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Table of Contents

Hailey Harris - Cover/ “Tu eres el luz de mi vida” .................................................. 1
Josh Anthony’s cover letter ................................................................. 5
Son Myong Park, “Harmony” (graphic) .................................................. 6
John Sibley Williams, “Fathersong” .................................................... 8
Katherine A. Vondy, “High-Tech Coffeemaker, Green Desert Canvas” .......... 10
Melanie J. Cordova, “The Mortal” ...................................................... 18
Lou Gaglia, “All Mapped Out” ........................................................... 30
John Sibley Williams, “Fathersong” .................................................... 8
Katherine A. Vondy, “High-Tech Coffeemaker, Green Desert Canvas” .......... 10
Melanie J. Cordova, “The Mortal” ...................................................... 18
Lou Gaglia, “All Mapped Out” ........................................................... 30
Alex Myers, “Arm’s Length” ............................................................. 41
Hailey Harris, “Alluring Display” (graphic) ......................................... 53
Paul Stenis, “Darknuts” ................................................................. 54
Nels Hanson, “Night and Morning” .................................................. 73
Ying Cui, “Traitor and Patriot” .......................................................... 77
Frank Scozzari, “iWarriors” ............................................................. 79
Nels Hanson, “The Other Valley” .................................................... 94
Rhiannon Poolaw, “11” (graphic) ....................................................... 99
Alexandra Daley, “Silence” ............................................................. 101
R. Hoyte Raney, “Canary Jones” ....................................................... 103
Peter Clarke, “The Death Times Horoscope” ...................................... 109
Lynn Hoggard, “Soul of the Bull” ...................................................... 113
Lynn Hoggard, “Night of the Messenger” .......................................... 114
Mark Spitzer, “Gar Vs. Sewage: A Tragedy of Waste” ......................... 117
Kory Shrum, “Break” ................................................................. 133
Kory Shrum, “Reincarnation” .......................................................... 134
Kory Shrum, “Timberlane Street” ......................................................................................... 135
Mandy Brown, “Salt” ............................................................................................................. 137
Hailey Harris, “Fly Study” (graphic) .................................................................................... 152
Jean C. Howard, “Rosie’s Diner” ........................................................................................ 154
Jean C. Howard, “Two Tulips” .......................................................................................... 156
Son Myong Park, Untitled (graphic) ................................................................................... 158
Rosalia Salia, “The Two Anthonys” .................................................................................. 159
Kevin Acers, “Birthdays” .................................................................................................. 175
Sara McLaughlin, “OK 13” (graphic) ................................................................................ 176
Jens Birk, “The Maze” ..................................................................................................... 178
John Grey, “If Only Life Were Laundry” ............................................................................ 188
Jane Beal, “Dreams of Ga-Lun-La-Ti” .............................................................................. 191
Brian Fanelli, “Temp Worker” .......................................................................................... 195
Melissa F. Pheterson, “Letters from Ben” ......................................................................... 197
Holly Day, “Missing Keystrokes” ..................................................................................... 212
John Smelcer, “If Evil Knievel Were Indian” .................................................................... 214
John Smelcer, “How to Make Blue Ribbon Fry Bread” .................................................. 215
Beverley James, “The Last Word” ..................................................................................... 217
Sara McLaughlin, “OK 4” (graphic) ................................................................................ 225
Donna M. Girouard, “The Most Important Thing in the World” ..................................... 227
Sara McLaughlin, “OK 6” (graphic) ................................................................................ 249
Luca McMillan, “Sunset” .................................................................................................. 251
Son Myong Park, “Untitled 3” (graphic) ......................................................................... 256
Sara Hughes, “Elegy for a Stranger” ................................................................................ 258
Todd Outcalt, “Manche El Baile En San Juan” ................................................................. 260
Barry Spacks, “Again the Muse” ..................................................................................... 262
Dearest Poetry Editor,

There are three types of cover letters: a) this is me, this is what I’ve been published in, weather is nice, thanks for the consolidation; b) this is me, I’m using humor, weather is nice, thanks for the constrictions, c) this is not me, you didn’t realize I was trying to be funny, weather is alright, thanks for the consecration.

This is me, an undergraduate studying in Burlington, VT. I’ve been published in a fingerful of lit-mags.

I’ve never been convicted of espionage.

These poems were not written in blood.

Thank you for the incineration.

Sincerely,

Josh Anthony

Josh Anthony is a current undergraduate studying in Burlington, VT.
Son Myong Park was born and raised in South Korea. She worked in graphic design in South Korea before moving to United States to continue her education. She is currently a senior majoring in multimedia design at Cameron University. She is also a lab tutor in the multimedia department and president of the multimedia design club.
John Sibley Williams

Author of the poem, “Fathersong”

FATHERSONG by John Sibley Williams

Now that I have your language I can testify
that rivers run both directions concurrently
and survive on rituals of replenishment
slicing currents to and fro
much like how you guided my tiny hand
which still hasn’t grown
over a serrated knife through
meat and bone and back
to where we started
which is where I’ve started
with my son’s tiny hand
under mine under yours:
a skill he’ll some day use
to cut out my heart
and replace it with his own
as I did yours so long ago
in becoming a man
Katherine Vondy

Author of “High-Tech Coffeemaker, Green Desert Canvas”

Katherine Vondy is an LA-based writer and filmmaker. Her award-winning short film, *The Broken Heart of Gnocchi Bolognese*, has screened at festivals worldwide and is available on iTunes through the PlayFestivalFilms app. A 2009 resident writer at Wildacres and a 2012 resident artist at Starry Night, her prose and poetry has appeared in *The Stickman Review, Toasted Cheese, Red River Review, Perigee, Dark Sky Magazine* and short story anthology *The Lover, the Lunatic and the Poet*. Her blog of short comedic essays can be found at [http://thewalkingdeadpan.tumblr.com/](http://thewalkingdeadpan.tumblr.com/).
The baby’s name was Jackson and Will couldn’t believe how much he loved him. Jamie held Jackson, wrapped in an antiseptic blue hospital baby blanket, and Will leaned over and touched the infant’s head with his big pinkie. Jackson’s squishy face looked up at Will’s face — no, actually, past it, because the baby’s eyes couldn’t focus yet.

“It’s our son!” Will said to Jamie, because he couldn’t help himself.

“Yup,” she said, and he knew she was too tired to reprimand him for saying something so evident and devoid of wit and subtlety. She preferred him clever. But her hair was slick and wet where it had been dampened by ribbons of sweat and she hadn’t brushed her teeth all day, so perhaps she felt she had no room to criticize Will’s temporary shortcomings. Usually she was much more beautiful, but he didn’t care.

“I love you so much,” he said, gazing into her eyes and ignoring the swollen pouches underneath them.

“You better, after what I just went through,” she said. It was a wan overture towards a joke, and though Will was in a frame of mind in which he was only interested in sincerity, he smiled obligingly for her efforts.

Will was older, by twelve years. Jamie was twenty-three, he was thirty-five. He was handsome and devoted, and she was beautiful and bright. They were an exquisite pairing. Sometimes, in his more patrician moods, Will thought of his wife as the fine cabernet sauvignon to his filet mignon.

Their house was what he had always imagined a house to be. His income provided a certain level of comfort; Merry Maids visited every two weeks to give the place a good once-over, and Crate & Barrel
had, over time, made quite a profit off his patronage. The coffeemaker in the kitchen was a marvel of modern technology, a state-of-the-art contraption with a multitude of settings and buttons. It had a touch-screen interface that lit up in all the colors of the rainbow. Red when the coffee was brewing, green when it was ready, blue when it was on sleep mode for the night and automatically programmed to start its slow-drip process in the early morning hours. All this, all this Will could provide. Jamie, he deduced, used her occasional earnings as a freelance illustrator to buy sweaters and subscribe to travel magazines.

When Jackson was a month old, Will hired a photographer to take a family portrait. By the time Jackson was a month and one week, the photo was hanging in the foyer and also framed on Will’s desk at the office. *What a beautiful family you have*, people said when they saw the picture. This was Will’s cue to tell a charming anecdote.

The best one was the one where Jamie had first told him she was pregnant. It had been the night of her first art show. Her paintings were landscapes in impossible hues, trees with bright magenta leaves, looming teal mountains, the sky reflected in pools of fuchsia water. The show had been packed, phrases like ‘innovative vision’ and ‘post-apocalyptic nature’ and ‘brave fantasy’ tinkled with clinking champagne glasses. ‘Sold’ stickers were not a rare sight.

Jamie had been looking at the painting Will knew to be her favorite. It was a desert, sand blazing green under a great white sky. The navy sun was hazy around the edges, fading into a powder-blue that was reminiscent of one of Will’s nice dress shirts.

“I can’t believe nobody’s bought this one yet,” Will had said, putting his arm around his wife’s waist.

“This one isn’t for sale,” Jamie had said.

“That’s silly. It would get a fortune.”

“I’m going to put it in the baby’s room.”
“What baby?”

“That baby you want,” Jamie had said. “Don’t tell me you don’t want it anymore because it’s too late. And I’ve been missing out on the champagne all night because of it.”

Shock and joy had raced for first place in Will’s emotions so energetically that he had dropped his beverage flute. It had smashed on the tiled floor, champagne spreading in bubbly rivulets, eliciting a tired sigh from a nearby member of the custodial staff. (This was a sigh that, when emulated, never failed to garner chuckles from the listener -- the comedic highlight of Will’s charming anecdote.) He had looked at his wife, surrounded by her eerie and likable paintings. Her talent was immense and the things she made were fascinating and lovely. He’d had no doubt that their baby would be the same way.

In the months that followed Jackson’s birth, everything changed. This was to be expected, but it threw Will off balance. It threw him off balance to be twice as in love as he was before, in love with Jamie and in love with Jackson, too. It threw him off balance to be perpetually exhausted. It threw him off balance to feel the days speeding and creeping at the same time, so that any given week was at first interminable and then immediately a distant memory. The pile of outgrown baby clothes packed away in the closet towered higher and higher: on the bottom, the adorable onesies of the newborn, and then a cavalcade of coveralls for infants aged three to six months, and then the miniature cargo pants and T-shirts of the six- to- nine-month-old baby. Tops printed with dinosaurs, pants embroidered with sailboats, cuddly pajamas emblazoned with soccer balls and footballs.

“I can drop those off at Goodwill on my way to the grocery store,” said Jamie, pointing at overflowing stack.

“What if we have another boy? We’d have to buy this stuff all over again,” Will reasoned. “Let’s not waste it.”
“Another one?” Jamie laughed and doodled on her shopping list. “Sure, if you want to be the one squeezing him out this time.” Will had hoped for a different reaction, but Jamie left the tiny outfits in the closet when she left for the supermarket.

Jackson’s first birthday party was car-themed, the baby having shown a definite interest in things with motors even at this callow age. Will placed stacks of racing-stripe printed paper plates on the buffet and tied the Mylar Corvette-shaped balloons to stationary items so they would not float into the ceiling fan. Then he went into the kitchen.

“Did you pick up the cake?” he asked. Jamie was stirring a mass of pasta salad.

“Of course,” she said. “It’s in the refrigerator.”

Will pulled open the door; she was right. The cake sat on the bottom shelf in a box with a see-through plastic lid.

“Oh oh,” he said.

“Did something happen to the cake?” Now Jamie was cutting organic carrots into thin sticks. For the vegetable tray, he assumed.

“I thought you were going to get a cake with a car on it,” he said. “That cake just has balloons.”

Jamie did not stop with the carrots. “The bakery only had one cake with a car on it, and it was yellow cake. You know I hate yellow cake.”

Will did not understand why his fists were clenching at his side; after all, it was only a cake. But he lacked the willpower to calm himself.

“But the theme of the party is cars,” he said, his voice rising the same petulant way it did every time the Orioles lost.
Now, Jamie threw down the knife. The blade left a thin scratch in the countertop before it bounced and fell to the floor. “Fuck the cars,” she said, and left the kitchen. Will heard the sound of the screen door opening and then closing, and then the growl of her own car’s engine and the scraping sound it made over the gravel driveway.

“Jamie just ran out to get some ice,” Will said over and over to the people who asked, and after he’d lied in such a fashion for almost an hour, he began to recognize a knowing gleam in the eyes of his party guests. Nobody took an hour to buy ice, but no one was crass enough to point this out to Will. After a while they stopped asking where she was.

The vast stretch of minutes following the party was difficult. He put Jackson to bed at the normal time, but the kid cried and cried. Will picked up his son and paced the floor of the baby’s room. He jiggled him and rocked him and stared at the poster of a sports car that hung over Jackson’s crib, in the place that Jamie’s emerald desert had used to hang. Now the desert leaned against the back wall of Jamie’s studio, next to the two unfinished canvases Jamie had started before she was pregnant.

Jackson still cried, and a panicked tear ran down Will’s stubbly face as well. Could he love Jackson without Jamie? He did not know.

He had a dream that night. It began as a memory from two years ago, several days after he’d bought Jamie’s engagement ring but still several days before he’d proposed. They had been getting drinks with his coworker and his coworker’s wife. Martinis, 6:30 PM. Jamie and Alicia had left their table to get another round at the bar, and while they were gone the coworker had said she’s going to do big things, isn’t she? Will had said yes. Later, driving home, only slightly impaired, he had looked at Jamie from the corner of his eye. She was looking out the window, and passing neon signs were casting strange glows onto the side of her face, the colors of her favorite paints. He’d taken his right hand off the steering wheel and put it on her knee. I’m so lucky he’d said.
In real life, in the real past, she’d said *I’m lucky too*. But in his dream she turned away from the window and looked at him, straight at his face. He was no longer driving because the car disappeared. They were in a hospital, standing next to the bed his father had died in. The strange lights that still quivered on her face were reflections of the electronic lines on the screen of the heart monitor. It frightened him, the slow-motion way that dreams had of clarifying things he should have known. He had not known how close she was to death.

*It’s just a dream, I can save her, it’s just a dream.* He was still asleep. *When I wake up she will be home. Down the hall the baby is crying. He gets bigger every day and I see recognition in his eyes when I say the words ‘apple juice’ or ‘diaper’. He is many years from being a teenager and so he does not yet hate me. In the future there will be balls, galas, community picnics. In love there is a streak of poison that sickens the heart. I have felt tears of happiness in my eyes on my wedding day, I have never experienced a moment of what-if. You can tell me in a whisper if you like, and it will be different. But it will not be different, but we will pretend it is different. I miss your tired body.*

In the morning, Will awoke to the sound of the coffee grinder. He ran downstairs in his boxers and the relief he felt at seeing Jamie in yesterday’s clothes, in a messy ponytail, tightly sealing the bag of gourmet blend from Kenya and replacing it in the cupboard, was immense. Jackson sat in his highchair making modern art out of cereal bits on his tray table.

“Thank god,” Will said, a phrase that did not come easily to him. “I’m so sorry.” Jamie poured the ground coffee into the coffeemaker and poked the touch screen until the machine whirred into action.

“I know I overreacted about the cake. The balloons didn’t matter. I know you hate yellow cake and I want you to be happy. I want the three of us to be so happy.” He breathed. He could fix things. “Let’s put the desert back in Jackson’s room. It looked good there.”

Now he had said it, his apology, the admission of wrongdoing he had felt so deeply in the lonely hours of his temporary abandonment. He waited for the feelings of freedom and of liberation that he had
grown to expect from such confessions. But seconds passed, and there was only sinking, a grave and unstoppable sinking. Jamie turned to look at him.

“We are happy,” she said. The coffeemaker’s touch screen projected incandescent fuchsias and teals and magentas onto her cheek, the colors of the world ending. Her life was supposed to have been quite different, but Will knew she would never leave again.
Melanie Cordova,

Author of “The Mortal”

Melanie Cordova is currently a PhD student in Creative Writing Fiction at Binghamton University. She received her MA from New Mexico Highlands University, where her thesis was a magical realist novella set in early twentieth century southwestern Russia. She has been published with *Larks Fiction Magazine* and *The Waterhouse Review*, among others.
THE MORTAL by Melanie Cordova

After old age drafted Buster into the dirty profession of pushing up daisies, Jackie saw dragons in everything. The gravy pourer was a dragon. The shampoo was a dragon. The couch was a dragon. Her mom’s hairdryer was a dragon. Her dad’s black sock at the top of the hamper was a dragon. Buster’s old red leash that still hung on a nail in the garage? Dragon. The scissors, the doorknob, the knot in the fence: dragon, dragon, dragon.

Three weeks and a day after her dad lifted Buster off the porch and carried him to the back seat of their clunky van, her mom tucked Jackie into her Star Wars sheets and kissed her on the forehead.

“I’m thinking tomorrow we can go to the SPCA and see if there’s a puppy we can bring home,” she said, brushing Jackie’s bangs to the side of her face. Jackie blinked. “What do you think?”

Jackie pursed her little pink lips. She thought of Buster in his last few months, of him dragging himself across the porch with his front legs because he couldn’t lift his back ones, of the trail of excrement it left because he’d lost control of his bowels.

“I don’t want a puppy,” she said.

Her mother traced Jackie’s eyebrow with her thumb. “I know, sweetie. You want Buster.”

She shook her head. “Fitz. I want Fitz.”

“Wh--who’s Fitz?” She followed Jackie’s line of sight to a row of stuffed animals on the shelf by the door. Last year her Great Auntie Kay stitched a full set of Winnie the Pooh characters for Jackie, which sat front and center. Tigger’s tail wrapped around Eeyore, who was face down in Winnie’s lap. Jackie threw a tantrum earlier that evening when her mother asked her to put the toys away. After Jackie whirled around the room like a tearful tornado in protest, her mother said, “Jacqueline Rochelle, you know this is what we do every night. Calm down, young lady. I thought we had agreed this wasn’t such a big deal?” --to which Jackie replied, suddenly calm, free of tears, quite seriously, “I guess you didn’t think it through then, did you?” and kicked over her hamper. Her small T-shirts splayed and coated the floor. It was only the threat of a bath that got Jackie to arrange her Winnie the Pooh animals and
straighten things she had knocked askew--her coloring book and crayons off her desk, a daily dog calendar off her dresser, the dream catcher off the wall above her bed, where she now whimpered for Fitz.

“That one,” Jackie said. “The dragon.” She tugged her arm out of the tucked sheets and pointed.

Her mom walked over to the shelf. “This one here?” She patted a polka-dot lion that slumped over Piglet, the only stuffed animal in her daughter’s collection that looked even remotely like a dragon.

“No.” Jackie’s lip trembled. A tear appeared in the corner of her left eye. “No--Fitz has the nose--the one with the nose.”

“That’s the Heffalump Great Auntie Kay made you, hon.” She grabbed the elephantine creature by the leg and sat down on the bed.

Jackie grabbed the Heffalump, shoved it on top of her head so that its nose trailed down her neck, and maneuvered her arm into the sheets again. “It’s a dragon.”

Her mom chewed her lower lip and a frown creased her forehead. The TV remote had become a dragon that afternoon. And the tub of ice cream, too. Jackie had names for all her dragons. She took them from authors lining her parents’ bookshelves in the living room. The list of dragons grew but the seven year old remembered them all, even though she couldn’t pronounce half of them. Wollstonecraft became Wolt and Bulgakov became Bug and Yamashita became Yama and Carpentier became Caper. Somehow Jackie remembered. She had a knack for it like her father had a knack for building those bookshelves. He was in the middle of making another one but kept putting it off with some excuse about the corners not fitting right. He left his tools next to the tall stack of books that needed to be put away as a sort of quasi-motivator to get it done. Jackie’s knack was much more ordered; her mind was like a filing cabinet, each dragon in its proper place, each grievance stored for future reference.

Her mom leaned forward and found her daughter’s cheek beneath the Heffalump. “All right, sweets, get some sleep. Pancakes tomorrow.”

Jackie said goodnight as her mom re-tucked the arm that had demanded the dragon. When her mom flicked off the light, Jackie rolled over and wiped off her glistening eyes on the belly of the beast. The dark air felt cold against her wet lashes. The soft sound of her mother’s feet stepping down the
carpeted stairs floated up to her. Jackie heard the deep rumble of her father’s voice but couldn’t make out the words.

Her mom’s voice cut through the quiet house: “It’s like she’s forgotten half her vocabulary. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.”

Laughter from her father, some murmured words.

“How long should phases last, though? She’s been in one for years. I even told her she could pick out a new puppy but she’s stuck in some fantasy world up there.”

The kitchen chair’s metal legs rubbed across the tile floor and then the plastic on its seat crinkled like a sigh.

“I guess you’re right. It feels like the time we caught her tormenting Buster with the umbrella—but I’d rather have her throw tantrums than do something like that again.”

More murmurs. Then her mother: “She really frightened me this afternoon, Aaron. You should have seen how serious she was. She’s been doing that a lot more lately, especially after she said goodbye to Buster. Maybe she should start seeing Dr. Simmons again.”

Her father said something, but now even her mom’s response was blurred in Jackie’s mind. She nuzzled against the Heffalump’s belly. Household sounds drifted in like the current through the doorway and swirled in a pool around her room. The drip-drop-drip from the bathroom sink swept through the corners while the rumble of her father’s voice pulsed the ceiling fan. The crack of the settling beams popped from one side of the room to another like fish, knocking against her shelf of stuffed animals and jostling Eeyore’s tail. When the sound of the running toilet rolled through the closet Jackie kicked herself awake, but by the time the muffled footsteps from her parents bounced off her windowpane and into her ear, she had fallen asleep again.

#

The SPCA functioned as the town’s primary animal shelter. When her mom rolled open their mauve van door, the smells and sounds of animals struck Jackie as a pungent mixture of sawdust and corn chips and dust and her mom’s snuffed cigarette. She gripped her mother’s hand and hopped out.
“Hi there. Welcome,” said the volunteer at the front desk. She smiled and smoothed a flyaway from the dark hair at her temples.

Her mom pulled Jackie close to her hip and patted her on the shoulder. “We’re looking for a new pet--could we take a look around?”

“Sure. I just need you to sign in here and I’ll bring you round back.”

Jackie freed her hand from her mom’s grip and walked over to an aquarium on the shelf by the window. She squinted and searched for fish among the cloudy water and natural grasses. A slim orange one slid from one porous rock to another and Jackie thought it might have winked at her. She knew that sometimes dragons were sly like that.

“And what’s your name?”

Jackie jumped and turned on her heel. The volunteer smiled with all her teeth and nodded. Jackie frowned. She didn’t like women who wore their hair too tight. It reminded her of her Granny May, whose forehead grew with each passing day as if her scalp were sucking her hair into her head through her bun.

Her mom clicked the pen, tossing it onto the counter, and grabbed Jackie’s hand again. “Don’t be shy,” she said.

She blinked and the words spilled from her: “My name is Jacqueline. Nice to meet you.”

“Well, Jacqueline, I’m Katie.” The volunteer stepped from behind the counter and punched a code into the door to the back room. “Let’s go find you a friend, okay?”

They followed Katie through a wide hallway that smelled like cleaning solution. They hit another door where she used another code, and behind it was a veritable warehouse of domesticated animals. Rows and rows of clean spacious pens lined the aisles and when the animals heard the door click open, a cacophony of barks and whines welcomed them.

“Are you interested in a dog or a cat or--?” Katie raised her eyebrows.

Jackie shook her head and peered into the nearest pen. A tan dog with brown spots jumped at the fence and barked. She stumbled back.

The volunteer laughed. “They get pretty excited. Why don’t we just take a look around?”
Jackie’s mom gave her a gentle push down the aisle. “Go see if you like any of them, okay, hon?”

Jackie walked down the row. She felt the eyes of animals on her. To her left, a small round dog. To her right, a medium-sized gray one. To her left, a shaggy black one. To her right, a noisy wiry-haired one. To her left, a big brown one. They all seemed ready to pounce on her, the small intruder in their small home.

“This is a great space you’ve got here,” said her mother. “Nothing like you see on those sad commercials.”

Katie smiled. “You’ve never been here before?”

“No, we got our old dog from a breeder.”

The volunteer nodded. “We like to keep this place in good shape. I just put up these decorations yesterday, actually. Seemed like a nice touch.” She gestured to the various harvest and fall decorations attached to the tops of the pens. One paper horn of plenty trailed an orange streamer. The dog in that pen jumped up on the cage and nipped at it.

“Oh, that’s sweet.” Her mom touched the bottom of a flimsy paper pumpkin. “We used to dress up Buster for Halloween. Jackie loved it. We always let her pick the costumes for him at the store. She liked the elaborate ones the most, poor dog, ones with shoes or really big wings.”

Jackie heard her name as she neared the cat enclosures. It was quieter over here. The dogs’ initial furor died down and now only an occasional whimper or meow floated to her. About five or six cats shared each pen. As she walked one by one they lifted their heads and watched her move. A tabby. A calico. One white, one fat, one without a tail, one asleep in the corner. Tall kitty playgrounds reached to the top of their enclosures. She walked up to one enclosure and tilted her head. A cat with wide round paws tilted his head as well. She moved to the next pen. These cats were even less interested in her. One licked himself at the top of the climbing frame. Another lapped at a bowl of water.

The next pen--not much difference. Cat after cat. She took a step toward the next but something caught her eye, something in the dark little cave feature in that one’s playground. Long, skinny, scaly. She
squinted and gasped: wings! She leaned forward and hooked a finger on the cage. The animal stuck its head out of the opening and yawned.

Jackie grinned. A real dragon! She shifted her feet and said hello.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

The dragon crawled out of the cave and curled his tail around his thin red body. “I don’t have one yet. You’re supposed to name me. That’s how it works around here.”

Jackie skipped over to her mom and Katie and pulled them both to the enclosure. “That one. I want that one. Please please please, that one.”

“Oh, good, sweetie. I’m so glad you found one you like.” Her mom squatted so she could see the dragon at Jackie’s level. “Could you bring it out, please?” she asked Katie.

Katie fiddled with her keys, then jabbed one into the lock. It clicked but didn’t open. She tried another one and the lock popped, the gate swinging forward. She grabbed the dragon under the belly and lifted him from the cage.

Jackie grinned with such force she felt her skin pushing her ears back. She reached for the dragon and he climbed up her arms and settled himself across her shoulders. His red scales were smooth and cold against her neck.

Her mom gave her a tight squeeze and sighed. “You like him? He seems to like you.”

Jackie nodded.

“What are you going to call him?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You could call him Dragon.” Her mom’s face was hopeful, her eyebrows high and her mouth in a half smile. “You like dragons, right, honey?”

Jackie scoffed. “That’s not a good name for a dragon. We didn’t name Buster Dog.”

Her mom rubbed the dragon’s head. His tiny horns bent backwards and when she got to her feet he snapped his equally tiny teeth at her. “Feisty little thing,” her mom whispered.
The dragon rode on her lap on the way home, and as soon as her mom opened the front door of their house, Jackie whipped past her father, who was fiddling in the kitchen with some part of the unfinished bookshelf, and ran toward the living room. She hadn’t taken a name from the shelf next to the window yet. She closed her eyes and felt the dragon adjust himself, his claws digging into her back.

Jackie reached a hand up and grabbed a book at random. When she opened her eyes she saw the cover of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. She pursed her lips and sounded out the words.

The dragon clicked his tongue against his teeth next to her ear.

“The Mortal,” she said, catching his yellow eye in her peripheral vision. “How’s that? The Mortal?”

The dragon nodded and put his chin down on her shoulder. “That works, I guess. The Mortal.”

His tongue slithered in and out of his burnt-red lip scales as he said it. “The Mortal.”

Jackie stole her mom’s lighter from her purse and grabbed the scented candle from the bathroom. It made her feel so adult to sit by the window and have the glowing candle there on the sill, like she was at some fancy restaurant. Her second-story window overlooked the walnut tree in the front yard, and she saw the pile of leaves she pulverized after having helped her mom rake them an hour before. She wondered when her mom would notice that the leaves weren’t in the nice pile she’d left them in.

“Please, Jackie,” her mom had said. “I’m not asking you to do it by yourself; I’m asking you to help me. We can do it together.”

Jackie imitated the growl The Mortal did whenever her mom got within ten feet of him. He climbed up onto her shoulders and gave her the idea to help but then run through the leaves when her mom wasn’t looking.

She watched the wind disturb the branches outside her window. Jackie had done this with the candle countless times, always sneaking the lighter back before her mom noticed. This time was a bit different, though—not as relaxing. The Mortal had been snoozing on her shoulders when she put the candle on the windowsill, but at the click of the lighter his yellow eyes slid open. He stretched his dragon
neck and yawned. A moment later he bounded to the drapes and tore his way up to the valance. He paced there at the top of the room, his claws digging into the cloth and sending bits of the drapes dancing through the air, where they twirled and scattered before landing.

“Get down from there,” she said. “Mom’s going to be mad.”

The Mortal flexed his wings like one cracking his knuckles. “She’s always telling you what to do.”

Movement caught her eye outside. The wind picked up and shook the walnut tree. Leaves floated to the ground like the little bits of drape within. Her legs felt sore from romping around beneath the tree earlier. Jackie had squealed with glee as she ran through the giant pile. The Mortal was close on her heels. She kicked and leaves flew through the brisk October air. The dragon scrambled up her leg and then bounded into the pile. The leaves crackled and he sneezed. Jackie dove next to him and doubled over in laughter. She knew her mom wouldn’t make her rake again.

“That’s true,” Jackie said, her mind back in the room, “but at least I got to jump in them.”

“She never said you could do that. She told you to come inside and change.”

Jackie picked at the warm candle wax with her fingernail.

“Your mom doesn’t like me.”

She frowned. “I don’t know why. You’re the best pet.”

“It’s because they don’t trust you. I heard them say again last night that they might send you back to that therapist across town.”

Jackie shook her head. “I hate Dr. Simmons. I’m not going back there.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Jackie looked up and saw the red dragon harsh against the light blue of her wall behind him. His yellow eyes were little slivers of sunlight.

“What do you think I should do?”
The dragon adjusted his scaly shoulders and licked his tongue around his mouth. Then with what sounded like a burp a tiny flame sparked from behind his teeth. He coughed and clung to the valance again. “Like that.”

Movement from outside again. Jackie looked across the street and saw Mrs. Murray rolling out her trash can to the street. When she turned again to The Mortal she saw the dragon inching his way to the edge of the drapes.

“How would that help?” she asked.

“Everybody’s afraid of fire,” said The Mortal. “They’ll have to listen. I promise.”

He gathered himself up again for another spark. He wrapped his tail around the valance and arched his back. Then with a loud gag he expelled just the tiniest flame. Most of what burst from behind his teeth was smoke. The little cloud rose to the ceiling and dissipated against the fan in wisps of gray and white.

Suddenly loud beeps screamed through her room. Jackie covered her ears and tried to blow the air away from the smoke alarm. The sound so surprised The Mortal that he grappled with the valance to keep his balance. He jumped from the window but his claws stuck in the drapes and he swung down with a smack against the windowpane. The edges of the drapes flapped over the candle and the flame licked the threads.

Frantic footsteps up the stairs—Jackie’s mom flung open the door, eyes bulging, her hair wild and strands in her face. “Jackie--where are you?”

Now smoke from the burning drapes clouded the room. Her mother cried out when she saw the fire spread quickly up the drapes and jump to a scarf hung over her hamper. She grabbed Jackie by her forearm. “Out! Let’s go!”

Her dad burst into the room. “What’s going on?” He coughed and waved the smoke from his face. The alarm blared on.
The Mortal flailed and hissed and desperately tried to dislodge his claws. When he did he bounced off the window, flapped his leathery wings, and landed on Jackie’s mom. She stumbled back and screamed.

“Get this cat off me!”

Jackie saw the wings of The Mortal bluster with her mom’s flailing arms. They fell to the floor in a heap. In the panic her dad rushed to the window and pulled the drapes from the rod, trying to smother the flames, but the fire only spread to Jackie’s shelf of stuffed animals. The flames from the scarf spread to the clothes in the closet. A moment later he turned and smacked the dragon off his wife. He pulled her up, his hands slipping from the blood on her arm, and yanked Jackie to him. Together they stumbled, coughing, out of the room, through the hallway, down the stairs, through the front door, until they were safe from the smoke and fire, watching the growing spectacle from the pile of messy walnut tree leaves in their front yard.

#

Three weeks and a day later, Jackie sat in her living room and watched the evening light transition around the room. The windowpane cast odd stretching shadows across the floor from the mound of things they’d had to remove from Jackie’s room. The muffled sounds of her father helping her mother upstairs sounded on the ceiling. Her mom had needed stitches after the dragon attack and both of her parents had burns on their hands. As punishment for playing with fire she’d had to help her uncles identify what was still good and what was ruined from the fire, which consumed half of their house and the neighbor’s hedge, but now that the sorting was done she didn’t see why they still had to stay at Uncle Jeff’s.

Jackie moved some of her playthings aside—a marker set, a book, some dress-up clothes. Near the bottom of the pile lay her smashed Heffalump. She picked it up and tried to fluff it. The fire had singed its long nose, which was now just as curly but black like melted plastic.

She knew where The Mortal was hiding. When she walked into the living room an hour before, the shuffle of scaly claws and folded wings brushed some ash from the fireplace. He must have heard her
dad say they could stop for yogurt after her therapy appointment that afternoon. Jackie frowned—
and The Mortal **should** hide, she thought. He promised that the fire would keep her from having to see Dr. Simmons again and answer all of his questions. He broke his promise; it was all she could think about but when she saw the red tail slither up the chimney: he broke his promise, he broke his promise, he lied, he lied, he lied.

Now she knew why there were reasons dragons were always bad in the fairy tales she read in books and saw on T.V.

Jackie set the Heffalump atop the pile of rubbish and walked over to her father’s tools in front of the unfinished bookshelf. A hammer lay there in the sunlight. Her dad had said that they were lucky that their large library had survived the flames, but Jackie noticed that soot covered his tools and obscured author’s names from their book spines. She gripped the handle in her small hands, turning the wood over in her fingers. The dragon had broken his promise. The dragon had lied. She had to slay the dragon.
Lou Gaglia,

Author of “All Mapped Out”

Willy-nilly and out of the blue, Kelly smiled at me in the library. She smiled warm and big as she passed with her cart while I sat in the stacks flipping through Sherwood Anderson and some other books, mostly poetry that I didn’t even wind up looking at. It was her first smile at me, the first time she gave a nod to my existence, compared to all the other times I’d seen her in the library or when she passed me during her neighborhood walks and gave cheerful hellos and sometimes even signs of crosses to “everyone and his mudda,” as they say around here. And it was the second time I really got a good look at her eyes up close—the first being when Tommy introduced me—and I would swear on anyone’s Bible that they were even prettier than when I saw them the first time. They were a soft blue. That’s all I’m going to say without going overboard and getting indecent about them.

I do miss my waitress friend, my sweetie at the Chinese restaurant, but they have banned me from there because of my old pal and enemy Jeff, who threw a brick through their window over their menu selection. But it wasn’t really about the menu. It was only because they were Chinese, and he didn’t like that idea. He wouldn’t have did what he done to that window if we were at a steak and potatoes joint that had a manager named Butch, or even if the manager was a nerdy Mr. Henderson type.

Even now, months after the incident, it would be impossible for me to get back in there and see her again. I couldn’t say anything at all to the Chinese restaurant manager—that I had no idea that Jeff was going to throw a brick through his window, that I always hated the guy even when we were friends, that I wanted to please come back and be welcomed again—because saying any of those things was top secret, and it would have been worm-like and wussy-ish to share them in a situation like that.

So, alas, the romance between me and she—the waitress, that is—was kaput before it could have gotten off the ground, all because my Long Island friend didn’t get the dish he wanted and came back to Brooklyn with a brick the night after we were there. But at least, after that full smile in the library, Kelly
and her blue eyes and her perfect posture and walk was still possible. I just had to make sure not to bring Jeff to that library or he might toss a brick through its window if he wound up with an Ella Fitzgerald book instead of an F. Scott.

I sat at a table in the stacks while Kelly went around with her cart, placing books back on the shelves. From the next aisle, hidden away, she moved some books and placed others. I heard them softly go thunk, thunk, and at every soft thunk something deep inside me felt a punk, punk that spread through me in all directions like a pond will when you throw a pebble in. I never wanted her to run out of books to rearrange, the sound of them made me so comfortable and calm. And when she finished and went by my table with her empty cart, I was in the midst of inhaling the first part of a sigh, and I caught the scent of her—of lilac or sumac or tarmac or maybe daffodil or whatever she smelled like—but it was so sweet that it made me think, “I’ll never inhale again.”

***

Tommy is a good guy but he has a way of bursting my bubble and sending me spinning into the abyss. While we sat on the stoop in front of our building, only a few days after I’d listened to Kelly rearrange books and inhaled her in the library, he broke word to me that she was an impossibility, that I should forget her for good.

“You may as well go back to that Chinese restaurant,” he told me—because I had already told him about the waitress and Jeff and the brick. “You have a better chance there.”

Before I could ask him why, Kelly herself turned the corner of Court Street and came down the street toward us, her perfectly straight head turning first one way, then another. From far away it looked like she was talking to herself and counting on her fingers, which I’d seen her do before. When she got closer, she dropped her counting hands and her head swiveled our way.

“What happened to the cold weather, Tommy?” she said, with an exasperated smile.
“I know, it’s almost Thanksgiving,” Tommy said. “It’s like summer.”

She stood facing us from the edge of the sidewalk, but she didn’t look at me, only at Tommy. “Well, let’s hope it stays this way,” she said, and she crossed herself and walked on with a bright sweeping wave. We watched her go down Union Street until she disappeared with a sharp right onto Clinton. I felt my face was red, and my lips were pressed together.

“She’s messed up,” said Tommy. “That’s why I’m telling you—forget about her.”

“Oh yeah?”

Tommy didn’t say anything.

“She always says hi to everyone. Not to me, though,” I said.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. She says hi to the squirrels, so it don’t matter. She’s messed up, I’ll telling you.”

“Okay,” I said.

He looked over at me. “You’re all mad about it but—” We both had to stand when someone came out of the building with his dog and started down the steps. When we sat again, Tommy didn’t say anything for a while.

“Mad but what?” I said.

“What?”

“I’m all mad about it but what? What do you mean?”

“But nothing,” Tommy said, a little impatient. “She’s a mess, that’s all.”

I didn’t say anything and we sat there. “I gotta go up soon,” said Tommy finally. “I’m in for the
damn night.” Then he started banging the pinky part of his fist on the step between us until he broke out, “What the hell do you want to know about her for? You don’t even know her.”

I shrugged.

“She’s really good looking, she’s been out with a million guys, and she’s not for you. What are you thinking, Glen?” He kept banging his fist against the step. “Don’t be getting stuck on the ones you can’t get…like that restaurant girl—are you kidding—or that stupid ass girl from Long Island you told me about.”

“I looked out into the street. “Right…”

“Right, that’s right.” Tommy pointed down to Clinton Street to where Kelly had disappeared. “She was married once already, you know. Right out of high school. This guy Patty from the down the block, you wouldn’t know who he was. Cab driver. He was robbed and shot right in his own cab. So she’s bad luck besides being a nut.”

I looked down at his pounding fist. “Wow. When? When was this?”

“I don’t know, five years ago maybe. She’s been a nut ever since, and super religious, too. You don’t want her, I’m telling you. Just look at her, fine, but keep away.”

“Okay…”

He stood up. “Now I’m all pissed off. Thanks a lot, Glen.” I sat up straight and looked at him. “I hate this thinking bullshit!” he shouted so loud across the street and down the block that I jumped, and he ran up the steps and burst inside.

***
Friday afternoon I took the train from Atlantic Avenue out to see my parents, which was to be followed by a pizza restaurant visit with old best friends I had sworn off for good, including Al the traitor and Jeff the brick thrower, who’d organized the big bash. Before the train pulled out, I looked out the window at the people who boarded my train and others who stepped onto the one across the platform. There were too many to count, but I thought of how each one had a whole history and a life that was either going according to their plans or against them. It gave me an idea for a poem, and I tried to write the beginning of it on the back of the newspaper I held, but I couldn’t even come up with a first line. I didn’t have a poem in me.

I’d been looking through poetry books at work at the book store and frowning about my own poems that I used to think were good. But it was even worse when I browsed through St. Mark’s Bookshop, where the hip and fancy poets’ books were. I sat on one of those dusty, squeaky circular stools and came up against guys like Stafford and Bly, and then someone named Merwin, who I couldn’t tell by the initials or the poems if it was a guy or a lady.

So, on the train, after striking out on a poem about people with life plans that were either working perfectly or going to pot, I just stared out the window while the train sped through Queens and into Nassau, my pen stuck in my pocket. I cursed low out the window at myself—at Tommy, too, whose own life plan stunk, so he was no one to talk, and at Kelly who wouldn’t look at me, who probably was a nut like Tommy said, and at my job, and at my stupid tiny apartment, too. I cursed at my one box of cereal and my total of two bowls and two spoons, and at the jar of peanut butter in my cabinet. I cursed my bed and the dusty floor and the windows that I hadn’t gotten shades for yet, and at the crummy old desk I used to write my crummy poetry on.

By the time I reached my parents I was really in a mood. But after greeting Mom and grabbing a sandwich, Dad made coffee and I felt a little better, wanting in a way just to stay there with them and forget everything, just stay and be bored stiff and roam around my old town useless forever, without
having to do one thing except be comfortable and routine. Dad took the coffee out to the patio where it was almost fifty degrees, warm enough to pull down the patio chairs.

I was used to Dad calling me stupid on the patio. It was his favorite place to lecture me, telling me I should go back to college or think about working with the horses at the track with Uncle Eddie, but he didn’t say anything this time. It made me feel even worse to watch him sipping at his coffee so silent. We sat and sipped, and finally he asked me if I was being careful in the city.

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, the city’s not as dangerous as you think.”

He sipped at his coffee and frowned quietly into the yard.

