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redcedar REVIEW

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EDITOR'S NOTE

GREG BEAMISH, JORDAN POLL, SHELBY DOSSER

To Our Loyal Readers,

We are pleased to share with you Red Cedar Review 48, our first digital issue. This volume is a true collaborative enterprise, showcasing the writing, editing, and design skills of undergraduate students at MSU and beyond. We want to extend our warm gratification to you for your interest in our publication and your patience in awaiting this issue. We have had more than our fair share of trials, tribulations, and transitions as we have moved from our recent home at MSU Press back to the Department of English. However, it has been an absolute joy to work with everyone and to finally see it finished. We are proud to be a part of Red Cedar's impacting leap into the world of digital publications. If there is a single word to sum up this issue it would be TRANSITION.

In the past, we accepted creative works from writers and artists from all walks of life, and we have been fortunate enough to have published renowned authors like Jim Harrison and Margaret Atwood, as well as MSU undergraduate students who have gone on to make a name for themselves as writers, most notably Carolyn Forché. Beginning with Volume 47, we made the decision to feature exclusively the work of undergraduate writers and artists from around the country.

Even as this is our first digital issue, we acknowledge the importance of our physical transition from our office in Morrill Hall, our home since the 1960s, to our new office across campus in Wells Hall, where we have found a home in the Digital Humanities and Literary Cognition Lab. Our organization has many fond memories of Morrill, from basement to second floor to first, and we are happy and excited to be in a new space. The art featured in this issue memorializes our old home.

It has been a privilege to collaborate with so many lovers of literature and

compile this collection. We are grateful for the MSU students who served as editors and readers, including Vikram Mandelia (managing editor 2012-2013), as well as to Kaitlyn Canary and Nick Yodock for their contributions as poetry and prose editors, respectively. And to all our readers—you know who you are!—we can't thank you enough for your time and keen writing skills, going through hundreds of submissions each year. Over the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years, Krista Pass, Franny Gagnier, Eliza Foster, and Andrea Jeannotte offered valuable assistance as typesetters. We are thankful for all the assistance we have received this year from the English department, particularly from our faculty advisor, Professor Robin Silbergleid. Additionally, MSU Professors Kathryn Houghton and Chris Corneal made the digitalization of this issue possible by overseeing typesetting and design. Finally, all of us would like to extend a thank you to author Roxane Gay for allowing us to interview her.

Thank you, everyone for your patience, hard work, and dedication! We did it!

RUBIES

MICHAEL KULICK

And what did the rubies say
standing before the juice of pomegranates?
— *Pablo Neruda*

"All this crimson that spills into the cracks seems purposeless."
The juice streams under the dim light
flows to the unknown pool in the shadow.
They say holy water shimmers in the cathedral.
This juice seems to whimper here
seeking purpose under the split kernels.
These pomegranates have traveled far.
Seen goats kick full pails of milk
that creamy white didn't shimmer—
more opaque and dingy,
farmer straining to fill another pail
managing to get only a quarter full.
He traded these pomegranates, milk, and honey
for couscous, barley, and a hatchet.

These rubies could say the pomegranates bled quiet
slowly releasing their juices across the cutting board.
These rubies were jealous of the pigeon blood-red
seeping down from the pomegranates.
These rubies stand in gold
in line next to diamonds.
A dowry gift for the wife.
She is learning her way through this new kitchen.
Unsure of the many contraptions on the counter

she splits the pomegranate with a chef's knife
one half rolling from her outstretched hand off the counter.

These rubies stand before the juice of pomegranates.
Watching the pigeon red blood spill and fill cracks.
The former bride is looking for a mop or a broom.
The rubies say to the pomegranate
"All this crimson that spills into the cracks seems purposeless.
You are not red like I am.
You are not true like I am.
You are not alive like I am."
The pomegranate replies
"Have you seen what I've seen?
Then you too would want to be slain in half
made to bleed
nourishing this woman
showing her to fail in the kitchen is human.
But to fall into gold and stand next to diamonds
—that is dead and vain."

WHAT YOU KNOW

ELAINA MERCATORIS

You smell them first, the oranges.
The aroma seduces you, fills your chest
with a hunger so great you can't stop inhaling,
so sudden and potent it suffocates your lungs.
You exhale hastily, to take more
air—you want it all in. Opening your eyes,
you see short trees—rows and rows, their orange
circles cloaking dark green leaves. Far away,
you cannot tell if they're blossoms or fruit,
but it's the fruit that throws you off—what you know

is nothing like this smell. The humidity
overtakes the orange trees, overtaking
you, but you know you won't win. An old beat-up
red truck carries a white jug spraying
water fifty feet in the air on both sides, replenishing scent
and fruit. Blue skies overhead only
jacket the orange grove. They don't reach you
inside, sheltered and starved. What you know

is nothing like this want. All you crave
is running through unguarded groves, untouched,
unreachable. *If you go, he won't let you*

out again, they said. You wake up to smell
the forbidden trees next door—who said you wanted
to come back? A loon perches outside:
tall with white heavy wings. You approach. She waits.
Come closer, her quiet eyes stare, no quiver
from her wings. So close you could touch her—but don't—
she turns to fly away from you. What you know
is nothing like this.

CHRISTIAN SERVICE

PATRICK KINDIG

I looked up from my book at the only other group of people in the café. Reading had become impossible after they came in, and although they spoke quietly, I could hear every word they said. The woman was doing most of the talking. An old man in a tweed jacket and a blue sweater sat across from her and sipped his tea, and a young man sat slightly apart with his head hung forward, rubbing one hand with the other. The young man looked as if he were constantly rediscovering that he had sat in something wet, but neither the woman nor the old man seemed to notice. The old man seemed to be a professor, and it was clear that this meeting was a college interview.

"Tyler is a great citizen," the woman said. She had not broken eye contact with the professor since they had sat down. "He volunteers whenever he gets a chance. He tutors at-risk elementary school students twice a week and he's always helping out with those charity events his youth group puts on."

She gave her son a look and he straightened up and turned toward the professor. The professor continued to sip his tea.

"Yes," the young man said. "I volunteer with my youth group a lot. And I'm the treasurer of my school's NHS chapter."

There was an awkward pause in which the woman stared at her son. It looked as if she were trying to put words in his mouth telepathically. When he said nothing else, she turned back to the professor.

"He's just nervous," she said. She gave the professor what was meant to be a sympathetic smile. It looked like she had swallowed her own lips.

"That's all right," the professor said, turning toward the young man. "I'd

like to hear more about this youth group, though, if you don't mind. As a Jesuit school, we like our students to have a strong background in Christian service. What kinds of projects have you worked on with your group?"

"We do food drives for Christmas and Thanksgiving," the young man said. "And we sponsored a pro-life 5k last year."

"And every year they go on an alternative spring break trip to build homes for the homeless," the woman cut in. "You know, clothing the naked and feeding the hungry and whatnot."

The young man lowered his face and his mother took control of the conversation again. The professor did not seem to care from whom the young man's story came, and he listened contentedly to the woman.

The one-sidedness of the conversation began to make me feel uncomfortable, and I tried to return to my book, but I could not help looking up at the young man after each sentence I read. He seemed to have resigned himself to being a third wheel in his own interview, and it was clear that his mind was beginning to wander. His mother looked at him occasionally to solicit uninteresting anecdotes about his schoolwork or his extracurricular activities. The young man paid less and less attention as the conversation went on. At one point, his mother had to say his name out loud to get his attention. He looked sheepishly at the professor. The woman looked as if she were watching a play she had written and directed go horribly wrong.

