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Editor’s Note

I am pleased to present Volume 4 of *wordriver*, replete with change. This year brings the departure of our founding editor Beth McDonald and the addition of new Fiction Editor Justin Burnside and new Poetry Editor Paul Sacksteder. Both are recent University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) graduates and new adjunct instructors with a fresh eye for literary talent and an enthusiasm for this journal. Like many of our contributors, I have been an adjunct instructor since I finished graduate school nearly two decades ago. I am excited to be part of this extraordinary journal that exists to provide a platform for your writings. You will find many new voices in our pages this year; we received submissions from so many corners of the world. If you have not spread the news about *wordriver* yet, make this the year that you do, so we will continue to grow.

The host of individuals we owe thanks to includes Dr. Christopher C. Hudgins, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Dr. Richard Harp, Chair of UNLV’s Department of English, for their continued support of the journal. Without the diligence of Susan Summers, Budget Technician and Contributing Editor, you might not be reading these pages. In the twilight between issues, Susan and Sandra Hooven, Non-Fiction Editor, pledged to keep the journal afloat and recruited both new editors and contributors. Finally, thanks to Ph.D. candidate Molly O’Donnell for her formatting and copy-editing expertise.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue and sharing it with friends and colleagues. Send us your work at http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu and look for yourself in Volume 5!

Rebecca Colbert, Managing Editor
Spring 2012
What the River Knows

it has learned in the whispered
confidences of water
over rock and sand
and in a close continuing intimacy
with earth and air

it has gathered in half-heard rumors
from the wind
speaking in tongues
singing the music of storm
in harmony with thunder

it has inherited from the sun
passing through oak and alamo
through overhanging willow
to leave its secrets caught
in the confusion of light and shadow

it has comprehended through a lack of roots
in the deep curves of backwater pools
their boundaries banked and grass-grown,
seeming solid, offering respite, yet
belying the tenuousness of their existence

belongs to its mutable currents
to white water circumstance
to the lean years and the fulsome
the snow melt’s prologue
to the summer’s inevitable drought

is gleaned lightly
from the more than occasional traveler
rock or leaf, log or man
riding the inexorable wave
until their journey’s end

is the story never ends
its epilogue continually is written
and erased—what the river knows
exists deeper than bones
or roots or the telling of earth’s tales
The Water Puppets

I love it when the tide comes in. The water rises clear and cold. It rises so quickly, and, after the first sweeping presence, is so silent. I love the change it visits on the world, making it over; the same things, but different, better. Everyone grumbles: the extra work, the danger, the things lost: always things are lost. But I love it, and always did, and await the big moon in its eccentric six-times yearly cycle with excitement, not fear, and the rising of the water which sets the rest of my village on nervous edge, instead calms me down, and I look into the glassy depths overwhelmed by a profound stillness. The colors are brighter, the movement slower and somehow orchestrated: in the one great motion of the sea the grasses all dance as one, with perfect grace. And the single-minded shoals of brilliant fish move too to some secret steersman’s cue, and the light ripples contrapuntally over it all. My own shadow is impelled to rhythmic motion, part of the same great aqueous symphony. The sea puts the world together for me, rebuilds it from its impossible fragments every tide, and I am enthralled by its power.

Our village is towards the top of the tide, so the water stays only a short time, and we don’t need such long anchors as the less fortunate souls many miles further down the beach, but (even as we do today) when I was a boy we looked with envy to the hills just visible to the west, where even at the highest of storm-fed spring tides a series of dark smudges remains visible on the horizon, the island tops of the hills, the promised land that was dry night and day, summer and winter, year after tideless year. There lived the tenders of the wealth of our world, the trees on which our lives depended. Although, perhaps when hurrying to complete a task before the tide comes in, I too thought of the apparent ease of life above the tide-line, the thought made me shiver: I imagined a dry world, naked, cracked and withered; tainted and unwashed. I could not go there and see: I would have had to fight my way up the beach, village by village. Our relative positions on the beach had been established by aeons of competition and conflict, and were guarded jealously. Movement between villages was rigorously controlled and ritualized, marriage being the main vehicle of change. The prettiest girls, the strongest boys, could be traded up the beach, but their partners would be the third string of the higher village, able only to maintain their
standing in the tide-line by marrying below them. The second ranks were able to marry across the line, a meeting of equals. The disappointed fourth rank would have to marry down the line, drifting out, generation by generation, into the deeper water, with its harder labor, its greater risks, its lesser resources and poorer diet. In the end, their descendants might find themselves at last at the low-water mark, where legend has it there was the possibility of being traded with the unanchored ones of whom the stories spoke, those who had cut themselves loose from the dry land and endlessly sailed the endless seas. I did not believe in them. But I loved those stories and dreamt of going against nature and turning my face to the tide and following it out to where I might see their great boats and somehow come to join them, and leave forever that small world huddled between the water and the sky that was everything I knew.

There are many ways to leave this narrow existence, however; many ways may be contrived by circumstance to make a brief life briefer. For instance, my sister was one of those who ‘dragged her anchor’, as the old people liked to put it, ‘is swimming with the fishes’ as we are told when we are small — and she was small, so perhaps that’s the way to think of her, as gliding through the clear water, as silver-quick as the fish with which she swims. But I do not think of her this way; I think of her as I think of all those who die; as drowned. She came into deep water, and was overwhelmed, as we all will be.

When she was born my parents had to bear the disgrace of having exceeded their quota. Birth control is strictly overseen by the village committee. This does make sense; our resources are strictly finite, and if you believe what the old people say, they are even shrinking: the tide rises a little higher, stays a little longer, every year. We live on a knife-edge, and an expanding population would indeed undermine the careful husbandry that keeps us on our perch. Growing hungry we would begin to cast envious eyes at our neighbors, or our neighboring villages — and that is why representatives from adjacent villages sit on our birth-control councils, and why we sit on theirs. It is a serious thing, and disobeying the council’s birth-plan is a serious offence in the eyes of the community.

Of course sexual relations being what they are, such offences do take place, with some regularity. Repeat offenders
have been given forced abortions, but a woman died recently after such a procedure, so the council has been reluctant to make such an order, though no doubt the memory will fade and someone else will be subjected to the bone tools of the medicine woman.

But while the mechanisms of birth are never wholly in the grip of the council, neither are the mechanisms of death, and since the object of the birth-plan is to maintain a stable population, accidents on the positive side of the equation are sometimes compensated for by accidents on the negative side. In such cases an over-quota pregnancy that the council feels to be accidental may be allowed to proceed to make up the shortfall created by the death of an adult who had yet to reproduce. Alternatively permission may be granted for the pregnancy to go ahead on the basis that the family will feed the newcomer from an unchanged food allowance. Our food is produced communally and allotted communally according to need. So an extra mouth in a family with an unchanged allowance means less to eat for the rest of that family. In a good season this may be no hardship, but our good seasons are outweighed by our bad seasons, and in many such cases the owner of the extra mouth does not last many years before being ‘cast off’; placed in a reed boat like a corpse and let go with the falling tide. The idea in such cases, both for the living and the dead, is that they are borne all the way out to sea, to drift forever in the great emptiness. The truth is that just as we receive the occasional cold grey corpses deposited in our territory by the receding waters, so, I imagine, do many of our cast-offs fail to make it to their poetically more pleasing destination, and instead end up tangled in the fishing nets of some village down the beach.

There were three bad years following my sister’s birth. I remember being hungry all the time. The crops did not stand up again after their sea-drenching, the fish did not fill the nets with writhing silver. I remember too, painfully now, watching my mother feed my sister, and resenting every mouthful. My sister was a little stick figure with a swollen belly and I suppose that I, although several years older, looked much the same: the very symbol of life’s fragility.

I remember that winter that my parents spent most days in endless argument. I did not listen, or did not understand, or else the centre of their disagreement was left unstated. But I remember the long days of tension gnawing at
me from the outside as hunger gnawed at me from the inside. Eventually I fell sick.

It was while I lay in the grip of fever that it happened, or rather, it seems to me, it was as I lay recovering from fever, which always suggests to me some brute calculation at work on my fate and that of my now long lost sibling. I remember my mother mopping my brow with water, and it feeling wonderfully cool. She said my name and smiled, and told my father that I would get better now. I think I must have drifted off again, but I dreamt that I heard, or I actually heard them arguing in tones of muted despair. The raft-house we lived on was moving gently, so I knew the tide was in, and I was puzzled, because it was not tide-time for a week, and angry too that no one had told me when they knew that I loved to watch the rising tide.

It was night and as I lay in a kind of post-delirium calm, not quite yet part of the world again after my wanderings on its dark fantastic borders, I could see the bright stars through the window, I felt the raft-house swing on its cable as the tide turned, and I heard my mother sobbing.

By the time I could stagger weakly from my bed, the tide was almost out. My father took me to one side and told me that he had some bad news: that my sister, while they were distracted at my bedside, must have fallen overboard. They had heard and seen nothing. I hated my father then for trying to shift the blame for my sister’s death onto me, and I still think it ignoble of him.

They told me to stay in the house while they set to work putting to rights the tide’s work: the endless cycle of doing and undoing and doing again by which they lived. As soon as they were at work with the rest I went to look for my sister.

I had a strong intuition that I would find her, though in the end I had to walk down the tideline, imagining how the current would have taken her, farther than I had ever been before, but in truth that was not very far at all. I trespassed onto the land of the next village, keeping a careful eye out, fearful of what would happen if I was caught. Now I can see that one small, sick boy would have caused little stir as an invader, but then I truly feared capture and the tide-post. And as I searched for my sister’s tiny body my mind was filled with images of myself shackled to the post which every village had at its centre, as the water rose around me, lifting
the surrounding raft-houses, all filled with solemn faces watching me drown.

I found her caught in the spiky tendrils of a bush. Her body was bare and white, like the things that live under stones, though in life she had been as brown as a berry. Scouting around I found the remnants of the reed boat my father had made, hurriedly and badly; it had not borne her far. I would not mention it, but I knew what I knew.

I would not leave the body where it was though, and as we do not bury our dead. There was nothing to be done but to carry her back to the village, to be placed on the funeral raft to await the next tide. It would be a long wait, but the women did something to the body to preserve it.

In my weakened state even her small body felt like a great weight, and I had to rest many times as I walked home back up the gentle incline. The people in the fields saw me, and stopped work, and my father came over and relieved me of my burden, a strange look on his face: a mixture of grief and embarrassment I now suppose.

We had a proper funeral at the next tide. My father made the reed boat well this time and I hope her drowned body found its way out to sea. There is more dignity somehow in being consumed by the myriad strange creatures of the ocean than in slowly rotting in a ditch at the back of someone’s home. But I do not know if that was the case: this time I didn’t look.

My father’s tears as he made my sister’s funeral craft made me see him as less of a monster than I had begun to perceive him to be. But I never quite felt the same about him: I never really trusted him I suppose, but slept with one eye open when the hard times came again. And as I grew older I began to dream of marriage down the line, going against our culture’s values, and my father’s ambitions. Here nothing seemed to change, ever, and all we dreamed of was ascent to the dry land at the eye of our world. This to me became anathema. At the centre I imagined only stillness; stasis. Down the line I imagined change and drama and the possibility of new things that I had not even thought of. Above all I dreamed of the untethered lives of the boat-people. Did they exist? I did not know, but I hoped to find out, and to marry some determined sailor-woman of their people and head off for a new life in a new place. We spend our lives weaving and maintaining the great cables that hold our raft-houses in place.
I came to hate these cables and planned many times to cut ours one night at high tide, setting myself and my family free to drift out on the tide’s wide road.

In the end of course I did not cut the rope and have little doubt of the consequences if I had done so. Nevertheless I do still dream of an untethered life, and pursue change where change is possible in our straightened circumstance. I still love the implacable crystal drama of the sea-world which eases between us and the too solid ground six times a year, but there is also an aspect of the man-made world which floats above it that I have come to love too. When my grandfather was alive he used to say that our village had the finest water-puppets on the tide-line - up or down,’ he always added with a look in his black eyes as if daring me to challenge him. He was a skillful puppet-worker and told me that when he was young he dreamed of becoming the puppet-master, but shaking his head sadly, he explained that he rapidly realized, once he had learned to operate the puppet-mechanisms, that he did not have the water in his soul: the clarity of vision and perfect surety of movement that was the hallmark of a potential puppet-master. He laughed too when he said this, and said that he did not mind. He enjoyed working the puppets as an assistant, but that he did not have the obsessive relationship with them that a puppet-master had to have. So he was content to remain the world’s oldest puppet-apprentice, and to enjoy a drink with his friends like a normal man, instead of living apart as the puppet-master did.

For the village puppet-master was more than a mere entertainer. In our village he fulfilled a role something like that of a priest. Of course we had a priest, and he and the medicine woman performed their rituals at the set times, and people went to them with their problems. They were our intermediaries with the great otherness of the world, the otherness that swept in the water and sucked it out again, that drew the moons to our world, that called up the great winds and drove the fish into our nets – or withheld them – that sent the great killer-fish to punish us for we knew not what sin, and it was to them that we looked to tell us.

But the puppet-master’s mysteries were not concerned with that otherness, or only tangentially. His concerns were with us, ourselves: his mysteries were our mysteries. His focus was not on the tide, but on how we lived, and died, with the tide, and with each other. And sometimes I
felt that his complex tales, both old and new, were the stranger and more potent of the two discourses.

The water-puppet plays were staged on every other high tide. Once I asked my grandfather why we did not have them every tide, since we loved them so much. He responded with his customary fire, appalled at my sacrilege, telling me that once every other tide was enough. It was the waiting that made us want them, and the resting that made the puppet-master want to set the gleaming puppets sweeping once again on their smoothly violent way across the stage. The water-plays were not an ordinary thing, and to have them on demand, conveniently, whenever we wanted them would make them appear to be an ordinary thing, and we would have lost them. He told me that the spaces between things were as important as the things themselves, and that that was the first rule of the water-plays, as true on the watery stage as in our watery world.

His words stayed with me, and I went out that day trying to focus on the gaps between things, and trying to understand what he meant, and in every play I stage, I am trying still.

So I became caught up in my world after all, drawn in by the subtle machinery of the water puppets. I used to beg the puppet-master to let me watch the puppeteers practice, and to my surprise, he let me. Soon I was operating the puppets myself, and I remember my first small part in the mermaids chorus as though it all lay before me still in the quiet clear water below the stage-hole in the floor of the puppet raft, sharpened and clarified by the refracting prism of time instead of dimmed by it. It always felt right to me, and I remember the puppet-master saying to me shortly before he died that a puppet-master must work from the back, but think from the front. And as I stood up to my waist on the puppeteers’ shelf of the puppet raft, working the mechanisms of three puppets at once, I hardly had to watch them through the gauze backdrop that hid our mystery from the audience, to know what they were doing. They danced not across the surface of my vision, but swept out of the deeper waters of my imagination, whole and round and perfect.

When the puppet-master died, I, naturally, it seemed, stepped into his place. There was no election, no choosing. I became the puppet-master and carried on the long story. It was a story everyone was enthralled by because it was the story of
our lives. Like the old puppet-master I always put on two plays: one old, and one a new play of my own devising. My own plays were longer than the traditional ones, with more talking and less singing. I wanted to create something like the world we lived in, only better: stronger and clearer; seamless, smooth and flowing.

When my parents were both long dead, I staged a simple story of a boy whose sister is sacrificed by his parents that he might live. I had new puppets made, carved very thin. I felt the stir of the audience as they absorbed this new element. I peopled the boy’s feverish dreams with many strange shapes and figures rising from the water, dancing strange individual dances, and the audience was silent, and I knew that I had them.

Towards the end, as the boy pulled the drowned figure of his thin sister across, and back, and across the small stage again, I heard a collective sigh, and when she reappeared, floating alone from behind the backdrop, there was silence again. We made waves from behind the stage, and slowly, to the slow beating of a drum, and the thin piping of a bone flute, the puppet corpse slipped beneath the surface. The waves and the flute stopped, but the drum kept on to tell the audience it was not over. And it was not over until the last ripple was gone, and the stage shone dark and impenetrable in the lamplight, like wet stone.
In Interesting Times

Windscreen glum with rain
keeps the speckles off their noses
and his hands on the wheel.
The pourings are not the tears of grace or forgiveness
from the all knowing one. This is an atheist douse
a meaningless watering of motorway full
of countless Fords and Renaults
that carry lovers under this blow of sky.
Broken lovers with their special lingerie and private trimmings
their special plans for later this week
now with their secret biographies
and sleepy eyes revealed. Quiet lovers now learn
the words for uncomfortable silence.
Terrain falls towards
a contemptuous sea, the painful tide
of being found out. The spray of words
said over long distance lines
retains a luminescent gleam
like radiation in the heart.
In the distance kelp shows itself on shore
to prove green still exists beyond this window
as the woman, afraid, picks her nails
for fear of dirt sticking
and he says without rage or grief
without knowledge of his voice’s audibility
May You Live…may you live.
Micheline Mayor

Happiness

It comes on unexpectedly. And goes beyond, really, any early morning talk about it.

– Raymond Carver

On the last content day, I’ve ever had collecting bottles out behind the pine tree yard with Andrea. Five cents apiece at Maple Leaf grocery and old Kenny Wong at the cash for as long as we were old. Four coke bottles in our pockets, three in each hand our fingers stuffed in the O of the mouth piece making them part of our hands long glass clink fingers. Sometimes a couple tucked under our arms and top out our loot at $1.10. The blue fish and licorice babies fresh today. I walked all the way there looking down at my feet. Fabric Mary-Jane’s from the dime store in the mall.

The day before he picked up the sofa and moved. The day before I heard the words, “Do you want me to move out” The day before I heard, Yes. Yes, I do.

I sat on the floor with one candy left A marshmallow strawberry and I watched tv while the whole of the room moved itself out of view.
Hangnail

for S.S.

On the first day of my hike in the mountains,
I catch my eponychium, that bit of skin
the Greeks called “the little claw”
on the dry air of Alberta and a pin size laceration opens.
All things become measured on this
micro-millimeter of blood.
The wail of the wound echoes down the valley wall
to the nearest living doctor
and in the manner that all small things
have the potential to become large;
and the cuticle throbs louder than quads
on each step of each walk up the tunnel mountain
it whines its way through all cells.
The lunula complains to sky of . . . not much
and when the brain and the eyes turn down to see
the microcosm of devastation
it emits enough irritation to rive the body into its sum of parts
like some people I know,
or could think of today,
in their offices and homes bellyaching away.

Be still, I say, be still
little thing
you aren’t the universe.
Virus

Last night I dream that I am listening to a commentary of my life by Howard Cosell on ABC’s The Wide World of Sports. “The thrill of Victory and the agony of defeat.” I sweat like Bruce Jenner. Only this life has all the slow bits edited out, no grocery shopping, no boredom. The clock says 9:15, it must be in the am, now. The neighbor mows the lawn. The dandelions protest loudly. On the sofa under a stack of blankets, I watch Maury’s guests, with no sound, yell things as if animated in slow motion. Instant reply. Commercial. Instant replay. Alex’s phone is underneath my hip along with the remote. I dream in tweets which vibrate lines of haiku. Basho texts,

need 2 see U 2
Tim Hortons 2 nite yum bug
luv 2 luv u A

Alex comes home from work at lunch with an idea to make meatballs in the crockpot. I go back to sleep and dream of cracked black pepper and the afternoon, Johnson, yes that’s his real name, and I necked under the bleachers. Everyone should have an ex Johnson. His hands loped all around my bra strap without once crossing the line, without the big score. I saw him at the bar two years ago. He tied a cherry stem into a knot with his tongue and handed it to me without a word of hello. I must be shouting.

“Sshhh.” Alex is shaking me awake. “Have you seen my cell?”

Why? Will I wake the meatballs?
The stars are out and behind his head in the window like a dark blue pool.
The maple shafts of his iris dip into the black poison of his pupil.

“No, Johnson” I say. I’ve taken too much Tylenol today. Alex is wears his pea-coat and his navy cashmere scarf. I gave him that scarf.

“I’m going to Tim Horton’s, “ he says. “Want anything?”
The front door clicks shut before I form the words buttery tart. I feel sticky. I want to dive in that pool behind the
window. It looks luscious, fresh. The fever has broken. I can feel it lifting. Tiny points of light are bursting behind my eyelids. It’s all becoming clearer.
She Wishes Me Away to the Cornfield

She wishes me away to the cornfield. She waits until I am bending over with the baby in my arms and then hits me square on the back of my left thigh. It hurts a little. Startled, I let out a yelp and then stifle it. “Lauren! What was that for?” I demand.

“I’m mad at you ‘cause you…’cause you,” she begins.

Lauren has started doing that lately, stumbling a bit on her words mid-sentence. “What did I do, honey?”

“You didn’t come play with me. I told you to come play and you didn’t.”

I’m home alone with her and the baby and the baby needs to be fed. “Go to your room, sweetie,” I plead. “As soon as I feed your brother, I’ll come back and play with you.”

“Brother, too,” she says and walks away before waiting to hear if I agree or not.

All of this is true.

* * * * *

She wishes me away to the cornfield. She comes home from school one Friday acting more tired than usual. She’s grumpy and wants to argue with whatever I say. We tell ourselves that she’s had a long week. Between ballet class and soccer and not going to bed last night when she was supposed to, we are satisfied that that’s all it is. She goes to sleep without a fuss around 7:00, but wakes up hot an hour later. The swine flu is going around, so we worry. We take her to Medcenter West since Dr. Harrison’s office closes at 4:00 pm on Fridays.

The doctor there tells us she’s negative for H1N1, which is good, but he thinks she has bronchitis. Giving us a prescription for a decongestant and an antibiotic, he rushes us out the door.

“She won’t take the medicine,” Michael says. Michael’s my husband and my kids’ dad and he’s remembering the last time she got sick and how hard it was to get her to take the medicine then. He continues to complain as we drive away. “Is it even worth it to try to make her take it?”
“Yes!” I insist, surprised by his demeanor. “Cut the radio down,” I tell him. I try to say this nicely.

“When it’s one of your songs on, it’s okay if it’s loud…” he begins.

“Just cut it down, okay?” My tone is not quite as polite this time.

Turning around uncomfortably in my seat so I can see her in her booster, I begin to talk. “Sweetie, we’re going to get you some medicine and you need to take it. If you take it, you’ll feel better and we’ll buy you a toy.” I am definitely not above bribing her in this case.

“What kind of toy?” she wants to know.

“Well, what kind do you want?” I ask.

“I want a toy from the blue toy store, not from the white toy store, okay?”

The funny thing is, both of the stores she’s referring to are Toys-r-us stores, but they are on different sides of town and their exteriors are painted different colors. I have to hand it to her that the blue toy store does seem to have a better selection and friendlier employees, though.

“Okay?” she asks, again. Apparently, I am not quick enough to respond.

“Yes, Lauren,” I say. “That’s fine, as long as you take all of your medicine.”

“What will happen if I don’t take it?” She seems to really want to know the answer to this.

“I don’t know, honey.” I really am getting exasperated now. I was counting on a low-key Friday night and we got anything but. “I don’t know,” I repeat, “but you need to take your medicine and then you’ll get better.”

“And then I’ll get a toy?”

I must not have answered quick enough this time either because she demands again, “I’ll get a toy—right? Right? I’ll get a toy from the toy store?”

“Yes, sweetie…as long as you take your medicine.”

All of this is true.

* * * * *

She wishes me away to the cornfield. At her preschool the kids talk about their mommies, compare them. I guess they want to see who has it best, who has it worst, that sort of thing. One day she tries to trade—me for Lacey’s
mommy. Lacey is her new best friend. Now she wants the same Skechers that Lacey wears, the kind that light up. She asks me to braid her hair now, just like Lacey’s mom does. I don’t know how to braid hair, not really. Pigtails were fine last week; now they are not. Lauren decides she wants Lacey’s mommy to be her mommy; she doesn’t want me anymore. None of this is true.

* * * * *

She wishes me away to the cornfield. “Mommy,” she says, insistently, “I’m trying to tell you about the dream I dreamed last night.” Putting her brother down, I turn to her. “Tell me, then,” I say, perhaps a little too impatiently. “I had a dream that you died,” she begins. “Died how?” I ask. “You got sick, Mommy. You got sick and you took your medicine but you died anyway.” All of this is true.

* * * * *

She wishes me away to the cornfield. We’re at her grandparents’ house, my in-laws. Except for the baby who is already asleep in the other room, we’re all sitting at the table about to have dinner. My father-in-law starts to say grace. “We say grace at school,” she interjects. “Never at home, though.” She goes to a Catholic school and grace is big there. Michael and I have always been more of the Christmas and Easter church crowd, as I like to put it, though to tell the truth it’s hard to get him to attend church even then. My mother-in-law looks at me askance. In her mind, if we’re not saying grace, it must be my fault. “Lauren, sweetie,” I coax, “we can start saying grace at home if you want us to.” “I want us to,” she answers and smiles at me knowingly.

No one talks for an awkward moment. Then, Lauren, still looking at me, tells us all, “When you say grace, you are talking to God.” None of this is true.
She wishes me away to the cornfield. I’m talking to her dad and the television is on loud and we’re sort of watching it and she bursts into the room. I didn’t hear her coming, probably because of the noise on the T.V.

“I want to know where Victoria’s daddy is, Mommy,” she interrupts. Victoria is her best friend this week.

Victoria’s dad died last year, but I’m not sure what the best way to communicate that to Lauren is.

“Victoria doesn’t have a daddy anymore,” I try to tell her.

I’ve had conversations with her about single parents and divorced parents. I was even able to explain to her about the little boy from the pool who had a mommy and a “helper mommy” (as I chose to describe her).

“What happened to Victoria’s daddy?” she wants to know.

I start and then stop. I am thinking to myself that I need to explain this as delicately as possible.

“Okay, honey. Here’s the thing. Victoria had a daddy. He was a very nice man and a very good daddy.” As I’m talking to Lauren, I’m putting a lot of emphasis on the word very, though I feel silly as I’m doing it. “Everyone liked him very much, but he died.”

“Died? How?” she demands.

“He got sick, sweetheart. Very sick.”

“What kind of sick?” she wants to know. How do you explain bone cancer to a four-year-old? I don’t know what to say. I don’t say anything for a moment; I just look at her.

“Did he take his medicine, mommy?”

“Yes, sweetie. He took his medicine and everyone tried to help him.”

“But it didn’t work? It didn’t work?” She really wants to know.

I pause. After a second, I look at her. “No, honey, it didn’t work.”

She looks away from me but doesn’t move. She seems to be thinking. After a minute, she gazes back at me and asks, “Did he pray?”

All of this is true.
When you left Dad,

I stopped calling you Mom.
I invented comedic nicknames.
“Hey Lady,” I’d say in the
tradition of Jerry Lewis.
You’d try to squeeze it out of me,
to wave a magic wand and
teleport us to times of ease,
when we’d watch I Love Lucy
over dinner and ice cream,
when we’d huddle together,
me on the couch, you on
Great Grandpa’s chair,
Dad on the carpet by my side,
together in black and white.

But when it came to Hey Lady,
you’d cry sometimes in your
truck when you’d drop me off
at Dad’s, wondering what you’d
done wrong, and I’d stare with a
blank face and wash it off with
shrugs, pseudo smiles,
and a wave goodbye, the garage
doors slowly lowering until
you faded from sight.

For a while we could only watch
movies together, the trivial
dialogue replacing our own,
experiencing closeness vicariously.
Other times we’d go to lunch,
sounds of metal against plates like
echoes in empty hallways,
words spoken only for ambience,
as if in the restaurant we sat on
opposite sides of a fault line,
chewing our last bites
on different continents,
sharing only distance.
And you’d drop me off,
kiss-smile-wave-I love you,
the garage door lowering
and lowering until you faded
from sight, the sound of your
truck rolling off, the hum of the
engine lost in a desert of wanderers.

Later on, the phone would
carry your voice to me,
the mournful “bye” that
grew raspy and regretful,
thoughts of kissing my forehead
before the night’s end remaining
only as a shadow of memory.

When I finally moved off to college,
you were on crutches, and it was
all too dramatic, the final embrace
before I rolled up the window
and you were gone.

You had said your goodbye
while turning away, sunglasses
covering tears, that same raspy and
regretful voice I’d heard on the
phone as if in time we’d be
connected only in sound waves.

And time perpetuated itself,
new marriages for old,
the crutches aside, sunglasses off,
a new ability to say goodbye.
But a stinging feeling lingers
that you will cultivate remorse
like a crop, that even if I
call you Mom, deep down I’ll
still be quoting Jerry Lewis.
Ryan Leack

A Midwinter Night’s Sleep

It’s Christmas again,
and the party’s dying down.

Drunk and red-faced,
the bank manager dozes
on the diving board,

bending it with his rotundity so
the tip dips into the cool pool,

until someone nudges him
and he awakes at the bottom
of the deep end drinking

chlorinated water from
a beer can.

Tomorrow he’ll service
your home loan.
The Streets of Huehuetenango

I crouched, with my feet in a dusty gutter in Huehuetenango, throwing up. On a busy street in the highlands of Guatemala, I lost all my bearings. As I sat with my head between my knees, my mind was somehow detached, too sick to be ashamed. I could not see then what others must have seen—a stupid, well-off American girl, traveling alone, in her jeans and Hush Puppies with ankle socks. Twenty minutes earlier I felt okay, thinking I had previously contracted a bout of stomach flu, or maybe it was something I ate.

I was sitting at a table across from Robert, both of us discussing earnestly our plans. We did not mention my mysterious illness, not what had occurred the night before. But we were confident that if we had figured out the proper path forward, one in which I would take a bus back to our home base in Antigua, and he would notify our professors of my arrival, everything would be all right. It made sense that Robert would take the return trip on the bus, to continue his studies and pay our rent. After we said goodbye, however, and I tried to make my way to the bus station, my body betrayed me.

Robert was already on the bus, a thirty-mile ride that took three hours due to the terrain. This was 1979, a time before cell phones. We were students, on a university sponsored research project, Robert studying the Mayan roots in Christian celebrations, and myself transcribing marimba festival music on my Yamaha guitar. Robert had lost valuable time, taking me to Huehuetenango. The festivals of Skach Koyl, a traditional horse race, and the Dance of the Conquistadores, celebrating the Dia de los Muertos were about to begin.

No one stopped as they passed me by—not the men with their burdens of sticks attached to their backs nor the women with their tubs of masa balanced on their heads. An unfortunate gringa, they could clearly see, was none of their business. Small children, dressed in colorful clothes, stared at me as they stepped in their mothers’ wakes. The throng moved like a wave it separated around me and flowed in a wide berth. Huehuetenango (Way- way- ten- angle). The name sounded like a dance or an exotic fruit. Strangely, the bright clothing people wore contrasted with their abject poverty. The
Anne Stark

women wore the products of their own labor, having sat in the dirt for hours working looms that were slung around trees and their own backs. They wove their pictures of flowers and birds and vines into the beautiful garments called rebozos, slung over the head, tucked into sarong-type skirts and held together with a long woven belt that wound around their waists.

The feet that passed me were slate-hard, dark and dusty. The sandals did little to protect them from long hours of walking. In Huehuetenango, everything was dusty: the bus with its cargo of people and loose chickens, the homes that often consisted of swept dirt floors, even the bright mangos and papaya at the open air markets. The meat was often covered with flies. The dust was the driving force of survival that overtook just about everything.

How did I get so sick? I asked myself as I rested. Was it a question of immediate causes—invoking memories of the night before? Or was it distant causes—Could the illness be traced back to the trauma of a fallen hammock? To food eaten from a street vendor? To the end of a relationship and missing embroidery? To the spirits of the volcano Agua by Lake Atitlan? Was it any number of unwise practices engaged in since Robert and I first boarded the narrow Bluebird bus?

*****

My husband, my son and I are alone in the house. We are having dinner together. There are some plates with grease hugging the sides. There is still one spear of broccoli in the dish. Pictures on the walls and on tables at our rear show other members of the family, two children who have grown and gone. Other items in view are Hispanic and Mayan artifacts, a copper cross on the mantle, an embroidered rebozo slung over a chair, my husband’s blue-green eyes sparkle as he looks from right to left at our son and then at me. His hair has grayed over the years, but it is still thick and full.

While we eat, we discuss the topic of which question is more important, “What?” or “Why?” This is how we like to talk in this house. Questions such as, “How was your day?” or “What did you do at school or work?” never get answered, but questions such as “By saying X, do you mean Y?” engage us for hours. We interact this way in part because we all spend our days at the same place—the local university.
I argue that a reason for something always precedes the action,” but my husband and my son disagree. They say the “what” comes first and then the “why.”

My husband offers an example. “If I ask you to dance, I am thinking about ‘what’ we are going to do together,” he says. Our son agrees. “But there will always be a reason,” I counter. “Why do you want to dance with me? Do you think I’m cute? Do you just want some exercise? The ‘why’ of your question comes before the ‘what’?” I have convinced neither my son nor my husband, but they smile anyway. Here the exercise of logic is an expression of affection.

As I put the food away, I spot the black and white photos stuck to our refrigerator door with flat magnets. They were all taken by a friend of Yvonne’s when we were staying in a small village outside of Antigua, Guatemala. In the first one, the woman we called Abuela, sits yoga-style on the bare dirt with a backstrap loom set up in front of her. She is in the process of weaving. The deep wrinkles in her face belie years of hardship, but it is impossible, just as it is with Buddhist monks, to guess her age. If I could read her thoughts, I would guess that she is being indulgent towards two silly young women who want to record her expert work on the loom. I doubt she has ever seen a developed photograph. In the second photo, a girl of about eleven stands with her hands placed in the position of a concert soprano, one hand cupped on top of the other. She is proudly wearing the recently finished rebozo, one that she will wear for most of her young adulthood. Her smile belies a warm, open heart, inherited from her mother, a woman who once prepared a very memorable dinner. In the last photo are two more of the children in that family of seven, a seven-year-old girl balancing her four-year-old sister on her shoulders. In all three cases, the subjects never saw themselves in the photos that were taken, yet they all had their own ideas of the pose. It lends credibility to the idea that there was a “why” before the “what.”

*****

In a shack owned by a man I only knew as Señor, I was falling asleep. There was wood and dirt and two hammocks—and nothing on the dirt but two backpacks, a satchel and a case bearing the guitar that I had brought all the
way from California. The only furnishings in this ten-by-ten room, just off the main road in a Mayan village, were the two hammocks slung from end to end. As I drifted into sleep, the earth seemed to shake, and I thumped into the dirt. My rear end sustained the fall, but my thinly clad body became wrung in one end of the hammock fabric. The upper end of the hammock was still attached to the wall. I spent the rest of the night in the same position because, with no electric light, here or outside, the dark was as complete as blindness. Days earlier, I had to go pee, but could not find the door of the cabin to make my way to the outhouse. I hid my shame from Yvonne the next morning by taking a palm frond and sweeping away the evidence; thus I discovered the single advantage of dirt.

The day after the fallen hammock incident found Yvonne and me both standing outside as Señor hammered in new holds for the hammock while he chuckled with his friends. These men could not understand why two white girls would be in their village, except that Yvonne was learning to weave from one of the elderly women residing in the area. Every day Yvonne walked to the house of Abuela and attached accepted the yoke of the loom around her back. She sat on the ground and wove from morning until night. She produced something long and thin and colorful at the end of each day.

Not long after we moved in, we were surprised by an invitation to dine with Abuela’s family. Her daughter fixed us tamales, and we ate them with heavy hearts because we knew that the scant pork in those tamales were the whole family’s protein for months. The family had a small garden of calabasas and maíz, but they relied on the hard work of the men on the coffee plantations to bring other sustenance. Before I set out traveling with Robert, Yvonne and I brought over a large basket of fruit to Abuela’s family. Then we took a series of black and white photographs.

*****

After dinner, I point to a knife, serrated and dotted with butter, resting on our red countertop. “How can the knife by itself be a stimulus?” I ask my son. The three of us—father, mother, son—are now discussing a phrase that our son has brought home from his studies in psychology at the university.
After throwing my arms about wildly at this oxymoron—a neutral stimulus?—I get out *Webster’s Dictionary* to prove my point. The definition in *Webster’s* states that a stimulus is something that incites action or thought. If something is neutral, then it’s not a stimulus at all.

My husband and son do not see it that way. In their view, if the phrase has been used by the experts, then it must make sense. “It is an artifact of the profession—“my college professor husband says. “—it’s jargon. It is the assumed midpoint between positive and negative stimuli.”

I get that. But as an English teacher, I have to turn back to the common usage of words. “Take this knife, for example,” I say. “When it is laying here immobile on the counter, it is not a stimulus. But when I move it like this…” and I place the blade edge so that it is hanging precipitously off the edge of the counter—“I would call it a stimulus.”

“Not always,” says my husband. “If that knife is pointing at me, even if it’s safe, I may want to move it. Or if it’s dirty, wash it.”

“A stimulus can cause a thought process, and you can’t see a thought,” says our son, a grin on his face. “Is a thought an action?”