***

I had given up on the poem I was planning at the train station, but I still held onto the idea in my head about people in general, that all their lives were either going according to their plans, or that all hell was breaking loose. My own plans, etched in stone from the crib, blew up in my face the second Jeannette went off to bowl with Al almost two years ago, as a way of telling me to take a hike. That by itself was neither hither nor thither anymore, as far as I was concerned, because I wouldn’t have gone back to her even if I had two hands tied behind my back and with my feet bound like they used to do in China. But everything else in life was helter and skelter anyway, and I even thought of skipping the big reunion and heading back to Brooklyn, after having seen my parents and only chewing a little bit of the fat with Dad because he was so quiet.

Dad had let me borrow his old car and told me to take it home to Brooklyn afterwards and bring it back the next weekend. “But make sure,” he said, “you come with rolls and those jelly cookies from that
bakery on the corner.”

I smiled because it was the most he’d said during my whole visit.

“And bring Italian bread, too,” he added. “Just don’t come over again empty-handed with a sour puss on your face.”

I passed through town and went directly to the pizza place where the old gang was going to meet, but when I didn’t see too many cars in the lot I circled around again and wound up parked at the library looking out at the old baseball field where I used to play as a kid.

My life was all mapped out in junior high when I played baseball there and Carolyn came to watch me play, and it was mapped out during our first kiss under the tree in foul territory past the left field line. It was mapped out in high school when I worked at the Penny Saver and then for Mr. Childress’ landscaping business in the summer. And even though my time with Beth and Amy didn’t work out when I was a sophomore and a junior, everything just clicked with Jeannette in senior year, and then it was only a matter of time, I was sure.

Her parents were nice, except for her mother when her smile sometimes had the look of a cold-blooded killer behind it. And her Dad was a nice guy too, except he enjoyed beating the hell out of me in golf and pool, which pissed me off at him. But they were okay future in-laws, all in all. And Jeannette’s friends all liked me, too, except for Diane, who rolled her eyes when she was around me sometimes and thought I didn’t notice. Her other friends, though, Barbara and Lucy, called me to express their sorrow at Jeannette having taken leave of her senses when she ran off with Al, and they were good sports and good listeners when I told them it didn’t matter anyway, that I was off to Italy to see the world.

My life was still mapped out even then, when I wandered through Italy writing poems, first to Jeannette and then about the Italian women and that one Switzerland woman and a Japanese woman I met along the way. I was miserable there, but I was happy, too, because my life-map said I was still headed
for good things, only different.

But the map had been blown to Kingdom Come now that I was at a dead end in Brooklyn, with no more prospects, with a crummy book-stacking job, with one woman I liked behind the restaurant glass, so to speak, and the other one I liked a nut job who talked to herself and the squirrels and counted on her fingers.

I circled town once more, and thought of continuing on past the restaurant and to the highway for home, flat-leaving them all like a kid would do, but I chickened out and pulled up alongside of Al’s car. I thought of scratching his passenger door with my key as I headed inside, but I chickened out of that, too.

They were all in good cheer, as they say, and surprised me with hearty handshakes. Then they ordered up some beers for everybody, except that I changed mine to a coke. Besides Al and Jeff the brick thrower, there was Rob and Billy, and Billy’s girlfriend who I didn’t know; and there was Samantha, who was with Al, but they looked like they were just friends, not hanging all over each other like a boyfriend and girlfriend would. They called me the prodigal Brooklyner, which made me feel good because I told them I liked Brooklyn. When they asked me what I was doing with myself, I told them just this and that, trying to be mysterious, and each one of them just said, “Oh,” or looked like they wanted to say, “Oh.”

Across the restaurant I saw Diane the eye roller in a booth, and across from her, with her back to me, was the flowing hairdo of Jeannette. Diane glanced over at me and leaned toward Jeannette to say something, but Jeannette didn’t turn around. I looked away, deciding to make my eyes into stones and just listen to the hilarity at the table.

They were telling stories about work. Al worked at some kind of fancy electronics company, and Billy worked as a manager at a toy store, so they had plenty of funny stories to tell. I smiled through each one of them, not hearing a word they said, and sipped at my coke. Later I munched on garlic bread and pizza. More beers came and I finally broke down and ordered one because the
merrymaking was leaving me behind and I couldn’t keep the smile on my face.

They told office stories, mostly, and Jeff told college stories, but not one word did he say about throwing a brick through a window. I looked at him about as much as I looked at Jeannette, which was once. Rob was all right, though. He talked to me through two pizza slices about city life compared to Long Island life, and he told me he’d never live anywhere but near the beach. I agreed with him about the beach being great, but I told him I liked Brooklyn anyway. It was the good kind of disagreement.

Then Jeannette and Diane were there, standing at the head of the table, near Al and Jeff, and I felt lucky that only one beer always gave me a buzz, because my quick buzz kept me from worrying where to look while they said their fake hellos to the crowd and added onto their good moods. I excused myself to go the men’s room, telling only Rob that I’d be right back while Diane cackled over some joke. I made sure to smile and not look mad when I left the table.

Ten minutes, one leak, and three washed faces later, I returned to the grand cheer of the table to find them all in the middle of a sidesplitting conversation about Rich, a high school nobody who Greg Conner had fooled, with a fake letter, into thinking that the Yankees wanted to try him out in Florida. Jeannette and Diane had sat down near Al and Jeff by the time I got back, so they added to the glee. Meanwhile, I had another beer. I listened but looked down at the table instead of at them, while they laughed about Rich and his father taking the plane down to Ft. Lauderdale for the tryout that Rich had never been invited to. I glanced up at Rob, finally. He was laughing too, drying his eyes at the joke.

I turned to look at the door, as if someone was coming in. I thought of Tommy busting in and sitting down next to me, saying, “This whole thing is bullshit.” I sort of smiled, and I downed my beer through the laughter, all their voices mingling into one big hardy-har. I belched loudly but no one heard me, and I got up, sneaky-like without standing, until I was clear of the table. I put a twenty dollar bill in front of Rob and leaned over to tell him I might forget later. He just looked at me.

In the men’s room again I took a final leak, and then headed out the door. Jeff looked up with a
smile on his face but without really seeing me. Rob knit his eyebrows together at me, so I motioned to him with one-finger gestures that I was going out but would be right back.

I headed for the highway, but before I got there I turned off into a development and parked in front of a house where there was no street light. And I started laughing, first giggling a little and then laughing out loud until I couldn’t stop, thinking of Jeannette’s flowing spray-pumped hair and Diane’s darting eyes and Jeff’s better-than-everyone-but loving-everyone look, and Al placing himself at the head of the table because he made the most money. I couldn’t stop laughing, until I thought of Rob’s lost look when I headed out. Rob telling me he liked the beach, and Rob struggling, cleaning people’s rugs for a living and renting a basement apartment. So I stopped laughing and felt at my head and waited for it to clear a little.

I went for coffee before heading back to Brooklyn, stopping at a big diner on Jericho Turnpike and sitting anonymous and headachy at the counter. Three refills and a few leaks later, I hit the parkway and the expressway. I knew how to get to Brooklyn no problem, but as soon as I got off the BQE, I got lost. The poem I couldn’t write came to me again while I went in circles, but only as a feeling this time, with no words attached. I figured that’s how it would always be.

But if I ever did find the words, it wasn’t going to be about some people’s lives being mapped out and others having no clue. It was going to be about people who think there is even a map at all, which I knew then wasn’t so—especially when I reached my block and passed my own building at least twenty times because I couldn’t find a parking space for almost an hour.
Alex Myers,
Author of “Arm’s Length”

Alex Myers grew up in rural Maine and currently teaches high school English in Rhode Island. His short fiction has appeared in a number of journals, including *Juked, New Ohio Review*, and *Drunken Boat*. In addition to writing, he enjoys running, baking bread, and playing ice hockey.
Karen stood across the desk from her shift supervisor, who sat, hands folded in front of him, a grim smile on his face. She stretched her back and neck to full extension, as if balancing a book on her head, but even so, her supervisor overtopped her by several inches.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think this job is working out,” he said, no trace of apology in his voice. He was pale and thin, something you’d find if you turned over a rock.

“What can I do to improve? I’m willing to make any necessary changes.” She pushed her chest forward to further suggest her willingness, though she didn’t think his interests went in that direction.

“There’s nothing you can do, I’m afraid. It’s simply that you’re not fit for the job. I mean, honestly, you can barely see over the counter.”

Though she didn’t like to admit it, this was true. Because of the high granite counter, the bank where she worked as a teller—a job she’d held for only a few weeks—was not designed for someone of her height. “If you’d just let me have a stool, something to step or stand on…”

“Bank policy is clear.” The manager cut across her. “Nothing behind the counter: no chairs, no stools. It’s security. Those could be used as weapons. Surely you’ve noticed that no one else has a stool?”

Karen nodded, forcing her lips into a smile, even as she imagined using a stool as a weapon, whanging it repeatedly over the manager’s head. “I have noticed, but I hoped there might be an exception.”

“I’ve informed human resources that they need to change the hiring policy. Someone of your…stature… just isn’t suited for the position of teller.”

Karen was not a dwarf, not one of those people with the big, peanut-shaped heads and the heavy disproportionate limbs. She was, however, a midget (as she had been disappointed to learn in high school when she finally admitted that she’d achieved her maximum height). A midget, scientifically speaking, is
anyone under four feet ten inches (Karen was four feet two inches) and is, unscientifically speaking, what most people had called her for years. She was short. Everything else about her was normal: her face was okay and she was thin, almost child-like; the only big thing about her were her breasts, which kept growing when the rest of her didn’t. “Those’ll be good for something,” her father had told her. About the only true thing he said. Without them, she’d be mistaken for a sixth-grader.

The shift supervisor had a point. When she waited on people in the bank, she had to strain on her toes to reach the countertop. The cash drawer ejected at head level, always threatening to concuss her if she didn’t dart out of the way. Other employees shut it with a tilt of their hip; Karen could have given it a head-butt to achieve the same effect. Often, customers waiting in her queue grumbled, thinking she’d gone on break – they couldn’t see her standing back there. But she worked with polite efficiency, didn’t make mistakes in data entry, and always showed up on time.

In fact, Karen liked being a teller. The pay wasn’t great but she loved the seriousness of it. Before this, she’d worked summers in high school scooping ice cream, practically having to thrust her whole body into those ten gallon drums to scrape out enough for a cone; after high school she’d worked taking phone calls at a customer service center, talking people through warranties on blenders and how to return a malfunctioning toaster, until the company had folded. But this job at the bank felt adult; even more, it felt like a job that might launch her into a successful orbit. The people waiting in line passed her thick wads of money for deposit: a week’s worth of tips from a waitressing gig, or hefty checks, the commission for a month’s car sales. Her computer screen brought up the balances of people’s life savings – the old guy who wore baggy corduroys and flannel shirts was worth almost a million; the young man whose hands trembled as he passed her his deposit slip had squirreled away ten thousand. At first, she’d been jealous: all this money so close and she had hardly any. Now she liked it, as if she were basking in the promise, the security of the bank.

She lifted her chin to square her eyes with the supervisor’s. “Please. I’ll think of something. Give me another try, just a little more time.”
The supervisor shrugged. “Sure. I don’t know what difference it will make. It’s not like you’re going to grow a foot, but company policy says I have to give you two weeks’ notice.” He drew his hands across the desk so his gold cufflinks rattled against the wood, clinking out to her his superiority.

At the end of the day, Karen drove home, her little Ford Escort wheezing through the rush-hour traffic. Her boyfriend, Eric, had screwed wooden blocks onto the gas and brake pedals so that her feet would reach. Still, she sat with the seat pushed all the way forward, her chin barely level with the top of the steering wheel.

Every building in their apartment complex looked the same, a uniform tan stucco, three apartments upstairs, three apartments downstairs, too bad for you if you were in the middle and got to hear everything. Of course, she lived in the middle. Building Six, unit E, Birch Acres. How they could name it for what it had negated was beyond her.

As she pushed open the door, she saw that Eric lay on the couch in his boxers, a bag of Cheez Doodles leaking orange dust onto the carpet, as he watched TV. The place reeked of pot smoke.

“Hey, baby,” he said as she walked in. “How’s my cash cow doing?” He’d been calling her that since she got the job at the bank, a nickname he accompanied with a squeeze of her breasts whenever he could reach them. Now, though, he waved his Cheez-coated fingers in her direction, but she just shrugged without moving any closer.

“Mr. Fancy-Pants the shift supervisor told me I’m too short. Gave me notice today.”

“What the fuck? Too short? Isn’t that illegal or something? I bet that guy’s a faggot.” His voice had the sleepy intensity generated by marijuana.

She turned away from him, went to the bedroom. There, she changed out of her nylons and work clothes, put on the velour tracksuit that her grandmother had made for her two Christmases ago, one of the few outfits that really fit her. As a small person, it was shockingly difficult to find appropriate clothes. Sure, she could buy from the girls’ department, but how could she go to work in the bank dressed in a cartoon character shirt and pink pedal pushers?
Through the bedroom door, she could hear the noise of the TV, some stupid sitcom that Eric was watching. They’d been together for over a year now, long enough that he should be asking her a certain question soon, not that she’d say yes. In the dim light of the bedroom, she wondered why she was still with him. Eric was tall; Karen had always dated the tallest guy she could get her hands on. Whether this was a genetic drive – some urge to have average-sized children – she didn’t know, though she certainly had no intention of procreating with Eric anytime soon. He was long, skinny in the legs and thick in the chest. Thick in the head too, she thought. He liked to think of himself as a big guy, probably thought that having a short girl with big tits made him even more of a big guy (she’d learned that, in fact, lots of guys liked short women, and she’d broken up with her last boyfriend when he’d come home with a frilly girl’s dress and asked her to wear it for him). Eric wasn’t like that, but he still got off on her being short. Like the first night they slept together, here in this apartment, and they undressed in the dark, only the tepid yellow of a streetlamp sliding through the venetian blinds.

He’d leaned over her on the bed, eyes on her chest, and said, “Jesus. My dick’s almost as big as you are.”

She could hear the excitement in his voice, the absence of tenderness, and she studied his pale stomach, the whiteness of him as she replied, “I’ve seen bigger.” It was like that when they made love.

She hated this apartment. She hated her life. The only good thing about Eric was his reliability, at least where his job was concerned. He drove a delivery truck for a regional bakery, Daylight Bread. His hours were irregular. Depending on the day’s route, he drove to grocery stores, nursing homes, schools – anywhere someone wanted cases of bread. He delivered a little marijuana as well, a better revenue stream by far than white bread. Karen appreciated the money although the drugs made her uncomfortable, not just the legality, but the way they made her existence seedy and marginal. His truck was a big panel-sided one, painted on both sides with the company name above a picture of a little girl, brown hair up in pigtails, cheeks round and red, biting into a buttered piece of bread. Her mouth was open, the butter glistened, and beneath her it read, “So soft, so good.” The picture bothered Karen, the almost pornography of it. She hated to imagine Eric driving around the county with this girl advertising his
presence, taking breaks to smoke reefers inside the belly of the truck, unloading stacks of rolls and buns, now and then sliding little packets of weed along with them.

With a sigh, she went to make dinner. She dragged the milk crate from next to the stove and stood on it to reach for the box of pasta. She kicked it to the sink, stood on it to fill the pot with water. The world was not designed for short people.

Karen arrived five minutes early to work the next day, carrying the milk crate. She set it beneath her teller’s station and stepped up on it; her midriff was now level with the counter, just like the other clerks. The first customers of the day filtered in, and she smiled at them – nearly eye to eye – her hands counting out the crisp twenties with practiced precision. She’d been amazed to learn that the bank washed its money, a fully-automated process, otherwise she would offer to do it herself. She felt the sidelong glances of the other tellers, thought perhaps they were snickering at her, the ridiculousness of needing a step stool only proving her inadequacy. But she ignored them, focused on the deposits, withdrawals, account transfers, intent on being neatly efficient. At ten thirty she took her first mandated break of the day, drinking coffee in the staff room, and when she returned, the milk crate was gone.

“OSHA guidelines,” said the shift supervisor, when he saw her looking around.

“OSHA?”

“Occupational Safety and Health Administration,” he said slowly, as if she were retarded in addition to being short. “That crate isn’t meant to support a human being. Even a small human. If it broke, you could be hurt. Besides, as I said yesterday, it is a security concern.” He smiled as if to imply that he was concerned for her safety, but she knew better.

Back at the counter, Karen felt shorter than ever. She took a social security check from a flabby old man who grinned at her and said, “Hello, down there!” She thought about stilts, wondered if there were such a thing as a leg extension.

She tried to remember the last time she hadn’t been aware of her height. It might have been fifth grade, before the onslaught of puberty, the last year that she could look the world in the eye. Both her
parents were of average height, and for a while she had expected to grow. But only her chest did; otherwise, Karen the ten-year-old shared the same dimensions as Karen the twenty-year-old. Despite this, she believed, as she strained to rise up on her toes, flexing her calves to get her chin level with the bank counter, that life had made her short. There had been a chance for her to be normal, maybe even to be tall, but somehow this had been stolen from her. She believed this even though she knew—vague memories of high school biology—that height was determined, like hair color, like intelligence, by her genes. Her four feet two inches of bone and muscle and flesh had been written inside her, had been destined for her from the moment of conception. Yet, wasn’t there the slightest chance that she could have grown more? Put in the right soil, introduced to the right person, exposed to the proper moments of sunlight and hope, wouldn’t she have stretched to new dimensions?

When five o’clock came, Karen drove home and found the apartment empty. In her closet, she rummaged through her shoes and measured the biggest heels she owned, four inches: barely enough to get her head and shoulders above the counter. She put them on and tottered around the bedroom. They’d been purchased for a friend’s wedding, and she’d worn them for an hour before taking to the dance floor barefoot. Her ankles wobbled as she walked. The shoes were silver, sparkly. She’d look like a whore moonlighting as a teller. Besides, she thought as she took another precarious turn, they were probably against OSHA standards too.

Out in the kitchen, wearing a pair of fleece-lined slippers, Karen sorted through the refrigerator to make a salad and was forming hamburger meat into patties when Eric came home. He pushed through the door in his shit-brown Daylight Bread uniform, dangling a loaf from each hand. “Hey, hey, the breadwinner’s home.” Karen smiled up at him, her hands sunk into the raw meat on the table. “How’d it go today, baby?” He put the loaves on the counter, unbuttoned the uniform shirt and sat at the table across from her.

“Aawful.” Karen flicked the stove burner on and waited for the frying pan to heat. She washed her hands, pushed a chair against the stove, and flipped burgers, her back to Eric, telling him the whole story of the crate and OSHA, the way the other tellers had shied away from her in the lunchroom as if she
had some terrible disease. “They know I’m dead in the water. No one wants to talk to me. I might as well just quit now.” She shoved the burgers around the pan, then slid them onto plates.

Eric stood, transferred the jars of mustard, ketchup, and relish from the fridge to the table, snapped a can free from a six-pack of beer, and sat back down. “Those bastards,” he said, taking a swig.

She could see him puffing up with each swallow, getting bigger and bigger as he thought about her in that bank, the way he felt the world was against them, keeping them down. It was this pot-head mentality that he had, this paranoid belief in conspiracy, that he could be a great man, but the government, or authority in general, kept him from realizing his potential. She spread mustard on the top bun, ketchup on the bottom, then ate her salad quickly, before the juices from the burger could spread across the plate. Seeing this faith – albeit misguided – present in him, she felt the hollowness of her own beliefs, the fruitless desire to be tall, the hope that she could ever, even in the past had the potential to be, anything but short.

“That fucking asshole,” Eric said, his voice muffled by meat and bread. “I’d like to rob his bank, shove a gun in his face. Make him piss his pants.” He swallowed, took another bite. “I don’t even care if I got any money. I just want to show him he’s a piece of shit.”

Karen looked at him; he was staring across the kitchen. She didn’t even need to be here anymore. He was sunk deep into some tall pothead dream of his, something that involved piles of money and women that looked only vaguely like her, reefers the size of cigars. She cleared the plates as he talked about what kind of gun he’d use. He probably thought he was being sweet, protective. From the window by the front door, she could see the sky had gone from gray to black. She pushed the chair up against the counter and washed the dishes slowly.

Behind her, Eric kept on going. “What time of day would be best? When’s he there but there aren’t so many customers? I want it to be just me and him.”

Karen paused in her washing to imagine Eric in a ski mask in the lobby of the bank, a big black gun in his hand. He’d be enough of an idiot that he’d wear his Daylight Bread uniform during the
robbery, complete with the patch that said his name above the pocket. “Eric,” she said, “You’re not going to rob the bank.”

“What the fuck? I thought you hated this guy?”

She didn’t say anything, just kept scrubbing the frying pan. She heard him open the fridge, pop another beer can, heard his footsteps as he walked to the living room and flicked on the TV.

She was reading on the bed, just a trashy romance novel, one that she’d bought in the supermarket checkout line, because the cover – a muscly man cradling a green-gowned woman to his chest, a city in flames behind them – had caught her eye, when Eric came in. He had a beer can, the last of the six pack, if her count was correct, in his hand. With his other hand, he twisted the blinds shut on the window, then put the beer can on his night stand. He undressed quickly, letting his clothes fall on the floor. She stood up, folded his pants neatly, and hung them on the back of a chair. She wasn’t being nice, just practical – if she didn’t do this now, she’d be ironing them in the morning. When she was done, he grabbed at her, catching the waistline of her sweatpants.

“Eric…”

He managed the zipper on her sweatshirt, shuffling the sleeves off her arms, pushing his lips against hers. She thought of excuses as his hands, chilly and damp from holding the beer can, worked their way under her bra. She gave up pushing against his chest, let him do what he wanted. He shoved her back on the bed, an approach that she’d read hundreds and hundreds of times in her novels, the passion, the wildness, the abandonment of sense in the face of pure desire. But he was drunk, his hands shaking slightly, and she wasn’t interested. He gave up on his version of foreplay and simply stripped her of her sweatpants, her underwear, and now, suddenly he was inside her, bumping against her as clumsily as he would bump against the living room furniture if he went to get another beer. As he thrust at her he grunted, “take that” and “yeah sucker,” and she knew he was imagining the shift supervisor and the bank, his arrival there, masked and armed, seeking his vengeance, pointing his gun at the row of tellers, making them cower behind the feeble counter. There’s nowhere to hide. The thought hurt her more than his dick
did, banging against her, the weight of him on her. He was hot and sweaty and she was dry, chilly where their bodies didn’t touch.

Eventually he came to a shuddery halt, slid off, and fell asleep with comic quickness. She did not watch him, as the heroine in her romance novel would have done, did not move the strands of hair from his forehead, did not kiss his cheek with tenderness and gratitude. She did turn off her bedside light, plunging the room into an almost complete darkness, as close to dark as this room got, and padded off to the bathroom. The tub took a few minutes to fill, so she brushed her teeth, waiting as the mirror clouded with steam. The bathroom was all white, boring, some people would say, but Karen liked it; it reminded her of a fresh piece of paper. She felt like she could be anywhere, unlike the rest of apartment, which could only be here. Slipping into the hot water, she had to wait a few moments, submerge herself inch by inch, her skin tingling with pain and then submitting to the heat. Finally, she was all in, up to her neck. The tub was the perfect size. Her feet, legs flat against the bottom, brushed up against the far wall, bracing her at just the point she needed to keep her nose above the water. Her hair floated around her head in wet coils.

The white walls of the bathroom faded away and she was back in the marble of the bank lobby. It is morning, a new start, and she comes in from the break room. She passes the massive door of the vault, its heavy brass wheel, the complicated maze of hinges and valves, pipes and locks, that runs behind a Plexiglas shield, like a model from biology class that shows the muscles and organs beneath the skin. She is fascinated and revolted all at once. She has never seen the vault door open, and this strikes her as one of the saddest things; she will never get to see the wheel turn, the levers slide just so, never get to hear the click and hiss of hydraulics as the door is pushed back on its hinges, never get to glimpse inside. She imagines anachronistic rubies, chests of treasure, the stuff of pirate lore replacing the gray canvas bags of legal tender. She can hear her heels beating out a neat cadence down the hall. The shift supervisor is at his desk; he does not raise his eyes as she enters and takes her place at the counter. Without strain, she can see over the counter’s top; she rests her forearms on the cool granite and looks out into the lobby. The guard by the door raises his hand to her, half wave, half salute, and drives his key into the front door
lock to let in the assemblage that waits for her, ready to offer her envelopes of money, to request the day’s bounty.

She could feel the draught of cold air on her nose before the sound of the door opening penetrated the water. She raised her head enough to clear her eyes and ears of the bath. Eric was there, still naked, one hand on his dick, the other on the wall, as he pissed into the toilet. His eyes squinted against the glaring white, and it was only when he turned to leave that he seemed to register her presence.

“What’re you doing?” His eyes blinked rapidly, as if fending off some assault.

“What clean.”

“What gonna come to bed?”

She slipped down again, waiting for her toes to catch her against the far side of the tub, waiting for him to shuffle off to sleep. But the water had lost its heat, and even when she closed her eyes, she saw nothing but the black inside of herself. She reached down below her ankles, pulled the plug; there was no use staying here now.

The water swirled away and Karen kept her eyes closed, hearing Eric shut the bathroom door. She imagined him climbing into bed, stretching out his legs, how it must feel to have his feet hang off the end of the mattress, to be as large as the world wanted him to be. Long after the water had drained, Karen stood and dried off. Stepping into the darkened bedroom, she retrieved her track suit from the floor and pulled it on. Eric lay on his side, his legs bent, curled up against his chest.

Karen eased the bedroom door shut behind her, crossed the barely moonlit kitchen, and took Eric’s keys from the bowl near the front door. Outside, she heard the sizzle of cars on the highway, not the constant rush of daytime traffic, but a sound more intense and lonely, each car’s passage distinct. The Daylight Bread truck was parked next to her Ford Escort and she poked the key into the lock, grabbed the bar beside the door, and swung herself on board.

She had to stand, propping her back against the seat, in order to reach the pedals and still see out. From the outside, she imagined, it must look like no one was driving, a phantom bread truck. But she could see okay, enough to make her way through the familiar streets, the deserted avenues. The
supermarket, only mildly lit; the auto dealership, cars waiting; the bank, her bank, tucked up against the night. All she could see was the red glow of the exit signs, guideposts, the promise of safety, but there was no one inside. She took her foot off the accelerator and let the truck glide into a parking spot, felt it bump up against the concrete divider at the top of the space.

Now that she was here, she didn’t know what to do. If she had a key, she’d go inside, leave something nasty for the shift manager to find in his desk. But of course she didn’t have a key. Though she could ram the truck through the window, that would be the end – there would be an alarm and a mess and she would still be here. Still, she gripped the wheel with her hands, squeezing the plastic, staring at the dull black glass that hid the bank’s lobby from her view.

The coolness of the night seeped inside the truck cab, draining whatever courage or cowardice had brought her to this moment. Leaving the keys in the ignition, Karen stepped down and walked along the side of the truck. From this angle, the Daylight Bread girl looked grotesque, unrecognizable. Her mouth was a pink blodge, like a watermelon slice. The butter on the bread – from a distance, a neat pat – appeared as a crooked yellow mountain. All the artist’s tricks to make the picture seem real, alive, three-dimensional, were rendered obsolete by her proximity. Wasn’t that always the way? The closer she got to what she wanted, the more horrible it seemed, until it bore no resemblance to what it was supposed to be. And whose fault was that? Her own. The world was best viewed at arm’s length, but her arms weren’t long enough to keep her properly distant.

She turned her back on the truck, on the bank, and cut across the parking lot to the sidewalk. Tomorrow morning, Eric would get up for the early morning bread run, delivering loaves that nursing homes would turn to toast, that school cafeterias would fill with processed cheese, that an old man would tear to pieces and toss to the ducks. He’d wonder if the truck had been stolen, belatedly realize that she wasn’t there either, but her car was. She imagined him, crunched up in her little sedan, knees banging against the underside of the dashboard, hurtling towards the bank. For herself, she walked away.
Hailey Harris, 
Painter of “Alluring Display”

Hailey D. Harris is a student at Cameron University double majoring in graphic design and printmaking. She has always been interested in the fine arts but was not able to fully experience it until she attended college. Since her first years as an art student she has grown to appreciate all types of mediums and enjoys experimenting with anything from traditional art to digital art. With her printmaking degree she has become very successful with her linocuts; all of her works are original hand cut and pulled prints. Through her experimentations Hailey has discovered an interest in the world of Entomology, and has looked for new and interesting ways to capture the enigmatic beauty of this impalpable realm in her most recent works. This past November she was recently accepted into the “Oklahoma: Centerfold” Regional Juried Show at the Leslie Powell Gallery with her piece “Alluring Display”, and has been awarded the Leslie Powell Scholarship for the 2013-2014 academic year. Her Cameron activities and achievements include the Laura Fields Scholarship, McMahon Scholarship, Aggie Ambassadors, Cameron Art Guild, Aggie Sharp Start, Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, The Who’s Who Award, and the Top 20 Students Award.

Paul Stenis, 
Author of “Darknuts”

Paul Stenis has published stories in *Muse & Stone* and *Limestone*. He hopes to place stories in journals without stone in the title soon.
"Alluring Display" by Hailey Harris
DARKNUTS by Paul Stenis

Brad Caldwell pedaled toward Whittier Middle School in spotless khakis, a short-sleeved plaid shirt, and tasseled loafers. Rubber bands held the cuffs of his pants to his ankles to protect them from the greasy bike chain. He touched the bridge of his nose nervously as he approached the parking lot, used to the glasses once affixed to his face with an elastic strap. But it had been months now (four to be exact) since Nathan Mungle had broken them with a dodge ball. Brad still remembered the pungent taste of the rubber ball on his lips. But that was at Park Lane, his elementary school back in Lawton. Now he wore contacts, and today was his first day of seventh grade in his new home of Norman, Oklahoma. More importantly it was the day his brother Gideon planned to buy The Legend of Zelda, the newest game for the Nintendo Entertainment System. Brad couldn’t wait to play the game.

He wasn’t particularly sure why heads turned as he rode past these Norman kids. Why the sunlight caught on their metallic smiles as he passed them along the sidewalks. Did they know how stupid they looked in their brand name clothes? Did they have any idea he had drawn a perfect Tektite on the inside flap of his Trapper Keeper three-ring binder? These dillweeds probably had no idea Tektites were one-eyed spiderlike enemies dwelling in the Overworld of Zelda. He had only just learned it himself from Gideon’s Official Nintendo Player’s Guide.

His bike absolutely kicked ass. He admired the chrome-framed Mongoose, blue tires and matching blue grips as he pushed it through the gate at the edge of the school parking lot. Some delinquent had tricked out the bike before Brad’s dad bought it at a police auction. The bell was Brad’s touch. Three boys loitering nearby grinned at him and then at the bike as Brad laced a chain through the frame and scrambled the combination lock. Brad’s dad had told him a million times not to let other kids ride it, but sometimes other kids didn’t ask permission.
Brad removed the rubber bands from the cuffs of his pants, checked the digital watch he had programmed to signal the start and end of each class period, and then scanned the parking lot for teachers. He saw none. The time between arrival and the first bell would be unsupervised. Figures, Brad thought. The three boys who had been admiring his bike now stood inside the gate. They weren’t much smaller than Brad’s brother Gideon, who was a freshman at Norman High.

“Hey, kid,” said the one in the middle. “Let me ride your bike.” He had a stud in his left ear and blonde hair cut short on top and long in the back. The guys at his flanks wore red polo shirts tucked into expensive blue jeans. Their haircuts were high and tight.

Here we go, Brad thought. “My dad won’t let me.”

One of the minions shoved Brad to the ground while the other yanked on the lock. “Hey Cameron,” he said. “It’s got a combo.”

Cameron was watching the other minion dump Brad’s lunchbox from his backpack. “Wakka Wakka,” the minion said. On the back was a picture of Fozzie Bear with a banana in his ear.

Cameron nodded, and the minion tossed the lunchbox into the drainage ditch on the other side of the fence. Brad’s Kermit the Frog thermos and peanut butter and jelly sandwich spilled out into the water.

“Hey!” Brad shouted.

“I don’t want to see you at this school again,” Cameron said. “You’re a fucking disgrace.” And then they walked slowly away.

Brad picked himself up and took deep breaths as he collected his backpack. In an effort to blend in, he ventured toward a group of boys in silver and blue soccer regalia. The word “Azzurri” was stitched into the collars of their shirts and their admittedly awesome-looking shorts. In unison, the Azzurri boys picked up their duffle bags and moved to another part of the parking lot.
Brad looked at his shoes for a time, then wandered slowly through the parking lot and tried not to look as scared as he felt. He settled near a hefty kid with a trombone case and some serious pimples. He looked at Brad from the corner of his eye and edged closer, but neither of them said a word at first, agreeing that silence and invisibility were essential. Finally Brad noticed a Nintendo sticker on the trombone case and said, “Zelda comes out today.”

“I know,” Trombone boy said. “My little brother won’t shut up about it.”

“You do me a disservice. Your disingenuous complaint reveals that you do in fact share your younger sibling’s anticipation.”

Trombone boy gave him a long look. “Maybe,” he said.

Brad’s watch beeped, the bell rang, and the cliques came together like an amoeba. As his would-be friend ambled away, Brad raised an imaginary flagon toward his back and muttered, “Safe travels, Trombone Boy.”

To Brad’s relief he got inside and packed his things into his locker without incident. But when he went to the boys’ room and settled in before a urinal, someone shoved him from behind. Warm pee soaked his pants and thigh. Brad managed to zip up before being socked in the nose and shoved to the floor.

One of the red-poloed minions from the bike racks picked Brad up. Cameron leaned against the sink with an unlit cigarette hanging from the edge of his mouth. “Where’d you get those shoes?”

“I don’t remember,” Brad said.

The minions laughed, but Cameron only looked on. “I don’t want to see that crap on you again. I don’t want to see you in a collared short-sleeve shirt unless it’s Ralph Lauren. And I don’t ever want to see you in an elastic waistband.” He paused. “We only want certain kids at this school. Understand?”
Brad used his backpack to hide the stains on his pants on his way to class. His teacher Mrs. Carver announced that she was seventy-seven years old, and since her husband, a veteran of the Second World War, had passed away, she had been doing just fine. After calling roll, she pointed to a student in the first row and said, “Page 17. From the top.” Then she paced the room, roll sheet in hand, and mumbled to herself. When she felt one student had read enough, she called out the name of another. Brad wasn’t surprised when she stopped next to his seat. He had cleaned himself up as best he could, but he still smelled like pee, his nose was swollen, and blood had dried on his upper lip. He also had gas. As Mrs. Carver stood there, he released a fart so carefully it whispered through his asshole like a sigh.

“What happened to your face?” she said. Who knew her feeble voice could reach such a volume? The reading stopped. Heads turned.

In the ensuing silence, Brad noticed a strip of paper taped to the metal clamp on Mrs. Carver’s clipboard that read, “The beatings will continue until morale improves.” Brad couldn’t bring himself to answer.

“Would you like a referral?” she asked.

“That would not be ideal,” he said. The class laughed.

She scribbled on a notepad, ripped off the top sheet, and pushed it toward him. “Go on.”

When he got to the office, he showed the slip to the secretary, who pointed to a seat near her desk. Brad was scared. He had never been sent to the office. His parents would be furious.

A towering man in a black tie and a short-sleeved shirt emerged from a doorway and inspected Brad with a weary expression. The fluorescent lights reflected from his forehead, his crew cut a poor
cover for the curve of his skull. He asked Brad his name, and ushered him into his office. He examined the slip of paper. “We take fighting pretty seriously here,” he said. “How did you manage that one?”

“Some guys jumped me by the bike racks.”

“Do you know the Warrior motto?”

Brad shook his head.

“Respect.”

No kidding, Brad thought. “I’m a straight-A student,” he said. “You can ask my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Oakleaf. She’s in Lawton where I used to live. She was an avid collector of kites. On the last day of school she brought them all to school and we flew them on the basketball court. Mine got caught—”

“If I see you in here again, I’ll suspend you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you have a change of clothes?”

“I don’t,” said Brad.

“I could suspend you now, you know.”

Brad said nothing.

The vice principal’s phone rang. As he moved around his desk to answer it he pointed at Brad and said: “I think we’re through here. Don’t let me see you in here again.”
When Brad burst into the apartment after school, the place smelled of chlorine. Gideon’s wet practice suits dripped from the bathroom doorknob. In their bedroom, Gideon was sprawled across a blue beanbag, playing Zelda. He wore sweatpants that were too small and a dusting of saltine crumbs on his bare chest. Gideon did nothing but eat, sleep, swim, and play video games. His eyes were barely open and his bleached hair stuck out like straw. The skin around his eyes was creased from the suction of his swim goggles.

The desire in Brad to play the game increased his heart rate. Strewn across the bedroom floor were the golden box and the instruction booklet, both of which Brad quickly retrieved for study. He was hypnotized by the fantasy landscape of Zelda, but he sensed he shouldn’t ask to play right away. Gideon moved Link, an elfin boy with pointed ears and a green jerkin, between round green shrubs in perfect rows. Brad loved the sound of Link’s footsteps as he descended into a dungeon. He loved the way Link’s sword screamed across the screen when Link’s heart meter was full. He loved the sound of the boomerang collecting rupees and hearts. Gideon guided Link through the Level 1 dungeon and took out Aquamentus, a dragon that shot a trio of fireballs across the room. When Link retrieved his prize, the golden Triforce, he lifted the shining triangle above his head in triumph. Brad couldn’t resist any longer.

“Let me play,” he said.

“No.”

Pressure built against the backs of his eyes, but he climbed to the top bunk and compared the Zelda instruction booklet to The Official Nintendo Player’s Guide and pretended to feel fine. Finally Gideon looked up at him. “What happened to you?”

“Oh.”

“Have you been crying?”

He didn’t answer.
“Were you in a fight?”

The truth was Zelda had made him forget the day, but now that Gideon had brought it up, he felt bitter again. “Can’t you see my nose is swollen?”

Gideon paused the game and leaned in for a closer look. “Not really,” he said. “If you want my advice, let whoever wants to kick your ass, kick your ass and be done with it. You’ll survive. If you bitch and moan like a pussy, he’ll just do it again.”

Brad thought about that. “That’s idiotic.”

Gideon scoffed. “So? It’s true.”

“How many times does it take?”

“How many times does what take?”

“Before he leaves me alone?”

Gideon shrugged and unpaused the game.

“Should I tell Mom and Dad?”

“No way. They’ll screw things up completely.”

“Give me a ride to school tomorrow.”

“Can’t. Swim practice.”

At the dinner table, Brad hoped his parents would notice the damage to his face, but no one said anything. Finally, while his dad scooped out the banana splits, he told them he had gotten into a fight.

“With who?” Mom asked.

Gideon kicked Brad’s shin underneath the table.
“I don’t know their names.”

“‘Their’?” Mom asked.

His mother escorted him to school the next morning. In the schoolyard Cameron’s minions laughed when they saw them. Cameron winked and held up his fist. Most of the other students didn’t see them or didn’t care, but Brad knew the damage was done. Gideon had been right. When they got inside the school, he and his mom went to the office and waited.

The vice principal with the buzz cut appeared and led them into his office. This time Brad noticed the nameplate next to his office door said “Mr. McMahon.” They sent Brad to class before the conference began, and he didn’t cross paths with Cameron or his minions that day, nor did his parents talk to him after the conference. By the time he got home, he had decided Gideon had been wrong after all. Mom had made a difference.

Gideon was in their room playing Zelda again. He had gotten the blue ring, which meant enemies could only inflict half damage. He killed three Pols Voices, elusive cat heads with long whiskers, with one arrow from Link’s bow.

“What dungeon are you on?” Brad asked.

“I don’t fucking know,” Gideon said.

“Mom talked to the vice principal today.”

Gideon scoffed. “Mr. McMahon?”

“Yeah.”

“That guy’s a tool-bag. He’s probably on the bully’s payroll.”

“Yeah, right.”
“I’m not joking,” Gideon said. “McMahon coaches Azzurri, the under-fourteen club soccer team. Half the jocks in the school are on it. You think he’s going to cross one of those parents? Dream on. Buy yourself a jock strap.”

“They didn’t mess with me today.”

“And this kid saw Mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus.”

“Give me a ride to school tomorrow.”

“I told you. I have swim practice.”

--

On Sunday morning, as they passed Whittier Middle School on the way to church, Brad felt something essential escaping his body, like red from Link’s heart meter. The other kids in his Sunday School went to Whittier too, and seeing them would remind him of Cameron. That was part of it. But mostly he felt the same self-consciousness and embarrassment that filled him before school every day, like he was the butt of a joke about to be told again. “I don’t want to go to Sunday School,” he called from the back of their white van. “I want to go home.”

“No,” his father boomed from the front seat. And that was that. Brad couldn’t find the words to explain how humiliated he felt. He didn’t blame his parents, or even Cameron. It was simply too hard to explain, and even if he could explain it, he didn’t think anyone would understand.

His Sunday School teacher was an obese college girl named Abby Winkler. She also helped their dad lead the youth group, and all the adults thought she was “fun.” She wore baggy clothes, a lot of jewelry, and gave the other kids the impression she really wanted a boyfriend. She showed up six minutes
late and sat in a large plush chair. The four students, including Brad, sat in folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle around Abby. Elias Maxwell was a seventh grader too. Alison Johnson and Mark Hansborough were eighth graders. Abby bent down with a grunt and pulled out her activity book.


In this game, Abby would read a situation aloud from a book and ask, “What would Jesus do?” Then they’d talk about how Jesus would handle the situation. The worst thing about the game was that no one in their right mind would ever handle the situations the way Jesus would. This week the first situation was a familiar one. A bunch of kids are hanging out at an unsupervised party after school. One of them lights up a joint. WWJD? So after the students exchanged eye contact, Alison Johnson burst out impatiently, “Jesus would tell them drugs were wrong and leave the party.” Elias Maxwell whispered in Brad’s ear, “Jesus would take a hit.” Brad blushed.

