

redcedar
REVIEW



VOLUME 51

**THE RED CEDAR REVIEW IS AN ANNUAL LITERARY MAGAZINE
PUBLISHED IN THE SPRING BY MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
UNDERGRADUATES WITH SUPPORT FROM THE MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF ARTS AND LETTERS AND DEPARTMENT
OF ENGLISH.**

COVER DESIGN BY MARY LITTERAL.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

CAROLINE WHITE

Dear Readers,

A few weeks ago, I had coffee with Dennis Pace, the *Red Cedar Review's* managing editor from 1973. Forty-three years of the *RCR's* history stood between us, but, as we discussed our different production processes and the ways the journal has evolved over the years, we realized that, despite the technology revolutions and the editorial board changes that have occurred between Dennis's tenure and mine, there are some aspects of the *RCR* that never seem to change.

Edits are no longer scribbled in the margins of coffee-stained paper, but there is still the thrill of sorting through pages and polishing pieces into the best versions of themselves. A printing press is no longer used to place text on paper, but hours of care are still poured into layout and design. And, although the submissions no longer sit in giant mail bins in the basement of Morrill Hall (a building that, in fact, no longer exists on Michigan State University's campus), we continue to be amazed by the incredible work that comes to us from all around the world.

This year, we continue our recently adopted tradition of exclusively publishing the works of undergraduate writers. There are stories of heartbreak. Passion. Growth. Reflection. For some writers, this is their first published work, and, for others, it is another piece to add to a growing portfolio. We are thankful for the writers that chose to share their work with us and look forward to seeing where they go next.

I would also like to thank Robin Silbergleid, our wonderful faculty advisor, for giving us the freedom to experiment and innovate with the *RCR*, the Department of English for supporting our publication, and Phillip Russell and Jill Talbot for their wonderful, thought-provoking discussion included at the end of this edition. Finally, thank you to our dedicated staff members and our loyal readers. Without you, the past fifty-one editions would not have been possible.

Sincerely,

Caroline White
Red Cedar Review Managing Editor

WING BEAT

REBEKAH BRESEE

Heather would've taken the boys to church. I wonder if she'd be mad knowing that we went hunting instead. That day, I woke the boys up early—Mason had apparently worn his waders to bed. Within ten minutes, the boys had on waders, jackets, beanies, and gloves. Can't get 'em ready for school on time, but they hear the word "hunting" and they're dressed before dawn.

I tell them to meet me in the kitchen for breakfast. I have finished buttering the last piece of toast when I hear light footsteps.

"Is Uncle Ken coming too?" I turn around to see a sandy blond eleven-year-old. The blond hair and freckles he got from her, but looking into Dillon's blue eyes always makes my stomach hurt. They look exactly like hers.

"Yeah, we're picking him up along the way," I say and avert my gaze from my dead wife's eyes. "Where's your brother?"

"I don't know," Dillon replies.

"Well go get him and eat up. I'm gonna pack the truck."

It is still dark out, so I grab the flashlight and my jacket and step out into the brisk October air. When I reach the shed, I flick on the light and grab the guns, shells, decoys, and duck calls to put in the bag. Once I have everything, I throw the bag in the back of the truck. The air feels a little wet, so I decide to throw the

camper top on just in case. I go to check on Sadie, our old black lab. She jumps as I approach her pen.

“Down, girl,” I say, and she obeys. I open the door to her cage. “Truck.” She bolts from the pen and bounds into the back of the truck. “Good girl.” I swear that dog will outlive us all.

I double-check the inventory of the truck bed. Satisfied, I walk back into the house and ask the boys if they are ready. Mason smiles at me, his tongue slightly pushed through the gap where his two front teeth should be. Dillon looks less enthusiastic, but he grabs my thermos, the sack of sandwiches, and the six-pack of beer before heading out the door.

My truck only has two seats up front, so the boys sit in the bed with the gear. Mason tries to sit on the right side, but that’s Dillon’s favorite spot. I don’t know what the fuckin’ difference is, and I tell them to stop bickering before I hit ‘em.

We swing by my brother’s house before heading out. The son-of-a-gun comes stumbling out, coat half-hanging off his shoulder. He walks to the back of the truck. I hear him open the trunk.

“Mornin’ boys,” he says and throws his gear into the bed. He opens the passenger door and climbs in.

“It’s fuckin’ cold,” he growls. I can smell the whiskey on his breath.

“It’s October.”

He grunts, and we drive in silence the rest of the way.

The bluish tint of early morning helps light our way to our favorite hunting spot. Ken and I have been coming here since when we were kids. Dad always used to take us hunting with him, from about the time I was Mason’s age. As the oldest, Ken always got to take the first shot, but I was the sharp-shooter. In those days, hunting wasn’t just for sport. We hunted to eat. Dad taught us all he knew, then sat back and drank his sorrows while Ken and I provided for the five of us—my parents, brother, younger sister, and I. When we got game, Dad gave us a beer. If we came back empty-handed, he drank double and beat us until he forgot the hunger pains in his stomach.