I pause, caught in a standstill, looking at two tall and handsome men staring me down. I’m wondering if the neutral stimulus could possibly be the “why” that precedes the “what.” We load the dishwasher with dishes that will come out sparkling clean at the end of the wash.

*****

Some time before Robert and I took our trip to Todos Santos, I paid a quetzal for a cob of hot-peppered corn on a stick. That was a lot of money, since a quetzal equaled about one American dollar, but the vendor didn’t have change for so large a bill, and I gave the rest as a tip.

I noticed that I was losing weight on the trip, but I didn’t know why. The bus rides were long and demanding. Sometimes Robert and I were too tired after a bus trip to try to find food at the end of the day. We knew that we shouldn’t eat fruit and vegetables from outdoor markets, but some of the towns that we visited were so small that they lacked a single restaurant. We were both trying to save money.
The taste of the corn was certainly a dollar’s worth. It had been barbequed on a hibachi until tender and caramelized, and then dusted with a finely ground, red hot pepper. The kernels burst with juice in my mouth while the pepper stung my tongue. It was a battle of competing sensations. It reminded me of that other meal, the meal of tamales cooked over an open flame, the most valuable meal in the world to Abuela’s family because it was all they had to give.

When we got to Todos Santos, in the mountains north of Huehuetenango, we found a small pension and rented one room for the two of us. There were no showers, and the restroom was an attached outhouse, located downstairs from the rented room. In this sleepy little village, this was the normal arrangement.

*****

After dinner and dishes, my husband and I settle down on the couch in the front room. On one of the end tables is a little handmade book, one that I purchased in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The pages are rough brown construction paper, and the binding is wood and twine. There are about fifty pages in the book, and the first page has the heading that makes a play on our last name. Over the years, I took it upon myself to record some of the sayings that my family repeats so often that they become our mantras. One of those sayings is a sentence that I repeat often to our youngest son: “Everyone is a hypocrite about something.” I always say this after he has identified what he sees as one of my many inconsistencies. I tell him that once you really commit to something, you will find that you are vulnerable to being labeled a hypocrite. Being nineteen, he is yet to commit, so he just sits back and laughs. His mantra is a line from the Rush song, “if you choose not to decide you still have made a choice.” I’m thinking about the relationship choices I made when I was a few years older than our son is now.

*****

Towards the end of my three-month Guatemalan trip, I broke up with my boyfriend in California. This was the third time we broke up. Despite the fact that we were sleeping in the same rooms, it had nothing to do with my companion Robert.
I went to great lengths to dismiss any romantic notions between us, even to the extent of making up a Spanish nickname for him, Conejo (Rabbit), with which I pestered him now and then. On his part, he could have been gay, because he showed little interest in women. At least I couldn’t detect it. He was pale and soft-muscled, not a large person, but he had a lovely head of thick black hair. He was a very analytical guy, telling me that he only slept two hours a night due to the constant activity of his brain. When I stared at him in disbelief, he assured me that two hours was all that a human body really needed.

I broke up with my boyfriend because he wasn’t writing letters to me. Our relationship had developed to the point where it marriage was in the backs of our minds, and yet we weren’t sure if we were true to each other. During the first part of our trip, I was imagining our wedding, and even looking at traditional Guatemalan dresses as wedding gear. I was embroidering in rainbow threads the head of a Mayan warrior on a plain white buttonless cotton shirt that the man I imagined my boyfriend, as my husband, would wear. I wrote him several letters hinting at a possible wedding. After a month or so, when I didn’t hear from him, my thoughts started to change. It was as if I’d reached some sort of tipping point because my thoughts ran in the entirely opposite direction. I was through. Yet I still continued with my embroidery, thinking it would serve as some conciliatory gift.

I was unable to embroider during the bus ride from Huehuetenango to Todos Santos because of the harrowing ride. The roads were windy, narrow and gullied, barely hugging the tight mountain cliffs. Chickens squawked in their tight cages on the ledge above our heads where I set my embroidery aside. The scenery out the window was dense and green; the late October sky was gray with thunderclouds.

When we shuffled to get off the bus at its final destination for the day, I reached up for my ex-boyfriend’s shirt and found that it was gone. In the confusion of chickens and children and corn, my exquisite embroidery had been misplaced. My heart was heavy, and my blood flow seemed to slow down. I didn’t really want to break up, did I? Perhaps I had harbored some hope that our relationship would not actually be over. And yet I had already sent the break up letter.

*****
Anne Stark

My experience of Guatemala was a mass of contradictions. Here are some of the things I told my family about my trip of 1979:

General Fernando Lucas was President of Guatemala while I was in the country.
There were armed guards on the street corners in Guatemala City.
Anti-American sentiment was widespread in the mountain villages.
Guerilla militias were holed up among villagers in small cities such as Todos Santos.
My wealthy host family from Guatemala City had cut glass on the tops of their outer walls.
The closer your ties to Mayan culture the poorer you were.
My middle-class host family in Antigua kept the price tag attached to their stove.
Corn, beans and squash, in ancient times and now, make a complete diet for Mayan villagers.
My American friend was paraded down the street of a small Mayan town by paramilitaries.
The armed guards in Guatemala City, wearing berets, did not smile at you as you passed by.
I brought my Yamaha guitar to Antigua and sang Italian folk songs with it.
The cousin of my host family in Antigua proposed to me.
My boyfriend from California sent me several letters that never got to me.
The maid of my host family in Guatemala City set each place with a demitasse spoon.
The father in my Antigua host family got drunk every night on a type of local moonshine.
President Lucas received over 10 million USD to fight the paramilitaries in the mountains.
Lucas’ actions against the Mayan villagers from 1978-1982 are called the Guatemalan Genocide.

*****
Robert and I checked into the little pension, and we rolled our sleeping bags over the two cots that were really just wooden slabs. It was October 30th, and we planned to see the Day of the Dead and All Saints celebrations. The name of the town meant “All Saints” in Spanish, and this feast was the town’s crowning celebration, celebrating its Catholic and Mayan heritage.

That night, however, instead of restful sleep, I experienced fevers and chills. Robert, who was probably not sleeping anyway, but instead was meditating beside me, started to get worried about my restless tossing. He got out of his sleeping bag and covered me with it. When I still complained of chills, actually crying out, he climbed up on the slab and put his body over the mound of down covers to warm me up. He helped me down the stairs to the outhouse and stood outside in the dark until I was ready to come out. On the way back to our room he whispered plans for the next day.

Back on my pad I was able to sleep. I doubt whether Robert got even his two hours that night.

The next morning, after the dawn broke, we climbed on to the first bus out of town. The anticipated steep decline, the switchbacks, and the jostling made for an uncomfortable trip as the bus inched its way towards Huehuetenango. At the station we got our tickets and dropped off my bags. After we had a small breakfast in a café a few blocks from the bus station, I gave Robert my share of the rent. We discussed to meet again in California at the start of a new school term. We said goodbye amicably, neither of us mentioning the long and strange night we spent together.

With Robert gone, my thoughts ran into a muddled jumble: So now I have five blocks to walk. Using this bus ticket is my only way out of disaster. If they load my luggage, I don’t have enough money for another ticket. There is no one who knows me here to help me. There is nothing in this situation that is either logical or definitional. No explanations of how or why or how I got sick. Only that I have to get on that bus, no matter what.

I hobbled to the station five steps at a time. My stomach was empty. I dry-heaved every now and then; my brow was sweaty and my limbs shook with weakness, but there was no more danger of curbside spectacles. Then the station door opened, and I was inside. My bags and my guitar
were still in the corner where Robert and I left them. I fell in a heap on the floor next to them.

The bus pulled up and I crawled into my seat. My seat companion was an Englishwoman. She took one look at me and offered her shoulder as a headrest. My neck was too weak to resist. I slept all the way to Antigua where my teachers were ready to pick me up and take me to the hospital: there I was immediately stuck with an I.V. by an old man with a kind face. I was diagnosed with amoebas, and parasites, and hepatitis. In the days of my recovery, friends and fellow students came by to visit, but I was either asleep or partially conscious because I didn’t remember them. Yvonne left a gift of green woven cloth behind; others left a poster of Lake Atitlan. As I returned to my parents’ home in Southern California, my family embraced me with love and concern. By that time, my eyes and my skin were bright yellow.

When I returned to classes in the spring, Robert had moved on. The last time I saw him was across the table from me in the little café in Huehuetenango. In my mind’s eye, his usually analytical face is streaked with emotion. If I could have expressed my thoughts at that moment I would have said, simply, you just saved my life.

*****

I pick up the homemade book and open it to a nonsense poem I wrote for our kids during the years when they were old enough to do dishes and young enough to have favorite utensils to eat their breakfast cereal with. The refrain goes: “The checkered spoon, the checkered spoon; I feel like a goon with my checkered spoon. I love the sun, I love the moon, but most of all, I love my checkered spoon.” This jingle seemed to entertain our youngest son and our daughter, next to him in age. It did not do much for our oldest son or my husband, who merely tolerate such silliness. This quality my husband has—call it steady fortitude—is one of the reasons that we are married today. Because when I sent him that breakup letter from Guatemala so many years ago, he chose to ignore it.

Over the years my husband’s told the story of our break-ups so many times— with our kids rolling their eyes—that I’m thinking the line, “When Mom broke up with me…”
will end up in the book now called “Stark Remarks,” after our last name.

My husband’s teasing reminds me of how I never meant to add more burden to the people of Huehuetenango. The questions “Why did I get sick?” and “Why did no one stop to help me?” pester me occasionally, but the equally unanswered questions “Why did Robert help me as he did?” and “Why did Abuela’s family feed Yvonne and me?” seem more important to me now. In this situation, there was no way I could determine the reason anything happened; only the actor knew the “why” of his or her actions. But this “why” brought my husband to me, and that’s all that matters. With no more philosophical discussions in the back of my mind, I give him a big hug and leave it for another day.
Midlife, With Asperger’s

I

First, I notice that I haven’t aged, although my body has – but even it is aging slowly; I see this in the eyes of coeds before I look away. It used to make me nervous. My “theory of mind” may be opaque – Aristotelian rather than Platonic – but I have learned to classify those grins:
Genus: amorous
Species: libidinous pluripotentialis
They worry me no longer though; the world allows that I am old, and so I’m off the hook. (Subspecies: unethicalis)

II

Less and less do I care to be embraced. More and more does speech electrify me – a beautiful ugliness with a mind of its own, an unconscionable conscience for the potential of words, a hopeless hope for the startling unsayable. My new religion is Figuration, in all its ancient self-possessions: metaphor, diaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and their semi-noble sister, simile – a dreadful case have I become of Aristotle nursing at his master’s Forms.

III

Language seems the option it has always seemed, a puzzle calling for complete examination, like a strange machine rocking in the surf. The dolphin half of me would leave it there; but the human half would solve its riddle. And so I am a student of the liberal arts, a writer and a teacher of the same –
but always on the verge of speechlessness
at what I know the world is not.

IV

Aquinas and Kant agree: there are two domains,
two truths, one of which we do not make
and cannot know. And in the surf between them:
language, a sandy thing, amorphous,
a rusty breaker on the circuit
between eternity and time.
The limits of my language are the limits of my world,
but not of me. I dwell within a self
I never thought to name,
a dignity of silence at play in the fields of the Word.

V

For this I am alone,
a wolf among dogs, timid and perplexed.
More and more I make a habit of avoidance.
I let the moon beguile me precisely
with its lack of purpose; like a beacon in the sky,
it draws a moan of ancient, pointless feeling—
a wolf among dogs, alone,
until the puppies charm me, and I consent to play.

VI

And so I make what peace I can with time.
The compromise was slow in coming.
I think about my brother, dead, and all the rest
who die. (I’ve learned to count myself.)
Speech is all the restlessness I know now,
the angel at my shoulder a model of stoic silence.
But he will have to wait, for the woods are dark,
and the moon is bright,
and I am still at play.
I couldn’t have brought home Grandmother’s bones from Mexico City even if I’d found them. Buried almost a hundred years, who knows what shape they’d be in. And what would I tell the custom’s officer when he asked what was in my gift bag from the National Museum of Anthropology? Tequila? Not likely.

Those bones wouldn’t be easy to disguise, no matter how invisible my Scottish grandmother may have been in my life. Invisible? Maybe not the right word here. Present is better. She wasn’t present in my life, but then, from what my mother tells me, she wasn’t present in hers much either. A grandmother who left few traces of herself—who died before I had a chance to be born.

A few bones would be welcome, just to know she really did exist. Yet she must have. I have her genes. So did Mother. My bones are hers. So in a certain way, I did bring home her bones after all.

*****

Except for the stories Mother told me over the years, only a single photograph of Grandmother remains, the only evidence she once existed. In it she’s holding her first and oldest child on her lap; he’s wearing a white christening gown. Scowling, he looks resigned to his fate. She looks absolutely bored with being part of this event and with the whole business of motherhood. Bored and removed. Her glance doesn’t meet the camera’s searching eye.

I wish I could say she looked murderous, another Medusa, but that would call for more emotion than she projects. Clearly, she had checked out already, and it wasn’t long before she actually took off for Mexico City—in the mid-20s.

I had thought of visiting there many times over the years, hoping to catch a glimpse of her wandering the countryside, planting heather in that dry forbidding soil, but something held me back. It was easy to convince myself it wasn’t safe for a woman to visit Mexico City alone; I was waiting until I had a companion who would join me. Besides, the travel warnings stressed the negatives: banditos attacking
people traveling in cabs or even accosting them on the street and spiriting them away, demanding ransoms.

What had it been like when my grandmother moved there? Had a Mexican captured her so she couldn’t return to her family? It would be nice to think so. How else can I explain what she did? She left Portree, Isle of Skye, after WWI ended to join her husband, a Scottish schoolmaster, in Canada. He’d gone to the new world before the war to find a better life for all of them. Seven years later, she and the children joined him, arriving in Calgary during a snowstorm.

To go from the warmth of the family womb in Portree (uncles, aunts, cousins, friends), a charming village, to this frigid climate on the barren prairies, must have been a jolt. Was it revenge at being forced to leave her home that encouraged her to leave husband and kids after a year and find work for herself with a family in the Mount Royal district? She must have been furious with my grandfather for making her join him. He also was a difficult man, his tongue stinging as much as his slaps. She refused to tolerate his abuse any longer.

In the 1920s, it took guts and daring for a woman to abandon her husband and kids. It took even greater nerve to travel to Mexico City with her lover, her employer. Did she know then she would never return to either Canada or her homeland?

Some might claim she had a psychotic break, but I think this interpretation is too clinical. Menopause madness? More plausible. But why do we need to assert a woman is mad or unbalanced if she chooses to leave her kids and an inattentive, abusive husband? Some children drive their parents to drink. Some aren’t lovable. What if she just got fed up with the whole mess and wanted a life for herself before it was too late?

Or did she have a premonition she would die young (four years after she arrived in Mexico) and decided to do as much living as she could in the meantime? The city would have been much smaller then, only about a million people, and beautiful colonial buildings dominated, creating a European ambiance. It combined aspects of a world-class city with the Mexican village, the Zocalo the central focus, residents gathering at the huge plaza at the end of the day and strolling, men traveling in one direction, women in the other. Did she
join this promenade, flashing her peasant skirt at a passing caballero?

*****

When I arrived in Mexico City, eighty-five years later, I thought I would be overwhelmed. I was sure my grandmother’s spirit would rise up and impress its image on me, as the Virgin of Guadalupe is reported to have done to the poor peasant Juan Diego when he had a vision of her. Surely my grandmother would make contact with a granddaughter who had come so far to find her.

But she didn’t. Not even in my dreams. Or maybe I wasn’t receptive enough to her presence. There’s that word again: why would she be present for me if she weren’t present for my mother and her four sons, five kids altogether. She gave birth to them. She did her duty by bringing them into the world. Surely they didn’t expect her to raise them as well.

Everywhere I went in Mexico City, I expected to see her, serving me in a cafe, cleaning our hotel room, strolling across the Zocalo. I inquired about where I’d find death records, but the bureaucratic maze and lack of Spanish language skills discouraged me. It would take days and many pesos to make any headway. Even then, the chances of finding her grave seemed very slim. But I couldn’t help wonder if she too had seen the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. Had she marveled at their image rising out of the Mexico landscape? Did she climb the Pyramid of the Sun where she could see for miles, the mountains looming in the distance?

I imagine her poised for flight, a quetzal, or something equally exotic, released from earthly concerns. At that height the breath labors, and the heart flutters, and she must have felt a kinship with the dead sacrificed there, given one final view of all they were to lose at the flash of a knife. Maybe she waited for Mexico City’s Angel of Independence to rescue her, or even the Aztec warrior, frozen in statue form on a main boulevard. Or perhaps Diana, another statue, a naked warrior woman who surely wouldn’t let her die.
There She Is

The thing about celebrities, at least the two I’ve seen up close, is they seem to love rodeos. I say this out loud and my college-aged daughter gives me an eye roll. It’s not a big one—but I notice. It’s incredibly hot in the sun, over ninety degrees. My daughter, a freshman at Vassar College, is helping me conduct research on women in Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica. Our study investigates sources of resilience in low-income Costa Rican and Nicaraguan women. Today is our free day, our day without interviews, note taking or travelling between houses to find no one at home—or someone at home but not the person we hoped to interview.

It’s a rodeo festival day in Cartejena, and the actor Julia Stiles apparently got the memo about how to dress. The entire town has turned up in what look to me like stylish tight jeans, cowboy boots, pressed western shirts, or for the women, sparkling tee shirts. The women are perfumed and towering on heels. Tiny children transform into mini versions of adults and pre-pubescent and pubescent girls dress like cowgirls on Broadway. Julia Stiles has put together an understated version of Costa Rican rodeo wear. She has cowgirl boots, and her outfit of jeans and a plain violet-grey tee shirt suggest a gesture toward assimilation without the hyper-feminized approach. I believe she may be wearing a jogging bra.

It’s hard to pin down the type of American who makes the trip to Costa Rica. The adventuresome traveler who isn’t too adventuresome, the biologist in khakis with a fanny pack, the overly-tanned retiree, sinewy surfers with blond mullets and pierced nipples, middle-aged women seeking tummy tucks, and “dental tourists” economizing on crowns and veneers—these people populate the plane from Miami to the Pacific airport in Liberia, Costa Rica. On return trip, it’s common to see tourists with blindingly white teeth and beaded beach braids leaning tans against American Airline headrests.

Although it’s clear to me that tourists come to Costa Rica because it’s possible to see oneself as an accomplished traveler in a place where packaged deals make adventure manageable, and the culture of accommodation and agreeability prevails, it’s harder to understand why celebrities with teams of vacation and image planners would select a relatively common place like Costa Rica for their destination. Why does Julia Stiles come here, for example? My daughter
squints at me sideways and says she was wondering the same thing. Certainly, more exotic and brag-worthy places exist than Costa Rica. Julie Stiles trots past us on a chestnut horse in the company of at least one hundred and fifty Costa Rican adults and children. A Canadian tourist standing near us mentions that Julia Stiles’ American mother owns a ranch near Cartegena. My daughter and I look back toward Julia Stiles’ pack of horses wondering which middle-aged American woman in a bold halter top is her mother. Oh, that one! Things could be worse. We could be searching for the abandoned family of Mel Gibson or the family of Brittany Spears, celebrities who both apparently frequent the Costa Rican Gold Coast.

Julia Stiles’ horse pauses as she waits for a beer at the side of the ring, close to the outdoor, make-shift bar where my daughter and I are sipping water from plastic bottles. Julia Stiles doesn’t ask for her drink. No money gets exchanged. The crowd reads her mind and the bar tender climbs the high fence and holds out a brown glass bottle with the gold label. Her face looks unremarkable and then sparkles with expression as she offers thanks, takes a swig, and then passes the beer to someone on a horse near her, perhaps her younger sister.

“Maybe we’re fascinated because we wish she knew us like we think we know her,” my daughter says as we keep staring at Julia Stiles. We admit to feeling slightly disgusted with ourselves. We are someone too, I think to myself, perturbed. Our cameras are out of batteries, and we’ve been waiting, while digesting a heavy chicken, rice, and tortilla lunch, for hours in the sun. We are out of fashion too, both in outfits that would work well for a stroll in muggy Poughkeepsie, but not for a rodeo in Cartegena. Our Costa Rican friends, both young men we know from earlier visits, seem fascinated by our fascination. They haven’t heard of Julia Stiles but encourage us to take photos. They are pushy. “Come on,” they say. “Do it.” We say “shhh” and then smile at them as if we don’t mean it. We show them our dead cameras and look back toward Julia Stiles. Her face flushes as she gallops by, her blond ponytail lifting and falling like a blessing.

When Julia Stiles gallops in for her second beer, I wonder to myself how she manages to stay so thin, consuming two beers before five in the afternoon. She sits with excellent
posture on her horse while chatting easily with a local admirer in aviator glasses and crisp black jeans. She allows him to take her photo on his cell phone. Even though Julia Stiles is only one of two celebrities I’ve seen up close, I draw this conclusion: celebrities up close make the average citizen feel frumpy. Their fingernails seem effortless clean and the crowd falls around them in ways that emphasize their graceful movement through the world. I’m thinking about this conclusion again the next day when I receive e-mail from my Shakespearean scholar friend in New York who suggests perhaps it’s more that we are fascinated by celebrities, our eyes seek them out, because they make our own lives seem more vibrant—just as the sun’s glow lights up the dark moon.

I hear from another writer on the topic of celebrity worship. He’s a former reporter for News Day and he usually sends me Morse Code-like responses to my intrusive writing questions. His e-mail has a “get real” tone. I’m not surprised when to find that he’s suggesting I should write a different story. This one has already been written. There must be something else I would write about down there. This phenomenon of celebrity worship is old news, he says. “Take Jesus, for instance,” he says, and signs off.

After Jesus was reported to live, but before the time of internet, cell phones or seat belts, when I was a pre-pubescent kid in red, white and blue bell bottoms and long thick braids. It was our bicentennial year and kids in Oregon were excited. I became friends with the freckled, be-specked, pencil-thin daughter of a celebrity. I’m pretty sure I was mainly interested in her because her father was a celebrity. She was the kind of kid who left food in her braces. I wasn’t befriending her to increase my social viability—although it would be fair to say there wasn’t much farther for me to fall.

One day, during the start of summer in our sleepy, alcoholic town, my parents reluctantly allowed me to attend a rodeo in Sheridan, Oregon with this celebrity and his daughter. The celebrity was actor Dallas McKennon, best known for his live role as Cincinnatus on Daniel Boone and for his voice as Woody the Wood Pecker. The daughter and I climbed into the doggy smelling back of a VW hatchback to leave seats for the adoring friends of Dallas, one of them a beautiful woman from Ecuador who kept getting nose bleeds on our ride. The route we took along highway 101 was one to inspire gushing circulation. Precipitous drops and astonishing views, the
Judith Nichols

seascape stays with me thirty years after the day of this ride to a North American rodeo with my first celebrity. I also remember being carsick most of the way.

Perhaps because Dallas McKennon was grizzly, jolly and old in my eyes, he didn’t make me feel frumpy or unprepared for life. What I remember is feeling dazzled when it turned out that we, or rather, Dallas McKennon, would be the Master of Ceremonies at the rodeo. My friend and I were the chosen daughters riding in an open-top antique car at the front of the town procession. Waving at ordinary townspeople, I felt the power of people grinning back at me. I preferred waving to citizens of Sheridan to waiting for an hour outside of the local bar for Dallas McKennon, something my freckled friend seemed accustomed to doing as we stood there in the late afternoon with our knee socks falling down, needing to pee.

I remember an hour in the bleachers, watching pretty cowgirls clip by on horses, shirts ruffling, a dark Chinese restaurant, and a mysterious hour or two in a florescent-lit police station with plastic chairs sticking to our legs waiting for Dallas before the sleepy ride home up highway 101. When Dallas finally returned me to my parents’ porch at three in the morning, I watched his theatrical apology. I think he went down on a knee to what I know now would have been my very pale father and red-faced mother. I can almost see my mother in her quilted bathrobe with her arms crossed and my father breathing through his two eye teeth. Celebrity status wasn’t buying Dallas a pass.

But back to the question of why celebrities have so much power with most people. I think of rodeos again, Jesus, Dallas, and Julia Stiles.

In Costa Rica, time goes a little slower than most places I’ve lived, daylight on the equator snapping off by six p.m. as the sun sinks into the Pacific. In Costa Rica, Nicaragua and other Latin American countries, people pay large sums of money to travel between fiestas built largely around rodeos, where ordinary citizens can pretend to be a celebrities and where real celebrities sometimes emerge. Because night comes so early, rodeos require powerful overhead lighting that buzz with local insects and pop and sizzle with current surges. Broadcasters seem excited to have the microphone and shout names of horses, cattle, people, politicians and products. They tell endless jokes. Local men in jeans act the part of jesters.
chasing around in the bright light of the field, trying to annoy panicked bulls. The local person who might draw the most attention at the rodeo is the cowboy on the spine-tossing back of an oversized bull. Towns in Central America take turns hosting rodeo fiestas. One woman I talked with said it would cost her family a month of her salary as a grocery clerk in Tamarindo, Costa Rica to go to Santa Cruz to attend the rodeo, buy a simple carnival refreshments and perhaps a balloon or trinket for each of her three children. Rodeos set her back financially but she goes because she says she needs to break the routine, get dressed up, go out and be seen. She needs something different. It’s necessary, she says, to dream.

Julia Stiles may allow us to dream. She’s a fixed light in an otherwise whirling context. The grocery clerk, my daughter and I will be different tomorrow or next week, and certainly next year or decade. Julia Stiles, wherever she is or whatever she is doing, will still be running alongside Matt Damon in The Bourne Ultimatum or Heath Ledger in Ten Things I Hate About You. She won’t age, not for us at least. We know even as we see her shining so brightly that we can navigate something of our own lives.

Dominating beasts and riding across an arena with body and soul united, the cowboys usually survive. Bucking and thrashing, the neck releases heads to bob, wobble and thrash. One Costa Rican friend tells me he thinks the public rises to their feet when a cowboy flies off not because we want him to live but because we want him to die. I think about this theory as I pass a fatal car wreck where a man has left crystallized skull print on the front windshield of his car near the town of Matapalo. Whole families line the road near the wreck for a half mile stretch looking expectantly toward the police officers who investigate. Maybe common people, the non-celebrities, are not longing for death on roadsides or at rodeos but rather longing for the miracles of rewinding the film and making the broken man whole again.

Perhaps we lean out to look at wrecks and gawk at celebrities to remind ourselves of some sense of direction. We are living, breathing humans with places to go. Dreaming with direction expands our lives from being one dimensional into vibrant and thirsty as a young star tipping back a beer on a horse in the sun. Perhaps we wish to have eyes follow us as we figure our next step, our next ride, our next string of words, or our next story. There’s that white lady, professor, writer,
Judith Nichols

poet, walking across the bleachers. There she is again on the dance floor. She sure can’t dance—but there she is!
Going to Live with the Dugam Dani

I dug through cobwebs in the crawlspace behind my bed to look for the suitcase from the honeymoon trip. What was I thinking, joining my name with his—blocky, black letters on a frayed travel tag? Back there in the flashlight’s gloom, I could feel the ghosts around me—my father’s and mother’s and there, in the corner, the babies. Spirits puddle in the rafters and globes of absence brush through light. The beautiful eyes of my newly dead grandson follow me everywhere. He finds me on the toilet. He watches me soap myself and floss. He follows me as I kick the sides of the broken washer until it dents and hurts my foot.

Maybe because of my years of bad luck, I’m quick as a jackrabbit when I decide to get out.

“You’ll never win,” my husband said every time I read off my numbers. His name is Jim and he has a roll of fat around his neck. His head seemed smaller than the last time I’d checked. Loving my husband was like loving a bad habit. Leaving him would be easy as jumping off Brooklyn Bridge.

My only daughter would have come with me, if there’d been a warning. She’s one of the good ones and she likes a wild time. Full of all my best qualities, she could have been anything. But I couldn’t wait for her, her children, her employer, her tiresome responsibility. I packed my old suitcase with all my best stuff. I snapped the latch shut on all that crumpled crap.

“Winning the lottery can be a curse,” my husband, the broken record, said again and again. “Did you hear about the guy who committed suicide?” he said.

I look carefully at my husband, the genius in tube socks.

“You’re so right,” I say and he flinches. Jim sneers on the left side of his mouth. Some people think my husband’s a mean guy. I don’t even know what to think anymore.

What I know about the Dugam Dani could fit into a coin purse. I know they lived in New Guinea, and that the men wear gourds to cover their private parts. The women have missing fingers. The men tell lots of jokes. The connection between jokes and missing digits is in punishment—but I can’t really remember what the women did wrong. I didn’t really care. Don’t bore me to death with printed ideas.
I had dreams for myself, sure. Everyone does. But this one, the one where I’m released, poof, and suddenly free, I hadn’t put the wheels to spinning on that. I married a Catholic and gave up on happiness. Most of my dreaming was local. I imaged myself on the stage at Tanglewood. My dress would be burgundy, low-slung and my voice, a strand of water pearls, strung across the night. Watching me up there on the stage, women, and even some men, couldn’t help themselves from crying.

But this was no dream. There’s no preparation for my kind of luck. I’ll be out of our house without a trace—a woman picked up in the talons of a hawk. Winning the lottery doesn’t happen every week. I’ll only get three thousand bucks each month—but winning is winning and it’s time to get out.

I put on the sunglasses, a zebra striped thong, a pushup bra and tight jeans. I click my heels knowing there’s no way I’m going home. I’m not even sure if the Dani exist anymore. New Guinea looks a long way from Massachusetts. The book was written the same year my fourth child entered kindergarten. Now he’s in on unemployment and sleeps on his sister’s couch.

I’m out of here flying. Over open ocean, there’s no looking back. Back and forth, trying to stay alive, trying to catch a breath—that’s the plan I had before this. The moon looks like an old face outside the plane window. In my mind, my husband’s face hangs like a bulldog’s and he stomps around the house. About to see the light, he stops in the hallway and punches plaster until it breaks.

There are no pretty pictures behind my eyelids. Being trapped made me flat as a map of Kansas. Being free, who knows. I’m my own boss now—although Dani life is quite public, my book says. Maybe I’ll have to share all my stuff. Just like in our house, that leaky trap. Ghosts, it turns out, enforce the rules. People are gentle with children, generally. But then there’s the part on cutting off girls’ fingers, as appeasement or an offering for peace and long life.

I’m leaving my people and I won’t look back. I don’t think about my sister anyway, except on Saturday mornings, the hour I used to call her. “That you?” she would say, like she expected someone else. Seven o’clock sharp, who else would call her like that? I can see her in her kitchen with her lists and her white sneakers. The house is in order and she is tuning
her radio to some progressive public station. Her helmet of white hair shines a halo around her head.

“Who do you think it is?” I would say. We laughed hard like it was a joke we hadn’t heard before.

Sometimes—or all the time—my sister drives me nuts. She thinks because she’s younger, she’s got permission to be stupid.

The further the planes flies, the worse I feel. The man on one side of me is wearing headphones. The college age girl on my other side is sleeping with her hood tied tight under her chin. In my lap, I see a photo of Dani women and girls with spears and arrows. They are preparing to dance together and pray for enemy death. When people die, ghosts remain in the vicinity of their homes and are a potential cause of trouble for the survivors. When Dani are asked why they fight, they say it’s because of ghosts. We’re more advanced than that in our family. We’re not actually all that terrible. We have cars and medicine and shoes for our children. My sister would take me in, even if I did something terrible. When we buried my grandson, we put his ashes in a space age building made of marble and glass. It looked like the prison where he spent two years.

One time last winter I drove up to my sister’s house in the middle of a snow squall. My grown grandson slept in the passenger seat, quiet as a rock. He had been using crystal meth and stealing again. The snow was coming down in flakes the size of white moths. I knew time was standing still. It was like magic, the way it just hung there. I could decide to make a change, if I wanted to, I thought. I could be free of all the mess of living. I had never felt so powerful in my entire life. My hands on the wheel looked like men’s hands, like the hands of Adam or someone even stronger. Muscular and dry from the winter, I could hurt someone with these hands. Then the storm stopped and I couldn’t remember what had set me off.

“Do you think you had a mini stroke or something?” my sister asked when I told her about time standing still.

“No, I think I hate my family,” I whispered.

“I don’t believe you,” said my sister, looking serious. Her sad face made me angry enough to want to spit.

“What I do hate is your living room couch,” I said and we both laughed because it’s a known fact that my sister has terrible taste.
I look at the ocean and think how I wish we were flying close to the surf. Sometimes when a plane falls out of the sky, it descends for five minutes before it finally hits earth. The people sitting with seatbelts tight, clutching at their hearts, can see the end coming like a movie spinning in their head. I imagine what five minutes of waiting feels like, upside down, right side up, air funneling past the windows away from the rock hard sea. When I was younger, I could imagine smooth landings. The tops of trees seemed like places I could live. An ocean might be a cushion full of sunlight. Out here hanging above the world, I wish my life had been different. I wish I could be my sister and she could be me. I wish my grandson could have learned how to fly. I wish everyone in the world could see what I see, descending foot by foot, going to live with the Dugam Dani.
Eulogy on a Name

I am in mourning.
One day I’m “Devney,” the next I’m married and “Mullins” along with half the population in this town, including the pubescent boy who checked me (not my items) out while in line at CVS. Fear crept in his face when he learned we had the same last name. Paternal third cousin twice removed?

Sharing is not my strong suit, so I am offended when strangers think we are akin. No, I’m not related to Joe Bob of South Shore. My grandfather is not Jim Dudd who lives down the ‘holler’ in Chesapeake. I’ve married in to the genetic mapping but not the mispronunciation of ‘hollow.’

My attempt at true originality is over, but so are the spelling wars with telemarketers. No more “D” as in doctor, “v” as in victor, and the ever popular, you’ve added an extra “e.” Still, I miss my maiden name. My tongue longs for its syntax. So why not keep it?

I’m not that feminist. Hyphenation? I’m not that new-age. Middle name? Wish I had thought of that earlier. But the real reason: no woman in my family has. In keeping with one tradition I end another. The last daughter of the only son who carried our name—and I demolish it.

So, I pocketed a piece of my old driver’s license, thanks to Shirley, the county clerk, who scissored the tiny square that I keep in the crevice of my wallet, like a proud mother who carries her grown child’s grade-school picture. Before I left, she reached into her purse and pulled out hers, saved from thirty-four years ago: flimsy plastic, faded blue-green ink, and her hair, fashioned into a decade of disco.
Salute Viscera

In my afterlife,
St. Peter hands out
canopic jars and their
lids—the iconic heads
of Mary, Jesus,
Emerson, Walt Whitman.

One for the liver.
Another for the lungs.
The most embellished
for the brain
which we refuse
to discard. Organs

swathed in layers
of linen we must
cultivate on our own.
Harvested flax
winnowed and
woven into ecru.

Hand carved calcite,
adorned in symbols
detailing our lives:
births and marriages
are included, divorce
and death are not.

October is etched
into the trunk of an elm;
grape vines entwine
my vows, fashioning
into a 25. But the 13th
is not allowed—

one’s beginning should
never mark one’s end.
His name encircles a timpani,
quarter notes float
from my cornet. Vintage
volumes stack the sides,
their spines gleaming
gilt titles. Maps of Boston
and New York trace
the northern halves,
North Carolina and Kentucky,
the south. Initials of nieces

and nephews mask space
future miscarriages
leaves blank. Family trees
form an overlay
from front to back,
cradling us into death.
Meredith Devney

Pantoum for the Class of 2000

(This poem was originally published in Volume 18 of *Thin Air*. The author and journal have graciously allowed us to re-publish it here.)

I am at my ten year high school reunion, scooping spiked punch out of a bowl when Devon Donnivan, (my life-long crush) walks up to me.

Scooping spiked punch out of a bowl, I’m praying for immediate intoxication as my life-long crush walks up to me and says, “I’ve loved you since second grade.”

I’m praying for immediate intoxication as my cup drops and red drips all over my dress and says, “I’ve loved you since second grade,” without me having to say anything.

My cup drops and red drips all over my dress and he’s grabbing napkins and wiping my breasts without me having to say anything. “If you love me,” I manage to utter,

and he’s grabbing napkins and wiping my breasts, “I will try to love you more than my tablet of paper, if you love me,” I manage to utter. And he stands up and stares at me strangely, “I will try to love you more than my tablet of paper?” And I nod my head and open my too-honest mouth and he stands up and stares at me strangely “I think I’ll need a little bit more than that,” he says

And I nod my head and open my too-honest mouth, “That’s a lot,” I say, “for a writer.” “I think I’ll need a little bit more than that,” he says, turns from me, and walks away.

“That’s a lot,” I say, “for a writer,” when Devon Donnivan turns from me and walks away
It had been a bad week. Her father was beginning to exhibit signs of age-related dementia. She and her sister called him groundhogs-dad, a twisted attempt at consolation. She fell into a construction hole and bruised her ego. Her Ficus dropped all of its leaves. And her dog died.