"Sorry, could you repeat that one more time, sir?" the young man asked. "I zoned out for a second there. I'm just really tired. I was up late doing homework last night."

"Don't worry about it," the professor said. He seemed incapable of reading facial expressions, and he continued talking without noticing the woman's horror or the young man's sheepishness. "At least you're losing sleep over something important. We like to see a certain passion and dedication in our students."

This calmed the woman, but it only seemed to make the young man more uncomfortable.

"This is my last question for you," the professor said. "Then you can ask me any questions you might have, or we can call it a day. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," the young man said. The news that the interview was almost over seemed to have focused him back on the conversation. He squeezed his left hand with his right and sat up straight, waiting for the last question.

"This may seem like an unfair one—especially right at the end—but this last question is pretty simple," the professor said. "What makes you unique? What makes you different from all of the other applicants we've had this year? Why should we pick you?"

The woman brought her coffee cup to her lips even though it had been empty for fifteen minutes. She pretended to take a last sip as she hid her smile behind the cup. They had practiced this question.

"Well," the young man began. He did not make eye contact with the professor. He looked just past his right ear. It seemed as if he were looking straight at me. "I know we talked about service a little earlier, but I kind of want to come back to that. I get pretty good grades and I try hard in school, but I think what makes me stand out from other people is that I'm a giving person. I just love helping other people, even when it's not with an official group or anything."

"It's true," the woman chimed in. "He loves helping people. He shovels our neighbors' sidewalks when it snows and he does yard work for the old woman across the street."

"I know a lot of kids do service work just because it looks good on college applications," the young man continued after a quick glance at his mother. "That's not me. I actually love helping people. That's kind of what I want to do in college. I want to get a degree so I can go on and be a doctor and make a career out of it."

The professor smiled. This was apparently a very satisfactory answer.

"Well, that about does it, then," the professor said. "Do you have any questions for me?"

The young man looked at his mother for a cue. She did not look at him, and he seemed to take this as a sign that he was done.

"I think I'm good," he said.

"All right, then," the professor said, standing up. "It was lovely meeting you both. You should be hearing from us pretty soon. And relax, Tyler—you did great."

"Thank you, sir," the young man said, stretching his arms. He shook the professor's hand and then his mother shook the professor's hand and they said their goodbyes. They left, and I was alone with my book again.

* * *

That evening, I decided to go for a walk before bed. It was that time of year when the air begins to smell cold but it still feels warm, and I wanted to enjoy the weather before the seasons changed. The park downtown was supposed to close at dusk, but people often came after dark to walk their dogs or to jog in private. It was quiet tonight, and I only saw one or two joggers as I walked along the path.

I was nearing the end of my walk when I came across a stone bench and I decided to sit down for a little while. I liked to look at the stars and pick out constellations, but I rarely got the chance to do this because it is impossible to see the stars from most places in the city. I was just figuring out where Venus was

when I heard something that sounded like a whisper and saw a clump of bushes set some distance back from the path move in the darkness. I listened. There was silence. Then I saw the bushes move again and heard distinct whispers. There were two voices, and I was sure they were coming from the bushes.

"I thought I heard someone," one of the voices whispered.

"So?" the other replied. "Is it a cop?"

"No, I don't think so," the first one whispered. "And I think they might be gone now."

"Then who cares?" the second voice said quietly, dropping its whisper.

"I guess you're right. But I should get home anyway. Where's my sweater?"

I peered at the bushes. My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I could make out flashes of color between the branches. I wondered what these voices had been doing that made them so worried about the police.

"Here," the second voice said. Something about it sounded familiar. I could not place it, but I felt that I had heard it somewhere before.

There was more movement in the bushes and I heard a couple of muffled "goodbyes." Then a young man with dark hair appeared behind the bushes. He pulled a red sweater over his head and looked up and down the path. He did not seem to notice me on my bench in the dark. He looked over his shoulder as if to make sure no one was following him and then took off down the path.

After a moment, another young man appeared behind the bushes. He stood there for a moment straightening his shirt. Then there was an electronic buzzing sound, and the man pulled a cell phone from his pocket and brought it to his ear.

"Hello?" he said. His voice was uncomfortably loud after the whispering. "No, I told you. I'm at Nick's. He's helping me with my AP European History stuff, remember? —Yeah, I'll be heading back soon. I'm packing up my stuff now. —Mom, I won't hear back about that for weeks probably. —Yeah. —Yeah, don't worry. —Okay, I'll be there soon."

The young man put his phone away and walked toward the path, then turned in my direction. As he drew nearer, his face came into view, and I let out an involuntary laugh. The young man jumped and then froze, squinting in my direction. When he saw my face, he looked puzzled for a moment. Then he realized where he had seen me before and he smiled slyly. He began walking along the path again. When he was in front of me, he gave me a cocky smile and said, "I'll be here all week."

I realized how I must have looked, sitting alone in the dark, listening to the rustling sounds in the bushes. I searched for some way to assure him that I had not meant to listen to them, that I had just happened to sit down as they were finishing their business. But before I could figure out what to say, the young man was gone.

I watched his silhouette melt into the night. When he had disappeared, I sat there a little while longer. Then I got up to go home. As I left the park, I could not help thinking to myself that the young man had been telling the truth at the coffee shop. He really was a giving person.

MEADVILLE, PA

ELAINA MERCATORIS

for my father and his father

You've given your name
to buildings, to the red brick lying
around stone letters spelling Mercatoris
in your hometown. When the gas industry
died, your industrial family left

town, leaving behind nothing
more than a name. You gave that name
to me, along with another and another,
until I was so full of your names
I couldn't eat.

I came back a half a century after you, found
no remnants of how you said it used to be,
instead witnessed its markets, empty
sidewalks and the color green, growing.
Your brick building converted
years ago into a Laundromat—

just a cemented name, not mine. I know
that there are none of us inside. You ran
as winter thrived, the market emptied,
sidewalks filled with ice—
the name stayed unaffected.

Even the best coffee shop closed last week.
My favorite graveyard flooded yesterday.
That name remains the same, haunting
our ancestors whose names are never mentioned,
who built buildings and towns. I am the only witness
left. Now the chains on my favorite swing are
rusting, and so are my hands.

LITTLE DEATH

MITCHELL KING

Like Murder,
It has a scent
a scene
that lingers
and like Murder
its color is red
flashes
flushes
shades of
red
terrible red
virgin red
and like Murder
when it is over
it lasts
it impresses
itself upon you.
Old and new,
like a fairytale
it will transmute you
like a fairytale
breathless,

I've awoken before
new.

Turning away the plate of toast,
the glass of milk,
the can of Coke,
I want to remain beautiful—
for three days
I'll nod off
sleep
and hum the same song
the momma song
the spoon in my mouth
the taste of whiskey-burn song.

Like Murder
I will dream of it
wild,
red,
red dreams.
I'll pass them
press them
into you.

Turning away the plate of toast—
like a fairy tale
you'll dream
you will dream
like a fairytale
like a murder
a *little* death
you will dream of it too.