The blind from our childhood remained where it had always been, but I moved to the other side of the state after marrying Heather, and Ken never left home. He maintained the blind all these years. The boys and I always used to visit during hunting season, but I haven't brought them out here since their mother's death.

We sit for an hour before we see a flock glide on the water. I practically have to hold Mason down because he is bouncing so much.

"Let's wait for them to get a bit closer," I whisper to the boys. Mason nods his head frantically while Dillon looks at the birds in silence. "You're the oldest Dil, you'll take the first shot."

He doesn't respond.

The flock drifts within shooting range. I creep toward Dillon and shift my body, crouching behind him and whispering advice into his ear.

"Gun ready?" Dillon nods. "Ok, take aim. See the straggler? Shoot one in his direction to send the others flying, then we'll get the mallard."

He doesn't respond, doesn't move.

"Dil?" I notice the gun is shaking. "Dil, steady your aim. Shoot toward the straggler."

"I can't," he whispers.

"What?"

"I can't do it, Dad," his voice is shaking. Dillon has always been a softy, but he's killed before. What the hell is his problem?

I grip his shoulder and give it a tight squeeze. "Listen to me," I whisper in his ear, "You're going to shoot at the straggler. It's not a big deal. You probably won't even kill it."

He flinches.

“They’re gettin’ away, Wayne,” Ken says, “Just let me shoot.”

“Shut up. He can do it.” I squeeze his shoulder harder. “You gotta be strong, Dil. Steady your gun. You’re stronger than the fucking bird. Kill it.”

Dillon aims. Doesn’t shoot.

“Kill it,” I growl.

Nothing.

“Kill the fucking bird,” I yell. The flock flies. No shots are fired.

We drive in silence. I left the blind without grabbing a thing. Dillon looked at his shoes on the walk back to the car. Mason looked at his brother, but, for once, kept his mouth shut. That’s not a skill he learned from me.

Heather was the patient one, something I loved about her. I wonder if she would’ve agreed with my decision to move back to Grand Coulee. She would have understood there was nothing left for me in Bellingham, not without her there. I didn’t even want to live there, but she had a career set up after we graduated college. Grand Coulee had nothing to offer her. So the small-town boy moved to the big city with big ambitions. Yeah, right. I worked as a mechanic. She was a nurse practitioner. Her long hours left me in charge of the boys most of the time, but she was always the better parent. Always patient, always gentle. She knew which discipline would work, when to be strict and when to let them off the hook. She would’ve taken the boys to church. Now, those decisions are up to me.

Heather wasn’t even supposed to be home that afternoon. She had left work early because she wasn’t feeling well. The robber had a pocket knife and panicked when he saw her. Stabbed her three times. Dillon and Mason found her when they got home from school. Motherfucker was put away for life. I quit my job and moved me and the boys away from the city within two weeks.

“Pull over,” Ken says, bringing me back from my memories.

“Why?” I say and keep driving.

“Just pull over, damn it.”

I steer the truck onto the right shoulder. I have barely stopped before Ken opens the door and hops out, sort of skipping as he hits the ground. He runs toward the back of the truck. I hear the tailgate open.

“Hand me my gun. Come on, Sadie,” he says, rustling around before slamming the tailgate shut.

Through the passenger window, I see Ken high-kneeing through the brush, Sadie trailing behind. I open my door, stand up on the running board, and yell, “What the fuck are you doing?”

He doesn’t even turn around. I see him dive down into the thicket. I get back into the truck and wait. About thirty seconds pass. Two shots fire. Birds fly out of the brush. Silence.

I see my brother jump up with his arms in the air and hoot. Sadie runs about twenty feet ahead of him and picks something up in her jaws. She runs back to my brother, the shape flopping around as she moves. Ken grabs it and comes trudging back. As he approaches the truck, I realize the dangling form he is carrying is a rabbit. He stands at the passenger window with a stupid grin on his face, holding the rabbit up by its hind legs. It is limp and lifeless, blood on its fur, its mouth hanging slightly open. Marble-black eyes staring at me.

I give Ken a thumbs-up. He turns, walks to the trunk, and opens it.

“I shot the fuckin’ Easter bunny,” he slurs. I hear the thump of the dead rabbit’s body as it lands on the bed of the truck. Dillon starts screaming. Ken laughs.

We have rabbit stew for dinner that night, in silence. Sadie rests under the table, hoping to catch scraps. Neither of the boys touch their bowls, but stare at them blankly.

“You ain’t gettin’ anything else,” I warn them.

They both look at me, then at each other. Mason stares back down at the orangeish-brown concoction and hesitantly digs in. He is shoveling food into his mouth in seconds. I smile at him and then glare at Dillon. “You better eat your damn food.” I motion at the bowl with my spoon.

Dillon looks at the bowl and scrunches his nose. “I’m just gonna go to bed.” He gets off his chair and begins to walk away.

“Oh no you don’t,” I stand and walk over to block his path. “You ain’t goin’ nowhere until you finish your goddamn food.”

“I don’t wanna,” he says, trying to push past me. I put my hand on his chest and give him a shove back. He stumbles and almost falls.

“Listen to your dad, Dil,” my brother slurs.