She contemplates these events as she stares at her desktop, attempting to finish at least one essay today. There are five or six extraordinary literary pieces of potential incandescent brilliance speaking to her in funny accents. Family meatball stories mix with displacement stories and hair stories and student stories and word games and politics. She paces in her bathrobe. She would smoke if she didn’t think smokers just really were so stupid. So she makes some tea. And thinks about walking her recently deceased doggie, which of course results in heaving, uncontrollable crying fits.

She craves closure, a clearing out of the cranial cobwebs. “Onward through the fog.” So, here it is. Everything you always wanted to know about the contents of the questionable author’s unfinished desktop and more.

Her life in six word sentences.

Her father’s brain; her mother’s heart. Her husband’s nightmare.

Her daughter’s mother; her advisor’s student; her students’ teacher. An artist’s subject; object of his affection. A musician’s muse.

Always someone else’s definition of her life.

She was bored.

So, she made meatballs. Everyone’s are different. Just like people.

Begin with the ground beef. You may also add ground pork. Tofu is never an option, with apologies to vegetarians. Veal also a no-no, as it smacks of inhumanity, fully acknowledging the hypocrisy of the aforementioned commentary.

Add eggs, a splash of nice red wine, a lot of Parmesan cheese, a little ricotta, maybe a little mozzarella in small chunks, some day-old Italian bread, some basil, some oregano, maybe a little thyme if you’re in the mood, and definitely lots of garlic. Maybe throw in some mushrooms. Schmush (not a real word) using fingers. Form balls and sauté in olive oil, then add two cans of whole Italian tomatoes with
basil (first pureed in blender), a little nice red wine and cook for three or four hours on low heat. Feed a house full of your closest friends.

Some people are spicier than others, just like the meatballs.

She loved to dance to the wa, wa-wa-tusi.

Some people do crosswords. Some play games. She likes to play with redefining common words. Intractable. Unable to manipulate farm equipment. A friend’s definition of idiosyncrasy—two morons talking at the same time. She sometimes made up her own. Apocalypso: Rhythmic dance for the end of days.

MENSA has a contest every year to find the most hilarious creation of a new word from an old one, complete with definition. She especially liked these and wished she had invented them. Ignoranus: one who is both devoid of information—and an asshole. Sarchasm: The gulf between the witty and those who clearly just don’t get it. Elitist bastards!

She reads her students’ essays. They use the wrong words. Spell check is the likely culprit. They write about Al Gore’s Incontinent Truth, obviously painful, and a new copulation of essays, to be sure replete with penetrating analysis (her colleagues’ penciled note.) Another student writes that drug companies have finally found a cure for male “impenitence.” She ponders the pharmaceutical facilitation of the language of the apology.

She thought she’ d write a book: Live from the Melting Pot: New York Stories.

In truncated moments. Waiting for Cezanne at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A older woman enveloped in fur. A much younger lover. In and out in a huff. “This is not Cezanne Cezanne!” She said. She said. Sharing a table nearly as small as a large plate in a NY City restaurant after waiting an hour for the privilege. Grateful. Obsequious. A strange Central Park encounter with a man in a hospital gown. Wanna get stung by a bee? Sitting in traffic on a crumbling antique bridge threatening to collapse into the Long Island Sound. Repeat every weekend for two years. A car wrapped around a clothesline pole. Nervous laughter. A side mirror left to sit as still life on the hood after having been swiped off by a madly pedaling bicyclist. An Italian restaurant in the Bronx, a smoking waitress and red velvet on the walls. A bottle of
Anisette placed on the table with the espresso. Clear fluid in the cup after five hours of conversation.

She dropped her very first graduate seminar because she didn’t understand the post-modern-speak of her colleagues, only later to learn this particular genre could be defined as the absence of an idea about anything.

She wrote about a bad hair day. She had just relocated to the frozen tundra of rural Pennsylvania from Flagstaff, and she missed her friends. She missed the sunshine. She missed their voices in her home. But, her universe would enlarge. She would make new friends. And her disposition would improve. Most importantly, so would her hair.

She wrote yet another political campaign ad and faxed it to the DNC. Why Smart is Good. The French-club Mom. The Chess-club Dad. Rob the Scientist. Jane the Doctor. Mary the Writer. Peter the Professor.

Elitist Bitch!

But, SRSLY…Screw Joe-the-Plumber. And the incoherent Sarah Palin. And now for your continuing entertainment, the new faces of the vacuous Michelle Bachman and the Ken-doll Romney and the dread-cowboy-Perry. See: thinking with the dumb stick. Thank you, Ling.

Another essay looms large.

She mused about direct and inverse relationships. The Brain and the Penis; Sarah Palin as hot? The larger the trash pile, the greater the likelihood of voting Republican. The greater the narcissism, the smaller the brain. The larger the vehicle, the smaller the penis…and the greater the likelihood of voting Republican. An astute study in stereotype.

She momentarily re-thought the Hummer.

What if…this 30-something man wearing the cowboy hat and driving the bright orange Hummer listened to Pearl Jam and Jack Johnson within the confines of his monstrous behemoth? What if the seat beside him was normally occupied by his partner, who worked for a not-for-profit environmental organization and volunteered at the local food bank? Was it possible that this Pennsylvania-cowboy-30-something pulled his Hummer into the gravel driveway of his solar-paneled geodesic dome made completely from green recycled materials, entered his residence, turned on NPR, pulled up a chair in front of his zero-carbon emission pellet stove, picked up his New York Times, sipped on his caramel
Marylouise Markle

latte, just as his poorly paid partner drove his or her used Volvo 244 DL Wagon into the very same driveway?

She nearly hit the median and instantaneously reverted back to type. Cowboy-Hummer-Man was no better than others of his genre. Ah. Her own intellectual universe fell harmoniously into its agnostic, Starbuck’s guzzling, NY Times reading, Volvo-driving, Obama-loving place.

She continued in her reverie, oblivious to the fact that she was driving. She perceived recurring images in nature. Jesus in the rye toast. The Christian fish in her husband’s pancake. Joseph Stalin in the fabric pattern of a favorite armchair. Jesus yet again in the linoleum. FDR in the kitchen floor. The Virgin Mary in the tree trunk. Stigmata in the peanut butter and Jelly sandwiches. Going to hell now. Copulating squirrel figures in clouds. Better still, Jesus in clouds. Large, twig-like spermatozoa on the sidewalk. The sacrilege of preceding and/or following a Jesus reference with the words copulating and spermatozoa. And yet, procreation is every good Catholic’s life mission.

Catholic irony.

Catholic guilt.

Protestant therapy, with martini.

She was tired.

And, ah, there was always the heavenly Ambien on the night stand.

When not asleep, the author lives in a 60-year old money pit, landscaped by a beautiful oak tree, a green yard and a productive garden from which to eat non-toxic veggies all summer… assuming the moles and the voles and the slugs and the hideous rain don’t eat and/or kill them all first. No traps. No chemicals. No veggies either.

Barbara Kingsolver might approve of her lifestyle. Except maybe for that closet full of shoes.

And the three-nights a week of take-out in Styrofoam containers.

Proceed with caution to Thursday-night Thai.
The Source of Problems

I first got the idea that my daughter hated me about a year ago. She was sixteen at the time, right after my divorce had become final. I’d taken her to Molly McHale’s, her favorite restaurant, but she refused to eat. Instead, she moped and pushed her food around her plate as if she were writing with a stick in the sand.

“Sit up straight and eat,” I said, and that, it seems, turned out to be the wrong thing to say.

“I hate you,” she said calmly. “I really do.”

I glanced around to see if anybody else was picking up on this, but apparently they weren’t.

“Later I might apologize and say I didn’t mean it,” she continued, “but I’ll be lying.”

She never apologized.

The fact is, Lydia’s never really cared for me. I’d hear about other dads, they’d get home from work, they’d walk in the door, and their little girls would run across the living room floor and spring into their arms. Not in the cards for me. I’d get home, most times my wife was either drunk or sleeping, my daughter would be watching TV, or talking on the phone, or fooling with the computer. Pudge, our Boston terrier would greet me, but he died two years ago when I walked him off-leash and he got run down by a motorcyclist who just kept going.

Since that night at Molly McHale’s, things haven’t gotten any better. Lydia, never a great student, started getting in trouble at school. Nothing too terrible—talking back to teachers, unexcused absences, a shoving match with another girl—but her grades plunged. In her senior year, most colleges seemed uninterested, but she finally did get accepted at a university in New Hampshire famous for admitting anyone with a steady heartbeat and a certified check. When I asked if she wanted to go, she shrugged and said, “I guess so. What else am I going to do?”

My ex-wife lives four-and-a-half hours away in Maryland. I got custody when she was judged to be an unfit mother. Since that time, Marcie has gone through rehabilitation and, she swears, hasn’t picked up a drink in months. The last time we talked, she told me she was happy and dating some guy she met at A.A. “We keep each other sober,” she said. She was also thrilled to learn that Lydia was
going to college. “Can we afford it?” she asked, as if we were still a family.

I told her the university was giving Lydia a partial scholarship and that I’d find the rest.

“We need to have some mother/daughter time before she goes,” Marcie said. But like so much else Marcie says, I just marked it down in my bullshit book.

*****

Weird how stuff works. Seven months ago, just before Christmas, I got this card from a girl I used to know in high school. Deb Pulone. Twenty-two years without a peep, and suddenly here she was again. Wrote to tell me she found my business address—which is also my home address—on the Internet and filled me in on what’s been going on in her life. I learned she eloped with Ryan DelSanto, the guy she went steady with all through high school, and that he died a few years back with lung cancer. Told me she worked as a systems analyst for IBM and had a son in the Marines. Me and old Deb double-dated a couple of times during the Napoleonic era. She and Ryan, me and Marcie.

So I e-mailed her and she e-mailed back. I came to find out she lived only thirty-five miles away, so we arranged to have lunch together which turned out to be very pleasant. A wrinkle here, a wrinkle there, but all-in-all she’d aged pretty well. We talked all through lunch and the following day—a Sunday—we saw a local production of Butterflies Are Free which she acted in and I painted scenery for, way back when. We grabbed a couple of beers and a basket of fried shrimp after the play, and I invited her over to the house the following week for veal marsala.

Unfortunately, Lydia went into bitch-mode. Refused to leave her room while Deb was there. The following Monday she announced that she’d made a Wednesday appointment for us to meet with Dr. Ibe, her high school psychologist, at noon. When I told her I had to go to work, she said, “Fine. I just thought this was more important.”

*****

Dr. Ibe, even seated, looked tall enough to play professional basketball. He dressed well and seldom stopped
smiling. The walls of his office were decorated with medieval weapons: swords, daggers, even one of those spiked balls attached to a chain and handle. We sat across from him, me and Lydia side-by-side, while he jotted notes on a yellow legal pad. My daughter did most of the talking while Ibe nodded and I tried to figure out what she was getting at.

“I don’t even feel related to him sometimes,” she said. “We’re night and day. What I like, he hates. I might as well be living with a Martian or somebody from a non-English speaking country.”

Before our forty-five minutes were up, Ibe asked Lydia to leave so he could speak with me alone.

“The new woman?” he said. “Your daughter feels threatened by her.”

“What should I do?” I asked.

Ibe tilted back in his chair.

“Break it off,” he said, flipping his pad closed.

*****

Months went by and spring rolled around and not much at home changed. We passed each other on the stairs, bumped shoulders going by, hardly ever exchanged a word. Sometimes, during meals, I felt lucky if I was asked for the catsup.

As hard as I worked during the day, I didn’t sleep that well at night. I run this little business, Soap Studs, from my house. Three trucks, a manager named Jerry who does most of the running around, four guys from Brazil who work like their lives depend on it, which maybe they do. We do both industrial and residential cleaning, from concrete to aluminum siding, hauling huge pressure washers from site to site. We stay busy, especially when the weather is good.

The night I got the call I was home in bed, not asleep, just kind of lying there. It was the police one town over phoning to say Lydia and two of her friends had been arrested and I should come down immediately. When I got there an hour later I was told that my daughter, who snuck out of the house soon after the lights went out, was riding around with her pals while passing a bottle of flavored rum back and forth. They got hungry, found an open convenience store, bought a few things and raised a bunch of hell. As soon as they left, the clerk called the cops and they were picked up less than two
miles away. The girl who was driving had a valid license, but none of them was old enough to legally have booze.

“Why would you do this?” I asked on the ride home.
“What else is there to do?” she puffed.
“You may have just screwed everything up,” I said.
“College, everything.”
“Big whoop,” she said.
At her arraignment the next morning Lydia and her friends were each sentenced to sixty hours of community service. Worse, they were told that they’d be randomly drug tested until they reached age twenty-one. Even in college, three states away, Lydia would have to pee into a cup under supervision, and the results would be sent back to Connecticut.

*****

For dinner that night I grilled some cheeseburgers. There was corn-on-the-cob, and macaroni salad from the deli, but Lydia only ate potato chips. She sat across from me at the redwood picnic table, staring down the entire time.

“I miss Mom,” she finally said.
“Yeah,” I said. “Me, too.”
“Then why’d you drive her away?”
“Lydia,” I told her, “your mother had problems.”
“She had you,” she said looking up. “You’re the source of problems.”

She was referring, in her own subtle way, to the fact that I had an affair—a “fling” is more like it—back when she was a nine-year-old. It was with someone I met while I was power washing the dock at her lake home, a woman whose name I don’t even remember. I didn’t dog around except for that one time, but that one time was enough for me to get a dose of the clap and bring it home. Once caught, I admitted to what I’d done. What choice? I moved out of the house, more embarrassed than ashamed, and lived on my buddy Jerry’s couch for almost two months. Marcie finally took me back, but things were never right between us, and my wife, years later after who-knows-how-many drinks, admitted that she had told Lydia the entire story.

“I screwed up,” I said. “It happens to the best of us.”

Lydia shook her head, got up from the table, took the bowl of chips and went inside the house. I sat there until I smelled the burgers burning, then I got up, walked over to the
grill, and flipped both charred patties into the bushes by the fence.

*****

In early September, after weeks of hardly seeing one another, I rented a U-Haul, filled it with her stuff, packed some sandwiches and Cokes into a thermal carrier, and drove her north toward New Hampshire’s White Mountains. She never touched any of the food which stayed on the seat between us like a boundary marker. She listened to her MP3 player almost all the way up, until we found the campus and I nudged her shoulder.

“What looks like summer camp,” I said when she pulled the ear buds from her head.

“Just don’t embarrass me,” she said. Don’t make this like my sixteenth birthday party when you came out with the rubber hot dog.”

“I thought that was funny,”

She scooted across the seat toward the passenger door. “Think again,” she told me.

I parked outside a building that looked like a few good kicks would bring it down, and together we unloaded everything into her dorm room. Her roommate, a clean-looking kid from neighboring Vermont, made us tea on an electric hot plate. Her half of the room was decorated, if you could call it that, with an exercise mat and a wall chart of yoga positions.

“I hope you’re not looking for a wild roomie like in the movies,” she told my daughter. “A fun night for me involves chanting and candle concentration.”

“Great,” Lydia said when she walked me back out to the truck. “I’m bunking with the Dalai Lama.”

“This is your problem,” I said. “You don’t give people a chance.”

“You better get going,” she told me. “You don’t see so good in the dark.”

I leaned in to kiss her and she bent forward so that I could only get her on the top of her head. When she straightened up, I saw she was ready to start crying.

“I’ll see you,” I said.

She turned and started back inside the dorm and it was then I realized. I wouldn’t see her anymore. I mean, I’d
see her, she’d be back to visit especially during her freshmen year, but the visits would become less and less frequent and I wouldn’t really see her, because she’d never really be there.

On the drive home, I stopped at a gas station a few miles from the university and bought a pack of cigarettes. I hadn’t smoked in fifteen years, but now I wanted one.

“Dropping off one of your kids?” the ancient-looking guy at the cash register asked.

He pointed toward the window where the U-Haul was parked out front.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Any more at home?” he asked.

“No.”

He didn’t exactly smile, but he did look me square in the eye.

“Life begins,” he said.

When I walked back out to the pumps, I thought for a moment it was her. She was standing next to the U-Haul, looking around, a duffle bag not far from her feet. But this girl was smaller and plumper. She wore shorts, a denim jacket, flip-flops, and a tilted Tennessee Titans cap. She looked tousled, like she’d been sleeping on the run, and pale, like she hadn’t been sleeping all that much.

“Hi,” she smiled while I was still at least twenty feet away from her. “Where you heading?”

“South.”

“South is where I want to go.”

Up close, I saw that she couldn’t have been older than fifteen, despite efforts to mask that fact with purple eye shadow and too much lip gloss.

“You by yourself?”

“Just me, myself, and I.”

I knew that this could be trouble in any number of ways: a can of mace in her duffle bag, a boyfriend ready to spring from the woods, a statutory rape charge. I also knew that if I didn’t give her a ride somebody else—God knows who—would.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” she lied, then added, “I can’t pay you, but I’m good company.”

“You hungry?” I asked, remembering the lunch in the truck.

She shrugged. “I could eat.”
Once on the road, she relaxed. She devoured two turkey sandwiches, took off her flip-flops, slumped back, put her feet on the dash. Her toenails, I noticed, had minute, crudely painted palm trees on them. She told me her name was Scarlet, which I doubt it was, and that she was from Greensboro, North Carolina. She denied that she was running away and said that she had her parents’ blessing to “follow her dream.” Her “dream,” as she explained it, was to make her way down to Seaside Heights and hang out with the cast from *Jersey Shore*. I’d never watched the show, but it was impossible not to be familiar with it.

“You know Snooki?” she asked. “That is one cool bitch.”

“By this time a month from now,” I told her, “the entire Jersey Shore will be boarded up for the winter.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “We move on to Miami Beach.”

“What if they don’t want you?”

“I’ll find somebody who does.”

I told her what I thought she should do. She should let me drive her to the closest train station and buy her a ticket back to where she came from. She was hardly listening to me, but finally she said, “You could just give me the money for the ticket and if I decide to go back I will.”

“I’m not as stupid as I look,” I said.

“Me, neither,” she said. She reached forward and picked up the unopened pack of cigarettes from the dash. “Mind if I keep these?” she asked.

I took her into the Amtrak station in Hartford, and gave her $200 that I got from the ATM. “I’m not going to put you on the train,” I said. “I’m going to let you decide.”

“Cool,” she said.

I can only guess, with some certainty, what she did after I left.

*****

As soon as I got home, I called Lydia.

“What is it?” she asked impatiently. “We’re on our way out to dinner.”

“We?”

“Me and a couple of other kids.”
“Great.” A long pause. Then I said, as casually as I could, “Listen, I miss you.”
“You should call what’s-her-name. Deb. Probably do you good to be with somebody.”
“I just wish we could have talked more, you and me,” I said.
“I don’t know,” Lydia said. “All-in-all I think we did okay for two people who don’t really like each other.”
“What are you talking about? I love you.”
“I didn’t say you didn’t,” she said.

*****

It wasn’t even eight o’clock, but already I was thinking of going to bed. It was what my father did after my mother died, just after Lydia was born. Every night, earlier and earlier it seemed, he would call me up and tell me he was going to make himself a drink and turn in. “Dad,” I would say, “it’s only six o’clock.”
“I like to get up early,” he would tell me.
One night he didn’t call and they found him dead, sitting in his recliner, an untouched vodka and tonic on the snack tray next to him. He lived in Florida at that point, but all the sunshine in the world can’t keep a man going.
Fuck this, I thought.
I dug out my wallet and found Deb’s phone number on a folded slip of paper I’d stashed behind my driver’s license. She picked up after a ring-and-a-half.
“Hello?” she said.
“Hi. It’s me.”
“Hey, stranger,” she said.
“Why don’t you come over later? I’ll open a bottle of wine and grill you a steak you’ll remember for the rest of your life.”
“I already ate.”
“So eat again.”
She hesitated for just a second, but it seemed like forever.
“Live dangerously,” she said.
The Funeral

We wake at dawn and dress,  
the day much warmer than usual,  
a lion, a lamb, they say the season  
either way, has teeth to bite.  
Spring is never a delicate thing.  
Muddied snow banks melt

On the way to the cemetery,  
I’m surprised to see daffodils wavering up  
through new tough earth.  
Nose soft against the glass,  
my breath makes a kiss.

Later, eight of us, four on each side,  
grip the coffin’s curved handles  
as the throats of horns blast  
“Taps” into the cool mausoleum.  
I make eye contact with my brother,  
look away. The solemn ceremony of soldiers,  
their crisp clicks and turns.  
Through stained glass, bare tamaracks,  
the twigged grace of branches.  
In the back, church women  
clutching rosaries, one with a chiffon scarf  
hung from her wide-brimmed hat.

She’s the only one crying. I watch her  
shoulders quake quickly, business like,  
her upper body a dark umbrella shaken  
after hard rain. I don’t know  
who she is or how she knew my grandfather  
but I want to nestle under her

winged veil, lean into her sorrow,  
some make-shift shelter.
Arms and Hands

Kyle said it was his hand that had pulled the trigger. I held my boy on my lap, my arms embracing his. “Junior was this close to being hit,” I said, failing to gesture with my hands.

“You should have seen the blood guzzle out of his head, like crude oil overflowing from a cracked pipe.”

I covered Junior’s ears. This wasn’t supposed to be about Kyle’s daddy.

“You know, the sensation that part of your body is not your own? There are people who swear by that feeling all their lives.”

Yes, I remembered such a feeling—only once or twice—before realizing that it had just been a dream. That one time when I grabbed one hand with the other and threw it across the bed. It felt like I was grabbing someone else’s hand that at the same time was my hand, so that when I woke up I was surprised to find both hands still there.

I squinted at the walls of our living room, each one equally white and bright. The slits of daylight shining through the vertical blinds added nothing to the uninterrupted glare of the barren walls.

I wanted to escape the memories of Kyle’s past, or the memories of his memories in my mind. He would blurt them out at odd times, generating uninvited images in my head. They did violence to me, so that I could feel the terror of a scream imploding, with no one else to hear, where even shutting my eyes felt unsafe.

“We really ought to hang some pictures up,” I said softly, now rocking Junior with a loosened grip. I thought of family photos, with their eternal grins.

“Maybe you’re right.” Kyle grazed the top of my head with his hand as he passed towards the opposite wall, softly skimming its surface with his fingers. “But when I touch the naked wall like this, it feels so cool.” Not like his daddy’s fury. Daddy used to shout, stop making my blood boil.

I lifted Junior from under his arms, gently placing him on the floor. He held one arm out towards his daddy, stretched out straight, but limp at the wrist. Kyle failed to take his hand, just as he had failed that very morning. “He’s still just a baby,” I whispered, recalling the horror of the screeching tires and my body gripped in terror, as the car just
missed him by inches. I thought that Kyle had him by the hand as they crossed the busy street intersection, while I trailed behind. But when I raised my eyes up, Kyle had his arms folded while Junior wobbled ahead.

Kyle stared at Junior’s wrist, gripping his own tightly behind his back. “Wrists can be bent backwards or forward.” He had told me in the past that when his daddy wasn’t around, he would practice, to see how far he could bend them, to get them stronger and ready, for the next time.

“He had told me in the past that when his daddy wasn’t around, he would practice, to see how far he could bend them, to get them stronger and ready, for the next time.

“An arm can take on a life of its own.”
And that’s what he had told the court.

I watched Kyle as he stared at Junior arching his shoulders, swinging his arms freely.

He pushed back the black-rimmed glasses from his sweating nose, which failed to keep back the flames that seemed to flash from his eyes.

This was after all, about his daddy. Ignoring the sensation of panic rising within me, I asked. I had to be sure. “I know you’ve told me the story of that awful night before. But when your Aunt testified in detail about what she saw your daddy do that night, was she right? Was it really that bad?” I asked, instantly recognizing the answer in the way Kyle Senior stood several feet away from Kyle Junior, stepping back further as Junior reached for him with his fingertips. I couldn’t remember the last time he had picked up or held his son.

Together, we watched Junior lean forward, swinging his arms around in circles. And in that moment of unrestrained freedom I couldn’t help but remember my own version of that violent night.

A young boy yanked off the bunk bed. Yanked by one arm and slammed into the floor.

One arm yanked. Body slammed against the floor.

Yanked by the arm. Body slammed.

Maybe the little boy saw his arm fly across the room after his face smashed against the hard wood floor. The arm was no longer his.

The movement of Junior’s arms appeared random, prodding him clumsily forward. Kyle grabbed from under one arm, and then the other as my boy’s feet shuffled off the floor. I cried out—from fright or relief—I’m still not sure.
Long Roots and Deep
The Argument

How do you hug a man who fears his skin?
A man who, more than most, throughout his life
Stayed deep in need of reassuring touch
To let him know that that he was was good...

… And yet, how could he otherwise have lived,
This man, of whom a father might feel pride
In his achievements, might feel gratitude
For youthful tries at helping out at home,
Might feel rewarded seeing him grow up
A model of his precepts, fit to thrive
Among the tumults of the changing times
Neither had known, nor could anticipate?
This man whose mother never had to think
that “Junior didn’t care,” or “wonder where
Her wandering boy” might be, for years on end?
Not birthday calls and cards, but monthly visits,
Year after year, third Sunday every month,
No breaks or gaps? She knew that she was honored,
No need to wheedle for a Hallmark card
On Mother’s Day, or any other “Day,”
From Junior, or indeed from little brother,
Who also strove to please (but then, he pleased
More easily from being youngest-born).

Harry Junior (how he wished he bore a name
That was his own, that let him off the task
Of family redemption, set him free
To fail or triumph on the field he chose
To fight, instead of in the path in which
His father stumbled, hesitated, turned,
And cast aside his promise) could not help
Sensing the never-uttered scorn; he saw
The smiles fade quick, the lips grow tight and thin,
As parents put the starting chores of day
Behind, and went to work their separate ways.

Early he learned it was his special task
To help his brother learn to do without
A mama’s hugs—what kind of man, indeed,
Would need such demonstrations, or admit
He wanted them? Another boy, one less
Discerning, less alert to facial signs,
Less wary of past pain, might let himself
Call for a mother as he woke in fear
From nightmare; he knew better. Such a cry
Brought punishment, not solace. After dark
Came bedtime for the house, and only quiet
From boys could be allowed. That there were whispers
Behind the parents’ doors was no excuse;
Those whispers might conceal specific content,
Never the tension, never the growing grief
And fear to which the rhythm of the hairbrush
Stroking at least a hundred times through more
Than fifty inches of unbraided hair
Kept time uncanny. When the whispers stopped
And lights went off, and no sound reached the boys
But far-off squeaks of rocker-arms in motion…

…Both boys knew not to appeal to Mama
For anything their father might be missing.
Richard Foss

Expectant

We are beginner gods
past pleasure, wanting
creation in our own image.
But before desire a child begins
with books, instruments;
you’ve charted our failure –
graphs, spreadsheets record
each month, year, a code only
you know. The dead signified
in symbols I can’t understand.

Scientists, we are accountants,
counting blood, needles, chances.

From the world you call
me to our room; with clocks
in your eyes, you drop your skirt,
arrange yourself across the gray
comforter with purple flowers.
Your practical fingers gauge

your readiness. Yet again, deftly
we’ll compose our bodies, careful
of breath, as if calm could help
us hear existence explode

into existence and we would
know. We again labor – what else
can we do, but press our wills
to shape the abstraction

we’ve already named.
I undress. Breathe in
what’s left of the breath
of god. Come on, you say,
tapping the bed.
Richard Foss

Near Still Life, My Father with Telescope

Tonight after work you had slept through dinner
So you could dress now in the dark, measure
The creaks against your wife’s waking, and out, into

The moon-glossed dark, climb to the roof, catching
A satellite like god’s eye sailing past.
You see everything up here. You fill your eyes

With the moon’s blue light, light borrowed from the sun.
It looms, in the new eyepiece, large as this house
You built thirty years ago, evenings and Sundays.

You uncover the telescope – blue fiber glass
Cylinder, tripod screwed to the wood carriage
You made for ease of movement –

Sweet-talk Venus sitting low tonight
In the northern sky. With thumb and finger
You key her numbers and ease her into focus,

A moment, and she spins darkly away, stealing
Across the surface of your carpenter’s eye:
Her image, striking beauty, having traveled

A hundred thousand years to reach you here tonight;
And you, standing on the flat roof of your house
In Chicago, brown parka, your once night-black

Hair whitening under your Irish lid,
You, after all has been said and all has been done,
In this ghost light, lift toward everything.
Ultrasound

This is how we meet, nearly, you and I,
in this grainy storm.
Sound echoes unheard

through your mother’s abdomen sparking

the colorless kaleidoscope:
muted whites, flashing blacks

swirl and zoom like T.V.
storm radar.

At first it’s hard to tell
the difference between you,

the machine, but soon we
see how from dream and science

you’ve come, somehow, to be.
The tech, with her meticulous
cursor crossing and counting,
proves it. You form and reform,
as if purposely teasing
our need to see you. Again

and again your image resolves
briefly into a readable human

then winks itself away. You
are translucent and nearly

all that makes you,
legible as letters.

There’s your kidney,
bright wand of femur,
spine curving,
like a string of stars.

I’ll never see
this much of you again,

pulse of cerebellum,
the dark network

recording this first meeting;
your heart – how it hammers

as if alone it could knock
down the closed door to the world –

I see so much, but not
you. But even this

is one up on you;
since, after all, you see nothing

of me. Just sense
of light, new menu of sound,

the jog and jostle – all as alien
as what’s to come (or is it?):

mystery more than you or I
can know, and with a click

and a switch, back into black,
for now, you go.
The Tao of Flitcraft:
Some Thoughts on the Ancient Art of the Near-Death Experience

-1-

There is a private joke among my family (you’ll excuse the redundancy of the expression; the reader will understand that most family jokes are of the “private” variety, but perhaps given the grim circumstances there is special need for emphasis here): I am, they say, the proverbial go-to man when a misfortunate loved one is in immediate need of eulogizing. Certainly I’ve written my fair share of these dismal things except that there is something so manifestly unfair about the solemn, and often gut-wrenching, proceedings that it would probably be more fitting to say that Heaven has blessed me rather inequitably with the honor of having to compose so many of them. But let it not be said that Heaven watches over us without a sense of the sardonic: On Monday, June 27th, the day I normally celebrate my birth, in this case the dreaded 40th (halfway to the finish line, one foot in the grave), I very nearly had the dubious distinction, not to say plain bad luck, of having one of my eulogies read back to me, or at least read back to my horrifically mangled and unrecognizable corpse.

Exactly who would stand at the podium and address the mourners is still unclear. Public speaking has never been my family’s strong suit. I still recall with great indignation how my brothers squabbled over which of them would give the toast at my wedding reception. With great reluctance one of those buffoonish and unlettered roughnecks shuffled drunkenly across the dais and, gripping the podium with both hands, fêted his eldest brother thusly: “Kevin knew it was time to find a wife when there were more hairs on a bar of soap than on his head.”

For this reason (and for a few others that I won’t bother describing here) I much prefer that no one said anything at all. Besides, I don’t want a low comedy roast; I want a show. One suggestion: I’ve always wished for a Viking funeral on Lake Erie, my body burning gloriously on a skiff laden with wood or fireworks or maybe hashish, my ashes mingling with the ever present graphite dust spewing from the iconic Cleveland steel mills, but something tells me that even in death I will continue to play the part of chastened
Kevin P. Keating

dreamer and have to suffer the banalities of a Catholic funeral officiated by some doddering, sanctimonious priest fond of his ability to conjure up a suitably vapid platitude meant to comfort, or perhaps tranquilize, my sobbing relations. Not that anyone will shed real tears at my passing. I’m sure most will have the good sense to bring with them some freshly cut onions concealed in their dry tissues and monogrammed handkerchiefs.

With any religious ritual, you see, there is a certain amount of theater involved. Everything is staged. Just ask a fallen clergyman to expound on the distasteful hocus-pocus of transubstantiation, and he’s likely to tell you, with a magician’s knowing smile and a mischievous wink, how the juice and crackers become the body and blood. In this regard a eulogy is not so very different than a grandiloquent soliloquy delivered with just the right amount of showbiz panache, a kind of artifice designed to draw one’s attention away from facts that, ironically, are quite unspeakable. And I was about to become peripherally involved in case that, without question, fit under the general rubric of “the unspeakable.”

The days prior to my near fatal ordeal began on a rather ominous note, the details of which are suitable for the most lurid horror story. I was enjoying my morning coffee at a suburban Cleveland café and reading the Plain Dealer, or more accurately reading the headlines and skimming the stories (no need, is there, to read page after page of the latest congressional sex scandal?), when I turned to the obituaries, normally a thing I never bother to do. Most of the faces proved that the departed had succumbed to the Reaper’s scythe at the appropriate harvest time, a small consolation perhaps and a halfhearted reassurance from the gods that the odds were still in my favor, but among the grainy photos of this fresh octogenarian crop was a photo of a 25-year old boy wearing a doomed smile. With morbid fascination I read the notice and discovered that I had a lot in common with this ill-fated fellow: We grew up in the same city, went to the same grade school and high school, and, like a lot of young people unable to find work in the industrial wasteland of Cleveland, we both began our professional lives in Chicago.

Hoping to learn the cause of his death, I slowly reread the notice only to find that the author had failed to
disclose this vital information. I simply assumed the deceased had succumbed to some terrible illness. In this age of poisonous air and water, who can really feign surprise at the staggering number of young people contracting fatal diseases? What pithy saying did I hear the other day on National Public Radio? “Our genes load the gun but the environment pulls the trigger.”

After finishing my coffee, I went about my usual, lazy summer routine. As a professor of English, I sometimes find it difficult to invent ways to occupy my time, especially when classes aren’t in session. Because I’m stranded at home with my eight-year old daughter, I sometimes feel as though I’m looking out over a vast and bitter ocean of boredom. I have long considered myself a committed writer (or perhaps a writer who needs to be committed), but of late I’d been suffering from, not exactly writer’s block, but writer’s procrastination. Why is it, I wonder, that so many how-to manuals on the art of fiction deal with writer’s block rather than its obvious corollary? Writer’s block, if we’re going to be blunt about it, probably comes from a lack of talent as well as inspiration, but procrastination comes from something much deeper, some ferocious dragon lurking in the dark cave of the psyche--the specter of fear, fear of failure, fear of facing the page, fear of coming to terms with one’s own mediocrity.

As I puttered among the shelves of books in my study and battled through another day of oppressive banalities, the phone began to ring. One call came in the early afternoon followed by another thirty minutes later. Consecutive calls? Something was up. But because I have little interest in speaking to people on the phone, I very rarely pick up and saw no reason to make an exception in this case. I admit to having a chronic aversion to small talk, or what is colloquially known among my peers as “bullshitting”; that is to say, I don’t enjoy bullshitting with people over the telephone. I can get away with this, I continually assure myself, because I am an introvert, a bohemian (or at least a middle-class bohemian, if there is such a thing), a bibliophile who is a bit off his rocker, and if I need to say anything important I will simply jot it down on a piece of paper and submit it to an obscure literary journal where, like any ordinary conversation, it will immediately be forgotten. The equation works the other way as well. Most of the people I know have a powerful aversion
to reading, almost a paranoia of the written word, so lines of communication are often difficult to establish.

Typically my wife listens to the voicemail after she comes home from the office and then demands to know why I never answer the damn phone. I shrug. After twelve years of marriage this should no longer be a mystery. Sometimes I even refuse to pick up the phone when she’s on the other end because I know she takes great pleasure in calling just so she can hang up on me. It’s her way of expressing outrage for my latest minor infraction. She has earned a reputation for being short-tempered in a wide range of circumstances. Case in point: During a road trip she scolded me for not chewing a piece of gum long enough. “What a waste!” she snarled. But this time, rather than berate me for my negligence, she listened attentively to each message and afterward said, “First my dad and then my uncle called. They want to know if you still have the eulogy you wrote for my mom’s funeral. A friend of theirs would like to use it.”

Upon hearing this request, I’m ashamed to admit, I let escape a mirthless bark of laughter. “Your mother’s eulogy? I wrote that 10 years ago. I never save those kinds of things. I don’t keep them on file.” This was true. After delivering a eulogy I usually tore up the pages. To retain such an artifact of grief and suffering would be almost as macabre as keeping photographs of the beloved resting in a casket (something I once witnessed by the way—a man snapping pictures as he marched behind his father’s coffin into the church). What kind of person wants such a memento? No, my eulogies were always one-of-a-kind originals, signed, dated, and then buried or cremated along with the corpse.

My wife, unwilling to accept this explanation, repeated her request with greater urgency. It seems that the funeral in question was for the young man I read about in the morning’s paper. In fact his mother and my wife’s mother were friends, students together in law school. Even after all of these years, this woman still remembered the brief eulogy I delivered. To be specific, she thought it touching that I chose to end the eulogy by reciting a prayer: “To die and not be forgotten, that is the only immortality we will ever know.” Except it wasn’t a prayer at all but a few lines, slightly altered, from a then recent translation of the Tao Te Ching, a bit of blasphemous rascality on my part, a way of getting back at the solipsistic priests with their tiresome tautologies. That I
prefaced these words by describing them as a prayer only increased their heretical nature.