WILD SWANS

MATTHEW GESICKI

Oh, what will I do, what will I say,
when those white wings touch the shore?
–Mary Oliver

In darkness, Noah is like a man at war within his body. Tonight he wrestles in his sleep until daybreak, when the thin gray hands of light, clasped as though in prayer, come apart at the horizon and crowd into his room. Finches sit heaped in the trees now, their bodies broken in song. The dogwood outside his window is seized with their voices.

Noah doesn't bother combing his hair. He shoves himself into a faded pair of jeans, ragged at the edges, and takes a shirt from the last hanger in the closet. Running its fabric through his fingers, he hesitates for a moment. Dark blue flannel, and it is too large for him. The sleeves hang from his arms.

He walks to the kitchen, its narrow space swept clean with air and light. His mother is at the stove, stirring oatmeal, an apron tied loosely around her waist. Her hair is like rust, angling down from her shoulders. She doesn't look up when she hears the quick breaths of his footsteps.

"Morning," she says.

"Morning," Noah's voice offers back.

"How did you sleep last night?"

He runs his tongue along his teeth.

"All right," he lies. He rubs a thumb at the base of his neck. His hair is too long, slipping up against the collar of his shirt.

She glances at him. Her eyes are dark and wide, set too deep within the caves

of their sockets.

"You're wearing his shirt," she says at last.

Noah stares at the floor. Something flutters in his chest. Like the shudder of wings unfolded. Like an arrhythmia, the uneven pulse of the lines on his father's EKG. A song of captured heartbeats. The liquid thrum of blood erupting in Noah's head when the doctor walked in, his long clean hands closed together before him, so unlike a father's hands.

"It still smells like him, I think."

She drops her gaze. Noah follows the movement of her wrist as she stirs the oatmeal. The wedding ring is looser on her finger than it was before. Her skin seems too small for her bones.

They sit across from each other at the kitchen table, and she places a bowl of oatmeal before him. Noah lifts a spoonful to his mouth and swallows—it is like mud in his throat. She watches him without speaking, her fingertips drawing patterns on the table. The quick talk of finches breaks the silence.

"You should let me wash that shirt," she murmurs.

He stares at the table. The hands that lie before him seem not his own. "I know," he says.

"I worry about you. About all this—"

She pauses. Noah rises from the chair, crossing to the sink and turning on the water. He breaks its flow with his fingers. Following her son, she stands close behind him, her chin on his shoulder—their bodies drawn together. Her hand reaches for his beneath the water. It is like light on his skin, washing open the pores. Thousands of years ago this would have cleansed Noah's soul—like Pilate dropping his hands into a bowl of water, beckoning Christ toward death.

"Noah, please." Her voice is jagged at the edges. "It—It's just a shirt."

"I can't." He wonders if she ever moves at night. If her body ever slips into the bare rift of the bed where his father once slept.

"Noah—"

He turns to face her. Her apron is beginning to come undone. Her hair is too loose, thrown around her shoulders, the strands dull and drifting like those of a drowned woman. She reaches out to him, her pale hand with its net of blue veins—

Noah wants to fit into her again. She would let the hollows of their collarbones come together again. Let him bury his face in her hair. She would pull to him once more with the old stirrings of blood in a mother's belly—like the days of his infancy, when she would wake in the predawn stillness to tend his cradle.

She says his name again. Hushed, like a mother with her child held to her chest. But her voice is far away—as though she is separate from him, as though

she is drawn from him by flooding waters. Her hand is at his neck. He imagines her washing the shirt.

She isn't enough.

Noah pulls from her touch. He retreats from her, backing away through the door and into the raw air of dawn. She calls after him, begs him to come to her. Her voice unravels in his wake.

A rush like wings pushes at his temple as he runs. He darts through the closet of trees at the backyard, through the broken fingers of branches. He runs unaware of his bare feet, not stopping until he throws himself through the trees into the clearing, at the edge of the pond. He breathes slowly, his heart slipping from his throat to its chamber in his chest.

The sky is flattened with gray, the light clean and otherworldly. Clouds are hunched and bursting at the horizon. Today the pond is still, not quick with small life as it is in summer—Noah's hands covered by larger hands, diving together into the pond's muddy rim for crayfish. Small armored bodies, burying themselves in dark corners at his touch.

See? Don't be afraid. They're just as scared as you are.

But the swans are here early, drifting on the water like two banks of white silk, broken open upon the dark surface. Their long necks lean into the bondage of their wings. Swans are monogamous, his father would tell him. Noah had not known what that meant then, but somehow he had understood just by watching them.

One swan lifts its neck and drapes it against the throat of the other. Together their heads drop. A slim white muscle, perfectly coiled, formed to loop around another. Shaped to be one part of a whole.

Rough hands on his shoulders, his head held to his father's waist, Noah had been one part of a whole. He would sense the pattern of heartbeats through his father's chest, that heart cocooned in blood and muscle—even then already faltering. He would wear the dark flannel shirt and guide Noah's arms through the movements of flight, the swans opening themselves in demonstration. Wings uncoupling before their eyes. His sleeves rolled up, and the old blue bruises of Navy tattoos on his arms. The scent of lye soap and pinewood.

Sometimes his mother would stand at pond's edge with his father—her hair in a careless ponytail, the fraying red strands hazed over with light. Their hands touching each other's waists.

The swans flex their wings. Wings like pale hands, like bloodless hands unclasped. He remembers years ago when they had seemed so large to him. When they would pedal their feet against the dark water, bodies arching in the pose of a messiah. Noah had retreated from them then.

In an instant the swans shatter, breaking for the air in a commotion of white. Their bodies split midflight like origami figures, as though borne from a child's open palms—Noah's palms, the heat of another still on his skin, the paper birds drawn on high with his breath. Their own bodies too weak for flight.

They always learn to fly somehow.

Noah drops to his knees, sinking into wet upturned earth. He holds out his arms. His father's shirt is loose on his chest—like a single body halved, like a skin beginning to unravel. He wishes that the shirt would pull open, that his own flesh would peel away until he is nothing but feather and bone, a nexus of flight. He would dive into the silence of felled trees, fly into the ether. Into some other realm where there are no murmurs in a man's heart and nothing breaks, where the swans linger over the darkness of the water without ever rearranging a wing.

AUNTIE

MARGARET O'BRIEN

Did you have a bell on your bike when you were ten?
I ate dutki with my *Teta Vida*.
She was brown and wrinkled as my baseball glove—
equally loved.

She toted me back and forth from the diamond
and swatted dust from my smudged knees.

She showed me how to see the eggs under a mother-dragonfly.
They were red, like fruit
and clustered as raspberries that grew through the fence—
her yard reaching out to mine.

My *Teta Vida* had a line beneath her lip where sadness and stories slept.

I waded hours through her words
so heavy with wonder
Eastern and rounded and sinking under the weight—
memories of the soldiers and the blistered fear
house-smoke and the cold, severed black of the Atlantic.

Someday, she told me, you'll love someone so much,
you will see why cigarette smoke looks blue when I blow it away from you.

Once a day, for 87 years. And I could count on those.

I counted on their smell, yellow beneath her nails
when she pulled snot and blood from my nose

the time I battered Brian Russell, boy down the street—
split my knuckles on the teeth of his mockery.

