter to and fro. Jake can't understand how he came here. The gateway demands awe; wood contoured on the top to sweep from a peak at the meeting point between both arms of the gate, intricately carved with figures that seem aesthetically pleasing yet random, patternless, while a ringing and distant familiarity echoes in Jake's mind like a shepherd sounding his horn to collect strays from the flock.

“Can we enter?” asks Jake.

“We certainly can, it just depends on how,” replies James.

“Do we really want to?” says Chris, but by no means rhetorically.

It's been almost two and a half hours and still nothing. Chad begins to lose hope. He hates hospitals. The sounds alone are enough to drive anyone crazy. He thought he could come inside to escape his sister-in-law's hysteria. She's been outside chain smoking cigarettes and crying with her sister since he arrived. An accident was as much information as Sarah could coherently speak over two hours ago when Chad woke up and groggily answered his phone. She screamed, cursed and babbled incoherently. Chad wasn't sure if she was laughing drunk and calling him on a whim to make a joke, but he sensed something more serious. He managed to get her calm enough to pass the phone to her sister Kate who explained that Jake, Andy, Chris and James had been in an accident and Jake was at the trauma center.

“He's hurt pretty bad,” she said.

“How're the other guys?” Chad wondered aloud.

“They’re barely scratched. How fucked up is that?” Kate said a little too loudly with what sounded to Chad like a laugh. *Would it be better if they were hurt too?* He wondered silently.

The saplings grow agitated and become wearisome of their decision to allow the preceding to occur. “Is it your decision to enter and pass through these gates?” one of the saplings seems to ask as it flitters around the boat. Jake wants to say something, but before he can allow his mouth to open and his breath to follow, the saplings determine that this was not a proper decision; the saplings should not be considering opening the gate to anyone or anything that may be accused of possessing wisdom. They had made that mistake before and were now suffering because of it.

The saplings speak in concert: “You wish to cross this threshold. Do you not see that it can never be crossed more than once?”

One step forward can never be recreated by stepping backward, thinks Jake, but the saplings do not enjoy or understand his thoughts.

“Who is it you come here with?” query the saplings.

“I’m here with my friends,” Jake replies.

“You seem to be alone,” remarks one sapling above the gate’s intersection. Jake now wonders how this can be and looking close to his heart, discovers that only Andy remains, but he too withers like a sun setting behind a foggy mountain.

Now alone, Jake thinks about the gate: the intricately carved images evoke happiness, yet the reasoning behind the emotion fails presentation. In fact, Jake suffers sadness from the unexpected departure of his friends and he suddenly thinks about his wife Sarah and their two boys, Sam and Kip. Where are they? Shouldn’t they be here? Wherever *here* is? The saplings offer no sympathy to his pining or his absence of friends and family.

“Where’s my wife?” Jake asks, then adds “and my boys?”

The saplings speak in concert: “They are where they have to be.”

Jake feels angered and saddened by this conversation and decides to focus on the gate. “What is this gate?”

The saplings respond in voices out of concert, assaulting Jake’s mind with myriad explanations concerning

the gate and many other things, but he can't make sense out of any of it with the saplings rambling in thousands of voices. He can't explain to himself how these thousands of little saplings, no bigger than softballs, darting through the crisp air around him, can help. He doesn't even know why, or if, he needs help.

"Realm. You can pass," says a voice that may come from one sapling or all of them.

"My name's Jake."

"You are Realm. Not like Ursa, you will pass through the gate as we wish it."

Sarah's call came at 11:42 p.m. It was now going on 2:30 a.m. and he had yet to hear from any of the doctors. It was bad. Sitting inside the waiting area, he thought he would be able to gather his thoughts—thoughts on what? His brother Jake was somewhere in the building, seriously injured. His sister-in-law was outside, hysterical, and he was in the waiting room. Waiting for what? *Hospitals are the worst places on Earth.* He hates the waiting room. The sounds, the smells, he hates hospitals. To his right, Chad hears the quiet sobs of an older woman and man in the corner. It's as though they don't want to burden anyone else with their suffering or make a public offering of it (pride is a strange thing). But they cannot avoid the whimpering he now hears. The constant beeps of unknown equipment, the incessant buzzing of doors only those with the right can pass through, phones constantly sounding off in that talk-radio tone. It's almost enough to push Chad out the doors and back into the company of his sister-in-law's hysterical musings. He hates hospitals. The smell is something else. Disinfected, deodorized, clean to the effect that most people get suspicious. The hospital smells so clean that Chad thinks something rotten must lie beneath. It's kind of like his grandma's attic full of moth balls. The smell of ether drowning out death and decaying memories. *They can only last so long,* he thinks.

A helicopter's pounding beat gets louder and louder as it gets lower and lower, drowning out the hospital sounds. The buzzes, beeps, yatterings, and quiet sobs all die in the wash of the approaching Med-Evac, but it can't kill the smell. *Must be bad.*

“Oliver. Sarah Oliver,” announces a voice. Chad startles from his stupor and takes a couple seconds to reacquaint himself with the living.

“She’s outside,” he says quickly rising and pointing to the doors at the trauma center entrance. “I’m her brother-in-law. I’ll be right back.”

In a small room that only those with the right can enter, the doctor talks constantly but only a few of her words register: *Coma, head trauma, one lung collapsed, one lung partially collapsed, life-support*. His sister-in-law’s sister has to take Sarah from the room. She remains hysterical, shouting at the doctor that it was her job to save Jake, that she knew how to save Jake; that she *better* save Jake. Chad tries to calm Sarah down, but he really doesn’t put too much effort into it; he wants her gone from the room as well.

Chad only remembers the doctor’s final words: “If this was my brother —” and she completed the ellipses floating in the empty space between them with a look that comes as close to compassion as a trauma center doctor can safely make. She left the room and patted Chad on the shoulder like a coach who had just given a pep-talk to the captain of a losing team.

The gate was no longer. Jake was now surrounded by the constant flashings of saplings. They came and went without announcing it. A little burst of color — greens, reds, blues and things like a welder sees. They came in and out with every second and left in a small burst of particles. There were thousands of them. The sky was nebulous, multi-colored foam with so many saplings coming in and out; it looked like a shaken, psychedelic soda.

He kept walking along the river and the saplings continuously assaulted him with their voices: *tell me a story, I’m scared of flying. I..who..reve..level...woeueleldlduscjnb*.

It all became gibberish and Jake noticed another being in the distance. The man was sitting and swatting at the saplings as if for sport. They burst into bright particles at his attacks and as Jake moved closer, he heard the saplings’ cries louder and louder. He tried to tune them out, and while he could hardly distinguish coherent words, one resounded in his head: *Ursa*.

The man noticed Jake approaching and jumped to his feet. He appeared to be in his forties, slim with thinning hair

and a tiny, upturned pug nose with empty, grey eyes. He stood somewhat defensively and Jake stopped a few yards from him. They stood facing each other in silence when Jake decided to speak. He didn't know where he was or why he was here, but he knew he wanted no trouble.

"You must be Ursa," he said in the friendliest tone he could manage.

"That's what these little bastards call me," the man replied, gesturing toward the closest saplings around them.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Jake, but these things keep calling me 'Realm.'"

"Well then, Realm, that's your name now. At least for as long as you're here." The man's posture lightened up and he appeared relieved to see Jake.

"Where exactly is here? I mean, what is this place and why am I here?"

"That's the 64,000 dollar question. Why am I here? Haven't we always been curious about that one?" Ursa said and began walking toward the river, apparently satisfied with the conversion where it stood.

"Wait. Hang on, you must know something," Jake pleaded and ran to catch up with him. "How long have you been here? How did you get here? You can't tell me anything?" Jake was becoming irate and desperate to get an answer from this man. As he walked along side of him, the saplings continued to buzz in and out and around him without coming too close. He could sense their fear of Ursa. The man trudged on, but suddenly stopped and turned to Jake.

"Listen Realm, I'm not sure of too much anymore. I don't know how long I've been here and I don't remember who I used to be. I only know that I was someone else once. See, time gets away from you here. You see those trees way back there," he said pointing toward a dense forest in the distance. "They don't get any closer. I've walked and walked and they don't get any closer than they are now. And the sky never changes. It's always this way — dusk. You begin to lose track."

"I remember," said Jake. "I have a wife, two boys and a brother back home and I need to find them."

"Good luck. I might've had some of those things too, but search me if I know it now." Ursa shrugged his shoulders and looked like he truly didn't know what Jake was talking

about. They continued walking and the saplings continued to avoid them. Jake decided to change the subject for the moment. Maybe he could get something useful from Ursa.

“Why are they scared of you?” he asked glancing around the sky filled with tiny orbs.

“Cause I know how to scare ‘em,” Ursa redundantly replied. “There’s not a lot to do here and after a while I learned to get into them. They’re just kids, so it don’t take much to scare the bejesus out of ‘em.”

“What do you mean they’re just kids?”

“Like the two boys you remember. These things — saplings, they’re just kids and when I feel like it, I scare ‘em for something to do.”

Jake realized that Ursa remembered more than he claimed to and that this whole conversation was some kind of game. What he didn’t know was how to get the guy to square with him. He couldn’t understand why, but he felt something strange inside him; some kind of connection that grew weaker as they continued walking. He looked to the frothy sky filled with saplings constantly bursting into so many colors. *Kids?*

Sarah had calmed down enough to wait with Chad and Kate for visiting hours the next morning. They weren’t really hours, more like minutes, when the doctors would allow immediate family to visit Jake’s room when they weren’t doing something to him. His parents were flying in sometime today. Snow in Denver stranded them and they did not know when they could leave. He really wished they were here. They all agreed not to let the boys see their dad in this state, with strange tubes coming out of his body and unable to do anything but lie there; it would do nothing but injure them. Chad was scared as hell and confused, he couldn’t imagine how his nephews would feel. He was thankful Sarah’s folks were watching them while they visited Jake.

He was not improving. In fact, his condition had worsened during the few hours they were gone. A different doctor, this one a young black man, had made it very clear to Sarah that the situation was increasingly approaching when a decision would need to be made. Chad could see that she was beginning to realize that Jake might not be coming home, but the three of them maintained as much hope as they could.

Jake had to learn what Ursa knew and he had to do it fast. Something was changing and it wasn't good.

"If these things are kids, then what the hell is this place?" he asked, unable to shield his anger at being toyed with.

"Calm down, partner. You're the first company I've had besides these little bastards. Shouldn't we get to know each other better before I tell you my secrets?" Ursa was still playing with Jake. He understood why the saplings feared the man. He was cruel and got off on it, but Jake wasn't scared.

"Look," said Jake, "I don't know what's happening, but I can feel something slipping away. I know I don't have much more time and I need to find my wife and kids. I need you to help me."

"Well, since you put it like that, I suppose I can be your knight in shining armor. Just go on and toss down your hair princess," he said with a laugh.

Jake was furious. He wanted to smash Ursa into oblivion, but he also knew Ursa was his only chance. Ursa could see the fury in Jake's eyes. No way to hide it.

"Alright, alright partner," he said holding his hands up in a stop gesture. Jake could have sworn he saw a glimmer of fear in the man's face, which was reassuring — at least Ursa didn't have all the cards now.

"Let's have a seat right here and I'll tell you what I know, or what I think I know." The two men sat near the silent river and the saplings buzzed all around, always mindful of Ursa's proximity to them. Jake despised this man.

"First, you said you feel something slipping away, right? Well, I don't know for sure in your case, but I'd bet that it's your body."

Jake's anger rose. He was being toyed with again. "My body's right here. It's fine."

"This isn't your real body, Realm. I don't know what it is, but our real bodies aren't here. I've been back to my body twice since I came here, but only for a second both times, and it's lying in a hospital. I don't remember who I was, but as long as I can feel the tether, I know I might make it back for good. You feel yours letting go, huh?" Ursa paused and Jake, not believing what he was hearing, attempted to ask another question.

"Just listen," said Ursa calmly. "I'm not fooling with you. I don't know why I came here and I don't know why you

did either. I do know that this place is not where we're supposed to be. This place is for kids." Jake was horribly confused, but listened without interrupting. "You see all them saplings popping in and out around us?" Jake nodded. "Those are kids dreaming. That's why they come and go so fast. Some stay longer than others, but never too long. I get in and scare some of them from time to time and can see them — they're just kids sleeping. Crazy, huh?"

"The saplings are spirits?" Jake asked, dismayed.

"Call 'em what you want, they do us, but I don't really know what they are. Hell, they're not dead, just asleep so who knows?"

"Why do you give them nightmares?" Jake asked.

"I don't. They have their own nightmares, I just scare 'em a little, but I get all the blame: Ursa the boogeyman," he smiles as if he is proud of this.

"How do you get into their dreams?" Jake asks realizing this might be his only chance.

"You see that river in front of us? That's what brought you here, right? Well jump in and go for a swim. See what you can find. I'll be around when you get back."

Jake rushed to the edge of the river and looked down. It was smooth, with small wrinkles like old glass and silent. He cast no reflection. Jake turned to ask Ursa how to get back, but he was far off in the distance walking with his back turned. *Time is running out.* Jake leapt head first into the river and felt a warm surge through his body as everything went into an inconceivable darkness. He felt like he was spinning end over end at amazing speed through a black hole, when, suddenly, Jake emerged into light.

A burst of energy sent his mind, he no longer had a body, shooting through the infinite colored lights rushing around him. He could see Ursa's shape walking in the distance below—a dark entity on the plain. Jake knew he was with the saplings now. Thousands of images rushed through his mind, but they were in no way overwhelming. He saw children flying through cities, deserts, mountains, and trees; some frightened, some elated. Countless shapes filled his mind's eye and he nearly became lost in the sheer joy of it all, when he regained his focus: he had to find Sam. Kip was too young. *Please let him be here.* The tether was releasing.

Jeremy Beatson

That morning Sam awoke and felt a tremendous weight, like a stone on his chest. He knew his dad was never coming home. He had said goodbye after all, and Sam promised he would never let Kip forget.

Lift

On his knees in the walk-in fridge breathing
pink detergent, he scrubs under shelves of food
with numb hands. The relief of cleaning the deep fryer,
feeling still warm fat sludge through his fingers,
digging out brown wrinkles of potato and batter.

He watches the clock above the bins
he empties after every shift, when the pans
have been scraped clean, the floors swept and mopped.
On the bus home, his head tilts against the cold window –
night falls – his reflection ripples.

Walking from the stop, looking at the ground,
something crackles from the hedgerow. Through dark
he sees a thrush trapped, panicked in leafless mesh.
He pushes his hands in, and pulls lightly at the web
of prickled branches.

The bird fights free, lifting
above the rooftops and telephone wires, vanishing.

Oreos

“What’s on that tray out there?” I ask, pointing out the kitchen window to the back stoop, with its small set of stairs which lead to a vegetable patch and up into the woods. The woods in northern Iowa have the slough of glacial loess, the debris pushed up by giant ice sheets moving across the central U.S. ten thousand years ago, so this woods has large freestanding slabs of limestone that jut out of the hillside or lie at strange angles like the crude remnants of some haphazardly discarded toy dropped by a giant child. Deeply grooved grey-barked black walnut trees and smooth box elders tower over the tangles of wild black cap vines, bright red and yellow columbine blooms, and the tall mixture of grasses and undergrowth.

“Oh,” my father says, looking at the woods and then down to the level that my finger is pointing to at the top of the back stairs. “Well, can’t you tell?” he asks me. His face is still and serious, but his eyes are glossy and black, mischievously bright. “Whatta you think it is?” he challenges.

“I don’t know.” I reply, stalling for time. There’s something on the post at the corner of the stairs, something brown and clear piled in a four inch high mound. I don’t recognize it, but it doesn’t seem accidental.

“No, huh?” he prods, seeing if I’m quick enough to understand the mystery, but I only wrinkle my forehead, staring at the mound then glancing at my father to see if he will give me some clue. Finally, he laughs and tells me, “It’s grape jelly.”

“What?” I scoff. It’s the last thing I’d think of. I’m not sure I should believe him.

“Haven’t you heard of using grape jelly to attract oreos?” he says, smiling. “Your brother, he brought me a jar and put it out for my oreos,” he explains. His voice begins high and drops down as if it’s falling from the sky.

“What? No way!” I tell him. I know my brother is a joker, and I’ve fallen for more than one of his tricks. Once the whole family was out picking up walnuts for the forestry service, but my brother spent the day carefully placing this taxidermied baby skunk, that he bought somewhere, next to our gunny sacks and on side hills where one of us would find it and freak out.

“Okay,” he snips at me, turning away. He’s acting indignant, but he knows he’s got my attention. “Well, supposedly it attracts oreos. I’ve had a half a dozen or more come to the feeder. But you watch and tell me what you see.” he demands, walking away from me as he returns to pulling dishes out the dishwasher drainer and toweling them dry.

I wait by the window, not entirely sure what I’m waiting for. My thoughts drift to my husband in Arkansas. He is probably sitting at our dining room table eating breakfast and watching a pair of cardinals bully the other birds at the two cedar feeders hung from the trellis over our back porch. His view is crowded by the great green fullness of the oaks covered in early summer leaves, the long-needle loblolly pines and white pines standing like sentinels on the crest of the small rounded mountain we live on. Maybe he’d catch sight of a palliated woodpecker or a red-bellied sapsucker on the great blanched bone of dead pine that stands amid the slick-looking new oak leaves vibrant greenness and the dark green needed of the pines. On a clear morning you can peer through the trees and spy layers of milky blue veils hovering over the river valley. Through the veils you’ll see the tree covered humped backs of old worn-down mountains, the foothills of the Ouachitas where we live. My husband and I might both be drinking our morning coffee now and looking out the window at these two different lands, watching the bird feeders instead of televisions.

I observe the gray-tufted titmice, hopping juncos, and common black-throated sparrows peck through the hulls of black oil sunflower seeds looking for crumbs beneath the homemade two liter bird feeder which more often feeds the squirrels. I get lost watching the juncos frenzied hopping. They till the hulls with their beaks, flipping, and jabbing at these casings for tiny remnants of seed-meats. I check to see if there are any nubby spears of asparagus peaking out of the soil at the top of the backstairs, where my grandmother transferred the crowns of wild ditch asparagus several years ago. There are spears, but none are big enough to eat. The jelly is untouched by the juncos and sparrows, but then a flash of fire and a streak of black draw my attention.

“Da’, come here.” I chirp, my voice high and excited. The colorful streak has come to rest on the post near the grape jelly. “There’s one,” I exclaim, too captivated to turn and see if my father is looking. “It’s an oriole.”

“Just one?” He sniffs and rolls his eyes at me, but I can tell he’s pleased. “Well, watch, Sara,” he says standing near me and gazing out the window too.

The oriole is a male, bright orange and jet-colored, sleek bodied with a pale straw-colored beak. He hops on the edge of the margarine lid where the glob of grape jelly lays, turning and tilting his tiny head in jerky motions taking precaution not to eat before he’s sure it is safe. I slowly step back from the window, afraid he’ll see me and fly away.

He takes a small hop forward and jabs his beak into the jelly. My father laughs, a high-pitched breathy sounding chortle. “Look at that!” he says. “They love it. Oh, I’m surprised there’s only one. Ofen times they’ll be two or three, but they fight over it. Uff-dee! I don’t like to see ‘em fight. You don’t see more than one eat at a time, my oreos.” As he speaks he dries his hands on the towel, folding it into a long cylinder before hanging it on the bar across the oven door. His voice and face are joyfully animated. It’s as if he’s free from the kitchen, from chores, from the emotional reserve of Midwestern and Norwegian stoicism. We’re just two children watching the beautiful oriole and his pleasure in eating the grape jelly.