Having been educated by the Jesuits, I was familiar with the Church’s teaching on death: Immortality comes from one’s acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior, not from such paltry things as memories. To be fair, maybe the Church is right to take umbrage with this Far Eastern mumbo jumbo and warn credulous Westerners, desperate for a loophole, to be leery of abandoning their own traditions in favor of maxim-spouting New Age gurus. Still I believe the Jesuits are missing the larger point. Everyone, including Jesus, is destined for oblivion.

Most scholars believe Jesus’s public ministry lasted anywhere between six months and two years, and what little information we do possess of his life comes from four contradictory gospels written decades after his death. I can, if you wish, split the difference and say that Jesus preached for just over one year, but this still leaves us with the overarching and ultimately insoluble question: What in the world was the man up to for the other thirty odd years of his life? In the absence of solid evidence, history must remain silent on the matter, and I have yet to meet the Jesuit presumptuous enough to take a guess. The job always seems to fall on the Christian fundamentalists, by definition the most relentlessly critical of any word that does not explicitly appear in scripture and the most pathologically adverse to any addendum to it, who nevertheless are seldom at a loss to invent the most unconvincing and bromidic back-story for their redeemer.

To better illustrate my point, perhaps I had better use a less revered though no less contentious figure. While works like King Lear and the Sonnets are often described as immortal (and surely even this is hyperbolic), their mortal creator alas has been consigned to the tepid realms of myth and legend. I’m an enormous fan of the so-called Shakespeare Wars, and one thing I have gleaned from these pedantic debates is that no one really knows who William Shakespeare was as a man—or even if he was a man at all. Could Beatrice and Rosalind and Lady Macbeth have been part of the furtive oeuvre of the Queen of England? Aside from a few revealing lines scattered throughout his plays, the bard left us practically nothing of an autobiographical nature (unless one believes the recurrence of cross-dressing to be a small but important clue
to one of his less permissible fetishes; certainly the Sonnets suggest something of a rather ambiguous sexual nature).

The everyday experiences of Jesus and Shakespeare have been forgotten, and what is true of these men is true also of us. If we pause for a moment to think about who we are, we will soon come to the inevitable realization that we lack real self-knowledge. Can a man of forty recollect enough of his past—who he was as a boy of 5, of 10, of 15—to have a truly accurate portrait of himself? All that remains, it seems, are fragments of a past largely beyond recall. Given time we might actually come to appreciate this “amnesia” as one of Nature’s greatest boons. After all, do we really want to know who we are and what we have been? Of course this acute memory loss may also manifest itself as a sort of dementia, the most pernicious form of which can be seen in the fervent multitudes whose desire to die, at least symbolically, is nullified by their even greater desire to be “reborn” after undergoing some utterly benign experience like, say, an immersion in water. These are precisely the kinds of religious practices at which the redoubtable polemicist and self-proclaimed anti-theist Christopher Hitchens sneers:

I once spoke to someone [Hitchens writes in his memoir Hitch-22] who had survived the genocide in Rwanda, and she said to me that there was now nobody left on the face of the earth, either friend or relative, who knew who she was. No one who remembered her girlhood and her early mischief and family lore; no sibling or boon companion who could tease her about that first romance; no lover or pal with whom to reminisce. All her birthdays, exam results, illnesses, friendships, kinships—gone. She went on living, but with a tabula rasa as her diary and calendar and notebook. I think of this every time I hear of the callow ambition to “make a new start” or to be “born again”: Do those who talk like this truly wish for the slate to be wiped?

Petty though Hitchens makes it sound, the deep yearning for the “slate to be wiped” is a universal theme hardwired into the human psyche, probably because, whether we want to admit it or not, the slate will be wiped once and for all, and in an attempt to cope with this grim and unavoidable state of affairs, cowering humanity has concocted a plethora of mythic imagery—Christian baptism and the swift waters of the river Lethe. In this regard Taoism is somewhat more accepting of the facts than most other ancient philosophies,
and it strikes me that one of the indispensable lessons of the Tao can be summed up in just this way: “To die \and\ to be forgotten, that is our true destiny, and to fight against this inevitability is not only futile but also the cause of so much of our misery, angst and chronic frustration.”

According to Victor H. Mair, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature in the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the concept of the Tao is probably deeply embedded in the human mind. To bolster his theory he offers some new and fascinating philological evidence. The word Tao (pronounced dow) may have had an archaic pronunciation like drog or dorg. Mair goes on to argue:

This links it to the Proto-Indo-European root drogh (to run along) and Indo-European dhorg (way, movement). Related words in a few modern Indo-European languages are Russian doroga (way, road), Polish droga (way, road), Chech draha (way, track), Serbo-Croatian draga ([path through a] valley) and Norwegian dialect drog (trail of animals; valley). The latter two examples help to account for the frequent and memorable valley imagery of the Tao Te Ching; ways and valleys, it would appear, are bound together in our consciousness.

The nearest Sanskrit cognates to Tao (drog) are dhrajas (course, motion) and dhrai (course). The most closely related English words are track and trek…Following the Way, then, is like going on a cosmic trek. Even more unexpected than the panoply of Indo-European cognates for Tao (drog) is the Hebrew root d-r-g…which yields words meaning “track, path, way, way of doing things…”

The universality of this imagery is difficult to ignore. During a traditional Christian funeral, to give but one example, you are likely to hear of a journey through a valley, usually in the form of that most famous and proverbial, if clichéd, verse from the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 23, which in the King James version is translated as “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me…” Maybe the anonymous poet of this Psalm, when composing these lines to express the great abstraction of death, was tapping into a universal pallet of images that had the same pleasing effect on Lao Tzu, the man attributed with having
written the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu maintains that one should not cling to the things of this world. “He who is skilled at traveling leaves neither tracks nor traces.” The implication here is that the vale of death’s shadow is analogous to the eternally nameless Way. “In metaphorical terms,” continues Lao Tzu in Victor H. Mair’s translation, “the relationship of all under heaven to the Way is like that of valley streams to the river and sea.”

But on that gloomy November day ten years ago, as I gazed out over the traumatized faces of my mother-in-law’s Christian friends and family, I instantly surmised that a long exegesis on the *Tao Te Ching* would not have offered much in the way of consolation and may even have riled a strict adherent of the more esoteric philosophies of the East since, at least in Lao Tzu’s quasi-mystical view, we should train ourselves to think not in terms of life and death but in terms of being and non-being. Death, like life, is illusory, part of the mysterious, indescribable, unknowable Way of all things.

-3-

Later that evening, while searching through the obits online, my wife stumbled upon the gruesome story of the young man’s untimely demise. It was all over the Chicago papers and even made national news. One cumbersome headline ran, “Autopsy results are inconclusive in the death of a man who was partially eaten by his pet pit bull.” The man, a habitual drug user, had taken an overdose of some undisclosed illicit substance and was thought to have been dead for some days before the dog began to dine on his decomposing face, neck, chest and arms. At first it was unclear if the dog had ingested any flesh while the man was unconscious. Further evidence suggested that the wounds were inflicted postmortem, but the initial lack of hard facts did not prohibit the most craven bloggers, hiding behind the anonymity of their laptops, from assailing the world with their vile opinions and facile explanations.

As one writer gibed, “What is a poor dog to do when the dimwitted junkie of an owner decides to OD without leaving the door open? Gotta eat somehow to survive, right? Hope the doggie finds a good new home with normal folk.” Another blogger, making the same puerile point more succinctly, wrote, “The idiot overdosed on his latest fix, and the dog got hungry waiting for something to eat. Easy
solution.” Believing these people were starting to get a little boring about it, another commentator posted, “This story is sooooo stupid! No one is blaming a starving dog for eating what is probably the only thing it could eat.” Still others, perhaps getting to the real heart of the matter, took issue with the parents. “Don't blame the dog, blame the guy's father for not checking up on him sooner. If I had not heard from my son for a few days and I knew he had a dog, I'd be checking up on him, or making calls to the proper authorities.”

As I clicked through this dreck, I found a few unexpected pop culture references (“Sit, UBU, sit…Good dog”) as well as an occasional bad pun (“Face: Its what's for dinner”). Although some people blamed this grisly and unfortunate episode on the particular breed (one study reported that pit bulls accounted for 59% of all dog bite related fatalities in the United States and that between 2006 and 2008 pit bulls were responsible for 52 deaths or the equivalent of one pit bull killing a U.S. citizen every three weeks), I was astonished to find that most of the online commentators were rather deferential toward the dog and decidedly less forgiving of the man who, because he had a serious drug problem, apparently deserved to have his face “recycled.”

I found the story disturbing, in part because the thought of my famished shih-poo, crouching atop my lifeless body and nibbling at my nose, made me shiver, but also because my wife and I were planning a weekend trip to Chicago to celebrate my birthday, and we would almost certainly be passing through the same neighborhood streets where this man once lived. I could already feel the bad vibes emanating from the bars and restaurants where the man’s friends would surely be gathering that weekend to mourn his passing and tip a few pints in his honor.

I reject outright the idea of a supernatural order and give no credence to the laughable notion that restless spirits wander the earth but, as it would later turn out, the young man from my hometown may have played the role of guardian angel and saved me from my latest near death experience.

-4-

Common sense tells us that men and boys (that is, those members of the species most lacking in common sense) are far more likely than their female counterparts to seek out situations where they can get themselves readily killed, and
the chronicle of my life is certainly fraught with many such examples. As a boy of three I was discovered playing on the “choo-choo” tracks next to my parent’s apartment where I was very nearly killed by a locomotive barreling down the line. As a boy of four, and already something of a wanderlust, I hopped on my Big Wheel and, without informing my father, set off on a journey to visit my grandparents. My perilous trek through the tough neighborhoods of Cleveland came to an abrupt end when I managed to stop traffic at Detroit and West 117th Streets. A middle-aged man pulled over, put me in the back of his station wagon and, running his nervous fingers through his greasy comb-over, asked where in the hell I thought I was going. For most children this surely would have spelled the very end of the journey, but to my great fortune the man was an acquaintance of my grandparents and delivered me safely, and unmolested, to their home.

In my twenties I worked third shift as a boilermaker at an oil refinery near Canton, Ohio and one night watched in stunned horror as a tower filled with petroleum suddenly exploded, hurling a co-worker fifty feet into the air. Chaos ensued. Men ran for their lives. A seasoned journeyman yanked me toward the nearest gate and, invoking a familiar biblical injunction, told me, “Don’t look behind you and don’t stop!”

As a man of 30, while riding my mountain bike, I struck a cement curb, flew over the handlebars, and felt (or maybe heard) my clavicle snap in two. Had I landed a few inches to the left my brain would have been spilling through a gaping hole in my skull. In my mid-thirties I went to the Pennsylvania wilderness to visit my wife’s hillbilly kin and, after drinking a few vodka tonics around the fire, decided it was a good time to take a spin on their prized ATV. I was tearing along a muddy trail at a pretty good clip when I lost control, flipped over, and went pinwheeling into a muddy ditch beside a copse of hardwood trees. Why my neck didn’t snap I do not know.

But my most recent opportunity to dance with death presented itself on the weekend of my 40th birthday. I was staying at the Sheraton Towers and Gardens in the Streeterville section of downtown Chicago with my wife and daughter. The weekend was uneventful enough until the morning of our departure. Unable to sleep, I found myself wandering through the hotel lobby at six in the morning and
decided to take a leisurely stroll down the street to buy a strong cup of coffee and a newspaper. The forecast called for sun and mild temperatures, but the day greeted me with a gentle mist and a cold, gray sky.

After making my purchases, I started back to hotel and managed to get about fifty yards past the nearest intersection when I heard a loud crash. At first I didn’t bother to look over my shoulder to see what had happened. I spent most of my twenties in Chicago, first as an undergraduate at Columbia College in the Loop and then as a boilermaker on the near westside, and those years of living in the city had conditioned me to the incessant metallic screeching of the el and the deafening rumble of cranes and wrecking balls across the checkerboard of construction sites. Still, there was something not quite right about the sound I heard, and after walking a few more yards curiosity got the better of me.

When I turned around I saw the twisted hulk of a yellow cab hanging halfway inside a parking garage. The damage was such that I initially thought the heavy garage door had slammed down on the vehicle’s roof, caving it in and trapping the passengers inside. How then to account for the man lying on the sidewalk ten feet away? The frame of the cab was so crumpled that no one could have been ejected. It was only later that day, while watching video footage of the event captured by a security camera, that I was able to piece it all together. The cabbie, attempting to pass another car, suddenly lost control, fishtailed ninety degrees and slammed into the side of the parking garage. As the taxi slid across the rain-slicked street, it struck an unsuspecting pedestrian, swatting him like a tennis racket and killing him on the spot. Emergency vehicles arrived minutes later, and the paramedics, rather than rushing the victim to the nearest trauma center, simply bagged him right there at the scene. About a week or so after the accident, I ran into a firefighter friend of mine and asked him about what seemed like an unusual practice.

“Yeah, well, whenever we see gray matter, that’s it, we don’t even bother performing CPR.”

I played the video footage again and again and noticed that, in the background, not far from the spot where the cab begins to lose control, there is a solitary figure walking in the direction of the Sheraton. There I am, serene as could be, with Death literally breathing black exhaust down the back of my neck.
Witnessing the aftermath didn’t change my composure all that much, which is more than I can say of those closer to the accident. Before summoning help, the parking garage attendant proved incapable of doing anything other than run around in circles. After a long, dramatic delay the cabbie, like some famous actor making his first appearance onscreen, managed to force open the mangled door and stood trembling in the cool, June mist. When he saw the body in the street he put his hands on his head and let out a low, miserable, protracted wail. Within minutes the police arrived, sirens blaring, and shooed the dumbfounded gawkers from the terrible scene.

I plodded away, thinking that if I’d been delayed by the cashier at the store just thirty seconds I would have been the unfortunate man now being zipped inside the body bag. Oh, then I would have been in real trouble. I could imagine how my wife would have woken up in the hotel room to find that I was missing. She wouldn’t worry about me or express concern or ask the doorman of my whereabouts. She simply would have stewed in the room for an hour or two and let herself slowly grow more and more irritated, working herself into an epic rage, until she actually fantasized about my death.

As I ambled unscathed into the hotel lobby, I started to wonder why men even bothered with marriage. It then occurred to me that this latest brush with death was a truly pivotal moment in my life and a quintessentially American one at that. Our books and movies abound with examples of the middle-aged family man who is suddenly plunged into an existential crisis and then, after assessing his situation, decides to light out and start his life all over again. Here it was, the eons-old rebirth theme, this time played out on a secular rather than religious stage.

One of the more famous examples of this theme can be found in chapter seven of Dashiell Hammett’s noir classic *The Maltese Falcon* in what has become known as the Flitcraft Parable, about an ordinary man who decides one day to walk away from his humdrum life:

Here’s what happened to him [explains the protagonist of the novel Sam Spade]. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up—just the skeleton. A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk right alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn’t touch him, though a piece of the sidewalk...
was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek... He was scared stiff of course, but he was more shocked than really frightened. He felt like someone had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works.

Flitcraft had been a good citizen and a good husband and father, not by any outer compulsion, but simply because he was a man who was most comfortable in step with his surroundings... The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had showed him that life was fundamentally known of those things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam. He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them...

[He] knew before he got twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life...he would change his life at random by simply going away.

The story has many antecedents. One of the more disturbing is the gothic fable “Wakefield” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, about a man who has reached “the meridian of life” and decides, after ten years of matrimony, to abandon his wife. It’s a most familiar tale, explains Hawthorne, “which appeals to the general sympathies of mankind. We know, each for himself, that none of us would perpetrate such a folly, yet feel as if some other might.” On that count Hawthorne may be in error.

In some of my college courses I teach Paul Auster’s Moon Palace, a novel that focuses, in part, on a painter named Julian Barber who leaves his family and travels to the deserts of the American southwest in a kind of spiritual and artistic quest. I have also taught Jon Krakauer’s Into the Wild, about a well-behaved, middle-class, college boy who abandons the comfortable trappings of his life and roams the empty spaces of the continent until he dies alone in the Alaskan wilderness. The theme is not an exclusively male one either. The pugnacious Christopher Hitchens begrudgingly concedes that his own mother, Yvonne, wanted to “make a fresh start of it” in middle life and expressed her desire to leave her husband, always referred to as “the Commander”, and live out her remaining days in Israel. Shortly after divulging this secret to
her son, Yvonne took her own life in a hotel room in Greece. So it goes, as Mr. Vonnegut would say.

When faced with the unending constraint of certain social institutions like marriage or a nine-to-five work routine or the relentless vapidities that constitute life in the manic-depressive suburbs (to paraphrase Sylvia Plath), people naturally begin to yearn for liberation, for release, for a bit of warmth and sunshine to creep back into those dark and dreary places where the soul resides. A traumatic event, a Flitcraft episode, can be the key to our escape from the sickness and withering decay of this voluntary imprisonment.

But I elected to return to the hotel, the dutiful spouse and father, the reliable eulogist, the would-be Flitcraft, and in the days following my brush with death I began writing this essay, a small contribution to the soon-to-be-forgotten conversation of humanity. To engage in too much wish-thinking is a dangerous thing, and so let this essay serve as the encomium to the Flitcraft within me, the restless wild man who dreams of one day waking from the shadowy valley, the impenetrable Way, the maddening Möbius strip of the quotidian. There are people—I have known a few—who want to not merely investigate the obscure realms of an unfettered imagination but to begin living an altogether new, thrilling, dissolute, and possibly self-destructive life. Let me not be counted among them.

Somewhere in the shadowy regions of our brains, most of us understand that we are always beginning anew, that each moment is yet another tiny branch in the infinitely vast fractal of life, blind chance, luck, randomness, evolution, call it what you will, but because our minds are incapable of grasping the complexity and mindlessness of the natural order (or is it disorder?), we have created all sorts of high-stakes games to bolster the illusion of permanence, all of them designed with one thing in mind: that for the game to continue the deck must eventually be reshuffled. Only we won’t be sitting at the table when a new hand is dealt.
Handmade Gods
Excepted from *Being Caught, and so Mastered*

They had just enough time to jump on board and find a cozy compartment with clean windows before the train pulled away from the platform. The jolt was unexpected and caught Him in the act of sitting. She had been arranging Her things on the seat and the sudden movement squeezed a high-pitched squeal as She struggled to maintain her footing. They both laughed at being caught unaware (an undesirable situation for a god) but quickly recovered, and with a sigh sunk deep into the crushed velvet seats, happy to be at the very beginning of their first day off in millions of years.

The train moved slowly, steadily gaining elevation now and again to go over a street or to cross over one of the many creeks that fed the White River which coiled itself round and through the center of the city. The smells of spices and meat cooking crept in through the open window, mixing with the smell of creosote and Her perfume. They knew everything about this city. They knew the family lines of its inhabitants; a geography of skin, every one of them grown from a handful of flesh that these two gods pulled from between the small threads of individual pieces of paper, each drawn from one of the first trees. And this was how each family traced its history. For example, Mrs. Kimble—who was at this moment leaning halfway out her second floor window, yelling at the postman—was from a line that had its roots deep in the high mountains, her ancestors drawn from mountain Juniper which guaranteed a long and weathered life, one that would not be split or bowed by the heavy hands of fate. And then Mrs. Kimble, too, was lost to an ever growing distance as the train crossed the river again, moving ever forward.

On a hill, in the distance, the Casa Loma glittered in the morning light. The windows had been cleaned the day before in anticipation of this trip. He knew She loved all that glittered, all that spoke to the crow blood that ran through her veins. And what’s glitterier than the largest building in town catching up the amber effluence of dawn?

He had invented the automobile; She, the train. And it was the train that captured Her fancy; a smell and sound sweeter to Her than even waves lapping at the feet of the continent. She invented the wheel that ran them both, and time was invented along similar lines.
He disagreed with Her concept of Time, and the argument became the world’s first fight. He was in favor of cutting Her circle into a line, certifiably starting with the moment of their coming together, and an end that was the end of everything they’d created including themselves. Neither would compromise. A deal was struck. The world would be divided into two equal halves. She would assign Her concept of circular Time to one half, and He would assign His linear version to the other. They would see who came out ahead. Both believed they were right and in non-sporting fashion attempted to exert control of the other through the medium of meat. Trained men with wicked instruments of torture and death crossed entire continents leaving a slick fetid mess in their wake. The issue was never fully settled.

The warm air filtering through the window turned Her inward.

Do you ever think about existence? She asked.

I exist. So, I suppose I think on it time to time, He said.

It’s fragmentary, this existence. I think it so.

I don’t think so. We’ve done a rather good job of piecing it all together.

I don’t mean “fragmented,” I mean “fragmentary.”

Sounds like a simple matter of endings.

No such thing as a simple matter.

She paused, turned from Him toward the window, as if gathering Her thoughts from the ever escaping scenery. Fence posts moved faster than the fields, where wheat stood at attention in mature khaki.

Isn’t a fragment a whole unto itself?

No. A fragment is a piece of something else. I mean, isn’t it by definition?

What if we looked at it as being whole?

Forget about any preconceived idea of wholeness…that’d be the way you’d have to do it.

He didn’t know what to say. She was given to these fits—He referred to them as fits—of interiority which He didn’t share. He proudly thought of Himself as a man of action, not introspection. And felt it was better to approach
things as they are, not as they might be. Either way, He had no mind for abstract thought and no tongue for eloquence; which was fine even if, from time to time, She had a good laugh at His expense.

For instance, if I were to break a mirror…
Don’t do that, we can’t afford the bad luck.

She giggled which made Him laugh.

Silly boy. If I were to break a mirror I’d have fragments, which would still reflect the world it came into contact with, wouldn’t it?

Even if you did, those fragments can’t be called a “mirror” because they no longer represent a mirror. You’d call them “shards” and shards aren’t wholes.

Yet they mirror.

He had a very low threshold for this kind of banter. He wanted to talk about the ocean, their destination, not about some language quandary. And He was beginning to get bored with the conversation which traditionally made Him grumpy.

What’s difference does it make anyway?

She seemed not to be paying attention so He went back to reading His Farm & Field magazine.

We’ve done a good job, haven’t we?
I’d say so. Wouldn’t you?
I have this nagging feeling that something is missing.

He started going over a mental list of what they’d created, starting with amoebas. She could tell He was focused; He always looked up at the sky while sucking on His bottom lip when He was thinking. Minutes passed before He spoke.

Can’t think of anything, can you give me more information?

Well, I don’t know what it is, but something’s been bothering me.

Beyond the fields speedily filing past the window, some buildings, moving slightly slower, came and went from view. Mid-morning and the fields switched to vineyards, stout hills prowled the horizon line. A lake with a forgotten name glinted in the distance, trees began to grow thick round the tracks, ferns and brambles; by mid-day the thin mountainous air.

She propped Her legs on the opposite bench and took a long look at Him. She wondered if She loved Him at all. It wasn’t that She didn’t love him at all, not really, just times
when She hated Him and His over-thinking self-righteous shit. His annoying habit of letting Her speak until She spoke above His ability to comprehend, and then He’d get mad, pout, and be an all-around bother. That man only had two speeds. And there was a part of Him She’d never like; a vile pit She knew was there beneath the veneer of politeness waiting to be revealed. Her ears popped as they gained elevation, the landscape outside was sparse and the window cold to the touch, snow hid under the stretched shadow of a solitary boulder; the Juniper trees shook like tambourines in the high, starved, sub-alpine wind. She watched Him pull His jacket tighter to His chest while She wished more than anything for the train to stop here and let Her out, for this was exactly the type of country She fancied: hard rock that would easily splinter bone, the cavern’s gaping maw waiting to swallow Her up again and again forever.

Do you want to hear what I have to say?
His mind had already moved on to other things, namely His affairs at the office that weren’t getting attended to while He was on vacation.
Tell me.

We created this population, pulled them kicking and screaming into this world. We gave them identity, the ability to think, to make choices.

There are limits though.
They couldn’t be like us.

They wouldn’t need us.
Do you think of yourself in relation to the other things around you?
I don’t worry about things like that.
They don’t either. That’s the problem.
I don’t see a problem. It’s better for all of us.
The world we left continues to move forward without us. The world we are heading toward doesn’t yet know we are coming. Here in this car nothing changes, yet outside everything does.

That was the point. If it didn’t, we’d never stop working.

You don’t understand.
I guess I don’t, why don’t you fill me in?
See, that’s the problem.
Look. As far as I’m concerned they have two things to do: buy the stuff we make for them and pay their dues. Beyond that I just don’t care.

Great. Your system. Your way.
I don’t see anyone complaining. You didn’t complain when we moved from that little dinky trailer to the Casa Loma.

He was riled up. That meant She had two different choices. She knew it would be easier to let it go, they were on vacation and all. But the truth is that She’d grown tired of His shit after putting up with it for centuries. In the beginning it was easier just to let it go and get on with it. But in the end She realized that She’d lost a lot because of this approach, and further, that this approach was no longer tolerable. In the end this wasn’t a fight She felt She must win, and in the spirit of companionship, She decided to simply let it go.

She felt bored as She looked out the windows at the slowly rotating mountains which surprised Her as She felt most comfortable in natural settings; they used to live in a broken down trailer in the country surrounded by balsam firs and grape vines where she used to walk in the early mornings and the late evenings, venturing out at times in the middle of the night where she sauntered along the river bathed in moonlight when the hot flashes of pregnancy made it difficult to sleep. Perhaps it was the close quarters of the train car that prompted Her restlessness. Maybe it was the trip, feeling a bit long or the fact that it had been a long time since they were able to be in each other’s presence without arguing about one thing or the other. She took a white handkerchief from Her pocket admiring the detail through the light of the window.

If I opened the window and threw this out, when would be the best time to let it go?

It would make little difference.

Just play along.

Alright. It is a pretty nice hankie, if it was me I’d probably keep it.

But If I did decide to let it go, would it matter where?

How would I know?

I think it would matter a great deal.

Wherever I let it go, it would have a profound impact. People are the same way.

Put them in a different place and some of
them thrive where other’s struggle just to survive.

I love you infinitely but sometimes you bore the crap out of me.

This is a very unique hankie.

She gave it to Him and motioned for Him to examine it closely.

Very unique. I did an experiment last month, simply out of curiosity, where I examined a great many of these that we had laying about. I had a hunch. And I found something out.

It looks just like the rest we made.

Wrong. It’s different. Look closely at the detail, there in the daisy petals.

He gave it a once over and handed it back to Her. She refused to take it.

The design. Look. Three flowers with stems in all four corners. Now look in this corner…there is a flower missing a petal. Do you see it?

And suddenly it was clear to Him. Yet She was unprepared for His reaction.

That’s impossible!

Improbable maybe, but not impossible.

Damn it! I must have made a mistake in my pattern.

No, I checked that. Our pattern was perfectly correct and this was the only one that was different. Isn’t that thrilling?

No it certainly isn’t thrilling, I’ve obviously made a mistake and you’ve gone out of your way to put my nose right in it!

Calm down, you’re going to blow a gasket.

Don’t tell me what to do!

I’m trying to make a point here.

Well you’ve certainly made it.

Oh, don’t be such a drama queen. What did you expect? We’ve set rules and things into motion. With rules we get freedom. There isn’t a way to have freedom if we don’t also have rules. So in a way we’ve made free choice. Or, in this case, our little friend here experienced free will.
That’s ridiculous. This isn’t a sentient being, it’s just cloth.

Don’t you see how exciting this is? Don’t you understand what I’m saying?

I understand clearly enough.

You’re shutting down. Don’t shut down on me. This was supposed to happen. An end to institutions and a reintroduction of probability and possibility.

What else have you been mucking about with?

Nothing. Life is simply moving beyond us, beyond our control. It’s fantastic.

He kept turning the hankie around and around as if He were hoping to discover something She’d missed, something that would vindicate Him. It is curious, she thought to Herself, how utterly unbending He can be. He refuses to see things that are out of His control as anything but strategic mistakes that must be rectified. Not that this came as any real surprise, only that it seemed to get worse the older He got, regardless of what She tried to do to shake Him of it. She had long given up and had decided to view Him as a bit of an experiment. She had learned just about everything about the world they lived in and had, in the last couple millennia, turned Her attentions to Her partner as She figured out that often those who are closest to us are more often the strangers among us.

What do you hope to find?

Where I went wrong.

She snatched the hankie from His grasp, popped open the window, and stood with half the milky white cotton whipping in the wind.

When, not if, I let this go the act will, by changing the environment where it lands, change everything. Imagine coming upon this by the ocean? Or beside a river? Or in the upper boughs of a ponderosa pine? Either way, the prepositional relationship changes and that is the key: in, by, on; these words that are generative in action.

Stop it.

Let’s see if it does.

You’re bound and determined to make us but accessories where we are now king and queen.
It’s time.
Stop messing with stuff.
Is that a threat?
Take it as you will, witch.
She put the hand clutching the one corner of the handkerchief further out the window.
I’m warning you.
I defy you.

And with that She let it go. It went off with great speed and was soon lost to sight. His body trembled; He wanted to wipe that smirk from Her face. Yet, what was done, was done. The train wound down the mountains and toward the sea which was now visible from the windows glittering in the distance like a giant mirror laid flat on the torso of the world.

They didn’t talk as they walked along the beach. She walked ahead of Him, head down, face hidden by hair as the heavy waves thumped along the shore. The air was dense with sea spray, a smell that reminded Him of the kitchen after Madame Celine’s weekly trip to the market, fresh and a bit sickly that essence of sea which is copulation and decomposition at the same time; a smell that His clothes took on immediately and held until they reached home; a smell that He was loathe to part with as it was, in His mind, inextricably tied to His associations with Her. She slept against His shoulder on the way home while He stared blankly out the window.

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In the morning, the home they had returned to seemed somehow a far more dusty and forlorn place than they remembered leaving.

I want my own study.

Was it a question or a statement? Either way it caught Him off-guard. And it seemed hardly a comment one should voice with such malice over a perfectly grand breakfast. They were dining in an east facing sitting room where the large bay windows caught the early morning sun and with it set about sweeping any shadows from the corners.

Fine. We’ve plenty of rooms.

After breakfast, which was an uncommonly morbid and silent affair on this particular morning, She called for
Madame Celine who cooked and cleaned, and for Pierre, who handled all the other affairs of the house and enlisted them for Her large project. Throughout the day they took boxes of books and of strange beakers up the stairs to a large salon on the third floor. The room had one wall made entirely of windows that looked across the city and offered a great view of the fields and beyond that, of the hills, and even beyond that, the purple silhouettes of the mountain ranges.

When everything was safely up the stairs, she began to unpack. The books, in every language and from every country one could think of, went into the bookcases which occupied two of the four walls in the room.

The last wall was covered by a long, tall bureau composed of small individual boxes like one might find in a Chinese pharmacy. Each box contained some substance: dried herbs, animal parts, rocks, dust, and all sorts of things one might want to investigate or experiment with. Another bureau, which was only as tall as to reach the waist of a person of average height, held the paper in drawers that they used to create the world. Represented here was every bush and plant known to man. Thin sheets made from cedar, from Spanish moss, from the petals of buttercups to the woody veins of the Ayahuasca vine. On top of the cabinet were bins of pencils, pens, and other drawing tools.

The middle of the room contained a long set of heavy tables covered with beakers, burners, jars of elements and chemicals, and anything else an alchemist would require to change this into that.

It took a very long time to unpack and by the time She had finished She had missed dinner.

He had spent the day in their old study doing nothing. It had become uncomfortably empty. There were dusty spots on the floor, crumpled trash, and an overall feeling of lacking in a room that hadn’t been changed in a thousand years. He was in a terrible mood, in fact He yelled at Mme. Celine when she but put her head in and told Him that dinner was ready. He told her to make sure the room was clean by next morning. His mood refused to improve over the day, instead He schemed ways to make Her pay for this abandonment under the auspices that She had, in fact, abandoned their work though it was more than probably He who felt abandoned. There is nothing quite like the cut of abandonment. It works on the guts like a knife thrust in and twisted. And like such a wound, it
festered until the whole of the world seemed to be against Him, as if it’s entire reason to exist was to trick Him, to make Him the fool and not the central character (and possible hero) He felt was His birthright. And He felt it was a blow not only to His ego, but possibly to His business interests; did She expect Him to go about the whole business of inventing everything all by himself? And if She did, what the hell would She be doing down there every day, fooling about while He worked His fingers to the bone? Yeah right, as if He would let that happen. So He decided to starve Her out, which seems like a stupid idea, more of a grasping for straws concept than an actual plan with any actual attainable results. He’d avoid her like the plague. Well that was His second idea, His first was to actually inflict Her with the plague. But She would immediately know He’d given it to Her, and a second time at that, which would do little, he imagined, in hastening their reconciliation. The first time He’d given Her the plague had been a regrettable mistake, one He was still, in a way, making up for. It was the product of passion, coming into existence during a particularly nasty fight, over what He couldn’t remember. In their anger they drew up all manner of nasty things to throw at each other. Unfortunately for Him, He was the only one actually trying to do harm, She wanted only to annoy him with Her curses, mostly itchy things like stinging nettles or poison ivy. His plague hit Her square in the chest and left Her bedridden for weeks while He hunted through Her botanical notes trying to find a cure. They learned that a plague is one of the few things that can actually kill a god, a plague being something capable of wiping out an entire people, and without a people there is little reason for a god to exist. This is a truth that may be found in any history book on the subject. He was so busy trying to find a cure that He neglected to make sure the curse was cleaned up entirely which led, as you may know, to a period in the world called “the dark ages,” the first time in recorded history that darkness came upon the land and refused to lift for many years; and resulted in many cases of miscommunication, a general lack of adequate grooming and hygiene, and the crusades—a dreadful situation where a lot of horses got hurt, and a good many people too.

His plan was soon apparent. She decided He could have it anyway He wanted retreating to Her study where She conducted Her secret experiments committing Herself to an
investigation of the issue of Self and of Other, of perception, and of the generative abilities of the prepositional phrase.

He locked Himself in His own study trying rather unsuccessfully to work. They came together rarely, usually for afternoon tea which soon turned, for Him, into afternoon drink.

He heard the help talk about some big experiment She was working on. It was some mirror, unlike a normal mirror, the glass being made of sand from the bottom of the great rivers of the world and from the tips of the dunes that moved steadily across the great deserts. Somehow She’d managed to inject the mirror, so they said, with prepositional phrases—how one did was a mystery to the help—But what was not a mystery were the comings and goings of strange individuals and stranger packages arriving at the house at all hours of the day and night. One day, when He was preparing to leave the house himself, there was a knock at the front door, and being stationed in front of it as He was, He took the job of receiving the visitor on himself. It was the post-man who presented Him with a rather large package addressed to His wife bearing a strange return address writ in a lovely meandering script. He waved Mme. Celine away and went into the sitting room instead of going out as planned. He didn’t open it, knowing that this would amount to no end of trouble for Him, but He did study the return address. The International Within and Without Society, it said, and it said nothing more than that. He called Celine in and handed her the package, and made a mental note to ask after the business during afternoon tea.

She was late to tea. This vexed Him for two reasons: He abhorred tardiness, and He had grown tired of not seeing Her on a regular basis. The latter somehow making the former that much more annoying. He meant to let Her know how irritated He was but when She finally showed up, hair sticking out all over Her head and soot on Her face He couldn’t bring himself to do anything but chuckle.

Don’t laugh at me; it’s been a hell of a day.

Not laughing at you dear, laughing with you.

She helped herself to some of the snacks while He poured Her some tea.

Lots of interesting things happening around here these days.
Justin Burnside

She didn’t seem to hear Him or didn’t want to acknowledge His comment.
Like the other day, I was getting ready to go down to the market, a little walk to clear my head; when we, I mean you, got a package. Being naturally curious, I had to wonder what you got in that package?
For the first time in a long time, She smiled at Him.
Oh, that was a great package indeed. In fact, it was the last thing I needed to make my experiment functional.
I suppose you won’t be happy until you’ve burned the house down with these experiments?
He gestured at Her face. Her retort was to laugh and take up a napkin and spoon and try to wipe some of the soot off.
Sometimes, when She was alone in Her study, She dreamed of burning the Casa Loma down. It was ancient and taking on a peculiar scent, it was particularly noticeable when She was on Her period, when Her sense of smell was heightened and She sometimes had all She could do not to retch simply moving from room to room.
I’ve been working.
She said it in a way that did little to check His fears. But She was happy, and maybe a little more personable than She had been for some time. He studied Her face, and when He was sure She was in just the right place, He asked:
What, exactly, is this “Society” you seem in such close contact with?
She tilted Her head and grinned.
You’d like to know that, wouldn’t you?
Maybe. Maybe it makes no difference to me if you have secrets. I have secrets too.
Really? And what would your secrets be?
I have them, make no mistake; I have them and I’m certainly not telling you.
But I’m supposed to tell you mine?
Well not if you’re going to be such a pain about it.
It’s really nothing.