“Shut up, Ken,” I can feel my heart racing and my face heat—maybe from the whiskey, mostly from my temper. “You watch your tone with me. Now, sit your ass down and eat the fuckin’ stew, or I will beat you until everyone else has finished their meal.”

Fear. That’s what I see on the boy’s face. Not her eyes anymore, just his own terror-stricken gaze. They become a little watery, but he blinks before the tears can fall.

Why doesn’t this hurt me?

Dillon’s faced turns sour again. He turns on his heels and stomps toward the table. “Mom wouldn’t have made me eat,” he mumbles.

I snap. My hand catches his bony arm and clenches it hard. I pull my shoulder back and swing him into the wall. His body makes a nasty thud before sliding down into a slump on the floor. Dillon groans. Sadie starts barking. I hover over his body and look into his deep blue eyes. I bend over, squeeze his face with my left hand, raise the right, and SMACK! His face slumps to the right. Sadie’s still barking. Again. Squeeze, raise, swing, SMACK! BARK! When I grab his face again, I can already see a purple bruise forming on his cheek. I pause with my hand still in the air. Her blue eyes gaze up at me, full of tears, full of pain, full of fear. They are the eyes in my nightmares.

“Please stop,” Dillon moves his lips, but it is her voice crying out to me.

I lose all feeling, all rage. I release Dillon’s face and step away. I look around the room—Sadie is cowering under the table, Mason is crying, and Ken looks as if he’s seen a ghost. I don’t look at Dillon directly, but through the corner of my eye.

“Go get some ice and go to bed.” He scampers into the kitchen, comes out with a bag of peas, and runs down the hallway. I hear the door slam and return to my spot at the table. Mason is still sniffing, but he stares down at his food. Ken stares at me as I slowly eat my stew.

“Wayne.” I look up at him. He shifts his eyes uncomfortably, not completely meeting my gaze. “What would Heather have done?”

The familiar sting of tears threatens my eyes. I look back down at my stew.

“Heather would have gone to church.”

WORD GAMES

SOPHIE PANETTI

It starts as a seed:
a small pinprick that
grows into a buzzing bee in my bonnet.
My fingers scramble for purchase
on slippery keys
or cramp from clutching a pen too tight
between pointer and middle fingers.
And then a poem blooms
onto the paper:
flowered, streaked with the color of my words
(they are purple, blue, red, yellow,
they are electric, they are vibrant,
they are moving too fast).
I stretch and reach for them,
try to grasp them between my fingers
before they run away.
But they are elusive. They slip away
into the depths of my brain
and kindle fires there.
They rub their hands in glee at their escape,
play games with each other,
wait until I'm one inch from sleep
to emerge and dance little taunting dances.
They thumb their noses at me and giggle

until I snake a hook around them
and yank them back out,
throw them onto the paper
and tie them down in tangled sentences
until they sigh at me and behave themselves
because they know
I won the game this time.

BLACK OUT

HOLLI STEINMETZ

My third attempt to fit the key in the lock allowed us access to our apartment. Sophie collapsed on the living room couch and moaned something about work the next morning. I was not interested. She was the dumbass with the morning shift and the one who suggested going to the party in the first place. I threw a blanket over her and made sure there was a trash can next to the sofa. God knows I didn't need another one of her puking episodes to further stain the shitty carpet. I'd had my fair share of accidents, but I was decent enough to try to find the bathroom.

Whenever Sophie's drunk she likes to sleep in my room, but she snores like my dad's bulldog. So this time I made sure to lock my door. The only event on my schedule for the next day was my painting class. I wasn't fond of any of my other classes, except yoga and sculpture, but those were Tuesday/Thursday things.

My dad works at the university, so I don't have to pay tuition. I'm the lucky daughter of a janitor. I can fuck around as much as I want, and all the school can do is send my parents e-mails when I fail classes. My mom is too busy with her new gallery in New York to give a shit about what I do here. Her talent and her eyebrows are the only things she's ever passed on to me. The child support checks stopped coming a few years back, but she sends cash on my birthdays and Christmas. Sometimes I'm even lucky enough to get a card.

Where my mom lacks, my dad tries to fill in. He's not the strict type—more like the type to bribe me into doing better. Expensive acrylic sets, gift cards to

Applebee's, and a couple twenty-dollar bills whenever I come by the house. It's nice when I'm running low, but it doesn't make up for much. He brings in extra cash by selling the pot he grows in the basement. His usual clients are mostly college kids stupid enough to think they're getting a good deal. The rest of his money is spent on booze. He's black-out drunk whenever he's not working and is always going on about how his life could be much better. Like father like daughter, I suppose. Two big reasons why my mom didn't stick around.

The five shots of Jack from the party were starting to wear off. As I kicked off my flats and straddled the stool in front of my easel, I rummaged through the pile of acrylic paints on my dresser to find the remote. My TV screen brought me back to the Bob Ross episode I hadn't been able to finish earlier in the day.

"...why don't we put an Almighty mountain in right here?"

I picked at the callouses on my hand and stared at the half-finished canvas for longer than I wanted to. Sophie moaned loudly from the living room and threw up a couple times. I clicked the volume higher on my TV and double-checked my lock.