My mind flashes to a memory of the painting of an Eastern oriole, like the one we’re seeing, which my grandmother always had hanging in her entry way. My father has this painting now in nearly the same place — the entry way, hanging over the coat closet. It was painted by my father’s sister Elizabeth, who drank herself to death before she was fifty. I remember her dark hair and eyes, the way she hesitated before entering a room or a building, the way she often took flight from a place if there were too many people or the walls were too close. She was someone who could light up a space with her joking and her laughter or bring the thunderheads inside with her by saying a string of expletives that cut the air like thunder cracking the sky. “Liz was bright,” my father’d say, “So much promise, quick witted and artistic, but then she started to drink. Oh, and she drank so much. And when she drank she was just belligerent — said such hurtful things about me, about mother. She’d just attack us. It wasn’t any good for us or for her either. I finally had to tell her not to come to the house, when she was drunk like that.” There was pain, and some anger, in my father’s voice, but he’d always

end such talk with, “At least she was never like that with you kids. Anyhow it wasn’t her, just the booze talking.”

I don’t know about my brother and sister, but I know I never kept that rule. I never refused to let her in, as I was told I must do for my own safety. If Aunt Liz came over and tapped on the window or stood at the door because she knew Dad and Mom’s car was gone, then she came in too. I was a little afraid and guilty about disobeying my parents, but I was also fascinated. I thought she could tell me what my parents wouldn’t. The kid I was innocently thought that maybe I could convince her to stop drinking. At least, I might hear a new story about growing up with my dad, and sometimes I’d ask her to tell me why she called my father and grandmother such awful names.

We’d sit down at the kitchen table and her eyes would dart about the room, but always come back to the small cabinet above the stove where the hard liquor was stored. Sometimes she’d pace the room, stopping to peer into the living room or to look into cabinets, to pick up fragile tea cups or look into bowls in the dish cupboard and then put them back. She’d scan the countertops, fingering loose change and the plastic cover of my dad’s check ledger or open the fridge and give me a glass bottle of pop after offering me a beer or complaining if there weren’t any. Maybe she’d have a beer with her or take one from the fridge, but her eyes would always return to the doors of the small cabinet.

I won’t say I didn’t climb my mother’s white vinyl-covered stepstool with the olive green pattern on it that looked like weird flowers or maybe mushrooms on it, climbing up so I could stand on the counter and bring down a bottle or two. I won’t say I didn’t replace them carefully, turning the bottles so that they stood perfectly centered in the circle of dust, keeping the labels facing just as they were when I took them out, and turning the cap so that the strip of broken safety seal paper lined up. I won’t say I liked doing it, but I wanted my aunt to stay.

Some of those conversations are my most vivid and pleasant memories of her. She’d flash me a smile, strike a match to light her Camel, and take my small dimpled hand in her rough brown trembling one. Playing with my fingers, she’d tell me she loved me so much. “Yes,” she’d say. “I love your dad, too, honey,” and I’d beam up at her squeezing her fingers. “Even though he’s a real asshole,” she’d continue. I’d

wilt. She'd apologize, "No, no, I'm sorry. Look at me baby. He's only an asshole half the time." She'd laugh and try to get me to. "Okay, he's not so bad. No, I love him. But he's my brother so I can say what I want about him." She'd pause and remind me, "But I shouldn't say it around you. You kids don't need to hear that." Aunt Liz would name her other siblings, and her mom and dad and say she loved them too, but remind me that maybe I shouldn't tell them she said that. Sometimes she'd lay her head down on my hand on the kitchen table and cry and go on slurring her words until I wasn't sure what she was saying. Then she'd disappear out the backdoor into the onyx-colored night.

I fix my gaze on the oriole eating the grape jelly, even more firmly. I will him not to go, as I try to absorb all the tiny details of his coloring, the way he moves his eyes, how he eats, the color of the inside of his beak, and then he calls out. Dad and I both break into smiles and listen. I want to remember the voice, but I know I won't get it quite right. Somewhere nearby there are calls in response.

Dad continues filling me in, "Well, Matt said it would work. Oh, I don't know a few months ago he came by and put some out. Woof-dee!" He chuckles. "I thought he was crazy, but he goes, 'Just try it. You'll have oreos.' Says he has more oreos out at his place than he knows what to do with. Just got to watch out for the squirrels. Well, the wasps like it too, but they don't eat much so I don't mind. But if you see a squirrel, you let me know. Squirrel'll eat the whole thing."

"I gotta getta picture of him," I tell Dad, turning to run out of the room. My camera is in the coat closet in the front entrance. Aunt Liz's oriole painting is just above the door to the coat closet, and I pause to look up at it. The painting is of a male oriole with very bright orange coloring. He is perched on the branch of a flowering tree with a great pale pink blossom on it. The blossom is delicate and lovely, but dull next to the oriole with his striking colors. He's painted like a racecar, sleek and bright. I'd never noticed before, but he seems to be singing. His beak is slightly open and his head is tilted up to project his voice. Even the feathers about his throat seem slightly puffed out with the expansion of his song.

"Oh, there he goes. Sara'd you see it?" my father calls from the kitchen.

"No." I replied. My throat is tightening and my eyes begin to burn. "I missed it," I mumble as I return to the

kitchen focused on the absence of the bird. But my father is smiling, still looking out at the post, the grape jelly, the woods, the sky, and the quick movements of the juncos culling the seed remnants on the ground.

“Oh, well. There’ll be another one. Just watch.” Dad says, and I become still and calm, focusing on the glob of grape jelly where the bright orange bird has just been breakfasting. He disappeared so quickly, but Dad is right. Soon the oriole returns for another taste.

“It’s on-real, isn’t it?” Dad laughs, his eyes following every movement the male oriole makes. I go through a jar about every four days.” He pauses. Two bright winged orioles are reflected in his eye glasses as he watches the one oriole plunging his beak into the jelly. “It’s worth it,” he continues. “I love my oreos.”

the space-time continuum
of antonio calderon de la loza

in the lobby of baskin engineering
it ain't rocket science
the more you resist me
the more i want you

your declaration of independence
is the trajectory of my yearning
your filibusters of freedom
my confounding invariable
you need your space and have
so little time

all that counts in this equation is that a man
as busy as the pope
as elusive as christian bale can
spare a few hours to
send me to heaven

so baby
go with gusto
be busy be absent and above all be
free
for such quantification
is the critical mass
of my desire

The Long Happy Flight of Asa Smallidge Streb

Settling in by the window, Asa is pleased to see who's got the seat assigned next to him . . .

Even the way he *yawns* looks macho and youthful. Big strapping nameless jock of the unexamined life: lean build, working-class hands, plenty of hair. *Make sure your seat-backs are in their full upright position*, and so slink back to the glories of 1969, long before I lost my hair, long before my new neighbor came into this world. *Flying time to Los Angeles this evening will be five hours and fifty-eight minutes*. Five no six hours of strapping kid strapped-in beside me, another solid advantage of flying cramped economy. I mean I love plans, and hands, which are relevant to the quest. Who's waiting for him at the other end and what does he want in life? Whatever his culture, it's more physical than mine: already he allows our legs to touch, our elbows. Nice, nice, this marriage of Iceland and Brazil, and such an improvement over afternoons at the Finer Skin Institute. Great nameless child in a t-shirt: Eat My Giant Burrito, it says, And Don't Forget To Try My Beans...These precious hours, who *are* you. Let them take my blood pressure now, the doctor would be stunned to see a mellow one-twenty-five over seventy-five. Back at the Conference, the popular people ate near the fuchsias, while the more socially awkward sat near the doors to the cooks. Only concoct. Cocky, too, he spreads himself, nods off. This sea is fine. This sea is pretty. This sea is always sea and wavy. We live so long, and slink back, every day, to child, hooded. Who is my lover if not you. Bodies join. Clouds, as we ascend, enfeeble the invulnerable, allow me to dwell in an Eden that grows lush as a country club. At least I "matured" *slowly*. What's my direction. Solitude desires only to observe the formulaic ride of ping-pong ball and butterfly. He's sleeping the sleep of nineteen: sleep like the spirit of generations of bruised warriors. His tattoos: probably well-done, but pedestrian. Back at the Conference, the popular people ate by the fuchsias, while the more stoically awkward stayed by the door to the cooks. *Tonight's feature presentation will be Gidget, starring Sandra Dee*. Mommy always said, "When boys hit, don't fight back, but go report them to the yard teacher." Hunt nothingness like an arrow. Let the white coat people take my BP now: a wholesome one-twenty-five over

seventy as long as I'm slouching next to *him*, touching. Reckless venereal sleep of the masses. Hip-hop pumping into brown ears and all the gals aflutter. His name? Oh my Moondoggie. It's the ultimate. The flight attendant asks me — seeing he's asleep — "You want his Oreos?" I accept the Oreos that might have voyaged through *his* body: torn and chopped by his teeth, probed by his tongue, moistened by his spit, forced down through his esophagus, churned by his young stomach into thick liquid and squirted deep into his bowel and absorbed into his bloodstream. Nice. But what'll he be like in forty years, or ten. Serve Gidget to the sharks so I can have my Moondoggie. Serve a forty-year-old movie to a twenty-year-old boy and watch him fall asleep to hip-hop. He is not a beauty — perhaps only his hands are good. This drawn-out twilight as the plane flies west above the clouds. This drawn-out twilight as creases increase and nothing but white hair ever falls to the barber shop floor, and not much of that, as his heat begins to envelop me. Can a therapist be wrong about so many things. Dear southtrust bank Customer: Technical services of the southtrust bank are carry out planned software upgrade, we earnestly ask to you to visit the following link to start the procedure of confirmation of customer's data, please do not answer to this email. Two milligrams of Xanax, once daily, forty milligrams of Lipitor, once daily (by mouth), twenty-five milligrams of Atarax, two hundred milligrams of Celebrex (white with gold band), two hundred milligrams of Leptressor, five hundred milligrams of Bioxin every twelve hours: the patient is very depressed. He is also anxious. He worries about his health, and his future. The patient is so nervous that when anybody walks into the room, he fears that they will come and tell him bad news. He denies having any hallucinations at this point. He is single. There is no family support at this time. The patient claims that he is healthy. The patient is a middle-aged Caucasian male who looks his stated age. The patient is nervous now and requests medication. He denies having any suicidal or homicidal ideation. The memory is intact. The control impulse is fair. "You want his Oreos?" "When boys hit, don't fight back, go report them to the teacher." A good goal to have: one night, get to bed before dawn. At the Conference the popular people sat by the fuchsias, while the less socially adept strayed far from the toys and the frisbees. Oh my Moondoggie. Oh Mommy. Slink back, every night, to child, hooded. Oh

Mommy, gotta follow the sun, we were an elevator heading for the sky speeding across the ocean it was the ultimate. Hear that? The sea has left its whisper here, in here, come hear and see. Summer of sheer happiness, you can't imagine the thrill of shooting the curl, it positively surpasses every. . . Naturally, Jeffery would like to think his son was dating the right kind of . . . Put a condom on your toy and live a long and healthy life. As my stomach churns his Oreos. As the mirage of Iceland and Brazil puts its problems on a camel's hump and sends it wishful, diffident, undramatic through the dunes. Say you happen to meet someone who flips you. Say you happen to have a boner at the Bulldog Baths, circa 1969, long before you lost your hair. Say you are lying in front of Charles V's palace lulled to sleep by the strumming of a guitar as swallows swirl and cypresses sway. Peace. Let Dr. Snow see how compliant my blood pressure can be in good company. Dear Mr. Streb: I hope you will respond to this very special invitation to have your name on the Wall of Tolerance when it is dedicated. Placing the name Asa Smallidge Streb has a purpose beyond public recognition. *Please return to your seats at this time, we've encountered a little turbulence....* Working-class hands, long face, and hair. A hundred milligrams of ease, two hundred milligrams of sanity, five hundred milligrams of lovingkindness, will he let me hold his hand if the turbulence goes on, or gets worse, or if the wings of the pilot catch fire. Mouth open, elbows solid against time. "Sleep thou, Sancho, for thou wast born to sleep as I was born to watch." When I am tested, the sleeve tight around my arm, there is always Dr. Snow like a used-car salesman so I must shut my eyes and I'm at Ka'anapali Beach, ukulele sounds coming from the palms, it's always me and some Hawaiian dude as the waves wash up against us from Here to Eternity ("I never knew it could be like this"). Oh Moondoggie, hear that? The sea has left its whisper here, in here, as night falls on the red states, as the cabin shakes to gentle worries of Gidget this, Gidget that. Put a condom on your boy and love a long and happy lie. Dear Mr. Streb: During one of our regular automatical verification procedures we've run across a technical problem caused by the fact that we could not verify that informations that you provided. Dear Mr. Smallidge Streb: A Democratic victory is in your hands! Now go back to Momma and run, don't walk, call in sick and watch sunlight in the elms playing in the elms as it did in 1955

or 1965. Maybe the urologist will be satisfied with my flow and function, then I'll rejoice in the gym with all kinds of kind people and have fun watching triceps trying to inflate and all showered-up I'll have my non-fat cappuccino in a paper cup with my name written on it. And then I'll wander with my book, looking at hands, even if it rains, and think of someone who rose from a tangle of freeway and cinderblock and put out his cigarette and lay back, crammed my fingers into him, crammed my head and all my thoughts into him, he was from Guanajuato and remembering what he told me about his love of soccer I entered him with an eye to his sterling silver toe-ring and soles like the hard monolithic underside of an iron getting closer, closer, giving off a forbidden scent — and then a handshake and it was over, he slid back, reabsorbed into the smog and the grit. Every day is filled with people we see once and never again. But what hair — black greased and brash, as far from greyness and thinning-out as the rainforest is from the Ice Age. Hair. How soon can I expect results? If minoxidil is working, what will my hair look like? What if I miss a dose? Should I try to make up for missed doses? Can I use minoxidil topical solution 5% more than twice a day? Will it work faster, better? Will minoxidil work for *me*? Piss on ants until they die. Buy Comet cleanser and clean the house finally for God's sake and for God's sake smile at the cashier. Wander the streets until it's all crazy with dawn, as my foot crawls up his athletic footwear. Can't stand my feet these days, will minoxidil work for *me*? Back at the Conference, the in-crowd sat near the fuchsias, while the more socially inept stayed near the door to the cooks. "Don't fight back, go to the yard teacher and report him!" Derek Honda slams his social studies book down on my forehead — hey swell — and when I report him to Mrs. Sarcander (she's going bald, you can tell) she looks annoyed and looks away and walks away, ringing her bell: they swarm around me, even one of the traffic boys, they want my old brown briefcase this time and work and work to peel my fingers off the handle, work to peel them off one by one — bye, briefcase! Faggot. Sissy. Goon. Fifi the French Poodle. It's gone, the goon's trusty briefcase, the wishbone, the traced drawings of fashions through the ages. Work to peel the fingers off, work, work for two hundred milligrams of Lepressor, five hundred milligrams of Bioxin every twelve hours (by mouth). Dominic Garfono is tough in just his undershirt, asks me to show him the jack-o'-lantern

I've just made. I want to show him my jack-o'-lantern, I do, he takes it. I hand it to him and he takes it. The patient denies having any hallucinations at this point. Nice boy. The patient claims that he is healthy, and the swells are getting pretty big, maybe we could get the Gidget to run delivery service to the hot-dog stand. And Mommy there fretting. Bye-bye, jack-o'-lantern. When I think it's safe I skip outside with the dog but Ken Fry is waiting. It's almost painless: a strip of air, a strip of life, a shrinking, a narrowing. His hands squeeze. The world narrows. Hands squeeze my throat — Oh Gidge it was creamy, it was the ultimate. Life is always junior high, sandal, thigh and cigarette. Fifi. Faggot. Grass covers the helpless and grass covers the wild. Where is my new name new body new past? Queen of Iceland, creepy Queen and easy prey in search of prey, in search of their soles' smell first thing in the morning and their forbidden smells, unwashed, after nights on skateboards — the thirst, it's like trying to grab hold of a cloud, nothing but nothing, nothing but no. Peace. Will you please take a pen and gently begin to draw all over me, as if you were sketching ideas for a tattoo over my body. Peace, peace. Start at the troubled feet and work your way to skin usually untouched, draw and draw until my body is new, until my body is acceptable and a boy will slip out of all the used skin and it will be the picture you have drawn, great strapping nude. The sun and the surfers have gone, and when a voice picks out my flaws with the cunning of a sniper, there is always another tongue nearby to reel me in, reel me in, saying: Liliuokalani and Kamehameha; and he, like all the other young men lining up for falafels, is dangerous, even the way he waits is dangerous and athletic, even the way he yawns is macho and electrifying. Tourists are filling the cafés besieged by diseased flamenco. At the entrance to the subway they're playing Pachelbel to the beat of a blind man's cane. An ice-cream truck lurches by, drunk or demented, and I make love with the mattress and write his name and burn his name, just like the therapist told me to do, but I keep seeing him curled up with his tomcats, curled up and powerless over TV, saying: Liliuokalani and Kamehameha; his chest smells like apples. The whole city — where am I? — is lucky with youth and lean with swagger. The subway disgorges a much-pierced crowd — I can't wake up, so I relax into the crowd's wiles, into its pliant optimism, and someone looks at *me*. Wanted: escape into the postcards of the world, where it's always a

Alex M. Frankel

canal and a gondolier. Wanted: a theme park consecrated to facets of the surfing life, to lifeguards' lives and the hollows of their chests. In a derelict cathedral a date palm has grown through the altar, and crows rage in the dome. Shattered rose window, moonlight on the dust. Somebody taps my shoulder, taps gently then harder — talk of *landing*, talk of *arrival*. Put a kiss on his impending laughter.

Benjamin Smith

roughly, sixty seconds

I told my students to write in their journals
about “the moment that changed your life”.
Fifteen pens and six pencils
raced across notebooks.
It was a gray morning for
the middle of September after four days
of rain and raw mud.

To these freshmen it was a
Dead Poet’s Society assignment.
They don’t understand how contrived it sounds.
To me, it was a bridge between
the wild writing of high school and
the cold analysis of college

They kept writing, when I considered
how I would complete the assignment:

We’ve decided to get a divorce.
“Have you heard of Kurt Vonnegut? I think you’ll like him.”
She broke my heart.
Another one broke my heart.
I’m not sure I believe in God anymore.
She broke my heart. Again.
“Your grandfather died.”
“Dad’s in the hospital. It’s pretty bad.”
Where’s my name tag? Goddamnit.
“You should probably move out.”
“I can’t handle how much you love me.”
“It might be cancer.”

but then I remember New York
last winter, standing two feet from
Starry Night
seeing the brushstrokes pushing the cobalt sky
curling into itself
and the haloed city
staring at the saucer stars
and the aged moon
when I started to cry, surrounded
by tourists and armed docents.

Grace

Driving home from Fairfield Middle School in the late afternoon, Grace Jones thinks about 12-year-old Tyler Banks who writes like he's chasing something that's getting away. Sentences run into each other, much like the streams that follow the road.

"Try to slow down," Grace says in class.

"I think too fast," Tyler explains.

Grace understands. She is an English teacher for whom writing is difficult. Words come from the knuckles and digits, not directly through the mouth like talking. Thoughts veer off course, land in the toes, the hips, drift above the ear line.

Grace remembers. Her essays once bled where teachers poked them with red pens, trying to force her to slow down. Lost in the abyss of the page, she fingered the folds of her skirt and stared down at her brown shoes.