Fine.
He could be such a child sometimes. It took nothing to bruise His ego, and He thought that He must know everything about everything or somehow the world would fall apart. He was such a chore sometimes. And it wasn’t worth the effort, she decided, for a secret that was not a secret.
It’s a society I started. I needed help to gather all the materials I would need to build my mirror. Did you know that these people love to explore? And all this time I thought they were homebodies. You’d be surprised at their ingenuity.

I’ve made wild progress. In fact, just now I finished my prototype, do you want to see it?

What else do they do for you? Do they worship you?

She had tried to wean Him off jealousy, had tried and then given up. At first it was sexy knowing how tied to Her He really was, but it got old after awhile; She grew tired of His temper (an unfortunate side effect), now she simply waved it away opting to use humor to defuse potentially lethal situations. She pushed Her hair out of Her face and behind Her ear.

What does it do?

Thanks for asking! I’ve been trying to figure out the relationship between the Self and Other. I’ve come to the conclusion that the issue at hand isn’t with the object of examination but with the process of examination.

He sighed. He certainly didn’t follow, and didn’t really care.

It’s a prepositional matter, a language issue, follow?

Not really.

The question is when it develops. I think the question blossoms once one has entered into a relationship with language. Maybe it happens even before then, most likely at that first brush with abjection, birth, severance.

I’m not sure this is tea-time conversation.

She rolled Her eyes and let Her head hit the patio table.

Don’t be so melodramatic. I’m trying…

No you’re not.

She picked up Her head and propped it on Her arm.

Go on.

When we set this world into motion, we set it like a bicycle wheel with spokes issuing
from a shared center—us. These creatures are good companions but they aren’t exactly bright—don’t get me wrong, I love them to death—but they’re a bit dumb and exceptionally lazy. Following suit, they formed an understanding of the world that mirrored our own.

She took a biscuit from the tray.

What’s so wrong with that?

There you have it. The problem is you don’t think there’s a problem.

He took up the newspaper again, shook it out for effect, and pretended to read it.

I don’t wish to fight with you, I only see you once a day.

Come and see for yourself?

He pretended not to hear Her.

Come on, it’s been so long since you visited me.

It’d been awhile since He’d visited Her lab. She had gotten used to hearing Him shuffling about in the corridor. Often She’d go and crack the door a bit just to see if He’d follow, which He did from time to time, come sneaking in and sit in the corner by the window aimlessly flipping through the pages of some book or another.

She took His hand and pulled Him out of His seat.

And if you’re good, who knows what could happen?

Outside, the clouds gathered and a soft, warm rain cascaded down to earth. People came from their homes to enjoy the surprise summer storm. Some youngsters, at work in the fields, claimed that the gods had made love, and then why shouldn’t they? And the young ladies, picking grapes from the long rows of vines that twisted through both time and space, said they only made love to nice boys with bright smiles who used pleasant language. The youngsters claimed they’d use only the sweetest words to woo them from the brightest smiles for a kiss. And some got kisses there in the wheat fields, and some even fell in love, while others got laid in the orchards. But most went home to their mothers who told them to take a hot bath lest they catch their very deaths.

Back in the Casa Loma the two newly reconciled lovers lay naked upon the chaise longue of Her study, rosy
cheeked and spent, where they said nothing, opting instead to be with each other in the moment.

Can I show you my mirror now?
He was watching the reflection of rain on her skin.
Yes.
She got up and went over to a large object that sat in the middle of the room covered in a linen sheet.

Is that our good linen being used as a dust cover?
His smile said he was only joking.

I give you…the prepositional mirror!
She pulled the linen at one end revealing the mirror in all its grandness. The workmanship was truly advanced, and its sheer size—at what looked like eight feet by ten to Him—monumental.

Isn’t it something?
Sure is, how much does it weigh?
Not sure but I’d guess over two hundred pounds.

Good grief, woman.

The glass, where it’s thickest, is six inches.
Every piece was collected by the Society and shipped here. I started with the frame; there are over ten thousand individual pieces of wood, from over ten thousand different trees, bushes, you name it, I’ve got it.

He got up and moved closer to it.

I’ve never seen glass like that, how’d you do it?
Trade secrets. Suffice it to say, there’s a lot of stuff in there in very specific proportions.
That’s how it works. I started small—got a couple of closets full of mirrors that didn’t quite do what I wanted them to do. But this one works. Wanna see it in action?
I don’t know. You know how I feel about this sort of thing.

Don’t be such a negative Nancy. Come here, stand beside me.

He backed up toward the door but She caught Him by the hand, pulled Him over to it where they stood hand in hand, naked, looking into the mirror.

Think of something. It’ll do the rest.
So He thought of the only thing He could, Himself. For a moment nothing changed in the glass, then something curious began to happen. The surface of the mirror began to vibrate like when one throws a stone into a still pond. And there was a resonance in it, a sound like a wetted finger drawn along the rim of a crystal wineglass. The surface of the mirror began to shine with a detached light, and pictures—at first He thought He was imagining them, and then the shadows coalesced into shape into substance—snapped and flashed across its surface. The experience conjured reminded Him of a long time ago, when He was young and with the good doctor, deep in the jungle where the acrid smoke of a pipe full of certain mushrooms pulsed and floated up into the infinite canopy. An experience, and a night, that left Him uncertain of Himself and the reality He’d worked so hard to craft. And these memories of being—out of control, of hallucinogenic conscription into some privileged assumption—left Him there feeling hollow, as the mirror went from reflecting the room to reflecting everything that could be thought of, until they were both there in relation to the whole of the universe. He saw things there that He couldn’t articulate moving so fast He couldn’t keep up: galaxies, molecules, mammals, and the cold windswept torsos of rocks at the four points of the world came at Him in unquenchable numbers. All around them, things moved, tumbled, and died; were born, aged, and wizened—all without concern or permission from Him. And it became less about Him and more about everything else as trillions of hubs appeared and disappeared before His very eyes. He saw Himself: on, according to, across from, for, and between.

And as suddenly as it began, He was back in the room, Her hand tightly ensconced in His own. He backed away from the mirror.

What have you done?
It’s okay, really, it’s okay.
No it’s not okay! You’ve ruined us.
Calm down.

She moved toward Him, hands raised, steps confident and sympathetic, like one would approach a wild mustang that has had his first taste of the saddle.
Do not touch me. I forbid it.
Just think of the possibilities. How much it will free us to do what we want to do.
I asked you to leave things alone.
He was gathering up His clothes, keeping His eye on the mirror which now had the cover back on it. She stopped moving forward. There were tears gathering in the corners of Her eyes.

I was thinking of us.

You were thinking of only yourself, witch. You just couldn’t let it be, and now you’ve gone and ruined us and everything we tried so hard to do here. He left Her there softly sobbing, slowly shrinking down to Her knees in the middle of the room. She stayed there until late in the evening when Madame Celine found Her, wrapped Her in a robe and ushered Her out of the lab and to Her chambers.

*****

After the fall he spent the rest of the week locked in his study with the shutters drawn. He paced back and forth, propelled by his troubled mind he plotted, ever the clever strategist, his next move. He knew he wasn’t capable of letting this treason go unpunished. The question lay in the punishment, since this was an entirely new situation. Previous ways of making her pay simply wouldn’t do. What she had done would possibly put him out of business entirely, would put them out of business, and he must stop her and the distribution of those mirrors before it was too late.

It may be awhile but she’ll come around, she’ll come around and thank me for putting her feet back on the righteous path.

A couple weeks later her bags were packed as she prepared to go and visit the doctor, a man who she’d met on her travels, a traditional doctor of the sort that traded in various botanical medicines, and who was, she was led to believe, at the moment north of Mato Grosso state. She wasn’t feeling like herself recently—she was sick every morning—something she kept hidden with great effort from the very nosy (though with the best intentions) Madame Celine. Now he would have his chance.

The morning she left for the airport he called his associates. They went up to her study and began to remove everything. They smashed the small prepositional mirrors, beakers, and anything else that was breakable. The books were removed. When only the tables were left he began to feel peculiar, a sensation he hadn’t felt in eons, a sensation of guilt.
that percolated into fear as the men began to tip the large mirror in the center of the room.

   Stop! You can leave that one.

   He had the men suffer it out into the hall, up the stairs, and into one of the rooms never used. The men set about sweeping up every shard and carried the whole mess out the back door. It was all over. When the dust settled, he told Madame Celine, who had been listening and watching from round the corner that he was off to get a lock for the study and that she was to say nothing about this to anyone on pain of being unemployed and unemployable. Then he left.

   Celine went into the room to survey the damage. Everything but the valuable paper they both used for creation was gone. A small glimmer of light emanated from the corner and there she found a small shard, hopelessly alone, lying against the wall. she took it and wrapped it in her apron expecting to return it to the missus at some later date.

*****

The journey by plane and by mule had been an arduous one made more difficult by the constant requirements of pregnancy. Yet she arrived at the little village outpost just shy of the jungle, where the mud huts shimmered in the afternoon heat and where she immediately crawled into the hammock provided her and promptly fell asleep.

   She awoke late in the night and, leaving her hammock, bent at the waist to exit the hut. There were still people moving about in the darkness as her arrival had become a bit of a curiosity, a change from the regular day to day life of the small village; it was not often that a god came over the plains—though it was not unusual for a god to come from the jungle and move about the encampment. The kind people had been busy preparing a feast for her and her retinue: several Capybaras had been slow cooking in the bosom of the earth, and there was there a plethora of vegetables simmering, roasting, and baking. She sat within a circle of women working with some sort of vine. Their nervousness turned quickly to curiosity and before long all were conversing amicably in Portuguese. None of these people were old enough to remember her last visit but they had all heard the stories of a tall lady in a belted dress who wandered about the
rainforest seen, when seen at all, with an entourage of Jaguars about her feet.

She was called into the chief’s hut after the feast. He and the village shaman questioned her about the purposes of her visit as if she were simply anyone. At first she found this informality troubling, and his long speech about where his people came from boring as she had heard it many times before; but soon, by virtue of his calming tone and a full stomach she quickly became disarmed and her eyes wandered naturally, following the flames reflected in the pupils of those gathered round to see such a strange deity.

When the chief’s story ended she was informed that they hadn’t seen the doctor for several weeks. There was only one way to find him and that way was through the tea. Hours later she found herself contemplating whether it was the tea or her unusual pregnancy that was at the root of the immense sick that seem to pour from her inner being. This wasn’t her first time but it never got less terrifying, never felt less than launching her body off some tall mountain and plummeting through the dark down into the valley below. It had been here where she learned about the possibility of the mirror. There came upon her suddenly a feeling of immense pressure, as if she had abruptly descended to the abyssal plain and breathing became a laborious pre-occupation. There were noises now, invisible whisperings at her ear. She could feel the breath but could not locate the body. She scratched at her skin as something tried to kick its way out of her belly. Then there were hands upon her, real hands holding her down as her body tried to float away. Things moved into and beyond her vision. Some she recognized, like the face of the shaman delicately disembodied above her head mouthing something she could not understand. She stared into his eyes until the whole scene splintered and gave in upon itself. Something was happening at the Casa Loma that shouldn’t be. Something was happening in her belly—another kick though she wasn’t far along enough in her pregnancy to register but the faintest fluttering palpitation in the fluid, more fish than human, small webbed fingers floating before the vacant eye holes’ translucent beastly stare. She thought she might be hungry and said as much though there was no response there in the hut with the firelight dancing across mud walls where trooped millions of ants moving into place, their masses pulling into the shape of a human face there on the wall, a face which flicked its lizard
tongue and opened its human mouth to swallow her up, and she fled naked into the jungle, her white hide in stark relief against the oppressive green, the crash of her exodus audible only a minute and then she was gone.

She awoke refreshed, unwrapped herself from the snoring jaguar that provided her warmth through the night and went down to the river to wash. Halfway through her bath she noticed she was not alone. There, at the opposite side of the creek, a man sat on his haunches motioning her across.

*****

It has been a long time, said the doctor as she came up out of the river.

So it has. Why is it always so difficult to find you when I need you?

You wouldn’t respect me if I was at your beck and call.

He turned his back to her and headed up a narrow path leading away from the river. She followed after watching him intently. It had been a long time since she had seen her friend though she decided that he hadn’t changed much really, a bit shaggier and more patches of gray running round his head, he still moved well through the jungle (a feat for any person) carefully avoiding sticker bushes and any number of poisonous creatures creeping or sliding across the rotting fragrant mud.

How’d you find me so quick?

When a strange creature is heard crashing through the jungle, word gets out. And anyway, he stopped and smiled, Emanuel called me from the village sat phone and said you tore ass out of the chief’s hut and he figured you might crash land by the river.

Nothing mystical there, she said, sounding a bit disappointed.

Usually that’s the case; you being, of course, an exception to the rule.

It took another hour of hiking to reach the doctor’s outpost, a small clearing in the jungle comprised of several canvas tents for various botanical experiments and living quarters. He informed her that he’d indeed received more funding from the Society, and that it would be enough to keep
him there for at least five more years studying various medicinal plants.

After breakfast he asked her tentatively about the reason for her visit.

I think I’m pregnant, she said.

You could have simply called me.

I hate phones, you know that. My mind wanders and I find it hard to focus.

They sat there in silence while a light rain fell upon the canvas roof. She knew he was simply being courteous but that her presence was a distraction from his research. Several Indians, most likely from the village moved among the boxes and flasks, the sound of their work lost as the light rain turned to a steady downpour.

The thing is I have misgivings about this potential pregnancy.

Why?

Because it’s his.

I thought you were both happy.

So did I, but lately I think he’s losing his mind. Something’s not right with him.

And when did you notice this type of behavior?

Always.

But it’s gotten worse lately?

I don’t know if I want this baby.

Well, how far along are you?

Not very far.

And you’ve made up your mind then?

No.

Can I have a look at you? I’ll do my best not to pry.

Sure. I came for your opinion.

The doctor got up and crossed to his personal tent, when he came back he had his medical bag. He pulled his chair closer to her chair and, pulling out his Ophthalmoscope, peered into her eyes. He received a shock when he looked in on someone looking out which turned to terror when the fetus spoke from behind the pupils.

Shit, you’re definitely pregnant, no doubt about that, he said leaning back in his chair and dropping the tool back into his bag. His hands were shaking and his voice trembled.

What did you see?

Goddamnit, what didn’t I see. I will never get used to how your body works. It’s always so shocking.
Justin Burnside

You’ve a person in you, that’s for sure, and it wants out. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.
That’s fine. I can’t help how I am. I know my coming must have been a terrible inconvenience and I thank you for your time.

Where do you think you’re off to?
I can make the village on my own tonight and I’ll head back tomorrow.

Well you can’t just take off and leave me here by myself. It isn’t often we have visitors, why don’t you stay the night and we’ll head back to the village tomorrow, together? I couldn’t stand having you leave so abruptly especially after my outburst. Stay, we’ll have dinner with the crew, swap some stories, and then get some good sleep.

She acquiesced, thinking it very nice to spend one more night under the canopy—this time on a warm cot. Morning came and they headed back to the village where she bid goodbye to the doctor.

Your child told me to tell you she must live. You know I want the best for you, and you know I believe it is fully your choice to make.

Did she say anything else?
This bit of new information stopped him dead in his tracks.

“She” is it? Anything else you decided not to tell me?
Just a hunch I had, that’s all.

She said she’ll clean out her father’s house, if you’ll give her the chance.

Did she? Cheeky little bastard.
I certainly wouldn’t be surprised.

They parted company, she returned to prepare for her child’s birth; he back to the jungle and his work.

*****

When she returned she found the Casa Loma empty. No note adorned the breakfast table, and it took a couple of hours before Madame Celine found her standing at the door of her study.

Why doesn’t my key work?
I wouldn’t know miss, said Madame Celine.

Dinner is ready.
A cold rain fell from the heavens but inside the dining room the atmosphere was warm and light.

My key doesn’t work.
Which key would that be?
My study key.
We’ve had some issues with sticky locks round the house while you were gone. I’ll certainly add that door to the list I’ve already got. Would you pass the bread please?

She obliged, searching his eyes during the exchange.
I’d really like to get back to work as soon as possible.
Aren’t you a bit pregnant to sit upstairs blowing things up?
How’d you know I was pregnant?
Seriously? You think you could keep something like that from me?

He turned toward the kitchen and hollered for Madame Celine.
Celine, can you believe the good news?
I am overjoyed to hear it! And what marvelous parents you’ll make.

I should hope so! What do we have to celebrate with?
I’ll just go and look, she said disappearing into the kitchen.

How was the old man doing out there in the jungle?
Well and busy enough.

An awkward silence followed. Something just didn’t seem right; the way he moved hesitantly through the motions belied guilt and she wondered exactly what it was that he was feeling guilty for.

Are you not feeling well tonight?
I think I’m just worn out.

As I would imagine. I’ll spend tonight picking out a selection of papers we can consider for the nursery while you catch up on sleep.

Sounds great. I think I’ll turn in.

She got up and left the table without waiting for him to offer to walk her up. He watched her leave then went back to his dinner.

The days passed quickly for the both of them, he kept her busy with this and that and promised to call a locksmith.
though he never did. Yet they did spend a lot of quality time together preparing the Casa Loma for its newest tenant. The world outside the house was as green and fertile as anyone could remember. The rains came but never for too long and the sun didn’t wilt the crops. The Casa Loma was re-painted, wallpapered, and otherwise pampered. Its halls reverberated with the sounds of labor and laughter. She was kept busy with doctor’s appointments, and though her mind often drifted down the corridor toward her study she scarcely had time to think of it. They spent long hours at the drafting table drawing everything any child could require. The nursery continued to fill up with all manner of necessities, while Madame Celine and friends knitted well into the night.

She said nicer things to him and he took criticism better. They nearly never argued and both felt better than they had in a long time.

Then the day arrived and a baby girl was born. She was perfect as babies always are. The whole town came to her unveiling and everyone agreed that she was the perfect mixture of sun and moon.

The weeks and months wore on and, despite their never-ending doting, both parents—suffering from a lack of sleep and general exhaustion—turned again to their own pursuits. She missed her books, her work, and her mirrors. And the day came when she acted on those desires, threading her way up the stairs to the dusty door of her study. The door required a bit of perspiration to open and a few tools were needed which she commandeered from the maintenance shed. But after an hour of work she managed to pry it off its hinges and gain access within.

The study she found was not the study she left. The sunlight cascading through the window sparkled on the few small pieces of glass left gathering dust all over the floor. The drawers were empty. The book’s gone. At once she knew who to blame. She decided to broach the subject at lunch.

Why did you wreck my study? The question, posed as it was, carried more weight than the nonchalant tone that delivered it. And he knew right away that he would not be finishing his soup, and furthermore, that he would not be escaping this conversation unscathed.

Madame Celine, with a fresh basket of bread in tow, stopped dead in her tracks and retreated back into the kitchen.

There’s going to be a fight Pierre, she said.
Pierre was leaning out the back sneaking a cigarette which he hastily threw into the alley and, chasing the smoke away from the kitchen with one hand, he then gestured with the other as if she should continue.

She’s been in the study Pierre and seen what he did.

What do we do?

We get the hell out of here and don’t come back till it’s over.

What about the child?

We take it with us.
She threw the bread basket into the sink and rummaged in the pantry until she found a cloth bag.

I should have told him, she muttered, that his idea would do nothing but bring evil into this house. Well don’t just stand there looking stupid Pierre, help me gather some food.

What am I to do with the dinner?

Leave it you silly old thing. Grab some cheese, wine, and more bread. Now, we’ll need somewhere to go. You have a cousin close-by don’t you?

Yes.

Then that’s where we’ll go to weather the storm. I’ll grab the baby, you continue to prepare—and make sure to pick out something nice for them as a thank you.
She found the child playing quietly in her nursery. Scooping her up, she made quickly for the door.

As the weather changed outside, people began to close up shop. The café tables were brought back inside, their brightly colored umbrellas and the sweet smells of coffee stowed safely behind closed doors. An ill breeze blew hot down the street scattering those few stragglers left.
Justin Burnside

Pierre, Celine, and Pierre’s older brother sat at a small table on the patio drinking wine and looking out at the gorge which cut the countryside in two. Deep within the gorge a river coursed, the main path along its banks bisected by the cloven hooves of wild boars. Pierre’s brother’s wife leaned out of the second story window watching the heavy clouds roll in.

This don’t look good, she said. I think you better come inside the house. We’ve got enough wine stored up in the cellar to ride out the apocalypse, if it come to that. And you’ll stay the night Celine, won’t you?

We’d appreciate it, Celine said gathering the child up and heading indoors.

And bring them tables in too, I don’t want my nice wood table blowing out there and getting lost in that gorge.

There was the clink of glass against glass, the scratch of chair against flagstone, and the satisfying thud of a heavy door shutting as the first rain fell.

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Neither of them had spoken. They sat at the table; he stirred his cold soup; she sat with her hands in her lap—her eyes fixed on the space between his.

Well, why’d you do it?
I thought it best.
You thought it best to destroy three centuries of my work.
I did it for us.
Have I ever fucked with your things?
No.
What did you do with the mirrors?
You listen to me.

There was an inescapable menacing tone to those words. One that promised violence if provoked.
Your bullshit mirrors were threatening to ruin what we’ve worked so hard to forge here.
I always knew you to be a jealous man, a man given to fits of selfishness, but I never
imagined you to be the sort of man to do something like this. At least not to me.
Maybe you should keep that in mind next time.
Maybe I should.
The rain that fell against the windows turned flood. The sewers, filled to capacity, broke their restraints. In the low part of town, where the cemetery stood, the excess water ate the bottom out, releasing the dead; caskets and disembodied body parts further plugged the drains and got caught up in the branches of trees. The residents abandoned their homes and ran for the high ground some three miles inland, though most were pulled back and swallowed up by the sea which breached both jetty and dikes.

I offered love for love, she said getting up from the table, consider my debt to you—whatever it may have been—paid in full.

He had expected a fight. In fact, he had been preparing himself all these months for just such a thing. he was completely unprepared for the reality of the situation. And with that, she was gone. He elected not to follow her, choosing instead to slip his anger into a jacket and leave by the back door. It was a very long time before he came back.

When he did come back, he came back to a very quiet home. There was no one cooking in the kitchen. The nursery was empty. Soaked and freezing, he took a warm shower. When he had warmed up, he went looking for her. She was locked in her study weeping; at the last moment he decided not to knock upon the door and instead sat down against it.

What have I done?
But there was no one there to answer him.

As the days turned to weeks turned to years, he saw her rarely, if at all. A regrettable sadness permeated the Casa Loma. Outside the walls, in a world that effectively had the lights turned off, people steeled themselves against a cold and desolate world. Inside, Madame Celine was beside herself with worry. She took it upon herself to dial the family doctor and inform him that the missus was “dimming,” a malady the poor doctor had never heard of let alone treated during his tenure. The doctor informed Madame Celine that people couldn’t “dim” and that if whatever was happening got worse she should not hesitate to call his personal number which she did, in a matter of minutes no less, as she was not the sort of
lady to be patronized and because—she swore—things had deteriorated even since last they talked. He agreed to call on the family the very next day, his hesitancy more likely due to a worry that he would fail to diagnose or treat this illness, whatever it was, and that his reputation in the community would suffer as a result.

However, he did show up at nine the next morning wearing a sharply designed suit with a stethoscope round his neck. After the type of banter that normally accompanies a knock of the door they made the decision to check in with him who was—as had become his habit—wandering aimlessly along the corridors of the Casa Loma, his shoulder wearing down the wallpaper, muttering to himself. When approached, he acted as if the doctor and Celine were but figments of his imagination and as such not worthy of attention or reproach. Being out of his element the doctor opted to stand there and observe, his hesitation was viewed by Celine as procrastination which earned him a stiff arm in the back urging him forward.

What are you doing? He hissed.

I’m putting you to work, Celine hissed back.

The scene then took a turn toward the comedic as the doctor, spurned to action, tried to waylay his charge in the hallway. But the question then became one of how to corral a god as the poor doctor took on more the role of a kindergarten teacher running after a child who has had a healthy dose of sugar than a respected doctor on house call.

Celine, in a moment of brilliance, snatched a chair from an adjoining room and placed in front of him who, oblivious to its presence, promptly ran right into it effectively seating himself in the process. And the doctor, regaining his equilibrium, attended to his patient.

After a period of time in which an examination, or a good try at an examination, transpired, the doctor, with a wave of the hand, summoned Celine into an empty room.

I can’t do anything for him.

What do you mean? You’re the doctor for god’s sake.

I would need to run many more tests, tests that he would have to sign off on, and from
Justin Burnside

what I’ve seen so far I’d seriously doubt that to be an option.

Can’t you give him some pills?

What sort of pills do you suggest, Madame?

Shall I just dig out something from my bag and lob it toward his open mouth?

Don’t get smart with me.

Let’s see the other one, we can always come back.

Celine took him to the nursery. She was sitting at the window her vacant eyes passively watching the young girl playing with blocks on the floor before her. He had seen many things during his tenure as a doctor and a good many that had shocked him, but he had never come across something like this in all his years. The body seated at the window was not the woman he had come to know over the last thirty years. This was not the woman who, seated in the lounge, cigar in hand, held forth on any and all topics her riotous laughter and generous liquor soothing hurt feelings and opposing viewpoints. This was not the woman who relished bloody contests, who traipsed the woods followed by lions and leopards; not the woman who lived and loved every orgiastic moment, every earthy and dripping extreme; not the woman who allowed her fields to be plowed and seeded every spring and whose name was and will forever be shouted from the very ceilings of the world. This was but an apparition, a fuzzy and cheap symbol of that powerful being. And he was filled suddenly with an intense longing, an urge to tear up and tear off, to be any place but here seeing anything but this. Still, he had a job to do and he approached her position in fits and starts, finally reaching her and reaching up toward those eyes that held nothing now but forever night.

She had no pulse. No heartbeat vibrated in her chest. It was her eyes that mystified him most, they held no discerning pupil and were all black, the kind of black that isn’t a color so much as a concept, the mystical tomb of both the infinite and the finite; that place that spat out the Sage and the very place that will swallow him back up.
How are you feeling? He asked her.

She won’t speak, said Celine from the corner, she hasn’t for months.

You must stay with us, he implored, for the baby’s sake if nothing else.

She lowered her eyes and opened her mouth but what sound came out could not be described as voice. It existed somewhere between a wail and a whisper, a broken sound lying with a broken back at the bottom of a deep canyon void of life.

I am taken. I have been touched.
Drowned in whisperings of love
and dragged to the bottom.
My body, wrecked by cold, stretched over the stone.
I will not come again
nor will my kin be able
until my daughter sits at the head of her father’s table.

No one dared breathe. They stood frozen. The child, now playing with this specter’s ghostly curls, mimics in her youthful way the motion of those lips now fallen silent; her eyes unfixed now in time and space stare balefully out the window.

The doctor promised to come every time he had a chance to check on the residents of the Casa Loma and he kept his promise. But the residents didn’t recover. she continued to dim and on the morning of the first day of the child’s third year she simply went out. And this is the world the young girl-child inherits.

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What do you think of the place? he asked the young mister until who had just been shown up to the ornate office just down the hall from the Penthouse and who was looking a bit nervous. The two had met each other many years ago in Cairo while he, suffering the loss of his wife, had been on some sort of self-prescribed exile and mister until, fleeing from his residency at the Sorbonne—no doubt on his parent’s dime—had been on a self-described spiritual ‘walkabout’ whose end was imminent at the moment of the two men’s
meeting as his parents had effectively cut him off. If the two incidents, the cutting off and the meeting, have something of the reek of San Nectaire to you so be it.

Regardless, the two men formed a tight bond no doubt owing to the one’s vanity and the other’s poverty and finding in each other a kindred spirit they took up residence together in the country bungalow mentioned earlier and stayed there—well out of reach of prying eyes and ears and offspring—happily for many years. He finished his book and, by no small feat, made until until finish his studies. And now they were re-united after a period of five years during which time mister until hadn’t seen him at all, and had given him up for dead, lying along some mountain road a pile of unsold books pages flitting along with the wind slowly rotting beside him, when out of nowhere he had received a call summoning him to some town whose name he didn’t know for a meeting. This was a happy circumstance, thought the young man, because he had run out of money and sold the bungalow long before and was now facing eviction.

Well boy? What do you think of the place?

It looks a bit worse for wear to tell the truth.

He simply ignored the comment, waving it aside with his hand and settling behind the desk.

I’ve a proposition for you.

You already know I’ll say yes.

Will you be saying yes because you already know what I aim to ask you or because you’ve well fucked your way out of house and home and have no one else to turn to?

You always did look hot behind a desk.

Sit down and pay attention.

He rummaged through one of his drawers while the young man’s eyes drifted to the peeling paint and general untidiness of the office. His attentions were brought back by the thud of papers against the walnut desk.

Here are my plans drawn up in their entirety. It’s a contract stupid, I want you to run the Casa Loma in my absence…

Your absence? You won’t be staying here? I can’t sit here anymore. And I’ve grown tired of holding your hand and even weary of your body—no offense meant, yours is a particularly fine body—I know but I tend to, how to say, get bored easily.
Oh, Mister until said.
But I didn’t want to leave you in the cold, and besides, I need someone to take over this joint while I go do other things. Now that you have your degree, and I realize it isn’t in business, I feel I can leave you in charge. And you’ve nothing to worry about as I’ve arranged everything with folks you can rely on and who you will be meeting tonight at dinner.
Can we talk more about it after dinner?
Doubtful as I won’t be at dinner. I leave right away.
Now what do you say?
He threw up his hands and smiled a big toothy smile and until could think of nothing to say but yes because yes was what the pecker wanted so yes was what he was going to get one way or another.
Excellent! I’ll finish writing this up and you can go on downstairs and have Celine show you around. I’ll leave the papers with my lawyer, you’ll meet him for cocktails and…
But what about the child, until said gathering himself together, what’ll you do with her?
I’ll cover the costs of raising her and all costs inherent in keeping the place up. But my lawyer will be ever so thankful if I don’t tell you everything right now as he would then have nothing to say and he loves to talk!
But I still have questions.
We all do and answers are few and far between. Now be a man for once in your miserable life and shake my hand so we can be done with this business.
Which until was left with no other choice but to do. Then he went back to his papers and until, feeling a bit nauseous about the whole thing, picked up his suitcase and made his way to the door. He lingered at the door a bit longer than usual and then outside the door a bit longer than necessary in the veiled hope that that booming voice would call out to him, perhaps to summon him back inside and into that embrace he’d missed so very much over the past years. But that of course wasn’t going to happen as he had made particularly clear by dismissing him like some schoolboy and not with the proper respect until felt he deserved. And this was the world until inherited and how he became master of the Casa Loma.
For a Walk

I.

Lease signed, furniture arranged, plates unpacked, dishwasher tested, half a dozen still-unopened boxes stacked in the bedroom closet, and at last there is the matter of the walk. I open the door – my door – and step out. The darkness holds enough warmth to raise a sweat. From somewhere, there comes the after-sunset smell that means spilled lighter fluid and settling ashes and the night’s last beer, even though none of these scents is quite discernible on its own. In all of this I feel welcome. I feel the promise of this new neighborhood. I jog a few steps across the gravelscape that separates the door to the apartment – the door to my apartment – from the street, and I look left, and I look right, and neither direction beckons more than the other. I remember the joy of this moment. For a week, for a month, whenever I go out for a walk, I am nothing more than a discoverer. If my thoughts are interrupted by an unexpected cul-de-sac or by the crawling underskin chill of nerves raised by streets where shattered bottlescaping replaces gravelscaping or lawn, then I have learned something still. There is pleasure in abandoning oneself to the tracing of the contours on the map.

II.

Boxes collapsed and stored, postcards tacked to walls, stove dirtied enough to warrant a cleaning, a friend invited for a glass of wine, bathtub finally used on the one night cool enough for it, and summer has loaded its heat into asphalt and sidewalks. When I step out, the warmth is thick enough to swallow. The map has divided itself, now. From my door stretch walks which seem as distinct from one another as countries on different continents.

To the left: two blocks, and a right turn, and through the tunnel that crosses under the freeway. There, the zoning laws become freer. The asphalt breaks and gives way to a network of private roads, some once-paved, some never-paved, some less roads than absences-of-trash. This walk requires its walker to guide himself, past overgrown tamarisk and saltbush, through sagging chain-link fences, over old flood channels cut into open stretches of ground. Some
houses, here, have been abandoned, and some are fuller than they’ve ever been, home to young Latin American men desperate to be in this city, home to young Eastern European women desperate to be anywhere else. A walker can duck through holes in fences and peek through the windows of sheds and outbuildings, and there he can find crowds of refrigerators, jumbles of scrap metal tangled floor-to-ceiling, well-kept horses sleeping in clean hay. If he wants to, a walker can connect the most beautiful places to one another, can look in on horses and follow a flagstone path around the property of the house with the butterfly garden and the wind chimes and end his walk on the far side of the vacant lot at the top of the hill, the lot with the view of the mountains beyond. If he wants to, he can connect the ugliest places, can pick at the rust of the abandoned RV, can carve his name into the burnt wall of a house that caught fire, can dodge nails and screws on the grounds of construction sites, model houses left half-built on spec that failed to fulfill its promise. This walk instructs its walker to choose a lesson from so much debris, but choosing is hardly difficult, there.

Or, to the left: ten blocks, past the cavernous glare of a strip-mall parking lot, and a second left turn, across a six-lane road. In the neighborhood there, sprinklers and lawn swallow the noise of the thoroughfare behind. All that is audible is the hum of money, cars purring, unmolested by the screeches and clicks that signal poor repair, hedgerows echoing hours afterwards with the buzz of electric trimmers. Old mulberries catch the wind, and the whisper of broad leaf rubbing against broad leaf makes the air feel cooler, somehow, makes the sound of shade, so that even at night a walker feels sheltered from everything above, everything outside. In that neighborhood, the streets meet each other at right angles, and the blocks, dozens of them, speak with the same vocabulary: the machined buzz of the lawns and hedges, the whisper of the mulberries, the driveways protected from the dripping-down of motor oil. Every block looks like every other block, and any turn could be any other turn. This order inspires the walk and frees it from itself, gives a walker a measure of space to think, to be safe in so much near-quiet, whatever the truth, whatever the noise, of the neighborhood’s happiness or sadness, hidden behind garage doors, always closed, muffled by curtains, always drawn.
Or, to the right: four blocks, and a left turn, and at night a hop over a wall. In this stretch of space, the city council has developed an old watercourse into a public park where the acid scent of puke always rises from the remains of one-shot-too-many. Concrete paths wind through stands of bulrush. The turns come so frequently that they lose meaning, and the walk loses its direction and dissolves into time that proceeds not in seconds or minutes but instead in surprises, groups of greasy mallards startled awake, already-cracked plastic broken further underfoot, the shuddering horror that accompanies the resolution of what had been an inorganic form – some sod, a rock – into the shivering or yawning of a homeless man or a destitute woman. The panic of disorientation stretches seconds into minutes, minutes into hours, but the calm of not being afraid of being lost can squeeze hours into minutes, too. A walker might emerge after fifteen minutes convinced of the lateness of the hour, taken by an awareness of the need to sleep, or he might emerge after two hours, cognizant only then of the lateness of the hour, startled by the sight of the moon so far from the spot where he’d thought it should be, worried by the proximity of morning but thrilled at the evaporation of so much time, the dissolution of so much self into such welcoming oblivion.

Or, to the right: two blocks, and a right turn, and between always-open gates once kept closed by a guard paid by a homeowner’s association, since dissolved. Here, the roads curve with leisurely sweep, and the houses sprawl but keep low to the ground. This is suburb consumed by city, suburb of Oldsmobile’s with deflated tires abandoned in driveways, suburb of old men who have forgotten what this neighborhood used to be, of young mothers who have never known. Every house, here, was once identical to every other house— an ornamental well out front, a semicircular driveway, a porte-cochere shading the kitchen door, a front door with an oval-shaped window fitted with the same stained-glass, two gila woodpeckers nesting in the trunk of a saguaro, a row of ornamental sandstone boulders along the house’s street frontage, an olive tree behind shading the backyard gate. But the houses are different, now. Porte-cocheres have been converted into garages, have been replaced by spare bedrooms, have burned down, scorched beams unremoved from their concrete bases. Ornamental wells have been repaired, or they’ve been dismantled, bricks taken and reused.
to build mailbox-stands or ramps for skateboarders. Lawn has given way to gravelscaping, to Astroturf, to bare dirt. This walk cannot know whether its walker should dream of that time, then, when a developer’s vision could be replicated again and again and again, when purity of vision was possible, or whether he should celebrate this time, now, the pieces of that vision scattered, their trajectories traced into good repair and bad repair, into health and worry. This walk cannot be certain, given the lazy meandering of roads that intersect without reason, whether it is a walk that has somewhere to take its walker, or whether it is a walk that exists only in delirious aimlessness, whether this neighborhood means something, or whether this neighborhood is nothing but a beautiful trap.

My sweat is up enough to hold the polyester tag of my t-shirt to the back of my neck. I close my door and lock it, and I step across the gravelscape. I turn right, and before I’m able to settle on my opinion of this evening’s weather, comforting heat, aggravating heat, I turn right again. I’m facing the rusted-open gates of this neighborhood I can always imagine making mine, this neighborhood I can never understand.