And my *Teta Vida* taught me ladies don't fight
but no one has to be a lady all of the time
or ever she wrote years later,
on a postcard plastered with the pelicans we liked to watch feed
because we just are the strange ones our mothers fashioned.

She fashioned me, knuckled, heaped, kneaded me like so much dough.

My *Teta Vida* feared her ghosts were swallowing me.
We saw the bones of a holy man to be free
and shared a hot dog afterwards.
And I wished I knew the Macedonian to ask her
How big is love, freely given?

~~A WIKIHOW GUIDE TO~~ PUTTING OUT ~~A FIRE~~

J. PHILLIP REED

1. [Consider the reason for extinguishing ~~the fire~~.]
   a. Muscle memory.
      i. Craigslist.org > (pick your state, your city or region) > personals > casual encounters > m4m
      ii. Be clean, send stats / pic. You host or we meet. Be discreet.
   b. I did not attend my grandmother's funeral last year.[1] I just didn't have the time. It takes me five hours, nine gallons of gas, and an average of seven cigarettes to drive from college to home in my dusty, two-door Hyundai hatchback. And something important was happening: I was taking a course on the Hebrew and Christian traditions, taught by a Ph.D. who incorporated into her slideshow lessons three-fingered illustrations from a children's book of Bible stories. Adam had a very red, half-eaten apple in his paw, the teeth indentations hinting at the impressive evolution of oral composition. This was my last chance to fulfill the course requirement. I had been avoiding it since my freshman year, when, on the first day the class met, Dr.

[1] Well, of course, this wouldn't be an honest early *essai* by a twenty-something without the obligatory insertion of a dead grandmother. See also Lee Gutkind's "The MFA in Creative Nonfiction: What to Consider Before Applying," in the September/October 2012 issue of *Poets & Writers* Magazine, p. 115. Hold a talisman close to the heart while reading.

Weisz made a general statement about the worship practices of black congregations and then stood directly in front of me and asked if I would confirm. In his defense, none of the other students could.

I don't do church. When I watched the pallbearers lift my aunt's casket—some thick, gleaming wood and all eighty pounds of cancer and bone—from the altar and off to a crematory I never asked the name or location of, reasons to ever return to church counted down to one: weddings, after which an obnoxious consumption of alcohol is forgivable. Aunt Marsha was succeeded by sweet tea.

c. When the affair with E. ended last Saturday, a few of his departing words had to do with my getting right with God. I said *okay* a lot in that conversation, reassuring him of what I was and would be, and when he left to make the five hour drive in his shiny, four-door BMW, I remembered trying to cry over Grandma, how much easier it had been to cry in front of him.

2. [Decide immediately whether the threat of ~~the fire~~ spreading exists ~~and if the proper authorities should be notified~~.]
   a. After high school, these are the occasions that render an erection inopportune:
      i. Mornings.
         1. Urination. One often has to sit on the toilet, taking care that in positioning himself he does not let his penis[2] graze the rim. One may also find it difficult to keep the penis within the confines of the toilet.
         2. In (unexpected) company.
            a. One tries to remind his mother that, while she has seen his penis more times than most, these invasions of privacy occurred within a five-year span, before one learned shame and good manners. Additionally, the twenty-three-year-old erection is not cute but often dangerous and unaware of its proximity.
            b. One tries, at first, not to offend roommates and other live-in companions who do not wish to be accosted by the unabashed erection. However, this restraint is often short-lived as, while one alone can go to certain lengths to make an erection inconspicuous, many cannot keep up the charade.
         3. Waking alone.
      ii. Any occasion of business not involving a clandestine affair in which the

[2] Word choice resultant of linguistic register. The writer cannot ascertain if anyone ever positioned a DICK, but the likely answer is "no."

[3] There is a single exception which the writer feels unjust to ignore completely: the "blow and go" encounter, in which it is entirely acceptable that one party opens an unlocked door and is greeted by an erection. Typically, no words are exchanged between parties in this circumstance; the two minutes to establish pleasantry become therefore unnecessary.

parties have sex in an office, on a desk, and/or while still dressed completely and business-casually.

iii. A first meeting, no matter the relationship thereby entered into.[3] Even if one makes acquaintance with the intent of committing to a strictly (probably brief) sexual exchange with no further implication, one should not betray his arousal within two minutes of answering the door or crossing over the threshold.

iv. Reclining on a couch beside a sex partner while his dog gets comfortable in one's lap… If I may amend that, ALL OCCASIONS INVOLVING QUADRUPEDS.

v. Leaving a lover's place of work while wearing slacks after having made out in the lover's storage hall. More inopportune about the erection in this circumstance is its risk of catching the eyes of the lover's employees, who all know his sweet wife and will probably see her in the produce aisle and who may remember one's member after discussing Paula Deen's not-gay son. —Who has their own *storage hall* anyway? Who hangs a shrine to Ronald Reagan in his office?[4]

b. I met E. on Craigslist. Having just been tested, I was in the mood to make the best of being negative. He responded to my ad, the subject line of his email: *28 mwmddf 6'1" 165# 7c.*[5] You should know, by the way, that those in the market for casual encounters don't tend to need more information than that, and many can't be bothered with age or height. In fact, the most frequent and reliable command in such pander is *SEND PIC* because photographic proof of a sexy physique bypasses all otherwise need-to-know. E.'s pic was less than flattering—pale and flaccid and awkwardly angled—and on many occasions in the following weeks, I meant to tell him so.

c. Take your mother to gay pride festivals. She has seen worse. When you blow a guy in the back of his SUV and accidentally leave your sneakers there because you thought wearing his would be cute and then he never swings by for the trade, pick that motherfucker out of the crowd and, while she won't buy your cigarettes, Momma will go to bat for you. My mother swings bats.

3. [Call ~~friends, family, or neighbors~~ if you are ~~able and they are~~ available.]

a. How to manipulate a man into loaning you his gas card[6]:

i. Drive a shittier car than he does.

[4] And what self-respecting homosexual thinks it's okay to sleep with this person? See also *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika, Act Four, Scene 8*, et al.

[5] Discreet encounter shorthand, meaning "28-year-old masculine white male, drug-and-disease free, six-feet-and-one-inch tall, weighing 165 pounds, and in possession of a seven-inch-long, cut (circumcised) penis."

[6] Patent pending. The writer cannot be held responsible for any negative repercussions experienced in the attempt to replicate. This *experiment* should never be enacted against a friend, although practicing it on an unreasonably frugal family member is encouraged.

ii. Travel to meet him frequently, making sure that he recognizes the effort you put into having his company. With calculated subtlety, try to insinuate how much time you AREN'T spending with family.

iii. Don't talk about money until you have none. When you have none, have enough gas in your car to drive home in case he takes absolutely no interest in your dire circumstance.

iv. Don't immediately accept his offer. Refuse long enough for him to take pity on how prideful you are, but don't refuse long enough for him to change his mind.

v. Put out, either immediately before or soon after.

vi. Return the card to him as soon as possible, having used less credit than he assumed you would. This increases the chances of a repeat.

b. If State Farm were really there 'like a good neighbor,' do you think they would drop the unsuspecting girl from 4E into a living room with three losers and a hot tub?

c. You're just jealous.

d. When I visit my father in Jacksonville, I go off on my own at least once. In August, I got a one-dollar pack of American Spirits. Last July, I wrote a good poem and found a better fuck named Steven. Facebook tells me he may have been a drag queen some years back. I want to feel embarrassed.