Teachers injured her papers but praised her written insights, paralyzing her with their seemingly contradictory evaluation. She possessed urgent, poetic thoughts and an almost physical impulse to write, but the idea of being an author overwhelmed her.

After graduation, she continued writing only for herself, and letters to good friends, within a private, safe freedom she insisted upon, allowed herself, found.

* * *

In Grace's seventh-grade classroom, Tyler Banks reads his essay aloud in a small group then asks for specific, "directed feedback," such as help with transitions or copy editing, protecting himself from an onslaught of opinion. He revises his essay based on an outlined plan. His new draft is almost an entirely new essay, a so-called "Drastic Draft." Writing should involve change, Grace believes, much like personal growth. First drafts can be saved for pirating and posterity.

Painfully, Grace listens to her students ask, "Did you like my paper?" Some mask their concern by pretending not to care. Sad, she doesn't want their attitudes to be so contingent upon her approval. Her students plead for so much more than the technical assistance she can provide (comma splices, dangling modifiers). They seek assurance that what they write is intelligent, *special*.

They must feel strong, like authors, Grace thinks.

* * *

Anxious, Tyler sits in Grace's cinderblock office with his essay on the Green Bay Packers, his favorite team. It's punctuated in only three places, once with an exclamation point, but Tyler doesn't notice. Grace refrains from correcting. Papers litter her desk in a messy, friendly way.

"Look," she says, pointing out the window to a parking lot, a big oak tree, a gravel path, students walking. "Notice how part of this picture is moving: the limbs of the tree in the wind, the students, that car?" Tyler looks. He sees things moving. "Notice also," Grace adds, "some things are still; they have stopped. What isn't moving?"

Tyler looks nervously out the window. "The school," he says, "and some cars."

Grace nods. "Writing has both these elements. Some things stand still as a tree trunk. Some things move. People sit on a bench, watching."

Grace puts a pink finger on Tyler's paper. "Here. I want to stop and sit down here." Tyler lets out a short breath. "Now, show me where *you* want to sit."

The long-awaited teacher response.

* * *

Tyler's high school English teacher, Mr. Preston, wearing a worn corduroy jacket, carrying a bundle of books and loose papers under his arm, tells Tyler his paper on *King Lear* wasn't relevant to the reading. He says the word "solipsistic" as if it were a bad case of acne. "I want to hear less of your opinion and to see more references to the text," Preston explains as they walk down the hall. "This isn't a diary. At least one quotation on each page, and don't write 'I think.' It's your paper. I assume you are telling me what you think." Tyler, age 17, looks up solipsism in his torn, paperback dictionary and reads: "The theory that the self is the only existent thing."

In college, Tyler learns that by building connections between himself and what he studies he creates meaning. In philosophy, he learns a tree doesn't fall in the forest unless he hears it. He remembers his *King Lear* essay and realizes, in retrospect, that he admired Lear's strength, that he values people who endure. At age 21, feeling his budding authority, he challenges a bespectacled poetry professor who asserts that *Ode on a Grecian Urn* has one, correct interpretation. "But the

poem means something different to me,” Tyler insists. In ensuing years he recognizes the truth in both his and his professor’s stance. There is a transcendental, classic quality to great art, but he affects it, brushes against it in passing. His master’s thesis contrasts the absolute truths of science with the more interpretive, spiritual truths of literature (convergent versus divergent thinking). The subjective element of the latter complicates evaluating his students’ essays. He struggles to be a fair grader, to respect his students’ assertions, to not wound them with his red pen in the small office he shares with three other, part-time instructors.

Knowing his students want him to love what they write, he reflects that most audiences are critical: teachers, employers, peers, editors, readers. Students tell him that even when they *freewrite* in their private journals they feel watched. But when he attempts to be non-evaluative, to remove himself as the central authority figure, they become confused. When he charges them to determine their own audience, they complain: “Who else do you want us to write for? You’re grading us.”

Half of them still can’t end sentences with periods.

Throughout his 30 subsequent years of teaching, Mr. Banks labors to foster self-authority by requiring students to construct and defend bridges between their inclinations and the material they study. The public education system mandates that he prepare them to be debriefed.

* * *

Grace pulls into her driveway, after work. Home at last. Mist from the river rises above the stubble of her neighbor’s corn field. She feeds her cat, then settles into her chair by the front window and writes, first privately, slowly expanding her imagined audience, overcoming her fear of being an author.

Most evenings she doesn’t know what she wants to say, feels only the familiar, almost physical impulse to keep writing.

Hero's Guide to Travel

You never know when you will come home. Maybe
the sun will be rising over the blurry horizon.
Maybe you have been lost for ten years, sleeping
on needles, fiending for demons. Maybe you will be recognized.

Or maybe it will be raining and when you finally walk into your home
you find it flooded with rivals who do not even notice
your soaked clothes. Or you go to the airport in Rome,
and though you miss something like crazy, maybe your black dog,

you can think only of motives to miss your plane.
You haven't seen Bernini's Fountain, you haven't indulged in amaretto.
Really, you don't want to return, ever, you want to fly, find
hallucinatory worlds. Remember to take care:

or your wings may tear apart and you will plummet
back to the same maybes you tried so desperately to escape.

Finding Haworth

They told me I shouldn't drive there.

"The best way to go to Haworth is by train," said Colin, his mouth full of spaghetti.

I thought it best not to argue, since I was staying in his house. Actually I thought of the place — a centuries-old crackerbox crammed between two others like it — as his wife's house. The house seemed more like Clare than like Colin — untidy, but earnest and warm. The tiny town we were in, Menai Bridge, sits on the Anglesey side of the narrow waterway dividing the island from mainland North Wales.

Clare did not approve of my plan to drive from Menai Bridge to southwest Yorkshire either.

"It's a four-hour drive at least, and you've never driven in the UK before," she said, pushing spaghetti around on her plate. The spaghetti was for my benefit — Clare thought it appropriate for an American guest of Italian descent.

She was taking my plan very hard, mostly because she was sick of Americans breezing into her country full of "everything will be fine" optimism. I could tell she wanted to crush that optimism, prove it to be misplaced.

Clare had earlier tried to discourage me from even contemplating a trip to Haworth. In her opinion, conveyed to me via email the week before my departure, I was planning too much, trying to cover too large an area in just ten days.

"What you risk," she wrote, "is seeing so much that you really see nothing at all."

Her travel strategy, she said, was to "pick a centre" and settle in to "absorb." Making a detailed itinerary ahead of time, she said, was a big mistake, as it left one no chance to "look about" and decide what was worth experiencing.

Get lost, I thought. "I'm sure you're right, C," I wrote, "but I think I'll do it the way I've already planned." It seemed as if she wanted things to go wrong for me, just so my irritating optimism would suffer defeat.

"You Americans always complain about everything when you get here anyway," she fretted at me just days before

my departure. “You come here with assumptions formed by the realities of travel in America. Don’t you understand that travel in the UK just isn’t like that?”

The Haworth plan had come to me one day while I was making my trip itinerary. I was looking at a Michelin map of central England, which I’d purchased because it included details of Manchester, the city I was flying in to, and of North Wales, where I’d be staying for several days. As I sat looking at the urban blotch of Manchester, the name *Keighley* caught my eye. My heart jumped — I knew that name. Keighley was the nearest big town to Haworth, the village where the Brontë family had lived 150 years ago.

I sat almost breathless. If Keighley were so close to Manchester, Haworth must be as well. There it was, to the southwest. I was already going to Manchester — why couldn’t I go to Haworth as well? It looked to be only a two-hour drive from the Manchester airport. *The parsonage*, said a tremulous inner voice. *The graveyard*. *The moors*. In that moment, I knew I would go no matter what the cost or complication.

I’d always wanted to see England, especially the homes of famous writers like the Brontë family. As an undergraduate, I read *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and longed to see the places described in those books. Later I read and admired Virginia Woolf’s essay in *The Common Reader* (1925), in which she said of Charlotte Brontë, “In that parsonage, and on those moors, unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation, she remains for ever.”

About 15 years after graduating, I was browsing in a secondhand bookstore and came across William Stanley Braithwaite’s *The Bewitched Parsonage*, a biography of the Brontë family published in 1950. Intrigued anew by the reclusive, talented sisters, I bought *The Bewitched Parsonage* and read it that evening. But the Brontë story according to Braithwaite left me cold. Many of his assertions seemed ill-formed, and his negative depiction of father Patrick bothered me. Quick to seek two-dimensional characterizations, Braithwaite makes the story what it need not be: over-dramatized.

Juliet Barker’s 1994 biography of the family, *The Brontës*, which I turned to next, put right what Braithwaite had kicked askew for me. Patrick Brontë was not a cold and uncaring father, though he obviously lacked what today we

might call “interpersonal skills.” Stunned by the death of his wife when all six children were under eight years old, and then by the deaths of his eldest two, Patrick buried himself in work. Should we wonder at his emotional distance from the household? Everything in his upbringing had taught him to take the academic perspective. He read, studied, delivered sermons, and wrote letters to his local newspaper. With two unmarried women in the house to care for the children, he probably saw no reason to do otherwise.

I did not think much about England and Haworth in the two years following my reading of those biographies. Then someone gave me a book of photographs entitled *Brontë Country*. As I paged through the beautiful pictures of Yorkshire, I thought, *I really must go there*. Three years later, when I finally did plan a trip, I did not at first consider visiting Haworth because I thought it was too far north from where I’d be staying. Discovering its tempting nearness to Manchester that day I looked at the map made my proposed trip even more exciting.

As I sat at dinner with Colin and Clare that night before my departure from Menai Bridge, I thought with some apprehension about my upcoming long drive through unfamiliar country. I did not, of course, convey this apprehension to my hosts, lest they find in it grounds for smugness. Instead, I pretended that I wasn’t at all worried. I played the American optimist until it almost made me dizzy.

When I left Menai Bridge early the next morning, I found that Clare had taped a sign to the dashboard of my rented car: DRIVE ON THE LEFT. I laughed, but left it there.

My drive to Haworth went without a hitch, and by noon I had arrived at the famous dot on the map. The village has expanded far beyond the boundaries known to the Brontës, but the real action is still in a cluster of steep, narrow, cobbled streets that all rise toward the church. After parking the car, I went straight to the bewitching Brontës’ former home, which lies just behind the church.

The Haworth parsonage is a big box, divided inside into squares, like an elongated Rubik’s cube. The rooms are so small that at first I couldn’t believe it — the dining room, where the young Brontës did their writing, is scarcely big enough to hold four people in addition to the furniture. Patrick Brontë’s study, the room in which he spent almost all his time,

is smaller than some bathrooms I've been in, and is just across a narrow hallway from the dining room. I was moved by the thought of such big personalities in these cramped quarters. An additional wing, built post-Brontë, invites visitors to linger over exhibits, but one passes through the main section of the building rather quickly. The Haworth parsonage is almost never without visitors, so it's difficult to stand and contemplate in peace.

Once outside the parsonage, I felt disappointed — I had been in the presence of the Brontë ghosts, but had not been spooked by them. The lawn in front of the house is tidy, and surrounded by a well-grown herbaceous border. Along two sides runs a low stone wall which separates the front garden from the church cemetery. In contrast to the immaculate house and grounds, the cemetery oozes decay. The predominant gravestone style is horizontal slab, but the roots of large trees (planted after the Brontë's time) have pushed the stones around, so that almost none lie flat. Because the trees block the sunlight, the slabs, their inscriptions nearly worn away by exposure, are covered with slick moss. If the ghosts inside the parsonage were untouchable, the ones in the graveyard were almost unbearable.

After roaming around the graveyard, I went inside the church, the back door of which lies about 50 yards from the parsonage front door. Inside, a sign says that all the Brontës but one (Anne, who died and was buried at Scarborough) lie below, in the family vault. This church is not the one Patrick preached in, but the tower adjacent to it is original.

Outside the church, a few dozen steps from its front door, is the entryway to the Black Bull Tavern, where Branwell Brontë drank himself to death. Within view of the apex formed by the church door and the door of the Black Bull are establishments making a profit from the Brontë mystique. "Land of Gondal" said one that I avoided. I went instead into a tiny shop which served as a tourist information center.

It was in this shop that I bought a small flyer for 50p which, thanks to sloppy editing, got me lost on the moors that day.

There were six young Brontës when Patrick and his wife Maria moved their household from Thornton, near Bradford, to the rather bleak village of Haworth in 1820.

Charlotte, destined to become the most celebrated of her kin, was the middle child. There were five girls and one boy.

Maria Branwell Brontë, age 38, died just over a year after she and her husband moved to Haworth. The four eldest children, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Emily spent only a few years in their new home before they went to a boarding school about 45 miles away (Charlotte would later vilify this school in *Jane Eyre*). Maria soon returned home seriously ill with tuberculosis and died without seeing her sisters again. A short time later, Elizabeth returned home with the same disease, whereupon Patrick withdrew Charlotte and Emily. Elizabeth died, and Charlotte thus unexpectedly became the eldest child. After their return from school, she and Emily paired up with younger siblings Branwell and Anne to create two complex fantasy worlds, Gondal and Angria, which they recorded in tiny books written in an almost unreadable script.

After their mother and older sisters died, Charlotte, Emily, Branwell, and Anne spent their childhood under the care of their mother's sister, Elizabeth Branwell, who had come from Cornwall to run the household during her sister's illness. Patrick never remarried, so Aunt Branwell stayed on; she died at the parsonage when the children were grown. This woman was present for most of the literary output of the impassioned, precocious Brontë siblings, but left no diary or notes on the miracle taking place under her Cornish nose.

Aunt Branwell ran the household well by all accounts, but maintained something of an emotional distance from the children. Their other caretaker, Tabitha Aykroyd, offered them a warm kitchen and stolid good humor, as evidenced by some of Emily's "diary papers" left in her portable writing desk. And so the children grew, turning increasingly to each other for solace and entertainment. They became obsessed with their fantasy lands, but kept them a secret from the grown-ups.

The juvenile stories did not, however, lead directly to the publication of their famous novels. Initially, they all attempted other careers: Charlotte and Anne as governesses, and Branwell as a private tutor and railroad employee. Emily, most reclusive of them all, left home only once, for a year's study in Brussels, at the Pensionnat Heger. She went there with Charlotte to learn the essentials of setting up a private school, a plan which Charlotte was convinced would establish an independent income for them.

But their bad Brontë luck took over, and the school never opened (they received no replies to their advertisements). Then Charlotte had another idea: why not publish some of the poems that she, Emily, and Anne had been writing? She overcame Emily's objections and eventually the book of poems was published in 1846 (they paid the publisher £31 to print it). Despite their cautious move in using male pseudonyms (Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell), the book failed: it sold only two copies. Charlotte, undismayed, suggested that the three sisters try novel writing. Brother Branwell, by this time embarrassing the family with his public alcoholism and drug addiction, was not invited to participate.

Over the next few years, the three sisters produced four successful novels among them. Financial independence was finally theirs when tragedy again struck: Branwell, Emily, and Anne all died within the same year. Emily was 30; Anne 29. Charlotte, now alone with her robust father (he lived to 85), went on to fame and fortune as a novelist, and in her 38th year, married Arthur Bell Nichols, her father's curate. The Brontë curse caught up with her as well, however, and she died within a year of her marriage. Not one of the six Brontë siblings reached the age of 40.

Listed in the flyer I purchased at the tiny shop were three self-guided walks on the moors. I chose the shortest, which promised me a hike of just over a mile. One exits the parsonage graveyard through an odd contraption called a "kissing gate," which allows humans but not livestock to pass through. Then you walk along a narrow stone path which runs between two paddocks, each bordered by a low, dry-stone fence. Turn right at the end of the paddock and head straight up a muddy, rocky path wide enough for a car, though certainly not meant for one. After a fairly serious vertical ascent, you reach a plateau, along which runs a narrow, paved road. Cross this road, the flyer said, and you've left civilization behind. You are officially "on" the moors.

As I crossed the paved road, I almost immediately lost sight of the village and surrounding farmhouses. One can't see what's below during the slow climb — the view is cut off by endless rolling hillocks. To see any distance, one must climb to the highest points, which sometimes are jumbles of giant rocks. The flyer directed me to follow a stony path through swathes of heather. Far ahead, I could see a man with

a dog, but otherwise I was alone. I climbed steadily. The heather was dark purple; it riffled as the wind passed through. Huge slabs of rocks were strewn about, some sheltering small pools. The wind was intense, almost violent. I felt, for a moment, just like Jane Eyre:

I struck straight into the heath; I held on to a hollow I saw deeply furrowing the brown moorside; I waded knee-deep in its dark growth; I turned with its turnings, and finding a moss-blackened granite crag in a hidden angle, I sat down under it. High banks of moor were about me; the crag protected my head: the sky was over that.*

The flyer's directions were clear enough, though they relied on some dubious landmarks ("go a little past the pile of dirt"). I took many turns and climbed several hillocks at the bidding of that bit of blue paper. When I came to a fork in the path, the flyer said, "Take the right fork and walk along the stone wall." I obeyed, walking along the wall and then beyond it for some time without encountering the next listed landmark. Where was the paddock with two cows and some sheep I was supposed to come upon? I realized that Something Had Gone Wrong. There was nothing but more hills ahead of me, and the day was wearing on. The sun would soon set — I had to get back to the village. Somehow the flyer had led me astray.

I couldn't see anything from the low place I was in so I climbed a big pile of boulders. Looking back about 300 yards, I could see the place where the path had forked. That was the last flyer landmark I'd verified, so I had to get back there. I turned around and started retracing my way along the stone wall. As the bright sunlight faded, all the hills were beginning to look alike, and I suffered a moment of panic. What if I couldn't find my way before it grew too dark to walk safely? Would that man with his dog find me? If he did, would he help me or hurt me? Would I find myself, in Emily's words, amid "high waving heather 'neath stormy blasts bending?" Nothing in *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* had prepared me for this. I walked on.

Then, at last, there again was the fork. I stood in its midpoint, flyer in hand, thinking hard. My options were either

to take the *left* fork this time (i.e opposite what the flyer said) or backtrack the entire way. I didn't think I had enough sunlight for a complete retracing of my steps, so I went left, gripping the flyer rather fiercely. The path started heading perceptibly downward about 30 yards along, and soon I came upon the expected paddock and livestock. Suddenly, my fear was gone, and once again, I became Jane Eyre: "What a golden desert this spreading moor! Everywhere sunshine. I wished I could live in it and on it."

The rest of my walk was problem-free, and I returned to the village just as the sun was setting.

Wuthering Heights is a book I often want to reread. I encountered it first at age 21 and thought it interesting but odd in its intensity. Several years later, during my second reading, I found a gripping story that left me wishing to stand on the moors myself. I know it was Emily's power, rather than merely the setting itself, that moved me, because *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (also set on the moors) did not have the same effect.

In winter nothing more dreary, in summer
nothing more divine, than those glens shut in
by hills, and those bluff, bold swells of
heath.**

That is how Emily describes her native landscape. But the writer who made the Yorkshire moors famous the world over, who made me want to climb the hills and feel the wind, was ultimately an enigma to her family and to her audience. The closest one gets to Emily is on the land she loved so fiercely. There are many biographies of the Brontës, but one needn't read them to understand what formed the "peculiar music" of their creations. Find Haworth, and you have found the Brontës. Even after 150 years, they are still at the parsonage. And on the moors.