Then Abby flipped to the back of the book and closed it with a sigh. “A kid you don’t know very well, a new kid, let’s say, gets pushed down in the lunch line,” she said, making one up on the spot. “You witness this along with several other students. The students point and laugh. One of them pours their milk carton over the kid’s head. What would Jesus do?”

Elias Maxwell whispered in Brad’s ear, “Fart in his face.” Brad pulled away.


Silence ensued. They all looked at one another.

“I bet Brad would know,” said Alison Johnson.

“Yeah,” said Mark Hansborough. “He got beat up the other day.”

“No, I didn’t,” Brad said.

Another silence. “Is this true?” Abby asked.
Brad shook his head.

“Were there witnesses?”

“Nope,” said Alison Johnson. “It’s happened before, too. The teachers know about it. The vice principal. All of them. But no one does anything.”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that,” Abby said.

Alison Johnson laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“I think we’re getting a little off topic,” Abby said.

“Don’t worry, Brad,” Elias Maxwell said. “If Jesus were there, I’m sure those guys would kick his ass too.”

Everyone laughed except for Brad and Abby Winkler.

Abby asked Brad to come to her office after class. She gave him an orange soda from her mini-fridge and smiled. This small transgression, if it was one, was supposed to endear him to her, Brad realized. He popped the soda open and took a drink. “Ah,” he said. “Refreshing.”

When she asked Brad what was happening at school, he didn’t name names, but he told her everything else, and the words came easily and with relief. Abby sat very still and nodded often. “That must have been hard for you,” she said. “That’s terrible.” But soon she glanced above him at the clock.

She pulled her Bible from a desk drawer, and flipped to a dog-eared section of Matthew. Then she set the book in front of him, and urged him to read the underlined verses aloud.

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.
But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you that you may be the sons of your father in heaven.

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

“I don’t understand,” Brad said when he had finished reading the passages. “What do I do?”

“Pray,” she said. Brad started to laugh but stopped when he saw that she was serious.

--

Brad soon learned to recognize the perfect conditions for taking dumps. The school had many restrooms, but he could never be sure where Cameron and his thugs would be, and since his parents had visited the school, the bullies had stepped up their attacks just as Gideon had predicted. Still, they rarely went out of their way, so Brad had learned to avoid them. He knew they sometimes skipped class in the bathroom near the gym, but other times they loitered elsewhere to avoid getting caught. He knew Cameron’s fourth-period class was PE, and the gym was at the opposite end of the school from Brad’s fourth-period Art class, and so, for a couple of days, he shat in peace.

But on the third day they were waiting for him, and it felt like his first day of school all over again. Cameron held an unlit cigarette between his lips. His minions in their red polos and white shoes were wrapping the stalls in toilet paper.

“Hello, Brad,” Cameron said. Each minion took an arm and they dunked his head into the toilet and flushed. When they lifted him from the bowl, Brad’s head throbbed where it had struck porcelain and water burned his throat. One of the minions unzipped and pissed into the toilet near him, and urine spattered his cheeks and caught in his eyelashes. The smell triggered his gag reflex and Brad, filled with
anger so intense he could hardly see, lashed out blindly. But the minions slipped away. Their laughter echoed over the tile and faded down the hall.

This time he didn’t clean himself up. He began the long walk of shame to Mr. McMahon’s office. He could hardly see where he was going, and bumped into Trombone Boy, who handed him a note. Then Brad continued on his way, worried that he might recover from his injuries before Mr. McMahon could see them.

When Brad got to the office he couldn’t bring himself to speak. Mr. McMahon examined Brad’s forehead. “That’s quite a bump,” he said. “What happened?”

He wanted to tell him everything, but he remembered what Gideon had said, and realized he had messed up before by telling his parents and letting them be seen at school. Pressure built at the back of his throat, and he started to cry. “I fell,” he said.

“Uh huh,” said Mr. McMahon. “You hurt your head?”

Brilliant observation, Brad thought. He nodded.

Mr. McMahon walked to the front of his desk and leaned against it. Brad had the sensation of standing outside himself, seeing what the vice principal saw. A trembling boy, knees slightly bent, face flushed with rage.

“Take a deep breath.”

Brad followed Mr. McMahon’s advice, and his trembling lessened, and he understood his feelings better than he had on the way to church. He wasn’t angry at the injustice of the situation, at Cameron or his minions, or even at the teachers or vice principal. He was angry at the idiots who made the rules. In Zelda your heart meter grew with your experience. With the acquisition of each gold triangular piece of the Triforce, Link grew stronger while the monsters of Hyrule stayed the same so Link could venture into
ever more dangerous areas of the world. Life was more like trying to fight a Dodongo with a wooden sword.

Mr. McMahon led Brad to a chair. He pulled an ottoman over and sat near him. Brad noticed for the first time a picture on the wall of Mr. McMahon with a group of his soccer players. Cameron Claymore smiled from the back row, just a regular kid like the others.

“Who did this to you?” Mr. McMahon asked.

“I told you,” Brad said. “I fell.”

“Your Sunday School teacher dropped by. A Ms. Winkler?”

A lot of good that did, Brad thought.

“She told me what happened before, but she said you wouldn’t tell her who was responsible. We can’t help you, Brad, if you don’t tell us everything.”

Brad said nothing.

“Listen, son,” he said. “I have to suspend you for fighting. Those are the rules. You might as well get the other guys, too.”

Brad glanced once more at the picture, but forced his eyes to his shoes. He imagined pointing at Cameron Claymore but decided not to. Whether this was bravery or cowardice, he wasn’t sure.

Mr. McMahon suspended him.

The note from Trombone Boy was a pencil drawing of a scene from Zelda: Link thrusting his sword through the eye of a Darknut. Darknuts were knights with horns on their helmets and crosses on their shields. You could only defeat Darknuts in the game with blows to their backs or flanks. In
Trombone Boy’s picture, the Darknut’s helmet had fallen to the ground to reveal a boyish face. Gray blood spilled from the knight’s head.

---

That night Gideon kept dying in the eighth dungeon. He had to maneuver Link through a room of Darknuts and bomb the opposite wall to face a four-headed Gleeok, but he always died before he reached the Gleeok. Brad knew Gideon was going about it wrong. At 12:57 am Gideon maneuvered Link to the room full of blue Darknuts a fourth time, then paused the game to take a leak. Brad seized his chance. He crept from the top bunk as quietly as he could and unpause the game. He maneuvered Link through the swarm of Darknuts and placed a bomb at the center of the north wall. The bomb detonated in a puff of smoke and revealed a secret passage leading to the room with the four-headed Gleeok.

In the hallway he heard the low voice of his father scold Gideon for staying up too late, followed by a response from Gideon. His father had the last word.

Gideon was back. “What the hell?” he said. “You got past it?”

In his excitement Brad attacked the Gleeok too aggressively and died.

“Fuck it,” Gideon said. “We have to go to bed anyway.”

“Can I play again tomorrow?”

But Gideon was looking toward the hallway. “What’s the deal with dad? I can’t seem to get on his good side.”

“He’s kind of like Darth Vader without Jedi powers. He likes to think he can do the Jedi mind trick. Anyway, he just wants you to obey.”

“Why should I?”
“Because he’s our dad.”

Gideon considered that. “That’s not enough,” he said.

“Can I have a ride to school tomorrow?”

“All right.”

Zelda returned to the title screen and the music was the sound of Brad’s blissful daydreams spilling over the edge of a cliff.

--

Brad got the lightest punishment possible for fighting, one day of in-school suspension. That morning Gideon lent Brad jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt and drove him to school in the white van with the bass cranked high enough to rattle the speakers.

When they pulled into the parking lot, Gideon asked Brad to point Cameron out to him, but the bully was nowhere in sight. Gideon turned to Brad and said, “It doesn’t matter. I can’t fight your battles for you. If I kick his ass today, he’ll come at you tomorrow. If I kick his ass tomorrow, he’ll come at you the next day. Understand? Whatever you do, just keep showing up. That’s all you can do. I have nothing more to tell you.”

“I’m tired of being taught a lesson.”

“Then learn something.”

Brad got out of the van, and Gideon drove away. That’s when Cameron appeared. One of the minions pushed Brad to the asphalt, and some of the other students gathered to watch. Cameron stood over Brad with his arms crossed.

“What’s the matter?” Brad shouted. “Can’t fight me alone?”
Cameron flushed and looked at the kids gathered around. He pushed his minion aside and lifted Brad by the shirt. Brad remained calm and still, and then twisted crazily, his fists flailing against the bully’s face. Cameron leaned back to avoid the weak blows, and released Brad’s shirt. Brad made a run for it, but the crowd was thick, and he bounced among the bodies until some kid he didn’t know grabbed him and held him.

Cameron caught Brad and pushed him to the ground. He straddled him and hit him in the face and stomach. Brad held his arms up to protect himself, but the minions pinned his arms to his sides. Cameron kept hitting him. At first the pain triggered waves of adrenalin, but the blows were strong and he soon felt blurry and tired. Brad was about to stop struggling when he heard a heavy thud. The blows stopped. Brad pushed himself up to find Trombone Boy hitting Cameron with his instrument case. Then Mr. McMahon was there and he broke up the fight.

They all breathed heavily. The crowd circled the principal and the three boys, and a buzz of excitement passed through them.

“Cameron,” Mr. McMahon said. “Did you start this?”

“No,” Cameron said. “This little shit attacked me with his trombone case.”

“That’s a lie,” Brad said.

“You’re twice the size of both these kids,” McMahon said. “How did Brad get his face beaten in?”

“I don’t know,” Cameron said. “Maybe you better come up with something. I’m out of here.” Cameron pushed his way through the crowd.
Mr. McMahon let him go. “Did anyone see anything?” He pointed to a kid nearby. “How about you?” The kid put his hands in his pockets and walked away. Brad saw Alison Johnson from his Sunday school class, but she looked away in embarrassment.

Turned out in-school suspension was a breeze, and David, aka Trombone Boy, kept issues of Nintendo Power in his backpack. They read them when they were left alone, which was basically all the time. David had broken Cameron Claymore’s nose. They would need all the friends they could get when they were allowed back into the real world.

When Brad got home from school that day, he went straight to his room and turned on the Nintendo. He listened to the Legend of Zelda intro music for a few seconds, then pressed start and typed in a name for his version of Link, BRAD, in the slot below GIDEON. He guided Link into the first cave, and the old man inside said, “IT’S DANGEROUS TO GO ALONE! TAKE THIS.” Link lifted the wooden sword above his head with a smile, and with the triumphant trill of the game Brad felt a thrill pass through his aching body.
Nels Hanson,

Author of “Night and Morning” and “The Other Valley”

Nels Hanson has worked as a farmer, teacher, and contract writer/ editor. He graduated from UC Santa Cruz and the U of Montana and his fiction received the San Francisco Foundation’s James D. Phelan Award. His stories have appeared in Antioch Review, Texas Review, Black Warrior Review, Southeast Review, Montreal Review, and other journals. "Now the River's in You," which appeared in Ruminate Magazine, was nominated for a 2010 Pushcart Prize, and "No One Can Find Us," in Ray's Road Review, has been nominated for the 2012 Pushcart Prizes. Poems have appeared in Poetry Porch, Atticus Review, Red Booth Review, Meadowlands Review, Emerge Literary Review, Jellyfish Whispers, and other magazines.
BEHOLD A PALE HORSE!

The white stallion was galloping across the fields, crazy, breaking down vineyards trailing long snags of stakes and tangled wire, felling orchards, crashing through windows and walls of houses dragging clotheslines with shirts and dresses still pinned to the plastic-covered cable, the metal T’s collapsing and following along. The dazzling horse—was it Dancer?—grew bigger as it ran as if it ate what it destroyed, now heading for the blue gum grove that suddenly appeared as grass around its knees. Its great hooves and teeth flashed white as it tried to escape the barn it pulled on the rope, the unlatched door swinging shut, open and shut. A hawk with wings like a rainbow, bright blue
and green and yellow and red, with rose and then violet
deep lavender at the tips, the pinions, circled overhead

waiting its chance as Delmus raised the gun to shoot
the horse. *Bang!* I smelled gun smoke, my eyes
and throat burned. But the hawk was a kite, made

of paper, the string broke and it flew straight up
to the moon that was full, red, the color of blood.

Or was it the sun? Was this the Last Day? The horse

raced off, Delmus hadn’t shot it, only the rope, a perfect
aim. The hawk was what the horse was running from

not the barn, the barn had become the hawk, it had

been all along— I’d awakened with pounding heart,

the radium clock on the night table said three. Delmus

hadn’t come to bed. Where was he? Drunk? I’d lain
listening to the silence of the house, for his boot-steps

in the hall, for rain to ruin the raisins. I didn’t sleep

till nearly six. Now I stood at the open refrigerator,

chill air against my face, on the milk carton Hopalong

Cassidy’s white horse Topper gleaming in the bulb’s glow,

at attention, tame and saddled, innocent of fear or rage.
Ying Cui,

Author of “Traitor and Patriot”

Ying Cui is a graduate student at the University of Georgia, specializing in Language & Literacy Education. She is originally from China and loves integrating her experience in China when she writes poems.
TRAITOR AND PATRIOT by Ying Cui

Anti-Japanese protests erupted in more than a dozen Chinese cities on Sunday after Japanese government decided to buy the disputed Diaoyu Islands. But some of the protests turned to be violence.

--- China Daily, August 29, 2012

“Traitors! Get out! Shame on your Toyota!”

pricking tires, smashing windshield

“Patriots! Please! My baby is in the car!”

A bleeding skull, frightened cry.

“Traitors! Dirty baseness! How dare you take savage cuisine?”

Barbarian’s Hibachi grill, sick sashimi

“Patriots! Please! We won’t take it. Never!

punching proprietor, dragging-off diners.

“Traitors! Cursed souls! No Japanese in China!

besiege ambassador, rob service staff

“Patriots! Please! I promise I’ll quit my job tomorrow!

helpless tear, despair sigh.
Frank Scozzari,
Author of “iWarriors”

IWARRIORS by Frank Scozzari

The image shook as Amar tried to hold his hands steady. He shifted left and then right, and finally centering in the small digital screen was the image of a man, gravely injured or dead, lying face down in the street. From a concrete building across the way, a long piece of rebar reached out and tried to pull the wounded man to safety. The rebar came from an open doorway, from which the shadow of a man laid across the tile floor.

Amar took a deep breath and clicked ‘video.’

He watched through the screen as the piece of rebar finally hooked the wounded man’s upper arm and began to drag him toward the shelter of the building. But the wounded man rolled and the piece of rebar had to come back and find another place to hook. The end of the rebar was conveniently bent like a horseshoe, and reaching across the body, it found a grasp beneath the wounded man’s arm, and again, the rebar began to drag the wounded man toward the shelter of the doorway on the far side of the street. All the while Amar focused on keeping the image centered in the small digital screen, and keeping his hands steady.

He stood in a building foyer, out of the sights of the sniper, with both feet planted shoulder width apart and his arms straight out before him. He could hear someone yelling down the street, but he could not make out the words. A distant gunshot caused him to flinch but he quickly re-centered the image and resumed his stance. Slowly, the rebar worked, pulling, tugging, slipping, reaching back for another grasp, and finally heaving the injured man to the safety of the building.

Amar looked at the face of his smartphone, touched the save option, watched for the confirmation, and then tucked the phone in his blue jeans. He disappeared into the doorway behind him, hurried through an empty corridor, and came out on the opposite street a block away. He looked in both directions, and when he saw that all was clear, he sprinted down the sidewalk in the opposite direction from which he had come.
After three blocks he slowed to a brisk walk, turned a corner, and stopped mid-block beneath an open window.

Amar made a whistling sound. A head popped out from the window, looked in both directions down the street, and then down at Amar. Amar tossed the smart phone up, and the man in the window caught it using both hands. The man disappeared into the window, the window closed, and Amar walked inconspicuously down the street toward his apartment.

Inside the building, the smartphone was hurried down a hallway to a secluded room. There, was a makeshift office designed to receive and transmit video dispatches to the media world outside. Two men sat at two tables with a laptop computer in front of each of them. The smartphone was promptly handed over to the nearest computer operator, who promptly connected it to a USB cord, and with a stroke of the keyboard, the video was uploaded onto the laptop computer. A webpage was opened, a message link was clicked, and the man began typing in English. The other two men watched over his shoulder as the message formed on the screen:

“Freedom fighters try to rescue fallen protester, shot by Assad’s henchmen, in Hama, Syria. 4th August, 2011.”

Using the mouse, the man attached the video to the email, clicked the send button, and the message was sent out via satellite internet. The recipient’s email address - Al Jazeera News - flashed back on the screen, confirming the message had been successfully sent.

The three men looked at one another and exchanged congratulatory smiles.

***

Amar entered his apartment to find his room-mate, twenty-six-year old Murhaf Rahman in the kitchen fixing lunch; a sandwich of pita bread, humus, and meat. Leaning against the counter was an AK-47, recently smuggled in across the Turkish border, compliments of Turkey’s Military High Command.

“I told you I don’t want guns in here,” Amar said.

Murhaf took the rifle, opened the kitchen closet, and tucked the gun away inside. He then resumed fixing his sandwich.
“We having a good day, brother?” Murhaf asked.

“Yes, it has been a good day, brother,” Amar replied.

Brothers they were, but not in blood. It was the five-month-old rebellion that bonded them; though they had differing views on exactly how the rebellion should be conducted. Murhaf, a member of the Free Syrian Army, was committed to taking up arms while Amar, one among a self-proclaimed group of internet warriors, relied on technology and internet connectivity in their fight against Damascus. Here, in a country where foreign media was banned and local coverage was severely restricted, the only way the outside world could see what was really happening in Syria was through the efforts of Amar and his comrades. Until now, the best they could do was upload grisly homemade videos onto YouTube; of victims mangled by gunfire, and other unsubstantiated events, via makeshift satellite transmitters or flash cards smuggled across the border into Turkey.

Despite their different ways, Amar and Murhaf were both freedom fighters; until then, known to the World’s media as the Opposition - Syria’s anti-regime protesters.

But Amar knew it was not really an opposition, it is the whole of Syrian society.

“We will be meeting this evening,” he said in English. “I would like you to come.”

Murhaf was surprised at the invitation since the two had frequently exchanged their opposing views on the rebellion.

“I want you to see what we do. I want you to meet Hazem,” Amar continued.

“I think it would be a waste of time,” Murhaf said.

“He is a wise man. If you hear his words…”

“Why? Because he speaks English?”

“No, because he speaks words that make better sense than any man I know.”

“I’m sorry. I do not understand this kind of warfare,” Murhaf said.

“How do you know unless you come and listen?”

“It is time wasted.”
Amar stared at Murhaf in a pleading effort. “Perhaps you will find it in yourself to join us brother?”

Murhaf said nothing.

“We will be meeting at the safe house on Friday,” Amar said.

And he said nothing more.

On Friday the meeting took place as scheduled. Hazem Saleh, the leader of this rogue band of cell-phone journalists, stood at the front of an improvised meeting room. He was a distinguished-looking man, middle-aged with graying hair and a graying beard, and was dressed in a business suit which had obviously not been pressed for some time. He had worked as a media supervisor for the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression before it had been completely abolished by Damascus, and had been a senior foreign correspondent for BBC World News, before foreign news had been outlawed. He had since utilized his skills to organize and orchestrate media coverage to the outside world, trying to bring some sense of professionalism to a band of gypsies.

There were several men seated in metal folding chairs, among them Amar. Near an opened widow was a portable, twenty-inch satellite dish pointed skyward. It had been skillfully mounted on a camera tripod and positioned far enough from the window so that it could not be seen from the street below. A wire ran from it to a box of wires on a nearby table.

Hazem addressed the men in Arabic.

“It is a good day, my friends, my brothers. The sun is out. We are alive. And the fate of Syria is securely in our hands. The longer the revolution lasts, the better chance we have for freedom.”

A noise came from the rear of the room and all eyes turned back to see Murhaf standing in the doorway.

“Welcome brother,” Hazem said.

Amar greeted Murhaf with a smile and offered him a seat, but Murhaf found a place against the back wall where he leaned his shoulder and remained silent.
Hazem took the laptop, opened it, turned it on, and set it on the table. As the screen lit up he turned it so that all in the room could see. He then clicked on a desktop icon.

On the screen appeared Al-Jazeera English showing grainy images from a mobile phone of detainees being beaten by Syrian soldiers. The reception, which was poor to begin with, went hazy and then vanished. A young man sitting next to Hazem near the front of the room got up and played with the satellite dish until the feed came back and the images came in clearly.

Hazem clicked on another icon and a second video began to play. Amar quickly recognized it to be the video stream he had captured on his smartphone; that of the long piece of rebar reaching out for the wounded man. Along the bottom of the screen within a blue stripe were the words, BBC Worldwide News. The announcer, a very British-looking, well-dressed, woman with blonde hair, spoke in King’s English: “President Bashar Assad’s bloody crackdown on protesters has taken an ominous turn over the weekend. In the city of Hama, an armored attack on thousands of protesters killed at least 150 civilians on Sunday. There were also reports of attacks by the army in at least four other cities with dozens more killed. The increasing violence has raised eyebrows in the West. The number of people killed in the bloody repression of an uprising against the government in Syria has now risen to at least thirty-five thousand, awakening leaders of the international community…”

“It is exactly what we need!” Hazem said. “To open the eyes of the West, to find support of the international community. It is our path, our way to freedom, and we are the window to the world, God’s spies on earth.” Hazem’s eyes searched and found Amar. “And thanks be to brother Amar, whose courage and steady hand has brought us this recognition.”

Hazem turned back to the computer screen and watched for a moment as the announcer continued. “Once-friendly nations have now criticized President Bashar al-Assad…” the announcer’s voice spoke. “And French President Nicolas Sarkozy has demanded his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad to step down for overseeing massacres of his own people.”
Hazem gazed across the room, his eyes smiling. They had secured an audience in the Arabic world already with many news reels airing on Al Arabiya. Now, they had found an English audience as well.

Hazem turned the screen off.

“It is success, my friends,” he said. “It is a new milestone. Now it’s only a matter of time and Assad will fall.” His eyes glanced down at the table-top. “And today, we have been afforded a new tool to advance our crusade.”

On the table were two small boxes. Hazem took one of the boxes, turned it over and held it so that all could see the image on the cover. It was an iPhone 4. He turned the box to its side and showed the printed words, “Apple - iPhone 4S.” He flipped it and began to open it, and half way through the process he tossed the second box into Amar’s lap.

Amar looked up and smiled, and promptly followed suit, opening the second box as well.

“It has enhanced camera and video,” Hazem spoke, now holding the iPhone in his hand. He waited for it to light-up. “Much higher resolution, thirty frames per second, longer battery life, and enhanced HD quality. With this, we can take media-quality video.”

He turned the iPhone so that all could now see the lit touchscreen.

“CNN… Anderson Cooper… here we come!”

The room erupted with applause.

In the back of the room, Murhaf stood restlessly. He saw no reason to celebrate. It was not the path, he thought. A new phone, sure it was nice, but it was no match to the weaponry of Assad’s regime.

“No rebellion was ever won without violence,” he spoke loudly.

All eyes turned back at him.

“It is silliness to believe you can win a war with a phone.”

The men exchanged glances and then turned their eyes up to Hazem. They all knew Murhaf and knew of his resistance to their media focused rebellion. After all, Murhaf was a member of the emerging Free Syrian Army whose doctrine was dedicated to the use of force, not to diplomatic change. It was his
kind that brought great worries to men like Hazem, not that anyone questioned the FSA’s dedication to the revolution. It was sectarian war that troubled him; the fear that Murhaf and his comrades, in their quest for liberty, would push the country into a civil war; a war that, once started, could not be stopped and would result in the destruction of Syria.

“Then our rebellion will be the first,” Hazem said boldly, finally breaking the silence.

“Assad will not fall to an image on a smartphone,” Murhaf replied fearlessly. “Ask the people of Libya.”

“Maybe it was true in Libya. But this is Syria. And we are Syrian people, and if we can find justice through diplomatic means… through peaceful means, without Syrians spilling the blood of Syrians, shouldn’t we choose peace?”

Murhaf looked cold suspicion at all of them. He was a believer in self-reliance; in the one truth that all things that must be changed, must be changed by one’s will to resist. Defiance was the path, he thought. Waiting for a diplomatic resolution, requesting help, especially from the Western World, was not only hypocritical but just short of cowardice.

“A brother falls and you photograph it?” Murhaf asked. He paused, glanced over all of them, and then repeated his words, “A brother falls and you photograph it? You photograph the blood of your mothers and fathers, the blood of your brothers and sisters, and your children?” Again pausing, looking over the silent group. “When will you fight back? If not today, if not tomorrow, then when?”

“We fight back, everyday,” Hazem refuted calmly. “With a picture that paints a thousand words and a pen that is mightier than the sword. And with the will of the people, and the will of the Creator, we will succeed.”

They were elegant words, Murhaf thought, but overused in the course of human history and not worthy of a response. He remained silent.

“It is through international pressure and intervention,” Hazem continued. “With the might of the West and the support of the Arabic states, Assad will crumble.” He looked at Murhaf. “Are you for the revolution?”
“Of course.”

“Then take this weapon,” Hazem said.

To the surprise of the other men in the room, Hazem held out the second iPhone, offering it to Murhaf.

Murhaf stared at it.

Hazem’s arm extended. “Here. Take it. This is our implement of war.”

For a moment Murhaf’s eyes remained locked on the iPhone. The other men watched, waiting to see what he would do. *It is such a small and simple device, Murhaf thought. Not a device for overcoming oppression or stopping tanks from rolling over defenseless protestors.*

He shook his head. “I don’t believe in the power of the pen,” he said. “I believe in the power of the sword. Give the phone to someone who believes in it.”

Hazem slowly withdrew his arm.

The meeting ended, uneventful and Hazem took Murhaf’s advice, later presenting the second iPhone to young Rami Ibrahim who had demonstrated bravery and cleverness in capturing aerial-like shots of protest-busting soldiers from rooftops. There was the normal handing out of assignments, and because there was to be a great demonstration in Assi Square in three days, Hazem took special care to coordinate full coverage of the event. He had a large map of the square, had sectioned it off into quadrants, and assigned the men to strategic spots within the plaza.

After everyone had left, Amar and Murhaf walked back to their apartment silently.

“Why come to the meeting at all if you are going to cause problems?” Amar finally spoke.

“A man educated in the West?” Murhaf mumbled to himself. He had a little half-smile he used to show disdain, and he wore it now. “It is only because he was educated in the West that you trust him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Since when do Syrians follow Western ways and Western words?” Murhaf said and then stopped. *Crusade? Who’s crusade?*
“It is because his way is the just way, under the eyes of God,” said Amar. “Some Syrians resist violence. Why have a problem with that?”

“You have forgotten your American history,” Murhaf huffed. “Democracy never came from peace. It comes from war. It is a fact of history. All great Nations have risen from blood. If Lenin waited for a peaceful demonstration, Russia would still be ruled by Czars. If Libyans relied on iPhone images, Gaddafi would still be laughing. And if you turn the other cheek now, Assad will roll over you with his tanks.”

“Murhaf, I pray that you do not destroy us.”

“No war was ever won by peaceful protest. The free people of Syria and its mujahideen will overthrow Assad, but we will not do so with an iPhone.”

***

Three days had passed and Murhaf’s prophetic words had rung true. The safe house had been raided by government soldiers and their esteemed leader, Hazem Saleh, had been dragged off and killed. Much of their equipment had been seized or destroyed. The laptops, which contained email lists of outside contacts on their hard-drives, were taken away by the regime’s intelligence service for deciphering. Any man who had used his name in any email, in anyway, was now a hunted fugitive.

Hazem could not be replaced, but as they had done in the past, the rebel effort regrouped and refortified. As safe houses were raided and destroyed, new ones popped up. As equipment was seized or destroyed, new equipment was donated or smuggled in from Lebanon or Turkey along the many smuggling paths which linked one safe house to another. And as leadership was lost, new leadership was found.

The massive demonstration in Assi Square had begun in the morning hours as scheduled, but had turned deadly by early afternoon. The number of demonstrators had swelled into the thousands, too many for the government to stand by and tolerate, so tanks and armored vehicles rolled in and seized the square. Some of the activists tried to stop the advancing armored columns with makeshift barricades, but they were no match to the military might. Amar had watched, and had filmed as the demonstrators scattered
and fallen back. Some of them, the fighters like Murhaf, had stayed in the square, throwing stones at armor. But the regime released their snipers, and their mafia-like gunmen known as "shabiha" who operated as hired guns for the regime, and they began to systematically cut down any pocket of resistance.

Amar stood back from it all in a small building alcove. He held his iPhone out steady before him and filmed what unfolded before him.

From behind the barricade, he saw a man stand up and raise his fist at the armored vehicles.

“Freedom forever, despite you Assad!” yelled the man.

The man was promptly shot in the head, fell to the ground, and his blood ran in the street and glistened in the sunlight.

Another man who sprang to his aid was also shot, and he fell diagonally, cross-bodied over the first.

“Now Assad,” Amar said to himself disdainfully. “How will you explain this?”

Another demonstrator threw a rock which bounced off the windshield of one of the armored vehicles. The rock was answered by a volley of machinegun fire, but the man had wisely ducked down quickly and escaped injury, for the moment.

Then the barricade was overrun by the shabiha, who came from all directions with clubs and guns and riot gear, and began beating, indiscriminately, any activist who failed to flee. Those who had fallen to the ground were kicked and dragged back to the armored vehicles.

Amar watched and filmed as another demonstrator fell to his knees with men over him flailing with their clubs, striking him against his arms which he held up to protect himself until his arms could no longer take the beating and fell to his side, and then his head was bare and unprotected and the clubs came against his head until finally he dropped, lifeless, and was dragged off with the others.

“And this? It is Islamic extremists? The world will now see Assad! The world will now see how you really are… and all your lies!”

It is brutality, Amar thought, and in that moment he reflected back on Murhaf’s words. It is true...

It is I standing by as my brother falls. It is I watching the spilling of Syrian blood and doing nothing
about it. Is it reprehensible? No! It is necessity. We film, not because we liked it, but because it is the path to freedom. It is the only way to defeat this monster.

Then, through the small digital screen, Amar saw one of the government thugs turn and look his way. Some of the other militia turned as well, and before Amar knew it, one of them had his rifle raised and pointed at him. Amar quickly ducked back into the alcove, breathing heavily. When he poked his head back around the corner, he saw the remaining demonstrators fleeing in all directions, and the shabiha coming his way. Amar turned and ran, as hard and fast as he could.

In the minutes that followed, Amar could not remember much, only running fast and breathing hard, until he was beyond the earshot of the carnage. He found himself in a protective alcove trying to catch his breath. He was sweating heavily. His mouth was stiff and dry from fear and from all the running. He looked down and realized his leg was shaking and he held his hand against it until it stopped.

He stood there and watched as the people ran past until there were no more. He snuck a glance around the corner and down the street. The street was deserted. He knew he needed to build his courage to return to the square. It was there that were the journalistic gems that would turn the tide of this rebellion.

“You must be brave,” he said to himself.

He looked again and saw no one. Then he stepped out into the street and began walking forward, filming images of burned buildings and rubble-strewn streets empty of people, yet four blocks away from the square.

A man emerged from behind a building and yelled as he ran past. “It is not safe, brother! Save yourself for another day.”

Amar continued, and another man came running past.

“Turn back,” the man yelled. “The entire Syrian Army is coming.”

Ahead Amar heard distant screams and gunfire, but could see nothing. He ducked into another building alcove, debating whether to continue or not.

“It is time for war, brother,” a voice said behind him.
Amar turned and saw Murhaf standing there, leaning against the wall. His AK-47 was in one hand and a can of Red Bull in the other. Murhaf smiled, brought the can of the Red Bull to his lips, and tilted his head back to get the last drop. He then tossed the skinny can to the ground.

“Come brother,” he said. “I will help you get your pictures.”

Amar was surprised to see his friend, but relieved nonetheless. In the midst of all this chaos, he was not alone.

He nodded his head.

Murhaf peaked around the wall of the building, down the street. Then he led Amar across to the other side, keeping tight to the walls of the buildings as they proceeded north toward the square.

They zigzagged from one side of the street to the other, keeping clear of the sniper fire that rotated from alternating rooftops.

Ahead, the street broadened into a boulevard.

Murhaf ducked into a building foyer, the architectural design of which offered a protective alcove.

“It will be more dangerous to cross further down,” Murhaf said.

Amar nodded.

Murhaf held his rifle in a defensive position and peered around the corner. The protruding façade of the building allowed for a commanding view in both directions. Now he could see the last barricade, a half-kilometer ahead, and he could see movement behind it. The last of the demonstrators, those who had pulled back from the square, had assembled yet another wall of toppled carts and lobby furniture, beyond which it was difficult to see because the air was filled with teargas and smoke.

Murhaf never liked this street. It was too big, and too wide, he thought. It was the financial district, built to show political might. It reminded him of all those who were in power. It was a street for the government elite, he thought, not for the common person. But he knew they needed to cross this street in order to be on the south side of the square, and this was as good a place as any.
Ahead they heard gunfire, and they saw a demonstrator running to the opposite side of the street. Another gunshot sounded and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near the man as he made a last leap onto the sidewalk and into a building. Murhaf looked up and saw the dark outline of a head just above the roofline on the opposite side of the street. As soon as he saw it, the head went down.

The demonstrator, safely in the building, peaked out a broken window and then disappeared.

Murhaf looked at Amar. “It’s our turn,” he said.

Amar nodded.

Murhaf looked up at the roofline and saw nothing. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

And without further delay, they bolted across the street, and as they did, midway through, something fell to the ground. It clanged to the pavement, and when they looked back, they saw the iPhone there in the middle of the street, lying there exposed like a flayed rabbit.

Amar reached into his pocket, disbelieving it had fallen out. His pocket was empty. In his mind, he was thinking of all the images it contained; among them the most striking video recordings of Assad’s brutal tactics taken to date.

“I must get it,” he said quickly.

“Wait.”

“I must get it,” Amar said again, and without hesitation, he began to move forward.

“Wait!” Murhaf said, holding his hand out against Amar’s chest.

Murhaf already knew of the sniper above them. He checked the buildings down the street. Along the roofline of a tall building on the left, another head showed itself. The head stayed up for a second and then went back down. That makes two, he thought.

He huddled there for a moment, thinking.

“There’s another one up there,” he said, motioning with his head.

Amar looked up but saw nothing.
They looked at one another speculatively. For the moment, they were safely out of the sights of the snipers; their heads and bodies were behind the wall of the building. Murhaf looked back at the cell phone shining in the sun. There within, he thought, were the pictures to paint a thousand words. Amar looked nervous and was sweating profusely. Further down the street, Murhaf could see the last barricade with only a few remaining demonstrators behind it. There were distant sounds from the square beyond, rattling machinegun fire and distant shouting, and he could tell by the way the demonstrators were crouched down and taking cover, something was coming, something big. In his mind he made the decision to retrieve the phone, not because he preferred it over charging ahead and spilling the blood of the Alawite thugs, but because he knew Amar was determined to get it at any cost, and that he, Murhaf, was better equipped of the two to engage such risk.

“Stay here,” Murhaf said.

Amar did not challenge.

Murhaf took one last glance at the rooftop. He saw nothing. Then he took a deep breath, gripped the AK-47 tightly in his hand, and bolted into the street.

A single shot of a sniper’s rifle stopped Murhaf, mid-stride, like he’d been hit by a ghost or something. He staggered two more steps and dropped to the pavement.

“Amar!” Murhaf cried.

For a second, Murhaf tried to pull himself up. But he fell back down and he laid there flat on his back, facing up, his rifle an arm’s length away from his extended hand. And now, Amar could see blood coming from beneath him and pooling in the street.

“Amar!”

Amar impulsively leaped into the street He fell to one knee beside his fallen friend and looked down at Murhaf’s lifeless face.

“Amar,” he cried.

*My good friend, lost now too to this uprising?* The pointlessness of it struck him suddenly.
The fatigue of hopelessness showed on Amar’s face. He felt himself shaking; he felt the emptiness that came from it all. *The rebellion is crumbling*, he thought.

The rattling of gunfire caused Amar’s hands to impulsively grab at Murhaf’s rifle. In an instant, he found himself standing alone in the street clenching an AK-47 in his hands.

A shot rang out and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near him and when Amar looked up he saw the head again above the rooftop. Amar pulled the rifle up to his shoulder, leveled it and fired. The rifle recoiled violently, spattered out several rounds, and the head quickly dropped back down below the roofline.

The droning sound of on-coming tanks, once heard, it is not soon forgotten, and now Amar heard this sound, in columns, ten-fold. *It is the sound of doom*, Amar thought. *It is the sound of military might*. He felt the vibration of the earth; he could hear the slow, steady, creaking noise, the mechanized hum of powerful engines, the clacking of tracks against pavement.

Through the smoke and haze of gunfire and teargas, he saw the tanks emerging, rumbling down the street directly toward him. The last of the brave demonstrators were now scattering from the barricade in all directions.

He looked down at Murhaf, his beloved friend, brother in the rebellion no more, the blood still fresh on his lips. Beside him lay the iPhone 4; there within, images that could change the course of the rebellion.

He felt his hands tighten on the wooden stock of the AK-47. He felt the blood welling-up in his head and the adrenaline pushing through his veins, he heard the sounds of rattling gunfire, and then he charged, into the haze, toward the advancing tanks.
THE OTHER VALLEY by Nels Hanson

As a child at my grandparents’
farmhouse one Sunday early I sat alone
in the kitchen flooded with morning brilliant
light and on the drainboard a white plastic
radio reflecting sun played and on the walnut
table shone an empty cup my grandfather
left when he stepped out to tend a chore.

In the warm windowed
room I listened after the Valley’s forecast
highs and lows, dewpoint, afternoon prevailing
westerlies and wheat, sorghum, pork futures
from Chicago, hypnotized by a preacher’s
story of a weary man who could no longer
bear his awful cross and went one morning
to complain to Jesus that it was too heavy
to carry a second more. Christ nodded, taking
up the man’s dropped cross, by the hand leading
him to a far wide valley where ten thousand
crosses lay spread in rows across the grass.

Jesus told the man
to choose any cross he wanted and he hurried down
the steep hill, hefting one cross and
another eagerly, another and another, pine,
spruce, cedar, yew, oak and hickory all day
but all the crosses were much too heavy
and in despair at last at dusk he lifted the final cross, t
he twisted and largest darkest one
that was light as two dry sticks. Happily he
threw it on his shoulder, running easily up
the hill where Christ was waiting patiently.

“This is the cross I wanted!”
the man cried and Christ smiled, answering,
“Then it’s yours.” “I can keep this cross?”

the man asked in wonder at his good fortune

that the new cross was so much lighter

than his own. “Keep your cross,” said

Jesus. “It’s the one you came with.”

A strange men’s gospel

choir sang out suddenly like a barbershop

quartet and I switched off the shining radio

but still the story struck me with the tired

man’s wonder and always I remembered

as I remember now after years of people

and ten thousand things my Aunt Lila

and her great maple loom, my grandparents’

oldest daughter, crippled with polio from

birth, who wove prism-banded afghans,

night-blue shawls with moons and stars, vast tapestries finely figured by sudden

foil veins

of gold and silver, working hours at her shuttle
and hundred strings as her strength payed out.

From her bed

in the living room she knitted complex

patterns, sweaters showing sharp-winged V’s

of blue teal in flight, Viking longships

with fearsome dragon heads, striped sails

and many oars, a green tree and yellow bird

singing above Eve’s red apples my cousin,

brothers and I mapped out on graph paper

she gave us with colored pencils to match

yarn that came by mail as her frame grew thin

and bent, almost doubled and she weighed

hardly more than a bird but kept insisting

her bones knew when rain was coming.

I think now as

somehow I thought then that if the story
of the valley of crosses is true then it’s also
true that a cross remains a cross and each
is heavy enough and in fairness there must
be another valley where we finally drop our
crosses the silent angels throw one by one
on a fire we watch for a moment, fierce orange flames fanning weathered timbers
familiar as
our legs and arms before we turn and climb
the path without particular surprise we walk so
lightly our bare feet fail to mark the ground.
“11” by Rhiannon Poolaw
Alexandra Daley,  
Author of “Silence”  

Alexandra Daley recently graduated from the College of Charleston in South Carolina where she earned her Bachelor’s in English. Originally from Chicago, she has remained in the South where she works full-time for an independent publishing company while doing freelance bookkeeping on the side. She has been published by Emerge Literary Journal and is currently writing a poetry book and a memoir. When she’s not writing, Alexandra can often be found on the back of a horse or shouting at the TV during a Green Bay Packers game.
SILENCE by Alexandra Daley

for Kaeli Mathes

The day you quit talking to me I woke
amongst the injured, in sterile space,
where I was told to swallow the carbonaceous material
used in art classes – the said cure
for biting the witch’s apple. And when I awoke, you
weren’t there.

It’s been five years,
that silence – as if you never existed, as if we hadn’t
been friends for thirteen prior. When I described the dark thing
inside me, its fingers pressing into the faded mass
unprotected by my skull, you said:
I can’t handle this anymore, and left me
stark white in the wind, held up at the corners
by forked pieces of wood. Even now, my humors restored,
I don’t see you outside of the pixels reeling
through my head, yearning for more
days when we pulled the strings
of our minds – bending, weaving – until
new shapes, moments, formed out of it.
How can we get back to that time? How
can I age knowing you’re out there, unmoved by my vow
to avoid going into the dirt?
R. Hoyte Raney,
Author of “Canary Jones”

R. Hoyte Raney is a Paramedic Field Chief for the Chicago Fire Department. He is also the front man for the Chicago-based Americana band "Drama Junkies.” His writing has appeared in N.E.I.U's the Apocalypse, the Chicago Tribune, and will be in the fall edition of Emerge Literary Journal.
It was two A. M. and he dreamt of death.