4. [Look at what resources are available to contain the fire.]

a. After the guitarist Brian "Head" Welch left the band Korn in 2004 and found God and several orphans in Israel, he decided to renounce the earthly pleasure of masturbation. To further deter his waxing the wood, he tattooed J-E-S-U-S on the fingers of his right hand.

b. When Grandma was in hospice, I did manage to make it home. At first, the worst part of visiting was the curtain drawn in front of her room. My hands were usually cold while pulling back the sheet, and by the time I was close enough to touch her, I was afraid she would shiver or shrink away, even when she wasn't really there.

c. Consolers tell the grieving to remember the dead at their liveliest. Here's what I remember: my grandmother in the hospital bed, a skeletal figurine boxed in Styrofoam; her skin drawn into folds everywhere except the knobs of elbows, knees, and heels where it shone in the unhealthily glassy way I imagine vampire foreheads do; her thick, browning fingernails clasping a teal blanket; her unrecognizably small thighs jutting out of the adult diaper, the originative hips either obscured or devoured. Her slow eyelids fell like nightshades. Thrush caked her mouth.

5. [Use a tool to create a "fire break" if no water is available.]

a. —? Because it is not enough to believe that the beloved dead are watching over us,

even when we masturbate. —? Because nailing a mirror to the wall before my bed never made me feel more or less guilty or disgusted by who or how I fucked, and I am my harshest critic.

b. How does a precoital conversation about cold hands usually go? I always pretend the condition is a surprise to me too. Like, "Damn, my hands are cold, I can't believe how cold they are." Sometimes, the guy tries to warm them between his own, but the typical hookup doesn't care about palm temperature, I've found, if his senses are elsewhere distracted.

c. I sometimes envision my grandmother without the curtain when I need to deter an inopportune erection.

6. [Use heavy equipment, if available, to create a larger firebreak if the situation warrants it.]

a. There is a couple in your town, in a large house on a hill in what looks—even through the swarm of wracked nerves in the nighttime—like a well-to-do suburb. Two men, middle-aged, in great shape. Well-endowed doesn't begin to describe how—they will put you between them as if erecting a bridge, they will make commerce of you. Buy from the short one and the other will sell. It feels as monumental as letting ships pass… But there is no dam to stem the flow. You'll remember later, when the obvious absence leaves you. And panic like an upset pail of water.

b. Wait, wait… fixate.

i. My grandfather smoked until his death. So did my aunt, which my grandmother never knew—we hope. I was careful not to smoke in front of Grandma, before seeing her and not after until I had driven at least three blocks away.

ii. Within twenty minutes of quitting smoking "[y]our blood pressure, pulse rate, and the temperature of your hands and feet will all return to normal," according to WhyQuit.com. But not if you drink coffee. And not if you have a genetic predisposition to poor circulation. And not if you're nervous, according to me.

iii. Smoke after sex. Smoke before sex but brush your teeth after smoking and before engaging in sexual activity. Spend an extra minute brushing the tar off of the tongue. Pretend to be a nonsmoker until your partner lights up. If both of you are pretending and no one lights up, you are already lying to each other. Don't make a hoe into a housewife. Wendy Ho tells us, "you never floss your teeth when you're about to suck a big dick."

iv. E. could somehow tell if I had smoked even one cigarette all that day. I told him I was cutting down. Cutting down is easy using replacement therapy,

as long as orgasms are the replacement for nicotine. This can create a much unhealthier dependency because men are not packs of cigarettes.

c. A note about corn-fed southern boys: They know what grits are. Their tans are oddly appealing. They operate tractors. What are they made of? Haystacks, sweat beads, and belt-buckles.

7. [Use buckets, pots, or other containers to carry water to the blaze if no other fire fighting equipment is available, and a stream or pond, or other source of water is nearby.]

   a. That moment when the nurse from El Salvador lists the implications of a positive test result and pretends to not recognize these as the most painfully drawn-out seconds of your life. Then, that moment after when she's your savior, cuando ella es tu Salvador.

   b. Bodily inadequacy. Piss on a wildfire. I look for Billy Bobs when I feel bad like Halle Berry.

   c. Last night I dreamed that Chris had convinced me to go-kart down Francis Marion Road. Of course I did I mean I do I love you anything you say. And on the ride back, the way was blocked by gargantuan sleeping alligators. He proceeded to run them over and well I got off and ran for my life. Is it important that I ended up on Claussen Drive, which continues into Howe Springs Road which eventually morphs into Alligator Road? The point here must be Chris. The point is I thought I had put that to rest.

8. [Be prepared to evacuate the area if danger reaches an unacceptable level.]

   a. E: If my communicating makes it harder for you, you tell me.
      I: (no response)
      —Oh, you.

   b. The best sex ever is pre-Med. You drive twenty minutes to find it, you get lost for ten minutes on the way, and it tells you to park in the garage. You think it disappeared upstairs once you pulled in, so you follow and call for it, hello?, and creep yourself out when nothing answers. It appears it was preparing the room. It wears what is left of a lifeguard shirt and has a stud in the straight ear. It says it isn't shy, you go straight to it, you tell it kisses like a straight boy. It laughs, makes it last, just what you beg for, and when it gets up to piss, your world is new! where have you been! reborn! rebaptized! a spectacular finish, but—here, it throws in a towel. In the following weeks you die to replicate it; for months you dress something like it, and it requests that you at least send a sexy pic. You make the cursor caress the words, at least. The best sex ever knows what it is and just now, you know you've had it.

   c. We should do this again sometime…

      i. I only say this when I don't mean it. I often say things I don't mean, like, I

just can't do this tonight, which means that I CAN do THAT all night, but not with you because I'm already bored.

ii. Statistics show that every year a relative dies.

iii. It's like love. Don't be the first to utter it unless the silence incites one of your organs to leap—I could be referring to a kidney, which is okay to mention in non-first date scenarios.

iv. Here is wisdom; let him who has it count the number for you because by the time sometime rolls around, you are no longer first in line to throw yourself on the grill. I have responded to the ad of a previous partner. I have gotten that email.

RUNNER'S HIGH

TREVOR J. BENNETT

My roommate passed me in the hallway as I entered the complex and patted me on the back. He was going to be right back, he said, and something about his girlfriend. He told me that he left his friend from class in the apartment. This was becoming a habit. Also, he said the mail was on the table.

The man was there when I got home, packing a bowl on the coffee table. He had years on him, an old community college student, unshaven. I sat down with him and shared the idle conversation one has with a friendly stranger in his apartment, and he shared his pot with me.

He told me his name, he joked about the heat, the rain, Michigan, etc.

Small talk got bigger. It wasn't long before the inevitable discussion about his deployment, and the way he shook as he spoke got me believing every word he said.

"I was there five years." He held the glass pipe in his hand.

"Was it the hell the news always says it is?" I said. I was startled by my own words. I've never spoken to a veteran about war, and I wasn't sure which wires not to cross.

His eyes closed slowly, and his brows raised. "It's something stranger than hell," he said. "If it were hell, I wouldn't want to go back."

He cashed out the remaining bud thoroughly, tapping the choke hole with his t humb, stirring the ash a few times with the base of his lighter. Didn't miss a fleck. Daily rituals become skill.

"Go back?" I asked.