**Jane Eyre*, Chapter 28

** *Wuthering Heights*, Chapter 32

Earth to Earth

Add water to earth stir by hands until gloved with mud let dry wriggle earthworm fingers to crack grayness peel off larger flakes yelp with pull of arm hair or use stick to stir broth in old pot or discarded can walk barefoot especially in mornings when earth is dew cooled and after rains pause to feel soil in soft places between toes claim wooden corn crib (if empty) as play house or tie string around even spaced elms in wind break pulling pungent weeds for clean dirt floors spend hour watching apple green inch worm on twig visit Little Bill's grave (he went mad so we shot him) use crates for stove and furniture up grade to off season fish houses try to tame captured field mouse in bucket for pet sneak cheese mourn its death sometimes eschew "houses" for baking in full sun or in shade of cottonwood in yard discover old tea kettle sucked in puddle pull tug let younger sister tug pull SLURP! suction breaks sister smack sits in mud (laugh. cry.) abandon freed kettle by puddle get clean panties pour mud into muffin tins and pie plates let dry decorate with rocks (those with fossils or pebble smooth preferred) risk wrath of Hank by gleaning grain for sale or cattle feed for garnish use violets clover daisies in season as will vary grayness by collecting ripe horse nettle and nightshade berries mash to red gold jam in mud free pan flavor with remaining drops in Crème de Menthe bottle found in junk pile near pig pen (hogs are such boozers) ask cousin who will die of cancer in a decade to taste (he refuses) discover adults still play in mud but call it gardening and use old tea kettles as watering cans.

Once Upon the Green Hills

It was during one of the trips to the green hills near Toronto, or Niagara Falls, that I met a wide-eyed youth who wanted to know more about Hong Kong, the ex-Colony, two weeks after reporters had disseminated news about its recent return to China. I was a courier of a different kind, bringing stories in person from East Asia to the classrooms in North America.

“Will the people of Hong Kong soon start eating dogs, cats, and snakes?” the youth asked. “You know, the Chinese do that in the mainland.” He waited for my answer.

It began to sprinkle. “Is that all you have heard about the Chinese people?” I asked.

“I’ve read about it even in church,” he replied. “The Chinese eat their pets.”

“You can’t trust everything you read or heard as if it were the gospel truth,” I said. “It could be as untrue to real life as the happy ending of a fairy tale.”

“What do you mean?”

“Many fairy tales end with a Prince Charming marrying a Cinderella, and they live happily hereafter,” I said. “That’s a lie. Their marriage could end in a divorce. You will find that out soon enough.”

“I don’t know what’s true, and what’s not.” He paused, and then released a series of questions in rapid succession. “Do you believe in UFOs? Do you watch the *X-Files*? Are you real? Did you come from out of space? You could have just popped out of the picture book I got last Christmas.”

“And you could be the happy prince,” I said.

“I love that story.” He smiled. “My mother read it to me when I was small.” He looked as playful as the sun disappearing and emerging behind the clouds. His hair rippled like a golden field of wheat in the wind. Light and shadow danced in the rain, and the youth held an umbrella over our heads. His cheerful disposition strangely reminded me of the sadness of a prince in a faraway land where the Union Jack was lowered for the last time after one and a half centuries of British rule. His Royal Highness promised the people he would never forget them although he knew very well they had been denied the right of abode in his kingdom.

I could not remember if it rained heavily that day, thousands and thousands of miles away from these hills, but I could almost hear the bagpipes and Chinese drums in the remote distance. A 21-gun salute echoed across the Victoria Harbour as fireworks burst in the sky. On top of the din, I heard Tufu from the Tang Dynasty reciting one of his poems, believing that the people of China can weather any crisis if only the leaders are mindful of their humanity.

I decided to satisfy the youth's curiosity and tell him a real-life story about the people of Hong Kong. "They are just like you and the girl living next door," I said.

I

The house was quiet when I returned from a birthday party. Mother was lying in bed in her room. There was no point of asking her if anything was wrong. She preferred confiding everything to my brother Luke, who had gone on a fishing trip with his friends to an outlying island. At 18, he was three years older than I, superior to me in every sport--roller skating, bike-riding, swimming, table-tennis, all of them. I played some table-tennis too, but he would not play with me, for he never thought I was a worthy opponent. An elder brother is supposed to take care of his younger sister, but Luke never behaved as an elder brother should. Once he shot at me with a toy water pistol, but I dared not fight back. I asked God why He had made Adam stronger than Eve. The pistol ran out of water, so Luke went to refill it and his anger began to cool. Maybe God had answered my prayer after all.

But mother loved Luke. Father liked me. He liked Luke too, for he could stay up all night helping him lay out the articles and photographs for publication.

Last night we had a fight. Luke was the one who started it right after we had turned off the lights and gone to bed. I outtalked him, and I heard father telling mother in the living room that I had good opinions. Luke heard it too. He got up from his bunk and climbed up to mine and slapped me across my cheek. "That's for your good opinions," he said.

Father came in to stop him.

"You're partial to girls," Luke said to father. He also insinuated the residents of our village were ignorant of that

fact when they elected father to be one of the three arbitrators to settle disputes in the village.

“Can you point out one particular decision that was unfair,” father said with solemnity. There was a special magical power in his voice that conveyed authority and silenced his opponent.

Luke was quiet.

Father asked Luke to behave himself and to be nice to me.

Last August Luke bought me a fuzzy toy dog before he went to Taiwan to do his internship. It might have been a cat. I couldn't tell. It had hair all over its face. He did not usually give me gifts, so it was a surprise. Shortly after his departure, he wrote back to us. He sounded homesick, saying that he had never cried so much in his life. What a shame! A man should spill blood, but not tears, as people say. I missed him, though, during the months he was away until he returned and started bullying me again.

“Where's mother?” he asked when he returned from his trip, swinging his filthy sweatshirt at my face.

“It stinks.” I fended it off.

Mother shouted for him from her room. He ruffled my hair and pushed me back into my chair. It fell back and I tumbled down with it. I heard mumbling, occasional sobbing, and short periods of silence.

My brother came out with a ten-dollar bill. “Mother asked us to buy fish balls and noodles for dinner. She's not feeling well.” He looked strange.

I went to the kitchen to fetch a large pot with a carrying handle and put it in a burlap bag.

“Don't choose that bumpy road again, please,” I said as I climbed onto the back seat of his bike.

He did not say anything, but he did not seem to be in the mood for playing tricks on me.

“Do you dare to speak English with the British?” he asked.

“Some of our teachers are British. Our form mistress said this morning that if we are caught speaking Chinese at school, we have to pay five cents for each word.”

“You know how to fill in forms in English too?”

“I have done that before.”

“I'm taking you to the city tomorrow.”

“Why?” I was surprised.

“To find father.”

II

The following day my brother and I went to the city by train. On the train Luke said mother had told him that father looked pale when he returned that afternoon with two other men. They followed him to his study which they searched, and they left with a pile of papers.

The room at the police headquarters was shrouded in melancholy. There were altogether ten people sitting on the bench, waiting, and my brother was the only man. Finally an English lady emerged from an office with a Chinese man following her. She was tall, brown-haired, and blue-eyed, like most foreigners. She looked like my English teacher, and the queen. All well-attired English ladies resembled the queen.

She had a sweet, pleasing voice, and politely asked what she could do for us. The Chinese man interpreted her question. A little elderly lady said during a staccato of sobs that she would like to see her son. The English lady said we had to fill in a form first and come back a fortnight later to check with them. Then she asked the Chinese interpreter to help us with the forms.

My brother gave me a push. He wanted me to ask the lady to find out if father was with them.

I never liked to speak to strangers, but she looked harmless. At first she could not hear what I said, as my voice was barely audible and she towered over me. She stooped a little, to shorten the distance between her ear and my mouth.

I repeated the question.

She stooped a little more and gave me a piece of paper to write down my father's name. My hand trembled while I was writing, and I tried very hard to hold back my tears. Then she left to get the details for me.

As we waited, I felt dizzy, wanting to hold onto something familiar. It was the first time I cried on my brother's shoulder.

Half an hour later, the English lady came back. She sat down beside me and told me that father had been detained in the Touch-the-Star-Peak center. Then she started asking me

questions, and putting down my answers. Finally she said we were allowed to visit father in two weeks' time.

It made the headline, but there was no need to splash such a trivial incident across the front page. Father did not have a hiding place for ammunition, so it was not a criminal case. But he collected information for several secret agents sent from Taiwan, in exchange for financial support for the newspaper he was organizing.

Mr. Sung, Member of the British Empire, called. Father had met him in a press conference, and had written campaign speeches for him. They had been good friends. I liked his daughter, who gave me a doll last Christmas. I had been to their house once, a three-storied mansion with more than ten servants, and with a kitchen three times the size of our house.

Mr. Sung promised to give father a full-time position if *Hong Kong News* fired him after his release. Mr. Sung had hired the most influential Chinese lawyer in the colony for father--Sir Joseph Wong. He and Mr. Sung were among those regularly invited to the governor's garden parties.

Father had confessed everything. He did not have any choice. A special unit in the Foreign Affairs Office had found out everything before they arrested him. Luke told me all this after his visit to Sir Joseph Wong's office that morning. A week later, the lawyer said over the phone that there would be no date for father's trial. There would be no trials at all. Suspects of political offenses did not go through the usual legal procedure.

None of us had a birth certificate. Luke and I were born in Mainland China, and so was mother. The Chinese government did not issue birth certificates. Although father was born in Hong Kong, he did not have a birth certificate either, for they did not give out birth certificates in those days. He was a British citizen. It wasn't a lie. The British government shouldn't deport its own citizens.

Sir Joseph Wong called, asking us to get someone to testify to the fact that father was born in Hong Kong. Grandmother was the only one who could do it, but we had been keeping his arrest a secret from her.

Grandmother had a weak heart, and I did not think she could stand the shock. We lied to her that father was going to Singapore to take care of some business on behalf of Mr. Sung. Father was applying for a passport, and he had to prove

that he was born in Hong Kong. She believed our story. Mr. Lee, Chairman of Chinese Affairs, promised not to reveal the secret to her. He was the interviewer, quite impressed by grandma's memory. The problem was that almost every witness of father's birth was dead or had gone elsewhere without a trace.

As we waited for the first opportunity to see our father, people in the neighborhood labelled us the James Bond family. "I hope our village will not be turned into a hideout for spies," said the owner of a rattan factory.

III

The truck stopped in front of a mansion that was almost hidden by a high stone enclosure. Luke told me that we were atop the Touch-the-Star Peak, and the building in front was the detention camp. He helped mother and me down from the truck. He also helped the elderly lady, who had come to see her son. She was my grandmother's age.

I walked on a cobbled path lined with palm trees along its two sides, curving around the mansion. Tall and erect, the trees were stretching toward the sky. I felt diminished, very small and frightened. Behind the flower beds on my left, five panting German shepherds were fenced in a wire enclosure. I looked into Luke's eyes to find the assurance that they could not jump over the fence.

A guard led us into a small room, silent and bare with metallic benches. Forty-five minutes later, an overweight British officer emerged from his office and waddled toward us. The three top buttons of his shirt were unfastened to expose a hairy chest.

"Ask them to keep their bloody mouths shut," he shouted. "If they yelp, I'll kick them out." His portly carriage rocked a little.

"Please stay calm," the interpreter said. "Otherwise we may have to ask you to leave." His job was to soften the threats hurled constantly by his bosses although he could not stop the verbal brutality.

"That's not what that ugly British said," I told my brother. "He must have mistaken us for dogs. Only dogs yelp."

He hushed me.

The elderly lady came forward, saying: “May I see my son now?” She started to weep. Although wrapped in a heavy sweater, she was shivering, and her face was pale in the dim light.

The hairy man abruptly curtailed her appeal for compassion with a shrug and quickly disappeared into his office, slamming the door behind him. She followed him to the door and stood there. He emerged a few minutes later, shot a glance at her, and pushed her aside. “John, put a stop to this, will you?” he said to the interpreter. “Why don’t you take them to the visitation room? I am tied up here.”

The woman wept uncontrollably and felt upon her knees.

“Is she crazy?” the hairy man shouted. The cluster of pimples, nestling on the tip of his enormous nose, reddened. “Ghastly!”

His scowl must have unsettled the feeble woman, whose muscles around her mouth began to tighten. All of a sudden, she reached for his hand, grabbed it, and sank her teeth into it.

The man screamed, bursting into hoarse shrieks which sounded hardly human. The elderly lady beat her head on the ground. Luke sprang to her aid and helped her get up. The interpreter interceded, explaining that she probably meant to kiss the British officer’s hand instead of biting it as two burly guards were about to take her away. Luke put his hand on the frail woman’s back and guided her away from the guards.

“I, daughter of a brave sea captain, have knelt before a barbarian for mercy,” she muttered between sobs.

“Come with me, everyone,” the interpreter said, trying to calm the guards and the visitors.

We were led to a bigger room. Some were typing while others were talking, or having their afternoon coffee break.

“What’s your name?” The man, sitting nearest to the door, spoke to us. He looked like John Kennedy.

Luke pushed me lightly. I told Mr. Kennedy my name, my mother’s name, and Luke’s name. He seemed impressed that I did not need an interpreter. He smiled.

“Fifteen minutes only,” Mr. Kennedy said. “Don’t give him anything.”

We had nothing to give him. They had made us leave the cigarettes and matches in the headquarters. Father might have quit smoking.

It was a dimly lit room. I could not believe what was happening. My own father, who was so near, yet seemingly so remote, was on the other side of the barred window. He appeared to be in grave meditation; his face showed signs of deep sadness, and his eyes looked at us with an unfocused attention.

Mother asked if they had fed him well, if they were nice, if he had found everything satisfactory.

Three meals a day. No cigarettes. Father tried to chuckle a little.

Luke wanted to know if they let him read the newspaper. *The South China Morning Post* only. But Father couldn't read English. Chinese-language newspapers were supposed to be either right-wing or left-wing. My brother worried about the kind of torture they might have used. No inquisition was necessary as everyone involved had been caught and deported.

I wanted to do Luke a favor, so I told father that Luke was taking good care of mother and me.

We were silent for a few minutes.

Father told mother that it would take him only a couple of months to establish himself in Taiwan. "The plum blossoms are the same everywhere." His voice trailed off.

Mother started to weep.

Luke had a job in the factory just a few blocks away from home, I told father. He could ride his bike there. He was paid twice a month, and two days ago he had received his second check and had bought some roasted duck for dinner.

Mr. Kennedy came in to ask us to leave. Father stretched out his hand to reach mine and asked me to be good. He did not have to worry. I was always good.

Grandma went to see Mr. Joseph Wong again, but learned that he could not locate any witness of father's birth. It was up to the ranking officers to decide my father's fate.

IV

“Dad.” That was all I could say, for his sudden appearance in the front yard did not seem real.

Mother hurried out from the house. I watched her closely and saw her eyes gazing at father with disbelief. She leaned against the door with a sigh of relief, her lips quivering.

“Oh,” she said, like a suspect who had just been found not guilty. I remembered what I had seen in foreign movies, all the kissing, all the hugging--the foreigners like to kiss and hug a lot. But I had never seen father kiss mother or her kiss him or them kiss each other. No, there was no hugging. No kissing. Nothing but my greeting “Dad,” and my mother’s “Oh.” Neither did father rush forward to embrace us, as people do in movies. I did not expect him to do that either.

V

The story of my father ended happily as a fairy tale should. Still holding the umbrella over our heads, the youth wiped the raindrops off his face. I assured him that this real-life story was essentially true although a few of the characters and events could be composites. The names of the people had been changed, and my memory might have played tricks on me at times.

Farm Justice

Rough framed pock marked
concrete porch horizontal
white slats broken
by brown barred screen against
this backdrop spaniel-mix Herbie
observes through alert black ear
sunlit wealth in copper
gold and red feathers
and the linen-haired
child barefoot dusty
denim overalls faded
shirt holes across knee and elbow
the white cup in his hand
giving water to a thirsty
bantam hen.

Feathers blood
stained paws
killed chickens
untrustworthy
We shot Herbie.

Reunion

My father came from among cows, and blared out from a deep tunnel or hollow cave: this ground-earth, and I could hardly make him out. An ass stood not far from him, a shaggy creature milling about, walking around, then starting to run around him. I watched him, my father, squinting because of the sun's intense glare.

"Father," I suddenly called out, in my wayward greeting.

His fat wife – round as she was – seemed taken by surprise because I was here. She was seeing me, as I was seeing her, as if for the first time. From among rose bushes she drifted closer: she came, I came. My father too. Bougainvillea and sunflower in my line of vision. Her hair streaming, it seemed, in the haze of heat like a sheet of rain, as I kept looking at her. My father blinked, then instinctively waved to me.

"Father!" I hissed. His high forehead, his sparse hair standing on end almost.

"Who are you?" he asked, as if he wasn't sure it was me.

"It's me, your son," I said.

His fat wife came closer, full-blown she seemed, and she muttered almost mutely, yet it was like a hundred voices in one; and I figured she was glad to see me, the long-lost son who'd stayed away so long, like our singular, if forlorn and melancholy, village ways. "So you really come?" she asked in echo.

I nodded, and again looked at my father in the shadows with the ass moving around him now. Flies flitted, a few wasps zooming in, the dreaded *marabunta* mostly. Then the ass opened its mouth, its teeth bared, literally, and it started braying; oh, its mouth widened, illimitably, then snapped shut. Ears yet pricked up, alerted.

"You really come?" my father asked, with blinking-unblinking eyes. I nodded; and he still kept coming out of a narrow cave, his hair knotted, clothes raggedly, and he seemed wasted, though his skin was like old leather. One wasp darted again, then began hovering close by, kept whirring.

Quickly I moved sideways to avoid the wasp's bite and sting.

So did my father, but slowly. “So you really come,” he hummed.

His gum, whitish-looking; his jaws set tight. His wife’s face was oval-shaped, like the moon, come to think of it, and I looked at her, almost compelled to it. But my father: it’d been such a long time since I’d last seen him; and I often imagined him in a kind of underground cave; he literally was; but for how long?

Right then his wife smiled, as the sun’s rays came around her, almost encircling her; and her expression was open, so natural. My father’s own face was sunken, in contrast, the jawbone pulled almost into a socket. His eyes burned.

I nodded to him, then to her: like my ongoing ritual.

She nodded back, and yet smiled. My father seemed to wait his turn now, and he wanted to say something else, maybe about what had been unreal with him all these years, yet wasn’t. The bougainvillea stirred. The palm trees fluttered, all here close to us near the equator; but then it was as if we weren’t here at all, nowhere . . . really. Absolutely nowhere.

Instinctively my father’s hand reached out: he touched me on the shoulder, which I was glad for. The ass started moving again, deliberately circling us. Would it start to bray once more with its mouth opening cavernously? My father’s wife (she was simply that) muttered something inaudibly, then asked if I wanted a drink of water, it being so hot! Indeed I was thirsty, like a new sensation in me; the same in my father, too, I sensed.

I swallowed the water she handed me, in gulps, and see, it was as if I was really meeting her for the first time; and such was her amiable face, with her own particular welcoming. The cup in my hand being yet my father’s cup: I knew, she knew. Everyone else . . . whoever, knew. I swallowed again and again because of my real thirst.

She smiled, once more. Then my father made as if to sip from the cup also, his action half-hearted. But his throat was parched, I knew; and I remembered that time when I used to watch him drive his cattle along the winding road . . . home. But no more! What else would now come between us?

Maybe he would ask about my mother, where she was, how she was doing. His wife took the cup from my hand, as if taking it from my father’s hand too; and we looked at each other, talked to each other with closed mouths, teeth

clamped together; and memory unfolding, indeed being with us, deep layers of the heart, as the entire village came closer. The ass, the other animals, moving around: it wasn't hard to tell without looking. The flies, wasps, bees, hovering. The wind hurled. Shrubs, trees, the tall grasses, rustling: all being with us. Yet maybe nothing was real.