In the dream the Shaman stood on the edge of the forever-forest and slowly beckoned with his hand. An old blanket hung from his shoulders, while somewhere in the distance an animal cried. With the sound the Shaman slipped between the dark and impenetrable oak trees like a shadow. After a few steps the only sign that he had ever existed were gently turning leaves.

Canary Jones woke and glanced at the clock upon the wall. Streetlights reflected off of snow, paled the shades, and brightened the one room shelter into brown. He lay on his thin mattress and listened to the interminable sounds of restless men in restless sleep and tried to push the thoughts from his mind. For a few seconds he focused on the phlegmy cadence of the man beside him and for a few seconds more he lifted his head and watched the door. When this failed to lift the heavy feeling that had settled onto his chest, he closed his eyes and listened. As a child he had always trusted his ears more than his eyes and unlike the remainder of his body they had not yet begun to fail him.

For nearly a minute he inhaled lowly as he concentrated past the breathy moans and alcoholic snores, around the manager who sat beside the desktop lamp, silently reading, through the walls and out onto the street in front of the Uptown Flophouse. He listened so hard that even the irregular tapping of his heart in his temples vanished into the whooshing silence of intense concentration—as if he had transcended his body as he had in childhood dreams and walked beside his ancestors. From an unknown distance he heard the noise that had awakened him. The laconic wind called to him like the howling of a wolf.
The sound made him rise upon his elbows—his eyebrows scrunched together. It faded away into a yipping that might have been any unfortunate stray that had been abandoned to the February cold. But then his eyes opened and he began to breathe normally again.

For just a second his arthritic right hand went to his pocket, but there was no bottle to be found. There hadn’t been for nearly two days—a long stretch to be sure, but not nearly enough to make him delirious.

And then the tight fist of his heart enveloped him and he could no longer breath. And it pounded inside of his chest like an armored car, plodding through rain and puddles.

He slowly pressed his knuckles into his eyes as the face of his daughter drifted past, still and blue like a painted porcelain doll in her orange-crate crib—thirty-five years dead. He saw the smiling faces of his fellow infantry grunts, blown into the awful abyss by that minefield he had inadvertently led them onto during yet another war.

Canary sneezed, violently and suddenly. The explosive, wet air pushed out and caught the light, like stars, and the tight feeling disappeared with it. All at once, he pushed himself to stand and began to step around the thin pallet-mattresses that covered the single room, storefront flophouse.

“Where you going, Jones?” the manager whispered when Canary was a few feet away. He didn’t raise his head or even look in Canary’s direction. “Bathroom’s the other way.”

“Going home,” he said when he was a step away from the door. “See my girl, Harriet.”

“Not tonight,” the heavyset black man said as he placed the book down upon the desk.

Canary stood silent for a moment with his beat up fedora twisted in his gnarled hands. He swayed as if his shoes were nailed to the floor. “Tonight the night, Boss. Gonna see family.”
The man sighed out, cocked his head and nodded toward the now empty pallet. “All the bars are closed, ‘less you’re gonna walk the mile to Alcott’s, over’n Lawrence. And I wouldn’t advise it with the way it’s snowing. All they’d find of you is frozen red meat in the morning.”

Canary remained standing in place; his lower lip thrust out sullenly. After a few seconds the man looked around suspiciously, reached into his shirt and extracted a cigarette. He moved away from his desk and placed it between Canary’s lips, lit it, and then stepped back and gave the old man a smile. “I let you out’n I can’t let you back in, you know the rules. And besides, it’s too cold. Why’n’t’chew just smoke’n then go back to bed?”

“I’d go for a smoke, Boss.” A deep voice piped in from the back of the room.

“Go to sleep,” another man hissed.

Canary continued to weave as white smoke drifted up and past his eyes. “Go see family,” he repeated. The cigarette fell from his mouth and skidded across the front of his worn and dirty sports jacket. His right hand formed itself into a crooked fist and came to his waist.

The man frowned and then walked to the front door. “Don’t expect me to let you back…” he began. But then he stopped, turned around, and walked back to the bed Canary had lain in. He grabbed the clumped mass of dirty overcoat, tiptoed back and wrapped it carefully about the old man’s shoulders. He then sighed again and opened the front door. “Goodnight, Jones,” he said as Canary stepped through.

Hushing sounds followed Canary onto the uneven, white sidewalk. They turned to brisk and howling wind. Less than a block later his overcoat fluttered away and was followed by his hat.

He was three-quarters of a mile away when the storm began to smother him. Snow flew in from his sides; the buildings were erased. And then the heavy hand returned and wrapped tightly about his chest, and he had no choice but to stop until the pain had eased. It caused time to crawl, his knees to buckle, and the wind to change to words. Charlie Firethunder’s voice boomed in his ears as loudly as if he stood beside him on the Army base. The words were coarse and angry, like he remembered, but forty
years of hard living had erased any fear that Canary might have felt from them originally. When he had
joined the Army, Sergeant Firethunder was his Master Sergeant and the only other Cherokee in their
squad. It had exposed Canary to unrelenting and merciless torment.

“You think these boys are tough? You ain’t seen tough yet, Jones. I’m a motherfucker. And
don’t expect me to pamper you either! These white boys will die if they don’t listen to what this skin
teaches ’em. But I expect you to be better, work harder, do more, and get by with less…”

And he had, until the minefield had wiped them all out.

The thudding vanished and was replaced by numbness as he stumbled across a street. White
surrounded and pummeled him as his shoes broke through a frozen puddle, became saturated, and then
disappeared in the snow. Without thought, his hands crossed and came to his armpits. Instead of stinging
back to life, however, they disappeared as well. Tears stung his eyes, crusting them together as the wind
cut his trousers.

For just a moment, he paused and raised his eyes. A shadow blurred ahead amidst white lines and
tears; it stretched out an arm and beckoned toward him. The wind rose up with a roar and pushed him
along as a trickle of water melted down his collar and caused him to shiver insconsolably. The one shiver
turned to a thousand as steam drifted from him and blended with dime-sized flakes of snow. The
shivering removed any sensation of legs he might have felt and made his knees buckle in front of a half
buried pickup truck, fifty feet from the stretched arm shadow. Snow slowly collected on his shoulders and
his trousers.

“You think this is cold?” the truck boomed as a mallet beat inside of his chest. “There’s a cold out
here that will freeze a man solid right between his steps. You wanna know why we’ll never win this war,
Jones? ‘Cause we’re trying to take what ain’t ours to begin with. Just like them white folk did when they
‘conquered’ us. Think they won? Hell no! ‘Cause we’re buried inside of ’em like cancer, and someday
we’ll kill ’em all.”
Canary raised his head as all the shadows blurred together and his forehead and ears burned away. Then his arms turned to nothing. Icy wind took the words from his throat and erased his lips.

“Wanna see famb’ly,” he finally mumbled.

“Family gone away, ‘way, ‘way,” the snow sang as it drifted down and smothered him.

“Famb’ly,” he softly repeated.

“Family gone this way, way, way,” the snow answered in return, and he raised his eyes. The tall shadow stood and beckoned for him with a soft glow at the end of its outstretched arm, like a lantern. When Canary tried to push himself from the snow, all that rose was a silvery plum from his lips. He closed his eyes and listened through frozen ears as the fist ground him into the snow.

He heard the wolf calling, but when he tried to open his eyes all he saw was white. In that instant he understood that the only way to find it was to rise up above himself as he had as a child—drifting off into dreams and fables remembered from his youth. Stories that he knew to be true, because his ears could hear a rabbit from a quarter-mile away. The sounds he now heard were family sounds—ancestral sounds: prayers chanted, myths repeated, legends learned that gave him a spiritual connection with that stolen past. He smelled the stinging scent of pine needles burning from that fire he had made when he was but thirteen, when he had tracked the wolf from the river to the mountain just like his father and his father before.

Those thoughts turned to white, like everything else, as he followed the old Shaman into the woods. And the only sign that he had ever existed were the gently turning leaves from those impenetrable oak trees.
Peter Clarke,
Author of “The Death Times Horoscope”

Peter Clarke is a recent law school graduate currently living in Sacramento, California. His short fiction has appeared in *Pif Magazine, Curbside Splendor, Hobart, Elimae, Locus Novus, Denver Syntax, Orion Headless, Pure Francis, The Legendary, Zygote in My Coffee*, and elsewhere.
Lucy attempted suicide every few weeks—whenever, for instance, her math homework overwhelmed her or anytime she looked long enough in the mirror at night. Her suicide attempts, however, were generally as disingenuous as they were frequent.

For most people, a suicide attempt amounts to an endangerment to life. But not so in Lucy’s case. For her, a suicide attempt worked as a sort of mental defense mechanism, ultimately causing her to be less rather than more mortally endangered.

Suicide, to Lucy, was artistic and beautiful—exquisite. To chop away at her wrist veins—even with a fingernail or the eraser end of a pencil—meant becoming spiritually associated with the notorious down-and-out anti-heroes who passed into mythology by being victimized to death.

Every now and then she confronted a terrible possibility: that, by “being suicidal,” she was merely embracing the fantasies of a stereotypical “troubled” sixteen-year-old girl. She fought against this cliché by being overdramatic about the whole affair: her depression, her troubled circumstances, her suicide attempts. The only clear result was an inexplicable irrationality, which, in turn, she recklessly accepted as a highly personal and rare sort of special entitlement.

Regardless of everything, Lucy swore that sometimes her suicides were successful—that sometimes she actually saw the other side. Death, she discovered, resembles rather precisely a 1920’s film: black and white, sentimental, Hollywood overtones. It’s always nighttime without stars or a moon in the place called Death. The action takes place in a rundown hotel plopped into the foreground of an endless desert.

In each episode, Lucy’s mind hit upon the most elaborate details. There’s the bellhop named Walter who stumbles about in baggy trousers, bowing periodically, barging into dead people’s affairs, saying with spotty ethnic charm, “Ah, let ol’ Walta take that off yah hands, eh, Mista?” while his wife,
Luisa, can very often be heard in her shrill voice gossiping about who-knows-what in the parlor with the parakeet, her famous catch-phrase echoing, “Honey child, girl, please!” There’s the morose Casanova at the bar, never seen drinking, but always ordering drinks, his sad, dreary voice sighing for another high ball, Pernod, or Scotch neat. The bartender wipes his forehead and stomps after the fluffball puppy (“the mangy beast”) at his heels while secretly tossing scraps of prime rib and steak under its grinning, dripping chops…

One night, after muffling her tearful face into her pillow until her toes curled, Lucy found herself in the hotel lobby, talking horoscopes with a midget. She had never seen him before; he was new to Death. His name was Jakobe. In Life, he had endured a complicated relationship with a field mouse named Idka. For over twelve years, Jakobe and Idka had unknowingly shared the same lover, a quiet orphan girl named Maxine.

“Maxine never loved either one of us,” Jakobe elaborated. “She just played games with us, the way kids play with dolls. We were her playthings. She grew up quickly. At nine years old she was already twice my height. Four feet and eight inches! She kept growing and developing into a full monster sized woman. Her breasts, each one of them, grew to the size of my head! Then, when she turned sixteen, that same month she got a six-foot tall boyfriend and a kitten. I tried to fight the boyfriend but he just laughed at me. If only I had had some sort of weapon! A baseball bat or a gun! I would have liked to have seen him laughing with a gun shoved in his face! But I only had my bare fists. While shielding off my advances with arms three times the length of mine, he shouted most idiotically, ‘Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?’—as if it were ever appropriate for the larger, more powerful party in a fight to ask that! Then he picked me up and threw me into a coffee table, which I smashed against head first and lost consciousness. When I came to my senses, Maxine sent me away and said she couldn’t see me anymore. Shortly afterwards, Idka visited Maxine and was eaten by the kitten. That’s when I decided to kill myself. I don’t remember anything else. And now here I am on this early 1920’s Hollywood set.
Haw! You know, talking about it like this, I say screw that dumb, mean, overgrown whore and her stinking kitten. Besides, I like it here. I always wanted to be in the movies!”

Jakobe related this story to Lucy in the midst of their conversation about horoscopes. Lucy and Jakobe had just discovered that, coincidentally, they shared the same sign of the Zodiac.

Sitting close together on bar stools, they read and re-read and took turns deciphering the following astrologer’s interpretation, as printed in the Death Times: “You don’t relate well to your insecurities and you don’t pretend to fool yourself as to otherwise. This is because Death is your most desirable state of being; Death, the only place where your insecurities don’t relate to you.”

“I just can’t stand that word ‘insecurities,’” complained Jakobe, thoughtfully poking at a black mole protruding from his chin. “If it said ‘eating habits’ or ‘sexual proclivities,’ that would make sense. But ‘insecurities’? That’s just one of those phrases, about as meaningful as horseshit to a jellyfish. Haw! Don’t you think, sweetheart?” Grinning, he leaned over to nudge Lucy’s shoulder. Instead, with a screech, he nudged against nothing and toppled straight off the bar stool to the hardwood floor. Lucy was gone. Whisked away back to her bed in Life. Sound asleep, navigating indescribable dreams.
Lynn Hoggard,  
Author of “Soul of the Bull” and “Night Messenger”

Lynn Hoggard received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Southern California and currently works at Midwestern State University, where she is a Professor of English and French and Coordinator of Humanities. In 2003, the Texas Institute of Letters awarded her the Soeurette Diehl Fraser award for best translation. For several years, Lynn Hoggard was an arts writer for the Times Record News in Wichita Falls and wrote more than six hundred articles, features, and reviews. She has published five books: three French translations, a biography, and a poetry anthology. Her poetry has appeared in 13th Moon, Clackamas Literary Review, Concho River Review, Descant, and Xavier Review, among others.
SOUL OF THE BULL by Lynn Hoggard

In ancient Iran the divine being who sustained and nurtured all life was called Soul of the Bull.

You stand at the far end of this meadow high in the Sangre de Cristo mountains—shadow of a shadow among the trees. You lower your head and huff as your hoof cleaves flinty earth.

Nearby, a startled hare dashes away, and a plump grouse turns to stone. In the meadow—bowl of overflowing light—deer lift their heads, ears pivoting, to stare; a caravan of wild turkeys halts, its leader alert, one foot suspended, head jerking side to side.

As you step into the meadow’s sun, you are the hush that falls, you the soaring eagle, the soul of all of this: resplendent!
NIGHT MESSENGER by Lynn Hoggard

From deep in the mountain’s dark,
I heard through the open window
a massive huff and shuffle; heart pounding,
I thought a bear nearby.

But the sounds that came were new—
a long and high-pitched shriek,
then a row of piglike grunts.

Like a vast, primeval bird, the creature
keened anew its wail and grunts, wail and grunts—
huge and single in its need.

When it finally lumbered off, I glimpsed
in moonlight the outline of antlers: bull elk!
His bugling cry sent mystery and musk
through the chill mountain air.
Danielle Coates,

Painter of “Neptune’s Waltz”

Danielle Coates will receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art from Cameron University and is set to graduate in May 2013. Danielle is originally from Fort Hood, Texas; however, she grew up an Army Brat, traveling around the United States and Germany. She moved to the Lawton-Fort Sill area in 2002 and attended three public schools in Lawton before graduating from Lawton High School in 2008. Throughout junior high and high school, Danielle took part in her schools’ Art Clubs. While attending Cameron, she was Secretary of the Cameron Art Guild from August 2011 to May 2013. She frequently went back to Lawton High School to work with the Art Club as much as she could. Danielle taught drawing classes last summer at Cameron University for children ages 4-12 in the Creative Expressions Art Camp and is set to teach again this summer. After graduating with her BFA, Danielle plans to continue her education at Cameron University, pursuing a Master’s in Education (M.Ed.), which will enable her to teach art in public schools. She also plans to continue creating and selling her artwork.

Mark Spitzer,

Author of “Gar Vs. Sewage: A Tragedy of Waste”

Mark Spitzer is the author of 18 books, a professor of creative writing at the University of Central Arkansas, and the Editor in Chief of the national, award-winning literary journal Toad Suck Review (toadsuckreview.org). As the world expert on the poetry of Jean Genet, he is also recognized as a leading authority on the primitive fish known as gar (he can be seen featured on reruns of the “Alligator Gar” episode of the Animal Planet series River Monsters). He has hundreds of publications in creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry and literary translation.
“NAPTUNE’S WALTZ” by Danielle Coates Claudelle
GAR VS. SEWAGE: A TRAGEDY OF WASTE by Mark Spitzer

“Now, gods, stand up for bastards,”
—Lear, I. ii.

It started with a flimsy cardboard sign, impaled in a frosty, windblown field in Lollie Bottoms. The sign said that Conway Corporation, the local utility company, had applied for a permit for construction. There were no notices in the paper, or on the news, or anything; just that lonely sign in that stark field informing 52,000-plus citizens that a public meeting had been scheduled to discuss any questions or concerns.

I was alerted to this sign by a home owner who lived off that road along the Arkansas River, a mile beneath the Toad Suck Dam. She had read about my water quality work with the Lake Conway Advisory Group in the local paper, and for some strange recurring reason, she singled me out as an eco-professor who knew how to assume a leadership role when developers rumble in with bulldozers—which was a far cry from the truth.

What I did know how to do, however, was create controversy by calling attention to an issue and writing letters to the editor. Whereas she was concerned about her human neighbors, though, I was concerned about the gar.

Lollie Bottoms contains one of the oldest, undeveloped, traditional spawning grounds for alligator gar in the state. The largest-known population of gator gar in Arkansas lives part time in a tributary of Pool 7, where the City of Conway was proposing to build a new seventy million dollar sewage plant, and there were other populations of gator gar that lived full time in the river right where the Conway Corp architects had proposed installing the outlet pipe. Meaning that this new sewage facility would be sucking up water from the river, treating it with chemicals, than spewing it right back into the most densely populated alligator gar demographics in the region.
What concerned me even more were the 700 days slated for construction in Lollie Bottoms that would muddy up Tupelo Bayou, a creek which flows straight down to the spawning grounds and empties into the Arkansas. The summer before, at least three fully grown gator gars had been shot by bowhunters in that area. In one case, three US Fish and Wildlife radio transmitters had been removed and thrown in a ditch—so I knew the big ones were mating in there.

I also knew that gar are extremely sensitive to flow. This was something that the biologists I worked with were in the process of finding out, having sampled from “the Garhole” for the last few winters. When the water was up (about fifteen feet on average), we discovered that the big ones moved into the forty-foot hole around October, fattened up for the winter, then hunkered down until the spring floods. The previous year, there’d been a drought and the water level had averaged about five feet deep in that stretch, which made the Garhole about thirty feet deep. I’d been out there every month for over a year keeping my eye on gator gar activity, and there’d been a lot less porpoising. In fact, there’d been virtually no activity in that hole for the last year, because the water was just too low.

We learned that when the water level was low in the tributary and on the main river, the alligator gar just didn’t congregate. We found this out by spreading nets and getting skunked, but what really provided this information were the different pings grad student Ed Kluender recorded throughout the winter of 2010. Basically, the gar we had tagged and hooked up with transmitters were still in the system, but they were spread out about a mile apart, each hunting in their own territory. At least, that’s what gar specialist Lindsey Lewis figured, and his theory seemed sound to me.

I was also worried about turbidity. I figured that if the water flowing out of the bayou was mucky and silty and full of run-off from construction, then the gator gar who’d been spawning in those bottoms for centuries might not venture up. After all, that’s what happens when logging in the Northwest sullies streams; something overrides salmon homing mechanisms and tells them to give up. And the result of salmon giving up, along with other factors, added to a crash in 2008 and 2009 in which millions of fish just disappeared from Canada to Mexico.
Still, I had to have proof that gator gar were spawning in Lollie Bottoms before I made a stand. So I contacted Lindsey, who said that he had netted a big fat female in there, and that he and Dr. Reid Adams from the University of Central Arkansas Biology Department had seen some old school adults above the concrete structure at the bottom of the bayou.

Then I contacted Reid. He said they were in there, but we really had no idea how important a spawning ground it was, since we didn’t have much data on this specific area. We both agreed that this would make a great study for some of his graduate students, and we both agreed that it was high time to start looking into this matter. He told me that if Conway Corporation was interested in working with the UCA on an environmental impact study, he would be more than glad to assist.

Hence, it was looking like another losing round of David vs. Goliath, which I was used to. When local cattle polluters up in Missouri had illegally purchased the watershed land surrounding our source of drinking water for the town where I previously lived, I launched my crusade—since the water treatment facility there was incapable of filtering all the fecal coliforms. There were plenty of municipal meetings, TV and newspaper interviews, independent research, participation in various forms of protest (some sanctioned, some not), and a riling up of the student masses. I even founded an organization focused explicitly on this issue, wrote an official letter full of state statutes and federal laws, and got a hundred other educators to sign it with me, then sent it off to the MO Department of Conservation, the EPA, and the Missouri Attorney General with an incriminating video. I generated so much explosive media in that corrupt one-horse town that it got to the point that I actually shut down City Hall. The arsonist mayor and her goon squad of drunken domestic abusers (the City Council) were so freaked out by a letter I published in the local paper that the mayor feared there’d be an uprising, so she canceled a public meeting with the people. Twice.

In the end, however, the state refused to step in. The cows continued to crap in our water supply, and four people and a cat were hospitalized for E.coli.
But now the terms were different. Now my city was attacking my fish, and wasn’t even aware of it. So it was up to me to stick up for gar.

In the same sense that Colorado squawfish are different from Oregon squawfish, and the now extinct Florida panther is different from eastern cougars, there are genes that get lost forever when a species is eliminated. When gene pools get wiped out, the traits developed through thousands of generations also get wiped out. And those genes, of course, are good for something.

In the case of the genetics of the Garhole population, the most noticeable trait is mangled tailfins. This characteristic might be caused by deformities, or maybe those gar just munch each others’ tails up, or a combination of both. I currently keep two gar in a tank, so I can attest that they occasionally nip at each other, sometimes shredding fins a bit. Their tails always repair themselves, but in the case of the population in the Garhole, they don’t always heal so perfectly. Whatever the case, there’s a reason for such behavior that’s endemic to the Garhole gar, which makes that population unique.

Mangled tailfins of Garhole gator gar.
But there’s something else that makes these fish even more unique. For some reason, the alligator gar in the Garhole are all big ones. Nothing smaller than five feet long. Meaning no new generations have supplemented this gene pool for at least twenty or thirty years, maybe even forty or more.

Obviously, I feel a connection with these fish. They’re right next door, they’re the gar I knew best, and since it’s hard not to get defensive when somebody messes with what you love, I was taking this matter personally.

Still, the argument that gar are bastard-fish wasn’t going to get me much traction at the public meeting—even though gar are hardly considered legitimate in the eyes of most Americans. Sure, it’s true that gar have been run out, shot up, dynamited, poisoned, thrown on the shores, and burned en masse to the point of extinction in many states, but it’s also true that making such analogies wasn’t going to help the situation.

I therefore resolved to subdue my urge to call upon the imagination of Conway Corporation and their appreciation for Shakespearian drama in order to make my case. Nevertheless, that’s the approach that kept running through my mind as I sat there in my orange plastic chair, listening to their rationale for closing the old Stone Dam Sewage Treatment Plant. It was old, it was stinky, it was time to upgrade to a system that could handle the growth of the city. Also, the proposed site for the new sewage plant was downhill from all toilets in town, and gravity being a major factor in getting waste to move through tubes, it also made sense to have a sewage facility next to the river, where tons of water could be recycled and dumped back in.

Another question that factored in was “What will happen to Lake Conway without six million gallons flowing into it on a daily basis through Stone Dam Creek?” And for me, living on Lake Conway, where I paddle out twice a day to check my lines in the cypress trees, I was invested in both places. Ultimately, though, I knew where I stood: I’d gladly see my lake take a hit, rather than the gator gar of Pool 7.
Unfortunately for the residents of Lollie Bottoms, who just had an airport forced on them for the seven corporate jets that sporadically fly in and out of Conway, the proposed placement of the sewage plant was the result of years of strategic planning. Even more unfortunately, if Lollie Bottoms were to be zoned for industrial use, a slew of factories was expected to follow.

The attorney for Conway Corp had prepared some type of environmental study. It wasn’t an official impact study; it was a report designed to serve their purposes. And the only specie of concern in the area, according to the lawyer, was the lesser terns that nested downriver, which US Fish and Wildlife said would not be affected by construction.

I’d recently talked to Lindsey about those terns, and he said he had assured Conway Corp that this species wasn’t an issue. When I asked him why the gator gar weren’t an issue, he told me that they never asked about fish. Plus, with the BP oil spill continuously spewing into the Gulf, US Fish and Wildlife had been steeped deep in daily confusion. Almost all their agents were assisting in Louisiana, so any other concerns were on the back burner. Lindsey, in fact, had been down there all summer, and now it was fall. Millions of gallons had stained our shores, and at this time it was all about the clean up, which was drawing resources away from other problems.

To say the oil spill was “a distraction” was a monolithic understatement. This disaster had forced the Feds to take their eye off the ball, and Conway Corp had benefited from this negligence. So when it came time for citizens to raise questions, I stood up for bastards with no hesitation.

This was no time for modesty, so I established my authority by announcing that I was a professor at the university, that I specialized in environmental topics, that I work on water quality issues, and that I wrote the book on gar. Then I dropped the bomb by explaining how there are alligator gar in them there bottoms that have been spawning there for centuries, and that state agencies across the South have been working with federal authorities to bring their numbers back up to snuff. Then I added that UCA biologists were willing to assist in studying how this project can be implemented without harming the threatened fish or scaring them off, so that we can have the sewage system that we need and the gar won’t
have to be compromised.

I explained how alligator gar reproduction is a delicate process, and that quite a few private and public sector projects had been implemented to encourage gator gar spawning throughout our interconnected systems. I told them how these spawns only take once per decade, how it’s been documented that gar won’t spawn if the conditions are not optimum, and how we still don’t know enough about how turbidity and flow affect gar. Thus, what we were risking was kissing this particular gene pool goodbye.

I also argued that there’s a concern regarding estrogen, which gets released into systems because of all the birth control that gets flushed into facilities that don’t have the capability to filter out the chemicals. Then, employing the example of the male suckers in Boulder Creek, Colorado that got turned into female suckers because of the release of synthetic hormones, I talked about how species all over the planet were going down due to too many mutant females in the mix—so we should consider this.

That’s when the Conway Corp lawyer busted in and said that the amounts of estrogen from the proposed sewage plant wouldn’t be enough to affect the sexes of fish in the river. This suit-guy, however, was no scientist, so I brought up the possibility of enough chemicals getting into the backwaters where gar and other fish spawn to have an effect. My point being: We needed a serious environmental study, not just assurances!

The silence that followed was definitely awkward. I truly believe that they had absolutely no idea that the continent’s second largest freshwater fish—and an “imperiled” creature at that—was breeding in the place where they intended to process fecal matter.

Some other people spoke, and when the meeting was over, CEO Richard Arnold came over displaying what I can only describe as “a shit-eating grin.” He shook my hand in the spirit of sportsmanship and asked for Dr. Adam’s contact info. I gave it to him and he said he’d follow up.

Then came the citizens and fishermen, who expressed their gratitude for what I had said and offered to do whatever they could. And as I shook hands all around, I immediately knew what the
difference was between this group and the joker who just told me he’d follow up on the impact study: These people, to put it frankly, were sincere.

The letter went viral within a week. It started in the city paper, got picked up by the state weekly, was reprinted in the state paper, and from there it migrated to all sorts of animal blogs, pet blogs, eco-blogs, and online newspapers throughout the state, region, country and world. USA Today provided national exposure, and Animal Planet made this news international from their website in the UK. I was also interviewed on our local NPR affiliate, sticking up for gator gar.

Basically, the letter repeated much of the info I laid down at the meeting, but it also included a call for finding common ground on the spawning grounds by working together for mutual goals; ie, the quasi-“beer summit” moment in which I stated “It may be that this area is not vital to sustaining this population, and it may be possible for Conway Corporation to develop an environmentally friendly treatment plant.” At the end of the letter, I added the information that “Conway Corporation is currently collecting comments from the community for the next ten days regarding this project. I’d like to encourage everyone with an interest in conserving this important natural resource to write to CEO Richard Arnold . . . as soon as possible and request that this matter be seriously studied before any construction begins.”

After that, the most common question I heard on this matter was “Can’t we get them listed as an endangered species?”

The answer to this was complicated. I’d received an email from a Little Rock attorney a few months back who had read Season of the Gar. Like most of those who contact me after reading my book, he wanted to know what he could do for the cause. But unlike most of that bunch, he was all fired up and
angry as hell.

He told me his story. He used to be a young and passionate environmental lawyer who worked on endangered species, so he knew how to get the job done. Now, however, he had metamorphosed into a fat, lazy, corporate asshole (to paraphrase), who didn’t do anything good for the world. So his life lacked meaning, which bummed him out; because he still loved fishing, and he felt he owed it to his son to help preserve our natural world.

Hence, he was ready to go pro bono, start filing paperwork, and get gator gar protected across the country. He’d work on the weekends, he’d work at night, but whatever he did, he’d do it right—so he wanted to know what I thought about that.

I was at the International Gar Conference at that time, so this topic was convenient for starting conversations with the experts. I spoke to all sorts of authorities, and here’s what I found out:

For the first time in history, science now has a coordinated effort going for gar. State and federal agencies are working with private and public entities, and the hatcheries and fish farmers and commercial fishermen are in on it too. This last group, though, is the biggest reason behind the logic for not making alligator gar off limits across the board. As Dr. Alysse Ferrara told me, commercial fishermen are providing specimens and collecting data, which is one of the biggest boons to this niche of biology that’s ever occurred. And as Lindsey explained, if gator gar get listed as endangered, then labs won’t have access to them. And presently, we’re learning a lot about aging, growth, egg generation, DNA, the whole shebang—so it would be detrimental to our momentum to suddenly lose all this. Plus, there were just too many big ones still holding out in Texas and Louisiana. Sure, there may only be a few thousand alligator gar left in the country, but for a federal act to protect these fish, there’d have to be a whole lot less.

So that was that. The Little Rock lawyer was disappointed that I couldn’t give him the go-ahead he was hoping for, but he respected the evaluation I offered him.
The residents of Lollie Bottoms, on the other hand, were up in arms and getting desperate. In addition to the airport imposed on them, they also had an uninvited soccer complex burning bright with light pollution, and it looked like there would soon be convoys of heavy equipment barreling by as their property values dropped like a lead zeppelin. Also, there were health concerns, issues of imminent domain, and, of course, no one wants to smell that shit. Literally.

Their leader came to me a few times. She called me at the office, she called me at home, and every time I listened. For half an hour or forty-five minutes I’d listen. I could never get off the phone with her—to the point that “people” became an annoyance, even though the individuals involved were definitely for something I was for.

This caused me a good deal of consternation. On one hand, people were coming to me and asking for help—so what kind of a guy would I be if I told them no? On the other hand, my area of study was fish—not civil rights. Which is why I ultimately decided not to stick up for gar, but to stick with gar.

Meanwhile, the ten-day comment-collection period went by in a flash, and during this time, the chat room conversations following an online article in the local paper shifted from practical to not very helpful. As usual, whenever the Log Cabin Democrat focused on gar, people started talking smack. Some complained about how ugly gar are, but then there were the know-it-alls claiming there ain’t no shortages. One old coot chimed in, claiming that alligator gar were all up and down Cadron Creek (when those are longnose), and should be shot on sight and left for dead. When I replied with a quip about how this type of ignorance is what stereotyped this fish in the first place, he snapped back that he’d been fishing these rivers for fifty years and wasn’t about to listen to no professor who sits at a desk and doesn’t know jack about being in the field.

I’ve come to expect these responses. There’s a prejudice against these fish that’s been part of our culture for centuries. It’s the same type of bias that used to just exterminate folks, but now that this is unacceptable, it’s safer to just round ‘em up and ship ‘em back to where their different looks and different ways won’t mix with ours. I encounter this all the time with gar: throwbacks so stubborn that they refuse
to consider evidence that can put their opinions to the test. Luckily, though, this generation is dying out, and the generations following it are a lot more tolerant. At least we’ve got that going on—while the world goes to hell in a hand basket.

But back to the comment-collection period, which I hoped would be open and honest. It wasn’t. Richard Arnold claimed he didn’t receive any letters, even though I had sent one in myself and I knew others who’d done the same. The result being: Conway Corp moved one step closer to building their “state-of-the-art” sewage plant.

Still, there was one encouraging factor: Now that the project was moving ahead, a City Council Zoning Commission meeting had been scheduled to discuss the granting of the permit for construction. Technically, this would delay the project. And so the war slogged on.

The press release I sent out said I’d be challenging Conway Corporation at the upcoming municipal meeting, and the media glommed on, looking for a fight. The Gar-nut vs. Goliath theme was pumped up, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette sent a photographer over, and they ran an article billing the show like this:

The city of Conway will hold a public hearing at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the District Court building to discuss planning and zoning for Conway Corp’s proposed sewage-treatment facility in . . . Tupelo Bayou. Mark Spitzer, a professor of writing at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, plans to be there, and Conway Corp CEO Richie Arnold isn’t surprised . . . Spitzer really only has one concern: gar.
Up in Fayetteville, the *Razorback Reporter* also ran a story, noting “UCA biologists have volunteered to help Conway Corp to run tests on the area to ensure the gar population is unharmed . . . [but] Arnold has not heard from any biologists at UCA.” So after asking me for that contact info, Conway Corp was spinning it as a situation in which the university refused to reach out to them.

And then the showdown:

When I walked in, I was greeted by the residents of Lollie Bottoms. They were disabled, in wheelchairs, had problems breathing, and they were looking for me to present their case—because I had clout (or so they thought). I, however, was only prepared to talk about gar.

It didn’t matter, though, because they did a pretty convincing job. One by one, they addressed the Zoning Committee, expressing their concerns regarding their safety, their quality of life, and the fact that most of their homes had been there for generations. Even kids addressed the Committee. They’d worked hard with their parents to actually physically build their homes, and now a big old stinkbomb was moving in. Where’s the justice? Why punish us?

Richard Arnold responded with the NIMBY (not in my backyard) argument. He said that wherever these facilities get constructed, there’s always resistance, so it’s unavoidable. Then he swore that the plant wouldn’t stink.

What a fako! He had come up to me before the meeting and shook my hand with a big cheesy grin. How that guy shaves in the morning, I don’t know. To me his agenda was nothing more than creating waste in the name of waste. Ironic or not, that’s what I saw going down. This sleazy guy, he was as greedy and as self-serving as King Lear’s slutty daughters.

Well, okay, maybe they weren’t slutty; but they were definitely those other things. So no wonder Lear raged to the fool upon the hearth. That’s what we do when we run out of hope.

But I still had some fight left in me. So when I got up in front of the Zoning Committee, I decided to stick up for the people. I talked about the legality of this issue, how both public meetings were announced in underhanded ways designed to keep citizens out of the process, and how Arnold’s claim
that no one had responded to the call for public comments was totally bunk. In essence, I was calling him a liar in front of everyone, because that’s what he was. But “Richie,” he just shook his head like I was some sort of whacko.

This tactic wasn’t working for me. My voice was starting to stammer, and it was clear that my comments weren’t as articulate as they could be. So I switched it to gar and talked about how two years of construction would muddy up the bayou, mess with the flow, and keep gator gar from spawning there.

All in all, it was a disappointing sparring round. I threw a few lame punches, and then stepped down. The featured event had been a flop.

But then a young state senator named Rapert stepped up, representing the constituency of Lollie Bottoms. And when he did, he brought a lot of “street cred” with him. He spoke slowly and deliberately and got his message through in a manner that was way more effective than my lousy attempt to slap Conway Corp on the wrist. And I was impressed. Impressed that I could be impressed—by a Republican.

Like most Americans in this severely stressed-out bipartisan climate, I tend to see those who don’t agree with me as the opposition—which can sometimes be a mistake. It’s important to remember that even if Democrats and Republicans and Independents don’t agree on particular issues, common ground can still be found.

That’s the way it was in Missouri. It wasn’t just Democrats fighting for clean water, it wasn’t just Republicans. I worked with members of both parties (even the pre-Tea Party), and we lost the fight together. Still, it wasn’t a total loss, because six months later another issue arose. The pornographer who owned the hotel downtown had installed a giant spotlight on the roof, which shot obnoxious beams of rotating light into the night sky. He saw this as advertising, but when I was six miles out of town and fishing at night, those damn lights were washing out the stars for over 25,000 people in the county.

Another round of concerned citizens raising complaints ensued. Since we were already united by the issue of cryptosporidium contaminating our water supply, it only took a few months to force the new City Council to amend a law about what types of lights can be used at night.

Anyway, the Conway City Zoning Committee—much to the chagrin of Conway Corporation—
decided to postpone their decision until all members of their team could visit a similar sewage plant in Little Rock to see if it stunk or not.

When I walked out, the last thing I saw was Richie Rich smoldering.

The way it all went down, however, is that the Zoning Committee took a trip to the northwest corner of the state and saw a different type of sewage plant that didn’t stink, so made the decision to zone the proposed section of Lollie Bottoms for industrial usage—alligator gar be damned!

This news, unfortunately, coincided with my three gator gar fingerlings going belly up in my tank. I’d been feeding them tiny minnows and larvae for the last few months, and they’d grown to about two and a half inches long. Summer, though (which includes fall in Arkansas), is a hard time to keep fish. With the warmer water, bacteria feeds voraciously, and infections are common, especially when you’re moving fish from tank to tank with dip nets. All it takes is one adverse microorganism and the next thing you know somebody’s swimming at an obtuse angle. After that, it’s fungus or ick or body slime or eye slime or one of a hundred other fuzzes which can decimate an aquarium.

But it was a fitting end to my clash with the Titan. It’s what I expected, and in a way, it was appropriate to view the death of these three Arkansas alligator gars as an omen of things to come.

Still, as is my nature, I resisted the urge to agree with the Shakespearian character of Edgar—who, at the end of King Lear, proclaimed, “The weight of this sad time we must obey.”

Meaning rather than suck it up and lump it, I decided to do what we all do when we can’t accept the situation. I chose denial instead. Denial that my city would create such waste to process waste. Denial that those rare and ready spawning grounds won’t be there in two years’ time. Denial that I couldn’t shut down City Hall or even keep three gar alive.
But as Lear yowled to the cataracts and hurricanos, “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow . . . spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks . . . spill at once” (III. ii.). Because the more rain we get, the more deluvianed land we’ll have for gar to take back what they once had eons before us fools came along, or even had a pot to poop in.

After all, gar were here first—before the dinosaurs, before the Native Americans, before that fact that if humans want to treat their waste, something’s gotta give. And in this case, gar lost.

But that’s what they’re used to, and that’s why they’ve been around so long. As Edgar also states at the end of Lear’s tragedy: “The oldest hath borne most”—a disposition which makes gar, who are masters at adapting, even more fascinating, and difficult to just flush away.
Kory Shrum,

Author of “Break,” “Reincarnation” and “Timberlane Street”

Kory Shrum has been published in *The North American Review, Bateau* and elsewhere. He did his MFA in Poetry at Western Michigan University and attended the Breadloaf Writer's Conference this past August.
BREAK by Kory Shrum

He has her by the throat, lassoed tight enough to burn. The frayed manila hemp or jute rubs raw the nape of her neck.

He keeps her trotting.

At first, she rears back, fights him hard kicks her legs high until the momentum came. He is the momentum, responsible, for the easy way one’s body gives in a soft current, following the line of a pretty fence—pretty face—

When forced to close her eyes against the unsettled sand, against the high sun, it’s as if she is running. She thinks she is still free. And this is because he has a soft touch.

He knows to wear her down gently and with time. As the handlers before him, he knows that all one needs is perfect tension in the line.
REINCARNATION by Kory Shrum

It took me awhile to come down
to this:

A single autumn tree
a blood burst of red, defiant
against the pressing white of
an approaching winter sky.

And be it the first leaf, headstrong
and wild, or the last tiny fist
curled around its mother’s fingers—
we all fall down, in our own time,
of our own measure.
Cut every branch
from me and I am still a tree.
Cut my trunk and my roots survive.

Dig up my roots, but my decomposing
leaves have already been swallowed by
earthworms, has become the dirt
which feeds every dead mouth—

And where was I before I was here
in this body? From what abundant
infinity did I spring forth—
Athena from Zeus’s own mind?

From what God’s dreaming
was I born and where shall I be when
he awakes—I awake—another daughter
emancipated from her father’s crimes?

You already know the answer:
red leaf
a hand spread wide
against the white winter sky.
TIMBERLANE STREET by Kory Shrum

—for Kim Benedicto

An upturned watch on the end table, an empty water glass forgotten on the white kitchen counter. Shoes side by side nearest the door, laces entwined. Jackets piled sleeve to sleeve, fabrics for every possible weatherscape, all arranged just so. Two desks lean cattycorner from one another each standing guard against a wall, and willing to offer differing perspectives, their different views of the white railings beyond the window, the ones holding blood bursts of flowers in wire coco-liner baskets, green vines reaching as an inscribed sun-catcher splinters the light. And like the oak, poplar, linden trees surrounding our shared loft, their seasonal shift from gold to white to green again, inside we grow as well. Cupboards flower and overfill. Closets pile, empty and are filled again. A bed warms each night and cools each day. Mums give way to petunias, to tomatoes and basil and the pictures lining the shelves remind us of where we’ve been. And of those whom we’ve brought with us—or haven’t. Borrowed books come and go and the most loved are filed away between aging covers, rounding out the bulging gut of an overstuffed bookcase. And small dog guards all, standing on a bench, vigilant at the open window for a trash truck or unsuspecting postal man, while I stand at the kitchen sink, washing out your forgotten water glass, contemplating the press of your lips to its translucent rim and the way sunlight brightens your eyes, drawing out the fire until the rich amber is a pale, glowing sepia. And the water droplets echo impatience in the metal basin like the ticking of a clock, the minutes between now and dinnertime, my impatience for the sound of your key in the door.
Mandy Alyssa Brown,

Author of “Salt”

Mandy Alyssa Brown earned her BA in English at Texas State University. Her poetry and fiction has been published or is forthcoming in Bartleby Snopes, 4’33”, The Stray Branch, Extract(s), and more. Mandy is the Managing Editor for eSteampunk and loves being a work-at-home mother. Follow her progress at mandyalyssbrown.weebly.com.
Jeremy Fontenot knew he shouldn’t stare, but he had never seen a boy without nipples. Two scars replaced the curve of the strange boy’s pectoral muscles, and the flatness of his chest reminded Jeremy of a black and white space movie he had seen two years ago.