He nodded and pulled another bud out of a wrinkled plastic sandwich bag and set it in a silver, chambered cylinder with an eight ball on top. It was an herb grinder that my roommate had picked up at the gas station on Grand River.

I pushed the topic a bit further. "Did you ever see combat?" These questions just kept coming out, no filter.

He was silent for a few seconds, not a loss of words, but concentration. I imagined servos spinning in his brain. He twisted the top portion of the grinder and set it down on the table.

"I guarded an airstrip," he said. "It was insane." He tapped the pipe lightly against the ashtray.

"All times of the day, man, we were being shelled. You would hear bullets hitting sandbags and guys yelling at us. They didn't want that base there at all." He chuckled a bit, and so did I for some reason. He handed the pipe to me, gesturing to the grinder, and I attempted to fill it, spilling a little onto the table, onto a pile of mail. Onto an Army recruitment brochure. He stared at the little green specks for a bit, then looked up at me as I held up a lighter.

"Wait, pack it down with your knuckle. Here." I handed him the pipe, and he used the first knuckle on his index finger to press the pile down into a flat shape. "Like that. Spark the side, leave some green." He handed the pipe back to me, and as I sparked it, he asked, "Hey, can you give me a ride home in a little bit?"

"I've got class in, like, an hour, can I just drive you after this bowl?" I wasn't used to this potency of marijuana, and the prospect of driving made me a little anxious.

"Thanks, man," he said and took the pipe I handed to him. He flicked the lighter, drew in smoke, held it.

He let out an explosive round of coughs and sat there a second, staring forward. "We were always being woken up by bombs and shit. I had to run right up to the wall. And I shot at them while they shot at me."

I had a big question, but I never asked it out of respect.

"There was something about that place, man," he went on. "Hot and dry as shit. Smelled oil and gunpowder all the time. Dust got in everything. They were always yelling and shooting at us. It was awful."

My hands slid to my knees, steadying the slowly spinning room. He was no longer shaking, just lying back in the couch with his arms spread out across the back.

"If you don't mind me asking, why would you want to go back?"

He laughed and said slowly, "I don't mind you asking." Thought for a second, looking at the pipe. "Winston Churchill had this famous quote. He said, 'There is nothing more exhilarating,'" he paused for

dramatic effect and to smoke, "'than to be shot at with no result.'" Smoke puffed out at th ese words. He handed me the still-cherried bowl. "Hit that while it's still lit."

I puffed on it quickly, and he scooted forward on the couch.

I imagined hot shards of metal cutting up sandbags and squad mates around him as he stood with a cigar in his mouth, belt of ammo over his shoulder, belt-fed machine gun rat-a-tatting round after round. Smoke pouring out of his mouth with the maniacal warrior laughter. Hail to the king, baby.

"While I was there, it was weird," he said, rocking a bit in his seat involuntarily. "Combat is a drug, man. Those years in Iraq, I could see better, I could hear better, I could smell better. Food tasted better. Life was just easier to follow."

"I can imagine—"

"No," he startled me, "you really, probably can't. It's like, it's like, you're against a wall made of sandbags, and all you can think is, like, 'Man, I hope those bullets don't just go through these bags. I hope I see them before they see me. I hope those fucks aim as bad as they did yesterday. I hope I don't piss my pants again. I hope that mortar I hear falling doesn't take off my leg.' Shit like that. And what kept me going was pure adrenaline."

His fingers dug into his pant leg, twisting, pulling.

"It was like I was high all day, every day, in the sun and the sand, purely off of chemicals that my body will no longer make for me," he said.

We sat in silence, and I cashed out the remainder of the bowl, stirring it with the base of my lighter. "You mind if we take off now?" I said. "Sorry, I don't want to interrupt you."

"Yeah, man, let's go, you're fine." I handed him his bag of Afghan Kush, and he tucked it into a little black

backpack. I stood and slapped my pockets to feel my wallet, keys, phone—check, check, check. I grabbed my Spanish book off the coffee table. We walked out the door, and I locked it behind me.

Descending the maintenance stairs, he pulled out a little brown vial from his backpack and handed it to me. It was a tincture of Tetrahydrocannabinol in propylene glycol. "Smell it," he said and chuckled. I uncapped it and was struck with the odor of what had to be a skunk orgy.

"Wow," I said, capping the vial again carefully, quickly.

"Put a few drops of that under your tongue and you're set for hours, man."

"I've really got to get a med card," I said, and we laughed. I handed back his prescription.

I unlocked my truck manually, slid over to the passenger side, and unlocked his door. He climbed in, and the cab rocked to the right for a second with his weight.

He buckled up, and I sat for a second, feeling the steering wheel. I took a deep breath, kicked in the clutch, and started the vehicle. Rolled slowly over a speed bump.

The left turn out of Northwind Drive on Grand River Avenue was always the worst. Five lanes of traffic only let up every so often. I waited a good five minutes before gunning it and stopping in the center lane. Inertia lurched the veteran forward and back, his hands on the little black backpack in his lap.

I was a little too aware of myself. I shook the stick back and forth a few times before catching back into first gear and joining the flow of traffic. I told myself silently over and over, “I've got this.”

"Take this out to Michigan Avenue, and I'm on a street just off of it," he said to me, and I nodded. His directions helped to sober me a bit. The sign for Bell's Pizza coasted by.

"So what was it like when you got home?" "Haha. Hard." He wasn't smiling. "Freedom must have felt nice."

"Yeah, at first it was really great, you know, not being shot at every day, deciding when to eat, drinking,

girls. But everything became so mundane, so fast. I missed the action, I missed the purpose. The objective."

I braked too hard for a pedestrian who couldn't make up his mind what side of the street to be on. My passenger flinched. I drove in silence, concentrating, until I hit Michigan.

"I did a lot of cocaine at first, when I got home," he said. I caught a glance of his lip quivering. I let a few seconds of silence pass.

"Yeah? What was that like?" I asked. He squeezed the backpack on his lap.

"It was..." he leaned forward a bit. "It was a runner's high. But the problem was, you know, you never got that same buzz you got the first time you did it."

"So you would have to do more?" Though the conversation had taken a scary new direction, I maintained my curiosity, partly from respect, mostly from my nature.

"Yeah, more every time. And it doesn't last more than an hour, so it's all about sustaining. I smoked crack for a little while. Then I stopped." He shook enough I could see it in my peripheral.

"It was the closest thing, you know. You don't know, but, you know."

I watched the Blimpie logo pass by on the right.

"There are better medications," I said, and he laughed a lot louder than I thought he would.

"There are other medications." He wrung the little black bag on his lap as his smile melted. He pointed. "Turn left here."

I missed the name of the street, but hooked a left and rode the clutch into a dense, downtown Lansing neighborhood. Peeled paint covered some of the houses.

"Up there, the green mailbox on the left." I bounced over potholes. As I pulled into his driveway, he popped open the door.

"Hey, take care, dude," I said, and he shook my hand.

"It was nice talking to you, man," he said, "Hit me up sometime." He climbed out of the truck, and the cab rocked with his weight.

"Will do."

He waved me off and turned and walked into his house. I backed out of the driveway, turned, and skipped first gear by accident, but came to a slow acceleration anyway. The truck rumbled. Took a right on Michigan.

As I gained speed, I realized that I never asked him his name, or maybe I did, but I never committed it to memory.