My father's wife beckoned, and immediately I began speaking, like my false words. Her words too, as she seemed to mimic me. My father forced a grin, sort of. The wind, flowers, bougainvillea, all looking at us. Wasps kept whirring.

What was going on between my father and me? Going on with us all here close to the equator? Words rounded out, sheer syllables: vowels and consonants, my sprung rhythm of another time, another place, maybe. What was I really thinking? Ten or eleven as I was, then . . . but now older.

Much older; and maybe I'd been away too long, even though I was right here, back in the village. I stood on hard ground, this caked earth. The ass's mouth opening again, widening; and it would start braying louder than ever before. Don't I know? The sun now a wide arc in the sky. Cirrus clouds drifting. Oh, how the animal brayed, as we talked: our words a mute rhythm, this song, who we were becoming.

My tongue slaked with water. The cup, indeed, being many cups in one, as the ass knew, the insects, flowers, the wind, the trees, all knew.

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So it'd be for days to come, weeks, months, even years to come, because I'd been away for so long, yet was also here...all along; nowhere else, as we continued talking and kept listening to each other: knowing and not knowing. The ground-earth, this tunnel, at a standstill. A decade going by in an instant, it seemed like, wind still blowing: everything so fleeting.

The ass's ears perked up once more for no reason at all. What would happen next?

My father kept listening, underground only, he wanted me to know.

He really listened in his instinctual way, I figured. His wife looked at us, and she wouldn't deny it.

Deny what? Everything that kept occurring, you see, in the sun's silence. Spaces everywhere coming around us, our paths narrowing. The wind's silence too, and the palm trees being at a standstill.

What would my father say next, as I looked at him.
What really?

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I didn't want to imagine more, believe it or not: because of how we'd lived in a previous time, as it seemed – my father and I, and my mother too: all of us! My young brothers, also, being with us. My father's round wife started moving away, instinctively moving closer to the line of the equator: to feel the intense heat only, as we kept talking.

Distances yet with us, but seemed unreal. How could it be?

What else did I consider, as the ass came closer, yet was yards away? Would the animal suddenly bare its teeth like palisades (if you can imagine it)? The wind began gusting, as if from a fresh new source . . . here in the equator. And my mother, *Where was she?* The fullness of time, the years going by. Oh time, which I didn't want to think about anymore, but only to listen to the ass's bray, the animal's eyes swirling in its forehead: such a dizzying turnaround.

I kept listening to it, in silence.

Ah, my father's throat was no longer dry: his thirst was quenched, finally, I knew.

Water on my lips again, the cup being handed to me once more.

My father's wife smiled, her cheeks becoming wider; her ears perked up, like the ass's own, on this spot of ground.

Imagine, eh.

My father suddenly stood alert and saluted, from underground, yet being above ground: if his silhouette only. Everything being in the sun's glare, despite a presage of rain, I thought, which only the ass understood and then started running around. Running faster, like no other animal anywhere did. The sky falling down, covering the face of the earth, I felt.

And what else did I know, as my father forced more words out, yet did not speak at all. Nothing else he would say,

I would say. Only his round wife breathed in hard, as the ass did too, its teeth bared; and time would be nothing really because the sun sunk low, the moon appearing-disappearing, for good. And I simply looked away.

Bruce Wyse

colour goes

colour goes quite quickly
when it is not colour fast:

the buoyancy of blue: sportive, expansive, magnanimous;
abounding, variegated green;
the bravado of implausible purple;
the alarming interruptions of red;
the naivety of yellow, losing caution, growing bolder, reckless,
then hardening into world weary gold;
the super-saturation of orange, outrageous in its self-promotion;
even the stubborn absolute of black, the utterly uncompromising, . . .

all become compromised with folded, ironed age,
scoured by a sun thirsty for solids,
sampled by the inquisitive transparencies of air and water

and colourless abstraction takes its toll on our hours;
the everyday emerges:
pale approximation of some indistinguishable, perdurable neutrality

Hamstrung on the Trampoline of Language

After fifty years of talking, he's out of juice. Tongue-tied and ill at ease, he trades in nothing to say while ducking the pressure to say it anyway. Crowded rooms are minefields. EXIT signs pulse with the urgency of heart monitors. Since phone calls assault him like orange alerts, he carries no cell. With the requisite travel budget, he'd gladly celebrate birthdays in a foreign city, alone, relishing the pungency of uncomprehended voices. Take away his fear of being eaten and he'd trade lives with a plaice fish, its mute self-possession masking diffidence like a psychic gel-coat. Still, when he greets you from across the street with a shrug that says, "If not for this river of traffic between us . . ." take him at his word. He's a stick-toy Ishmael, odds of rescue nil.

Social phobias may attest to character (defective in this case), childhood trauma (peremptory in anyone's) or the usual gang of existential thugs. What keeps him frog-marching himself along sanity's tightrope is the awareness that he *is*, in fact, damaged goods. Accused of self-absorption at an early age, he can only plead guilty as charged, and like literary idols from Montaigne to Emerson, he considers navel-gazing a respectable practice. Proust retired to his cork-lined room; Stephenson, to a South Seas island. Even they might have stopped short of Jean Paul Sartre, who defined hell as "other people," but here's the X-factor: when they're not writing, intellectuals seem to thrive on company. They live to talk. A fellow traveler with nothing to say, *our* man chokes on dysfluency, his throat a cindered airshaft. For this guy, hell isn't other people; it's conversation. He might take you by the arm if you're intimate and toss a frisbee your way (with enough distance between you to cancel out dialogue) or learn to sit wordlessly in your presence. When tongues cleave to palates, he takes a powder.

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Elaine's father ran the Shell station, more or less. His family lived in the floodplain of the Charles River, their slattern house moated with sandbags. From the bays of his service garage uptown, Earl Polito radiated menace. No hail-fellow-well-met, he; when the station closed, if you were interested in shooting seagulls, you could follow him to the

dump. But Elaine: in homeroom she'd tap you on the shoulder. An early bloomer who projected appeal in a restless, distracted way, she favored an expression adults would recognize as wounded. You recall the way she twisted strands of hair around her finger and jackhammered her knee against the underbelly of the desk. She blushed when teachers reprimanded her but kept on talking out of turn; Elaine couldn't help herself. Once in gym class, Steve Mangini stated conclusively, "Polito's a chucker." Her attentions confused you, but you paid attention. One day she invited you home.

"Why?" (the casa Polito being a place best avoided).

"I don't know. We could fool around together."

"Doing what?"

"We can have donuts. And," she said, "I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Just something. *You* know." Elaine paused for a beat before whispering (whether in fact or just in memory), "We could go to bed if you want."

Your turn to pause.

"Don't you like doing it sometimes?"

"Oh," the first flare of puberty answered, "I suppose *you* do." Let put-downs pass as foreplay.

Elaine gave up, had her seat changed. She put in appearances at Paul's Market to buy her old man's Luckies. Once she was glimpsed in Tommy Rafferty's Camaro, her eyelids painted lapis. Tommy it was that got Elaine in the family way, back when "intercourse" was a rumor and conversation nothing to worry about. Before Elaine drops from sight, though, let's feature her in a dream. There she is, balancing in a leaky skiff, round arms wrapped around her knees. On shore you hold the frayed, severed end of a rope. Good thing you're not aboard.

Muddles repeat themselves. When fellowship collapses, dismissed as a tenuous, unwillable condition, guilt vies with grateful relief. For habitual avoiders, getting to *not* know you is standard practice. Recently, after ten years of occupying the next-door office, a colleague retires. You've greeted him by name unflinchingly, but he only ever replies with a silent, barely perceptible nod — nothing unusual when you think about it. Students you've taught pass by on campus without a glance. In these aversions, you read no insult. The surface of the earth being crowded with animate, vertical

objects nattering on cell phones or moon-walking in bubbles of alien perception, how are we to countenance human beings? We go our ways, dragging tentacles of missed connection.

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The world is peopled with social beings, too, gregarious sorts who welcome the challenge of a charity case. Here we find an undergraduate, aspiring to write literature, who attends readings in the company of his English professor, Dr. Edwards. “Margaret,” as she insists he call her, has others in her coterie, and it’s only out of kindness she nudges him toward the podium one evening where a Famous Poet smiles, soaking up the rapture of his college audience. In one hour’s measure of liquid phrases, the bard pledges 300 youths to live and die for poetry.

Hailing the maestro, Margaret shouts, “This is (himself), one of the students I mentioned. He’s shown me *his* poetry, and I thought you’d like to know what a fine young writer he’s becoming.”

Nothing better, to be sure. Pleased to make your day. Shaking the poet’s large hand, his mute tongue congealing like a beef patty, the student knows what protocol requires: speak to his knowledge of the great man’s oeuvre, extol the muse whose acquaintance they’re supposed to share — whatever. But calculation kills. Our hero dons his Edvard Munch mask instead, yorking in an antechamber of his mind, as the poet’s gaze settles on some promising brighteyes standing by. We leave our tortured undergrad in an echo chamber of witticisms, anecdotes, panegyrics — the utterances that failed him a heartbeat ago. His moment for contact is past.

A history without regrets is a history without language — it’s unrecorded, and this explains the ways utopians fiddle with words. Quaker *thees* and Jacobin *citizens*, Bolshevik *comrades* and lesbian-separatist *womyn* all point to the need for clean breaks. Most language reforms come to nothing, though, and your own zip-mouthed agenda is haunted by the memory of another.

Summer of 1980: at a hill farm in southern Norway, you witness a childrearing experiment worthy of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Staying at Dalandgaard as a worker-*cum*-hanger-on in exchange for meals and a cot beneath the barn eaves, your occupation is pulling weeds in strawberry beds. Also digging

pasture stones and failing, mostly, at herding the milk goats, sheep, a single unruly cow, and tribes of miscegenating fowl. (For the record, Norse cattle say “møø.”) You want to improve your Norwegian, but the farmer of Dalandgaard puts a premium on spoken words. A disgruntled beatnik and fierce autodidact, Sigmund condemns language as a tool of oppression. “We are *colonized* by it,” he says. “It crushes us before we find a voice!” All human evils, he feels, are social constructs rafted on verbal currents from one generation to the next. Thus, conventional speech is *forbudt* in earshot of little Erling. Liv, the boy’s mother, goes along with this policy — she’s a product of experimental schooling herself. That, and the blows which have swollen her jaw like an eggplant. (Sounds of male snarling and female weeping grow familiar at Dalandgaard, perfectly audible in the barn.) When it comes to words, both parents keep shut around their child. Conversation goes underground, like sex after kids.

The regimen is raving mad, but to raise a human being without vocabulary or syntax takes work. Sigmund spends enormous energy producing the utterances he directs at Erling. Listening to his strings of nonsense syllables, a kind of Dadaist croaking, you feel you are hearing “I Am the Walrus” played backwards, or an African click language translated by Maoist re-educators. Whatever it is, it produces results. Going on five years old, Erling speaks not a word. He sobs and murmurs repetitively throughout his waking hours. He rocks himself in a corner of the yard, his back to a wattle fence, when he’s not sprinting from a homicidal turkey rooster; but you never hear him talk, even to himself. Not to worry, Sigmund explains. In marathon bull sessions, he keeps you up at night embroidering theories. An unspoiled child, appareled in celestial light, will have no need of verbal trappings, it seems. Corruption cannot cling to the mute, shielded as they are by their wise and cultivated innocence. “The words of men are breath,” Sigmund quotes, “and breath is but wind.” Whether or not the hay gets made or the strawberries go to market, Dalandgaard will bequeath to humankind a holy fool. “It may be too late for you and me,” Sigmund avers. Still, he takes comfort in shepherding goodness. The project will fail *only if Liv subverts it!* or *society!* intervenes. Success, Sigmund believes, depends on calloused love. Just a push from his father, and little Erling redeems Adam’s fall.

(There might have been a nightingale fluting when you crept from the barn. Channels of rainwater brimmed the ditches, swallowing footsteps the morning of your escape. Thirty years on, you wonder what ditches little Erling may have flopped in. What ceiling tiles has he memorized in his life? You ponder, too, your telling no one about the farm you fled like a fugitive.)

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Despite his sins of omission, he's always been attracted to Buddhists. Specialists in silent sitting are not known to be talkers. In the Zen technique known as *metta*, he reads, practitioners inhale the sorrows of the world and deliberately exhale wellbeing. An in-breath of suffering, an out-breath of kindness, breath after breath, patiently repeated — that's the exercise in a nutshell. It's not alleged to cure unhappiness; *metta* is just a way to acknowledge affliction, to free oneself from denial. Nor does meditation work magic, the teachers say, though it does unencumber. You can't help people unless you can be hurt.

The Arms and Armaments Gallery at New York's Metropolitan Museum: strolling past mounted knights on display, their tons of chain mail, casques, buckled greaves, and cuirasses, he learns that armory declined with the Renaissance. It was finally understood, a pamphlet explains, that the more thoroughly you shielded a knight, the less nimbly he soldiered. (Sigmund of Dalandgaard, a pacifist, armored his kid in silence. Little Erling may have escaped history, but the same can be said of an armadillo. The hermit's life is one you choose. Glimpses of it bring longing for the shoulder-rub of the herd.) On the sidewalks of New York, people merge and mingle.

Still, he remains unconverted. It is the herd he finds — in spades — during the summer of 1986, in Oxford, England, where he's anticipated monkish privacy. The stillness of the city's reading rooms, its cloistered groves and courtyards shadowed by chancel arches, gives way in summer to throngs. Tourists mug for the lens, their arms encircling the Radcliffe's Roman emperors. Busses disgorging Japanese obstruct the Bodleian Library, while Texan high schoolers appropriate street corners, loudly condemning the shopping opportunities. Jostled half to death, locals are conspicuous for

their testiness but deaf to the tact of scholars. *We're* not tourists, he wants to say. *We're* graduate students writing papers for actual dons! But stiff lips lose out to memories of the Blitz, apparently. A sorry pass he comes to one morning while striding through the covered market, one of few sites in Oxford unvisited by foreigners. Elbow-to-elbow with greengrocers and nannies pushing prams, a pair of student mates air opinions about Shakespeare in flat-footed American voices. *Coriolanus*, the play they've been reading, features vicious mob scenes. The uncouthness of crowds is their topic when the first mate turns to the second mate, saying, "*These* are by far the ugliest crowds we've seen! These are vulgarians on a rampage!" A teashop proprietor standing nearby overhears him — she let go a combustive snort before pulling her glass awning and securing the shade behind it. Seconds later, a hand reaches past the blind to secure a primly lettered sign: "Trading has ceased for today." On the trampoline of language, dismounting is the hard part. Better not to climb aboard.

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Years of experience and a sharpened sense of shame urge you to tread water at the social margins, an agoraphobic extra in a farce of miscues. To overflow is not your métier. Like a blistered heel, your dread of filler speech teaches you to step gingerly, and you risk others' poor opinion to avoid it. Yet the habits of solitude may put off reckonings. A recent potluck buffet occasioned this insight for the hundredth time. In spite of wine, mood lighting, and upbeat techno pulsing from the ceiling speakers, the gathering you attended was bleeding its host — or half the host, anyway. The wife of the household basked in a corona of *bonhomie*; it was her husband who looked paralyzed. You knew how hard he was trying, having just repeated with him the same halting imbecilities you have staggered through on other occasions, partners with prosthetic limbs in a three-legged footrace. Good sports, you paraphrased NPR, tutted over the quality of public schooling, bemoaned the cravenness of the publishing industry. When lapses in conversation loomed you spoke at once, overlapping and jockeying for position. Recovery followed as the host deferred, banging his kneecap on the produce drawer while

reaching for another beer. “So,” you offered, “how does Whitney like violin lessons?” You’ll go on like this for years.

In the end, when other excuses pale, you are inclined to blame lockjaw on the vacancy of commercial discourse. Box store greeters conspire with SPAM purveyors — “Here’s the offer you requested!” — to render communication a fatuous, unedifying pastime. Media satellites pixillate the night sky, phone towers stake the horizon, and life on the grid makes solitary confinement imaginable. Speechlessness may be grim to experience, but at least it’s honest. Often laughable, it’s dumb in the literal sense only. None of us articulates the texture of the soul, yet — you feel — the prolix are leaking theirs by dribs and drabs.

Consider recent developments in greeting styles. Hipsters of the 1970s angled their palms around each other’s fists in a revolutionary dope-smoker salute. New Agers might take your hand in both of their own and give it a therapeutic pat. Who can forget Nixon and Brezhnev, entwined in their global strongman smooch? The south Asian palms-together bow is said to be in decline, while today’s youth, whether from reserve or hygienic principle, greet their peers with the lightest touch of the knuckles. It’s a handshake that says, “Here’s not getting acquainted.”

You are still looking for the greeting that asks, “How’re you holding up?” needs no rejoinder, and frees you to go your ways, unarmored if a bit unhinged.

Gavin Goodwin

Woman at a Window

Swinging from the handles of the pushchair
a polythene bag stretched with tins –
swinging from the handles, cutting at her shins
as she pulls the buggy up
the concrete stair case. Armpits of her blouse
dark with sweat. The bulb in the stairwell
burns a cold yellow light.
The steps smell of urine.

At the window, her back to the kitchen,
her son watching television,
she looks out at the square,
a cherry tree dense with blossom.
She looks hard into it: the clusters
of petals get thicker, softer.
She wonders, if she fell,
would those branches catch her.

Rumble Strip

They drove in silence. Threading south through the congested arteries of the aging Detroit-Metro freeway system, he noticed the silence waking, stretching, filling the cab of the small truck.¹ There are so many kinds of silence, and their two individual silences mingled in the absence of music or chatter from the stereo.²

His began as self-aware, almost guilty.³ He knew from the marriage he had given up on that silence could be treacherous.⁴ There seemed to be a point beyond which it hardened and became brittle, and to break it was to accept the violence of its shattering. Also though, he welcomed the quiet. He was used to driving in silence,⁵ and it got his mind

¹ A black 1996 Dodge Dakota, a model notorious amongst truck guys for electrical problems. The stereo had quit working, and though Brett took the dashboard off over three years ago, he has yet to attempt to fix or replace the radio.

² It started with a headlight dimmer switch, which had begun smoking one night on the way to work. He replaced that but is pretty sure that in doing so, he somehow killed the radio, which has not worked since.

³ Brett often feels guilty for things he might have done, and things he knows he did, but that no one could possibly know about, least of all her, unless he talks in his sleep, which he is reasonably sure he doesn't do, since his first wife was a light sleeper, and would surely have let him know, in her own special way, that he was disturbing her.

⁴ Madison had been three years younger than him, and chemically imbalanced. Her silences had alternated with bouts of tears and banshee rages. They had agreed to get a divorce two weeks after their wedding day, after she admitted to sleeping with a guy from work in the stockroom. Even now, imagined scenes of their sweaty humping amidst the pallets of Sunny Delight and Bareman's Half & Half come to him unbidden, accompanied by a sudden sharp twist of his stomach. After four years grooming racehorses, it amuses him to think of these cramps as bouts of colic.