I would've gotten an apartment by myself, but my hours working at the art building got cut. That left me with Sophie, a rich-as-all-hell only child, desperate for something. Love, friends, whatever. I didn't care. She covered my rent when I needed it, so I figured she wasn't half bad.

My head hurt more the longer I stared at the canvas. The original assignment had been a self-portrait. Cliché and expected, but harder than I had originally thought. After finding some ibuprofen, I reached for the fifth of Crown I hid in the bottom drawer of my dresser—if Sophie would've known about it, it would have gone missing. That's for damn sure.

"...and now let's make a happy little tree—there he is."

One of the pills caught in my throat, and most of the whiskey I was washing it down with ended up on my shirt. I took another drink to get rid of the weird chalky taste. I hadn't done laundry in a couple of weeks, so I didn't have any clean shirts handy. I tried to ignore it, but the more I stared at the unfinished painting the more I could feel the wet fabric sticking to my skin. Nothing was working in the painting and I knew it. It was already on a path to looking just like everyone else's.

I picked through the mountain of paint tubes on my dresser. Everything was too flashy, too colorful. There was grey, but I hadn't screwed the cap on right and it was all dried up. A large tube of black paint caught my eye, and I emptied a pile of it onto my palette. Side to side, I blacked out my face. Paint dripped onto my jeans and the newspaper I'd laid over the floor.

"...this is your world. You can make anything happen."

Nothing was happening. That was just it. I left myself with a dripping, black portrait. After taking another liberal swig, I emptied the remaining contents of the bottle over the top of the canvas and crawled into bed.

DORMANT

HANNAH JARVIS

Here it is, the truth:
I am afraid that our two
futures
are not meant to overlap.
Some days we are one,
two faces laughing in the glow of the moon,
mocking the gods who tried to keep us
apart for so long.
But other days you are the sun,
and I become the moon;
we revolve around entirely
different things.

Change is a beautiful creature,
lurking in fine lines,
tiptoeing in the strands of your
bitter root hair,
and yet it kills.
The person I was during our summers of
endless Bliss and
evenings spent dancing in the
Golden Twilight
is already a casualty.
Can I afford to lose whomever Change
decides to take next?
I worry my muse has already fallen prey.

I am so filled with ugly that I
can write nothing but
ugly.

In my fear, the only Hope
I can rope onto is the
air of your voice.
You speak as if you can see the
Golden Twilight
within me still,
and I begin to believe
perhaps
it has not been extinguished yet.

Perhaps I am only dormant.

MY EYES ARE UP HERE

SARAI DÁVILA

Training Bra:

“When they [breasts] are huge, you become very self-conscious...I’ve learned something though, through my years of pondering and pontificating, and that is: men love them, and I love that.”

— Drew Barrymore

The first documented appearance of a disdainful side-eye glance popped up after a Hollywood party in Sophia Loren’s honor. The stunning Italian actress was being celebrated for her catapult to fame in the course of a few years. But what everyone remembers from that evening is the snapshot of Sophia taking a sidelong look into the impressively ill-contained cleavage of Jayne Mansfield, the buxom blonde of a slightly less classy fame. The look on her face captures the moment perfectly—completely appalled and utterly unamused, with a tinge of fear in her eyes, as though the breasts might eat her. I found the picture in a coffee table book of old Hollywood actresses that my mother all but worshipped. Their

classiness, she always reminded me, was something that modern Hollywood was unable to replicate.

As a child, the concept of decorum was slightly lost on me. All I knew of the world was what my parents presented to me and what I gathered from my limited exposure to television and music made after 1987. At six years old, my assumption was that the pretty lady was jealous of the other pretty lady's boobs, or, as I called them, boobies. What other reason could she have for not wanting that type of cleavage practically spilling onto her plate? It seemed that everybody else liked her boobies, though. In other pictures, I noticed man after man staring purposefully down into the cavern of her cleavage. So, I thought, that must be what men want.

I was in fourth grade when I first started wearing a training bra. The same kind every girl wears at first: one piece of rectangular fabric not quite stretching and not quite fitting across an almost barren chest, usually with some sort of lace or sparkly edging to create the illusion of femininity. I didn't have breasts to fill it out, of course. The first tiny whisper of "buds" had sprouted on my chest, calling for the action of this almost useless training apparatus. Without one you could see the hint of a nipple through my clothing, but with it my back felt itchy. Nonetheless, I was relentlessly proud of the flimsy article. And what girl wasn't, really? Womanhood was finally on the horizon, and breasts were more than a far-off promise from my mother.

Wearing a training bra was the beginning of breast awareness. Not just for myself, but for everyone around me it would seem. Everybody was suddenly, painfully and awkwardly aware of their abrupt appearance. Of course, we had known our breasts would crop up at some point, but somehow we were still excited and scared when they did. Girls who had been flat as boards before summer were coming back to class with little mosquito bites hiding under their shirts. Some hid them with a self-conscious rounding of their shoulders, while others proudly boasted by displaying their front for the world to see. Boys who I'm sure had never even uttered the word "boob" before were suddenly fascinated by their appearance. They were acting exactly like the men in the photographs of Jayne Mansfield. Staring purposefully at the girls who had been blessed to be well-developed before the rest of us, bumping into them on "accident" during games of kickball, snapping bra straps while smirking—even the frequency of hugging grew exponentially with the appearance of breasts.