Glazed through Spanish class. Turned in worksheets. Got more worksheets. Drove home.

I pulled into my building's parking structure and entered the side door. Rode an elevator that reeked like a fart in a Subway restaurant up to the fourth floor. Put my key in the lock of my door. I heard a girl's voice.

The living room was empty when the door opened. The table was now home to several empty cans of

Keystone. A girl was moaning loudly through my roommate's door.

I cleared the table enough to sort envelopes, and I sat down. Played music on my laptop to cover the background noise.

I tossed aside junk mail. Credit card offers. Army recruitment brochure. Coupons for anything tha t was not

fast food. I paid a few bills online.

Got up to get a beer from the fridge and walked by my roommate's silent room. Good night. Wandered the cupboards for a little while before deciding on off -brand toaster pastries. I pushed down the arm on the toaster.

Sipped my beer while I read the sticky notes on the fridge.

Do dishes, your turn.

Need milk. Need eggs.

I pulled a new Post-It off the dispenser and took a pen out of a cup on top of the fridge.

Do not leave strangers in the apartment alone anymore.

The pastries popped up. I wrapped them in a paper towel and grabbed my beer. I looked at the dishes piled in the sink. I tried to move one, and they all rattled. I turned and left the kitchen, flicking the light off.

I sat back down at the table and looked for the remote. I had remembered seeing it on the table. Moved a few beer cans. Looked under a miscellaneous few papers. Lifted up the Army brochure, found it.

I sat back on the couch and held the two items in front of me. The remote was heavier. I set it down. Flipping through the trifold, I was presented with logos and action shots, where professional photographers got right into the thick of their training fields. Soldiers looked down their rifles to an off-camera target. Just like real life, right? What are they shooting at?

What was he shooting at? The veteran never told me what he was shooting at. Mortars came in, and bullets and rockets and piss. He must have been close enough, face to face with his enemy, he had to be. He could hear them talking. See their faces.

He never told me what he was shooting at. He told me everything but what he was shooting at.

A CONVERSATION WITH ROXANE GAY

COMPILED BY VIKRAM MANDELIA

The secret to becoming the Renaissance woman of letters and authorship: a Scrabble score of 597. Or a key ingredient might be versatility—such as having degrees in creative writing as well as a PhD in technical communication. Throw into the mix an extensive movie collection of more than a thousand titles, and you have Roxane Gay: writer, professor, blogger, essayist, and competitive Scrabble champion. Gay, who is currently an assistant professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, is a versatile author who has made an impact in both the print and digital realms. Gay's writing appears in *Best American Short Stories (2012), Virginia Quarterly Review, American Short Fiction, Oxford American, The New York Times Book Review, Wall Street Journal*, as well as a variety of other journals and publications. Gay is the co-editor of *[PANK] Magazine* and essays editor for *The Rumpus*. She also maintains a blog titled "I Have Become Accustomed to Rejection." Gay's printed works include her collection Ayiti (2011) and two forthcoming books—a novel, *An Untamed State* (Grove Atlantic), and an essay collection, *Bad Feminist* (Harper)—out in 2014. Her accolades include fourteen Pushcart nominations, being featured in *Best American Short Stories*, and having eight stories named Notable Stories for

storySouth's Million Writers Award.

Gay visited MSU for a couple of days to share her thoughts, work, and expertise. During her hectic schedule, she took the time to have a students-only lunch break to give some MSU Arts and Letters students the chance to ask questions and get a better grasp at the realities and life of a creative writer, offering advice on how to become versatile in a changing publishing industry.

Vikram Mandelia

In general when you visit other campuses, do you have a preference of what you like to read? Do you like to read from your novel or do you like to take pieces from your blogs?

Roxane Gay

It depends on the audience, really. I try to read a blend of things. Generally I try to keep it funnier or sexier to captivate the audience and respect people's time. I've done readings where I've read a review of *Twilight: Breaking Dawn* with visual aids.

Student

What did you use as visual aids?

Gay

I used pictures of the broken headboard, for one. [Laughter] Sorry, I love that movie so much. It was so outrageously bad.

Mandelia

It sounds like you like to consider your audience. One notable aspect of your work is that you write for such a variety of magazines, from *Salon* to *The Rumpus* to a personal blog. So how do you decide what you are going to tackle next, what your next project is going to be about? You go from writing about Daniel Tosh and his crude jokes about rape to…

Gay

Yes, well, I mean, it just depends. When I write for *Salon,* like the Daniel Tosh essay, I do what I can. It's whatever's going on in the world that grabs my interest or makes me angry. With the Tosh thing, I think he's a pig, and I don't think he's funny. That he heckled a woman who had the nerve to say that, you know, maybe your rape joke isn't funny—that really got under my skin and motivated me to write. It is whatever motivates me to say something, makes me feel something—

generally anger or passion of some kind. I also write book reviews and try to do some broader cultural criticism. I'm working on an essay right now juxtaposing Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* and the TV show *The Week the Women Went* and this sort of narrative we have of men as helpless and women as extremely capable and how men just fall apart. The problem with *The End of Men* is a faulty thesis shoddily supported by selective evidence, and it suggests that everything is great for women right now and that's not true.

Mandelia

Considering the many literary spheres that you've impacted, including print and electronic media, what advice do you have to students about being that versatile?

Gay

I'm a born Libra, so I believe in balance. You don't have to be both a critic and a writer; that's a choice. I have a lot of opinions, and people seem to be interested in my opinions. But I think you have to read a lot and write a lot and make sure you know what's going on in the world. Writers more than anyone else have the responsibility to stay abreast of what's going on. You don't necessarily have to write about it, but you have to know because that's going to shape the ways your audience understands your writing. I tell my students to be aware, to be engaged, to give a damn. A lot of times, especially when you're in college, you pretend you don't give a damn. You have to pretend you don't study, then you go home and study for real later. Be a little more sincere about what you are doing, and it will totally pay off someday. Maybe not in the ways you want, but sincerity has a lot of value.

Favorite Authors:

Laura Ingalls Wilder
Edith Wharton
Michael Chabon
Alice Walker

One concrete reason for Gay's success is that she is a student of her own teaching. In order to be relevant and successful, Gay conveys how aspiring creative writers need to be aware of what is going on in the world around them. From politics to literature to musicals and Oprah, Gay keeps abreast of a wide berth of cultural topics and issues.

Mandelia

In the microscopic amount of free time you get, what do you like to do?

Gay

Watch TV. Go to the movies. Adult things. [Laughter] Hang out with my friends. I play competitive Scrabble—serious business. Highest score to date: 597. I'm serious about Scrabble. I have an essay coming out in the Ninth Letter about my Scrabble life. Words—that's what's up.

Student

Do you play Bananagrams, too?

Gay

No, I don't. I love word games. I play Prolific on Facebook. I really have lots of free time. I just try to use my time wisely.

Student

[I] should try that. [Laughter]

Gay

There's something fundamental about being in college that prevents one from managing their time effectively. It's not something you learn until you turn 30.

Don't worry, you've got plenty of time.

Student

Thank God! [Laughter]

Student

What's your favorite reality show on TV?

Gay

Tough question.

Student

I'm crossing my fingers for Honey Boo-Boo.

Gay

Hell, no. That's a hot mess. I like *The Amazing Race* and *Survivor*.