⁵ [See also footnotes 1 and 2] He was a bachelor when the radio conked out, and for as long as Khalen has known him, he has driven in silence, with his dashboard laying in the open bed of the truck getting skuzzier and more faded every day.

working.⁶ He respected her for the guileless way she gave the silence space, seemingly unaware of its spreading out around and between them.⁷ Her curls made the words “spun sunshine” run through his mind when she turned to look out her window, and he smiled a little at the weight of the unspoken phrase on his tongue.⁸ The tired four-cylinder hummed along in fifth gear, bleeding speed on inclines and then racing downhill.⁹ The joints in the highway thumped at the tires like a heartbeat.¹⁰

She has not yet connected this aberration in his otherwise exemplary character with the procrastination which so drove his ex-wife crazy.

⁶ It is important for him to do things which “get his mind working,” as he fancies himself an author. He writes strangely melodramatic horror stories often centered on characters who are also writers. Khalen sees a direct link between each successive book he reads — most often by King, Cussler, or Koontz — and each “new idea” he has. He usually tells her the plot of whatever he is reading several times, and yet he seems entirely unaware of how similar his “new ideas” are to those same books. She finds this troubling, but she hopes it is only a phase and that with time it will pass. She is terribly optimistic, almost saintly in her faith in humankind, and in him in particular. This optimism is surprising, considering the state of her family life during the year and a half before she moved in with Brett.

⁷ Khalen is not, in fact, unaware of the silence — she simply prefers it to pointless chattering. Her mother is a chatterer, and it has always gotten on her nerves. In all fairness, her mother has every right to be wary of silences, as they often mark a shift in her husband’s capricious moods.

⁸ Brett is deeply in love with Khalen, and she knows this. She loves him back, as fully as she can, though never having been in love before, she cannot be absolutely sure. Following this line of thought might lead her to wonder if she will *ever* know for sure until she falls in love with someone else.

⁹ This truck, purchased for \$11,499.00 in Kentucky before his marriage, managed to pull a three-thousand pound trailer from Soo St. Marie, Michigan, to Bellingham, Washington, when he and Madison had left Kentucky in late August four years ago to “try someplace new,” as she had put it when she suggested the idea following the wedding. It was not until

Her silence had settled over her shoulders like a sleeping cat, and the pressure made her eyes ache a bit as she stared ahead toward the city. But it was the ache of some almost-pleasure, and the silence eased something in her as she let her mind wander across open spaces where subdivisions multiplied like toadstools.¹¹ She was acutely aware of him

they had completed the grueling week-long cross-country drive without AC that she revealed to him that she had repeatedly fucked her coworker, Bill [see footnote 3], in the stockroom at Kroger. With over two-thousand miles between them and family he did not have the heart (because she had torn it out and tapdanced on it) to kick her out [of the truck — see endnote A]. So they hung on for four more months, disliking each other but still fucking regularly until he got laid off and began wetting the bed. He is not sure, but he thinks stress can cause a regression into childhood dysfunction [see endnote B]. In a possibly related regression, he came home after his first night of work at a local grocery store sobbing that he just wanted to go home. So they did: they crossed the Cascades in mid-December, nearly losing each other several times on icy passes and slushy plains. They were divorced as soon as the paperwork could be processed. They had nothing much, so there was nothing much to divide.

¹⁰ It was not until later that Brett learned that Madison had been pregnant prior to the divorce. She called him one sunny January morning, when the light reflecting off the snow made it too bright to look out the window. She'd just had an abortion, she said. You were pregnant, he asked? Yes, she said, but it's over now. He didn't ask her if she knew who the father had been — or rather — would have been. He said the things that seemed appropriate in such a situation, and then they said goodbye. He often morbidly wonders about the remains. Do they bury it or burn it? If they buried it, it's conceivable, he sometimes muses, that he could find where it was interred and disinter it. Then its DNA could be tested, and he would know one way or the other if it was right to hate the cunt who ruined his life and killed his baby. Other times he imagines finding out that it was not his, and that he might hunt down that ignorant prick at the Lexington Kroger and beat him to death with a crow-bar in the stockroom for impregnating his [ex-]wife.

¹¹ When Khalen's mind wanders, it most often stays on well-

beside her, an arm's length away, and yet she avoided looking over at him, knowing that if she did, he would smile, perhaps touch her leg, brushing the ridges of her corduroys.¹² She looked away, not to keep him from touching her, but to extend that exquisite moment of equipoise for as long as possible.¹³

Silence always ends, though — if it didn't, we wouldn't need to name it. Theirs ended when they pulled off the highway and turned onto Woodward, heading south into Downtown.¹⁴

worn and comfortable paths, avoiding those dark and tangled places where the trees crowd in to tear at one's clothing. When it does stray down one of these paths, she often gives a little shake of her head, joggling it back on course. Brett has noticed this tic, and thinks it is a sign of how proud she is of her beautiful curly hair. It is beautiful. *He's* proud of her beautiful hair.

¹² Khalen's mother had forbidden her from wearing shorts or skirts for most of her childhood, and still, jeans and corduroys make up the bulk of her lower-extremity wardrobe. Her mother had feared that Khalen would attract the wrong kind of attention, the kind which led to trees tugging at a young girl's clothing.

¹³ She has become adept at looking away without seeming to. Most of her communication with her parents lately has consisted of avoiding meeting their eyes. When Khalen was younger, it had never been like that. Whatever happened had begun in her senior year, a while after spring break. Her father had suddenly grown edgy, and her mother even chattier than usual. She still wondered what it was all about. But aside from a single bizarre exchange with her father [see endnote D], she'd never found out for sure what had happened [see endnote C].

¹⁴ Brett has asked her to come on this drive, into the city. Khalen knows makes him uncomfortable, but he has not yet told her the reason. She suspects that they might be going to the Chris Rock show at the Fox, but she does not want to get her hopes up. She has contemplated for an instant something even more exciting, but *that* is out of the question. Isn't it? She refuses to think about it, though she gets a fizzy thrill in her stomach and chest whenever she does. The sight of the gigantic church across from the exit ramp gave her another of those thrills.

“Can you believe all of these old churches?” He craned his neck to see the top of the Ethiopian Orthodox church across the street.

“Almost as many of them as there are porn shops.” She pointed at yet another low cinder-block shoe-box with blacked windows and gaudy neon signs.¹⁵

He nodded. Traffic was heavy, but not frantic as it would be in two hours, when those employers who hadn’t *yet* relocated overseas or down south cranked open the derelict floodgates, and the suburban workforce poured out of the city.¹⁶ By then he hoped to be parked at the Renaissance Center and safely ensconced in a dim booth at The Pegasus.¹⁷

They both watched the countless gothic churches, like bankrupt cathedrals, some with handwritten signs proclaiming their current denomination and meeting times. Finally the road bumped from broken blacktop to cobblestones — an endless rumble strip that welcomed them into the eerily quiet heart of that old and wounded city.¹⁸

¹⁵ Saying this makes Khalen blush, but he is not good at noticing such subtle changes in complexion. He is red-green colorblind, and she enjoys teasing him about this fact. She blushes because the word “porn” reminds her of a nagging suspicion she has concerning the source of the troubling tension in her parents’ home [see endnote D].

¹⁶ Much of Brett’s family comes from Detroit, Royal Oak actually, so he grew up visiting them. But this is the first time he has personally driven into the Motor City, and it terrifies him. He hates driving actually, is burned out on it, and he never feels right in any city. But this is different: he has plans, and they are nearing fruition. He is, however, also nervous about taking cabs and he hopes that the People-Mover can get them to Greektown and back. He recalls the grimy cabs he rode in when his father had brought him and his best friend here for a Piston’s game and an evening of blues at The Soup Kitchen. He also recalls the wild yelling of the homeless man they’d passed in the street, drunk before ten, and most likely afflicted with Tourette’s.

¹⁷ They ate at The Pegasus once on that trip and Brett remembers the atmosphere to be romantic, and the Greek cuisine the best he has ever tasted. If not for the show at The Fox, he doubts he would have ever eaten there again.

¹⁸ Is it possible that we are more than the sum of our scars?

Notes:

A: For the first month in Washington State, they lived out of Brett's truck and Madison's car in a succession of campsites. They began at Larrabee State Park, with its miles of craggy coast, where they had made love (was it still love by then? [See footnotes 4, 8, and 9]) under the open sky, in full but distant view of the tourists at the roadside overlook. Larrabee was also where he found the seal carcass snagged in the rocks, like a popped inner tube with short hair. He had poked at it with a stick until it yielded up its skull. The crabs had peeled it pretty well, and two days of boiling over the fire in what became known as the "head pot" yielded a fine specimen of an aquatic mammal's skull. He had balanced it on a post in their campsite as a totem of some sort, but came back from work a few days later to find it gone. After that they moved up to Birch Bay State Park, where the tourists quickly became too numerous, sending them inland to Berthusen State Park, and the lonely campground with its banana slugs and stray cats. Strangely, the only other campers there the entire week were three vanloads of Mormons. There were twenty or more grown women, nearly thirty children, and three bearded men. He and his wife had quietly referred to the horde as the polygamists, and from then on, any large van was dubbed a polygamist van.

B: Understandably mortified by this, Brett searched the web for help. He learned that this condition is known as adult-onset secondary *enuresis*. At the helpful and aptly named *embarrassingproblems.com*, he learned that stressful events can sometimes cause a resurfacing of enuresis, or bedwetting. He was comforted by this as it allowed him to blame his then wife and ignore the fact that the consumption of large amounts of alcohol is also a contributing factor.

C: Khalen's father Melvin worked as a security guard at a baby food plant. Six nights a week he was the only person in the corporate office complex. Most of his shift was spent sitting at the reception desk in the dim lobby, scanning the internet's vast offerings of pornography. His favorite site was

[see footnotes 1-17, and endnotes A-D]

The Anal Adventures of Rear-Admiral Willy. It featured a sweaty old guy (fatter than Melvin, though more tanned, due to his adventures being in the sun as often as not) and his first mate Pokey. The two of them cruised the coast (of Florida, Mel suspected) picking up young girls in obviously staged meetings and inviting them out for an innocent cruise on the *S.S. Willy*. The girls invariably accepted and were soon sunbathing in the nude, which led to blowjobs and intercourse with the Admiral and Pokey and sometimes a few other guys. Even the tired looking older girls (still younger than Melvin by at least a decade and a half) managed to look pained and surprised when Willy slipped his skinny cock past their anal sphincter, but by the time Pokey (who was shorter than the Admiral, but much bigger around) took his turn, they were warmed up and appeared to enjoy themselves. Melvin thought the nautical theme was pretty hokey, but the photo quality was better than the typical motel-room-audition sites, and the girls were relatively young and innocent looking.

Melvin was aware on some level that there was something more than a little perverse about looking at pictures and movie clips of girls the age of his daughter—who was eighteen—having sex with men his own age. This knowledge sat like a lump of something sour at the bottom of his stomach, cramping sometimes. But it was not until the night when he clicked on the thumbnail labeled “Ashley” that he really understood that every one of the Admiral’s girls was, in fact, someone’s daughter. And she was his.¹⁹

¹⁹ Melvin was ninety-seven percent sure that “Ashley” was actually his daughter, but was prevented from confronting her by the questionable nature of the discovery. Instead he carried out his investigation on three fronts: (1) by trying to find out exactly where she had gone for spring break in her junior and senior year; (2) by trying to find out where exactly Admiral Willy operated; and (3) by spending every night trying to find more pictures of “Ashley,” hoping to assemble enough evidence to confirm or disconfirm her identity.

He had more luck with the first and third than the second. She had gone to Daytona Beach both years, according to his wife. He had no success at all in tracking down the Admiral. Looking at the pictures, he fantasized about flying down to Daytona and searching the docks until he found the *S.S. Willy*. He was not exactly sure what he would do at that

D: Her father began by saying that he knew everything. Khalen looked back at him blankly, so he added, “about spring break?”

Her eyes darted to the right, and then returned to him. She was pretty sure that was one of those signs interrogators watched for. She took a deep breath and asked, “So?”

“I know all of it,” he said. “We need to talk about this.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” she said. Not entirely true: she thought she could

point. He found several more pictures, and one blurry video clip of “Ashley.” The family computer also contracted a nasty worm in the process, and he explained to his wife that the internet was like that. She said she’d never gotten a computer infected with a virus. Not that you *know* of, he replied.

He was then ninety-eight percent sure that his daughter had been violated repeatedly aboard the *S.S. Willy* — and he had discovered a litmus test. “Ashley,” it turned out, had Celtic design tattooed low down between her navel and her groin. He noticed this in the seventeenth or eighteenth picture he found. He had, then, only to determine whether Khalen also had such a tattoo or not.

Feeling that asking her openly would reveal his hand, he tried to “accidentally” see her naked. Once he used a tiny flat-head screwdriver to unlock the bathroom door while she showered after her jog. He waited until the water stopped running and then barged in to “get some medicine.” He caught her winding a towel in her long hair. She was turned just enough that he couldn’t see her belly. She shrieked, turning further away and pulling the towel from her hair to wrap beneath her arms. She turned back, red faced, and asked exactly what the hell he thought he was doing. He couldn’t remember what he had intended to say, so he grabbed the first bottle he could find in the medicine cabinet and fled the scene. It was Midol.

After nearly being caught by his wife while trying to sneak into Khalen’s room with a flashlight at three a.m., he decided he would have to confront her. He was at this point, ninety-nine point three percent sure that his daughter was on her way to porn stardom. It was an intensely uncomfortable conversation for both of them [see endnote D].

guess.

Her father looked doubtful for a moment. He swallowed hard, and she noticed the sweat glistening on his forehead. “I saw the website,” he said, “the *pictures*.” His voice cracked.

“What?” She asked. “I have no idea what this is about.” She didn’t.

“How could you *do* that? Why? For *money*? You have . . . I —” He was trembling, and his eyes glinted wet behind his glasses. “Why *that*, with *them*?!”

“What...” He was frightening her. “Just what the *hell* are you talking about?” She had never spoken to him like that before or since.

He stood there trembling and then suddenly seemed to have remembered something. “Khalen,” he began, “Do you have a tattoo? Did you get a tattoo over spring break?” He dragged a hand across his forehead and wiped it on his thigh.

She understood some of it now. She nodded a little, pulling up the leg of her striped pyjamas to reveal a life-size black and yellow butterfly on her right ankle. It had hurt like hell, but she didn’t regret it. It was a tiger swallowtail.

Her father barely glanced at the butterfly. “No,” he whispered, “there.” He pointed at her lower abdomen.

She was confused again, and tired of whatever was going on. “No,” she said. “Look, I got it this one day...a bunch of us were drunk, okay? And we all went down and got them together. But it’s the only one.” And it was. She showed him. He didn’t mention the pierced navel [see footnote 18].

Ardis L. Stewart

Autumn Orchids

The phone message was: Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, I can spare this afternoon, the summer is almost over and gone, the orchids appear on the earth; the time of permission is come, and the voice of the red-tail is heard in our land.

Had I been Eve
we'd be in the Garden still
I fail to see adventure in eating toxic fruit.

Yet...

say
two words
Come. Orchids.
and I quickly transgress
my serpentine spine flexes
next to you
whorling your breath
and grace
looking up from below
dried scrub grass
cream with swirls of honey dripping
off lower tongues
smelling like linden in love
with white pine
cooing duets
with hidden brown-eyed owls
in cedar branches
we position the sun
on spires radiating
light laterally
in backlit opalescent
cleistogamy
ruffling lips together
against the cold.

Dreaming in the Third Person

The smell of burnt raspberries permeates the kitchen. My hands are stained with them. For me, it is a rare day off from work, and the house is empty except for the two of us. Gam is folding the stack of the day's laundry and I am canning raspberries. The steaming jars of raspberry preserves stand shoulder to shoulder on the cutting board. These jars are the product of the morning's labor, me stirring the pot, and my grandmother making comments as she smooths John's shirts on the kitchen table. The incandescent light overhead glints off the double-horse silver ring that encircles her wedding ring finger.

"Why won't these hands work anymore?" she mutters, raising her nicotine-stained hands, and turning her question into a statement of disgust.

"You have Greta Garbo legs," I tell her. I hope that Greta Garbo's legs were great at one time, since I struggle to remember some fashion icon from her generation. The hills above our Northern Utah home show off their ruddy colors in the window panes behind her shoulders.

"My legs may look alright, but they don't do me any good," she answers, though she is beaming at the compliment. Her thinning hair is platinum blonde. She has lost considerable height since the last time I saw her, and her body is small and frail. I know every inch of it, since I have bathed her several times already.

Seven jars canned, five jars empty and steaming, and I find that I need more raspberries. Phonebook open, I dial the number of a raspberry farm run by a family named Weeks. We live down the hill, only two miles away. "You want to go with me?" I ask my grandmother.

"Yep," she says. She shuffles to the door to put on her shoes. "I'm lame," she grumbles.

"Hold on a minute, Gam, let me clean up a bit first." With my oven mitts still on, I give her a big squeeze around her tiny bird-like shoulders.

Earlier that morning, while we are all gathered around the kitchen table eating pancakes with a scoopful of raspberries, John quotes a reader's question out of the morning paper's advice column. "I'm sure they've consulted their 'team of experts' on this one," he says. He takes a sip of

coffee. My microbiologist husband has a certain distain for these columns. Once they made an error in calculating the energy drain of the car radio on your starter motor, and he has not ceased with the derogatory comments. This morning the question is: "What is more common, dreaming in first person or third person?"

"I don't know," I answer. "Which?"

"First person," he replies. "Here it says that only 17 percent of people watch themselves in their dreams. Everybody else is participating first-hand." My husband folds up the newspaper in derision. "And how do they calculate this?"

Then my diminutive grandmother breaks in. "What is this 'dreaming in third person'?" she asks. At first nobody answers her.

I don't know where to begin. How can I explain this concept to someone who's refused to read anything except the horse racing reports and has refused to write anything but her name since a stroke destroyed her beautiful penmanship. The only thing left of English grammar is her gentele speech. Still I try to explain: "The 'third person' is as if you are floating up above in the clouds watching yourself at this very moment, drinking coffee and eating pancakes like we are now."

"So you're dead," she says.

"Not exactly, Gam. It's like there are two of you, one who's doing things, the other who's watching you do those things."

Will and Camila are having no part of this conversation. They take their plates to the sink and head to the bathroom.

My grandmother purses her lips and stares out the window. The age of psychoanalysis has passed her by; it is all foolishness in her opinion. *There is the body and the soul, period. The soul is in the body while you're alive, and when you die, it goes to God. Why would the soul leave the body just to watch the body?* she's probably thinking. She folds her twisted hands.

Four hours later, I have written a check for a flat of raspberries. Because of the early fall frost, there are only a few flats left, the man on the phone had said. Not great condition, but perfect for jam. Okay, I told him. After going upstairs, washing my face, and brushing my teeth, I come back

downstairs again and help my grandmother finish folding the clothes. We put on our shoes. Then I grab a jacket from the hall closet and test the air outside. For the first time I realize that I am going to have to hoist my 90-pound grandmother into the Ford F250, more like a boat than a car, with its cab doors two feet above solid ground.

Undaunted by the challenge, I locate a metal ice chest in the garage. I bring the cooler under the truck's deep running board and position it securely. Then I go back into the house and fold my grandmother's frail arm over my own. After braving the icy driveway, I guide her teetering body up to the top of the cooler. Ten minutes later, I have her safely seated in the passenger side of the truck. I rev up, and we head into the hills toward Weeks' Raspberry Farm. The air in the truck is chilly until the heater kicks in.

Parking the truck in the lot outside the warehouse, my heart sinks when I see no other vehicle in the lot. A light snow is falling, and the place looks deserted. But there's a flat of raspberries waiting inside for me, I'm thinking.