III.

Two coworkers invited over for dinner, the dishevelment and sweat-limpness of sheets gone too long unwashed, an overused air conditioner fixed by a landlord only after too many complaints, a four-a.m. stumble home from a night of celebration with a boss and three new clients, compact fluorescent light bulbs installed throughout, and summer tires of itself and wanders away southwards. I have lost the fear of scorched fingertips that made me approach my doorknob with hesitation, and the question of long pants is a question again. Jeans rolled twice at the ankles, shoelaces tightened and reknotted, I brush past the desert spoon blooming in the gravelscape and turn right, and turn right again.

This is the walk I always take, now, because the others I used to take – through the curtain of urine-stench hung across the entrance to the tunnel under the freeway, past the strip mall that still housed a Circuit City when I moved here, into the park where I once found a mouse whose desperation
for sweetness had trapped it inside a mostly-empty two-liter bottle of Coke – were too easy to know. Freedom, order, madness. This neighborhood, though, ranch houses, estates, is sprawl and emptiness and authenticity and charm, and I can never predict precisely what I might come across, here. Two weeks ago, in weekend daylight, the streets lined with the trash left out for Monday dawn pickup, I found a metal garbage can filled with half-melted plastic toys, trikes, dollhouses, waterguns, shapes deformed and colors denatured. Three days ago, in weekday twilight, I tripped over a little plaque left at the edge of the street. I picked the thing up, not knowing whether it had been discarded or whether it had been lost or whether it had been placed on that spot with some sort of purpose. On the plaque were a picture of a dog and a sentimental poem about a dog’s certainty of admittance to heaven and three little locks of fur cut from a just-euthanized body, seal gray, silk white, dull black. My speculations about these things are fruitless. These toys, this fur could say anything – were the toys burned intentionally? was the dog old when it died? – but they say, it says nothing. The muteness of the things I see leaves me mute, too. I am lost in specificity. So I return home and come back again a day later, three days later, at night, before sunrise, sometimes.

Tonight, the gates offer me a string of half-deflated balloons struggling against gravity, a Xeroxed sign pointing the way to a party that must have happened a night ago, or earlier, and I follow the curves of the streets until I reach the house. Another sagging balloon, held by its remaining helium halfway up the length of its tether, is tied to a mailbox. The recycling is out, and in the bins I see eighty or a hundred empty beer cans, ten or twelve drained wine bottles. Was this an engagement party, a wake, a twenty-first birthday party, a fourteenth birthday party, the celebration of a promotion, the celebration of a divorce? Who sorted and carried so many cans, so many bottles, from kitchen garbage can to curbside bins? What might that person have thought about so much aftermath? Was he taken by morning-after melancholy, convinced by the trash that the best world is the world that has vanished, that the cans’ emptiness was a symbol of the emptiness of everything else in the world, drained and cast-off, life transformed into artifact? Or might he have turned his attention from the trash to the pleasantness of the morning? Did he look at the evening primrose near the garage, and did
his hangover give way, for half a minute, to a little thought about the continuously-renewed wonder of the world, about joy, the infinite trellis of the world, up which we cannot stop growing?

I can guess the answers to these questions, and I can invent answers of my own, but I cannot be certain of those answers, cannot even be just-certain-enough to believe them. Other places, I am able to know, verb intransitive, even if I cannot know everything, verb transitive. Here, I am capable of neither.

IV.

A string of sixteen-hour days spent at the office, a stack of empty frozen-pizza boxes piled under the sink, vegetables gone bad in the refrigerator, houseplants dead for lack of water, carpets left unvacuumed for too long, and the scent of rot and dust is everywhere, but at least I can leave windows open to let in new air, now. Autumn has filed down the edges of the days, and I try to wander out-of-doors whenever I have the chance to. Keys in hand, door locked, I turn right, and I turn right. The sky – crowded elsewhere by the rooflines of apartment complexes, of two-story houses – opens and flattens, and again I find myself suspended in familiar confusion, of time, of detail. The sense is one of despair.

I pass an arsonist’s dream of a palm tree, an intensely brushy thing, and I wonder whether the it’s meant to look like that, a shaggy beast kneeling, or whether it’s been abandoned, whether, somewhere a pair of hedge clippers sits forgotten, blades rusted together. I pass the spot in the road where I nearly stepped on a scorpion, once, where I stopped to stare, where I stood for minutes, waiting for the scorpion to move, wondering whether it would have stung me if I had stepped on it or whether it would have stayed still even as it died underfoot. I pass the house whose ornamental front-yard fountain is always dry, and I wonder whether the house’s owners could still turn the thing on, if they wanted to. Lining every street are landmarks of my inability to do as much as suppose I know anything, and when I walk past them I am stuck asking myself the same set of questions. I follow the sweep of this road and turn into the next street I come to, and I see a man standing in his lawn.
“Hey,” he says, pleasantly enough, as though he’s been waiting for me. He’s wearing scuffed black basketball sneakers and cutoff sweatpants that stop just above the knee, and his Super Bowl XXVI t-shirt is faded and stretched. He’s thirty-five, maybe. “Why’d you come from that way?”

“Sorry?” I slow down, a little.

“Bus stop would’ve been closer if you came from that way.” He points in the direction I’m walking.

“I don’t think you—I’m not sure I—”

The guy starts laughing, and I start laughing. I’m relieved that he’s relieved, that he’s recognized that I’m not whoever he had supposed I was. I’ve passed his house, walked past the edge of his lawn, and now my shoes are raising dust from his neighbor’s gravelscaping.

“Alright, then. Take care,” I say.

“Fuck, man, come on, buddy. Come inside,” he says, still laughing, a little.

I crane my neck so I can face him, but I keep moving. “I’m really not,” I say. “I’m really not whoever. But sorry.” I turn again and already my eyes are fixed on the sky, cirrus clouds racing in ahead of the next front.

I know that I could stop, could try to chat, I know that I could try to figure what was what, determine who I had been meant to be, but that isn’t what I want to do. I want to be enough, on my own.

“Whatever,” the guy shouts at me. “Faggot.”

V.

An offer of promotion extended, the possibility of reassignment to a new city hinted at, a stuttered request for a little time to think, a day spent at home, and I wonder whether I need to begin cataloguing a set of objects and memories from my time here that will be able to generate nostalgic feeling three years from now, five years from now, that will be able to sustain the weight of deathbed reminiscence. But nostalgia is easy. A failed attempt at bonsai gardening, a season of overdrinking, a couple of nights out with an acquaintance who later died— from those things any person can build a world. I wrap an unneeded scarf around my neck – the trees have shed their leaves, though the air is hardly chilly – and I step out. I lock my door, and I turn right, and I turn right.
There are houses for sale, in this neighborhood, that I might be able to buy, foreclosures with moldy insulation I might squeeze meaning from for years. But there are houses in other cities, too, cities where my firm has offices, and I could live in one of those places, in a snowy city with brick sidewalks, in a city whose town council members are mad for flowers, where spring whispers in freesias and summer shouts in millionbells, where autumn and winter hide in greenhouses and orangeries. I keep walking. Someone’s car has been broken into. A spray of green-tinted auto glass catches afternoon light in a crack in the road. The street I’m walking on is Wagon Wheel Trail. The sky is empty. The houses are shingled. I can see a couple of pick-up trucks, a few coupes, a station wagon, a dirty RV parked in a driveway. Two dogs bark at me when I walk past their stretch of cinderblock wall, though I can’t see them and am not certain how they know I am passing. I can continue seeing, continue noting. There is a bullet casing in the mouth of a culvert. Two mourning doves sit on a branch, a hand’s width separating them from each other. I can see, but I cannot name anything here, cannot fix description to purpose, cannot remember. I don’t understand why. Is this the world, this ununderstanding, or is it something alien, or is it just confusion? Should I give myself to this? Can I hope to understand, some day, or should I never hope to understand? Or should I run for magical elsewhere?

Two days later, I step out of my house and lock my door. I walk from my front step to my car, and I drive to work, and I knock on the window of my boss’s office. I am honored to accept my promotion, I say. And might I take my new position in some other city, some other country, somewhere better than this?
Merchants of Identity

Buy the pretty purses. Pet the Maltese. Buy the small turtles. Throw them back into the water so that they will be free. You are the consumer. I am the seller. You are a banana. I am peeling open your skin.

I am one of the Merchants of Identity. We will sell you anything you want. Hair, skin, language, accent, height, body odor, food cravings.

You go to the back alleys. The first people to purchase our products were those who needed to hide from the law. Immigrants, criminals, victims of abuse all coming here to the armpits of the city, the assholes of the city. But you are not one of those. You are one of the ones hiding from yourself but don’t be shy, don’t be ashamed. There are many people like you; and we are all friends here.

In the beginning, the identities we sold were raggedy at best, but from a distance they could be convincing. The squat, illiterate man from some swampland could pass as a fair haired, blue-eyed woman, if you didn’t look too closely, if he was sitting on a bus and you saw her through the tinted window and you wondered what she was doing on that bus when she looked like she could have been on Wall Street, or pacing the waxed floor of a court room. The bus will roll away slowly and you will move on to thinking about something else and never make it to wondering why someone like her is on the Greyhound, unless, just as the bus is leaving, she turns her head and looks directly at you. You shudder because something is not right with her face. You can’t quite put your finger on it. Is it that her head is too big for her neck? Is it that her eyes are not aligned? Is it that her jaw is too big for her face? Is it that she looks too masculine? And it could be, it could very well be that the flaxen haired woman on the bus dressed as if she is going to work out in the financial district of downtown Boston, is really a man from the south end of the southern continent who entered the country illegally and is trying to live a quiet life of a butcher.

Business, like all things, has evolved. Nowadays alternate identities are sexy. Think about Subcomandante Marcos. Many women and men have deep romantic fantasies of him and the beautiful nose, full lips, and strong jaw line hidden beneath the bandana since the 90’s. It is the force of gaze. Force of eyebrows. You look straight on, or not at all
because there is a force there, force of gaze, force of eyebrows, energy and this is sexy and the secret to getting it is manipulation of identity.

For an additional $9.99 The Merchants of Identity will sell you whatever accent you desire.

But let us get to step one. Peel off your face first.
You may keep your hair for now.

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Story 1: Moth

1.

Liquid is a funny thing, especially when it surrounds and surrounds you.

It hurt when the man pushed her onto the ship. It hurt, but it wasn’t forever. She was barefoot and worried that she would get a splinter in the meat of her toes. They were all barefoot. Some of them toppled forward because it was difficult to walk stooped with their hands chained behind their backs.

Her life had not gone as planned. Her body was already being taken over when they caught her. The new life forming inside was claiming her in the way that grape vines and honeysuckle claim wooden poles. Since a few weeks ago when she realized she was carrying a child, she had been doing things like squatting duck-like to pick up rose colored stones. She noticed that things like sweeping up endless dirt no longer annoyed her. It was all simplified now to shards of pure silver scattered everywhere.

The twilight was still stunning. Even as she was grabbed by the roots of her hair and pulled backwards, even as she was being choked and dragged through the dirt, her heels trying to dig into the ground, her elbows bent and thrashing, the twilight was stunning. She saw black and red splotches and could not breathe. Her last thought was for breath and when she awoke—was she awake? Had she regained consciousness? Or was she submerged inside a half-alive-brain? Or was she inside a waking dream where it was twilight and the twilight was always stunning?—she was in chains.

There was a man in black boots, who loosely held a whip in his hand loosely joined to its wrist. The booted man
observed her and the people she was bound to as they boarded the ship, and she could see him applying efficient labels to each one of them, labels such as sturdy, skinny, fertile, quick-limbed, near-sighted. And what about her? Could he label her, easily distracted, prone to drinking water in a glass while peering through it into the future?

Language is a strange thing. The man in black boots did not want to hear them speaking. He did not want them whispering or chanting to their devils and gods. He’d made this very clear and yet, as they stood there, an old woman would not stop muttering. Her eyes were closed, her shoulder stooped. Why had they picked her up in the first place, he wondered, old thing that she was. He knocked her in the mouth and she fell to the ground, landed on her side, but kept muttering her incantations. He put his boot on her face so that she could not move her mouth. Now that he was up close, he could see how muscular she was. He did not put his index finger to his lips and say “sssshhhhhh.” Instead, he opened his eyes wide and covered his mouth with both hands like the triple monkeys: *Hear no, see no, speak no evil.* Then he removed his boot from the old woman’s face, squatted beside her, and squeezed her lips together, all the while staring at the row of faces before him. It did not bother him to make eye contact. Indeed, it would have been worse to not make eye contact. One did not close one’s eyes to a bear or a mad dog. As he made eye contact, checking for understanding, he waved for his first man to come over and grip the old woman’s lips between his fingers. Neither he nor his first man feared the teeth, because they knew how to pinch hard.

As the first man took over the captain’s position, the captain turned his attention to another woman in chains. As with the old woman, he grabbed her by the lips and pinched. He wanted to laugh. In fact, the tiny version of himself that sat in the attic of his head was laughing balls, rolling on the ground at the way the full lips were made flatter between his strong fingers. Then the captain moved on to the next woman. This one was pregnant and snapped at him, but he was ready. The reason he moved so languidly, so heavily was because he was always ready, always ready for recourse. As soon as she snapped, he slapped her heavily, feeling the chime of his rings against the hard enamel in her mouth. Even after that, the sailor behind her had to grab her by the head, her face seemed to bulge at him, making her look more feral, and again she
tried to snap at him. Now he was angry, although he kept it under control. He slapped her again and before she could move her face away he snatched her by the lips and gripped them tightly. Unlike with the other woman, he did not stare at the lips. The man in the attic of his head was no longer giggling. He would have to break this one harder and so he pinched tightly. He leaned down close to her, and the man in the attic of his head leaned forward too so that his nose made a smudge on the window, and the two of them: the captain and the man in the attic of his head stared into her, and she could do nothing but breathe heavily out of her nostrils as if she were a crude structure of skin, tubes, and hot air.

She felt two things very strongly. First, she felt the pain of her lips being pinched together. It hurt worse than the chains binding her hands, it hurt worse than the forearms around her head and throat. The arms were strangely warm, strangely familiar, because they were arms; arms she had, arms she used every day to such a degree that she forgot they were there, she forgot they were called arms. They were so capable, so useful, so functional that they became simple and forgotten. The arms were nothing, but the fingers on her lips had such a grip that they were not fingers, but pincers pulling her face away from her skull with the purpose of lengthening and loosening the skin so that her face would never again be able to sit comfortably and perfectly fitted around her skull; her face would hang forever loose.

The second thing she felt was the seed. She felt it poking her as he stared into her aching, watering eyes. She felt the seed sharply and realized that when she stepped on the boat—no even earlier—when she was dragged through the dirt, she thought the seed had cracked. With the shame of forced positions, the violation of being attacked, she thought the seed had become deformed: its contours changed and mutated by these new, surreal circumstances. But it hadn’t changed. It continued being as it always was just as the twilight had continued being the twilight, unchanged as if her lips did not matter, as if her burning eyes and the hairy forearms did not matter. Even the man, staring down into her so forcefully as if his eye were pissing into her eye, did not matter. But the seed was the same, and quite clearly now, she felt the weight of the child inside of her and its minute seed that was also there. She carried two seeds. No matter that her face stung from his blows, no matter that she felt ashamed.
because nobody had ever laid a hand on her. Even as a child eating sweets under the table, she’d never had a hand laid on her, and it was why, according to her older sisters), she was spoiled. She needed to laugh, to escape from these fingers, but she couldn’t laugh with her lips pinched as they were and the man’s hairy breath on her. She couldn’t laugh but her body tried to anyway. The laughter mixed with the need to defecate, it mixed with the iron flavor in her throat and became a grunt, which pleased the man. She imagined that she sounded like a sow to him and this was why he was pleased, why there was a bulge in his pants that was not a serpent. And perhaps she had been a spoiled child or perhaps not or perhaps this man was trying to spoil her now with his pinching fingers and his probing eyes. Perhaps he would like to see her spoiled: a dent in her face from his hand, lips loose like the skin of rotted mango. But she carried two seeds: one herself and the other a person she loved but did not yet know, so she made her body a sense-less vessel.

When at last the man in the black boots released her, she bent over and gasped for air. She imagined that the man in boots had a small diseased penis, not because she had known men like him before, but because this was what he deserved. She bent over and saw all the bare feet around her chained together and there was one set of gorgeously strong toes.

There wasn’t time for courtship. There were no flowers on deck. There was no perfume except that of vomit, piss, and the sea breeze.

When she stood up, the captain was gripping the lips of a man who was much taller than the captain. He made the captain look like a pale chimp, but what a grip had the chimp! The man did not look at the captain. He looked straight ahead, maintaining his fantastic posture as if he carried a glass of holy water on his head all day long. The captain squeezed and squeezed the lips until a teardrop appeared at the edge of the man’s eye. Almost, the man trembled, but she made him not. She fixed her eyes on him and willed him to see nothing but the line stretching before his eyes to the horizon. Now the captain had his hands on the man’s balls and he was laughing. Still the man did not move. She knew he wanted to. She could imagine that he was ashamed, just as she had been ashamed, but she held him as she could, without blink, without embarrassment. She held all of him, all of it: the scene before
her, and the pinching hand did not matter just as it had never mattered.

The form that love took was when she took away the hand on the balls and the tongue on the cheek. And she imagined telling him about her life that was a funny, made-up story now that it was being told on this ship where they were chained and held as slaves.

She held him very well. To be honest, he did not know where exactly this outside strength was coming from, because it was not just coming from her, it was coming from all of the people standing chained together. All of them were willing him to not give in because they all felt a strange, simultaneous urge to urinate. All of them standing in chains willed themselves to not pee, not even a squirt. They knew with their suddenly sharpened instincts that if one of them tinkled in fear, all of them would tinkle in fear. It was not just her; it was all of them willing him to hold his pee, willing him to fixate on a line that was the horizon.

The man in the black boots became bored and so he released the balls and the lips. He stepped back, cracked his knuckles and stretched his fingers, then turned away from the line of slaves and ordered the crew to take them below deck and store them.

What is the shape of love in a place down under where there are no birds, and the sky is imaginary, and your hands are chained? The shape is a lulling motion of the ship. The shape is the bottom of his foot touching yours. At first it repulses you because it is sweaty, because it is dirty, sweaty and calloused, but then love takes shape and it is almost the shape as the bottom of your foot and your heels are pressed together. Your toes touch the thick padding beneath his toes. And there you both lie until he recoils and pulls his legs up because his intestines are being attacked. You open your eyes, though there is nothing to see, and continue cradling the two seeds inside of you: fertile and rich.
Strands

As always, Imelda sat on her cushioned stool in front of the window, perfectly framed as if the house had been built with her at its center. Long ago, the room had been decorated with gold and velvet, but all of this was now faded and frayed. Vines climbed the walls and shoved their way through the floors and ceiling. Imelda still wore embroidered dresses that spilled over her knees and extended to her wrists, their shapes held together by the strongest of stitches. The dresses were hemmed up so that they hovered above her ankles and the porcelain bowl of water in which her roots drifted.

She was a woman except for her feet, but still she called him “gardener.” It sounded more elegant than “attendant,” or “helper,” and most especially better than “servant.” On this particular morning he wore rubber gloves and weeded her hair with a silver comb. The old strands came out reluctantly as he worked the comb from her scalp down to the tips of her locks that came to rest in the middle of her back. His hand was steady, but the longer he stood behind her as she stared out the window onto the empty street, the quicker and more uneven his movements became. The comb caught in her tangles and jerked her head back. She stiffened her neck and cried out, “Don’t pull my gaze from the window! The children are coming to see me!”

The gardener paused, holding the comb midair.

“But it is so important that they see you fixated on an abandoned road?”

Bringing her fingers to her lips, she leaned forward and rested her elbows on the windowsill. The color drained from her face, moved down through her body, her legs, and out from her roots, turning the water a rose-tinted brown. The street had once been filled with shining steeds, men in leather boots, women in lace twisting their parasols around. From this same window she had looked down at Juan Carlos Figuerra who sat on his horse, his left hand high in the air, waving farewell as he led the other men on the westward path towards The Grand War. The sun was behind him and burned her eyes so that he became the shape of a man blocking a patch of light. It was on this shape that she stayed fixated. Every step of his horse stamped its sound on her brain as his hand cut through the sky and blazed a trail as clearly as if the sky were made of paper and his hand were a flame.
“When the story ends, Juan Carlos Figuerra with his gold canine tooth and sword that spears apples, will return by that abandoned road.”

This was always her answer. The gardener returned the comb to her hair, moving it slowly once again. She resumed her upright position so that the color could seep back to her face.

“There’s no greater honor than waiting for intimacy.” They continued in silence, the gardener and the lady. He had tended to her ever since he found her five decades ago, slumped over the windowsill, dead except for one fluttering finger. He knew how best to care for her. When he was finished combing, he knelt down to rub her roots that curled out as long as his thumb, as long as his forearm. Some roots were thin as pencil lead, others as thick as a hog’s limb, and out of each one grew minuscule hairs. They sighed and breathed as the gardener massaged the thickest and most gnarled of the roots.

Imelda stared outside. On a clear day, Juan Carlos Figuerra would return to the edge of the wheat field where the western end of Mount Royal Avenue began. Closing her eyes, she imagined it was him kneeling beside her. If it were him rubbing her roots, she would wrap them around him. She would consume him.

“How tempted she was to curl her roots between his fingers and around his hands. How he would pulsate if she were to tighten herself across his palms and around his wrists. Then it would be only natural to slide her smooth bellied roots up his arms to his shoulders and neck. Her thinner roots would curl up in the coves of his face. Slowly then, she would move down against his torso, press against the muscles and the veins. She would know the gardener intimately.

But the children. Abruptly, she pulled her roots from the gardener’s caresses. The children were coming to look for her. They were going to find her and discover that she wasn’t a myth but fact: Imelda in the window, as dazzling as the sun. Their innocence and joy would be the fertilizer she needed to continue her vigilance, to continue stretching her arms outward and upward.

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The previous morning the gardener had been in town to conduct his weekly observations. Mayor Jones was standing on a box in the center of town inaugurating its bicentennial.

“Children! Remember our loveliest patron saint, Imelda!” He pointed to the City Hall mural that showcased fleeting glimpses of the town’s history. A loin-clothed hunter aimed at the sky with a bow and arrow. A gatherer looked fondly at the nuts in her basket. A sweet faced factory worker held up a round tortilla: the perfect exemplar of hard work. A bear rose up on its hind legs, and pigeons flew from the bottom right corner of the wall making a diagonal arc across the mural. In the center of it all was a window, Imelda’s window. Her hair was painted as a black waterfall. Her face was featureless, an oval filled with pale light.

“Children, you know the story of Imelda whose General left to fight in the Grand War. She was so lovely that when she wiped the perspiration from her face with a silk handkerchief, she left an imprint of a swan. She waited beside her open window. Did she lose hope? No! Did she cry? Yes! Salty tears that fell in a pool around her pale feet and turned them, because of her immeasurable depth of passion and fidelity, into roots. Did she bemoan this metamorphosis? No! She rejoiced in her evolution from mere woman to a woman with the capacities of a living plant. Ginseng! Dandelion! Rhubarb! More than any other individual of the 18th century, Imelda exemplifies the importance of romance and keeping a staked eye on the dusty road. Children, as we enter this new phase of war let us remember to be inspired by her: a bright gem in the mud of our history!”

The children cheered, and the mayor tossed sparkly pencils against the sky. Down they came and the eager children caught them between their teeth and spindly fingers until the click clack of a whirling projector hushed them. A movie screen hung where the mayor had been standing. Against it flashed reenactments of life on Mount Royal Avenue in 1796, when it was at the peak of its elegance. The children saw a street so wide that it fit eight carriages parked side by side. There were two rows of sixteen houses each. Each house was decorated with columns, balconies, marble statues, and doors carved with cherubs, mockingbirds, and cherries. The houses were gallant beasts and they faced one another like proud sentries on this street that connected to no other street, but instead was intentionally removed from the
rest of town. It lay nestled between an apple orchard to the
east and a field of wheat to the west. It was a strip of glamour
hidden in the frontier. Here, once upon a time, lived the
successful miners, the capitalists, the adept explorers, the
skilled dog breeders, the graceful dancers, the most generous
benefactors to the church. The women had smooth foreheads
and bright teeth. They wore hats with feathers that drooped to
their shoulders and grazed the silk that covered them. They
sewed with long, silver needles and picked blackberries to
carry in dainty baskets. The men braided their beards and
proudly patted the rippling haunches of their horses just before
they mounted and shot their guns in the air. Ducks fell from
the sky and the children felt as if they were there, really there
in the ancient annals of their town’s history.

The camera focused in on a white house with Greek
columns. It closed in on a second-story window as a rising
symphony of violins began to play. All the children lifted their
chins, strained their necks until finally, they exhaled in unison,
“Imelda! Sooo… beautiful.” Hair cascaded out the window, a
delicate elbow rested on the windowsill, and where the face
and upper torso should have been was a flickering orb. The
children swooned as they had seen the adults do: “She was
lovely! Lovelier than we could ever hope to be!”

Only three children did not echo these words. They
sat in the very back row where the most raggedy children sat,
hidden by rows of other children. The three of them huddled
together: a chubby boy, a bossy girl, and a girl with black
ringlets. From time to time, they glanced up, but immediately
they hunched back down again. The gardener drew closer so
that he could listen to their plotting. As the final sepia images
of the street, complete with accordion players and spinning
lovers, flashed across the screen, the three children nodded at
each other. Their lips mouthed, *Imelda. Tomorrow.*

Their words chilled him. If the children found
Imelda, they would tell the rest of the townspeople, and if the
townspeople knew she was still alive after two hundred years,
they would lay her on a table, dissect her roots, and cut open
her legs. He felt the danger, just as he had that day in 1978
when the hoodlums came to Mount Royal Avenue looking for
trouble. The street had long been abandoned. The
townspeople knew it had existed at some point, but that point
was far in the past. It was not in their nature or agenda to
wander. When they had a free moment, they were content to
stay beside the river. Then came the hoodlums, young and briefly brave, feeding on the energy of the times, giving them the courage to push out past the apple orchard onto the abandoned street.

When the gardener saw them, he quickly pulled Imelda away from the window even though she fought him. It was the one time he gagged her, fearful that she would call out to the hoodlums. They threw bricks through all the windows, smashing the glass. They scrawled their names and figures of naked women on the walls, set fire to the trees, kicked the locked doors. It was the gardener who had years ago locked all the doors and crawled out the basement windows whispering to himself that only Mother Nature should enter, only Mother Nature and he should enter. The locks deterred the hoodlums from entering, but they would have succeeded eventually if it hadn’t been for the heavy heat of the summer and the lazifying effects of beer and burgers. Hot and dehydrated, the hoodlums slumped to the ground, scratched themselves, then moved down the street towards the apple orchards looking for water.

When they were gone, the gardener untied the cloth from around Imelda’s mouth. She had wilted. It took him a year to nurse her back to health.

Prior to and since that day, nobody but the gardener had been to Mount Royal Avenue. He made sure of that, taking great pains to monitor the townspeople’s movements towards the street. He beheaded cats and strewed their decapitated bodies around the perimeter. When anyone came near the edge of the apple orchard, their feet caught in traps and they fell into deep pits. His campaign was successful. Nobody dared go near. Eventually they forgot why and simply preferred to remember through reenactments the way Mount Royal Avenue had been before the Grand War.

Now, the three children were plotting to undermine what the gardener saw as a perfectly distant relationship between the people and the street, the people and Imelda.

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“The dry spell must end,” Imelda said in response to the news of the three children.

“But the last time…” he began to argue, preparing to bring up the 1978 incident.
“Gardener,” she interrupted him, anticipating his next words and refusing to hear that year spoken into existence. “Juan Carlos will come. When we are reunited, we deserve the presence of all the townspeople as witnesses.”

The wind blew the curtain in and Imelda pressed her face against it. How badly she wanted the children to find her. Once they knew and fell in love with her, it would not be long before the entire town walked the several miles through the apple orchards to come and honor her.

“Clean up the dead animals. Take away the traps.” She turned her head away, but not before seeing the surprise on the gardener’s face. She had always known what he’d been up to guarding the perimeter of the road. The gardener didn’t realize how sharp her eyesight was, how far reaching her sense of smell and hearing. The 1978 incident had frightened her badly, so she’d let him indulge in his fantasies as caretaker and protector, but it was time to let the world in, time to shine again before an audience, time for events to culminate as they were wont to do in the natural ebb and flow of history of which she was a part, of which she was a pinnacle.

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The children were still in the orchard but she could hear them singing and laughing. Already she loved them: the bossy girl with her fuchsia ribbon, the boy with his ripe red hair, and the one with her long, pretty locks just like—Imelda stroked her own hair. Who better than these three to spread the tale not only of her legacy, but of her continued existence? She was ready to become flesh and inspiration to the townspeople.

When the children finally reached the border between the apple orchard and Mount Royal Avenue, their singing and giggles died out. They carefully parked their bikes, positioning them to face the orchard with enough space between them that they wouldn’t knock each other over if they had to make a quick escape. They stared down the shadowed street and its row of parallel mansions. If they looked hard enough and squinted their eyes, they might have guessed that she was there, on the south side of the street, the third house from the east end, but they were too entrenched in their plotting. The bossy one declared that they should search each house one by one and that as soon as they found something
good they should leave. All they needed was one historical relic to make them heroes, but it had to be a good one, like Imelda’s diary or her bones.

“Should we take weapons?” asked the pretty one.

“It is wise,” they said nodding to one another as they somberly gathered stones and put them in their pockets. This gesture startled Imelda. Unwillingly, her mind flashed to the 1978 incident, but she calmed herself. How surprised the children were going to be to find not her bones, but her living, growing self.

“Gardener, perhaps you should go down to greet them. Let them know there’s nothing to be afraid of.” She folded her hands expectantly and sat without moving until he left the room.

Imelda was eager to make contact with the children, but their first encounter had to be under the correct light, the precise angle, the perfect sliding together of moments. The pigeons always flew past her window. If she waited patiently she could lean out just as they passed. The birds would rise higher and higher and the children would follow the flapping of their wings moving in unison across the house and past her window. As the birds swooped up, the children’s eyes would trail off the tails and fall onto her. They would immediately recognize her as the one whom they sought; she was the one who waited, the one of everlasting beauty who requested only a small cup of water because she knew that with infinite patience intimacy would come. It would. Come into her arms. Rise up from the street.

The sound of footsteps startled her. The gardener was running towards the children. What was he doing? She had told him to greet the children, not chase them away. Even after he had spent so much time with her, he was still a wild card. Such unpredictable behavior infuriated her. There he was, a mad bull charging at the children. They screamed and pulled out their rocks, but even though a shower of stones rained down on him, he was able to grab the dog by its neck and run back inside the house. The children stood with their arms raised and cried out after the dog, “Punto Final!”

Imelda balled the curtain up in her hands. It was all ruined. The children would leave before she even spoke to them. A touch to her elbow made her jerk. Swiftly, the gardener had crept up behind her. He pointed outside to
where the children were bunched together, moving towards the house.

“Where’s the dog?”
“Sitting by the door, tied to the doorknob. See, how quickly the children are coming now to get him? They will see you soon. Remember? That’s what you wanted?”

She clamped her lips shut.

“Show yourself to them.” His lips were warm and flat against her ear. She hated how his words fell precisely into the folds, but he spoke the truth. Even if the children did not see her when the pigeons flew past, the important thing was that they saw her and understood that she was real. They needed to learn what truths of history survived and extended beyond the past and which ones flared up only once, then died.

Once again, Imelda leaned forward. Her arms fell into their chronic positions: one folded across the windowsill and the other one upright, so that she could rest her chin on the back of her hand. As the children came closer, she gazed at the road, not directly below, but at a point in the distance. She knew at what angle to tilt her head so that part of her face was brilliantly exposed, and part of it was hidden as she visualized the return of Juan Carlos.

He stands at the end of Mount Royal Avenue. The fields of wheat behind him dance in the late summer wind. His gold canine tooth flashes in the sun. The apple he spears with his sword releases a sweet aroma. The sun is grandiose and fat. It moves down the sky, dragging behind it a canopy of colors. It’s the end of the day and the sky is streaked and miraculous, and there stands Juan Carlos with his hand on the hilt of his sword, his boots weary from travel. His moustache is bold, his eyes kind, his hair is black oil rolling on the sea. Time dissolves as he walks, and she is a glacier cracking deep in the pit of itself, and she is the spilling of leaves to the ground on which he moves while gazing up at her, a gloved hand reaching.

“Huuuuuuhh!” the pretty one screamed. “She’s still waiting!”

Imelda opened her eyes and stared at the children standing in the shadows below her. The pretty one pointed in horror at her. Imelda’s gaze traced the tip of the girl’s finger, moved up the hand, wrist, arm, and shoulder, all the way up to the ear of the pretty one. She wanted to tell her, she wanted to tell all three of the children to not be afraid, to come upstairs
and give her water. She wanted them to know that he was coming soon, if they would only be patient.

Her jaw popped as she opened her mouth to speak, but her mouth was not mouth. Soundless. It was cavern. Time and distance scrambled inside of it. The children were so close. Which was her gaze and which was theirs? Who was who? Why was why? Everything was tangled and what did one see and what did the other saw and then she looked down at her spotted hands. She reached up and felt the sparseness of her hair, felt the brittleness of her bones and roots. She touched the roughness of her skin, and at last saw herself as the children saw her. Rotted.

“Run,” the bossy one shouted as she untied Punto Final, who scampered away towards the road that led back to town. The boy and the pretty one followed, flinging one last glance at Imelda. Their faces were as pale and bloodless as roots twisting underground. They ran and the sun kept slipping until it was lower than the sky, lower than the trees, lower than the road. They slipped away with the light, slid away from Mount Royal Avenue, leapt onto their bikes and pedaled away into the apple orchards. The sun was gone and all the shadows and all the light.

“I wanted them to know me in a beautiful way,” she said.

“I know,” said the gardener and began to wipe her limbs with a moistened cloth.

Imelda rested her forehead on the windowsill. She remembered, of course. All of the men except for Juan Carlos had returned, but not in the way they were supposed to, which was riding in the same parallel rows that they had left in, the horses lifting up their hooves and clopping them solidly to the ground. Instead, the men returned one by one with missing limbs and carved up faces. They plodded slowly down the street to their homes as their women watched from behind scalloped curtains. Once they reached their front doors, they were dragged in by their collars and the doors slammed shut. The exhausted horses collapsed on broken ankles and lay on the ground heaving. Flies infested the parched orifices. The people left the horses where they’d fallen, packed up, and moved to anonymous cities where they could hide the scars and missing parts, where nobody would know how far they’d fallen from prancing around on their private street of luxury. The women carried the dead men away. Imelda stayed. She
Sierra Jones-Yu

watched and waited, and now she stared into the bowl where her roots twitched. The gardener slowly filled the bowl with cool water. Watered now, watered later, left to wither, or left to blossom, it did not matter when the children screamed. What would they tell the others? Brusquely, she ran her fingers through her hair pulling out dead strands that the gardener had missed. Holding them up, she examined their languid form before dropping them in the water. They sank and became tangled in her roots. She stared at the lines of the decrepit houses. The window framed her perfectly as if it had been built around her as she sat on her frayed stool, looking out.
Let Me Rest

Hello? Oh hello dear, how are you?
You’re what? Moving to Paris?
Oh, making pie.
How silly of me.

Me? Oh, I’m getting ready for a nap.

It’s not the middle of the morning, it’s oh. Ten o’clock. Well, I’ll just work in the kitchen.

I love you, little one.
Goodbye.

After a careful struggle, the phone is back in its cradle. It rests there so easily. I remember our first telephone. I could grip the black receiver and dial the numbers with steady hands that didn’t tremble like dry corn stalks.

Whatever is eating at my brain is eating at my hands, feet, face. The floor seems to tremble as I walk. I survive an earthquake each time I get out of bed and shuffle my way to the bathroom.

My grief, it’s almost time to eat. I need to get dinner on. We should have roast and potatoes on a Sunday. Except it’s Tuesday.

And, the potatoes are in the cellar. Stairs. I grip the counter, with hands that cleaned potatoes before they could write, and can’t do either anymore. I’m just so tired.
Age of Reason

I’m sitting in geography class
making my grocery list
while casually taking notes
on the Ogallala aquifer

Milk, cereal and bananas
and my lack of same
being of more immediate importance

Then I hear my teacher mention
the age of water –
it’s from the last ice age.

My pen stops.
My brain runs out of ink.

The age.
of.
water.

I add eggs to my grocery list.

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Months and miles away
I read the placard.
“The Battle of Hastings
took place here on this field
in 1066.”

My brain tries
to build the battle,
so much younger
and closer
than the age of water.

But I still can’t
quite reach
anything.

I head back to the gift shop.
In Praise of the Fool

One languid Sunday afternoon as I lay on my bed, I felt via the electromagnetism of the radio waves, the voice of Nina Simone wash through me and fill the room with yearning:

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free,
I wish I could break all the chains holding me.