“A picture will last longer, asshole,” the alien said.

Jeremy stepped out from behind the tree and walked down to the edge of the dock where the wood met the bank. “I’m Jeremy. How did you get those scars?” Jeremy asked.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Thirteen,” Jeremy said. “You?”

“Fourteen. And it’s rude to ask personal questions.” he turned away and continued fishing.

“Yeah, so? If you tell on me, you’re just a girl.” Jeremy was taking a chance calling a resort kid names, but he didn’t want to look weak in front of the boy. He doesn’t look fourteen, Jeremy thought, too scrawny, and he needs a haircut.

“And what if I am a girl?”

“Oh, come on, how did you get those scars?” Jeremy said.

“Don’t you have to be somewhere?”

“Nope. Dad works at the resort. Mom’s at home.”

On the Louisiana side of Lake Toledo Bend, Honey Health ran a resort and spa for wealthy patients and their families to rest after intense therapies or operations. Jeremy’s father had moved them there with a new job as the maintenance manager. “This move will keep our family whole,” he had said as they packed the moving truck. Mom must have known that they were going to move because she had already packed her suitcase before Dad had made the announcement. “It’s important to stay together,” he had said again, putting her suitcase in the truck.
Their new house, one of the trailers Honey Health had bought for its employees, was even a better than the last one. Dad had asked for the only one on the Texas side of the lake, farthest away from the resort and miles away from anyone else. The resort’s only requirement was that family members not mingle with the guests. Jeremy stayed on the Texas side, but he couldn’t help it if the resort kids crossed over.

I’m probably breaking this rule, Jeremy thought. Dad will whip me later if he finds out.

“Well, ain’t that something special? Your dad works at the resort I’m staying in,” the boy said, making fun of Jeremy’s drawl. He gathered his fishing things and walked up the embankment.

“Wait,” Jeremy said, “you’re not going to rat me out, are you? I mean, you aren’t on the resort side, so I could’ve just thought that you lived here. And you not having a shirt on just kind of distracted me, and I was curious, you know?”

At the mention of his shirt, the boy rummaged through his tackle-box, pulled out a shirt, and put it on. He grabbed Jeremy by the shoulders hard. Looking around he said, “Look, I don’t know you. I didn’t see you, and you didn’t see me, not here and not without a shirt. Got it?”

“Ohkay, okay. Sheesh, what’s the big deal. It’s not like I’m wearing a shirt either.”

He let go and blushed. “Nothing, my dad just doesn’t like me going topless. He thinks it’s crude. But I don’t see the point.”

“ Weird.”

“Yeah, he’s lame. Won’t let me cut my hair either. Look, I gotta go,” he said. He walked up the shore toward the Louisiana side of the lake.

“Wait,” Jeremy shouted. “What’s your name?”

“Taylor,” he shouted back.

“What happened to your nipples, Taylor?”

Taylor shot him the bird. “Hunting accident, asshole.”

Jeremy spent that evening thinking about the nippleless boy.
“Dad, why would someone lose their nipples?” he asked over supper.

“That’s not appropriate conversation, Jeremy,” Jeremy’s mom said.

Jeremy ignored her. “Dad?”

Jeremy’s father looked up from his paper. “I don’t know, Son. Maybe they were born that way.”

Jeremy didn’t say anything about Taylor’s scars. If Dad happened to see Taylor at the resort, he would know Jeremy had bothered a customer, and it would be his ass.

“I heard there was a patient at the resort who lost them to a fire,” Dad said intent on reading his paper again. Jeremy listened. “Said it happened when the kid was a baby.”

“Poor thing,” Mom said.

“Maybe it was too many purple nurples,” Sophie said, giggling. The room filled with an annoyed silence. Sophie, Jeremy’s six-year-old sister, was a tick that liked to suck the energy out of a moment. She’d often try to follow Jeremy around when he went off exploring. It was hard to shake her sometimes.


Jeremy swallowed hard as his mash potatoes stuck in his throat. A week ago, on Jeremy’s thirteenth birthday, Dad had announced that he was now a man and had to eat a real man’s breakfast, lunch, and supper, so Jeremy was on a strict diet of eating whatever it was his father happened to be eating. The first week Jeremy chowed down his man’s supper with pride. But now he realized this pride needed something more, maybe some cheese, which they were out of, had been for a week.

Jeremy doubted even cheese could compensate for the bitter taste that seemed to be in his mouth as of late. Every night he gagged down whatever Dad had while ogling at whatever Sophie was eating because he used to be a kid too and eat whatever he wanted. Jeremy wondered what life would be like for Sophie when she became a woman.

“What did you do today,” Dad asked Jeremy’s mother.

“Just household chores,” she said staring at her mashed potatoes. “How was work?”
“I’m not getting that raise this year. Mrs. Shelly doesn’t appreciate the work I do. I’m telling you, I should have her job,” he said, pounding his fist on the table.

Mom nodded and reached for her glass of water.

Jeremy pushed his dinner around the plate as though it was serious business so he wouldn’t have to look at his mother’s new bruise. This one was on her wrist. Maybe she had asked Dad for keys to the second car again. I wish she’d stop doing that, Jeremy thought.

“But I need to buy groceries,” she had whispered one night when Jeremy should have been in bed but had gotten up to go to the bathroom and sneak some food.

“Give me a list then. You need to stay where I can find you,” Dad had replied.

“I just need to run one errand.”

“You get the keys for one little thing and then what? You start deciding you need to go do other womanly things with other women, strange women who gossip and the like, put ideas in your head about me and the family like last time. No, you need to stay where it’s safe.”

“But what if there’s an emergency?”

“You’ll have to go the neighbors to call me then. And you can always pray.”

“That’s at least a mile walk. What happens if it takes too long? Please can I just have a spare set of keys?”

“No. You don’t need them. We’re God-fearing people. God will ensure nothing happens that cannot be taken care of. I will not discuss it anymore.”

Looking at his mashed potatoes, Jeremy remembered the nightmare he had of God turning Lot’s wife into salt for disobeying him.

Salt, that’s what the potatoes needed.

“I’m done,” Jeremy said as he pushed away from the table. He headed to his room.

“Give me your roll,” Dad said, reaching for Jeremy’s plate.
That evening Jeremy’s Dad knocked on Jeremy’s door. “How was today, Son?” he said, coming through the door and closing it behind him.

Jeremy sat on his bed playing video games. “Fine,” he said.

“I know it’s hard adjusting to life, here. But I appreciate you stepping up and being the man of the house while I’m away.”

“Sure, Dad,” Jeremy said.

“You met anyone new lately?”

Jeremy was glad to already be watching the television because his eyes would have given him away to the day’s events.

“I mean, have you met any of the new staff’s kids?” Dad asked again.

“No.”

“Well, the Michaels just moved in a few miles east of here. Mr. Michaels works with me. He said he has a girl your age,” he said. Dad rubbed the back of his neck. “Hey, have you kissed a girl yet?”

Jeremy pushed his tongue to the back of his teeth and swallowed, venturing an answer, “No.”

“Well, never too late to start. Eve was God’s gift to Adam you know. Find yourself a pretty lady, and get yourself some experience, Son. You’re a man now. Just always put one of these on,” he said, pulling out a box of condoms and placed them on Jeremy’s lap. Jeremy cringed at the sight of it. “You can have as many kids as you want when you own a house, but not until then. And girls lie about the pill, try to trap you.”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Jeremy said, staring at the box. “I don’t think I want to kiss a girl.”

“What do you mean?” Jeremy’s father ran his fingers through his hair.

“They’re just gross. And some of them are stupid.”

“Well, that’s only because you haven’t found yourself the right one yet,” Dad said. “I thought all women were like that for a while, and then I met your mother. She’s okay. Don’t you think?”
“I guess.” Mom used to be more fun, thought Jeremy. She used to cut my hotdog so that it looked like a tall octopus, and she’d put it on pasta shells and sprinkle goldfish to make it look like an aquarium. She hasn’t done that for Sophie in years.

“Oh, that reminds me. The spare keys are in the shed in the can that has all the loose screws and nails. I thought you should know in case something happens. You can step in and be the man and take care of whatever mess your mother makes.”

“Okay, Dad,” Jeremy said.

“Good talking to you, Son.” Dad patted Jeremy on the shoulder before leaving the room.

Sophie came to their room a little later, climbing into her bed across from his. Mom followed, pulling the sheets up. Jeremy pulled the covers up to hide the box of condoms.

“Mom, will you read us a story?” Sophie asked.

Mom sighed. “Not tonight.”

“Why?” Sophie said, pulling a pillow close.

“It hurt your father’s feelings when you and Jeremy insisted I read to you.”

“But you had all the cool voices. Dad didn’t do it right,” Jeremy said.

“Daddy does everything right,” Sophie said.

Jeremy watched his mother cringe. “Not everything,” she said. She looked at the carpet for a moment and then perked up to kiss them good night, saying what she said to them every night. “Good night, Sweethearts. Be good to each other, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

The rest of the night, Jeremy thought about what his parents had said and about what they would have said about Taylor.

Taylor’s family was spending their whole summer break at the resort, which meant that Jeremy had plenty of time to adventure with him. Taylor would sneak out of the complex and cross the state boundary that ran through the lake to meet Jeremy at the abandoned dock where they first met. They’d go
off and explore the woods or go fishing. Some days they’d wrestle in the muddy shallows, scaring all the fish away, or they’d have spitting competitions.

Jeremy forgot his lures one afternoon and had to turn back to get them.

“I’ll come with,” Taylor said.

“No, I don’t think—”

“Look, I’m not going to rat you out. Your dad’s at work and your mom doesn’t know who I am. Besides, I’ll hide somewhere if I have to, so what’s it matter?”

Jeremy relented, and soon the two were walking down the dirt path toward the repurposed vacation trailer Jeremy called home.

Jeremy tried to watch the ground because anytime he didn’t he noticed Taylor’s sway as they walked down the path, noticed his round haunches swing back and forth.

“Walk faster, will you?” Taylor said. “Quit being a creeper.”

Jeremy quickened his pace and walked next to his friend.

“That’s more like it,” Taylor said.

Jeremy found his eyes watching Taylor’s lips and blushed. He looked away.

“I stole my dad’s binoculars yesterday to watch those girls by the pool,” he said. He lied. He had seen them on a boat trip on the lake, but he hadn’t even tried to peep on them. “That girl with the purple bikini is a babe.”

“If you say so,” Taylor said. He kicked a beer can.

“What do you mean? She could smother you with those knockers.”

Taylor blushed. “Boobs aren’t everything,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ll take someone with a brain over boobs any day. Anna Garcia uses her breasts to get whatever she wants, and it’s like they don’t even care that she’s a mindless walking boob job. Makes me sick. Makes me glad I. . .” Taylor stopped.

“What?”

“Never mind,” Taylor said.
“My dad says that you lost your nipples in a fire,” Jeremy said. He hadn’t brought up Taylor’s scars since their first meeting weeks ago.

“Oh, yeah,” Taylor said, “thought my scars would be old news by now.” He took the shirt that was hanging from his back pocket and put it on.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“How did you get them? I won’t tell anyone,” Jeremy said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

They were at the house anyway, so Jeremy dropped the subject. He opened the front door and pointed to the couch. “Wait here,” he said. He walked over to a kitchen drawer and pulled out the keys to the shed. “Mom is probably out back in the garden with Sophie. My fishing stuff is in the shed. I’ll be right back.”

Jeremy went out the front door and looked out on the driveway. The Fontenot’s second car, an old blue VW, was sitting in there, dried red pine needles collecting on its surface. Jeremy opened the padlock to the shed and walked in. He got his fishing gear and knocked over a can of screws and nails. The car key fell out. He fumbled to put everything back in the shiny can. They let out a harsh metal rattle as he shook the can, counting each one. He picked up the key and put the cold metal against his lips. My father has made me your master, he wanted to say. But looking into the can of sharp objects he decided better of it. He put the can back on the shelf but kept the key. Dad would want me to have them anyway, he thought.

Jeremy picked up his fishing poles and tackle box and walked back to the house, but Taylor wasn’t in the living room. Oh, no, what if Mom sees him? Jeremy thought, regretting the moment he had spent in the shed.

Jeremy whispered. “Taylor. Taylor, where are you?”
“Like my lipstick?” Sophie asked coming out of the kitchen with a popsicle. She must have hidden it deep in the freezer because they hadn’t had popsicles in weeks. Her mouth was dyed red like a clown. She licked her lips to spread it around.

“Go away, Sophie.”

Sophie shrugged. “Want some of my popsicle, Taylor?” she called as she walked to her room down the hall.

Jeremy cringed, following. My stupid sister knows about Taylor.

“You can’t tell, Dad,” Jeremy said.

“That’s what Taylor said,” Sophie said swinging the door to their room open.

Taylor was standing over Sophie’s dresser, playing with her toy makeup set. He dropped a tube of lipstick. Jeremy looked at the orange rouge on Taylor’s cheeks and blushed. Jeremy pretended not to notice as Taylor wiped the color off with his shirt sleeve.

“I like Taylor,” Sophie said.

“I got my stuff. Let’s go,” Jeremy said.

“Can I come too?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Jeremy said. “We’re going to go do man stuff. Girls can’t come.” He stuck out his tongue and marched out the door.

Taylor followed.

“Man, what were you doing?” Jeremy asked as they walked along the shore to the abandoned dock.

“My perfect shade didn’t you think?” Taylor gave a half laugh.

“No,” Jeremy said.

“I guess you’d have a problem with me if I started acting like a girl, huh?”

“Well, yeah,” Jeremy said. “Wouldn’t you if I did?”

Taylor was quiet and for a few moments. The two didn’t say a word or look at each other. Jeremy squirmed. Did I say something wrong? What does he want to hear?
Jeremy dropped what he was carrying and tackled Taylor, pushing them both into the water. The two wrestled in the mud, trying to hold the other one in the water. They picked up whole handfuls of mud and threw it at the other.

“Here’s some makeup for you,” Taylor said rubbing it all over Jeremy’s face and neck. “Just your color.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jeremy said. “I can do you one better.” He picked up a handful and pushed it into Taylor’s flat chest, smearing it all over.

“I can beat that,” Taylor said.

And then, with a quick, firm movement, Taylor pressed his lips against Jeremy’s mouth. The kiss tasted like clay because of all the mud, but it was real—with tongue. Jeremy lingered in the moment, not ready to acknowledge what was happening.

Someone gasped from the woods.

Jeremy jumped back to see Sophie’s clown mouth agape and owl eyes staring from behind a tree trunk.

She turned and fled.

“She won’t tell anyone, will she?” Taylor asked.

Jeremy gaped as Sophie ran through the woods. When Dad found out, he’d tear into Jeremy. He’d use his hands until he got tired and then switch to a belt. Jeremy could already hear it whistle through the air toward his skin.

He turned to Taylor and punched him. Taylor flew back into the water, landing with a painful smack. He tried to get up. Jeremy punched him a second time. Taylor fell in the water again. Jeremy kicked him once in the ribs and then bolted, tears crowding his eyes as he ran home.

Dinner at the Fontenot’s house was quiet. Jeremy inhaled his saltless potatoes so he could finish before Dad came home. Sophie had told. Jeremy knew it by the way she wouldn’t look at him. He
finished, pushing his plate away from him and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand—wincing at
the pain of rubbing raw flesh against his lips—and went to his room.

He opened the door and looked at his mud stained clothes crumpled on the floor. He touched
them with his feet as if they were a hunter’s fresh kill. Jeremy had never done that before. Jeremy had
never even seen a fight before, just Dad when he was angry, and even then only through a keyhole.
Jeremy wondered if Dad noticed the sting in his hands when he hit Mom. Jeremy hadn’t noticed how
much his hands hurt until he got home. He remembered how his panic had subsided when his fist hit
flesh, how the smack of Taylor’s body hitting the water had brought him solace. In that moment, I was in
control. And I’ll be able to tell Dad that. And maybe he’ll be proud I beat a homo and won’t think that I
kissed back and beat me.

Jeremy’s Dad knocked and came in, sitting on the bed with a tired sigh. “Look me in the eyes,
Son,” he said.
Jeremy looked up.
“I heard you kissed that Taylor kid.”

Jeremy closed his eyes, bracing himself for a hard hand.

“ Heard you kissed a girl today. Good for you! Personally, I thought you’d go for someone with
more to hang on to in the front, but good for you. I don’t think she’s even going to tell the resort people.
Who would believe her? I mean, who would want a girl without any breasts?”

Jeremy half listened to his father talk about what Jeremy could—and should—now expect from
Taylor. It took a while for Jeremy to realize what Dad was saying. Taylor was a girl? He, no she had
never said so. She had never corrected his assumption, and Taylor was unlike any girl Jeremy had ever
met. She acted like a boy. She did everything a boy does: spit, wrestle, fish. She even talked like a boy.
But girls weren’t supposed to do any of those things, were they?

“You’ll get into the swing of things soon,” Dad said. “Being in love is fun, but it’s also hard
work. Got to make sure she has her priorities straight. Next time though, don’t go kissing a resort kid.
This summer I think you picked the one girl who isn’t going to say anything, but next time, it’ll be my ass. And then it will be yours. Night, Son. Proud of you. Missed you at dinner.”

Jeremy sat on his bed, staring at his hands. I hit a girl.

The next morning there was a knock at the Fontenot’s front door.

Jeremy looked through a window to see Taylor, still topless with her shirt hanging from a back pocket. Jeremy found it odd to look at her now. Somehow knowing she was girl made her look like a stranger. He stared for a few moments until Taylor saw him.

“A picture lasts longer, asshole,” she said. “Open the door.”

Jeremy went to the door. Taylor’s left eye was purple. It shone in the light, and Jeremy had broken the skin near her temple.

Taylor’s fist landed across his jaw. Then she kicked him in the groin.

“That was my first kiss, you asshole!” she said.

Jeremy held himself, stunned. He closed his eyes, expecting more blows to land but none came. Taylor walked past Jeremy and sat on the couch, waiting for him to compose himself.

“You lied to me,” Jeremy said.

“I told you I was a girl from the start. It wasn’t my fault you didn’t listen.”

“You still lied.”

“You were the first person who didn’t act weird around me, didn’t treat me like some cripple.”

“You should have corrected me from the start. We would never have. . . Girls aren’t supposed to do man stuff.” Jeremy looked at Taylor’s scars and then at the ceiling. “For God’s sake, put a shirt on.”

“No,” Taylor said. “Everyone thinks that cancer is some pink ribbon crap, but it’s not. It’s this. I won’t hide it just because it makes you uncomfortable.”

“So that’s how you lost your. . . how you got those scars?”

“Breast cancer. Doctors have never seen it so progressive in someone as young as me. So they just took them. And what’s with this man talk?”
“I just don’t think it’s right for a girl to run around topless, pretending to be a man.”

“What?”

“Well—”

“You mean, you don’t want to hang out with me because I’m a girl?”

“No, I just mean—”

“I’m still the same person I was yesterday.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“It’s just not proper. We’re supposed to do other things together. But not man stuff,” Jeremy stumbled to find the right way to say it. Jeremy’s father had made sense last night, explaining that a girl’s place is to wait on the man, but Jeremy didn’t feel right saying it that way to Taylor. He couldn’t explain it as clearly as Dad had.

Taylor got up. “I was wrong. Something has changed.”

Jeremy was relieved. “So you understand why—”

“You’ve changed. You actually are an asshole. Goodbye, Jeremy.” She got up to leave.

“Wait.”

“No, you’re not worth it,” Taylor said as she opened the front door. “I’d like to say it was nice knowing you, but now that would just be a lie. I am not any less of a person than I was yesterday. Unfortunately, you are.” Then she slammed the door, leaving Jeremy in awkward silence.

“Jeremy, what do you want for breakfast?” his mother called from the kitchen. Jeremy thought about his father’s new rule.

“Is Dad here?” Jeremy called back.

“No.”

“I want cereal,” Jeremy said.

“We’re all out of cereal, Hun. Sorry. I have some boiled eggs.”

“Why don’t we have cereal?” Jeremy asked, annoyed.
His mother was silent.

Her silence enraged Jeremy. He marched into the kitchen. “Mom, why don’t we have—”

She turned around from the dishes. Jeremy couldn’t look away. His mother’s right eye was purple too. It oozed a little or maybe that was the tears. Jeremy looked at his hands.

“I’m sorry, Jeremy,” she said. “I haven’t been able to go to the grocery store. Please don’t be angry.”

He hid his hands behind his back. “I . . . I’ll have boiled eggs,” Jeremy said sitting at the table.

“Sorry, there’s no salt,” she said as she gave him an egg in a blue bowl. She then continued washing the dishes, wiping yellow tears from her eyes as she scrubbed.

“I understand,” he said, staring at the bowl.

Jeremy tried to peel the eggs without looking at his hands. They were bruised and blistered. The skin was cracked, and mud loitered under his fingernails and cuticles. He thought of Taylor and looked back up at his mother. He felt sick.

“Mom, I hit a girl yesterday,” he said.

She stopped doing the dishes and turned around, looking at him as though he were a foreigner.

He walked up to her and gave her his hands. She held them with her soapy ones as though he had handed her a dead animal.

“Look at them, Mom. Look what I’ve done. She kissed me, and I hit her, hard. And I kicked her too.”

She sunk to the floor and started crying. “Oh, my god.”

“Mom, I’m sorry,” Jeremy said, putting his arms around her. “I’ll never do it again, I swear.”

“You even talk like him,” she said.

“I know where the keys are,” he said.

His mother nodded and stood up.

They left the kitchen with the water still running.
Jeremy didn’t see the girl without nipples as they drove out of Toledo Bend, but he wasn’t looking out the window. He sat in the back seat of the Fontenot’s VW, staring at the back of his sister’s and mother’s heads. Sophie was hugging her pillow and leaning on the backpack she had filled with clothes. She looked back at Jeremy with uncertain eyes, “Jeremy?”

“Don’t look back, Sophie,” Jeremy said. “You’re not supposed to look back.”
FLY STUDY by Hailey Harris
Jean C. Howard,

Author of “Rosie’s Diner” and “Two Tulips”

Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, performance poet, Jean Howard, resided in Chicago from 1979 to 1999. She has since returned to Salt Lake City. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Off The Coast, Clackamas Literary Review, Harper's Magazine, Eclectica Magazine, Eclipse, Atlanta Review, Folio, Forge, Fugue, Fulcrum, Crucible, Gargoyle, Gemini Magazine, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Painted Bride Quarterly, decomP, The Burning World, The Distillery, Pinch, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Pisgah Review, ken*again, The Cape Rock, Quiddity Literary Journal, Grasslimb, Rattlesnake Review, Concho River Review, Spillway, Spoon River Review, Verdad, Willard & Maple, Wisconsin Review, Chicago Tribune,* among seventy other literary publications. Featured on network and public television and radio, she has combined her poetry with theater, art, dance, video, and photography. A participant in the original development of the nationally acclaimed “Poetry Slam,” at the Green Mill, she has been awarded two grants for the publication of her book, *Dancing In Your Mother’s Skin* (Tia Chucha Press), a collaborative work with photographer, Alice Hargrave. She has been organizing the annual National Poetry Video Festival since 1992, with her own award-winning video poems, airing on PBS, cable TV, and festivals around the nation.

Jean is a Baltimore-based writer who has worked on both fiction and nonfiction. Her magazine and newspaper articles have appeared in several local, regional, and national publications. She worked as a staff reporter for a local weekly newspaper, *The Messenger*, and has written for Web sites including E-Diets.com<http://e-diets.com/>. I am currently an assistant editor for Narrative Magazine; my poetry has been published in a U.S. Department of Agriculture newspaper and in a publication by the Enoch Pratt Free Library.
At Rosie’s diner
it’s “Sorry, ma’am. Sorry,”
floating pork grease
in the air.

Dark-haired mahogany night
slips on countertops,
Louisiana-style.

Clock knocked-up with neon
says, “Order’s been takin’
too long, too long.”

With cashier jamming computer
screen, “shoot, shoot,”
her smoky fingers stab at sleep.

Home cooking on Ohio boy’s
mind as the fatality of orders
now taking near midnight
taps upon cigarette carton
laying next to car keys.

Young man in the kitchen
has no teeth.

Her lips mesmerize
air, as it slides, damp
and deep, while she “sorry, sorries”
throughout her shift.
If I ever will get fed,
immaterial
on this deep New Orleans
night.
TWO TULIPS by Jean Howard

The towers
of this flowerpot,
two tulips,
scrape the horizon
of ruby-colored
plum.

The eve
is stellar stainless
panes of cloud,
airbrushed and drifting
downward
into the valley.

Yet these two tulips
ascend,
scarlet ripping
soft pads of white,
and know the choice
is to extend
or crumble,

Burgundy astounded
by imploding planes
of yellow,

once as platinum

and pure with expectation

as any storm.

So they stretch,

and cower to no boundary,

though branches dip

to split their petalled rims,

And reach,

their might,

now towering,

as if tragedy

did not exist.
UNTITLED by Son Myong Park

Rosalia Scalia,

Author of “The Two Anthonys”

Rosalia Scalia earned a master’s degree in writing from Johns Hopkins University in May 2003 and is working on her first novel, Delia’s Concerto. The first chapter was one of seven finalists in a competition held by the National League of American Pen Women. Her story, “Henry’s Fall,” was a finalist in the Gival Press Short Story competition. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay; The Baltimore Review; North Atlantic Review; Pebble Lake; Pennsylvania English; The Portland Review; Quercus Review; Smile, Hon, You’re In Baltimore; South Asian Ensemble; Spout Magazine; Taproot; and Willow Review*. The story that appears in *Taproot* won first prize in its annual literary fiction competition for 2007, and “Uncharted Steps” merited a 2010 Individual Artist Grant from the Maryland State Art Council. “Sister Rafaele Heals the Sick,” first published by *Pebble Lake Review* and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2005, appeared again in an anthology titled *City Sages: Baltimore* (CityLit Press, May 1, 2010), a collection of stories by 32 Baltimore writers, including Poe, Anne Tyler, and Alice McDermott, among others. Most recently, my story, “You’ll Do Fine,” was a recipient of the Willow Review Award for the Spring 2011 issue.
THE TWO ANTHONYS by Rosalia Scalia

Junior watches Brenda pursing her lips. She’s wearing pearl and diamond earrings, the pair he’s given her for their fifth anniversary, and a burgundy sheath dress ruched on one side, and he admires how utterly beautiful she is. Her chestnut hair sits at the nape of her neck in a simple chignon, and she wears just a hint of lip gloss. “Why bother?” She sighs, glancing at him. He turns the car onto the exit ramp and steps on the gas. Junior understands the way she feels. Except it’s his father, the only one he has and something has got to be said for that. He almost lost the old man last year when he would’ve died if it hadn’t been for Junior’s kidney, now keeping him alive. Maybe tonight will be different, he thinks. “Anthony, you know this is an exercise in futility,” she says, as if she were reading his mind. “Don’t want to see you being disappointed again.” Junior shrugs, pushes his hand through his hair, wincing at the feel of his receding hairline. “He’s my father,” Junior says, stepping on the gas, merging onto the highway. “He’s my father,” he repeats, pointing their car north toward his parent’s house. He hasn’t yet told Brenda or his father or Bev, his stepmother, that he also invited his mom to join them tonight. He wants his mother present when he announces his big news. Junior bursts with energy and excitement.

Junior and his research team won this year’s Phillips Times Entrepreneurial Award, with its sweet onetime $10,000 prize for him, and another $50,000 a year for three years to continue his research. Who’d imagine that what began as a quest fifteen years ago to help a kid who lost a leg in a motorcycle accident by creating a better prosthetic would bring such recognition? Junior’s elated about this coup, proud of his series of prosthetic leg designs with computer chips that enable amputees to stay active doing all the things they did before losing their legs. His device compensates for and adjusts to the user’s gait and then attempts to mimic it so that the user doesn’t look lopsided or stiff when walking, and can go up and down stairs looking natural. The money could advance his work in unfathomable ways. Maybe he can start on computerized arm prosthetics.

* * *

Volume 14 Issue 1
Her father-in-law, Anthony Sr., is in the kitchen in his dress slacks, wearing no socks, shoes, or shirt. His skin sags under his white tank undershirt. Beltless, gesturing wildly, he shouts into the phone. In the other room, the television blares and Rudolph, Bev’s miniature poodle, is barking. Bev can’t get any more gaudy. Brenda bites the inside of her bottom lip and exchanges a look with her husband, raising her eyebrows as he widens his eyes. Of course, they aren’t ready. “Damn factory wants to raise the price of the rubber green monster toys,” Anthony Sr. says to Junior, covering the mouthpiece as if that would muffle his loud voice enough that the person on the other end wouldn’t hear him. “Too high, too fucking high; you’re killing me,” he shouts into the phone. He pulls a small rubber green figure from his pants pocket, rolls it around in his hand, then hands it to Junior. It looks like a Kermit the Frog knockoff in a tux. “Bev!” he calls from the bottom of the stairs, his hand again covering the phone’s speaker. “The kids are here already!”

Already? Brenda thinks. She wants to scream. “We’re late,” she says, glancing at her watch, keeping her tone neutral. Anthony Sr. tosses more toys at his son, gum ball machine trinkets: plastic spiders, miniature red rubber balls, hard plastic white ovals with eyes painted on them. Her father-in-law, who quit high school two months before graduation and never went to college, owns all the gum ball machines in supermarket entrances on the east coast, and those penny, quarter, dollar machines thrust him into the stratosphere of self-made millionaires. Insufferable, Brenda thinks. He never allows anyone to forget his success. But money can’t buy class, and Brenda’s excused herself from their company more than once, when her father-in-law blows his empty head about blacks or lesbians or pick any ethnic group not to his liking being shipped to an unnamed place, so long as it was away. It doesn’t take a mental giant to sell vending machine toys to kids at the supermarket. Junior sets the trinkets on the table without looking at them. “We’ve got to go, or the restaurant won’t honor our reservation,” she says aloud to no one in particular. “Can’t they just meet us there?” she asks her husband. Her father-in-law puts his hand over the phone’s mouthpiece again and says, “What’s the goddamn rush? We’re going to dinner at a restaurant. It ain’t the goddamn Academy Awards.” Brenda bites deeper into her bottom lip, but says nothing. She’d like to smack the blowhard two weeks into next month. For Junior, it IS the Academy
Awards. Junior purposefully kept the reason for the dinner quiet. Brenda fails to understand why Junior puts so much stock into that old ass-hat. Junior even gave him a kidney, something that irks Brenda considering Junior could likely develop the same condition as his father, except unlike his father, he won’t have a ready donor. Selfish bastard. Where’s Bev?

* * *

Bev stuffs her wide, puffy feet into bone-colored low-heeled pumps with gold buckles. She dislikes these shoes. They aren’t sexy and strappy, but her ankles no longer support higher heels. She examines herself in the mirror, pulls at her thinning hair, and frowns before twisting it into a small knot at the top of her head. She doesn’t like what she sees: herself turning into an old lady. She sympathizes with all those women who’d do anything to stay young-looking. She doesn’t want to get old. She grabs her auburn, shoulder-length, bob-style wig from its Styrofoam head and places it on her own before adding, then blotting into a tissue, another layer of red lipstick. The reds of the lipstick and wig clash, but Bev doesn’t notice it. She notices wrinkles on her face—thick with makeup—that refuse to stay covered by foundation. She still looks youthful at seventy, even if it’s with the aid and comfort of Botox and laser treatments, which her husband doesn’t know about. Never reveal beauty secrets to a man, she thinks, pushing the wig hair behind her ears, so that her chunky gold earrings show. “Bev, the kids are here,” Anthony yells from the bottom of the stairs. She slips a large diamond and sapphire dinner ring onto the ring finger on her right hand, and the matching bracelet, admiring the glitter. Grabbing her mink stole, her bone patent leather purse, she heads downstairs, wondering what special occasion prompted the kids’ dinner invitation. She wonders if they’re going to expect her husband to pay—something that galls her beyond measure, though to be fair, she can’t remember Junior ever expecting Anthony to pay. Now that she thinks about it, it’s always the other way around. Junior gave his father a kidney and made sure his father followed all the dietary restrictions to the point Anthony wanted to avoid him, and has never thrown it up in his father’s face. Something’s up, she figures, wondering if Brenda’s finally pregnant. If so, it’s about time. Brenda isn’t getting any younger and her window is about to snap shut. Bev can’t help
feeling peeved because her daughter Romie wasn’t invited, especially if Brenda’s pregnant. What kind of family gathering excludes people? Romie’s her daughter, after all, and will be the baby’s stepaunt.

* * *

Junior glances at his watch, just as Bev enters the kitchen. Bev shouts at Rudolph to shut up. Brenda’s staring at Bev’s wig, sitting crooked atop her head. His stepmother becomes testy at even the slightest criticism, and he stares at Brenda, hoping she understands. She catches his eye and smiles. He’s sweating, he’s so nervous.

* * *

Brenda must be shocked at how good I look, Bev thinks. “Don’t you look lovely tonight, Brenda dear,” Bev says, though she thinks Brenda looks rather plain without any makeup and tiny pearl and diamond earrings that no one can see. She wonders how much baby weight Brenda will gain. She screams at Rudolph to shut up, but the dog yaps and yaps, until Bev breaks down and gives it half a bag of treats, one after the other. “No wonder Rudolph’s so fat,” Junior says.

“He’s not fat. Just more to love,” Bev says and laughs. “So what’s the occasion? It’s not like we have a habit of going to dinner together,” she says. “Well, Pop was sick for a while, then had to eat carefully; maybe we just got out of the habit,” Junior says. “You can tell that to your dad. I know something’s up,” Bev says, looking at Brenda. “Brenda, you finally having a baby? Is that what this is all about?” Brenda’s mouth falls open. Bev smirks. Of course, Bev figured it out. She’s no dummy. In the dining room just off the kitchen, Bev opens the top drawer, retrieves a small box of perfume she reserves for special occasions and douses herself with it. Rudolph, who’s circling her feet, gets hit with the spray. Bev scoops the dog into her arms, kisses and pets him. “I got the best smelling dog around,” Bev coos at Rudolph. Now in the kitchen and still holding the dog, Bev sees Brenda’s eyes flash. “Bev, your wig’s on crooked. Here, let me fix it for you.” Brenda steps forward and adjusts the wig, but Bev drops the dog, yelling “Stop! I’ll do it,” rushing toward the powder room. She wants her gold earrings to show, dammit. Why did Brenda touch her wig?
Brenda nearly gags on the sweet, floral odor permeating the room and sees Anthony glancing at his watch again. “Dad almost ready?” he asks Bev, who shrugs and shouts at Rudolph to shut up. “You know your father. Man walks to his own drumbeat.” She shouts at the bottom of the stairs at her husband, now upstairs. “Hurry up, Anthony!” Bev turns and flashes a fake smile at her before she asks, “Brenda, you having a baby? Is that what this is all about?” Brenda’s stunned. Baby? Where did that come from? How could Bev have forgotten the shit storm Anthony Sr. raised about Brenda’s not wanting children when she and Junior got married? Brenda ignores the question. But the anger crawls up her spine and she tries to hide it though her eyes flash. “Since the whole family is present, why wasn’t Romie invited, too?” Bev asks Junior, who pretends not to hear it. “She’s family, too, you know. Romie should be here, too,” she says with a sniff. Junior’s face looks pinched.

“I’m coming, dammit!” Anthony Sr. shouts from upstairs. He’s not up for a fancy dinner tonight, but the kids insisted. Anthony Sr. slips into a white shirt with white stripes and decides on a red tie because red’s a happy color and Anthony Sr. couldn’t be happier. Thanks to Junior, his new kidney has given him a new lease on life, and thanks to his increased energy, he’s living every moment to the hilt. He and Bev could win an Olympic medal for doing it. He’s making up for lost time, all the time they couldn’t when he was sick. He only regrets that the kidney came from Junior. He wishes he didn’t know who donated it, wishes he hadn’t been so desperate to get better and waited for someone else’s organ. He offered to bring Junior into his business to thank him, but the kid flatly refused, saying he’s happy the way things are, but said it as if the vending business is beneath him, even though Junior would earn far more in the business than the chump change he earns at the university. The kid didn’t stop at the kidney, he stuck around for so long, dictating what he could and couldn’t eat, like a food Nazi. Anthony wanted to strangle him. Anthony harrumphs. Now Junior and Brenda insist on dinner at one of the most expensive joints around, dictating place and time again. I’m HIS father, dammit. Not the other way around. Dammit!
Brenda doesn’t understand why they just couldn’t meet Junior’s parents at the restaurant, why he insists they all go in one car. It isn’t as if the conversation is pleasant or intriguing. Anthony Sr. hasn’t shut up once about the damned factory in China trying to screw him over a penny per item. At the packed restaurant, they’re waiting fifteen minutes already for their table. “We were late,” Brenda says in a matter-of-fact tone when Bev complains about standing too long in what Brenda clearly notices are too-tight shoes. Brenda stares at Bev’s hair; obviously, the wig isn’t securely fastened on her head, as it keeps shifting. The wig’s red and the lipstick’s red clash, and Brenda shakes her head, wondering how Junior ever survived his father, much less his stepmother. Thank God for his mother, she thinks. Flora’s the normal one! Her father-in-law complains in his loud voice about the price hike of the green frogs, and brags about how he “Jewed” the “Chinks” down. Brenda bristles. “Pops!” she says. “The word ‘negotiate’ is better, don’t you think? And ‘Chinese.’ ” He looks at her blankly, but clearly he must remember she’s Jewish. When they are about to be seated, Flora arrives, all smiles. “So sorry to be late,” she says, kissing her son and Brenda, offering Anthony Sr. and Bev civil greetings. Brenda is glad to see Flora, but Bev’s stony expression says that Bev isn’t thrilled. Bev and Anthony Sr. have been married longer than Flora and Anthony Sr. were married, but Bev doesn’t seem to appreciate this fact, despite Flora’s indifference to her ex. Brenda smiles at her mother-in-law and squeezes her hand, expecting fireworks will ensue. She doesn’t wait long. “Why is Romie not invited? She’s your stepsister, Junior.”

Why did Junior go and marry someone just like his mother, Anthony Sr. wonders. Flora always corrected him in public too, and now here is Flora Repeat married to his son and seated next to Flora Original. He wonders how long Junior will put up with the know-it-all before he dumps her like Anthony dumped Flora. He’s going to pull Junior aside when he can and tell him that he needs to control his wife better or the marriage ain’t going to last. Flora Original acts as if they’re strangers, with no indication that they’d once been married and produced a son, the one sitting next to Brenda and the one who looks like
him, even if he got stuck with his mother’s boring-assed personality. Anthony Sr. needs a goddamn drink. Flora’s indifference toward him makes him sick. Goddamn know-it-all bitch. “What’s going on Junior? You assembled all of us here. What’s the bad news?” Anthony Sr. is unable to mask his annoyance. “You need a loan or something? Offer still stands to join me in the business,” he says.

Junior shakes his head and laughs. “No Pops. I don’t need a loan. I have a big announcement,” Junior says, and he’s smiling. Since he and Pop can’t drink anything alcoholic, Junior orders a large bottle of sparkling water for the table and an iced tea for himself and Brenda. Bev frowns when he orders the water. “Feel free to get something stronger if you want. You know Pops and I can’t,” he says. “Dad, what would you like, some sparkling water? Or anything else? A ginger ale?” His father orders a diet soda. “The sparkling water is the closest to champagne Pop and I can get to these days,” he says. Brenda beams at him, but his father seems not to have heard. “What’s the exciting announcement,” his mother asks. Bev doesn’t seem to hear either, because she’s ordering herself and Anthony Sr. Johnnie Walker Black on the rocks. Junior’s stomach twists into a knot. “Dad, you’re not supposed to have whiskey yet. It can compromise your health.” His father glares at him. “I’ve never felt better, Junior. Stop being a fucking food and drink Nazi. Last I checked, I’m still an adult,” Anthony Sr. says. Junior bristles. “I didn’t give you a kidney so you can destroy it.” Anthony Sr. smirks. “So you’re going to lord it over me forever?” When the drink arrives, Anthony Sr. sucks it down like punch. Junior uses a breathing exercise to calm himself. His father isn’t going to ruin this evening.

* * *

Know-it-all, tight-assed Junior doesn’t react when his know-it-all tight-assed wife insults me, and still is dictating to me what to eat and drink, Anthony Sr. fumes. Anthony Sr. can buy and sell his son and his wife and Flora Original ten times over, and she uses that tone with him. Because of Junior’s kidney this is supposed to be acceptable? Anthony Sr. blows puffs of air out of his mouth and, saying nothing, turns away from Brenda, and shoots daggers of hate at Flora. How many other business men do they know who dropped out of high school and became multimillionaires? Who learned how to fly airplanes
and flies his own damn plane? Whose house is so large it requires four distinct heating zones? Anthony Sr. jabs his hands into his pockets, certain this dinner promises to be hell. He appreciates the kidney, and he’s grateful, but Junior’s insufferable. When the waiter delivers a second whiskey, he throws it back in a single gulp.