I turn off the engine, grab my checkbook, and tell my grandmother I am going to get the raspberries. The door to the gray-blue warehouse is open, and I enter. I look around but the lights are dim. I am irritated because my empty jars are cooling on the rack, picking up microorganisms, and my check is already written. Maybe I can just get the berries myself and leave the check somewhere, I calculate, looking around the warehouse.

I spot a sign labeled "Fruit Cooler" above the door on one side of the warehouse. The outside of the room is constructed entirely of cinderblocks, and the metal door looks like it should be attached to a giant safe. I open the door and see the few flats of raspberries lurking in the far corner of the other side of the room. I flip the light switch on the outside wall and walk in. As I approach the flats, I hear the door seal behind me. I reel back to the door, but I find it locked tight. No handle on the inside. My worst fears start to surface. I bang on the door, but to no avail. My heart skips and I sink back, fighting an initial onslaught of panic.

I check for other openings, windows and doors, but there are none. Only a little metal sign next to the door that reads in Alice in Wonderland fashion: *To open the door from the inside, press firmly on the metal plate.* Below the sign, dangling midway on the door, is a limp-looking metal dowel

with a disc on the end of it. There is no other metal plate. I force the plate forward in fifty different angles, but nothing happens. It is clear as early snow in October that I am trapped.

Not only me, but I quickly realize that my grandmother is trapped as well. Even if she can find a way to pull the latch and open the door with her frail arms, she is still three feet off the ground. In my mind's eye, I see my beloved grandmother jumping towards the pavement. Then she is sprawled out on the icy ground. I get down on my knees and pray. *God, please don't let her try to get out of the truck.*

I find I'm going to be cold for a while, and I shiver even in my jacket. That's because this is a coldroom, I tell myself darkly. I locate the thermostat, but it is covered in glass and there is no adjustment from inside the room. I make some mental assessments. Cellphone is in the truck. Windows in the room, none. Food: raspberries. Plenty of raspberries and even, as I now observe, some whipped cream and enough bottled water to last for several days. Loved ones who know where I am: only one, Gam. Of course there would be no reason for my husband to think we made this trip to Weeks' berry farm. The results of my mental assessments are grim. I have just done one of the most breathtakingly stupidest things in my life.

My only hope is the little metal plate. I have to find a way to make it open that door. I stand next to the door and pound the plate in regular intervals. Seventy-five bangs and then I rest. I try this pattern many times, counting, to keep my mind from racing to even more frightening places.

After what seems like an eternity but is really only a half hour, the door suddenly opens. A young man stands before me, with a grin pasted on his face.

"Hi," he says.

"Sorry," I mumble immediately, my eyes flitting downward to the coldroom floor.

He smiles broadly and gestures to the sign inside.

"You have to kick on the plate and the door will open from the inside," he says.

"Right," I say, but I am thinking, *the next time I am trapped in here I will be sure to remember to kick on the plate.* I hand him the check and blurt, "Mr. Weeks said I could come by and pick up a flat."

“My uncle,” he says brightly. He passes by me holding open the door to the coldroom and comes back out with a flat of raspberries, which he hands to me. “These okay?”

“Perfect,” I say. No need to explain why my face was as red as the raspberries. The door behind me slams.

“You from around here?” he asks.

I murmur something barely audible and he says without malice, “I know the place.” I head for the door, waving behind me. Once outside I move as fast as my shaky legs will take me.

My first glance at the truck shows my grandmother sitting there in what seems to be the exact same position as I left her. Her little body rises over the dash like a welcome masthead appearing over the horizon.

“You’re back,” she says when she sees me. She looks annoyed.

“I locked myself into the storage room.” My fingers fumble at the keys. I can’t start the truck my hands are shaking so much.

“Are you okay, honey?” she asks.

“I am now,” I say. In the mist from my mouth, a small prayer of thanks escapes my lips. As the cab grows warmer, I tell her the story, chuckling a little on my own from relief and adrenaline release, while my grandmother’s face grows sterner.

“You were worried,” I admit, when I look her in the eye.

“You’re right, Princess. At first I thought you had met some friends, and were chatting, but I thought, she wouldn’t leave me here so long — that’s kind of rude — and then I thought: my, she’s been gone a long time.”

“You weren’t thinking of coming after me, I hope.” Then I see her nodding, and I shoot her a wary glance. “How were you going to get out of the truck, Gam?”

“Jump,” she says nonchalantly.

“Gam, you can’t jump!”

She smiles. “Why not, honey? How else would I do it?”

“You turn around and scoot your body until your feet hit the ground.”

“Oh,” she says as if considering this method of climbing for the first time. That’s a good idea.” She crosses both of her hands on her lap like the queen mother.

“Gam, let’s go get some lunch and finish these raspberries.”

“Do you think we should tell John?” she asks, with a new spark in her eye.

“Let’s wait a while, Gam. It’ll be our secret.” We give each other a knowing grin to seal the deal. We arrive home safely, and after lunch, I put up five more quarts of raspberries with my grandmother watching over my shoulder, her nose like a hawk’s beak.

A week and a half later, Gam calls me from her apartment in Southern California, eight hundred miles away, but two blocks from my parents’ house. The first thing she does after I pick up the phone is to ask me what time it is.

Without thinking I reply, “Four o’clock, Gam. Why?”

“That’s what I have,” she says.

“But this is Utah time, remember?” I say. “We’re an hour ahead.”

“Right,” she says. “But I’m keeping my watch set at your time so I know just what you’re doing when I look at the time. I know about when you leave for your teaching, and about when you get home and when you start dinner. I know when you pick up Will from band and when Camila comes home from ballet. And I know when you’re having pancakes with raspberry syrup.”

I try to say something but I find that I can’t get the words out. “Gam,” I say at last, “Do you know that you are thinking in the third person?”

“It’s like I’m there with you, honey,” she says. I can picture her rocking back and forth on her leopard print bedspread, cradling a cigarette. Her little apartment is the one place left where she can smoke in the house. And despite the fact that she has my parents to look out for her, she spends a lot of time alone, smoking and reflecting on her life. With the strikes against her health — her age and her smoking — vying against the heredity that works in her favor — her strong and glorious heart — I don’t know when will be the last time that I see her.

“Do you realize that, Gam, you are visualizing yourself here with us?”

“You’re right, honey, I am,” she says.

“You get it now, right?” I ask.

“I do, Princess,” she says, but I’m not sure that she does.

“Did you tell them, honey, about the raspberry farm?”

“Yes — John got mad at me, and now they all tease me. They were worried at first, but now they think it’s kind of funny.”

“I was worried at first, but now I think it’s kind of funny, too,” she says, and starts to giggle. And we both laugh until our sides hurt.

Kathryn Kerr

Brother Sun

after the movie by Franco Zeffirelli
on the life of St. Francis

Of course it's a rich kid
who throws silks out the window,
publicly strips off velvets.
A boy who always wore new shoes
can decide to go barefoot.
Only a coddled child,
his bed made by servants,
chooses to sleep in fields.

It's harder for us, Francis,
buying our clothes
at the end of the season,
scraping for mortgage. We can't
ask audience of the pope.
We want appliances in our homes,
CDs, not singing. Please
don't make us lift stones.

Lord, forgive us our excuses.
Let our feet feel earth, then
lift us, dumb as stone.
Dress us like lilies.
Teach us to sing.

Teaching the world to say please

You finally decide to stand up. It's a small classroom, but somehow there are over thirty-five students seated in front of you, staring. You look at all of their faces. You try not to judge why they're here, where they're coming from, or where they're headed. But it's impossible not to judge after this many years. You sift through the pretty smiles, the well-dressed, the bad teeth, the eager, and look for the apathetic — a kid who'll pull out a folded one-subject spiral notebook from his back pocket forty-five minutes into every lecture. There's always one. You used to learn his name first. Call on him. Ignoring the fact that he probably hadn't answered a question since the third grade, the last time a teacher told him he'd done good in anything. You'd like to think you know better now.

— Good evening, I'm Professor . . .

You introduce yourself and pass out the syllabus. You wonder how a classroom can smell like sweat, popcorn, lavender and coffee all at once. You wonder how there can be so many different faces and styles, the absolutes of Black and White and at least thirty different shades in between. Hair from free-flowing to dread, lips from non-existent to prominent, eyes from almonds to half-dollars. Back when you were a student, every one of your classmates always seemed so similar, the fades, the bangs, the kids in socks and sandals, the kids in black trench coats. And you in plaids, jeans, and boots. The only one in that classroom who was definitely not Black, definitely not White. Maybe a little red, but maybe a little yellow, too. And it wasn't like all of your classmates were blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but you knew each and everyone of them had a perfect Aryan sibling at home. So you, an island in that class, couldn't do a thing about the colors in your skin and the accent that reared its head every time you used the word “estrange” or “estrawberry.” And to make things worse, for some reason you had a knack for always picking a seat next to the quietest and angriest White boy. The sort of kid who, along with a diet low in fiber, ate three bowls of hate for breakfast every morning. In every class, you'd turn to Angry White Boy, just in case it was all a front. You've known down White boys all your life.

Hey, do you know this teacher?

Hey, I'm —.

Hey, did you understand the homework?

Yo, you know what time it is?

And every time he'd just look at you like he wanted to chew you up and spit you out for being a faggot. Of course, you'd sit in that seat for the entire semester — like everyone does when they get to college — and look around at your classmates and see lifelong friendships start from a beginning as simple as, 'hey.' You've tried not to carry the past with you, but you can't help it. You know it's not what you know, but who you know. That's how you got this job. And you've got no idea where the next one is coming from.

— These are the required books for this class.

You hold five trade paperbacks in your hand, like you're holding onto half a deli-style sandwich. You wonder why so many of them look like they've been holding onto a fart since Labor Day. Don't they know that they would have to be a certain kind of asshole to fail freshman comp? Some open their notebooks to a clean page and write down your name, the date, and the name of the class. Others start to take notes. You thought about making it easy for them, for yourself, by picking out texts you've memorized. Or even a textbook! But at the last minute, you thought it might be fun to do something different. You tell them how you've read each and every one of those books. You don't tell them that you've only read a few of them cover-to-cover, and the others, you've only read what's *on* their covers. It comes out so good even you believe yourself. You tell them you had them in mind when you chose them. A girl in the front smiles at you.

— This is what I expect from you.

You put the ten-page syllabus down. You talk to them from the heart. That this isn't a hard class, that you could make it easy for them, but that you care about their future. That life's hard. A few of the older students nod in agreement. That life's going to give them shit one day. Might as well get used to it. Some let out sighs. You pause. Then continue. That they have to learn how to deal with adversity.

— *And knowing is half the battle.*

Students haven't gotten your jokes in years.

— But I will work with you.

You've learned that things go smoother when you empower your students. When they think you care. You've tried berating students, telling them they're disrespecting their ancestors by not handing in that essay analyzing hills that only look like white elephants if you have no idea what an elephant

looks like. You know better now. So you tell them that you run this class as if it were the most important thing in your life. You tell them that they should take this class that seriously. There isn't a student in the world that can argue with logic like that.

— You are expected to attend every class.

You can feel their bodies stiffen. Yes, they registered for your class. But that doesn't mean you can assume they understand that they are required to attend class. You know the sorts of schools they're coming from. Eighteen-year-olds walking down hallways grabbing at the nearest ass. Sex taking place in stairways, in bathroom stalls, on the floor of the janitor's closet. Thirteen-year-olds getting smacked in the head daily because their moms don't understand the power of Nike. Teachers counting down the days until they retire. Those same teachers calling their students monkeys and savages. You know what they've been through.

— Four absences and you will automatically fail this course.

They listen. You've never failed anyone for absences. Not even when that kid missed twelve weeks and begged for the opportunity to make it up to you. Nothing in the world like a grown kid with everything going for him telling you that he has to take care of his mother, grandmother, baby sister and work forty hours a week to help out with the rent. It wasn't your fault he failed anyway. He was the one who never turned in his final portfolio. You know you haven't come across as serious as you'd like. You've heard your colleagues tell you to give them hell on the first day, to scare the shit out of them — so the ones you don't want there drop your class. But it never seems to work out that way.

— And three latenesses equal one absence.

You notice a few of them start to blink slower, taking time in between to imagine themselves somewhere else. You know how hard it must be for some of them — not the kids who stroll in late without a care in the world — but the ones in polyester suits and nylon stockings, the ones who haven't loosened their ties, the ones who forgot to change into the white sneakers underneath their desks at work. Many of them will fall asleep at some point during the semester. You remember when you used to take that personally. You'd talk louder. Slam books shut. Even call on them. Till one day when

you realized you can't blame them for being bored. Sometimes you're bored.

— Any questions?

The silence makes your mind wander. You've always believed that the first day of class should be a slow day. A day where everyone gets to know each other. They'll get to know you, and you'll make pretend you've gotten to know them. You tell them a story about yourself. How you're one of them. Public school to public school to public school, where you finally made sense of the world in a classroom much like this one, how you hit a home run that landed you in a fancy graduate school. You always repeat the same exact speech. That if you could make that leap, they could too! Then you go around the room and ask everyone to tell you their name, what borough they're from, and their favorite song lyric. The rest you do without much thinking.

You remember you used to experiment with “alternative” attendance policies. When you thought you could motivate the public college student to attend class on his own. You brought in pictures, the one of Washington crossing the Delaware, the one of that girl pouring milk into a bowl, and Van Gogh's “Starry Night.”

— Professor, that's Washington! I bet his ass was cold with his jacket open like that. Shit, look at all that ice in the water!

— Professor, why is that girl so pale? She sick? She supposed to be a zombie? What's up with the milk? Does it mean what I think it means?

— Professor, this shit is worth how much? Please.

You made them listen to Miles' “I could write a book.” And asked them how they thought he came up with that title.

— Professor, titles don't mean a thing.

You made them write about it all. Told them to move the pen on the paper. You didn't care if they drew pictures. If they repeated words. If they wrote a letter to their dead grandmother, wrote out some favorite lyrics, or the worst poem ever. You just told them to write, while you walked around the class, looking over their shoulders, telling them what incredible stuff they were writing.

Back then, you thought you could run a writer's workshop in a freshman composition classroom. In all of your

freshman composition classes. That they could all be writers if only they applied themselves! You made classwork ninety percent of their grade. And they showed up for a few weeks. If nothing else, you were different from every other teacher they'd had before. You thought you were being like Michelle Pfeiffer or Edward James Olmos. Instead, you were more like Robin Williams trying to be Joe Clark. Except you weren't funny. And you're about as strict as your ninety-year-old grandmother. But that's what watching the Sunday afternoon movie on WPIX taught you: you alone could change the world. One student at a time. And in the process, one student would call you her hero, another would say you were like a father to him. It's been ten years and nothing like this has ever happened. Once you got a Christmas card.

It took everything out of you. You took home a ton of grading. But as long as you handed back work from one class to the next, brought in more pictures and songs to class, everything ran smoothly. But then life happened. Or seven classes at three different campuses, three shifts a week in the tutoring lab, *and* life happened. Students started coming to class with expectations for the first time since they were in grammar school and their third grade teacher promised them a pizza party if they behaved during her class observation. But you couldn't keep up.

Add up two and a half months of four hours of sleep a night; letting your novel slowly move from urgent to afterthought to idea; enough money left over after rent, child support, student loans, Metrocard fare, and bananas — so many bananas — to take your daughter on walks and only walks around Flushing Meadow Park (when she asks about the zoo, all you can think of is to tell her that the animals are very, very, very sick); a girlfriend who little-by-little starts to leave you out of her plans because she's tired of hearing you say, “I can't because I have to work,” which even she knows really means, “I can't because I've got no money;” the paunch; the smell of popcorn emanating from your shoes as if they were extra large buckets of popcorn behind the concession stand at the movies; and the extra responsibility the tenured and the tenure-track *give* you — that you take in the hopes of an extra class or two the following semester. Add all of this up, the fact that you always try your best to take it all with a smile, and you should be proud of the fact you kept it together as long as you did. You're fucking Superman.

Of course, you can't see that. And worse, no one can either. New York City gives out pity the way she gives out affordable housing. And students have no pity in them for yet another teacher that has let them down. This is why you don't have any more experiments in you now.

They *know* you. You should know them a little, but you can't recall a single name, or where anyone is from. They'll be a bunch of faces for a while — the people you stand next to on the E train from Van Wyck to 7th Avenue. You don't learn names till December. When you'll suddenly realize you're going to miss them after all these weeks. It's always like that.

There's nothing left to cover on the syllabus. You reread the college's policy on plagiarism. And that's it. You almost laugh when you realize you've read aloud the same typo you've had for the past five years. You make a mental note to fix it as soon as you get home, again.

— Any more questions?

Someone asks what book they'll need first. Another starts to complain about his financial aid. The girl who smiled at you earlier, asks you if the daily schedule on the syllabus is the homework, or what is due that day. You've always wanted to respond with, read the syllabus. But you don't. Instead, you tell them what they need first. You tell them not to worry about their financial aid. You explain how to read the syllabus. Again. Then you smile at them and let them out fifteen minutes early. Fourteen and a half weeks left. You tell yourself you're not going to count down the nights. Not this semester.

You sit there. Three no shows. You decide to wait. In that empty room, tiny pieces of chalk hang out on the blackboard ledge like the molars of all the students who've left a bit of their soul in that windowless classroom. The whirr and the click of the exhaust fan above you will have you screaming the entire semester. Cough drops. You rub your eyes. The bright white florescents remind you that classrooms and hospital waiting areas are really the same thing. Then it's the thought you try not to have, but can't escape. It always comes to you in an empty classroom: you don't want to turn into the lifetime adjunct, the toothache like a tuning fork wedged in your teeth, the blazer dotted with mustard and ketchup stains, shoes that couldn't be resoled with all the Shoe

Goo in the world, and the hunched shoulders that tell everyone how successful you've been at what you do.

So you'll try harder this semester, you tell yourself.

That this will be your year. It's easy to have a positive outlook on the first day of classes. You like to think you know how the semester will turn out, but no two semesters are ever the same. You look up just in time to see a kid walk in. You welcome him. He walks in with that look: lips pulled to one side of his face in a half-pucker, half-smile. No book-bag. No pen. You hand him a syllabus, and show him the books he'll need for class. He asks you if you've taken attendance. You ask him his name. You mark him present. Then he walks right out. This is the kid you will try to save this semester.

Gina Vallis

where grace

deep fiddlethroat clearing
bow drawn on the lowest string

where grace
is the act by which one touches the string
briefly below the note being played

as well try to string the melody
into words

as peer puzzled into the empty frame
for sound

and still...

that afternoon we took our instruments to the water
followed one phrase to another upriver
until our breath shortened and our legs grew tired
bent the branches, felt the backlash of a picking strain
lost the beat, scrambled round, found it again
struggled the crest, and over the edge,
flung one single note —

held fast, until at last,
it found its place

Kindred

That day we played croquet on the lawn by the two towering hemlock trees high atop Black Mountain. And danced to the laughter of a brook we waded through on our way to the bamboo forest where we robbed blackberry bushes all afternoon. And filled our lungs and our spirits with the freshness of early summer mountain air. What were we? Eleven or so? Tossing our hair in the wind as we ran like two young fillies, not a care in the world . . . that day.

And here I sit, holding your hand. Gazing at your fairy hair feathered against a hospital pillow. Knowing somehow that an angel holds your other hand, and while you linger, my mind returns to all the places our spirits soared and dived and soared again.

Fourteen, you used to take me by the hand and drag me laughing down the hall to flirt with the boys. You, the stronger, more self-possessed. Giggling, when I wondered out loud why your boyfriend had stopped and parked the car. You in the front seat and me in the back with his junior high friend. What was his name? Andy some-thing?