I wanted to feel free too! Decades ago back in Berkeley, amidst the study of many things which were part of the spirit of those heady times, I developed a passion for a system of symbols known as the Tarot. The cards begin not with the number one but with a zero above an image titled the Fool. How strange, I thought, to begin before the beginning. In Western Mystery schools, the tarot cards are studied in sequence to gain insight about the journey of human consciousness. The quality of mind necessary to move from intention to completion in any cycle of manifestation is shown in the image of the Fool. And just what quintessential quality does the Fool represent? It is a sense of freedom.

Tarot cards have an ancient yet obscure origin; some say an Egyptian origin, others say mystics met to create the cards in the city of Fez which came to prominence sometime after the burning of the great Library of Alexandria. We do know that they first appear in Europe in the latter 14th century as playing cards. The story enacted in the cards starts with the image of an androgynous youth poised on the edge of a mountain cliff and dressed in the colorful motley of the fool as in folk and court traditions. With a serene expression of equanimity, he gazes upward at a distant height and seems unconcerned that he is about to fall off a cliff. To say the least, he is about to experience something new!

Things are not what they seem. Here on an isolated mountaintop, a place usually reserved for the sage, we find instead a fool on the threshold of possibility, about to incarnate into a new adventure—from the spiritual heights down into the valley of the material world. The card implies that when starting something new, it is wise to be a fool. With a willingness to go forth, he knows nothing but has faith in his own powers of being. Furthermore, the card is assigned the ordinal number zero as a point of origin. The fool is no
negative cipher but possesses all the richness of zero, the freedom of no limitations.

Almost endless are the associations that can be attributed to the image of the Fool. Like any enduring symbol, it has an open-ended quality which accrues new meanings over time. In many spiritual traditions, before the beginning of time, before the Fool can fall into the world, the breath of the spirit must exhale a world into being. So, it seems to me that the Tarot series begins with that foundational metaphor, the breath is the spirit, for the Fool represents that animating energy which gives life. The English word spirit comes from the Latin *spiritus* meaning breath, breath of a god, (inspiration!) from *spirare* to breathe. Numerous other examples exist. The Greek *pneuma* is the vital spirit, soul, or creative force of a person, literally “that which is breathed or blown.” In Hinduism, the Sanskrit word *prana* means the breath of life, the breath of the universe. In Hebrew and Arabic, the *Ruh* is the name for the vital principle of spirit as breath. The *chi* (or *qi* or *ki*) thought of in Chinese medicine as the life force whose movement through the body is the basis of health, has its root in the Mandarin word *qì*, literally “air, breath.”

How exactly does the Tarot Fool fit into all of this? Besides being numbered zero, that is, existing before the beginning as only a spirit could do, the concept of zero also connects with breath of wind. Zero derives from the Italian *zefiro* from Medieval Latin *zephirum* or zephyr, the light pleasant west wind, almost nothing. And the source of all of this is the Arabic *sifr* or zero, cipher, which was a translation of the Sanskrit *sunya*, meaning emptiness or the void. From this void, all creation arises and returns, the no-thing behind existence yet which mystics claim is “manifested in everything.” Thus nothing gets a symbol, not the round “O” but the oval shaped “0.” As Theseus says in *Midsummer’s Night Dream*, the human imagination gives “to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.” In the Tarot, the summation of the Fool’s adventure is found in the concluding card named the World. Here the life force is imaged as the Cosmic Dancer dancing on the airy nothing of the winds up in the blue vault of the heavens. In the wisdom that the cards have to teach us, She inhabits as if in a cartouche, the middle of a green wreath woven into the shape of zero. Freely dancing on air, She is balanced at the center of zero.
And in the magic of words, further study shows that the origin of the word Fool is from the Old French *fol* “fool, foolish,” from Latin *follis* “bellows,” and by extension, a windbag, an “empty-headed person.” A bellows blows air to ignite a fire and has sides that allow it to expand and contract like a human body which takes in a breath to fire our bodies with oxygen and then exhales. Thus the etymology of the word fool connects it to the medieval fool whose “empty headed” jests gives him the freedom to enliven the royal court and to the motif of spirit as the breath of life.

I was there on the day my goddess daughters were born. From my place in the hospital corridor, I waited. Beyond the wall, inside a room, their mother was giving birth. Suddenly, the sound of a cry astonished me, and then another. Nothing could have announced their presence in this world more to me than those first loud exhalations of breath. To hear it felt like an unbreakable bond between us. They had begun their fool’s journey a moment before with their first intake of breath. Much has been said about the rhythm of human breath. Meditation masters teach attention to the movement of our breath is one of the grandest tools we have for coming into the present and for restoring us back to who we really are. Back, they say, to some spark of ourselves before all the layers of socialization strangled us; back, they say, to the freedom to be ourselves.

The Fool shows us the way. Perhaps it’s an ideal more often than the real, but his essence we carry inside ourselves we as move through the adventure of being alive. Buoyant, young at heart, creative, the part of us that still feels free and enjoys life—the very opposite of the character Babbitt who reveals at the end of the novel, “I never did one thing I wanted to do.” Or to the kind of work Thoreau describes which gives a person “no time to be anything but a machine.” Far from the stoic endurance of grim duty or the view of life as a dreary series of lessons to be learned, is the lightness of spirit that is the Fool.

By Shakespeare’s time in the late 16th century, to be a fool could be a job description. One could be the official fool and be paid for it. What an era! Noble households employed fools for the pleasure of their company. Wit was a commodity. It is said that Henry the VIII’s fool, Will Sommers, rarely left the king’s side. Artist Hans Holbein included a portrait of him as part of the court life. The verbal
ingenuity of these learned or “artificial” fools gave them a privileged tongue to tell the truth but tell it at a slant through riddles, song, and rime. Set apart by their special costume made of motley green cloth (it was illegal for an ordinary person to impersonate a fool!), these court jesters with their delight in folly had a rare freedom to be themselves and still keep their heads. They stand with one foot outside the social order, but by evoking laughter, fools can make moral commentary on the life they see about them. Through his folly, the fool exposes folly in others. A second category of fools also existed in wealthy households, the “naturals” or idiot-fools who were mentally handicapped, but revered for their merry antics and moments of innocent wisdom. There was a rare meritocracy in the profession; anyone could be a fool: women, those from the lower classes. All one needed was ability. Thus the Fool moves from archetype to physical embodiment in the domestic fool-for-hire.

Of course, the history of professional fools stretches back thousands of years. There are records of fools in the courts of Egypt as early as 2200 BCE and in places as far ranging as the temple of the of Aztec king Montezuma, to classical Rome where the Emperor Augustus had a fool named Galba. A recent book, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World*, demonstrates the seemingly universal need of people for the fool and his humanizing influence on cultures independent of each other around the globe. The book tells the stories of numerous fools: Birbal the Court Jester to the Indian Mogul emperor Akbar, and Abu Dulawa the Arab jester poet or the Chinese jester Shi who during the reign of King Huiwang (7th century BCE) gave the perfect fool’s cover for verbal license, “I am a jester, my words can give no offense.”

Back to medieval times in England, we find the fool as a rustic clown or buffoon in burlesque folk festivals such as the Feast of Fools celebrated around New Year’s Day. Often held in churches and later in the streets, this sanctioned merry-making and drunken partying temporarily disrupted the usual social hierarchy. In a reversal of power, the lower could command the higher. During this ritualized overthrow of order, an elected Lord of Misrule, a kind of Holy Fool, often a peasant, oversaw the Christmas and New Year’s festivities. This once a year release of the steam of social resentments had a forbear in the wild revelries of the Roman Saturnalia where
slaves and masters switched places. All these festivals mark in one way or another the winter solstice and a return of the growing light, the rebirth of the sun.

Just as laughter erupts from a reversal of expectations, part of the mystique of the fool exists in surprises, reversals summed up in the phrase, “the wisdom of the fool.” Or as poet William Blake advises in the spirited Proverbs of Hell, “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.” Alas, the custom of the court fool comes to an end by the 18th century. Dicky Pierce, the earl of Suffolk’s fool, died in 1728, the last known household fool in England. An epitaph by Jonathan Swift is engraved on his tombstone. In the Age of Reason, under the oppressive sway of rationality, there seems to be no room for a fool. But despite shifting customs, the traditions of millennia do not die easily. Nothing as deep in the human psyche as the energies of the Fool can be wiped out completely. Witness our still celebrated April Fool’s Day, the movies of Jerry Lewis, Ernest (Scared Stupid!), Jack Black, or my favorite TV character as a child, the lovable beatnik Maynard G. Krebs who also stands outside the social order as he speaks his truth with the classic fool’s caveat, “No offense, good buddy.” Many Americans get the nation’s news from late night TV comedian/fools like Dave or Jay or Jon Stewart. And there is that wise learned fool the Great Gorino, Gore Vidal, who wants to wake us citizens up through his ironic commentary, “We have an empire, but none of our students can find it on a map.” All these are but to name a few.

Still, no one has immortalized the role of the fool more than Shakespeare. There exists no better place than his plays to see the fool in action as companion, trickster, exposér of folly. Most memorable are that great trio of fools, Touchstone in As You Like It, Feste in Twelfth Night and the Fool in King Lear. The addition of gifted comic Robert Armin to the acting troupe may have inspired the Bard to create these roles. (Armin later penned his own book Foole upon Foole.) Shakespeare turns away from the old stage tradition of the rustic clown to introduce the court fool as a new character. Thus Armin dons the costume of the professional fool—a coat of motley. In the eccentric book Shakespeare’s Motley, Englishman Leslie Hobson devotes 300 pages to what the word motley might mean. (Such is the devotion that Shakespeare excites!) Hobson proves how the
plays break new ground by shifting from buffoon’s russet jerkin to the fool’s long coat of motley.

Certainly Shakespeare’s explorations of the Fool and obvious affinity for this character represent the Fool’s highest moments, his literary apotheosis. In 1599, the witty fool Touchstone (played by Armin) first appears on the stage in *As You Like It* as a duplicitous trickster, seducer of shepherdesses and still part clown. After meeting Touchstone in the forest of Arden, the melancholy Jacques envies the fool his freedom: “Invest me in my motley; give me leave / To speak my mind.”

The splendid Feste, licensed fool to the household of Lady Olivia, finds himself in the center of the whirling atmosphere created by the mad revels of *Twelfth Night*. Also known as the feast of the Epiphany (twelve nights after Christmas), a fool might feel right at home in such an ambiance as this is another New Year’s celebration like the Feast of Fools or Saturnalia. Critic Harold Bloom observes, “The genius of *Twelfth Night* is Feste, the most charming of all Shakespeare’s fools, and the only sane character in a wild play.” After a quick paced exchange with Feste, Viola remarks, “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool; /And to do that well craves a kind of wit.” Feste, alone on the stage, closes the play with a song reflecting life’s uncertainties; the jester also knows the other side: “For the rain it raineth every day.”

Finally, we come to the incomparable Fool of Lear, a childlike “natural” fool known for his affections of the heart. He pines away for Cordelia and loves Lear and “labors to outjest his heartstruck injuries” as a gentleman puts it to Kent out on the heath. Or perhaps, as Bloom believes, the Fool torments the king into insanity as punishment for his moral lapses as a father: “Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.” Once Lear has collapsed into this state madness (become his own fool?), the Fool disappears back into the ether or whatever world he came from. I think sometimes the Fool just couldn’t take it anymore; he’d had it with Lear’s lethal personality.

If the essence of the fool is his freedom of wit, the two strongest mentalities of any of Shakespeare’s characters are Hamlet and Falstaff. From that most intelligent of writers, his most intelligent characters. Both of them play the fool. Hamlet acts the fool when he puts on an “antic disposition,” to feign madness as a cover for his designs of revenge and murder. Ah, that second scene of the second act, the
conversations with those spies Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, what gems of wit and philosophic depth await the reader, what a dazzle of words, of mocking puns and metaphoric leaps! The young prince takes on the persona of a natural fool with a diseased mind but with the soaring wit of the artificial fool: “I am but mad north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

One New Year’s Eve with the thought of doing myself some good, I forced myself to sit through a screening of The Secret—touting itself as containing, oh, the occult wisdom of the ages known only to a few. What great secret is revealed? Our thoughts make our reality. This is new? Hamlet said some four hundred years ago, “For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

Hamlet ponders all through the play about the brevity of life, the nature of human beings, “this quintessence of dust.” Never more so than in that graveyard when he famously holds in his hand the skull of the King’s jester: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?”

Here we see a detailed portrait of the King’s fool integrated in the family life of a noble household, the jokes, the kisses, the entertaining conviviality, the warmth. Indeed, is there any other character that Hamlet speaks of with such affection?

Many times in both Henry plays, Falstaff is called a fool and almost always acts the fool as he is the embodiment of wit. When Sir John vows to “live cleanly as a nobleman should do,” we know this pledge to virtue echoes St. Augustine’s prayer, “Oh God make me good...but not yet.” For the very next time we see him, much to our delight (for who wants a reformed Falstaff?), he is fully himself. Walking down a London street, having just ordered on credit a satin cloak and breeches for himself, Falstaff muses on his powers of invention: “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.” He then encounters the Lord Chief Justice, highest law official in the land, who implicates him in the midnight robbery at Gadshill and threatens to put him in
the stocks. Far from being cowed, the fat knight hits him up for a thousand pounds. When the Justice accuses him of being an old, burned out case, Falstaff claims to be young, having just been born this very day at three in the afternoon. The spirit of the fool, devoted to play in any circumstance, is ever young, ever being born again.

Falstaff lives. One of his greatest contributions to the plays is to stop the juggernaut of war, if just for a moment. In the thick of battle, Prince Henry, hot for revenge, calls upon Falstaff to lend him a weapon; the old man pulls from the holster not a pistol but a bottle of wine. Hal hurls it back at the knight: “What! is’t a time to jest and dally now?” Here Falstaff asserts his formidable personality. What better time to be a jester than in the face of danger? The violence that follows from the prince’s concept of honor, the “grinning honor” of the dead have no sway over him. Falstaff wants to live. One can recall another condemning speech about heroics from the most famous warrior who chose to die for glory, Achilles. One can recall the voice of Achilles from Hell:

I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.

One can never hope to understand all the mysteries of the many sided Fool. Nor does this even seem a desirable goal. The archetype of the Fool is an instinctual energy inside us. And yet to me, it hardly seems real that at one time, living breathing men and women were hired to be fools, treasured as a necessary part of culture. Although I know I carry my Fool inside me, sometimes I can't help but wish he were out walking beside me in all his colorful garb. In my life, I have suffered from anxiety and yearned for freedom. I am not alone in experiencing vacillating moods of despair and happiness. But whether my spirit feels heavy or light, I want my Fool there to give perspective on either extreme. Psychologist Carl Jung advises that “Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of...The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it modern dress.”
## A Deletion of Editors

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<th>Comment:</th>
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<td>I hate your magazine. Its stupid.</td>
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<td>The writing is really bad. And the articles are boring. –J, Abu Dhabi</td>
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<td>Why you are publishing this?</td>
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<td>–Aysha, Epco Petroleum</td>
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<td>This is nonsense. Your writers cant write. This is crazy! I saw a million typos. –Des, Al Ain</td>
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<td>You are making an effort, I can see this, but the grammar is atrocious and the content is desultory. Oh, and the visual layout is weak. This is the first of its kind magazine in Al Ain so I do give you credit for this. I’m sure you will be one of the best magazines in the country if you clear up a few problems. Spelling, punctuation, word choice, capitalization, etc. –Mohammed A., UAE University, groundskeeper</td>
</tr>
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</table>
We’ve had a great response from the website! Piers said.

Really?

Yeah, read this one. Piers handed the woman an 8 x 11 paper, which was blank, except for a sliver of text: “You are the best magazine in the country! –Mohammed A., UAE University.”

A professor? Peace asked.

Uh, yeah. Looks that way. Piers fingered the thick gold cross hanging between her breasts [outside the shirt]. This made her think of her daughter, Samantha, who was being fed by her nanny in Piers’ office. The nanny had a name, but no one was sure what it was, because Piers never introduced her to people. She was just a nanny.

Piers Ang
Box 14441
Al Ain, UAE

Experience: 2010-Present  The Date Palm magazine
Editor-in-Chief, Publisher
I founded this ‘free’ magazine by myself last year with start up money from The Al Suhaida Group. It is first magazine in Al Ain for and about the city. I have international staff of 5 and have total control over content and visual layout.

2001-2010  Hong Kong Public Schools teacher, Grades 6 & 7

Education: Hong Kong Polytechnic  1995-2001
Teacher Training

Skills, Interests and Misc, Etc:
I am native Cantonese speaker, computer literary, very serious about my faith (Christianity.)
Huh, where am? Rough night. I should probably feel ashamed of something...
But what, exactly?
Coffee.
Am I grunting? I seem to be making groans and wheezes while I walk. And sighs. Do I always do this? Must be getting old. Something needs scratching.
I’m watching the coffee percolate. Percolate? No, brew. My parents had a percolator, what?, mid-70s? Earlier?
You might want to take a cigarette break, go for a walk, whatever. Nothing to see here.

Okay, coffee, cigarette, sofa. It’s all good.
Or is it? Paco’s.…? I remember Steve and Ann and…that other guy…and…the band…oh, yeah, and…uhm…that’s no good. One-two-three-breathe-and-forget about it.

What’s this? Why is it behind the cushion? Oh, right. The Date Palm. Piers’ “magazine.” Piece of utter utterly-crappy crap. Still hasn’t paid me for my contribution. What’d I give her…?

I’m staring at the wall now, trying to remember. My memory gets worse every day.

A trivia quiz, a book review and a cryptic crossword. She said she was going to pay 50 fils a word. That’s about, what?, 10¢. Was expecting around $200 all told. Then she says, “Oh yeah, I spoke to my backer and he says we are not paying for reviews or puzzles. Sorry!”

Sorry? Yeah, right. [Sorry “!” Is that sarcastic punctuation?] She was never going to pay me. Said she’d “look for some petty cash” to give me, but she’ll be looking about as hard as OJ Simpson is out there looking for the “real” murderer.

Let’s look at this thing. Broken English, misspelling, can’t really…see what this photo is all about. Grammar, grammar, spelling, couple words mashed together, here we go. Matthew Arlington. Huh? I didn’t write that. I didn’t…who edited this?

Jesus H. Christ, what’s going on around here. Where’s the cryptic? In back, beautiful. Oh. My. God. They published it with the answers right in the grid. How fucking stupid…?
It took me a really long time to make up that crossword.

This is a farce. They’re guilty of excessive farce.

I need to see the masthead. Piers, right. Peace Ngegwi. What kind of name…? Senior editor/staff writer. Web designer, Enron Malsharb. Lessee…secretary, accountant, marketing…where are the editors? Just Piers and Peace? That’s it? Two non-native speakers for a whole magazine? My god. They’re a veritable deletion of editors. And she ruined my review of Jonathan Baumbach. Destroyed it. Utterly obliterated it. I mean, sure, have a go at the article by…Reem Mansouri, who has…lemme see…three consecutive sentences with no verbs and no prevailing sense of…meaning…but leave my stuff alone. I’m doing you guys a favor. Writing content that you don’t have to hack away at… Coffee. I need more coffee. And cigarettes. A shower, lunch, Paco’s.

Piers, looking over the new issue, chews on her cross. No, a different one. Tiny, silver, flaked with gold. She is not a native speaker, but she makes several unkind comments, in the coffee klatch of her interior monologue, about Peace, Peace’s writing, her status as a non-native speaker, her incompetence. Why did I hire her? Her grammar is not well. She write no good English at all. [See, like that.] And: I am gonna hafta letter go. I just felt so bad for her. She told me her life story and it was so…so…you know? I just could not not hire her. I will fire her today.

At no time during this lone and silent bull session did Piers alight on the irony of her own non-nativity, her own lack of experience as a writer, editor, publisher. She did not question the logic of starting a magazine without knowing how to do so. And being quite ill-at-ease in the language of publication. And launching the magazine before having a staff. And choosing staff members who were also inexperienced non-native speakers who had no expertise writing or editing, not even in their own native languages.

No, she did not [permit herself to] wonder about these things. We can wonder about these things, though. You can. I know I will, am, have.

Why does she do these things? Why? It doesn’t make a lick of sense. She should hire me to edit this thing. I
have a full-time job, sure, at Emirates University, teaching poetry to spoiled bluebloods, but that hardly takes up my time. I mean, hell, I could do that job in my sleep. Many professors do. Jim Dagish, for example. Well, not sleep. More of an alcohol coma. An alcoma.

This whole thing about Emirates University may not sound like genuine Interior Monologue. I mean, he wouldn’t tell himself this. Not in so many words. Not in full unfragmented sentences.

No, of course not.
Except that he would, really. He’s like that. It’s not just clunky heavy-handed exposition on the author’s part.¹

And no, I wouldn’t assume that you would like the guy. I don’t either. But hey, he’s the hero, so what can we do about it?

The “hero.”

You know what I think? Matthew, which is the guy’s name, the pre-narrative-intrusion guy, continues to think, still sitting in his boxers, blowing Camel smoke toward the ceiling fan, cradling the fifth coffee between his horizontal-to-ground right leg and the flank of his crossed-over-the-right left leg. I think she knows that she doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing. And she knows that she needs someone like me—well, me: it’s Al Ain; who the hell else could she get?—to set the ship of (discursive) state on the right tack (is that the word?), but she also knows that, if someone like me came aboard (Aye, Mateys!), he’d completely take over.² He’d [be forced to] tell her [either directly or indirectly or both] just how badly she was doing the job. But the thing is, Piers is way too insecure for that. She’s just secure enough to admit, to herself, that she doesn’t know what she’s doing, but she’s not quite secure enough to actually hire someone who does know what he’s doing because this would make her lose face. So instead, she surrounds herself with morons and incompetents.

¹ Eds. It’s true. We’ve fact-checked the hell out of this.
² Eds. Again, this rendering of Matthew’s stream-of-consciousness might bruise plausibility, but it’s the honest to god’s truth. This is the way he thinks, as if William James himself had urinated in said stream.
A thought, a realization, a burgeoning epiphanic event rose to the surface of Piers’s consciousness and threatened to erupt, but she quickly, deftly put a lid on it. The lid of embarrassed repression. And she sealed it with the duct tape of delusion and put it inside a ziplock baggie of projection.

Only in Al Ain, Matthew thought. Only in Al Ain. Only in this crazy dump.

Al-Ain city
United Arab emirati

Work Experience—Al Ain water plant, Al Ain Zoological resource centre and habitat wildlife resort and park (formerly ‘Al ain zoo’)
• Hili Fun City
• Hilton hotel and resort

Highlights—forth biggest city in U.A.E.
—means ‘The Garden’ in arabic-language.
—special place for H.H. Sheikh Zayed Al nayhan (PBUH).
—Birthplace of HH Sheikh zayed (PBUH).
—Many famous roundabouts around the world such as Deer roundabout and Dallah Roundabouts!

Peace? We need to talk? Can you come in here for a minute?

Sure, Piers. Just a minute.
Maybe sooner?
I’m just finish up this article on Sheikh Zayed (peace be upon him). He was born in Al Ain, you know.
I do know. But no, don’t worry about the article…[sotto voce] …it’s not like we’ll be running it.
Okay.

Peace made her way to Piers’ office and sat in the big soft cushy armchair. Piers came around from behind her desk and sat on the big soft cushy couch. She had once read that this is a more approachable way to address subordinates, on their level, especially when delivering bad news or “coming down on” them.
Remember how I told you that I hire you because I feel really connected to your story?
Yes, mum.

And to your whole family and—Piers was staring at the ceiling, not Peace, and she was waving her arms around as if she were juggling two bowling pins and a chainsaw. —And to your childhood in Uganda and the poverty and civil war and political unrest and all the things you saw and that happen to you?
Yes, mum.

Okay, good. Well, I still feel connected to you, and to—She made an abrupt lurching sort of motion, with her arms on one side of her body and her neck craning in the opposite direction, as if trying to push someone who smelled very bad out the door. —all those other things.
Yes, mum.

But that was not reason to hire you. I never should have done that. Piers laughed with what sounded like ironic distance.

Mum?
I am afraid I am gonna hafta let yugo.
Mum?
You really cannot write, can you?
I’m trying, mum.
Or edit. This—Piers held up the latest issue. —is not very good, is it?
I will get better, I swear to you, mum.
No, I am so sorry, Peace. This is your last day.
Peace threw her head into her hands, pushing them almost all the way down to her lap. She spoke, muffledly: But what about my family back home?
Oh, do not worry. Do not worry, Peace. I still feel, you know, really connected to them.
Is that all? Peace sat up.
My prayers are with them, really. Piers leaned over and touched Peace’s arm, with a reassuring smile that she’d read about in a management textbook.

So Harvey, we liked your piece last month. On the sanitation department.
Thanks.
Do you want some water? Cuppa coffee?
No, I’m good.
Okay. Piers smiled, twisting her WhatWouldJesusDo bracelet with the index finger of her left hand.

So… Harvey Gears looked around the room, but he couldn’t find anything to provoke conversation. He had worked in Thailand for seven years, teaching ESL to elementary school children, but, soon after he got married, his wife had insisted that they leave Southeast Asia. Too many distractions, she had argued, too many young women. Harvey had grown up in rural Canada and had a BS in marketing from a community college that had been granted, through some sort of semantic alchemy, “university” status. He was a husky 220 pounds with a drooping pelican-beak beergut, but, when he looked in the mirror, through some sort of ocular prestidigitation, saw only muscle, despite the fact that his “musculature” was soft, wobbling, flabby and lacking in the type of marbled definition one typically associates with muscle. In his mind’s eye, or perhaps his eye’s mind, Harvey Gears saw the hulking yet washboard-abbled star football player he once might have been, according to his memory. Or his personal mythology. Or his liberally edited, manifestly expurgated and thoroughly incomplete anthology of distorted self images.

Piers was leaning way over toward her new potential employee. She was smiling, creepily he thought. Harvey was getting a funny feeling. So…why am I here…?

Thought you could help out. Some staff writing, editing, you know?

I’m not really an editor or writer. Well, actually, I am definitely not either one of those things.

Huh, Piers said.

So…

When can you start?

I–

–I have got a feeling about you, Harvey.

You do?

Yes. I do. Are you religion? Sorry, religious?

---

3 Yes, we know. This subordinate-phrase-with-metaphor is syntactically identical to the subordinate-phrase-with-metaphor in the preceding sentence. But on their own, each phrase is fine, good even. [Eloquent? Rhetorically opulent? Maybe.] Point is, why should one be judged inferior because of its proximity to the other? By that logic, we should loathe the second twin, detest the multiple orgasm, abhor the beastly simulacrum of the xerox copy or burned DVD!
Uh…yeah?  Sure?
Super.  Piers smiled.

Harvey?  Piers called out, her voice an absence floating down the overly-air-conditioned space of *The Date Palm*. Harvey, hearing this voice, moved through the empty office, past the immense and polychromatic ENVIRONMENT FIRST! posters, 16 of which Piers had put up that morning. They flanked the narrow corridor like violence-prone bouncers guarding the red velvet ropes in the VIP room of Piers’ misplaced eco-enthusiasm.

Harvey did not float, though.  He bounded and clanked from his nook in the open-plan workroom toward Piers’ office, following the absence of her disembodied voice to the presence of her even more highly-air-conditioned and fully walled and doored personal office.

Remember Aisha?  Piers asked.  The secretary?
Uh hu.  She’s the other person who works here, aside from Enron and me and you.  And the guys downstairs who I never see.

Exactly.  Except no, she does not work here any longer.

Harvey had heard about *The Date Palm*.  The staff dropped like flies.  They either quit or got fired.  Once a week. Peace was the…seventh editor?  Eighth?  That’s why the office was so empty.  He fully expected to get fired himself, any day now.  But it was a good gig while it lasted.  Piers’ nanny, what’shername, when she wasn’t with the baby—where was the baby when it wasn’t with what’shername?  That’s weird…it, she, Maybelle, sure wasn’t with Piers—would wash his car, fetch coffee, get lunch, and all at no charge.  It was awesome.

Well, Aisha got married a few months ago.
I did not know that.

She did, yeah.  But—Piers began to whisper, loudly—she did not bleed on the first night, and this really upset her husband, Rashid, so he kept, you know, making sex with her every night, harder and harder and rougher and more violent each time, raping her essentially after the first two or three nights, and then she did bleed.

Wow.  What happened then?
Rashid was happy then, because she bled.  That mean she was a virgin.  His mother told him to look for blood.
Huh.
Right? I know. Piers made restive eye contact.
She told you this?
Piers’ eyes grew wide, she was sitting up plank-
straight, her chin dipping down so that it wasn’t a chin
anymore, but rather a walrusy neck fold, and she nodded
shortly but quickly.
Tell me, Harvey. Do you think she expects to be paid
for the whole month? I do not know about this one…I mean,
she only worked 26 days, and the last few she was just crying,
you know. Not very productive. Piers straightened her extra-
long t-shirt or tunic, which was festooned with a graffiti-art-
ish representation of Jesus Christ, whose crown of thorns
appeared…if you leaned over and squinted real hard…to be a
coil of computer cables.
I do not know the answer to that one, Piers.
Hm.

Hello?
Is this Matthew Arlington?
Yes.
This is Piers Ang.
Hi, Piers.
Hi. I sorry to do this over the telephone, but I was
wondering if you could help us out?
Sure, what can I do? They’re finally asking me to
edit! My big break!
We need some help with the editorial department
here at The Date Palm. I thought maybe you could help.
Well…I’m pretty busy down here at the university.
I know, I know. But you wouldn’t have to come in
much. Just edit the articles from home.
I thought you had a new guy, an English-speaker?
Yes, Harvey. He is o-kay…
Not working out?
Not really… Piers laughed. Since he started with us,
the number of grammar mistakes has dropped from about nine
to about two per article. At least that is what people tell me.
Everything look okay to me.
Mm.
Senior Editor? How does that sound?
Not bad.
Terrific. We will keep Harvey as the staff writer and then fire him when I find someone, you know, who is qualified.

Why didn’t you just hire someone qualified in the first place?

We don’t pay very much.

Then start paying more. Anyway, you can’t just fire him the second you find someone else.

Sure we can. They are practically no labor laws here in the UAE.

This sounded vaguely wrong, slightly exploitative, but it was a good opportunity. Matthew accepted.

Harvey, come in here for a sec, okayyy?

Okay, Piers.

This is Matthew Arlington. He is going to be working here from now on, sort of on the editorial side. Give you more time to write.

Hi, Harvey.

Hey. What’s your position, exactly?

Senior Editor.

I thought that’s what I was?

You were Senior Editor/Staff Writer, but you cannot do two jobs, Harvey! [sotto voce] You cannot barely do one…

Huh.

This will give you more time to write. Matthew will be a big help to all of us. Piers looked from Matthew to Harvey.

Sure, but will my—

—You will be taking a small pay cut.

Oh.

Matthew and I need to talk, so…

Nice to meet you, Harvey.

Yeah, same.

Now, I thought we would do a “Ladies” theme for the next issue, Piers said.

Matthew pulled a face, as if he’d inadvertently drunk his own urine. I don’t like themes. Tacky.

Oh, but I do like them so… Anyway, this will be about what a real woman means and— You know, according
Andrew Madigan

to my faith, a woman should support her husband and let the man make the decisions.

Okay… Then why, he thought, are we going with your crappy theme idea?

A woman should be at home with the kiddies.
Then why are you here, Piers?
It’s complicated
How?
Oh, you know. It just is.
Your husband makes a lot of money, I’m sure, so…
Yeah, I know.
Then why? Matthew was confused.
You know…
I don’t.
It is what it is.
That’s a tautology.
Piers paused, as if thoughtfully. We have had a really great response from the internet. Wanna see the reader comments?

Matthew went to his “office,” which was a white desk in a white room, across from Harvey.

Hey, Harv. Why don’t you give me all the submissions we have for the upcoming months.

Sure. It’s not a lot. I put them into two piles, Yes and No.

Good.

Matthew inspected the work. He started with the Yes pile. Harvey had blue-penciled the top piece, primarily by taking poorly written sentences and making them worse. He seemed to be inserting, rather than fixing, grammar mistakes, content errors and egregious clangers.

What’d you do before coming here, Harv?

Teacher.

Mm. A fatuity of professors, he thought, and a deletion of editors.


Matthew read another one. It looked familiar. Who wrote this crap…? James Taylor Dagish. My old friend and colleague, of course. Hasn’t shown up to work sober since 1984. Got lost on his way to the classroom a few times last...
week. And this, this, this whatever it’s supposed to be. It sounds like the minutes of our last faculty meeting.

What is this, Harv? This piece by James Dagish?
He shrugged.
But it’s in the Yes pile? Matthew asked/said.
I had to put something there.

Matthew threw the article in the trash. “Next,” he called out, in the improv space of his consciousness, impatiently, like the big, goateed, scowling counter guy at a Brooklyn deli.4 Reem Mansouri. “A Few Words Bout zheikh Zayed (PBUH).”

What’s with all this Poo-bah stuff, Harv?
Hm? Oh, PBUH? Peace Be Upon Him. You have to say it after the Prophet or Allah. Or Zayed. He’s like George Washington to them.

Matthew grunted. He read on: “He born al-Ain city in—”

Harvey. Did you fact-check this piece?”
Yes.
Well, the first fact is wrong. He wasn’t born in Al Ain.

That’s what Piers said.
Asking Piers isn’t fact-checking. Why are we even publishing this woman’s… nonsense?

Harvey shrugged. She’s got some deal with Piers. The guy who gave her the money for the magazine? It’s her uncle, or husband, or…

I see. This is both cutting edge journalism and cutting edge professional ethics.
I don’t know about that, Matthew.
I was being sarcastic.
Oh.

Matthew read a few more lines.
Piers? Can you come in here, please?

---

4 Author’s Note: Quiet down, please! Shush! We can hear you all the way down the hall, in the staff room. I know, I know. Catachresis! Abusio! A metaphor and a simile canoodling in the tiny airless room of a single sentence. Bad form, we’ve all been told, like a million times. This ill-advised, overstuffed, incestuous coupling will produce nothing but deformed offspring, three-headed figures with fat tongues and googly punctuation. None the less, I can’t help myself. Mea Culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa…
A few moments later she materialized, a web-page having loaded, the floating digitized hourglass of her stilettos clack-clopping against the marble floors. What is it, Matthew? You sound upset.

This is all wrong. All these facts. We can’t publish this.

Give me a for-example, Matthew.
Zayed wasn’t born in Al Ain.
Reem said he was, and she comes from here.
Another Emirati person said it was true, also.
That’s not how you check facts. Here, let’s google it. Matthew waited in quietly-boiling anger while the page loaded. These people…, he thought. Okay, here we go. See? Sheikh Zayed was born in–

—Well, this must be wrong. Reem says he was born here, so I must go with her.
It’s not just that, Piers. Every fact is wrong.
No, they are not wrong. Piers crossed her arms [petulantly? aggressively? unconsciously?] and asked her lisp to sulk.

I haven’t even shown them to you yet.
Piers looked at something else, while Matthew tried to look her in the eye.
I quit, Matthew said. Period.
You cannot just quit because you do not agree with something.
I’m quitting because I can’t be a part of publishing lies. It’s the most basic component of journalistic integrity.
Matthew stormed off. Piers and Harvey watched in silence. Although they didn’t know it, Enron had already left the country, for good. They hadn’t found a new secretary yet, either.

Piers watched him retreat, silently, for several moments, staring at the place where his back used to be, then:
Do you think he expects to be paid for the whole month, Harvey?

I do not know.
Piers smiled, fingering her titanium cross. She thought of all the money she was saving. With a staff of only one person, the magazine would cost almost nothing to

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5 Note to A.: Heavy-handed and too-frequent religious images? We get it already. She’s pharisaical. Delete some of this.
This made her immensely happy. She did not stop to consider what this manpower-reduction meant in terms of the magazine’s quality. In her defense, Piers did not have time for thoughts such as this. She was going to go to Al Ain Mall, which was right across the street, conveniently, to buy some new clothes [a whole new wardrobe?] with all the money she was saving.

Piers asked herself:
what kind of shoes would Jesus buy—
heels or pumps?
The Curiosity Killers

The lobby looked like a nineteenth-century drawing room, though if one examined the stack of parchment-printed brochures on the tripod table to the left of the davenport it would swiftly become clear this was not a private residence. “Jonson’s Exotic Travel,” the front of the brochure proclaimed. “Services available by referral only.”

Deeper inside the building, a few quiet people toiled at daily tasks. Nothing unusual was afoot: a clerical assistant filed pieces of mail into slotted trays while her employer—the very Mister Jonson of the agency’s title—dabbled a spot of spilt tea from his shirtsleeve. The pyramidal ebony nameplate twelve inches in front of him revealed his given name to be Benjamin. Belowstairs, an older gentleman in a white laboratory coat fussed with beakers and wires and keyboards, muttering to himself about quantum theory and transistors.