* * *

Bev hates sparkling water as much as she hates Flora’s sitting at the table, glaring at Anthony Sr. as if he is a crumb under her feet. At home Anthony Sr. drinks, but Junior doesn’t know. She’s relieved he’s drinking in front of Junior. Kidney donors and recipients aren’t supposed to drink, but hell, every once in a while can’t hurt. Flora raises her glass of sparkling water and says, “To Junior and his big announcement!” Everything about Flora irritates Bev, so she decides to blurt the announcement before Junior. “To Brenda’s baby!” Bev says, raising her glass.

* * *

Brenda squeezes her glass because the alternative is to rip Bev’s wig off her head. How Anthony emerged from this family is beyond Brenda’s imagination. She’s determined that these two buffoons aren’t going to ruin the evening. She emits a fake laugh, “Oh Bev, you’re such a joker!” She turns to Junior. “Now’s a perfect time, don’t you think?” Junior nods and announces the national science award, and the purse. Flora jumps up and hugs Junior, gushing over her son. “Oh my, what wonderful news!” Flora squeals. Tears flow from her eyes, and she’s smiling. Brenda beams, too. “The university is hosting a reception, and he’s going to give a lecture about his project,” Brenda says, noticing that Flora can barely contain her excitement. Anthony Sr. and Bev fail to react.

* * *

“Chump change,” Anthony Sr. says. “You think $10,000 for you and $50,000 a year for three years is something to dance about? It’s chump change. You can make far more than that every year if you join me in the business,” he says.
“Obviously, you don’t get it,” Flora says. “Of course, you wouldn’t,” she adds. “Anthony’s research and prosthetic designs serve a greater purpose, can change the world in its own way. Selling trinkets for pennies in supermarket vending machines doesn’t impact or change the world, unless you count the pollution of discarded trinkets and their plastic containers,” Flora says through gritted teeth. “It’s not about the money, but the recognition,” she adds. Anthony Sr. hears the sarcasm in her voice, knows she’s mocking him and considers him stupid. Ever since he took Junior out to fly that gas-engine model plane, the first remote control plane ever that he’d seen in his travels and brought home for Junior, things between him and Flora and him and Junior headed south. Junior was only six or seven years old then. The plane was tethered to the remote control gadget by a thin metal wire and could only fly in a wide-arc circle around them. He wasn’t paying attention and didn’t realize that the trees on their street stood in the plane’s flight arc. The day of its maiden voyage, Junior pointed to the trees and said something Anthony didn’t hear. Anthony Sr. insisted on controlling the remote, saying Junior would break it, and flew the plane in a smooth, wide arc directly into the treetop of their neighbor’s tree where it crashed, then dropped to the ground in pieces. Junior knew to calculate the length of the wire at age six. Anthony Sr. painstakingly rebuilt the model, but it never flew again and sat in the basement on a glass shelf. Anthony Sr. held it against him.

* * *

His father and stepmother look at him blankly. “I started working on the prosthetic legs…remember?” They didn’t. Junior inhales and continues, hungry for some kind of recognition or spark. None is forthcoming. His father and Bev wait for him. “Phillips Times Entrepreneurial Award,” he says, knowing the words mean nothing to them. “My research team and I won this year for the work on prosthetic leg design,” Junior says. “That’s nice,” Bev says. “Sweetie, Junior won a big award for inventing a kind of fake leg. Isn’t that nice? What do you want to order?”

“Hey, did I tell you that we’re expanding west, adding twenty new supermarkets—a single chain—in Tennessee,” Anthony Sr. says, changing the subject.
“Who gives a flying fuck?” Flora says. “This isn’t about you. Why does everything always have to be about you? Junior won a prestigious national recognition, is considered the nation’s top scientist, and all you can say is your stupid vending machine business is expanding into twenty supermarkets? Whoop-de-do! You’ve raised being an ass to a high art,” Flora says. Anthony Sr. glares at Flora Original. Flora Repeat glares at him. Bev glares at Flora.

* * *

Junior’s lips are curled into a barely perceptible smile, and he’s staring at the empty plate before him. Brenda knows when he smiles like that and looks downward, he’s angry. Brenda’s prepared. From her purse, she pulls a folded newspaper clipping and slides it across the table toward her father-in-law. “Look, Pops! *The Ledger* featured Anthony on the front page this morning.” She smiles. The headline in bold letters reads, “Local Scientist Awarded Nation’s Top Science Prize.”

* * *

Junior mouths “thank you” to Brenda and squeezes her hand under the table. The waiter comes by to collect their orders. Bev asks the waiter endless questions about the substitutions and changes, holding up the process. “My mother-in-law has reduced her diet to prison gruel,” Brenda says with a laugh. Bev’s eyes flash, but she continues asking questions and finally succeeds in ordering something that satisfies her.

* * *

Anthony Sr. reads the headline and the first paragraph of the story and feels his face flush. *The Ledger* never published a story about him, never featured him on the front page. Anthony Sr.’s own father died when he was three years old, and he and his brother had to learn to do everything themselves, from repairing the car to fixing the house. He orders another whiskey.

Bev attempts to soothe things between the two Anthonys. “Oh, it’s nothing, Junior. A drink every now and again isn’t going to hurt him. Everything in moderation, after all.” She plays with her chunky gold earrings to alleviate her nerves. “He just wants to toast your success, don’t you dear,” she says.
“I’m the father, and I damn sure don’t need to ask your permission for what I do or don’t do.”

Anthony Sr. gulps the drink, and it feels smooth going down. He raises the empty glass toward Junior.

“Congrats on the award, son,” he says, meaning it, knowing it sounds insincere. “Let’s eat now that that’s out of the way,” he says, reaching across the table, grabbing the bread basket and tearing off a piece.

“They’ve always served the best bread here, don’t you think, honey?”

* * *

Junior’s hands are balled up in fists on the table, and Brenda puts her hand over one of his fists to calm him. “I forgot how damned good whiskey tastes,” Anthony Sr. says. “I’m a new man, thanks to you, son! I can’t thank you enough!” he says. “Bev and I are going to get an award for doing it. We’re making up for all that lost time from when I was sick.” He winks at Bev. “Oh please,” Flora says.

Junior moves the empty whiskey glass from his father’s reach and plans to tell the waiter to refrain from bringing Anthony Sr. anymore drinks. “What the fuck?” Anthony Sr. says. “Why’d you do that?” He pounds the table. “Give it here,” he says. Junior shakes his head. “Cutting you off. It’s for your own good.”

“I’m not a fucking child,” his father says.

No longer hungry, Junior moves the shrimp around his dish. In the eighteen months since the surgery, he’s never played the kidney card, but now he’s remembering the pain he endured. The diet restrictions. The days away from his work. The days away from the gym. Bev and Anthony Sr. clean their plates. Flora tries to keep a normal conversation flow with Brenda, who eats only a few bites. Anthony Sr. snags his whiskey glass. Brenda winces at her father-in-law’s ice-crunching. She wants to ask him to stop, but refrains. Finally she snaps, “Pops! Please stop!”

Anthony Sr. asks, “Does she boss you around like this at home? How can you stand it? Reminds me of someone else I know.” He looks at Flora. “You married your mother, Junior.” Anthony Sr. crosses his arms and looks smug. “I built a business that bought and paid for Junior’s fancy-schmancy education. So in a way, this big award he’s gotten also belongs to me. So, how much of that award purse comes to
me?” he says and laughs.

Anxious to end the evening, Junior excuses himself and finds the waiter to pay the bill before his father can do it, not that he’d try but just in case. He discovers the tab is covered. The waiter hands him an envelope from Flora. In the envelope, the newspaper clipping with a note “Saw it in the paper this morning. Couldn’t be more proud of you. You deserve this honor for which you worked so hard. Congratulations!” Back at the table, Flora nods, her eyes gleaming with pride.

* * *

While the waiter clears the dishes, Bev imagines dessert. She imagines chocolate fudge brownie cake with whipped cream. Or chocolate mousse pie. Or some kind of tart with whipped cream and ice cream. She purposefully substituted things to reduce calories in her entrée so she could splurge on dessert. But the waiter doesn’t ask if anyone wants coffee or dessert, and instead thanks them for allowing him to serve them. “The bill’s paid,” the waiter tells Anthony Sr. after he asks. Anthony Sr. looks as stunned as Bev does. “What the hell kind of celebratory dinner is this?” she asks Anthony Sr., disappointed that she’s robbed of dessert. “Who paid?” Anthony Sr. asks the waiter. “Someone who asked not to be named,” the waiter says.

Anthony Sr. tells the waiter to bring Bev a dessert menu and to bring him some coffee. “You can start another bill,” he tells the waiter. “Coffee and dessert is on me.” Bev orders chocolate mousse pie. “Take your time, dear,” he tells Bev and glares at Junior, Brenda, and Flora, who appear as if they are about to jump out of their chairs. “Perhaps we could get dessert elsewhere?” Flora suggests. Anthony Sr. shakes his head. “My little lovebird wants dessert here.” Flora laughs. “As you wish.” She excuses herself to the ladies’ room. Later when Anthony Sr. tries to pay for the dessert tab, it’s been taken care of. “Who the hell paid the tab?” he asks the waiter. “Same person who’s covered the dinner,” he says. “It’s a gift for a celebratory dinner in honor of a big science award.” Bev glances at Flora and realizes that Flora has paid for the evening, but she says nothing because if Flora wants to act as if she’s superior, let her go ahead and do it. At least her Anthony didn’t have to shell out a penny.

* * *
In the car, Anthony Sr. breaks the silence, “So what the hell was that about back there with your mother, Junior? You rush the hell out of us to go to dinner and then you rush the hell out of us to go home. What gives? That fancy-schmancy award must have inflated your head.”

Junior calmly pulls the car over to the side of the highway. He twists his body so he can face his father. “I’ll tell you what gives. My patience,” he says. “I wanted this to be a pleasant evening to celebrate something huge. This award is a big damn deal, bigger than your vending business which sells kids crap they don’t need and only think they want.”

“How dare you talk to your father and me like that?” Bev shouts. “Who do you think you are anyway, Junior?” She adjusts her wig and glares at Junior and Brenda. “He’s your father. You’re supposed to respect him,” she shouts. “Not like you and your mother acting all superior. I know she’s the one who paid because she wanted to make your father feel little.”

Brenda stares at the clasp of her handbag to avoid looking at her in-laws. A kidney weighs a quarter of a pound. It measures four inches long and two inches wide. Everybody has two. Except Anthony and his Pops. They each now have one. Born with two, people can live with one. Brenda considers that the two kidneys between Sr. and Jr. must now weigh a ton.

“What the hell are you smirking at?” Anthony Sr. shouts at Brenda. “This marriage ain’t going to last long, Junior. She’s a Flora Repeat. She reminds me of your mother and not in a good way.”

Junior feels his heart rate spike. “Leave Brenda alone. She has nothing to do with this. Leave my mother out of this. She has nothing to do with it. Tonight’s disaster is all you. I gave you a kidney so you can live longer and be healthier and what do you do? You’re throwing back drinks like you’re going to run out of alcohol. You insult my wife, and you can’t even pretend to be happy for me about anything for once. And Bev is so jealous of mom her wig should be green instead of red.” Junior knows that his father has been drinking at home. He wonders how long he’s been hitting the bottle when he’s supposed to avoid alcohol and grapefruit so that the drugs that stop his body from rejecting the kidney continue to work. He imagines Anthony Sr. being noncompliant and wonders if his sacrifice was a waste. He throws the car in gear and speeds to Anthony Sr. and Bev’s house.
Anthony Sr. and Bev exit the car in silence. No one says good-night. Bev’s too-tight shoes are pinching her feet as she limps over to the front door, unlocks it, and pushes it open. Angry with his father, Junior still wants to make sure they both get inside safely before pulling away. He stares at his father, trying to remember good things about him, and he doesn’t see Rudolph shoot out the door past Bev in a brown blur. He fails to notice the dog racing around the sides and back of the car although he hears Rudolph’s incessant yapping and imagines the dog’s still inside barking on the sofa. He backs out of the driveway and runs over a lump. “What the hell was that?” he asks. The dog has stopped yapping.

“Believe me, you don’t want to know,” Brenda says. Bev’s face is contorted in horror, and his father is laughing like a madman, and that’s when Junior realizes what the lump is and that his father isn’t laughing.

The four of them stare at the inert Rudolph, before Brenda retrieves an old blanket from the trunk and hands it to Junior who gingerly scoops the dog, still reeking of Bev’s cheap perfume, into his arms. “It was an accident,” Junior says, his voice cracking.

Bev whimpers. “My poor Rudolph.”

“Animals keep it simple. They either like you or they don’t. They ask no questions and bring no drama. They have no expectations other than being fed and walked and don’t even get pissed if you forget to feed or walk them. They’re better than people,” Anthony Sr. says.

The dog still in his arms, Junior faces his father. “They can’t give you a kidney,” he says, his tone sharp.

“Don’t start!” Bev yells. With her crooked wig, grief-filled face, and smarting feet, she moves like a wounded robin as Brenda leads her limping into the house.

“You never understand anything I say,” his old man says, shaking his head. “That’s not what I meant. What a fucking disaster of a night!”

For once, Junior agrees but doesn’t say so. Despite the late hour, Anthony Sr. helps Junior carry the dog into the house; without discussing it, they first wrap the body in an old blanket and then seal it in
a black trash bag. They erect flood lights to illuminate the expansive backyard behind Anthony Sr.’s palatial house so that Bev and Brenda, both now wearing slippers, can locate the most suitable spot for Rudolph near the rose garden. Admiring her patience, Junior watches Brenda leading a somnambulistic Bev back into the house. His old man must be tired, but Anthony Sr. refuses to quit, surprising Junior by his stamina and their compatibility. Well past midnight, they both smile when Brenda brings them each a glass of sparkling water. Junior knows his father can drop the shovel, walk away and leave him with the task of burying Bev’s beloved pet, but instead, Anthony Sr. continues shoveling and tossing soil in synch with him, as if accomplishing this simple but unexpected chore grants him a long-needed and much desired succor against an overcomplicated and chaotic world.
Kevin Acers,

Author of “Birthdays”

Kevin Acers is a licensed clinical social worker who has also been a teacher, a Peace Corps volunteer, and a human rights advocate. He is a native of Oklahoma City, where he lives with his wife, two cats, and several potted plants. His poetry appears in Red River Review, Illya’s Honey (forthcoming), and a chapbook entitled ZIPPY ZAPPY. He is currently at work on TIME MACHINE, a full-length collection of prose poems.
Birthdays by Kevin Acers

The thing about turning fifty-one is you can throw a rock and without much effort hit Sixty squarely in the back. I can see him stop up ahead. He slowly turns toward me and glares for a moment.

It seems deceptively recent that my father turned sixty. He didn’t like it a bit. Now that he’s eighty-four he doesn’t remember how filled with dread he’d been.

Sixty turns his back to me, moving slowly forward. In the distance there’s another figure—from where I stand, not much bigger than a dot.

As I look on, Sixty bends down and picks up a rock.
“OK 13” by Sarah McLaughlin
Jens Birk,

Author of “The Maze”

Jens Birk is originally from Denmark. After living in Paris for 17 years, he moved to New York in 2004 where he has attended short story fiction writing courses at NYU and an ongoing private writing workshop with Susie Mee, an NYU writing instructor. His work has appeared in *The Alembic, Crate Literary Magazine,* and *Sanskrit Literary-Arts Magazine.* Jens is currently working on a short story collection.
I still dream about the maze. The footsteps in the dark, the full moon, and that voice—a night so
long ago, still so present in my thoughts. The night our friendship ended.

Half a century ago, Christian and I created our own private world. We found each other the first
day at school, no words needed to pull us together. He came over and sat down quietly in the empty seat
next to mine. We sat close together for days, our legs touching, rarely saying anything.

I hadn’t expected much about school, only feared that no one would want to talk to me. Such a
relief then to find Christian. And although my time with him occupied only a brief period in my life, our
relationship then outshined everything else.

I sometimes wonder if he thinks about it that way. If he even remembers.

It started when he began coming home with me after school. My mother never seemed curious
about our relationship or how it had come about. She appeared to like him though. Maybe she was just
relieved that our little family had grown, as if Christian could stand in for the brother I’d always pestered
my parents to give me. Or maybe she was simply happy I’d found a friend.

Before Christian, I’d spent hours on my own with books or just looking out the window. My
lively imagination had been my best companion; I was never really bored. But my parents must have
worried how I was going to manage in school socially, how I’d get along with other children.

We lived above the little auto mechanic shop that my parents ran, a family business established
by my grandparents. I was mostly left to my own devices as my parents labored there, and I always felt
like a somewhat unwanted addition to their lives. I was “a late bloomer,” they said, by which I guess they
meant I was not able to express myself properly until the age of five. But I was “easy.” I never cried. I
never complained. And so my parents could easily—maybe too easily—leave me alone. They seemed so sure I would never do any harm to myself or anybody else.

***

The front door of Christian’s home was attended by the maid, the only apparent adult fixture of the house. I never met Christian’s parents. He said he was not allowed to talk about what they did for a living, only that his parents both worked for the government, and so were only rarely home. He loved to make it sound a bit secretive, loved to nurture my fantasies. Although we lived in a remote part of Denmark, where the best you could hope to become was a farmer with plenty of fertile land, I imagined them as spies.

My parents would not let me go visit Christian on my own very often, which only enhanced my curiosity and eagerness. Mostly he came home with me. And after a snack, we would disappear to some part of the garage where I’d found a new secret spot to build a hideaway.

In the beginning, the garage had been small, with only room for a couple of cars and one mechanic. As my father grew older and took over the business, he began selling cars. A new garage was built on top of what had once been my playground and our small, ragged vegetable patch.

I barely remember when the new garage was built, and I think most of what I do recall comes from images of the Super 8 movies my father shot during the construction. I don’t remember any feelings associated with it. Pride? I taste the word, say it out in a whisper that fills the empty space before me. Pride. Was I just a little embarrassed that we took up so much space in our little town?

My favorite place was the storage area for big spare parts in the oldest part of the garage. I remember us climbing up the rusty metal ladder and entering what felt like a magical place where the smell of metallic paints, stainless steel, and oil filled the air. I was fascinated by this world of cars. Sadly, it seemed to be the only realm in which my father and I ever managed to develop a common language.

Christian and I discovered a corner where we couldn’t be seen, or so we thought. We built walls
from old car doors and carried car seats in from one of the wrecks in the backyard. We brought over our favorite books, those “Secret Seven Society” books about a group of child detectives who became like our best friends. We read and discussed them over and over and imagined being the investigators of all the exotic crimes that were never committed anywhere near us. We kept hoping that similar mysteries would appear right before our eyes, but, unfortunately, they never did. Or maybe we just didn’t notice them.

***

Christian’s sudden reappearance the other day brought a not altogether sad return to those days. Not that I’d ever forgotten him. He came to my front door late one evening, and I let him in. He took off his jacket and smelled of old days – as if he’d been coated with a concentrate of the garage, refusing to acknowledge the passing of time. That smell made those days seem so vivid, so recent.

But it had been close to fifty years.

What were we in those days? Not just innocent, I see that now. We were watchers, discreetly observing an adult world we pretended to ignore in spite of our fascination. We were also learning and concluding things about our surroundings, as we approached our new hideaway, as we built those walls and created a world so separate from our parents’. We were attracted to the adult world, yet tried to keep it at bay, tried to remain in our private world as long as we possibly could. Still, I remember watching the mechanics. Their voices, their rough arguments, their whispers and secrets. Their muscular, hairy arms stained by the black oil.

Sometimes they would watch us too and make comments. I wonder what they were thinking of me, the owner’s son. I can still smell the fuel and the dust, the exhaust, the dirt, the sweat from their boiler suits, as I walked up the steep metal ladder, loaded with biscuits and books, waiting for my close friend to arrive. Close friend. It seems strange now. With him around, I didn’t need others.

And then, suddenly, he was gone.

***

I still get shivers when I think about taking the bus to visit Christian that first time. My blood races faster as I imagine getting closer to his house. Even now, putting down the words, my hands are
trembling slightly; a sensation of happiness combined with dread. Once off the bus, I had to walk the
quarter mile down the alley of century-old oak trees, seemingly there to introduce me to a different world.
There would always be music playing when I approached the mansion. Opera. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. It
came out loud from the windows that were always left open.

My later fascination with opera—some would later label it an obsession—started then. My
parents didn’t listen to music, except that which came randomly out of the distorting transistor radio in
our kitchen. They didn’t understand why I became interested in such music. And although it didn’t seem
like music for children, they must have decided it was at least a sane interest. So they let me buy a
turntable, records in boxes, let me play that strange music that never found a way into their hearts. Music
that still reminds me of Christian.

I had only met his sister once. It was the first time I visited the mansion and the only time
somebody other than the maid opened the front door. She looked to be about nine or ten at the time, but
was dressed more like a young woman in a sparkly, long, dark dress. She had curly blond hair and a
motionless face. I’m certain she even wore makeup. She didn’t say anything, just looked at me. Her
muteness scared me.

We stood there for an awkward minute, and then she ran off without a word. A moment later,
Christian arrived and took me up to his room. It was as big as my parents’ living room and full of wooden
toys. When I asked Christian about his sister, he said she was insane. I always thought he simply meant
they didn’t get along. Thinking back, maybe there was more to it than that. They never played together.
She spent her life with the maid, following her around the house as she performed her chores.

Christian told me he sometimes had dinner with his parents when they were home, but most of
the time, food was brought to his room. Maybe the lack of company at home was what made him want to
spend so much time with me. Maybe the banality of my home appealed to him. I was similarly drawn to
his odd and seemingly exotic family who lived in a world of their own.

***

I look out the window now and see the sun setting over the ocean. This is the time of day when
deer sometimes walk by the windows, searching my yard for food. I often spot them when I wake up early: They arrive, always in pairs, walking stiffly on the lookout for danger. I get the impression watching them that I’m not the only one holding my breath. As if they sense a human presence. I have a real connection to them. They make me feel that my shyness isn’t so unusual. I sometimes imagine even that I’m one of them, and I try to pretend that I’m also part of a pair. That I’m not alone.

I usually only go into town when there’s little chance of meeting anybody. After seven in the evening is the best time. The few people likely to recognize me will be home by then, finishing dinner and getting ready for coffee and TV.

I’ve been good at this kind of life.

Maybe too good.

***

I have never stopped thinking about my last visit to Christian’s home. I remember playing then in their garden. Garden is perhaps not the right word—it was more like a park. They had gardeners attending to it constantly. It reminded me, in miniature, of Versailles where my parents had taken me during our only trip abroad before I started school at the age of seven. Bushes cut in odd shapes. Statues.

It even had a maze, built of tall hedges. It wasn’t huge, I guess; but at eight, everything seemed big and daunting. Nothing like the yard with the pitiful vegetable garden we used to have before the new garage.

Showing me the maze was Christian’s birthday treat for me. He built up the experience by walking me around the outside of it and explained that it had been built a hundred years before his family bought the house. He didn’t know the whole story, only that the former owner had lost his mind when his young wife died of a mysterious ailment and that he decided to construct a maze in her honor. “You will understand why he built it when you get to the center of the maze,” I recall him saying.

He told me it had taken him a long time to discover the trick to finding his way in the maze, that he’d gotten lost there many times. His sister, he said, never dared to go near it.

I still recall that day, walking a few feet behind him, looking at his feet pacing the gravel, his
voice sounding excited as we rounded the first tall set of hedge walls. He stopped and turned toward me:

“Don’t be scared. I’m here with you, remember?”

He was still ahead of me but beginning to walk faster and faster. I tried to keep up for a while, but it was as if we were abruptly in different worlds. My mind understood that he was getting ahead of me, but it would not send the signal to my feet to walk faster.

Suddenly, he quickened his pace even more, and I couldn’t see him—or even hear him. It was late in the afternoon, the sun was rapidly setting and cast confused shadows. The gardeners had long since gone home. His parents were not due back until the next day, and the maid must have been in the house with Christian’s sister. I stood still for a while, trying to gather my senses. I felt a rising sense of panic that I did my best to quiet. I tried to think: *Walk back the way you came*, but I couldn’t remember which turns to take.

I continued walking, never knowing if I was on the right track, and feeling more and more lost. I tried calling out for Christian and was shocked that he didn’t respond. I felt let down, disappointed. This was my birthday, after all. This was what I had been looking forward to finally experiencing.

Then I heard her—the voice of a young woman singing. At first, I thought it was Christian’s sister. It was a beautiful, soprano voice. I realized years later that she was singing passages from the final scene of Strauss’ *Salome*. Her voice seemed at once distant, impressionistic and yet terribly close. She was in the maze, in the heart of it. I tried walking toward the singing. I sensed I was getting closer, yet I continued to walk and I still didn’t seem to get anywhere.

I was still walking as the last light of day slowly faded away, and darkness quickly invaded the maze. I had worked myself into a state of despair and thought I would never find my way out. Nobody, not even my parents, would ever know where to find me.

I noticed the full moon briefly making an appearance behind a layer of dark clouds. The singing got shriller, and the tone threatening. I was no longer interested in reaching the singer; I wanted to get as far away from her as possible and never return. I was hurt Christian had brought me here and then left me behind. I kept thinking, *We were best friends.*
I came upon a stone bench where I sat down, exhausted and scared. After a while I decided to lie down on it, and sleep took over my already-heavy eyelids. I must have fallen asleep quickly, in spite of the sound of that terrifying voice that I came to despise more than anything else.

I’ve forced myself to listen to that opera later in life, although every time I do, it hurts. Still, the sad nostalgia has a way of making me feel a bit alive.

Sometime during that night, an unknown hand reached out for me and led me first to the wide clearing at the maze’s center and then out again, back to my own bed.

Part of me believes I was sleeping all along, though on the way out, in that clearing, I have a horrifying, vivid memory of passing Christian. The full moon, hidden behind clouds earlier in the night, all of a sudden illuminated the scene: Christian standing on a small stone pedestal, wearing the same long black dress I’d seen his sister wear. His skin was as white as the stone bench I’d laid on, his eyes were painted black and his lips a shiny blood red. And it was he who was singing, fiendishly, “Ich habe dein Mund geküßt.” In his hands he held something orblike. He gazed up at the night sky as if excitedly offering this object to the gods.

***

The following days are buried in a feverish haze. I ended up in the hospital in a state of delirium. I was unable to put words together. I don’t remember anything from my stay at the hospital. Eventually, my temperature fell and I could be brought home.

When I finally returned to school months later, Christian was no longer there. He had apparently moved away. I think I was relieved but also sad. And it left a mystery. I was never able to explain to my parents what had happened that night.

It was not they who picked me up from the maze, that much I know.

***

The following year, I decided to make myself face Christian’s house again. I was scared but knew I had to go—I had so many questions. Taking the bus was out of the question, so I rode my bike all the way up the hill, out of town. I didn’t want anybody to see me. I needed to go there on my own, needed to
feel my legs grow tired after climbing the steep hill. And I needed my bike to allow me to speed away from there as quickly as possible if I should end up meeting Christian.

I still have a hard time comprehending what I saw. I never dared tell anybody about it. I was afraid they would take me to the hospital again, afraid they’d think I was losing my mind. Because apart from the long alley of oak trees, nothing looked the way I remembered it. It was the same house, but in a state of disrepair, with broken windows and chipped paint. The trees and bushes and grass had been left to grow wildly. There was no visible entrance to the maze—no sign, in fact, of anybody having lived there for years. Perhaps decades.

***

Seeing Christian again the other night, I suddenly realized how much he looks like somebody else. At first, I couldn’t quite figure out who, but now I know.

He reminds me of my father during the last years of his life. So much so that I start to wonder if it really is Christian. The same eyes; the dark, wild hair; the big eyebrows.

The same silence.

It was mostly my father who insisted I continue seeing a doctor. My father always well meaning but not really understanding me. In those days it was unusual to see a psychiatrist, especially in our town. I had to go to the nearest city once a week and wasn’t supposed to tell anybody. My father drove me there every week, patiently waiting outside in the car. I never found the sessions useful but went there willingly. I didn’t tell the psychiatrist anything of interest, I believe, but I could be wrong. I certainly never mentioned Christian. The doctor would not have understood.

It was after my final session, during the drive back home, that my father told me about my brother. He had been born a year before me and had only lived for a few days. I looked at my father as he quietly told the story, his eyes fixed on the road. I could see his lips quivering and what could have been a tear forming at the corner of his eye. “Don’t let your mother know that I told you,” he said, and that was the only time during our brief conversation that he faced me and looked me straight in the eyes.

***
Christian still hasn’t told me why he has returned. He came in and sat next to me like he did that first day of school. He has kept quiet since then. I’ve told him that he can stay as long as he wishes. I have to get used to having him so close by again. He still seems the same, just older. I wonder what he thinks of me, what he thinks of my lonely life. Whether he made other friends during his life, or if the reason for his return simply is that he didn’t and has decided that what happened that night in the maze is something of the past. Something we don’t need to talk about.

I get shivers realizing that I’ve now arrived at the age my father was when he died.

But I’m not the only one.

There’s someone else in the room.
John Grey,

Author of “If Only Life Were Laundry”

John Grey is an Australian born poet. Recently published in *International Poetry Review*, *Chrysalis* and the science fiction anthology, *Futuredaze* with work upcoming in *Potomac Review*, *Sanskrit* and *Fox Cry Review*. 
Troubled days, you tell me,
and yet I watch you fold your clothes,
gently, carefully, like they’re new babies.
Your hands are jittery at other times
but now they tenderly lower
each arm of the sweater
to rest upon the yellow buttons,
follow the line of pleat and tuck of dresses
so no new crease is born.

Preserve the body like you do
the outerwear, I long to tell you.
Rest it gently on the bed
all parts accommodated.
Feed it only the most
protective of delights.
Take it to the places
where flesh and bone
are cosseted and cared for.
And whatever emotion it bears,
let them be of a nurturing kind.

But you’re your life,
not just what you’re wearing.

Can’t gather in the years
like they’re fine cottons,
placate mistakes
with evenness and care.

You look after your clothes,
extend the use of them
so that they’ll last a lifetime.

Then you shrug, what’s the use.

And I say maybe usage is.
Jane Beal, PhD is a professor at Colorado Christian University where she teaches literature and creative writing. She writes poetry, fiction, literary criticism, young adult fantasy, and creative non-fiction on midwifery and childbirth. She is the author of several poetry collections, including Sanctuary (Finishing Line Press, 2008) and The Roots of Apples (Lulu Press, 2012), as well as a short story collection, Eight Stories from Undiscovered Countries (Lulu Press, 2009), and an academic monograph, John Trevisa and the English Polychronicon (ACMRS & Brepols, 2012). She is the editor of Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception (Brill, forthcoming 2013), co-editor of Translating the Past: Essays on Medieval Literature (ACMRS, 2012), and the voice of Songs from the Secret Life (Shiloh Studio of Sound, 2009), a CD of her poetry read aloud. She enjoys bird-watching, walking with her beloved miniature dachshund, Joyful, and making music with others by singing her part, playing the flute or striking up the percussion. To learn more, please visit sanctuarypoet.net. Her work has recently been published in Boston Literary Magazine, Third Wednesday, Portland Review, Foliate Oak, Red Rock Review, and elsewhere. Her poem "After Working Hours" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the author of one chapbook, Front Man (Big Table Publishing), and her first full-length collection will be out later this year. A resident of Pennsylvania, she has an M.F.A. from Wilkes University and teach creative writing at Keystone College.
DREAMS OF GA-LUN-LA-TI by Jane Beal

I. TWO HERONS

I turn
at the edge
of the lake—

two Great Blue
Herons swoop,
each around the other

in mid-air

’til one flies
east, not far
from my face

while the other
goes west,
and settles

in the water

eyeing me
through the green pine
and the yellow grass

like Sky-Woman
fallen to earth
from Ga-lun-la-ti.

II. SKY-WOMAN REMEMBERS

I loved strawberries
before I knew why.

They were so red,
they caught my eye on the path

as I stormed away from First Man—
because he had made me so angry!
When I tasted them, they were so sweet,
they reminded me of his love.

I wanted him to taste them
so he could remember mine.

When I forgot all my anger,
I knew my Father

had thrown them down
through the hole in the roots

of the Tree of Life that stands
in the middle of Ga-lun-la-ti—

and soon enough,
I conceived.

### III. FIRST MAN SINGS TO FIRST WOMAN

Sky-Woman, beauty,
the light of the Tree of Life
still lingers on your skin—

you are the picture of peace and harmony
when I watch you putting berries in your basket,
your tear-dress untied and open

when you cradle our baby to your breast
and the milk of life sweetens his tiny tongue
in the morning when you sing to him of Ga-lun-la-ti.

I remember that place! How strong-willed you were,
climbing into the branches of the forbidden tree
and then crawling into the roots.

I remember watching you as you fell
through the hole in the roots
toward the shining ball of water—

I remember Turtle Island rising up to catch you
as the birds brought you safely to his back
and suddenly, new life sprang up at your lightest touch!
Sky-Woman, beauty,
you are to me always new, always life—
and my love for you is endless.

IV. MY CHEROKEE CHILDHOOD

By blood, I was bound to Cherokee sisterhood—
She Who Shall Rise Up cut first her finger and then mine

and we pressed them together,
Cherokee-daughter to Cherokee-granddaughter

not knowing our mother was Sky-Woman
and the roots of our Tree of Life

grew down into our veins
from Ga-lun-la-ti.

V. USQUANIQDI

Miracle-child, Usquaniqdi,
your mother and I are calling your name!

We are wearing our tear-dresses now,
for we have walked that Trail.

You are so young, so we will sing to you
the stories we have hidden in our baskets.

We will teach you to plant strawberries
for your wife to find in your garden when you are grown.

We will kiss you in the light
that comes down from Ga-lun-la-ti!

For you are our treasured one,
the one the Great Spirit gave

when he breathed new life into you
with the scent of orange blossoms.
Brian Fanelli,

Author of “Temp Worker”

Brian Fanelli’s work has recently been published in Boston Literary Magazine, Third Wednesday, Portland Review, Foliate Oak, Red Rock Review, and elsewhere. His poem "After Working Hours" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is the author of one chapbook, Front Man (Big Table Publishing), and his first full-length collection will be out later this year. A resident of Pennsylvania, he has an M.F.A. from Wilkes University and teaches creative writing at Keystone College.
TEMP WORKER by Brian Fanelli

He shakes his ass at Gateway Plaza,
the tax company’s designated jester, dressed in wrinkled
Lady Liberty robes, a crown of foam spikes
flapping in raw January weather. Drivers blow by,
while he head bangs, fist pumps, anything to catch their attention,
to earn commission, to keep a job.
He waves the plastic torch like a light saber near offices
where men in loafers and women in business skirts
sit high in heated spaces, while biting winds whip his skin,
numb his cheeks. Teenage boys fling assaults
from dinged-up first cars, howling,
*Nice moves, queer.* He keeps disco dancing,
pretending flickering streetlamps are club lights,
until his hands and ears warm, until April
pushes up flowers, until the next job—
summer-long labor stocking shelves and pushing mops.
Melissa F. Pheterson,  
Author of “Letters from Ben”

Melissa F. Pheterson received her B.A. from Cornell University and an M.A. in journalism from New York University. Currently, she is a freelance writer of health and lifestyle content for local and national media. For a recurring feature on restaurants, she invites chefs into her home to guide her through the recreation of a meal featured on their menu, despite her fear of knives and heat. In her spare time, she volunteers at her local synagogue’s museum of Judaica. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The New York Times, Bacopa Literary Review, Jelly Bucket, JewishStoryWriting.com, Jerusalem Post, Louisville Review, Talking River, Wild Violet, numerous Gannett News Service publications, on the websites Salon.com and iVillage.com, and in the anthology Have I Got a Guy For You. She received two honorable mentions for magazine articles from Writer's Digest.
LETTERS FROM BEN by Melissa F. Pheterson

Ben’s letters arrived every day at noon, reliably as the Daily News, stuffed discreetly between catalogs inside the letter box of Mrs. Rachel Rothstein on Utopia Parkway in Whitestone, New York. Rachel set the envelope aside on the cluttered card table in her kitchen as she sorted through the circulars from Macy’s and Aldi, the Visa offers for retired educators, half listening to General Hospital on the tiny TV with rabbit ears. She clipped coupons, stuffing them in a change purse that she kept pinned inside her bra in case she ever got mugged again. This made her bosom a bit lopsided, but whom was she trying to impress? She always kept at least one hundred dollars in there, given what cabbies charged these days. If the bus drivers ever went on strike again, she vowed to her daughter Leah, she’d phone Mayor Bloomberg (anonymously, of course) and ask how he’d feel if his elderly mother were stranded at the Aldi.

“Mom,” Leah teased. “You forget that if not for public transportation, Dad would never have found you again.”

“Huh,” Rachel grunted, beaming. “I was just a little girl from Brooklyn.”

Only after she had cut her checks, taken paperwork to the basement, and scratched appointments upon the Easter Seals calendar on her refrigerator did Rachel slit the letter from Ben, revealing the wobbly letters that seemed to shiver on the page. She mouthed the words to herself, her tongue curling into patterns that were becoming familiar. He missed his wife terribly. His heart ached. He remembered how close Rachel and Edith had been. He rehashed their outings to Coney Island and weekends in the Catskills, details dredged from the comfort of memory and thrust under harsh new light. He’d never forget how beautiful Edith had looked in the wedding dress she’d borrowed from Rachel. His son, Aaron, was newly separated; the wife had gone ultra-Orthodox. Ben’s daughter wanted him to join her in Florida, but he couldn’t bear to leave his home, the Colonial he’d lived in since before the kids could walk.
Every Friday, Rachel replied to Ben on stationery that had been a gift from her grandchildren in Florida: off-white with pink seashells along the borders. Rachel made it a point of pride to contain her reply within the seashells. “Dear Ben: Thank you for the recent letters. I sympathize with you at this difficult time. I too cherish Edith’s memory, and I understand the pain of recent widowhood. Don’t forget to visit your family and cherish your grandchildren. They will bring you comfort and joy. Please send my regards to your son. Is he still teaching social studies? Leah is teaching every subject except science and math. She is highly sought after. Fondly, Rachel.”

Letter writing wasn’t her forte; she was uncreative and proud of it. Give her a Daily News hot off the press any day. She could discuss the Yankees with anyone, even her grandson. She knew the current celebrity fashion and top-grossing movies. But she, an old-fashioned lady at heart, still didn’t understand this Internet, why anyone would expose her private affairs to the world. The world didn’t care; or would care too much and meddle disastrously.

“Did you know that Aaron is divorced?” she asked Leah that afternoon, setting down a chipped china plate of tuna and toast she’d prepared when Leah had called from the taxi. While Rachel herself ate at the card table in the kitchen, she always set up Leah in the dining room, below the chandelier with its smoky gray crystals.

“I didn’t know that,” Leah said, accepting a tarnished fork. She closed her eyes for a few seconds.

“Oh, yes. Apparently the wife went Haredi.” She cocked a stubby finger to her silver temple. “Crazy religious. At least they had no children.”

Leah stared at her gold-rimmed plate, the underbelly of which read: “Made in Occupied Japan.” Presented to her mother by her father, the china was a souvenir of his Naval service. Beneath the table, her denim skirt rustled.

Rachel had not mentioned to Ben that her daughter was now a substitute teacher, no longer the
department head of English at John Bowne in Flushing. It was bound to trigger questions and it was none of anyone’s business. Teaching in Brooklyn required toughness. Rachel had had it (you better believe it, sister), but her daughter was a frail and tender soul, more at home writing haikus than remaining calm when a student drew a blade. Leah was in demand, though. All the teachers wanted her as their sub. Rachel just breathed a little easier when Leah was back home. She always waited by the window at teatime, as though by straining her neck she could see her daughter’s cab inch across the Throgs Neck.

***

Most days, Leah arose before dawn to read and print out her e-mail—she was treasurer for the Hollis Hills Poets Society—before showering in the bathroom she and Rachel shared, still tiled in carnation pink with a tub that drained so slowly that mother and daughter had to space their ablutions half a day apart. Leah’s Bonne Bell perfumes and powders created a chalky film across the plywood counter that Rachel’s perfunctory scrubbing could never quite lift. While she waited for the call from the school board, Leah applied makeup from the Caboodles make-up kit she’d once bought for her niece. She eschewed mascara and liner because her mother had worried it would aggravate her sensitive eyes; and her windowpane glasses obscured her lids, anyway. But she had plenty of blush and lipstick in beautiful shades with elegant names: Peach Melba, Rosie the Riveter, even (and this did make her blush!) Multiple Orgasm. When she’d chuckled to her mother, Rachel had snorted. “I’ll never understand these days. I might be the last decent lady standing!”

Once Leah had washed and dressed in her long skirt and button-down blouse (she wasn’t Haredi, of course, but she did not want to rile the hormones of the sleazier seniors), she phoned the cab driver and, while she waited, dug through her bookcases for workbooks that might help her and the students. As long as it wasn’t math, she was on solid ground. When desperate, she could almost always dig up lesson plans from the garage, empty now of her father’s old Toyota Cressida.
Rachel saved each letter from Ben in a shoe box from Lord & Taylor. Even though she never reread them, she was decent enough not to dump such outpourings of emotion into the Staten Island landfill.

“You and Edith were so beautiful,” Ben wrote. Rachel scowled at the implication. “The old photographs from the Copa are now framed on my night table. I only weep sometimes when I view them. Rachel, you were Edith’s dearest friend, and I would like to take you to dinner so we can reminisce about our mutual object of adoration.”

“Spending time with my children brought me comfort after Jacob’s death,” Rachel replied that Friday.

“Leah, you’re a sensible girl,” she said later, heating milk for her daughter’s tea. “You’d never go Haredi.”

“Their extremism doesn’t appeal to me,” her daughter agreed, sighing. Her finger, rubbing her eyelid, blurred as it slipped under the lens.