My initial assumption about breasts had proved to be correct.

A-Cup:

“Even though I knew she needed to get something off her chest, I was hoping it wasn’t her big, beautiful breasts.”

“I love women’s breasts. I love how they don’t blink when I stare at them.”
—Jarod Kintz

In a matter of months, I started wearing more than the barest of training bras and was proud of my blossoming curves. My bra was more than a soft fabric shelf; now there were little triangle cups to house my growing breasts. I felt like a woman, and I knew other people were finally taking notice. All around me girls were outgrowing their original bras and replacing them with real ones. I was not the only one to see that. One day during class, after math but before reading time, two or three boys whose names escape me began lining up the girls. One by one they put us into a line while I stood in confusion, waiting to be herded. I finally piped up, asking what was happening. A hushed and falsely cool voice whispered to me:

“They’re putting us in order by the size of our boobs.”

Instead of being embarrassed like most of the girls were, I proudly stood, chest out, waiting to be placed if not near the top of the food chain then somewhere in the middle. My surprise must have been palpable (although I’m sure I tried to hide it) when I was placed second to last in the line. My boobs were the second smallest in the entire class. It had taken an outsider’s gaze to determine the actual size of my breasts, because my biased view had inflated them to wildly exaggerated dimensions. I had been enamored by my delusional body image, and the stark reality was that I had tiny pinpricks of breasts, light little ladies that were no more than a wrinkle in my t-shirt. The realization slapped me with embarrassment while the boys ogled Heather Gunter of the post-training bra glory. She had been placed at the front of the line.

For some odd reason, not a single one of us protested this judgment; we were too busy pushing our chests out in an attempt to seem shapely beyond our years.

There are two different designs for champagne glasses. One, the flute, is more

popular today. The classic lines of the tall glass generally do not bring to mind any particular part of the female anatomy, unlike the older design of the coupe glass. This archaic version of the champagne glass is wider, more rounded, and often likened to the shape of a breast. Legend has it that Marie Antoinette had the glass modeled after her left breast so that everybody in her court would celebrate her with each sip. Her curves were immortalized in the soft and sensual shape of a glass that rested perfectly in the hand of every lush alike. Her form would be lauded for years to come by people who didn't even know they were sipping their perfectly aged Chardonnay from Marie's breast.

The legend has been debunked in modern times. Although it raises the question of how it got started. How did a glass, whose shape mildly echoed a female form, become attributed to a woman of that fame? Were her breasts so glorious, so completely legendary, that they deserved to be infamous until the end of time? Did women in her court envy her and her delicate décolletage, or was it the men who sang praises of her two perfect examples of God's gift to them? Were they all in awe of the hourglass shape that surely made her the talk of the court? Which one of the men she canoodled with started the first whisperings that Marie had immortalized her chest for the world to enjoy?

One can rightly assume that men are infinitely obsessed with breasts—and who can really blame them? In particular though, they're interested in the perfect set of breasts—big, perfectly perky, and with the inability to talk back—a trait that women do not often share with their mammary appendages.

B-Cup:

“Scientists now believe that the primary biological function of breasts is to make males stupid.”
—Dave Barry

“A woman without breasts is like a bed without pillows.”
—Anatole French

High school blessed me with B cups, finally. To my delight, they refused to stop growing—B's, to C's, to D's. However, to my frustration, they never felt big enough. Never felt like womanly curves. Never felt like they were beautiful and desirable enough for men to look at them the way I saw them look at other women's. I wanted that. I wanted the palpable desire that emanated from a man when he looked at a woman who had breasts that were more perfectly formed

than my own.

But the first time I realized someone had noticed me, I wasn't sure how to react.

I was on my way to a football game, wearing a t-shirt that hardly accentuated my still awkward body. I was stopped in my tracks by a low voice whistling at me. I turned to look my admirer in the eye and caught him starting at my feet and making his way to a comfy stop at my breasts.

“Damn,” he said with a cheeky grin. I looked at him with surprise and scurried away, unsure of the strange power that was built into my body. I thought that maybe, finally, I was sexy.

We were in a car parked at the trailhead at the bottom of a mountain. He was kissing me with a question, probing me persistently, each sloppy movement of his lips taking control and leaving me behind. His hands started on my waist, moving down to my hips before starting back up again, this time not stopping at my waist. They trailed upward clumsily, meeting my timidly disapproving hands as they went. He stopped in frustration, whining about his predicament and pushing me to let him continue. My voice was soft in both volume and tone, trailing off at the end and wisping away, turning statement into question. That was enough to encourage him to insist. The words kept coming and the kisses came too, leaving me to keep saying “no” with a courage that seemed to dissipate with each weak declaration of the word. Eventually, I clammed up and held my tongue and let him slip my shirt over my head when he said, “They're the best thing about you. They're the nicest ones I've ever seen. What do you think a girlfriend is for?”