I forgave you for that.

Maid of honor for my wedding; matron of honor for yours - you asked me to sing at your reception. Which was worse? My forgetting the words to my solo or picking up the wrong ring from off the ring-bearer's pillow? (Did you forgive me for that?) You still got married. Tall and statuesque, looking so romantic in your tea-length dress, all layered in Victorian lace and a garland of flowers nestled in the dark tresses of your long wavy hair. I had worn an ivory church dress and a hat when I had married just six months before. Practical. Functional. Yours was a matching mauve when you gave a reading about the unity candle he and I lit. Two years before, you almost made me promise I wouldn't marry him.

I forgave you for that too.

Suddenly you cough and gasp. I move to lift you forward and cradle your head in the crook of my arm. Slowly you sip at the straw I've placed at your colorless lips. But your eyes stay closed. And you sigh softly, your body relaxing and slipping back into mine. I hold you a while longer.

Was this how you felt when I fell off the horse and you lay beside my motionless form? I had been riding well that day, you had said. It had been a wonderful taste of freedom, galloping along on a tall white horse named Serenity. Neither of us had seen the hole that broke his stride, catapulting me over his right shoulder, headfirst to the ground below. Right arm snapped in two, right knee twisted. And my face? Not pretty. I don't remember a thing, just what you told me. How you turned me over and lay down beside me on the ground and looked up into the sky and prayed, till help came. I'll never forget that.

And there was nothing to forgive.

So what if we didn't wear riding helmets. We never did. The only mandatory head-gear for you was your signature red lipstick.

Remembering this, I slide my arm out from beneath your head and explore the room for your purse. There it is in the back corner of a table almost hidden by vases of wilting mums and roses on top a litter of opened cards and envelopes. The metallic tube isn't hard to find among crumpled tissues and cough drop wrappers. Bright red – a shade somewhere between fire-engine red and cherry. Funny, whenever *I* tried to wear it, it always looked a hideous pumpkin orange.

Carefully, I tint your lips with the tube, softly whispering as I paint, "Well, now. Can't have you half dressed when it's time for you to go . . . home. Why, the angels might not recognize you without your red lipstick."

A sob sticks in my throat momentarily. I swallow it and go on. "You look so beautiful now. But *Sis'ta* (she would call me this when she was being funny), when we get you out of here, we're going to get your highlights redone!"

Suddenly I can't speak. There is no getting you out of here. This is good-bye. The family will be back from a lunch break any moment, and my private vigil will be over. I pick up her hand again and hold it gently in my own. Would I keep you here if I could? Perhaps, but not like this.

Remember that day in Tuis at the waterfall? How you stood in the middle of its cascading waters, looking up to the sky, singing and crying? You wept, you said, for the sheer joy of beauty and for the way you felt embraced by God. The sun broke through the canopy and burst into a rainbow above you. I saw it, though I am not sure I believed it.

It was a sacred moment, and I shall always picture you that way.

For hours we had climbed and slipped and crawled among the fronds of exotic tropical ferns and fauna, gasping with wonder at a flurry of orchids that hung like a garland around the trunk of a canopy tree. I remember the stream that had piqued our quest, its waters growing more pristine as we hiked higher up into the virgin rainforest. How would water like that taste right now? So pure, it seemed celestial. Heaven must be something like that. So exquisitely and wildly beautiful that you weep with longing and dance with unfettered joy.

And I . . . I am finally ready to let your wildly beautiful spirit – my kindred soul – go fly to its home.

Beth McDonald

river words, worddrivers

river words
cataract over
boulders
in white water abandon
carrying ideas
into the world
like tree trunks
careening
on the crest of
snow melt floods.

river words
murmur among
pebbles
in low provocative
cadences, hushed
syllables,
their rhythms
like lovers whispering
or children laughing
in untroubled dreams.

river words
flow into
quiet backwaters
currents turning, curving
against cutbank hollows,
discovering
in the act of stillness
the art
by which river words
become worddrivers.

Notes on the Staff

Beth E. McDonald (Managing Editor and Poetry Editor) has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a PhD in 19th Century/Gothic Literature (University of Oklahoma). She has published numerous poems in several small journals and worked as editor on others. Her book *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* has been published by McFarland. Since moving to Las Vegas, she has worked as an adjunct professor for UNLV, teaching courses in Composition II and World Literature.

Susan Summers (Contributing Editor) serves as the UNLV Department of English Budget Technician. She is the past Executive Director of a Pediatric AIDS organization and served as the Nevada State Coordinator of The Adoption Exchange.

Sandra Hooven (Nonfiction Editor) received her MA from Cal Poly Pomona. Before coming to UNLV, she taught English at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, California. Currently she is teaching the 101 E/F sequence at UNLV.

Sara Goosey (Fiction Editor) has an MA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and specializes in Appalachian and Southern literature. In addition to teaching Composition and World Literature, she is finishing her first novel *Shouting Down the Mountain*.

Olivia Montgomery (Graduate Assistant) is a Graduate Student with a BA in English. In addition to being a full-time student and working in the Department of English, she owns two horses and competes year-round in equestrian jumping.

Megan McDonald (Journal Cover and Website Designer) works as a User Experience Designer, improving site experiences on websites you may know and use. She has held positions in production, graphic design, user interface and information architecture. Outside of work, she kayaks, backpacks, and enjoys travel. She lives and works in San Francisco.

Notes on Readers

Jeremy Beatson is an adjunct English instructor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army, a Georgia State University alumnus and completed his graduate studies at UNLV. Jeremy writes fiction, literary criticism, and poetry.

Renée E. D’Aoust teaches virtually as an adjunct at North Idaho College. She holds degrees from Columbia University and the University of Notre Dame. Recent publications of prose and poetry include 2009’s *Redwood Coast Review*, *Origami Condom*, *Under the Sun*, *wordriver*, and an essay in Robert Gottlieb’s anthology *Reading Dance* (Pantheon Books). D’Aoust has been supported by several grants, from the Arbutus Foundation, Idaho Commission on the Arts, the NEA Journalism Institute of Dance Criticism, and the Puffin Foundation, as well as others.

Regina Dickerson received her BA from Hunter College in New York City, where she majored and minored in English, and her MA at Temple University where her focus was African American Literature. She has taught Composition, World Literature, and American Literature at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Expository Writing at Hunter College.

Alex M. Frankel is a writer and teacher in Los Angeles, currently working as a part-time adjunct lecturer in the English Department at Cal State Los Angeles. His poems and short fiction have appeared in journals such as *The Comstock Review*, *the North Dakota Quarterly*, *the Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Colere*, *Tears in the Fence*, *the Temple*, *Pinch*, *Beyond the Valley of the Contemporary Poets* and 2009’s *wordriver*.

Jo Gibson moved into academia after spending 20 years as an editor and writer for an architectural-engineering-planning firm and a training company, respectively. She holds a Bachelor’s degree from Kent State University and a Master’s and Ph.D. from Cleveland State University. Now an adjunct faculty member in Cleveland State University’s Department of English, she continues to work as a free-lance writer and

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Karen Haggar received her BA from Creighton University, MA from Marquette University, and did Post-graduate studies in The Novel at CUNY. At the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Karen teaches courses in Composition, Introduction to Literature, and World Literature.

Allan Johnston teaches literature and writing part-time at Columbia College and DePaul University. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rhino*, *Rattle*, 2009's *wordriver* and over 70 other journals, and he has published one book (*Tasks of Survival*).

Erin L. Kelley holds a Doctorate of Jurisprudence from Texas Tech University School of Law and an M.A. from the University of Texas at Dallas. She is an adjunct professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas where she teaches English Composition. Her other areas of interest include Shakespeare studies and romantic relationships. In addition, Miss Kelley is a published poet and has written other academic articles for various journals.

Susan Nyikos is a non-tenure track lecturer in the Department of English of Utah State University, teaching Intermediate Writing, Introduction to Shakespeare and other literature classes for non majors. Though born and raised in Hungary, she revels in the mountains of Utah, enjoying hiking, snowshoeing, or just taking it all in. Her poetry has been published in chapbooks by her local poetry group Poetry at Three and in 2009's *wordriver*.

Lollie Ragana is an accomplished playwright and award-winning stage director with many publications to her credit, including *A Woman's Europe*, *France Today*, *Myths of the World*, and 2009's *wordriver*. Her great passion for ancient cultures and the way those earlier people perceived their relationship to the natural world, each other, and their place in the cosmos inspires her to travel and reflect her journeys.

Notes on Readers

Teaching anthropology at Antioch University, various writing and literature classes at California State University, Los Angeles, and a study of sacred sites for the Landscape Architecture Program at UCLA Extension enables her to pass along to students those experiences that have transformed her.

Anne Stark has been a lecturer for twenty years, eighteen of which have been in the English department of Utah State University. She has published several scholarly pieces on her research topic, the female hero, and two pieces of fiction in university publications. Currently, she is working on a collection of short fiction and continues to write and teach fiction and literature courses. Her work has been published in both local and out-of-state university publications, including 2009's *wordriver*.

John Shields earned his MA from the University of Iowa and teaches English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His novel trilogy, *Letters from Alaska*, and his collection, *Six Stories*, are available online; he has also published short fiction in *Scéal*, 2009's *wordriver*, and *The Sewanee Review*.

Contributing Authors

Jenifer Augur earned her MFA in fiction from UMass/Amherst and her MA in humanistic psychology from West Georgia College and now teaches writing using humanistic methods. Her MA thesis contrasted convergent (technological) and divergent (creative) thinking, with Sisyphus as its subject. Her poetry has been published in *The Berkshire Review* and a publication of the Western Massachusetts Writers.

Jeremy Beatson is an adjunct English instructor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army, a Georgia State University alumnus and completed his graduate studies at UNLV. Jeremy writes fiction, literary criticism, and poetry.

Liam Murray Bell teaches Creative Writing in the Department of English at the University of Surrey, England, and also conducts research on the Troubles in Northern Ireland with a view to constructing a novel-length narrative on that subject. His previous publications include: "The First Day of Christmas" in *New Writing Scotland: Milking the Haggis* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004); "The Piano" in *New Writing Scotland: Bucket of Frogs* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2008); and "Death and other Distractions" in *Let's Pretend: 37 Stories about (in) fidelity*, (Freight, 2008).

Harry Brown retired from the Eastern Kentucky University Department of English and Theatre after over thirty years and now teaches part-time. His latest poetry collection, *Felt Along the Blood—New and Selected Poems* was published by Wind Publications in 2005.

KC Culver is a senior lecturer in English Composition at the University of Miami, where she also serves as Managing Editor of the literary journal *Mangrove*. She has been published in *Gulf Stream* and *Peregrine*.

Cyril Dabydeen is a part-time professor of English at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Widely published in books, literary magazines and anthologies, he is a former Poet

Notes on Contributors

Laureate of Ottawa. His last novel, *Drums of My Flesh*, was nominated for the prestigious IMPAC/Dublin Literary Prize, and won the international Guyana Prize for fiction. He also has served as a juror for the Neustadt Literature Prize awarded by the University of Oklahoma.

Rebecca Mears Duncan has lived and taught in the Birmingham area for more than twenty years, acquiring a Master's degree in English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and doing graduate work at Ohio State University. Currently, she is an adjunct English instructor at UAB and an adjunct Communication Arts instructor at Samford University where she teaches composition, literature, and communication arts courses.

Maureen Foster has been an adjunct lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for three years. She teaches "Core" (composition) at Porter College, and Core, as well as a film class, at Crown College and is the author of three published novels, *Beginners*, *Sparks*, and *Home Front*. Her poem "Lincoln Street" recently appeared in the Spring 2009 edition of *The Pacific Review*.

Alex M. Frankel is a writer and teacher in Los Angeles, currently working as a part-time adjunct lecturer in the English Department at Cal State Los Angeles. His poems and short fiction have appeared in journals such as *The Comstock Review*, *the North Dakota Quarterly*, *the Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Colere*, *Tears in the Fence*, *the Temple*, *Pinch*, *Beyond the Valley of the Contemporary Poets* and 2009's *wordriver*.

Gavin Goodwin researches and teaches in the English Department at Surrey University, England. His poems appear in *Pan*, *the Cinnamon Press* anthology, *Black Waves in Cardiff Bay*, and forthcoming issues of *Agenda* and *Fire*.

Dorothy Lehman Hoerr is a Lecturer in English at her undergraduate alma mater, Albright College in Reading, PA. She received her M.A. in English and Publishing from Rosemont College. Her articles have appeared in *Writer's Digest*, *KIWI magazine*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Allan Johnston teaches literature and writing part-time at Columbia College and DePaul University. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rhino*, *Rattle*, 2009's *wordriver* and over 70 other journals, and he has published one book (*Tasks of Survival*).

Kathryn Kerr has an MFA in creative writing from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and a MS in Botany from Eastern Illinois University. She currently teaches writing in Illinois State University's English Studies Department. Her most recent publications are in *Big Muddy*, *A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, and *Blue Line*. She has published scientific and technical articles, book and art reviews, and personal essays.

Jason McCall holds an MFA from the University of Miami. He currently teaches English and Literature at the University of Alabama. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in *Fickle Muses*, *Cimarron Review*, *New Letters*, and other journals.

Beth E. McDonald has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a PhD in 19th Century/Gothic Literature (University of Oklahoma). She has published numerous poems in several small journals and worked as editor on others. Her book *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* has been published by McFarland. Since moving to Las Vegas, she has worked as an adjunct professor for UNLV, teaching courses in Composition II and World Literature.

Patrick S. McGinnity teaches composition, literature, and creative writing as a member of the temporary faculty of Central Michigan University. He holds an MFA from Hollins University, and his work has appeared most recently in *Paradigm*, *The Truth About the Fact*, and *Temenos*.

Marco Fernando Navarro is a full-time substitute lecturer in the Department of Latin American and Latina/o Studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from New York University, where he was a *New York Times* Foundation

Notes on Contributors

Fellow, and has received third-place honors in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers (November 2008). He is currently at work on a novel.

Susan Nyikos is a non-tenure track lecturer in the Department of English of Utah State University, teaching Intermediate Writing, Introduction to Shakespeare and other literature classes for non majors. Though born and raised in Hungary, she revels in the mountains of Utah, enjoying hiking, snowshoeing, or just taking it all in. Her poetry has been published in chapbooks by her local poetry group Poetry at Three and in 2009's *wordriver*.

Katherine Pennavaria is a librarian at Western Kentucky University and teaches part-time for the English Department. She has published articles in library-related journals, but never anything in a literary review before. Her essay was inspired by a recent trip to England.

Lollie Ragana is an accomplished playwright and award-winning stage director with many publications to her credit, including *A Woman's Europe*, *France Today*, *Myths of the World*, and 2009's *wordriver*. Her great passion for ancient cultures and the way those earlier people perceived their relationship to the natural world, each other, and their place in the cosmos inspires her to travel and reflect her journeys. Teaching anthropology at Antioch University, various writing and literature classes at California State University, Los Angeles, and a study of sacred sites for the Landscape Architecture Program at UCLA Extension enables her to pass along to students those experiences that have transformed her.

Robert Schnelle is a long-term adjunct at Central Washington University, where he teaches in the English department and the Douglas Honors College. He has published an essay collection titled *Valley Walking: Notes on the Land* (Washington State UP, 1997). More recently, his work has appeared in the *Seattle Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Writing on the Edge*.

Sara Shumaker has been an adjunct instructor in English since 2003. Currently, for the University of Central Arkansas, she teaches World Literature I & II, Introduction to

African/African American Studies, and an Honors Core III: Encountering the Other. Her poetry has been published in *Lines n' Stars*, and *Juice* and her feature length book excerpt has been published in *Order of the Earth*.

Benjamin Smith is an adjunct professor in the English department at the University of Central Oklahoma. His master's thesis, focusing on the theoretical adaptation processes for comic book cinema, will be published in an abridged form in the upcoming anthology *Adapting America/America Adapted*. His academic and writing interests include adaptation theory, comics and culture, and the cultural history of cinema and literature. In addition to his academic work, he is an avid guitarist, painter, and short story writer.

Anne Stark has been a lecturer for twenty years, eighteen of which have been in the English department of Utah State University. She has published several scholarly pieces on her research topic, the female hero, and two pieces of fiction in university publications. Currently, she is working on a collection of short fiction and continues to write and teach fiction and literature courses. Her work has been published in both local and out-of-state university publications, including 2009's *wordriver*.

Ardis L. Stewart teaches Humanities and English part-time at Heartland Community College while working on her Ph.D. in English Studies at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Her poems have previously appeared in *Seeding The Snow* and *RHINO Poetry Magazine*.

Steve Street has been teaching literature, composition, fiction writing, and expository writing as an adjunct since receiving his M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas in 1984. Presently, he is teaching at Buffalo State College, a campus in the State University of New York System. His story "Balloon Theater" is forthcoming in this summer's *Cimarron Review* and his most recent column about adjunct issues appeared in the July 7 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Gina Vallis is a full-time lecturer in the Writing Program at University of California, Santa Barbara. She received her

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B.A. in English from U.C. Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in Literature from UC Santa Cruz. She has presented at multiple conferences, and works freelance in Graphic Design. In addition to grant writing and public speaking, she helped to establish a Non-Profit Agency, and is published in the area of early intervention for children with ASD. Currently, she has several writing projects in various stages of preparation for publication, including a collaborative article on film and memory, as well as a book chapter.

Isabella Wai received her PhD in American Literature from McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario), with a focus on the long career of Richard Wilbur and his milieu, which spans two centuries. She also holds an MFA in fiction writing (Wichita State University). Her work has appeared in many publications, including *New Directions: Prose and Poetry* (New York), *Heavenly Bread* (Hong Kong), *Daedalian Quarterly* (Texas), and *Literary Encyclopedia* (England, online). Currently, she is an instructor of Writing and American literature in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

Bruce Wyse is currently a sessional instructor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University and the Department of English at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. His poetry has appeared in *Whetstone*, *Grain*, *CV2*, *Existere*, and other literary magazines, and several of his short stories have been published in *Descant* and *Grain*.

Submission Guidelines

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Submission Guidelines

more than 6 sentences) listing your university, college, or community college affiliation, your adjunct status, your department and any previous publishing history, and your degrees, where you obtained them, and in what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all fiction submissions to Fiction editor worddriver@unlv.edu (The subject line of your submission email should read: worddriverFictionSub.)

Creative Nonfiction: Maximum 2 submissions (10 typed, double-spaced pages each). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one email. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address in the body of your email, as well as a short bio (no more than 6 sentences) listing your university, college, or community college affiliation, your adjunct status, your department and any previous publishing history, and your degrees, where you obtained them, and in what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all nonfiction submissions to Nonfiction editor worddriver@unlv.edu (The subject line of your submission email should read: worddriverNonfictionSub.)

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Photo Contest

We are accepting photo entries that display the meaning of the artist's/photographer's interpretation of *wordriver*. There is only ONE prize which will be awarded and that is to have your photo printed as the full cover photo placed on a volume of *wordriver*. The first two issues of the journal cover were pictures of rivers taken in Yosemite National Park and Ashland, Oregon. We are now looking for entries that are river images from anywhere in the world, or are renditions of your own interpretation of *wordriver*.

There is a \$5 per photo entry fee with unlimited entries accepted. Photos must be the original work of the entrant. No copyrighted work will be accepted. Photos must be in color and submitted in a 6 X 9 print or electronically (300 dpi). No prints will be returned. The photo contest is open to everyone.

Please visit www.wordriverreview.com for an entry blank.