Rachel turned twenty in 1946. She was already watching her friends push carriages down the street as she hurried off to the IRT, bound for the New York Public Library to research her thesis on the economy of the Southern states during Reconstruction. She was her parents’ only child and wanted to make them proud. Her faculty advisor at Columbia had eventually become a famous political scientist. He’d once asked her to dinner, just days before she got engaged. She had mentioned this story last Thanksgiving, upon catching a glimpse of her granddaughter Heidi’s textbook. Heidi had given a delighted squeal. “He asked you out?” She jabbed her fingernail against the cover. “Maybe he hid your name in the pages, like an acrostic. That would give me a reason to actually read this. Hey, can I post this
“What do you mean, honey? You know Grandma’s a fuddy-duddy.” She had seen this new computer craze called “Facebook” in the papers of late—some trend among college students—but had grown too impatient and confused to finish the article.

“I mean: Can I announce to all my friends that the guy who wrote this painfully dull textbook once lusted after my bubbe at Columbia?”

Heidi took a sharp breath through gritted teeth, watching Rachel’s face to see if she’d crossed a line.

But then her grandmother had smiled indulgently—she had been a knockout!—and given a sudden whoop.

“For a little girl from Brooklyn, I didn’t make out too badly, right?”

Heidi closed her eyes, wriggling her shoulders as she peeled off the neon pink sticker that read: “USED.”

“I could help you reconnect with him,” she offered, fluttering her lashes.

Rachel chuckled. “Oh, honey, he’s long since passed away.”

“Did you ever want to write a book, Grandma?”

“Oh, no, honey. I could do the research but I don’t have the creative mind to piece it all together. I never did finish my thesis.” But she smiled as she said this, still imagining her name embedded in the arid prose like a hoarse whisper.

“Surprising,” said Heidi, curling the sticker into a tiny spyglass, “given how you call me three days before my birthday.”
“Well,” said Rachel, “why would I bother you on your special day?”

***

On a Tuesday afternoon in November, as darkness gathered early above Manhattan, Jacob Rothstein had wandered in his sailor suit into the New York Public Library on his tour of Manhattan, right past those indolent marble lions flanking the steps.

Rachel had been making notes in the reading room, below the ceiling mural of celestial clouds and muscled gods. She could almost feel this divine light bursting above her, mitigating the dank and dreary outside. She was not bothered by the darkened room, its arched windows recently painted to give cover of night in the event of air raids. She could work perfectly well by lamplight. And she’d wanted to finish her thesis that spring, though it wasn’t due till the following fall.

Slips of paper rocketed through the pneumatic tube, often in synch with the coal huffing through the pipes. On the wall behind the book retrieval desk, the number “27” flickered to life. The request she’d dropped into the tubes had been answered, the Carolina Gazette newspapers found. Rachel stumbled toward the circulation desk carrying a bound volume of Evening Post papers, surely heavier than a turkey breast, only to stop short before colliding with a sailor.

“Excuse me,” he said, in a sandpaper voice.

She dropped the book, narrowly missing her foot, her irritation tempered only by his petulant lips. The emerald glass of the hanging lamp cast a glimmer that made Rachel unsure she wasn’t dreaming. She never bumped into anyone if she could help it.

He bent down and retrieved the book.

“Let me assist you.”

“No, thank you.” She took it back.
He cocked his head, dark eyes dancing. “New York,” he murmured. “Never fails to impress. There aren’t such pretty librarians in the whole state of New Jersey.”

She arched her brows, setting her mouth in a line to accentuate the Cupid’s bow. The stretching of her face made it difficult to close her eyes, but she wanted to show her pique.

When she snapped them open, she said, “I’m a student at Columbia, matter of fact. I’m writing my thesis.”

By way of apology, he bowed. “Jacob Rothstein,” he said, tapping his collar.

She nodded.

“And you are?”

She paused, debating whether to proffer her surname. It didn’t seem fair to drag her family into this.

Finally: “Rachel will do.”

He jumped again, rubbed his calloused hands together.

“Just like in the Bible!” he cried. “Jacob meets Rachel by the well.” One hand traveled to his collar and began to tug. Then he winked. “And what else is a library, after all, but a well of knowledge?”

_Such drama!_ she thought. _A regular Humphrey Bogart!_ Suddenly, unbidden, a hot fizz—like Coca-Cola left on the stoop in summer—seeped into her belly.

“I suppose you know your Torah,” she asked, thrilled when his eyes brightened. So he _was_ Jewish! “Surely you remember, then, that Rachel’s father made Jacob work for seven years to earn her hand. And on the wedding day, Rachel’s father tricked Jacob into marrying his other daughter, Leah. To marry Rachel, Jacob had to work _another_ seven years.”
A furrow cut into his chin as he smiled.

“And Jacob stuck it out, didn’t he? On account of Rachel’s beauty?”

“I’ll have to be getting back to work now. Excuse me.”

She let him follow her as she exchanged books, heading back to the polished oak table to concentrate on the post-bellum depreciation of cash crops. He wandered around the reading room, craning his neck at the ceiling to see what he could in the feeble lamplight.

As soon as she rose, he materialized to return her books. She thanked him, not only for his muscle but for his interest in her studies and his service to the country. He tipped his cap, revealing an almost shocking thicket of black curls.

Rachel took her wool coat and descended the marble stairs, fighting the urge to look back, trying to draw composure from the beaux arts arches, from the haughty lions outside. What were their names, again? She knew they had names. And then she was mercilessly exposed under the sky, shivering in the open air, wincing at the chill that whipped through the alleys and snapped her coat across her legs, until finally she let the earth swallow her by bolting down the stairs to the IRT, beating back the turnstile with her hip.

She was settled on the rattan bench when she saw his wide-cut trousers slip between the closing doors. Her gut lurched suddenly as the subway rattled into motion. Over the drumbeat of her pulse, she whispered the words that were cutting through her fog of disbelief: He followed me.

He fixed his eyes upon her at once, giving an awkward little bow. “Rachel, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to alarm you. But I knew I’d regret it for the rest of my days if I didn’t get your telephone number.”

She bit her lip, then recited a phone number. She watched his eyes watching her mouth.

“My family doesn’t have a phone,” she proclaimed, “but my neighbors are decent people.”
“May I escort you home?”

“No, thank you.”

“May I phone you?”

“Yes.” A pause. “Please.”

He looked as though he were about to squeeze her hand, but then rubbed his palms together, kindling unseen fire.

“My Jewish name is Yankel,” he said, as the train slowed down at Astor Place, and once the doors parted he was gone. She began to rub her kidskin pump across the top of her other foot, eyes fixed on the laces. She didn’t want to look up and violate this moment, meeting the amused or even, God forbid, mocking eyes of the witnesses to her private miracle, laughing behind their furs and fedoras.

When she stood up at last to walk home, her knees were rubber goo, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

Three months later, Rachel and Yank got married in Brooklyn. Her thesis was shelved. Never mind the economic crisis of the scorched-earth South; she was pregnant and needed to find a teaching job before she began to show. Her boys she’d named Seth and Steven; but the girl, arriving five years after she’d sworn off another pregnancy, she’d named Leah. A Biblical name, refined—just like hers. When Jacob had saved enough money to move his brood from a garden apartment into a slightly less cramped duplex, Rachel stuck the jaundiced papers in a blue hatbox from Gimbels. Clutter had since pushed them into a cobwebbed corner of the basement.

***

Leah, the diligent bard who glorified her parents’ star-crossing in verse, didn’t feel too terribly that her own story had flopped, that her ex-husband (met at a B’nai B’rith dance) preferred the company
of men, that her marriage was annulled within a year, before she could even think about a baby. She consoled herself that Father loved her best, the only girl, bullied and teased by the tall, knobby-kneed scoundrels for whom her mother cooked lamb chops and saved every dime for medical school. She was to be a teacher, like her parents. Rachel had surpassed her classroom teacher post to become district librarian. Yes, she’d impressed upon Leah the demands of her job—how, for example, she had ordered copies of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and faced questions from the superintendent regarding her communist sympathies. Lunacy! Or how she claimed to have a secret invisible button inside her desk that connected to the police—could Leah pull that off? But perhaps oh-so-unflappable Rachel had merely swallowed her anxieties during school hours, for Leah always clung, in her grief, to the memory of sitting on her father’s lap in the orange bouclé chair, his stubble rough on her cheek, listening to Rachel bellow down the stairs about one thing or another. The plumbing, the laundry, the Irish superintendent who had it in for her, the Catskills bungalow they couldn’t afford yet another summer.

Jacob’s cancer had been caught when the elder son was already a full-fledged oncologist who’d urged their father to pursue aggressive treatment. If only Jacob had done it with the same ardor with which he’d pursued her mother…but, oh well. Rachel had even sold her wedding band to help pay for the chemo, an act that inspired the poem Leah read at her father’s funeral. The week after Rachel retired, Jacob passed away.

***

“My old friend, Ben, is coming tomorrow,” Rachel told Leah, carefully, after her daughter had returned from work. Rachel did not want to upset her daughter. She read movie reviews on Sunday mornings, before they went to Clearview Cinema, to make sure the plots didn’t cut too close to the bone. And that Broadway show, *Mamma Mia*, to which her granddaughter kept inviting them? Completely out of the question.

Leah nodded, blinking back fatigue. Rachel toyed with again mentioning Aaron, cut loose at last
from that Haredi woman. In all her erudition, her smart-aleck discourse at the library about the matriarchs, Rachel had forgotten that biblical Leah was said to have “tender eyes.” Some sages took this to mean “beautiful”; others thought it meant “fragile.” As though punishing Rachel’s ignorance, Leah was born with a film over the center of her left eye. She was legally blind on that side and not permitted to drive.

“Of course, it’s not a genetic condition,” Rachel had assured her daughter after the marriage was annulled. In fact, she had offered to obtain an affidavit from a doctor stating as much, hoping it would bolster her daughter’s odds in the cutthroat New York City dating scene. That and a nose job for Leah were within Rachel’s means if she put off the new dishwasher and new plumbing. But her daughter claimed to have made peace with her nose, her looks. In poems, she described herself as a “sexy, yet maternal, Semitic princess,” doting on her mother in the room that her brothers once shared, packed with teacher’s editions of books and macramé brightening the walls, along with her father’s framed diploma from Trenton State College.

“Why don’t you go to the salon down the street, Mom?” Leah asked.


“Me-zahn-plahs, Mom. It’s French.” She gestured for a pen and pad, then wrote it down: Mis en place.

“You have a beautiful mind, Leah,” Rachel said sadly.

“Oh, come on.” Leah shrugged.

Rachel followed her daughter’s suggestion, mostly to kill time before Ben arrived, to keep her from getting needlessly anxious. They were both so old, really, and casual friends at best. She had already nursed one man into death and refused to nurse another. The gum-popping girl at the salon teased her limp straw-colored hair so that the strands floated around her head, like a cloud of brittle spun gold.
Rachel even splurged on Rent-A-Maid to dust a little, to scrub the talc from the bathroom and straighten the piles of New York Times. Not that she needed to impress anyone.

Ben arrived that afternoon with a bouquet of yellow roses wrapped in a cellophane that squeaked between Rachel’s fingers. (Mercifully, Leah had gone to a lecture on Kabbalah.) The always-trim widower was now dreadfully thin, his blue eyes watery and red-rimmed, narrow chin sagging into his neck.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Rachel said, opening her breakfront and grabbing a glass vase by its curved lip. “But Leah might like flowers. She writes beautiful poems about the bay.”

She stuck the vase under the rasping tap, shoved the stems inside, and then retreated to the powder room to towel off the water that had splashed on her skirt, prying a petal from the waistband. She heard his footsteps outside the door, irritatingly close; the mere sound of men’s loafers mashing the linoleum sent her gut clenching.

When she emerged, Ben shuffled over to take her elbow.

“Sometimes I talk to Edith out loud,” he blurted out. “You know. About the weather. Or the kids.”

“How is Aaron?” Rachel asked. “Is he still teaching social studies?”

He blinked, eyes retreating behind furrows and folds. “Oh. Yes. Out in Roslyn.”

“Leah, you know, she’s getting along. And I—I have some research on the Civil War he might be able to use in a lesson plan. It’s from a thesis I never finished. It’s in my basement.”

“Still, after all these years?” he said, voice cracking.

“You know me, Ben. I can’t bear to throw out anything that Leah might be able to use. Maybe Aaron could use it, too. It’s firsthand historic research.”
“Sounds promising.”

“Have him come over one day after school. Leah has a very creative mind about putting lesson plans together.”

Rachel consented to letting him drive her to the restaurant, in a movie star’s old home and now, it was rumored, a Mafia front, though this didn’t make the food any better or worse in her opinion. It was a five-minute drive that should have taken two, drawn out by Ben’s fitful braking along the potholed streets. Rachel had always wondered how it would feel to ride in a Lexus, and now she knew: No great shakes.

After they had sat down, squinted and frowned at the menu, ordered their veal parmesan, Rachel allowed Ben to talk about Edith, hoping her suggestion would seep into his subconscious. Her lips bled Revlon Red into the fine lines spiking her mouth—though the rest of her plump face was wrinkle-free—and she blinked heavily, the blue pouches beneath her eyes twitching, as the second hand of her thin marcasite watch swept over the Roman numerals. She granted him a few rueful chuckles and labored blinks, as though someone had glued eye to lid, but never any sighs of pity, certainly no caresses on the arm.

Yet perhaps the novelty of venturing out had stirred her somehow, thrown her off—for she’d failed to notice on the coffee table, atop the pile of tabloids, a thick marigold sheet the maid had found on the stairs, where it had slipped from Leah’s overstuffed binder. A poem dashed out as she waited to be told what the day held in store. A poem she’d intended to bring to school and refine as she ate her tuna sandwich. Wanting to find love with Aaron, but not this way. Not in her mother’s shadow.

_She slammed the books on her knuckles._

_He fled past Patience and Fortitude to rewrite her destiny, underground._

_“I want that woman. That woman. “_
Yet his knuckles went white against my arm at the sound of her voice barreling down the stairs.

And to me, alone, he moaned: “That Woman. That Woman.”
Holly Day,

Author of “Missing Keystrokes”

Holly Day is a housewife and mother of two living in Minneapolis, Minnesota who teaches needlepoint classes in the Minneapolis school district. Her poetry has recently appeared in Hawai‘i Pacific Review, The Oxford American, and Slipstream. Her book publications include The Book Of, A Bright Patch of Sunlight, Music Composition for Dummies, Guitar-All-in-One for Dummies, and Music Theory for Dummies, which has recently been translated into French, Dutch, Spanish, Russian, and Portuguese.
MISSING KEYSTROKES by Holly Day

Typewriter lies dead in the corner
on the floor, keyboard split, askew, like a mouthful
of angry teeth inlaid with
carefully-set pieces of ebony screaming
“hit me again you
qwerty motherfucker”

typewriter burns bright in the corner, tapering
flames darken the single sheet of paper still
stuck in the dented rubber roller one
word burns brighter than the rest taunts
“happily” asks “are you happy now”
John Smelcer,  
Author of “If Evil Knievel were Indian” and “How to make blue ribbon fry bread”  

John Smelcer is the author of over 40 books, including a dozen books of poetry. He is co-editor of Native American Classics (2013), a graphic novel of 19th and early 20th century Native American literature hailed "one of the hottest graphic novels of 2013." His poems appear in over 400 magazines, including The Atlantic.
IF EVEL KNIEVEL WERE INDIAN by John Smelcer

He would jump twenty-three semi-trailers
full of government commodity cheese
in a suped-up Indian motorcycle painted red.

He would line up every white guy who ever
played an Indian in a John Wayne western
and jump them all with his eyes closed
while twirling a sparkler in one hand.

If Evel Knievel were Indian
he would start at the moon
and pick up enough speed to soar
over every reservation—

a red and chrome meteor with its tires aflame.
HOW TO MAKE BLUE RIBBON INDIAN FRY BREAD

by John Smelcer

“Indians could spend their whole lives
looking for the perfect piece of fry bread.”

—Sherman Alexie, Reservation Blues

In a large bowl, mix the following ingredients:

Three cups of flour made from the ashes of failed Indian dreams

One cup of water made from the tears of Indian mothers

A pinch of salt, first thrown into open wounds of Indian fathers

Drop the rolled and molded dough into a pan of oil
hot enough to incinerate every Indian future

Remove fry bread when both sides turn brown and blistered
Beverly James,

Author of “The Last Word”

Beverly James was born in Tela, Honduras, and grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, New York. In 1989, she earned a degree in print journalism from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and spent the next twenty years as a daily newspaper reporter, magazine editor and media relations professional. She earned a Master’s of Arts in Professional Writing from Kennesaw State University (Georgia) in May 2010. Currently, she is assistant director for media relations at Georgia Perimeter College. She lives in Atlanta with her teenage daughter and enjoys writing multicultural fiction for young adults.
THE LAST WORD by Beverly James

Shit. I forgot the damn dressing for the damn salad. Now I’ll have to turn around and walk back down this long-ass block to the Kroger’s and get back in that long-ass line. That’s what I get for trying to start a diet on a Friday. My arms ache from holding the plastic grocery bags filled with a bottle of Zinfandel, Romaine lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, green and yellow bell peppers, and salmon. Oh yeah, and can’t forget the two oversized bridal magazines I grabbed at the last minute for no apparent reason other than to torture myself.

Just when I think my night can’t get any worse, I spin around and walk smack into Stephanie Turner. Stephanie, tall, slim, perfect dancer’s body, café au lait complexion, what my mother would call “a true beauty,” the one who snared the guy we all knew was the best catch of our graduating class. That Stephanie.

She is holding one of those eco-friendly canvas bags with a fuggly drawing featured on the front of its political correctness done by some toothless six-year-old who won a contest at her overpriced private school. Her other hand nestles against a fat little sausage of a baby who rides her chest in some kind of beige, cotton swaddler contraption.

“Stephanie! Girl, how are you? My goodness, it’s been years.” I sound retarded even to my own ears. We stand so close to each other that I can smell the cinnamon gum on her breath. I try not to look her up and down, but I can’t help it. She looks like a walking ad for Barney’s New York in her skinny, black 7 For All Mankind jeans, multi-hued Marc Jacobs sweater, and black Lanvin flats with ruffle trim.

“Kara! Come here and give me a hug, girl. It has been too long.”

She sets down her canvas bag brimming with green vegetables and bulky ears of corn before pulling me into her chest for an embrace. I do an awkward dance as I move my body to the right and my arms to the left and try not to smother her child. I inhale the sweet smell of the sleeping infant before
burying my head in Stephanie’s neck. I press my longing aside as the scent of baby powder eases into my nose. I noticed the baby is wearing blue; must be a boy. She pats my back and pulls away.

I push strands of my bobbed hair behind my ears and smile at her. I hope she doesn’t catch a whiff of what a fourteen-hour workday has left behind; I am limp, tired, and funky.

“You look great, Kara, chic as always,” Stephanie says, smoothing down her long ponytail. “You always were so put together.”

“You too, Steph,” I answer. “So tell me, how many kids do you and Gary have? Do you live close by?” I remember they had the wedding of the century shortly after graduation. We had all piled into her dorm room poring over Elegant Bride magazines, oohing and aahing at pictures of big, fluffy gowns and tiaras. I had gone on to law school, sniffing at my boyfriend’s suggestion that we get engaged. He must have lost his mind if he thought I was going to give up a full ride to Yale Law to wear an apron and watch him climb the corporate ladder. No sirree Bob, I was not going to be left behind baking cookies while he had all the fun.

But as her sleeping baby stirs and I shift the bags in my hands, I think about how every passing year the pool of available men grows smaller, and my need for a baby has sprouted like a tumor, gnawing at me every night until it yields tears and regrets. You know, just one baby along the way would have been nice. But the last guy I dated was a bus driver, and while Michael was great in bed, there was no way I could let anybody in my circle know that all I could pull these days is a man who wears a name tag to work. Unless you count my married college sweetheart that I see whenever he’s in town on business a couple of times a year, my relationship track record is like a Monet: it looks great from far away, but it becomes a big mess the closer you get.

She blabs on and on about her great husband and his great job and their great marriage. I home in on her ring finger, drinking in (and filing away for later contemplation over the usual Friday night meal of wine and chocolate, fuck the salad) the three-carat, cushion-cut, platinum engagement ring and matching channel-set wedding band.
“We have three: twins Sophia and Sydney who are nine; they’re with the nanny. And this is Gary Junior, he’s six months old,” Stephanie explains. “Our little family is growing, but I told Gary this is it, you got your boy.”

We grin at each other like two idiots, each struggling to find something witty to say to fill the silence.

“Have you tried the new Kroger?” I ask.

“Oh, we shop at Whole Foods right across the street over there, even though we live in a subdivision about seven miles away,” Stephanie says, leaning against a beige minivan. “I only buy organic for the kids and Gary wanted some corn tonight. What are you doing for dinner? Looks like you might be cooking a romantic meal for two, huh?” We both laugh at that.

“No,” I answer with a tight smile, “just staying in tonight and whipping up a little somethin’ somethin’ for a quiet Friday night after a hard work week. Because, you know, some of us actually have to work.”

Stephanie slaps back in full force. “Single professional like you, I’d figure you’d be at some restaurant with Mr. Super Executive or at a happy hour with a bunch of fine men. Slim pickings, huh?”

Little Ms. Housewife had to take a swipe at single, working women to make herself feel better. Nice, nice. I guess a successful lawyer for a husband and three beautiful kids aren’t enough. If I had a husband like that I think I’d find a way to be in a better mood. But that’s just me. Maybe, just maybe if she left the suburbs once in a while and got her hands dirty she wouldn’t be so uptight. I felt like going upside her head with my wine bottle, but why waste a good Zinfandel?

So instead I say, “I work all week with a bunch of juvenile men whose wives can’t keep them in line, so I figure I’ve earned the right to stay home alone on a Friday night.”

She looks really pissed, but tries to play it off.

“Nice suit,” she offers, “Nordstrom?”

“Sak’s,” I answer. “So, what are you up to these days? PTA and stuff?”
“You got it. I barely have time for myself between the kids, Jack ‘N Jill, Junior League and play dates.”

“And don’t forget Gary.” You know, your husband, the guy who spoils you rotten, and gives you everything, and waits on you hand and foot, and pays for a nanny for your non-working-ass, and allows you to shop at that glorified, overpriced grocery store. There’s not enough billable hours to justify that shit.

“Of course, Gary.”

Another stilted silence.

“Well, it was good to see you, Steph. Take care of yourself and those pretty babies.”

“You too, Kara,” she replies. “Maybe we’ll catch up again.”

I bend down to kiss the baby, swallowing hard to push down tears as I inhale his sweet scent. I imagine him as mine as my lips brushed against his skin. She has everything—a husband, kids, a nice home. I look into her eyes and see the same hard, selfish Stephanie from back in the day. None of it has been enough to soften her.

She walks toward the minivan, stops, and turns back toward me.

“Hey, Whole Food’s sells canvas totes. You can join the rest of us and get rid of the plastic bags. Better for the environment, you know?”

Smug bitch.

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Smug bitch.

Kara Peters is walking down the street, spins around and runs right into me. That’s Kara, always expecting the world to revolve around her. She had always been so aloof, even when we lived in the same dorm at Howard University many moons ago. Cool Kara, always quiet, but self-confident, not shy at all. The guys all loved her because she was a master at playing hard to get, but still knew how to be the life of the party, everybody’s friend, Miss City Slicker. Still, she liked her distance; never let anybody get too close.
Kara Peters the Perfect in her cliché black Armani suit, pedestrian Gucci pumps, carrying last year’s discounted Coach purse, and plastic bags from that run-of-the-mill grocery store. So I pull her in for a tight hug.

“I was online making plans for our fourteenth wedding anniversary, when I ran across an article on how you had recently made partner at your firm.” What I don’t tell her is how Gary has bragged about it for weeks: the kind of money she’s probably bringing home now, the corner office she works in every day, and the assistants who answer her every whim. Oh, Kara this, Kara that, Kara won the biggest award in the firm’s history…blah, blah, blah. Whatever.

She was a genius in college, legendary for being a double major, 4.0 gpa, full scholarship to law school and never broke a sweat. She always looked bored, like the whole college thing was just a nuisance, a form she had to fill out before she could move on to bigger and better things. She wasn’t like me; she didn’t need the babies and the man to be fulfilled.

She is telling me about her new position and all the responsibility it brings on top of the hassle of her recent move into a bigger loft just a couple of blocks away on Peachtree. Now she can walk to work, stores, and restaurants. Living the single life with not an ass to wipe or a dirty pair of draws to wash. Yeah, life is tough. Still, I have to admit that she has earned it. I’ve always admired Kara’s drive, her smarts, that unrelenting ambition, even if it scares me. What if you got to the top and they called your bluff, let you make the hard decisions? Then what? What if you failed? Easier to let somebody else fight the dragons while you run things on the home front. That’s what my mother did and her mother before her. They were all Howard women, well educated, married to the right men who provided the lifestyle that allowed them to stay home and raise families. But that niggling need for something more has grown over the years into a yawning chasm of emptiness that I fill with shopping and cleaning and luncheons. I’ve been too ashamed to ask Mother where she finds her happiness. I’m afraid she will confide that she has never lost it. Could I really be the only one walking around with a hole the size of the moon inside of me?
“Love your haircut, you always were so well put together,” I chirp, making myself sound more cheerful than I could possibly feel at this time of night with dinner to cook and the twins sick again and waiting for me to come back with cold medicine, and Gary probably parked, as usual, in front of the TV with a scotch in one hand and the remote in the other. Damn. I still managed to forget the French bread. I fight back the urge to burst into tears. I can’t do it all; I just can’t. I keep talking to distract myself. I hate to admit it but if I have to compare, my life feels like a Monet, beautiful from a distance, but a big old mess the closer you get to it.

She asks something about Gary, and I give the usual answer. Everything is fine, life is swell. Where the hell is Gary? Probably getting his online porn on if he isn’t already asleep in the recliner. No romantic dinners for us, no exciting nights out at a play or musical, not even a Friday night date to the movies. We are beyond that. We live more like roommates now with kids to raise together, a mortgage to pay, and a show to put on every time company comes over. “Honey, let me fix your plate! Sweetie, can you help me open the bottle of wine for our guests?” But once they’re gone, we’re back to being strangers who know how to put five thousand square feet of living space to good use in maintaining those boundaries. Still, I’m not going anywhere. My marriage may be as mundane as hell, like watching paint dry most times, but divorce is not how my life is supposed to go; it is not part of my story.

She looks bored as I talk about the subdivision where we live, like she could think of a million things she’d rather be doing. Poor Kara, forced to stand here and listen to a stupid housewife talk about her husband and kids. She probably is in a hurry to get home to some hot personal trainer, or to head out to happy hour or something. I am babbling, but I can’t stop myself. I see the way she rolls her eyes at my wedding ring, like it’s a symbol of everything I have left behind, the freedom, career, and personal growth.

“…this is it, you got your boy,” I trail off.

“So that’s it, no more buns in that oven, huh?” Kara offers. “You have been blessed, girl. They sure must keep you busy. But that’s okay; they will make us proud when they get to Howard.”

We laugh, both trying to find something else to fill the awkward silences.
She asks if we shop at that run-of-the-mill grocery store and I tell her no, “I drive the extra miles to shop for my family at Whole Foods.” I mean, is she crazy? My husband is a top lawyer; I am not buying store-brand, expired, preservative-laced food for my family. I may not be Super Career Woman saving the world from mediocrity, but I damn sure know how to prepare a nutritious meal.

Speaking of which, I wonder what Ms. Single and Ready to Mingle does for dinner these days. Maybe everything isn’t as rosy as it seems. How many lonely microwave dinners are part of her repertoire?

“Cooking a romantic dinner for two, huh?”

She laughs nervously. She might as well say, “No, just me and the cats tonight.” Ha! Score one for all the dissed housewives tonight. Okay, the next comment is low, but I can’t help it.

“Single professional like you, I’d figure you’d be at some restaurant with Mr. Super Executive or at a happy hour with a bunch of fine men. Slim pickings, huh?”

But don’t feel sorry for Kara. The girl gives as good as she gets:

“Not really, Stephanie. You see, I work all week with so many smart, gorgeous, wealthy men who are bored to tears by their stuck-in-the-mud wives that they’re constantly chasing me. So I figure I’ve earned the right to stay home from pawing hands on a Friday night.”

I plant a tight smile on my face.

“Nice suit. Nordstrom?”

No, she says, Sak’s.

“Remember the nonprofit you always talked about creating?” Kara asks. “Did you ever do anything with that?”

Did I look like I ever did anything with that? I mean, damn, look at me Kara. My hair is in a ponytail, I have baby puke all over my sweater, and my mommy jeans would look great in a board room. I don’t need her to remind me of everything that I have not accomplished. I think about it every time I look in an alumni magazine, or when I see a former classmate anchoring the news at 11, or when I host a dinner for Gary’s business associates and their wives. I get it; I sold out for a husband, and house and
babies. I get it. My husband hasn’t touched me since I got pregnant, and the night Gary Jr. was conceived was the first time we’d had sex in eight months. Truth is, he’s not the only one who falls asleep in front of the television every night. I have forgotten how to talk to him as a man, as the Gary that I knew before the kids, before the bills, before the big-time career that consumed us both. And I am invisible to him as the woman he first knew with dreams and desires. He can only see me now as wife, mother, maid. But we both pretend nothing’s wrong. So there you have it; my life is perfect.

She asks about my activities with the kids. I list them all, hoping to use my children to make her jealous.

“I barely have time for myself between the kids, Jack ‘N Jill, Junior League and play dates.”

“And don’t forget Gary,” she says.

Yes, who could forget my loving husband? It is obvious from the look on her face that she thinks I’m ungrateful for all he does as a provider. Kara, Kara, Kara. I wish I could give you a week with my husband. Maybe then you would understand. Maybe not.

We say our goodbyes, both exhausted by the chit chat. Another awkward hug, this time Kara leaning in to place a gentle kiss on Gary Junior. I watch as she closes her eyes and grazes the soft spot on the middle of his head, and I think how she must be thanking God that she never has to do anything more than nuzzle a clean baby. No screaming infants, no distant husband, no living for everyone else but you. As I turn toward the minivan, I hear the rustle of the plastic bags in her hands. She has everything; I just need the last word.
OK 4 by Sara McLaughlin
Donna Girouard,

Author of “The Most Important Thing in the World”

Donna Girouard is an Instructor of English at Livingstone College in Salisbury, NC, and faculty adviser of the college's literary-arts magazine, The Bear's Tale. Her essays can be found in the current issues of Storm Cellar Quarterly and Embodied Effigies and in the upcoming issue of Writer's Bloc. She has just completed her first book-length work, The Other Side: A Memoir.
THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD

by Donna M. Girouard

The baritone voice calling my name brought me scurrying from the playroom. Daddy had already settled into his scarred mustard-yellow recliner, which was torn and pock-marked by cigarette burns. His feet were already propped up on the footrest and waiting for me. He lit a cigarette and pulled the square-cut glass ashtray closer as my small fingers pulled the shoestrings of first one then the other of his black wingtips. I carefully loosened the laces so I could slip the heavy shoes off of his sore feet but paused, transfixed, when he exhaled a perfect smoke ring toward the ceiling. “Do it again,” I urged, but he smiled and motioned with his foot. I obediently slipped off his shoes, carefully lining them up next to the recliner (as I’d been taught) and climbed over the footrest into his lap. Smoke rings of all sizes soon drifted around us, and I reached out to stab the closest ones before they got away. Somewhere between puffs, I asked him to “open wide,” so I could gaze for a moment at the gold molar that never lost its fascination for me and made me wish for tooth decay. When the cigarette became too short to hold and had joined the other discards in the littered ashtray, I nestled closer and wondered what would come next today.

Sometimes he told me stories of skipping school, of shooting marbles or rolling dice in back alleys, or playing pranks on neighbors by shifting their unlocked Packards and Desotos into neutral to be rolled down the steep streets of Spencer, where he’d grown up. Perhaps I’d be treated to a tale of his Navy days, and I would reverently touch the tattooed dagger on his forearm or the anchor on his bicep while he described the sea spray that pounded Destroyer 474 as thunderclouds rolled over the Pacific and squid and hammerhead sharks glided by. If my mother happened to overhear, she would shake her head at his exaggerations: “Buck, why do you lie to her?” but her words were usually ignored. If I was really lucky, he sang to me, Maurice Chevalier whose accent he could easily imitate: “Thank Heaven…for little girls…” Whatever tale he told or song he sang would predictably be followed by the same question to
me: “What’s the most important thing in the world?” I knew the answer but always played along. “Money?” I asked, giggling. “Noooo…,” he always shook his head in mock severity. “Ummm…” I stalled, not wanting the game to end, “jewelry?” “Noooo…” he growled. Then, together, we shouted the right answer: “LOVIN’”

A few years later, when I turned nine, I joined the Girl Scouts, bras replaced my white cotton undershirts, and my father moved out of the master bedroom. A rollaway bed and odd nightstand that Pepere had in his attic appeared one day in the Other Side, the storage room that ran almost the length of the house where my maternal grandmother, Annie, once operated her dry goods store. By this time, Dad had already partitioned off his shed, and the remainder of the space was being used as a combination of my playroom and a laundry/storage area for my mother. However, upon seeing the rollaway bed in there, clearly not being stored but already made up with sheets, pillow and one of Memere’s patchwork quilts, I stopped short, the fate of yesterday’s victim of Barnabus Collins no longer the dominant thought it had been just seconds before when I’d raced home from school and once again (despite repeated warnings) hurriedly dumped my school books on the antique dining room table. The television show abruptly forgotten, I sought out my mother for an explanation. The snoring, she claimed, had finally gotten to her and no amount of whining or complaining from me would change the result: Dad’s “bedroom” would be smack in the middle of the Other Side, virtually dividing the room into thirds with my playroom on one end and the now smaller storage area on the other.

My fear of intrusion into my private playroom life proved to be unfounded – at least until a year or so later when my father quit his underpaid job as Mr. Krock’s chauffeur to work second shift at CPC Engineering, a steel manufacturing plant, (and even then, I suffered only during the mornings of the summer months when his right to sleep superseded my right to play). On the weekends, he still rose fairly early, so I was not inconvenienced by his proximity to my turf, and I noticed very little change in the overall behavior of my parents toward each other. They frequently and often vigorously disagreed, but they always had. The yelling, door slamming, and table pounding (as well as the long, angry silences that followed) had all been just as much a part of my childhood as their exchanged hello or goodbye
kisses. Apart from the discomfort I experienced when they argued, their volatile relationship did not directly affect me since I felt relatively secure in their love and neither had yet asked me to choose sides. That would come later.

One particularly memorable argument from my early childhood, even before my father’s banishment from the master bedroom, began after the delivery of the new couch. The living room walls had just that week been painted a pale tangerine, with cream trim and white swirly ceiling. Beige wall-to-wall had been installed and clear plastic mats put down on the anticipated heavy traffic pathways. As I recall, I impulsively requested permission to “camp out” on the burnt orange couch, anticipating the adventure of spending the night in a room other than my own boring bedroom. For some reason never made clear to me, my father challenged my request by staking his own claim on the couch’s first night in our home. I cried foul, something to the effect that I had “called it” first and that he wasn’t being fair. I don’t remember the details, but I know that my mother jumped in to take my side, whereupon Dad became stubborn, insisting that since he’d paid for the couch, he should be the first to try it out. As their voices grew in volume and intensity, I melted into the woodwork. Too young to realize that the fight extended far beyond who should sleep on the new couch, my only thought - as always when they really got going - was to be unobtrusive and tune out as much as possible. I now wonder if I somehow sensed that the day would come when I’d be forced to take sides and therefore stayed out of the way simply to postpone that no-win situation for as long as possible. This particular argument however, unlike most of the thousands of others I’d witnessed, rapidly escalated beyond any point of reason. An image that remains with me to this day is of my father backing towards the door, his eyes wide in anger and surprise, his hand raised to ward off my mother who was advancing on him while wielding one of the kitchen chairs over her head and screaming at him to get out - the only time, at least to my knowledge, that either one threatened physical violence to the other. Sometime during the night, as I fitfully dozed on the hard, uncomfortable couch cushions, regretting my request but determined to stick it out, I heard my father’s quiet footsteps on the porch, in the hall, and then up the stairs.
My parents’ new sleeping arrangement actually established a temporary sense of peace in the household, especially after Dad’s job change to second shift. The less time he and my mother spent together, the less they fought; a fact finally realized after several family vacations had turned ugly, resulting in mutually agreed upon separate vacations. Although I was not invited to accompany my father on his trips and saw him less often, I remained the equal fan of both of my parents. Ma and I shopped, baked, and talked, and talked, and, well actually, I talked while she mostly listened. Meanwhile, Dad still found time to entertain me with tales of his younger days, although I’d become too grown up to sit in his lap, and taught me air guitar before it was called air guitar, for which I displayed considerable raw talent and natural ability. From the living room stereo would twang the songs of Al Green, Ben Colder, or (Dad’s favorite) Buck Owens and the Buckaroos. I knew all the words so when Dad, as Buck, sang from his recliner, I joined in to harmonize from one of the other chairs or from the floor as his sidekick, Roy Clark. If the song had a guitar solo, Dad would say “Take it away, Roy!” and I would pick or strum the part with great finesse and enthusiasm, Dad “yee ha-ing” his approval.

Once situated in his new job at the factory, Dad would still be sleeping when I left for school; he’d be leaving for work when I got home from school; and I’d be in bed when he returned from work, so except for school vacations and weekends, our encounters occurred mainly in passing. He’d always had his “nights out” before, when he’d play cards with the guys at Duke’s, the bar from his old neighborhood about fifteen miles away; now because of the new work schedule, his nights out just shifted to the weekend nights. Perhaps because I was so caught up in my own riveting and demanding childhood world or perhaps because my mother remained such a large part of my life, it took me a while to notice the gradual and subtle shift in the family dynamic taking place right in front of me.

When I had the second largest part in the third grade play, for example, Dad still worked days, so not only were both my parents there to watch my performance as “the 2nd stewardess,” but the next morning my father got up early and drove me to school in the stretch limousine, the way all famous, talented actresses traveled. As Mr. Krocks’s sleek, black Cadillac pulled up to the playground, swings slowed, balls and bats dropped, and jump ropes ceased to twirl. My six foot tall, broad shouldered,
handsome father stepped out from behind the wheel in full uniform and walked to the very back of the limo to open my door. Enjoying this part even more than the one of the previous night, I regally offered my hand, to be helped down from my seat. I demurely nodded my thanks, he tipped his hat, and, wrapped in my new plush coat of midnight blue that exactly matched the velvety carpet in the Caddy, I sedately made my way toward the bulging eyes and open mouths of my schoolmates. The following year, when I played “Marcia from Russia” in the fourth grade play, however, Dad was working at the shop, but since my mother made such a fuss over my success, even allowing me a sleepover with my best friend, Andrea, his absence that night was of no great consequence to me.

As the months passed, I became only peripherally aware that Dad spent less and less time at home. On weekends, instead of accomplishing household chores or puttering in his workshop as he had during my early childhood, he seemed to find more frequent excuses to be elsewhere, usually at Duke’s or helping one of his friends – George, Benny, Don or Chill - with some task of theirs, having apparently lost interest in most of his own, especially once his summer-long project of constructing a new garage had been completed. If I had paid more attention, I might have sooner noticed that my parents’ arguments had begun to cover additional ground: the unfinished and neglected maintenance and repairs that Ma now had to hire outsiders to handle, as well as her new-found suspicions about where and how he was spending so much of his time for instance, instead of just finances and his compulsive gambling. Sometimes Dad called from somewhere to say he’d run into an old friend or that he had lost at cards and wanted a chance to win back his money. Gambling had always been an issue for him, so hours-long pinochle games at Duke’s seemed plausible. On occasion, I answered the phone, and I could hear the raucous bar sounds in the background - the half drunk voices, the clinking glasses, the jukebox, the laughter. Some nights, he’d be very late; I’d fall asleep hearing my mother pace in her bedroom, which was next to mine. The mornings that followed those nights were the quietest, with a silence that could last for days. Occasionally, though, he wouldn’t appear until daylight, explaining that he’d been so tired (and perhaps a little drunk) that he’d spent the night at a buddy’s or on a cot in the bar’s back room. I kept a low profile on those days to avoid being caught in the crossfire of their anger and sleeplessness.
Eventually, unless there was a specific family activity that required his presence; such as a birthday, holiday dinner, or trip to visit a relative; Dad’s “nights out” morphed into entire weekends out, and even I noticed that his preparations before leaving the house had become more extensive. After he showered, he took exceptional care in shaving and applying cologne, slicking back and combing his thinning hair, and choosing just the right outfit. I often plunked myself down to watch him get ready to leave on Saturday mornings after he’d made the two of us breakfast, deeply inhaling the scents of Irish Spring, Old Spice and Vitalis while he happily sang or whistled. Sometimes my opinion on which shirt matched which slacks was requested, and I readily obliged, thrilled by even this crumb of attention, so seldom did I see him by this point. My mother, having just awakened, might pass through and, if so, she would question why a nearly fifty year old married man cared so much about his appearance only to spend a weekend playing cards and hanging around with his buddies. Only kidding, I thought, because Dad kidded back that the ladies at Duke’s appreciated a good smelling guy. If she then got angry, he’d say of course he was just teasing; then he would quickly kiss her and be out the door like a kid headed to the carnival, careful not to provoke an argument that might delay his departure and reminding her that he could always be found if she needed him. Certainly, his assurances appeared to be true the day Ma smelled the gas leak.