As I sat in my bed after being dropped off that night, I thought that perhaps he was right—maybe that's exactly what I was here for.

“Oh I just love them. I love them so much I'm going to name them! Maria, and Señora Cruz,” the next guy I dated said with a laugh and almost sincere emotion as he dropped me off that night after our date. He had taken a mission trip to Mexico with our church, hence the names.

C-Cup:

“B is for breasts, of which women have two; once prized for the function, and now for the view.”
—Robert Paul Smith

“How stupid that all I have to do is grow two squishy lumps and suddenly I’m man’s best friend.”
—Christine Heppermann

“You know what I’m talking about, when you do that thing with boys?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Hannah! What thing do I do with boys?”

“It’s a thing you do! It’s why they always like you.”

My curiosity was piqued. “What is it that I do that makes boys like me?”

“It’s when you lean your body across theirs to grab something, or to say hello, and you just casually press your boobs against them. Well, press is the wrong word. You just, gently rest them against boys. You do it all the time. The gentle boob rest. How are you unaware of this? We all thought it was a strategy.” She looked at our other roommate, who nodded in agreement.

I looked to the only boy in the room for backup, and he threw his hands up in surrender.

“Sorry sweetie. Either you’re shoving your boobs at me when we hug or your back is just naturally arched.”

I couldn’t have named it, and I hadn’t done it consciously, but I knew what I was doing. I always knew what I was doing—giving the world exactly what they wanted.

I lifted the swimsuit top, handling the cups, and realized they would cover almost none of my more-than-ample breasts. A friend nearby laughed, commenting with an almost identical thought to my own. I picked the top up anyway, holding it to

my body and liking the way it accentuated everything and hid nothing.

I purchased it and wore it all summer, noting with satisfaction the dropped jaws. I went on more dates that summer than any summer before, and I got more sidelong glances of disapproval from mothers to accompany them. The men flocked, the women scattered, and none of them were quite sure how to be friends with someone who solicited herself in that way. But I let my false confidence remain, perched at the top of a seemingly insurmountable place that I had let people build up around me, a place that I now contributed to.

D-Cup:

“Breasts and bottoms look boringly alike. Faces, though, can be quite different and a damn sight more interesting!”

—Lee Remick

He had been a friend, at first. Then, fleetingly, a lover. It had all been a bit much for him, the idea of dating and of loving and of being loved. So he left rather quickly. In that passing moment with him, there was still enough time to share a kiss or two, and the first time stood out like a single bright match amidst all of the darkness. We were in the middle of a conversation, right on that precipice where the chemistry in the air changes and you know that either everything is about to change or the moment will fall away, never to be seen again. He had his listening eyes on, and I could see each word landing. The words mattered to him. And then, right in the perfect pause, he reached out and landed exactly where he was supposed to. Right on my lips, as gentle as could be. In that moment, I was awake like I had never been before. I felt more love in that kiss than I had felt from any other man. After just a few minutes, he pulled back and nestled next to me to hear the rest of the story. No fanfare, no insistent hands, no prolonged animal kissing on his couch or in his car. I couldn't help my confusion; he wanted to listen again. That was when I realized that he loved my words more than my body.

I wanted to press him, to ask him questions. But I thought late into the night, asking myself questions for once instead of asking someone else. Why had their opinions ruled my life for so long?

Two a.m. excursions always lead to ridiculous decisions and potentially disastrous

situations, which is why the lack of mishaps on our skinny-dipping adventure surprised us. Three girls in a dark canyon without anybody to protect them, naked in more ways than one to the world, and vulnerable in all senses of the word—the stuff of urban legends and horror stories. But we not only survived—we enjoyed ourselves. As we climbed back onto shore, dripping and suddenly aware of just how naked we were, a thought popped out of someone’s mouth.

“You know what? Boys never have to wear shirts. It’s two a.m. I’m not putting this damn thing back on.” She didn’t. The rest of us followed suit. Three girls, topless in a moving vehicle, making our way back into civilization. We blasted music, screaming at the top of our lungs and opening the windows to feel the breeze wick water away from our bodies. I glanced up and saw a sunroof above me, cracked open just enough to let air in. I stood without thinking, opening it to the sky and stepping up and out of it, letting my arms be held by the wind. The entire world became a blur and I laughed involuntarily, my barbaric yawp echoing through the walls of ancient stone. I was one with the wind and one with the night sky. I was natural, I was free, I was touching on prehistoric instinct. Nobody could stop me, and nobody wanted to. And best of all, nobody could see me—no voyeuristic man or peeping tom could catch a glimpse of my state. I was exposed, breasts to the world, and they were finally just for me.

AS CHILDREN

NICHOLAS BROWN

*One last cigarette, I tell him.
One last cigarette, he agrees.*

All the engines chortle back to driveways.
Windshield wipers struggle to smudge the glass.

*Remember when we were kids? I ask.
Sure. Sure, I remember when we were kids.*

A light soundless drizzle.
A bud sizzles in a puddle.
The folds of darkness groan.
The leaves heave back.