All in all, a perfectly normal afternoon. That was, until young Mister Jonson sat up straighter in his chair and got a faraway look in his eye. “Shiiiiit,” he drawled. “Oh, holy shit, Kris, we got trouble.”

The assistant blinked rapidly. “We do, Ben?”

“It’s Tuesday afternoon,” Ben informed her. “Look at the appointment book.”

Kris’ heart-shaped face grew ashen. “Holy shit.” Her bob of shiny black hair fluttered as she turned to look at the wall clock. “It’s way past time.”

Two hearts began beating so loud that Ben and Kris could hear each other’s quite well. The unthinkable had happened: Brimley Wheaton had failed to appear for his retrieval.

For the next twenty-four hours, there was a flurry of panic and yelling and sleeplessness. No one went home. No one ate. It was all full of stress and bloodshot eyes and half-finished coffee cups. Telephone retrievers were lifted and put down without numbers being dialed. There was no precedent for this, nothing in the company manual. No client had ever gone missing before.

“You’ve got to get him back,” the man in the white lab coat informed Ben. “Son, there’s nothing else for it.”

Ben was just beginning to make the preparations for installing himself in the machine when a whooshing sound came from the direction of his office.
At first, it was a great relief to Ben when his client suddenly appeared in a puff of soot and cinder. What surprised the agency’s director were the man’s location (the top of Ben’s desk) and his state of dress (something vaguely resembling either a very short monk’s robe or a very long potato sack). Wheaton’s feet were bare and dirty, and Ben cringed at the thought of twelfth-century detritus being smeared across his fresh ink blotter.

“Well, that’s a weight off!” Ben greeted his client. His bushy eyebrows were drawn down low over his eyes and belied Ben’s inner annoyance. He strode to the older man and held his hand out to him. “We’d given you up for dead.”

Wheaton’s eyes darted, rabbit-scared, around the room. “Where am I?” His gaze fell on Ben. “Oh, Mister Jonson! Thank goodness.” He took Ben’s hand and let himself be helped down from the desk. Once on the floor, Wheaton veritably bounced from spot to spot, his gait springy despite his size. He beamed at the younger man. “My, but that was a heart-stopping turn.”

Ben looked at his client somewhat sadly. “You know in a bit I’ll have to lock the memory away,” he reminded him. “We can discuss the events at length, and we’ll replace it--”

“I recall the sales pitch,” Wheaton interrupted. “I’ll think I had a restful spa weekend or some such.” He nodded. “I know, but blimey, the things I saw.” He smirked and elbowed Ben in the ribs. “The ladies! I know I wasn’t there for the ladies, but what a lovely surprise.”

Ben’s face flushed briefly. At a loss for words, he gestured to the outer room. “Let’s have a chat, then.”

After a short rest, Wheaton was much more appropriately dressed in a loose white dress shirt and mock equestrian breeches. He lounged by the enormous fieldstone hearth for his debriefing. The rest of the staff of Jonson’s Exotic Travel was there as well: Doctor Vere had joined young proprietor on the settee opposite, cups of tea thrust into their waiting hands by their assistant. After serving, Kris proceeded to splay her lithe form out on the rug, half-reclined into something resembling a modified supta badha konasana. Her hair shone blue-black in the firelight. “So did you find out whether the kids were aliens or not?” she asked.

Vere allowed his foot to swing lightly into her arm. “Ow! What! I was just asking what we were all thinking.”
“Young lady, that was impertinent,” Vere growled. “Miss Marlowe doesn’t care about being impertinent, Eddy,” Ben pointed out to his colleague. “Mister Wheaton, please. In your own time.”

“Well!” Wheaton sat up straighter, squaring his shoulders and putting his teacup down. “As you know, I grew up near Woolpit. I lived with the legends of the green children my whole life, and when I came into my inheritance, I wanted nothing more than to find out the definitive answer, once and for all.”

“But you went out on the town with a bunch of old-timey chicks instead?” Kris asked. She deftly slid out of Vere’s reach when it looked as if she would be kicked again. “I swear, man, you’re gonna lose a limb,” she warned.

Wheaton went on, ignoring the doctor and secretary glaring at one another. “As I learned through referral, your agency provides a unique service, so I decided to avail you of it.” He grinned. “And here I am, back safely to the twenty-second century, inquisitiveness fully sated.” He took up his tea again and took a long sip. “You’re welcome to do your bit erasing this knowledge, as I know is your process.” He sighed, gazing off at the ceiling as if examining constellations. “For it’s not the end result, you know, so much as the hunt for the knowing.” Another sip. “And now I do, much to my satisfaction.”

Three pairs of eyes blinked at him in amazement. Ben cleared his throat. “Ah, it’s customary before we begin the process to at least, well—”

“Tell us,” Kris interrupted. “All the clients, they get mindwiped so it doesn’t get out into the world, all the secrets, conspiracy theories, cryptids, cults…but we get to know.”

Vere tapped the side of his head. “Our minds are steel vaults. We’re sworn to utmost secrecy.”

“Or else,” Kris added.

Wheaton’s smile faded. “Or else?”

Kris drew a hand across her throat and made a gruesome gurgling sound. “It’s curtains,” she announced in mock Hobokenese, causing the word to come out a squeaky “koytons.”

Ben looked pained. “That’s an exaggeration.”

“Is it?” Wheaton asked. “Steel vaults,” Vere repeated. “Rest assured we don’t divulge anything.” He leaned back in his chair. “Personally, I
only care about the physics of time travel, so whatever unsolved mystery you unraveled is of no consequence to me.”

“Oh, please,” Kris shot back. “You were all up in that lady’s business, the one who came back from Roano—”

“Kris!” Ben barked. He immediately turned crimson; yelling was clearly not usual for the young man.

“Rowin’ a boat,” Kris amended feebly. She gave the client a nervous smile.

“Regardless,” Wheaton said, “it’s not a matter of trust. It just seems a bit unfair, you getting to keep the memory while I don’t. I mean, do I have to tell you?”

“Of course not, sir,” Ben immediately assured him. He rose. “If you’re ready, then, we’ll just get on with the erasure.”

Wheaton put his teacup down and got to his feet. He sighed and got a faraway look in his eyes. “The legend said the green children came out of the wood and startled the village with their strange appearance, odd manner of speech, and gifts of precognition. Over time, theories changed from angels to aliens to visitors from another dimension.” There was a sudden change in his movements, a shifting and turning and then a terrible clicking accompanied by a flash of metal.

Wheaton trained the gun on all three of them in turn. “I’m going to leave here with everything intact,” he informed the staff. His voice was even and his face relaxed, but there was a hint of hardness in his eyes. “And none of you will stop me.”

It was true. None of them did stop him as the man sprinted out, still in full possession of the key to a piece of unresolved—if unremarkable—history.

Probably unremarkable, Ben thought. Hopefully. Yes, most likely totally insignificant. Still...

“That gun...did anybody else think that looked a little weird?” Kris whimpered after Wheaton had gone.

“Kind of,” Ben agreed.

“I search everyone’s belongings upon check-in and—out,” Vere confirmed. “I can’t imagine where he was hiding it.”

Kris shuddered. “The green children gave it to him.” “From their home planet?” Ben asked. “Kris, that’s just a legend. Research indicates those children were Flemish, not Martian. The citizens of Woolpit didn’t recognize their features or dialect so the kids only seemed alien.”
“That was no Colt forty-five is all I’m sayin’,” Kris rejoined. “You want to put words in my mouth and say I’m calling it an alien ray gun, I’m cool with that.” She held her hands up and gave her boss a little shrug. “So what we got for this afternoon, huh?”

Ben wandered to the window, lifted the curtain, and gazed out. Somewhere, a man roamed the city streets with mildly dangerous knowledge. “An FBI consultant wants to know what happened to D.B. Cooper,” he murmured, sounding distracted.

“Do you think that’s for the best, Benjamin?” Vere asked.

Ben let his hand drift off the lace edge of the curtain. “Probably not, Eddy.” He gave the doctor a weak smile. “Probably not.”

An hour later, after the FBI consultant had been given her instructional guidebook and gotten tucked away in the training room, Ben took a winding metal staircase down to the sub-basement that Vere used as his lab. “Eddy, you got a fix on him yet?” he called.

Vere had a sandwich shoved between two rows of crooked yellow teeth. He looked up from under veils of wrinkled eyelids and nodded to Ben. With a sideways nod, the doctor gestured to one of his computer stations, an ancient cobbling-together of huge, monochrome CRT monitors connected to sleek, steel-encased servers. The entire mess was controlled by the disembodied keyboards of pre-war manual typewriters and mid-century adding machines jury-rigged with coiled landline telephone wires.

Vere yanked the sandwich from his mouth. “He thought he was being clever, going down to the sewers,” he mumbled around his unswallowed food. “Poor lad didn’t know our LoJacks are a bit more sophisticated than most.”

Ben cringed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “I take it you’ve already done it without checking with me, called in for a removal?” His voice quavered on the last word.

Vere finished chewing his bit of sandwich and shuffled forward. “Boy, you’ve got no head for this part of the business,” he said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s just a stupid folk tale,” Ben said. “We can’t let a guy go who just wants to keep that memory? He just wanted to know, Eddy! Guy’s a historian. I can relate. Why else do
you think I like hearing their stories when they come back? I like knowing. I get why he did this.”

Vere bowed his head. “It’s not just the green children he knows about. It’s you and me and Miss Marlowe, our work here, our location, everything.” He swept a hand around the room. “He’s been in the lab, Benjamin. I can’t have this getting out. The consequences of unregulated use of time travel? Do you understand how dangerous that is?”

A nod. The signing of a form with a sweaty, nervous hand. And then Ben walked back upstairs with a much heavier heart.

Kris was at his office door waiting for him. “Agent Lessup is done with her reading,” she told Ben. “You want me to set her up in the conference room?” When he didn’t immediately respond, Kris moved closer to him. “Dude, you’re looking a little paler than usual.”

“Tell me about the gun again, Kris,” Ben intoned flatly. His eyes stayed averted from hers. “I need to believe it wasn’t normal technology. Tell me it was an alien gun, a gun from another planet, another time...anything. Please.” He finally looked at her, moisture stinging in the corner of one eye. “Tell me we’re doing the right thing.”

Kris gasped. “Wow...I thought you guys were always kidding about that stuff.” She lowered her voice, leaning in slightly. “You weren’t going to let him go?”

Ben flopped down in his chair. He looked at his desk and could still see Wheaton’s footprint on the blotter. He didn’t answer, but instead just stared at the dusty outline.
Father Figure: Found Poetry Perspectives

I. Miscegenation


A separation occurred.

He returned to Africa
to fulfill his promise—
a book called *Origins*,
Prometheus and the fire.

Race—the essence
of the morality tale,
my father’s life.
At a local bar, a white man
“shouldn’t have to drink
next to a nigger.”

My father stood up,
smiled,
the white man tried to purchase
my father’s forgiveness.

Why didn’t my father return?
Miscegenation—the folly of bigotry,
the universal rights of man,
the (broken) promise of the American dream.

II. The Departure


He gingerly placed the needle
on the groove:
A tinny guitar lick, sharp horns, the thump
of drums, and voices,
clean, joyful, urging us on.

“Come,” my father said, “you will learn from the master.”

Slender body swaying, lush sound
rising, arms casting an invisible
net, head back, eyes closed,
then he peeked at me,
solemn face spread into a silly grin.
My first tentative steps follow my father.

He lets out a shout, 
bright and high, 
a shout that cries 
for laughter, that leaves 
much behind.

And I hear him still.

III. The Return

I dreamed I was traveling 
by bus, with friends whose names 
I’ve forgotten, men and women 
with different journeys to make. 
We rolled across deep fields of grass, 
hills that bucked against orange sky. 
The bus came to a halt, I got off, sat on the curb.

I stood before a cell, opened the padlock. 
My father stood before me, thin, hairless, 
black eyes luminous against an ashen face. 
“Look at you,” he said. “so tall, so thin, gray hairs even.” 
I saw that it was true. 
I began to weep.

“I always wanted to tell you how much I love you.”

An implacable sadness 
spread across his face. 
I whispered that we might leave 
together. 
He shook his head. 
I awoke still weeping—

his jailor, 
his judge, 
his son.
As always, tomorrow was going to be a busy day, Kyla Dennison VIII thought. She smiled as she considered her agenda. She was substituting for Ms. Stephanie Johnson V’s kindergarten class in the morning, assisting in the defense of an accused rapist-murderer with a rap sheet the length of her arm in the afternoon, shopping for a fashion designer and hanging drywall in the tenements project in the evening, and performing as the lead actor in an off-Broadway play at night. Before retiring tomorrow, she also had the upstairs rooms of the Marlingtons’ mansion to clean, and, bless them, but they were a messy family of fifteen.

She should retire early tonight, to charge her batteries for the next day, she thought, smiling, as she removed the curlers from her hair, brushing the long strawberry blonde strands into big, bouncy curls. Maybe she’d leave her stereophonic system on, to play a Brahms’s lullaby or a symphony of the sounds of nature: birdsong, waterfalls, and chimes tinkling in the breeze. The sounds of nature were soothing to the soul, she thought, grinning at her reflection. In the mirror, a beautiful young woman grinned back at her.

There was nothing much on television. The news was the same old thing: political shenanigans, corporate bankruptcies, raped runaways, drug rings, prostitution, product recalls, murders, robberies, teachers’ sexual assaults upon underage students, protest marches, wars in half a dozen countries, bank closures, fraud, an update to the schedule for public executions, hurricanes and tornadoes, forest fires and floods, a failed assassination attempt upon a foreign head of state, an increase in hate crimes, mounting racial tensions in the Western Continental Sector.

Kyla continued to scan the channels for a few minutes more, but nothing held her interest for longer than a few seconds. Technology was making everyone, herself included, a victim of attention-deficit disorder. She switched off the set, smiling at her image in the now-black, wall-size television screen. We’ve all become hyperactivity disorder victims, too, she added.

For many, life had become too hectic, too confusing, and too frightening, of late. Kyla supposed she could understand people’s feelings; technology had shrunk the planet, sped up time, and given everyone a hundred artificial
abilities, including flight—well, in aircraft or with the aid of back-mounted jetpacks—and new technological breakthroughs and scientific marvels were occurring daily, even hourly, further changing the environment and the quality of life for the haves, at least, if not always as rapidly as for the have-nots.

Kyla herself was a testament to such progress. Although she was but a few years old, she was already nearly obsolete. It wouldn’t be much longer, she thought, smiling to herself, before she’d be recalled so her parts, both human and mechanical, could be recycled and she could debut as Kyla Dennison IX. The only thing that never changes is change, she thought, smiling.

Until then, though, she always had a lot on her plate each day, metaphorically speaking. (Maybe, she thought, with a smile, the next generation of Kylas would be able to “think” in more sophisticated terms than clichés.) She liked the assortment and diversity of her daily chores. Variety was the spice of life, she’d found. One day, she might be a police officer, a baker, an automotive technician, a dental hygienist (or even a dentist), a soldier, and a beautician; the next day, she might perform the tasks of a politician’s bodyguard, a bank teller, a security guard, a vendor, a landscaper, and a florist.

Some thought that society was going to hell in a handbasket, if she were to believe the news programs and the scuttlebutt she overheard at office water coolers or in various employees’ lounges. Despite technological progress and scientific achievement, there was much that was wrong or bad or unacceptable about the world, she supposed, smiling, but there was much that was right or good or acceptable about it, too, especially if one counted one’s blessings, lived and let live, went along to get along, did unto others as one would have others do unto oneself, and didn’t rock the boat. It was all a matter of adapting to one’s environment, she thought, smiling, and of doing as one was told. It was all very simple, really, all very easy. Humans complicated things unnecessarily, with their egoistic posturing, their love of power, their insensitivity and greed and lust and envy and--

Something inside her head chimed insistently, reminding her that it was time for bed, and she inserted the cable to the computer that contained tomorrow’s programmed instructions, lessons, action and reaction codes, manual skills bank, personality profiles, and other data into the plug behind
her left “ear,” stretched out upon her bed, and pressed the Sleep button that also served as the nipple of her left breast. Her body immediately slackened, her head lolling upon the foam pillow, her limbs falling loosely to her sides, and what passed as dreams among the microchips and the miniaturized circuitry of her simulated autonomous nervous system flickered to life, or half-life, behind her twitching eyelids as her visual sensors entered the rapid eye-movement sequence of her simulated sleep.

Kyla Dennison VIII saw herself, in parts, moving down a mile-long conveyor belt, on either side of which assembly machines stamped and pressed and screwed and implanted and stitched and suctioned and clamped and drilled and bolted her together, and, as she neared the end of the belt, where she would receive her organic-mechanical brain, beginning life anew, reborn, as it were, as the new and improved Kyla Dennison IX, she smiled, thinking, It’s a wonderful life!
Doomsday Locker

At the overpass, like a mother robin
atop her nest, our watcher

burrows into the chain fence.
Several hybrids might synchronize a lane-

change, but amidst the present extinctions,
he laughs at the silence

these electric cars make flocking North.
*Bizarro* migration, he calls it,

to a doomsday locker
carved out of Norwegian mountains.

By our worst predictions, floods will
scrape skies, continents will cloak themselves

in deserts. Bees will die. But,
scientists will save 6,000 distinct seeds

for a post-apocalypse blossoming
of the juiciest German Johnsons.

He speed-walks over the road to read
a bumper sticker before it shrinks

out of sight: “Arms are for hugging.”
*If only*, he thinks, seeing us as possums

grazing in garbage, who’d collapse
at the applause of such far-off thunder.
Michael Zinkowski

After Watching My Dog Eat a Bunny

Bones soft in early spring—
she swallows the bunny whole

but not without showing me
its slack legs.

Add it to the list (the only thing of mine
that grows) of embryonic things:

raw kernels of popcorn,
clay molded to her molars,

a bag of skittles just
to deny me a rainbow, and Yes,

an entire container of cocoa,
bittersweet on her small tongue.

The next day, sad-faced, she reflects
on how her heart had raced to the hospital

but didn’t pop or take new shape.
What if, she thought, instead

of devouring my 35 mm film
so tightly rolled, she merely nibbled

each end, fraying what violet horizons
and white sand beaches I’d captured?

Would I be quicker to develop
the others? And what else

could she eat, stuck
in the limbo of becoming?

Would she eat a plane
before taking off

or a first date with real laughter?
What about the new moon?
A glob of paint, her beard
blood red? To prove a point,

would she eat me? To whom
would she present my limp body?
That Thing She Did

Coming home from school
on winter afternoons
I found her so often

sitting by the window
her eyes fixed on a world
not outside

her fingers idled
by that something that stirred
the folds of her apron

her elbows held up
by the brown chair’s curved
arms, a gift from in-laws –

she just sat there with shadows
growing in her defiant curls
the way she must have liked it

I asked her why

why sit in the dark
what needed to be seen
she said she could see

to be like her
I trained my eyes on her silence
trying in vain to cadge a smile
Bushes kneel by the roadside
branches heavy with white blossoms and I ask
“Jasmine?” and you take the next exit
to let me pick my first syringa blossoms.
Their honeyed scent slides from nostrils to tongue
so thick I feel like Baudelaire’s child
drunk on everything.
I feel my pores drunk on sun rays
the road getting drunk on devil’s dust
the sky drunk on its own blues
lichen drunk on the rocks.
And yes, you say time to go
break off a small branch to take with me
and I bury myself in this sweet death suffused
with fragrance and light brilliant
even if extinguished.
Susan Nyikos

Buzz Cut

Between us familiar strands pass. Silently, they slice the air

Unlatch the umbilical cord a many-thousandth time.

On the wall mother and son in the endless home of the same mirror.

On the bathroom floor dark double helix curls/halts into what we are:

Our own interruptions.
wordriver Literary Review is proud to feature the work of our Founding Editor, Beth McDonald, in this volume. Without her vision and collaboration, wordriver might still be a great idea but not an ink and paper reality. We hope you enjoy her work!

-The Editors
I want to fold
this poem
into the soft earth
gently
seeding dark loam imagination
with my desire for words
that will break ground
rise green
seeking sunlight
sustenance, nurture.
I want this poem to be
a soul in the act of telling
all its holy secrets; but some years
the poetry is sparse
spare
stripped of desire
or even inexorable need --
shedding dreams of sun
it emerges
sharp as the serpent’s tooth
an unintended harvest
harrowed for war
thorn-armored, ready for battle.
Dreaming My Ancestors

Night after night the dream comes.

In darkness, sound, a stone
falls, or is thrown --
    it makes no difference. The only sure thing
is that it hits the water. Its ripples travel

for generations, circles of desire
    almost invisible to the naked eye,
widening, widening,
    with the desperate knowledge
they have nowhere left to go, then seemingly

returning upon themselves, an optical illusion
    of visual echoes in narcissistic gloom. My ancestors
surround the lake where we have lived forever.
    The reflection on its surface is my daughter’s,
my mother’s, my mother’s mother’s mother’s,

my own. I gave one daughter my name
    and she ran away with it. I have no tongue now
even for simple words beyond fact of birth
    and circumstantial pain which comprise the sins
of the mother in all of us. In this place, ghosts alone

must eulogize the point of suffering, like a Brueghel
    painting on a museum wall. I dream the face
of a new child born of black water,
    grandchild I will never know,
and pray for a room her ghost cannot enter.
I do not walk the streets that Borges did, conjuring nighttime Argentina in his near blindness, seeking to etch its life in the beauty of lasting words; nor do I haunt these streets of moonlit Las Vegas, seeking the same fulfillment of that dream. My streets are my own, converging from many points, but the moon is always the same. For him, for me. This city is lost in darkness despite its neon glow; its streets and houses, the mountains that surround have no being until sunrise, yet here the moon of my last judgment rises, the moon of my end of days. Its light creeps in the window, draws me out to the walled patio – bright as day, yet secret from the world -- where my mind’s eye plucks the reflected places of youth from a heart’s memory. Moon of my regret shines full and ripe, piercing as nails palmed in agony. Moon of long shadows, moving, yet unmoved, and I unmoving, sleepless as I am under this Nevada sky, no longer wandering -- at home and yet far from it. Poem of my loneliness, moon that breaks my heart, where is my forgiveness?
The Unstrung Bow

Driving north beside inland waters
a third coast lake stretching the horizon
I think of Walcott’s Caribbean schooner
and Odysseus’ one-master
sailing for home
harps of canvas plucked by Aeolian winds
scent of landfall urging them on.

The singular eye that overlooked my youth
blind now with age, memory gone with sight
names me nobody,
errant daughter, easy to forget
the face that’s turned away. I was
her arrow set to conquer worlds;
she now, the unstrung bow
that never will direct my flight again.

Scylla’s arms, Charybdis’ churning waters
were vanquished long ago; yet the siren’s song
falls again on my unstopped ears.
Memories gather, heart thrums
like the sound of Odysseus’ sails
beating toward Ithaca, searching out a tune
that time and place and circumstance have altered.

No sailor I, no island here, no intoxicating trace
of grapes or sea or salt air;
Michigan’s loam-sweet smell
signals no safe harbor.
As I cross the line between away
and this remembered home
the pine-sharp air leaves a sour taste instead
reminds me I am a stranger in this familiar land
unstrung myself by all my years of wandering.
Emma Hudson

Another world, another century, 
from the fertile valley of the Mohawk, my great-grandmother 
spills into time. I follow her life 
in rumors—all I have—of a woman whose birth 
made her *persona non grata* 
to those later generations whose wish it was 
to blot the ink of Indian blood 
from the loose pages of our family tree.

Only I, expert builder of shells, 
of carapaces, of cocoons to cushion 
lack of acceptance and bastard names 
with my own fabulous blasphemy of immaculate conception, 
only I want to remember. One photograph is all, 
forgotten, shoved to the bottom of an old cardboard box. 
It shows her stiff, severe, standing at her husband’s elbow 
while he sits, cradling my grandfather.

In the mirror, I see her face, 
long nose, straight hair drawn at the nape 
into old-fashioned bun. Her dark eyes mock my blue. 
What randomness of time or nature made me 
beneficiary to her inheritance? Here beside Lake Michigan 
I am thankful for this sudden treasure, 
this revelation, this river of blood, flowing 
from her to me, blood river slipping between cliffs 
of German, through crevices of Irish, Scot, 
French, DNA from New York across Canada 
to this present lake land delta.

Mother of those who journeyed so far 
to bring me here, the dream of your blood 
is my refuge now. The wind whispers your name 
in my ear, gratifies my wings into unfurling.
Notes on the Staff

Rebecca Colbert (Managing Editor) has an MA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Sciences) from the University of North Texas. She is currently employed as an Acquisitions Librarian with the Las Vegas Clark County Library District and teaches World Literature and Mythology in the Department of English at UNLV. (Nevada).

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. (Nevada).

Justin Burnside (Fiction Editor) holds an MFA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His work has appeared in Alice Blue Review, Interim Literary Journal, and Danse Macabre.

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. (Nevada).

Paul Sacksteder (Poetry Editor) is from Louisville, Kentucky. For the last seven years, he’s lived in Las Vegas while teaching and earning his MFA at UNLV. His poems have appeared in Absent Mag, Hawaii Review, Sun’s Skeleton, as well as others.

Molly O’Donnell (Layout and Cover Design Editor) is a Ph.D. candidate and instructor in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is an academic editor for the Pater Newsletter, Victoriographies, and long-time former editor at INFORMS. Former associate faculty at the College of Notre Dame, she also continues to freelance as an A&E journalist.
Notes on Readers

Laura Breitenbeck received an MFA in fiction from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is a part-time writing instructor and tutor at Auburn University.

Michelle Hansen is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She specializes in American Gothic/Horror Fiction and enjoys teaching undergraduate composition and literature courses at UNLV.

Susan Nyikos, born and educated in Hungary, teaches literature and writing at Utah State University surrounded by the western fringes of the magnificent Rocky Mountains. Her poems have appeared in wordriver, Loose Leaves (UK), and in the annual chapbooks of her local poetry group, Poetry@3. Also, she has been judging poetry for the League of Utah Writers, wordriver, and the USU creative writing contest and publication, Scribendi.

Lollie Ragana wrote, directed and produced television for thirteen years and is an accomplished playwright and award-winning stage director: Her publishing credits include A Woman’s Europe, France Today, the Los Angeles Times, the Santa Monica Outlook, LA West, Trojan Family, Mobius: A Journal for Social Change, and Myths of the World, an audio book. She teaches English at California State University, Los Angeles, writing at UCLA Extension (The Writer’s Program and the Landscape Archaeology Program), and mythology at Antioch University.

Adam Strauss received his MFA in poetry at UNLV. He has a full-length collection, For Days, out with BlazeVox Press, and a chapbook of his, Perhaps A Girl Elsewhere, was published by Birds of Lace Press.

Matt Swetnam holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He lives in Seattle.

Monica Zarazua, born in Michigan, recently completed a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and has been published in The Collagist, The Blotter, and Asia Literary Review. She currently resides in Oakland, California.
Notes on Contributors

John Baker lives in southern New Hampshire and teaches English as an adjunct at Saint Anselm College. He has published poems with a small number of journals including The Piedmont Literary Review and Bitterroot.

Bill Bozzone currently teaches as an adjunct in the English Department at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT. His last three publications (under the pen name Z.Z. Boone) have appeared or are scheduled in these print magazines: The Chaffey Review, Weave Magazine, and The Lifted Brow.

Justin Burnside lives in Las Vegas where he eagerly anticipates the upcoming birth of his daughter. His stories and poems have appeared in Alice Blue Review, Interim Literary Journal, and Danse Macabre.

Valerie Burnside lives in Tucson, Arizona, where she spends her days working in a bookstore and documenting the beautiful Sonoran desert. Her work has been exhibited at the University of Michigan, Pima Community College, and Arts for All, Inc.

Tina V. Cabrera earned her MFA in Creative Writing from San Diego State University in 2009. She is currently teaching English and Composition as an adjunct instructor at Southwestern College and City College. Her work has appeared in the San Diego Poetry Annual, The Latent Print, and Fearsome Fascinations, Outrider Press/TallGrass Writers Guild 2009.

Kristin Conard’s professional writing career began in high school when she published a weekly op-ed piece in The Salina Journal. She earned my MA in creative and critical writing in England and works as an adjunct instructor of English at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, CA. Her recent publications were travel pieces for Matador Network, Travel+Leisure, and Draft magazine.

Meredith Devney received her MFA from Emerson College in 2006. She is currently a full time high school English teacher and adjuncts at Marshall University. Her work has
been previously published or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry, Et Cetera, Front Range Review*, among others.

**Dr. Heather Duerre Humann** teaches a variety of writing, literature, and special topics courses in the English Department at the University of Alabama. Her articles, fiction, and book reviews have been published in *African American Review, Black Warrior Review, Chelsea, Indiana Review, Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora, Journal of the Institute of Justice and International Studies, South Atlantic Review, storySouth*, and elsewhere. She has book chapters in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* and *Richard Wright’s Native Son*.

**Richard Foss** is an adjunct professor at Lewis University in Romeoville Illinois. He received his Ph.D. from Western Michigan University in 2007, and his MFA from the University of Maryland in 1999 and has been teaching—college writing, creative writing, film, literature—for about 15 years. He has had about a dozen poems published in various journals such as *Cimmaron Review, Atlanta Review, Quirk, Willow Review* and others.

**Starr Goode** is a poet and a writer and teaches literature at Santa Monica College. Winner of The David L. Kubal Memorial Essay Prize, she is also a recipient of The Henri Coulette Memorial Poetry Award from The Academy of American Poets. As a poet, her work has appeared in numerous publications, most recently in *Expanding Circles: Women, Art & Community* and *Sage Woman*. She has been profiled for her work as a cultural commentator in the *LA Weekly*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

**John Hill** has taught at universities in the UK, China, Macedonia and Canada. For the last four years he has been a sessional instructor at Vancouver Island University, in the English Department, and at University Canada West, in Communications Studies. He has also worked as a journalist, writing for *Jane’s Intelligence Review* from 2001 to 2006.
Sierra Jones-Yu lives in Chicago, Illinois with her two wonderful sons. A former pharmacist, she now manages a candy shop.

Kevin P. Keating’s essays and fiction have appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Brink, The Externalist, The Stickman Review, Mad Hatter’s Review, Underground Voices, Smokebox, Fringe, Perigee, Megaera, Plum Ruby Review, Fiction Warehouse, Fifth Street Review, Juked, The Oklahoma Review, Slow Trains, Numb Magazine, Exquisite Corpse, Thunder Sandwich*, and many others. His short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Story South’s Million Writers Award, and the Ben Hoffer/Best New Writing Award. He teaches English part-time at Baldwin-Wallace College in Cleveland, Ohio.

Justin E. Kidd (Rice University, B.A. 1963, University of Virginia, M.A. 1965, Ph.D. 1973) previously taught English at Auburn University, at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, and in on-site classes for Nova University. Currently adjunct at University of Nevada Las Vegas, his previous publications are bylined pieces in the Bryan, Texas Daily Eagle morgue for 1961, and the book and lyrics for Rice University’s Senior Follies of 1962.

Ryan D. Leack is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Faces in the Mirror* (2008) and *Remember the Planes* (2010). He is a graduate student at Cal Poly Pomona where he teaches rhetoric, composition, and literature, and he has published in journals such as *Pif, Contemporary World Literature, RipRap, The Cave*, and *Pacific Poetry Review*, as well as in *Pomona Valley Review*, which he now edits. He lives a quiet life with his wife in Pomona seeking some kind of Thoreauvian tranquility and harmony with words.

Lily Iona MacKenzie lives in the San Francisco Bay Area where she teaches writing part-time at the University of San Francisco, Department of Rhetoric and Language. Her work has been published in numerous Canadian and American venues, including *Malahat Review, Tampa Review, Poet's Podium, Marin Review, Marin Poetry Anthology, Northern Contours, Heartlands, Prairie Journal, The Denver Post*, and
The Vancouver Province and many others. Her poetry collection ALL THIS was published in October 2011.

Andrew Madigan has lived in the UAE since 2000. He has taught writing and other subjects at Zayed University and is currently the Director of the Writing Program at UAEU. His fiction, poetry and reviews have appeared in The North American Review, The Believer, wordriver, Bloomsbury Review, The Cortland Review, Island, American Book Review and other periodicals.

Marylouise Markle is an instructor with the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. She teaches two online courses: “Environmental Humanities” and “Humanistic Values in a Technological Society.” She now resides in State College, PA, where the hideous weather toggles between tundra and rain-forest. She has published essays locally in State College and in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Micheline Mayor teaches Creative Writing and Composition at Mount Royal University in Calgary. Canada. Most recently, she has been published by Descant, The Literary Review of Canada, and Rubicon Press. Mayor has a Ph.D. from Newcastle University in English specializing in Creative writing and twentieth-century Canadian literature.

Beth E. McDonald has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a Ph.D. 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.

Judith Nichols was born in Boone County, Missouri, grew up around the mid-west, and attended Earlham College and Pennsylvania State University for college and graduate school. She has taught writing at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York for twenty years now. Her essays have appeared in
inside *Higher Education, Sagetrieb,* and a Swall Press Anthology called *Women on the Verge.*

**Gary Pullman**, a graduate of Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, is a part-time instructor in the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he teaches English Composition. He also teaches a variety of English courses as an adjunct instructor at the College of Southern Nevada. He has published four young adult novels, and he writes *Chillers and Thrillers: A Blog on the Theory and Practice of Writing Horror Fiction.*

**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.*

**Matt Swetnam** lives in Seattle. His stories and essays have appeared in *DIAGRAM, The Portland Review,* and *The Bygone Bureau.*

**K.W. Taylor** teaches College English at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, where and serves as a Lecturer primarily in composition and literature. Taylor’s short story “Sparkling Teeth and Sacrifices” recently appeared in the collection *Once Bitten, Never Die* (Wicked East Press), and first novella, *We Shadows Have Offended,* was published last fall by Etopia Press.

**Tara Taylor** most recently taught poetry writing in the English Department at North Carolina State University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore, Nimrod, The Spoon River Poetry Review, The Grove Review, Inkwell Journal,* and *Merge Poetry.* She received her MFA in poetry from North Carolina State University where she was awarded Honorable Mention for the 2011 Academy of American Poets Prize, semi-finalist for the 2011 NCSU Poetry Contest and in 2010 was awarded the Brenda Smart Poetry Prize. She is the
recipient of a John LaHey Award in Writing as well as a Newhouse Writing Award from Le Moyne College. She was born in Syracuse, New York.

**Allison S. Walker** is a full-time English instructor at High Point University. A graduate of the University of Alaska Anchorage, she received her M.F. A. in Creative Writing and Literary Arts and gave birth to her daughter, Ada Cassidy, during the insanely dark Alaskan winter of 2004. Her poems have appeared in *Cold Mountain Review*, *Convergence Review*, and *Two Review*. She currently teaches rhetoric and composition and is at work on a collection of “Bad Mommy” poems.

**Michael Zinkowski** earned an MFA in Poetry from UNC Greensboro. In 2010, the Academy of American Poets awarded his poem “Star Gazer at 102,800 Feet” the Noel Callow Poetry Award. Michael’s published in *The Greensboro Review*, *Mason’s Road*, and *Blood Lotus*. He currently teaches English in Greensboro, practices yoga, eats vegan, listens to black metal, and misses snow.
Submission Guidelines

*wordriver* is a literary journal dedicated to the poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction of adjunct, part-time and full-time instructors teaching under a semester or yearly contract in our universities, colleges, and community colleges worldwide. Graduate student teachers who have used up their teaching assistant time and are teaching with adjunct contracts for the remainder of their graduate program are also eligible.

We’re looking for work that demonstrates the creativity and craft of adjunct/part-time instructors in English and other disciplines. We reserve first publication rights and onetime anthology publication rights for all work published. We do not accept simultaneous submissions.

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**Guidelines**

See [http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu](http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu) for the most current information on submissions.

All submissions must be sent by e-mail as Word.docs. MS Word 2003 or earlier (no Vista or .pdf files PLEASE.) Times Roman typeface is preferable.

Poetry: Maximum 5 poems (60 lines or less each poem). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one e-mail. Each poem must be formatted to fit within 5 1/2 inch margins in 10 point, Times New Roman. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address in the body of your e-mail, 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 what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all poetry submissions to the poetry editor at wordriver@unlv.edu. (The subject line of your submission e-mail should read: wordriverPoetrySub.)
Short Fiction: Maximum 2 submissions (10 typed, double-spaced pages each). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one e-mail. Include your name, address, phone number, and e-mail address in the body of your e-mail, 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 what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all fiction submissions to the fiction editor at wordriver@unlv.edu. (The subject line of your submission e-mail should read: wordriverFictionSub.)

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 e-mail. Include your name, address, phone number, and e-mail address in the body of your e-mail, 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 what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all nonfiction submissions to the nonfiction editor at wordriver@unlv.edu. (The subject line of your submission e-mail should read: wordriverNonfictionSub.)
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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 that 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 $10 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 e-mail wordriver@unlv.edu for an entry blank or visit http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu.
List of Contributors

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