I was playing in the back yard when I heard my name called. Once inside, I was ushered into the Other Side where I agreed that there was a distinct whiff of natural gas in the air. It being fairly late on a Saturday afternoon, Ma doubted that the gas company could be reached and decided the situation should be handled by the man of the house. The call to Duke’s was answered by Duke himself who indicated that, yes, Buck had been playing cards there all afternoon but had just stepped into the men’s room. As soon as he emerged, he would be informed of the urgent need for his return home. After nearly half an hour had elapsed and Dad’s car had not appeared nor had the phone rung, Ma called a neighbor from across the street to see if he might know where to find the shut off. As Andy rooted around in the shrubbery at the house’s foundation, Dad pulled into the driveway. A mixture of relief and irritation
replaced the fury in my mother’s eyes as Dad explained that Duke hadn’t immediately seen him exit the bathroom.

As far as I was concerned, Dad had vindicated himself: he had in fact been where he said he would be and though I had already come to realize (even if it hadn’t recently been implied by my mother) that he fell far short in his role of the ideal husband, I wondered if perhaps Ma’s paranoia and tendency to overreact might be partially to blame for his preference to spending nearly every Saturday morning through Monday morning away from home. In time, the gas leak story would actually take on a humorous light and often be retold with a smirk by my mother since, as soon as Dad arrived home that day (and before he’d been told of Andy’s assistance), he’d bolted into the Other Side and headed straight for a stack of tin pie plates, between two of which he had secretly hidden several fifty dollar bills. The punch line of the story was that Dad had rushed home to rescue not his wife and daughter but his secret stash of fifties.

As time went on, Ma seemed almost resigned to Dad’s time away and began, I think, to develop a more fulfilling life of her own, free from the bitter arguing and his sometimes bullying jokes. More than once in his zeal to be the entertainment at a Saturday or Sunday occasion he’d sulked at being required by her to attend, Dad retaliated by making her the butt of his humor, persisting until her feelings were hurt and yet another argument sparked.

“I never saw anybody consistently dealt such poor cards,” Dad might say, shaking his head. “The cards hate her. But of course, it would help if she could remember what cards were played…” And from there, he would animatedly relate a particular game of Canasta they had played as partners with another couple, during which Ma had apparently not followed his lead or made the right play or done whatever she was supposed to have done. Embellishments got more laughs.

For variety, he might discuss my mother’s inability to circumnavigate the crater-sized potholes on Crompton Street in Worcester (where his parents had relocated): “Last time, she hit them all!” he would crow with a smirk, “I said, ‘Poll, congratulations, you didn’t miss a single one!’” whereupon details of which parts nearly fell off the car this time followed.
Later, alone in the car and continuing into the house, he would object to her pouting or tears and loudly accuse her of not being able to take a joke, and she always shrilly accused him of deliberately goading her into the argument so that he’d have an excuse to walk out, which, of course, he inevitably did - after the customary table pounding and cabinet door slamming. Having reached the age to realize the likelihood of overhearing words and accusations that I had no wish to overhear, I began to rely on the stereo upstairs in my bedroom as my escape and usually cranked up The Beatles or The Stones to drown out the drama below. There I could remain aloof and safe from involvement, or so I thought until the day I was called downstairs by my mother during an argument.

“Tell your daughter what you just called me!” my mother screamed after she led me to the living room doorway to face my Dad who sat smoking in his recliner.

I hung my head, wishing I could be anywhere else in the world. I couldn’t look at either of my parents. I may have been only thirteen or fourteen at the time, but I was still old enough to know that this confrontation should not involve me.

My father refused to answer, even when my mother repeated her command, her voice slicing me in half. He shook his head and tried to wave us both away, but she would not be put off. I could feel the pain and anger rolling off of her as she stood there shaking, but somehow, at that moment, though I sensed that whatever he’d said crossed the line, my sympathy lay with him because I felt just as awkward as he looked. Finally he mumbled, “I said I was sorry,” and I instantly forgave him.

“He called me an asshole!” my mother shrieked, far from being mollified. I had an insane and completely inappropriate urge to laugh. That was it? I had imagined much worse things. Worse, actually, than what he had said was the fact that I was standing there to hear it.

“Fine. Now she knows. Can she go back to her room now?” The back door slammed shut before I had even reached the top of the stairs. From that day on, when the fighting began, I quickly found things to do outside.
Christmas Eve had, for as far back as I can remember, meant gathering with all of Dad’s side of the family to exchange presents, eat large quantities of food and play loud music. The festivities took place at Pepere and Memere’s until Memere died Christmas Eve morning the winter Dad moved into the Other Side. That year the family gathered only for Mass and the funeral services. Over the months that followed, much discussion took place by phone as to whether and where to continue the family tradition, and it was finally agreed that, from that year on, since Memere’s anniversary Mass would take place in Spencer, where she had raised her family, everyone would first meet at the French Catholic church and after Mass drive to Dad’s cousin Jeanette’s house, hers being the closest, to eat and open presents.

I took one last look at myself in the mirror, hating the glasses through which my severely near-sighted eyes stared back. I had already started hounding my parents for contact lenses, convinced that my popularity, not to mention my sex appeal, would soar once the gold frames disappeared for good. Other than that one flaw, I felt satisfied by my appearance: clingy red turtleneck sweater, short red plaid wool skirt and black knee length boots – very Christmas-y. My shorter, stouter cousin Monique, also fifteen, would be jealous.

Ma did not look happy when I got downstairs. “Your father still isn’t here,” she informed me, “but if we wait any longer, we’ll be late for Mass.”

At the church, Aunt Eleanor asked where Dad was and frowned her displeasure when Ma said she had no idea. “He said he had some errands to run, but that was this afternoon.” My father’s younger sister and my mother had developed a barely polite relationship that I could attribute only to the fact that Aunt Eleanor always said exactly what was on her mind regardless of whose feelings or sensibilities might be offended. Tonight, however, she had nothing further to say. Pepere gathered me into his customary bear hug, then patted my mother’s shoulder. “He’ll be here.”

As we filed into the pew, I made sure to leave room on the end. My father finally arrived during the First Reading of the Liturgy, genuflected, and seated himself next to me. Immediately I smelled the alcohol and looked out of the corner of my eye to assess my mother’s reaction. She remained impassive, staring up at the altar. Well, though unusual behavior for my father, consuming too much drink on
Christmas Eve could be understandable and forgiven, couldn’t it, especially it being the anniversary of his mother’s death? I hoped my mother would see it that way. I tried to concentrate on the Gospel.

“Wake your father up,” Ma’s voice hissed in my ear, startling me. Dad sat slumped in the pew, his eyes closed, his head drooping on his chest. I poked him in the ribs with my elbow in a way that I hoped would be discreet and unnoticeable to the other parishioners around us. Thank God Aunt Eleanor had chosen a pew closer to the front. Dad’s head jerked up, but I could see that his eyes struggled to remain open. Had he had that much to drink? The night ahead loomed ominous. My face felt hot.

During the sermon for his mother’s anniversary Mass, my father not only slept but snored. Loudly. So that I repeatedly and forcefully had to nudge him while the priest spoke, beyond caring what the nearby parishioners thought as they nudged each other, pointed and either snickered or shook their heads in disgust. On my right, Ma fumed in an embarrassment that I didn’t even need to see to know existed; I could feel it matching my own. This fight promised to be a beaut.

In the parking lot, I lagged behind so I wouldn’t hear whatever it was my parents had to say to each other, confident that at least their voices would remain low since Ma hated putting on a public show and was already mortified by Dad’s behavior. Their encounter did not take long. Within minutes, Dad stormed to his car and careened out of the lot.

Aunt Eleanor reached my mother even before I could. “He’s drunk,” she spat out. Ma, making an effort to keep her composure, did not reply.

“Where’s he going?” Aunt Eleanor boomed. Ma bit her lip and shrugged. Did I actually see a glimmer of sympathy in my large and imposing aunt’s eyes before she turned away? I did not dance to rock oldies with Monique and my other cousins in Jeanette’s basement that night. Ma and I went home and opened our presents alone.

The early spring Saturday afternoon our swimming pool collapsed, my father could not be located. Taking the railings into account, the massive redwood structure stood almost as high as our garage and had just begun its sixth year of use in our back yard, having seen me through one-piece
summers into two-piece summers into, finally, bikini summers. The pool’s purchase had been my mother’s idea, paid for by several years’ accumulation of tips from her full time job as a waitress. Dad had noticed some rot under the supposedly weather-treated deck, and arrangements had already been made for its repair even before its sixth annual Memorial weekend opening. Urgent enquiries into the company itself had led to our discovery of its recent bankruptcy; still, apart from the few visible suspect areas, the pool appeared to have several years of life left. Not so.

The unseasonably warm late May weather had prompted Ma to replace the back door’s storm window with its screen, so as I entered the kitchen, I clearly heard the wrenching, splintering groan of tearing wood followed by the rushing gallons of water gushing out of the pool’s newly split corner seam. When I looked out toward the yard, I saw the crazy tilted angle at which the whole structure now leaned, and yelled for my mother as I flew out the door. Already the side yard was under water, and a river was snaking its way down the street along the sidewalk. The far corner of the pool, split from the railing to the ground, fanned out, revealing soft rotted wood at the inner seams. Right behind me, Ma began to cry, fretting not only about the pool but about our house’s foundation and the fate of its dirt and bedrock cellar that had never before seen a wet day even during the heaviest rainstorm. With no way to control or divert the pool water’s furious onslaught, there was nothing to do but go back into the house.

Once again faced with a household crisis without her spouse by her side, my nearly hysterical mother picked up the receiver and started dialing, first Duke’s then one by one all of Dad’s friends. No one had seen him. Relatives followed. Still no luck. Since Christmas, communication in our house had been strained and mostly through notes or through me. As Ma continued to search through the phonebook for more numbers to call, I could see that she’d made it her mission to track down her errant husband who had either disappeared or found new friends.

I never found out who eventually relayed the message to my father to come home. Looking sheepish and a little scared, he showed up late the next morning, long after the chlorinated water had emptied out of the pool and the fear of a flooded cellar had proved to be unwarranted. I had begun planting sweet pea seeds in the red metal planter by the back porch and ignored his subdued greeting as
he passed. I tensed in anticipation of the hollering and banging I would surely hear from inside at any moment, but the house stayed oddly quiet. My heart beat faster as I repeatedly stuck my index finger into the dirt to make holes for the seeds. When Dad emerged from the house and walked over to me, I didn’t look up.

“I’m sorry I scared you and your mother,” he said softly. “That wasn’t fair of me.” He offered no explanation for his whereabouts, and I was trying too hard not to cry to ask for one, so I just nodded. Did he expect a hug? Part of me wanted to oblige, but this time, caught in his lies, he could not so easily be forgiven. After a few moments, he turned away, and I concentrated on the sweet peas.

I decided Mother’s Day that year would be extra special, so instead of sneaking away from Ma during one of our many shopping trips and trying to smuggle some little thing or two into the car when she wasn’t looking, I enlisted Dad’s help. The two of us rarely spent any time alone together anymore, so I looked forward to the occasion. Having agonized over the perfect gift, lush yet affordable, I’d found my answer at the library. A terrarium, its plants hand chosen by me and lovingly arranged in a store-bought container, would show effort, creativity, and love without costing more than my allowance could handle. Its purchase required only one stop: the local nursery, so Dad’s entire Saturday would not be eaten up by my errand. As we set out, it didn’t even occur to me to wonder why my father didn’t take this rare opportunity to treat me to lunch or even an ice cream along the way. Library book and shopping list in hand, my mind focused strictly on business.

For the container, I opted for large and plastic rather than small and glass. Pear-shaped and of a circumference such that, full, it could barely be carried by one person, the two-piece structure screwed apart (for planting and weeding) and funneled up to an opening with a dial-like lid, which could be adjusted to regulate air and moisture. Anticipating adequate light but only limited direct sunlight for my creation, I chose baby tears, spider plants, and ivy, with dracaena and coleus for color, and philodendron because of its hardiness and longevity. A bag of terrarium gravel and two bags of potting soil mix completed my purchases.
At the last minute, just as we reached the cashier’s counter, Dad picked up a similar container about a third of the size of the one I’d chosen and asked if I thought I’d have enough plants left over to fill it. Scanning the nursery packs laid out in front of me, I thought I would but why? While managing to avoid my eyes, Dad explained that he’d recently befriended a “very nice couple,” the wife of which would certainly be pleased to receive such a gift as thanks for kindness they’d extended to him. I pressed for more details but got only vague answers, and I could tell my father would shortly lose his patience with me if I persisted.

As I worked the rest of the afternoon, arranging and securing the plants in their new home, I tossed over and over in my head Dad’s sudden revelation about this mysterious “couple” in his life and couldn’t help but doubt its truth and innocence. The smaller container he’d bought, already prepared with gravel and soil, sat off to the side, waiting for its plants, but I’d already determined that it would receive only the leftovers from my mother’s arrangement, hers clearly taking top priority.

The multi-colored coleus, being by far the most striking variety I’d chosen, commanded center stage in Ma’s terrarium: two specimens tucked in with the other less vibrant greenery spread out around them. One lone coleus remained unused in its cell pack. I looked over at the smaller container and the other leftover plants, and a flush of resentment heated my face and tightened my chest. No. There would be only green plants in this second container.

Deliberately squeezing the third coleus in next to its planted packmates, I rationalized that, after all, I’d not received any specific instructions regarding the layout of the other terrarium and, furthermore, had paid for all the plants myself. This “wife,” whoever she was, would never know about the coleus anyway, and she should consider herself lucky to get whatever she gets. Satisfied with my work (and my decision), I hid Ma’s terrarium upstairs until the next day and left the smaller, much less impressive but still nicely arranged terrarium out for Dad to take with him when he left later on.

I was in my bedroom, reading, when I heard Dad’s sarcastic one-liner called up from the bottom of the stairs a couple of hours later: “Couldn’t find it in your heart to put one of those pretty colored
plants in there, could you?” I’d been waiting for it, knowing he wouldn’t be able to let it go. Feeling mean but triumphant, I did not reply.

On Father’s Day that year, I had a shirt I’d picked out for him boxed and wrapped in white paper with gold ribbon, card attached. Nothing had changed in the weeks since the pool’s collapse except that the back yard now had only a large sand pad next to the garage instead of a sagging, broken redwood skeleton. All day Sunday, I hung around the house, waiting for Dad to show up to receive his gift and cut the cake I’d baked for him, but as the sun dropped in the sky, and I realized that, despite the holiday, he probably would not return home until Monday just in time to get ready for work, I angrily hid the box in an upstairs closet where it remained forgotten until several months later when I would accidentally find it and tearfully regret my decision. Ma and I each had a piece of cake with our dinner that night.

Monday afternoon, true to form, Dad walked in the door with barely enough time to change into his work clothes. I noticed a slight expectant smile on his face as he attempted a bit of small talk with me and felt a little of the resentment my mother had no doubt been experiencing over the last several years. Where had he been all day yesterday when he should have been home to celebrate his special day with his daughter? I spoke curtly and never mentioned the day, his gift, or the cut cake he’d no doubt noticed in the fridge, and I triumphed over the hurt expression in his eyes caused by my responses.

We were led into a small examination room, much too brightly lit for the middle of the night – Ma, Jay, and I. I entered first, and immediately looked around for my father. That’s why we were here, to see him. The phone call had come not an hour before, the call that Ma had been anticipating for years, one that would change both our lives. Ma had then called Jay, her son from her first marriage, because she hadn’t felt steady enough to drive. Or, perhaps she sensed she needed more emotional support than her sixteen year old daughter could give. It crossed my mind as we all stood there under the searing lights that it must be really bad if they had to prepare us first.
An “accident.” But ironically not a car accident, despite the countless times Dad had fallen asleep at the wheel. Ordinarily he would be on his way home from the plant by 1:00 A.M., but this week Dad had requested more overtime to pay off some of his many gambling debts. I’d seen the area where he worked third shift as a steel burner and assistant foreman, but that steamy summer night when he’d shown me his station, I’d been more interested in the enormous mutant-like insects drawn in from the pitch black swamps through the lighted open doors and buzzing against the unpainted cement walls, their magnified winged shadows the size of bats as they swooped and swirled. The cranes and pulleys that hoisted the heavy pieces of steel from station to station to be cut or welded were for me mere backdrop to the insect antics, although the giant gas-fed torches had briefly held my interest as my father’s asbestos-gloved hands deftly guided their blue flames through the irregular cuts and patterns indicated on the blueprints in front of him. The torches, the heavy machinery, the massive slabs of steel - any of those could have turned against a man to send him to the emergency room.

Now as I stood with Ma and Jay, I tried to imagine the extent of my father’s injuries and how much care would be required. No doubt there would be convalescence; would there be disability? I envisioned myself his care-giver, bringing extra pillows, spooning food into his mouth, seeing the love and approval I craved in his eyes. Simultaneously, however, I dreaded the prospect, remembering his recovery from a simple tonsillectomy roughly two years earlier. Being out of school for summer vacation, I’d fully expected to prepare his lunches while Ma worked, but I had not anticipated repeatedly being called away from my books and stereo to fetch slippers or cigarettes or to change the television channel with never a thank you in return. Dad’s persistent complaining had quickly exhausted whatever sympathy I may have had for his discomfort and boredom, until, in desperation, I privately whined to Ma, “…but there’s nothing wrong with his legs,” to which she’d rolled her eyes and quipped, “What can I do? I can’t kill him.”

The examination room door abruptly swung open, and a man in bright green scrubs breezed in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “There was nothing we could do.”
I stared at his face, his eyes behind the gold rimmed glasses, the hideously green surgeon’s mask hanging around his neck as a sound like rushing water filled my ears like the day our pool split itself down the side. The man’s lips continued to move, but even though I could see every detail in his face, every pore in his skin under the harsh fluorescent light, all I could hear was the water, thunderous yet somehow muted, as if I were standing just inside a cave next to a waterfall.

“What?” I screamed, or maybe it was “No!” but my screams were only in my head, blocked by the waterfall, which was impenetrable until…one sound broke through: my mother started to cough, could not stop coughing, and I heard Jay’s panicked voice, “She has a bad heart.” The room was suddenly full of movement: nurses, doctors, hundreds of people, thousands even - and colors flashed by, buzzers went off, and gurney wheels screeched on the tile floors. The picture had thrust itself into fast forward while I stood, immobile and hollow, screaming in my head. Hours, or maybe just seconds, later, I realized I was alone in the room and wondered if I was an orphan.

The services the following week had everything my father would have planned for himself if he’d been a planner. Three nights of mourning and each of those nights, a limousine slunk up to the house to pick us up and slunk back with us three hours later. Relatives and old friends arrived from all over, even some old biker buddies who had lost touch after Ma made Dad sell his Harley when I was a toddler. Of course my father’s children were there too: Karen (with her husband and baby) and Bruce, who had driven them all in his new canary yellow Camaro. Although I felt more comfortable around my half sister and her little family, having seen them more often, it was Bruce, virtually absent from my life since he was sixteen and I was eleven, toward whom I gravitated, partly because we were closer in age than Karen and I were but partly because his thick curly hair and startlingly light blue eyes unexpectedly aroused some very unsisterly stirrings in me. I couldn’t stop imagining his leanness under his olive green corduroy leisure suit, and despite the mild guilt I felt as I fantasized, I pictured the two of us flying down the back roads in his Camaro, ultimately parking in a clearing and making out on the black vinyl back seat.
When I was in sixth grade, I read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and as I sat during the wake I half believed that my father hid among the crowd, watching us the way Tom watched his friends and family mourn his own supposed death, because I had already nearly convinced myself that the man in the casket wasn’t Dad. The face bore some resemblance, enough to be a pretty good likeness, but where was the recent Hampton Beach tan? This mask, this mannequin face of pasty-white rubber could not be my father’s face. Pancake make-up, I’d been forewarned, would be covering the cuts and bruises. I remained unconvinced. The nose was not right either; it was flat and askew, supposedly broken when he’d been knocked facedown onto the concrete floor, crushed by a five thousand pound piece of steel. Nope, still not buying it.

“He looks so natural,” I heard a neighbor announce from the back of the room, “as if he might just sit up and ask ‘what’s going on?’”

That’s about the stupidest thing I have ever heard, I yelled back in my head. I could almost hear Dad snicker at such a remark; perhaps he actually was snickering somewhere among the countless vases and sprays of cut flowers - out of sight but not out of earshot. Was I the only one who needed proof that this day was not some elaborate joke he or someone on his behalf was playing? Did the mouth of this mannequin have his gold molar? Were Dad’s tattoos there under the sleeves of the navy blue suit? I wanted to pull up the eyelids to prove that the fake head was hollow. To whom could I express my disbelief?

Ma had been pretty out of it since her release from the hospital. I’d seen the bottle of blue and white capsules in the medicine cabinet when I went in looking for Alka Seltzer. Even now, her eyes looked glazed, and she kept repeating how much her husband would have loved this since he always loved to be the center of attention. No one contradicted her because everyone here knew that to be accurate.

Jay? Although he had been useful in making all the necessary calls and arrangements, Jay had made himself predictably scarce around me. Supposedly he had identified the body as our mother was being wheeled into intensive care, but as far as I was concerned he was not to be trusted. After all, *his*
father was most likely stretched out on a couch somewhere watching a ballgame. Besides, Jay obviously believed this farce because now, as he once again stood before the casket, he exchanged the customary finger-entwined rosary beads for a brand new deck of cards. Those closest to the casket murmured their approval. I kept silent.

At St. Joseph’s Church, the farce became even less believable since, now that the casket’s lid was sealed, I could more easily convince myself that my father wasn’t inside. Two rows of men, dressed completely in black, lined the church’s walkway: coworkers from the shop, given the day off to attend the funeral. Rifles pointed at the sky and shot blanks at the clouds, military honors for a veteran of the Navy. Though only a step-son, Jay knew my father well, knew what he’d like. Through the ceremony and fanfare, I stubbornly kept one eye peeled for a glimpse of my Dad through the crowd.

Out of nowhere, a thin, pale man with brilliant red hair and thick glasses with heavy black frames approached first my mother, then me, hugging each of us in turn, crying and stammering his apologies. We’d never met, he explained, but he’d been the only one to witness the accident. A fairly recent employee at the shop, he’d been struggling with the machinery at his station and had asked for “Buck’s” help. The walkway led right past a large randomly placed piece of solid steel that stood on its end.

“I saw it!” the man bawled. “He walked by, and it was like the hand of God knocked over that piece of steel.” Shivering and shaking in his black trench coat, the man who had not given his name and who would shortly after quietly quit his job and leave the area, raised his own hand high in the air as he spoke, palm out and fingertips pointing upward, then to illustrate his point, swung his forearm down in one swift motion so that his palm was flat, parallel to the ground. Splat. How clever. Always include a grain of truth to make a lie more believable.

We already knew about the steel slab. Dad had told us over a rarely shared supper one night. Worried that sooner or later someone might be injured, he had registered a complaint to the boss regarding its placement and was disgusted that his concerns had been dismissed. Was I really supposed to believe that after weeks of hulking silent and immobile, the steel piece had spontaneously taken it upon itself to tip over at the precise moment my father passed by while working an overtime shift?
“Like the hand of God!” the man repeated, shaking his head at the tragic irony just before he stepped back and melted into the crowd. Wait, tell me why you’re lying, I wanted to scream. Who put you up to this?

The package arrived a few days later. About the size of a coat box and wrapped in plain brown paper, it was addressed to Mrs. Ralph Girouard but had no return address. The postmark read Woodstock, CT, a city about forty five miles away. Neither Ma nor I knew anyone from Woodstock. Inside the box, all freshly laundered and neatly folded, were a pair of Dad’s slacks, a couple of his shirts and undershirts, and several pairs of his socks and briefs. One of his leather belts lay coiled underneath the clothes. I watched my mother pick up the items one at a time, examining each as if it had a story to tell, and wondered who could have made such a cruel effort to confirm her years of suspicions at a time when she was already in so much pain. I knew my father often showered at the shop after his shift and therefore always kept a change or two of clothes in his locker, so missing clothes had never raised any eyebrows on laundry days, but I also knew that Jay had already cleaned out the locker days ago. My stomach turned over as I silently waited for the tears or the yelling or whatever reaction this evidence of her husband’s infidelity would bring, but, calm and dry-eyed, Ma made only one comment as she finished sorting through the box: “I wondered where these things had disappeared to.” That afternoon, she and I began cleaning out Dad’s closet and bureau.

My father’s duplicity as evidenced by the anonymous package proved to me his capability of so much more than just the random lies that had rolled so glibly off of his tongue over the years when confronted by my mother’s questions and accusations. Even when caught, seemingly trapped by his inconsistencies, his contrite, soothing voice and innocent blue eyes, his charm and ease with which he could manipulate an argument, would have deterred even the most expert inquisitor and were certainly no match for an overly emotional jealous wife who, deep down, still wanted to believe in her marriage. The Woodstock package told of another man with another life, separate from us, a life which he had apparently frequently visited and to which, perhaps for months, he may have been planning to escape. It fed my fantasy of the mannequin look-alike in the casket and fueled my hope that my father still lived and
breathed somewhere out there in the world. The bills, the debts, the arguments had just reached the point of intolerance for him, had tipped the scales in favor of this “other” life, and so he had staged this elaborate scheme to convince the world of his death so that he could disappear with no fear of pursuit.

I toyed with the idea that the package was Dad’s secret message of this to me because he knew I’d be the only one not fooled by the subterfuge. Perhaps, as the weeks and months passed, he would regret his decision, miss his daughter, and decide to return, tears in his eyes as he apologized for the deception. Or better yet, I fantasized, the double life itself might have weighed too heavily on him, causing so much pain that he had chosen neither life but instead had gone much farther than Woodstock, to think it through or maybe even start over but might still someday return.

For years, I kept my fantasy alive by scanning the crowds at Disney World or Miami Beach or countless other tourist spots, hoping I’d spot my father’s face, older but still familiar to me. I would rush up, catch him by surprise; Dad would instantly recognize me and we would embrace. Many times through my college years and even after my first marriage and the birth of my daughter I would see a man in the crowded street of some festival or parade who, from his profile or from behind, just by the way he walked or carried himself, struck me as familiar and my heart would palpate, the breath catch in my throat until a closer look would disappoint me.

I sat alone in the Fallon Clinic in Spencer, impatiently waiting for Bob’s name to be called so I could pay for his prescription and return home before he’d had a chance to dwell too long on my absence. The last thing I wanted tonight was an argument. Over the past several weeks, the pain from an injured back together with too much idle time on his hands had turned my husband belligerent and unreasonable. I glanced at my watch and sighed.

“Leon Gaudette?” When I heard the name I immediately looked around the waiting area to see who would respond. I hadn’t thought of Chill in years, hadn’t seen him since his wife Aurora had died after skidding into a tree not five miles from home while driving through a sleet storm. Chill and my father had been long time friends as had my mother and Aurora. Chill and Aurora had dated while my
parents were dating and each couple had “stood up” for the other’s wedding. Aurora had been a shoulder for my mother when Dad had been killed, and her unexpected death not long after had been a harsh blow. I had just assumed that with so much time having passed - twenty? twenty five years? – that Chill had died, as had my mother.

A short, plump woman with curly white hair and glasses who, I instantly decided must be the “new” wife, had risen and was approaching the prescription counter. On impulse, I decided to introduce myself.

“Excuse me. Are you…Mrs. Gaudette? Chill’s wife?”

“Yes, I am.” She answered without looking up, distracted by the wallet or checkbook search she had begun in her tote-sized purse.

Having already put myself out there, I persisted, “I’m Donna Girouard. Ralph’s daughter.”

At that, she looked up, blinking nearsightedly through her thick lenses. “Who?”

“Buck Girouard’s daughter,” I tried instead.

“Buck?” Buck! Yes! Oh, I remember Buck so well.” She was nodding and smiling. “Such a shame what happened. And you’re his daughter?”

“Yes, I am. How is Chill?”

“Oh, Leon is hanging in there. Nothing serious.” She went back to rummaging in her purse, then found her wallet and began looking through it as the pharmacist patiently waited.

A bit self-conscious that I was holding up the process, I meant to end the encounter by just telling her to say “hi” to Chill when she returned home, but I never got the chance. Still intent on her search, she said, “He used to go with my best friend, you know.”

I froze. “I’m sorry?”

“Buck. He used to go with my best friend,” now she was handing a card to the pharmacist, looking at him. “Rita.” She turned back to me as she spoke the name. “Didn’t he ever tell you about her?”
I couldn’t seem to make my brain work. In retrospect, this should have been my opportunity to get the answers to so many unanswered questions. Tell me what you know! Let’s go have coffee. Or better yet, may I follow you home and talk to you and Chill together! Instead, I stood there, stupidly looking at her, trying to form words. “No,” I finally managed.

“That’s odd. I wonder why he never told you about her. Rita Kamuda. I haven’t seen her in years.” She continued, her voice picking up speed. “I wonder if she’s still in Woodstock…”

I may have said goodbye, or even thank you, or maybe I just mumbled unintelligible sounds under my breath. Screw Bob’s prescription, I had to get out of there. Right now. I ran out the automatic doors and across the parking lot. I barely had time to unlock my car and slide in behind the wheel before the tears came - huge, choking sobs – and I pounded the steering wheel with my fists. “You bastard, you bastard.” Did I scream it? Whisper it? Or just think it? I have no idea. If there were passersby, I didn’t see them.
“OK 6” by Sara McLaughlin
Lucas McMillan,  
Author of “Sunset”

Lucas McMillan graduated from Drake University with a bachelor’s degree in magazine journalism and currently works as a copywriter. He has written several short stories and is nearing the completion of his first novel. His work has appeared in *Drake Magazine* and *Urban Plains Magazine*. Additionally, he received an honorable mention for his first-person story “Me, Myself, and I Don’t Know” in the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Student Magazine Contest. In his free time, he is an avid reader of fiction and is constantly honing his craft.
SUNSET by Lucas McMillan

Shannon sat at her parents’ kitchen table and stared warily over her father’s shoulder at the cuckoo clock. Its motorized marching band figurines in blackface, clattering out on their track, had plucked her tightly strung nerves every hour on the hour since she’d been a girl. It was close to six o’clock, so she was on guard.

“Honey, please just let us help you. Take our money.”

“No. I won’t take your and Betsy’s money.”

“You know she cares about you, honey, just as much as I do.”

Her father reached for her hand and patted it with both of his. He was a short, thick man, his calloused hands permeated with the scent of gasoline. His white hair, which had spent a lifetime soaked in sweat under a baseball hat, was now thin and frizzy, wafting in the air like kelp at a sea bottom.

“I know, Dad. I just don’t want your money, is all.”

“Why are you so proud? Where did that come from?” he said.

After Shannon’s mother had died, her father had married Betsy, a prosperous travel agent. This sudden (and to his mind, unearned) infusion of wealth wracked him with guilt, and he gave money away every chance he got.

“I won’t take your money, Dad,” Shannon said. “That’s that.”

“Then what do I have it for? Bets and I don’t spend it. We both have our life’s savings; we’re both retired.”

“I don’t know. Go on a trip or something. Isn’t that what retired couples do? Buy an RV, drive to the Grand Canyon, stuff like that?”

“Let us help you pay your bills.”

“No. I’ve got my job. You need your money for yourself.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sweetie. I’ve got everything I need right here. Isn’t that right, Bets? Hey, Bets?”
Shannon heard the porch door slam and Betsy waltzed into the kitchen, dancing a private rumba. She looked as tan and fit as ever. Shannon’s stepmother had unlimited access to discounted time-shares in warm-weather locales, a perk of being a travel agent that she and Shannon’s father took full advantage of, alternating winters in Florida and Arizona. Betsy had read a study about the purported helpfulness of alternating humid and dry climates in staving off degenerative brain disorders. Betsy read a lot of studies.

“Hi, Shannon. I didn’t know you were in here. Bill, you should’ve told me Shannon was here.”

Shannon stood up and hugged Betsy stiffly. Shannon felt the calcified hint of the older woman’s breast implants press against her own tender chest, still by turns aching and numb two weeks after lumpectomy surgery. Betsy wore a sundress and a straw hat with a floral ribbon tied around it. She looked younger than the last time Shannon had seen her.

“What are you two talking about? Shannon, how are you feeling? Bill always forgets to tell me.”

She slapped her husband on the back of his head as she went into the kitchen. Shannon watched her through the window of the kitchen’s bar as she took a pitcher of iced tea out of the fridge and poured two glasses. The electric candle orange of the sunset filled the kitchen and lit the two mason jars of tea, casting them as sludgy molasses.

“I’m feeling all right, for now,” Shannon said. “It’s only my second week of treatments, so the worst is yet to come, I’m afraid.”

“That’s just terrible,” Betsy said, shaking her head absentmindedly. “Just terrible. I had an aunt who went through chemo once. Just awful stuff.”

“Shannon, you tell that boyfriend of yours that he owes me money,” Shannon’s father said, apropos of nothing. These sharp non sequiturs were becoming commonplace in Bill Cooper’s speech.

“What was his name? The tall guy, the cop you were seein’?”

“Nick, Dad.”

“Tell Nick he owes me twenty bucks.”

Nick was a guy Shannon had seen for a few months. She’d brought him over to her parent’s house only once. Her father had forced a twenty into Nick’s front shirt pocket. Her dad had, of course,
promptly forgotten he’d given Nick the money, and then accused him of stealing it over dinner. Shannon had long since broken up with Nick, but to Shannon’s father their relationship was frozen in amber.

Betsy came back into the dining room with the iced tea and set a glass down in front of Shannon. She kept one for herself.

“Hey, where’s mine?” Bill said.

“In the pitcher, in the fridge, where you can pour one yourself.”

When Shannon was around, Betsy and her father tried hard to maintain the illusion that Betsy didn’t do everything for her husband, that his mind wasn’t circumnavigating the drain, but both were impossible facades to keep up for any extended period of time.

“Well, all right,” Bill said, standing up. He patted his shirt pockets, looking unsure of himself.

“I’ll be in the garage. The ’57 Chevy isn’t going to tinker on itself, will it, sweetie?” He leaned down and kissed Betsy on the cheek. He walked out of the kitchen’s back screen door, letting it slam behind him.

He whistled tunelessly as clomped down the back stairs.

“How’s he doing?” Shannon asked.

Betsy sipped her tea.

“He’s doing better,” Betsy said, flashing her best deal-closing smile. The crow’s-feet around her eyes bunched up and relaxed, scars worn deep into her face from years of practiced geniality.

“Has he been to Mayo since the prelim visit?”

“No. He keeps insisting he’s doing all right.”

“You know he isn’t.”

“No, well. He’s good enough, for now. You should worry a little more about yourself, Shannon. You have your own issues. Me and your father will be just fine.”

“Bets, you’ve gotta make him go back. If it’s up to him, he’ll never go. He ran his finger through with a buzz saw once and didn’t see a doctor for months. They almost had to amputate his hand.”

“I know, I know.” Betsy waved her hand in the air above her head.

“You know, your father would feel a lot better if you would just take his money. He really wants
to help you pay for treatments, Shannon.”

“I won’t take it. He’ll need every penny if he goes into care. God knows I won’t be able to provide for him.”

“All right, well, don’t say we didn’t try,” Betsy said, treacle notes dripping into her voice.

Shannon looked up at the cuckoo clock.

“I’ve gotta get to the restaurant. I just thought I’d swing by.”

She stood up and stretched, careful not to overextend her aching chest.

“Shannon,” Betsy said. She leaned forward onto her bony, well-toned arms and looked up at Shannon over the rims of her glasses.

“Let us help you. For Pete’s sake, you’re working, what, two jobs, just to support yourself. You’re in your thirties and you’re waiting tables. I don’t mean any disrespect here, but let us help you. There’s no shame in it.”

The pinkish light of dusk filtered through the dining room’s lace curtains, the latticework of shadow throwing Betsy’s face into sharp relief. Shannon could see every wrinkle, every crag her stepmother labored to hide.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Shannon said.

She walked out of the back door, the screen door slamming, its hydraulic hinge having long ago stopped working. She heard a yelp behind the house. She went to the patio behind the garage. Her father sat in a deck chair, a BB gun resting on his knees, staring into the well-kept backyard.

“I’m taking off, Dad,” she said.

“Okay, thanks for stopping by.”

She leaned over and hugged him around the shoulders. The barrel of the BB gun poked her in the thigh.

“I thought you said you’d be in the garage, working on your car.”

“When did I say that?”

“Just now.”
“Oh. No, I don’t think so. With sunset coming on, I think I better stay right here.”

“What’s that for, Dad? The gun?”

“Rabbits. They’re eating all our damn vegetables in the garden. Bets says we should just get some repellent to sprinkle around the plants, but I said I had the best repellent of all.” He patted the wooden stock of the gun. “I sit out here every afternoon, waiting for them to show.”

“Have you gotten any?”

His face clouded over and he looked out to the yard.

“Haven’t even seen one yet.”

“Well, happy hunting, Dad. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Oh. No, I don’t think so. With sunset coming on, I think I better stay right here.”

“What’s that for, Dad? The gun?”

“Rabbits. They’re eating all our damn vegetables in the garden. Bets says we should just get some repellent to sprinkle around the plants, but I said I had the best repellent of all.” He patted the wooden stock of the gun. “I sit out here every afternoon, waiting for them to show.”

“Have you gotten any?”

His face clouded over and he looked out to the yard.

“Haven’t even seen one yet.”

“Well, happy hunting, Dad. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay. Wait, wait, Shannon, one more thing.”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“If you see that boyfriend of yours, the tall one, the cop, tell him he owes me money.”

He smiled up at her broadly, blankly, and poked a twenty-dollar bill into her hip pocket. He winked.

“That’s for you though,” he said. “You take that, go spend it on somethin’ nice.”

Shannon heard the cuckoo clock chime to life in the kitchen through the screen door. It belched a sluggish and syrupy sound instead of its usual trill. It was running out of batteries. She glanced around the edge of the patio at the door. She heard the bang and clatter of pans, the crackling spatter of grease as Betsy prepared dinner.

“Dad,” she said. “Can I borrow some money?”

The sun sank behind the pine trees in their backyard. Long purple bruises of shadow swallowed the porch. The air went immediately cold. Her father looked up at her from his chair, his eyes shining with watery affection. He pulled his checkbook out of his back pocket.

“Sure thing, sweetie,” he said. “Just tell that boyfriend of yours that he still owes me twenty bucks.”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Shannon said. “I’ll make sure to tell him.”
UNTITLED 3 by Son Myong Park
Sara Hughes,

Author of “Elegy for a Stranger”

Sara Hughes is a graduate student at Georgia State University, where she is pursuing a PhD in English with a concentration in Poetry. Her poems and reviews have been published in Rattle, Rosebud, Ouroboros Review, Reed, Red Clay Review, Umbrella Factory Magazine, Old Red Kimono, and Arts and Letters, among others.
ELEGY FOR A STRANGER by Sara Hughes

He’s twisted as a fallen branch beneath a pecan tree—
but I jog past. I’ve seen his kind before, bearded men
with brown paper skin, day-sleeping in the park.
Looping back after three miles, I find a crowd
has gathered, an ambulance where an ice cream truck
should be. Are they saving him? asks a girl in braids.
I’m just in time to see a shape covered with a blanket.

Like the rest of this crowd, I can only know
his last hour: how warm the sun shone
in that grassy spot, leaves shivering like lacewings.
Before closing his eyes, he must have seen
the Ocmulgee drifting like dirty bath water
toward some faraway drain, and across the way
the rows of gravestones as straight as baby teeth.
Todd Outcalt,

Author of “Manche El Baile En San Juan”

Todd Outcalt is the author of twenty-five books in six languages with his most recent poems in *Rattle*, *Rosebud*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *Lyric*.
That night, waltzing the streets of old San Juan,
A quarter century of marriage made—
The walls of *Fuerte San Felipe del Morro*
Embracing our joy, our history’s strong defense—
We jazzed, and loved, and drank our silver toast
Beneath the arms of *Paseo la Princesa*,
Still dreaming of the years ahead and time
Together dancing into *dulce amor*.

Those songs—yearning, rhythmic, sorrowful—
Sang our lovely history, years, and sex
Borne on hardwood waves of salsa dusk.
Samba, sarabande, rumba, twist:
We tangoed into the night’s sweet sweat
And kissed the heat still rising between us.
Barry Spacks,

Author of “Again the Muse”

Barry Spacks has taught writing and literature for many years at M.I.T. and UCSB. He’s published individual poems widely, plus stories, two novels, eleven poetry collections, and three CDs of selected work. His first novel The Sophomore has just been brought back into print in the Faber & Faber Finds series. His most recent poetry collection (Cherry Grove, 2012) presents a selection from ten years of e-mail exchanges with his friend Lawrence E. Leone. It’s called A BOUNTY OF 84s (the 84 being a stanza limited exactly to 84 characters, echoing the traditional notion that the Buddha left us 84,000 different teachings because humans have so many different needs, that all of them are so differently the same).
AGAIN THE MUSE by Barry Spacks

It depends on how she's feeling;
some times she'll let you go all the way.
OKLAHOMA REVIEW MISSION STATEMENT

The Oklahoma Review is an electronic literary magazine published through the Department of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. The editorial board consists of English and Professional Writing undergraduates, as well as faculty advisors from the Departments of English and Foreign Languages & Journalism.

The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine’s only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

- The Staff

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- As many as three (3) pieces of prose/fiction, with all pieces, together, not surpassing thirty (30) pages in length.
- As many as three (3) pieces of nonfiction, with all pieces, together, not surpassing thirty (30) pages in length.
- As many as five (5) pieces of poetry or translations of any length.

Pieces should be submitted through email in either .doc or .rtf file types. When sending in multiple files, please send separate files, instead of sending one big file. Indicate in the file name, your name and the title in the following format (Author – Title of Piece).

Authors should also provide a short biography either in a separate file or in the body of the email. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable, but please advise us in your email if your work is being considered elsewhere.

The Oklahoma Review is a continuous publication. Two issues are published online each year, Fall and Spring. Although submissions are accepted year round, please submit by October 15th, 2013 to be considered for the Fall 2013 issue.