Student

What's your favorite movie that's come out recently? *The Hunger Games*?

Gay

I love *The Hunger Games*. I can't even talk about it in a rational way. And I'm Team Peeta all the way. In fact, a stranger sent me a cutout of Peeta, so I did this whole photo montage of Peeta and I took Peeta to work…Peeta is everything. My favorite recent movie was *Step Up Revolution*. It was so lousy, I couldn't get enough of it.

Student

What types of movies do you usually watch?

Gay

Everything. I love movies. I'm a movie freak. I own about a thousand movies. I go to the movies two or three times a week. I haven't gone in the past two weeks because I've been slammed. I'm really ready for *Pitch Perfect.* I was telling my students yesterday, I was like, "Guys, tick tock, *Pitch Perfec*t better show up here on Saturday, or there's going to be a riot!" In fact, tomorrow if I get home in time I'm going to go see my Liam [Neeson].

Student

Taken 2?

Gay

Yes! It's going to be so great—same movie, different city. The first one was amazing. I saw it in theaters and I was on the edge of my seat.

Student

So if you had to choose a few movies for the rest of time?

Gay

Pretty Woman. Easily. Forever and ever and always. *Gone With The Wind*. *Rear Window. Somewhere in Time. Alias* seasons 1-5. *The Hunger Games.* Not the shitty Batman movies. They're okay, but I thought that this excessive sacrifice that Batman had to do in the third movie was ridiculous. How many times does he have to be broken literally and figuratively and still rise again? It's a bit much. We get it, he's a hero.

Student

There's an absence of comedies on your list…

Gay

Well, that's because comedies suck. I love comedies, but they are just…Adam Sandler exists. Comedies like *Jack and Jill*—that was so offensive and so bad. I saw it in the theater; that was my mistake. Terrible. Oh, *The Usual Suspects*. I like smart comedy.

Student

Big Lebowski?

Gay

Wouldn't go on my top ten list, but *Big Lebowski's* good.

Student

Little Miss Sunshine?

Gay

Little Miss Sunshine was great!

Student

Forgetting Sarah Marshall?

Gay

Forgetting Sarah Marshall was good, too! I like Jason Segel—tall and goofy. *West Side Story*, hello! My bad. What was I thinking—*West Side Story* is timeless. I love musicals. Good musicals generally come from good source material—Wicked, for instance. Gregory Maguire is so bright, very imaginative; he just always manages to bring this sort of depth. We always tell each of our students in creative writing classes, "How are you going to find a new way to tell an old story?" and he found a new way to tell an old story—that the Wicked Witch of the West was actually good, and that Glinda wasn't necessarily bad but was nowhere near as good as people think she was, and so I really loved what he did there.

Favorite Musicals:
West Side Story
In the Heights
Wicked
Legally Blonde
Phantom
Les Miserables
Dreamgirls

Student

How did you become a writer? Was your background strictly in creative writing?

Gay

My PhD is in rhetoric and technical communication. I have always been a creative writer; my master's degree is in English with an emphasis in creative writing. I got the PhD in rhetoric and technical communication just because it was going to put me in a better position to get a job upon graduation. I teach new media, technical communication, professional communication, document design, and creative writing.

Student

Advice for people looking at graduate schools for writing?

Gay

It depends. First of all, you should not pay for graduate school. If you want to get an MFA in creative writing, get an MFA, but if you're going to get an MFA and pay a lot of money, go to a good MFA program. If you're going to pay $40,000 a year, go to Columbia or NYU. Get a degree where the name will actually work for you. An MFA is a forced time to write. If you want two, three, four years to write, get an MFA. If you want to teach creative writing, get a PhD. Even though the MFA is a terminal degree and should enable you to teach, the market is so flooded that it's no longer enough. A PhD [in creative writing] is more writing/studying—more literature, longer works. It is easier to get funding for an MA than an MFA. You can get your MFA funded, it's just a lot more competitive. I believe in aiming high, but I also believe in diversifying your options so you are not paying for graduate school. A graduate education is the best gift one can give themselves.

Student

Is it weird to get your MFA from the same school as your PhD?

Gay

No, it's not. But in my own case, I have degrees from three different schools. The advantage of doing it that way is exposure to different faculty (and) different environments. You can learn, travel, see the world—or the country, at least.

Student

I was surprised you went to Michigan Technological University; I always thought of them as an engineering school.

Gay

They have [one of the] top technical communication programs in the country. I had a great experience there. At first I was like, "I don't even know what technical communication is!" [Laughter] But you can always learn as a creative writer. I also know I probably had the fundamentals of creative writing down because the MA program at the University of Nebraska is a workshop-based MA in creative writing. I can teach technical communication just fine, but I love teaching creative writing. I get endless amounts of joy from workshopping with my students. They are so good! They just turned in their first stories, and they were amazing! One girl wrote a story that was like a Bible. And she formatted it like a Bible with books, verses, and chapters; it was called "The Book of Shelly." It was stunning. She wrote a story about a drug addict who basically sees God. She had started her life out with an evangelical mother who would burn a cross into her forehead. When someone has natural talent, there's just nothing you can really do but help them shape and refine. We had been talking about stories that are written in alternative forms. We had read a story that was written as an index, and we had read a story that was written as a recipe. One student wrote a story using text messages. He didn't know you could go online and find an iPhone generator, and borrowed his girlfriend's iPhone and texted back and forth and took screenshots. Another girl wrote a story as a letter. Another girl wrote a story as a series of news articles. Another girl wrote a story as a playbill. Every semester, students wow me with how willing they are to stretch their creative muscles.

Student

Not every creative writing class is like that. We are in one now that's like…"Do not experiment because you need to be good at this…" I mean, I respect knowing the rules.

Gay

You need to know the rules, but I teach the rules along with how to break them. Creative writing is about creativity, and if we use this old-school format of just sticking to traditional stories…I mean, how many times do we read John Irving?! I respect traditional writers, I read traditional writers, and I love them. But I use mostly contemporary fiction in my courses as examples. I go online and I pull a lot of work. I use Best American Short Stories because every year it's just really great fiction. I also show students how to experiment because that's where it's fun, and they're beginning writers, so they have a lifetime to learn the rules. And also, how can you constrain them to these stories that are traditional since they are already getting that in their literature classes? They don't need it twice. What we can do though is juxtapose; for example, alongside the index story, we also read a more traditionally formatted story about something similar. We look at the differences: "Where do you see rules being broken? What do you think is happening to the narrative? Is the narrative being degraded, or is it improved through this sort of experimentation?"

Favorite Music:

Lauryn Hill
Adele
Erykah Badu
Beastie Boys
Miles Davis
Rage Against the Machine
Britney Spears
Amy Winehouse

Above all, one important piece of wisdom Gay bestowed upon the students gathered was that in order to be successful and versatile authors, creative writers, professors of English, etc., you have to love what you are doing. You have to have a multitude of interests and opinions and craft your opinions or narratives in ways that are compelling, relatable, and refreshing to readers. Rules are guidelines that should be followed, but authors shouldn't be strangers to breaking the rules either.

With pastimes from Scrabble to movies, Gay revealed that part of being successful is not only honing and improving your craft, but also being an interesting person in general. Be a person who has quirks and character, an author with a personality that transcends the page—a feat that Gay clearly has artfully mastered.

CONTRIBUTORS

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