*I've been drunk for three weeks.
I've been high for two, he chuckles.*

A clearing of the throat.
A rearrangement of the greasy ponytail.
The grey drench of morning ebbing in early
desert raindrops.

*Winter won't last long this year.
The frost will stay longer than you, he says.*

A shuffle of the feet.
A resigned sigh.
The jaw yawns,
bobs back into his head.

*We used to play hide-n-seek on this street.
And lie in the road after. Remember?
How warm the asphalt stayed?*

ICARAS

CASEY VARECKA

The day Wallace Perkins decided to take his sixty-seven meter plunge from the highest point of the Golden Gate Bridge should not have been notable. The weather was mild, and traffic moved at a snail's pace. People had jumped before, and people would jump again. The breeze encouraged their actions forward. There would be no news article, lengthy or otherwise, detailing the sadness and horror experienced by onlookers. There were no onlookers. The truth was that Wallace picked one of the few peculiar locations in the world where suicide is commonplace. The only jumpers that made the news anymore were the ones that survived, and Wallace did not plan on surviving. The lack of community, media, and even individual interest was the very reason Wallace picked that spot to feel the aches of life for the last time. While living, he made sure never to cause a fuss, and he wasn't going to start when he was dead. An uninterrupted and lonely death was the only kind that felt right to him.

Wallace looked behind him at the bustling traffic, the sounds of impatient commuters demanding their right to move forward drifting to his ears. He wondered how many of them traveled this commute every day. He wondered how many of them had seen people standing in the position he was in, and he wondered how many of them could see him now. It took something extraordinary to catch the ever-shortening attention span of the world around him, and suicide was just not that. Wallace was just not that.

The dark sky seemed fitting to Wallace. It reminded him of the reasons he was there. His mind wandered to his neglectful parents, whom he hadn't talked to in over a year. He thought about the people in his life. Yes, Wallace had coworkers and acquaintances, people he could make small talk with if they happened to be stuck in the same room, but he didn't have anyone he could call his friend. It made him wonder the last time he had been happy. It was five years ago. Wallace was on a date with a girl named Katrina. She drank black coffee with no cream or sugar and talked to him about when she was nine and kicked a kid in the shins for making fun of her glasses. Wallace hated the bitterness and muddy aftertaste coffee left, and the added cream and sugar barely helped, but he drank a large

cup of it that day, adamant to connect with Katrina. It was the only date they ever had because Wallace was too nervous to contact her, and she didn't feel the need to contact him.

The steady breeze was shattered by a sudden gust, snapping him back into the moment and forcing him off-balance. Wallace stuttered forward an inch but caught himself without falling. Then, he laughed at the irony of his compulsive need to steady his balance. Then, he jumped.

Of all the things Wallace thought about leading up to these events, the feel of the wind smacking against his face at free fall was not one of them. As he plummeted down— headfirst to ensure his death— he couldn't help but think of the videos he had seen of skydivers soaring through the winds as if they owned the sky. Wallace always wanted to go skydiving, and he supposed this was as close as he would ever get, so he took advantage of his time in the sky. Wallace contorted his body, mimicking what he had seen in videos and movies. He spun to the water below in gentle diving circles. The wind tore at his eyes, but he fought to keep them open. Wallace did not want the darkness behind his eyelids to be the last thing he saw. He would see the world spinning around him, funneling him into the void that would follow. Wallace faced the crashing waves, amused at his aerobatics, but no less determined to embrace his end.

A funny thing happened. Wallace did not meet his end. The waves ceased their crashing below him, and the free fall winds stopped. All wind stopped. Everything was still. The sun peeked out from behind the clouds. He looked around to see what had caught him, although he hadn't felt his legs snag or his body smack. Upon tilting his head back, his body rotated in the air. His feet reoriented with the bay water below. It was then that Wallace realized he wasn't caught on anything but was, in fact, levitating.

Wallace looked up at the bridge. He wasn't far from the traffic above, and he noticed that the blaring of the horns had settled. Finding this strange, he decided to investigate the sudden peace of the highway. First, he had to learn how to navigate his newfound gift. Wallace wiggled his legs, thinking he could maybe swim through the air. He tried the different strokes he was shown as a child before his mother decided he was a lost cause. He tried to think of things that might make him move. *Up. Go. Ascend.* None of it worked. Finally, he pushed down with his legs, the way he remembered watching Peter Pan do a thousand times every weekend as a child. Wallace propelled upward, farther than he meant to go, and had to lean back to stop himself. He curved backwards, making large loops in the

air like a one-man airshow.

Steadying himself yet again, Wallace looked onto the bridge and saw that the angry commuters had all gotten out of their cars and come to the edge of the bridge; however, they were not angry anymore. Rather, they seemed ecstatic. They looked out at him, plastered with bewildered faces, some of them jumping above the others to get a better look at him or perhaps, Wallace imagined, trying to imitate his miracle. He gave them a wave, and an eruption of cheers echoed throughout the bay. The sun shone bright, warming his face and making Wallace feel like a shimmering god. He couldn't help but let a feeling of accomplishment overtake him and, subsequently, smiled for the first time in over two weeks.

Wallace wondered what had stopped him in the past from discovering this power and the euphoric sense of life it filled within him. It's true that he had never attempted to jump from such a large height before; however, he did recall a time when he was seven years old and jumped off the roof of his one-story house, breaking his leg. Flight was the end goal back then, and yet it wasn't until he had given up on such dreams (and everything else in his life) that he truly unlocked his inhuman potential. How different life would have been, Wallace imagined, if only he had discovered this gift sooner. The boys in school would certainly have had a harder time kicking him into the dirt when they found their target had flown to the roof. Wallace imagined, if such were the case, they might not have even wanted to hurt him. Perhaps they would react like the people on the bridge. The rage and hate that filled them would be overtaken by the joy and magnificence his flight brought.

The commuters' excitement would not let up, and Wallace was not about to pass on the opportunity to feel their praise. He repositioned his body with his head pointed just above the crowd. Like a needle carefully navigating its way through thread, Wallace weaved in and out and all around the support ropes. The crowd roared below him, flashing photographs and taking videos. Wallace imagined the headlines the next day: *Incredible Man with Incredible Power Wows Crowd*; *Man One-Ups Wright Brothers with Spectacular Display*; *Flying Man Soars into the Hearts of the People*. He imagined the videos that would be shown and the celebrity status he would obtain. It was impossible for him to contain the excitement of every passing thought.

This crowd would not be the only ones to benefit. Wallace made a determined jolt toward the city, finding that it was becoming easier and easier to control his speed and movement. Wallace knew that this was the freedom birds must feel

on a daily basis. Their songs were more than just forms of communication; they were praises to the heavens for the gift they knew only they possessed. He almost felt guilty for intruding, like he had snuck his way into an exclusive club; however, he imagined the birds would be happy that another had discovered their secret, and the euphoria of flight refused to let his guilt take hold.

The buildings seemed so much larger from his vantage point among their upper levels. As a street dweller, he rarely gazed above him at their staggering height; they were just the shapeless shop fronts and businesses that lined his walk. Now that he was among their height and could look down at the streets and sidewalks, he appreciated their stature. It was as if the architects and the city planners built the perfect playground, working from the ground up to create a jungle gym of glass and metal for him to fly through. The twists, turns, and alleyways seemed too perfect to be coincidence. Wallace ran his hands along the sides of buildings, feeling different textures and materials, learning the grooves of each one, learning the city like he never had before.

People waved from office buildings and the streets below. They were all happy to see him, making his chest tight with a sense of pride. All these people, this whole experience, made him feel ways he hadn't felt in years. He hadn't felt this way since Katrina. A new sense of purpose filled Wallace, and he took off down the streets to find the place that held this memory.

Wallace flew low in the streets, reading street signs, and was surprised to find the coffee shop after only a few turns. It was painted red with big bay windows that revealed the patrons inside. He was astonished; it looked the same as it had that day five years ago. Even more astonishing was that Katrina sat just inside. She looked out to Wallace, straightening up suddenly and covering her mouth. Katrina ran to the window, placing her hands on the glass like a child at a zoo. Wallace flew slowly toward the window, stretching his hands to meet hers on the opposite side of the glass. As his fingertips touched the pane, Wallace felt a sense of relief flow throughout his body. All of his muscles relaxed. Knots that had set into his back and shoulders long ago became loose. Wallace's eyes tightened in a crinkly smile as he looked at Katrina's beauty. She seemed to breathe in a heavy sigh from the other side of the glass, though he could not hear her. Katrina moved her head slightly closer to make sure Wallace was paying attention and mouthed, "I miss you." Wallace's chest seemed to catch fire with the heat from her words. Lights danced in his eyes, and the sun seemed to shine even brighter. Wallace gave Katrina a final smile and waved good-bye.

Rocketing upwards, Wallace flew away from the coffee shop and above the city. As he looked down on the man-made industrial shrine, he realized that what seemed so large before now seemed small and insignificant. He looked up and the sky expanded in all directions. He could see no end because there was no end. The higher Wallace flew, the greater his freedom was. Wallace soared through the clouds, feeling the precipitation baptize his body. He amused himself with childish thoughts of sitting on the top of a cloud or even gathering one up like cotton candy to eat.

Wallace looked down through the clouds and realized he was above his childhood home. The sun shone bright through the spotted sky and lit up the cul-de-sac, making everything around it grey and dull. He had to get closer, and as he flew lower in the sky, forgotten images rushed back to him. His old swing set stood sturdy in the backyard. The swings pulsed with life as they moved back and forth in the breeze. Wallace's lawn was neatly mowed, as his father always kept it, and flowers lined the house thanks to his mother's determination. The flowers were bright and beautiful, different colors melting together like a painting, too perfect for reality. The house itself looked better than Wallace could ever seem to remember. The roof had new shingles, the duct-tape window from when his father broke the glass in a burst of anger had been replaced, and the rest of the windows were scrubbed clean. Even the driveway was missing some of the familiar pock-marks it had formed over the years. If it had not been for its location, Wallace may not have recognized his childhood home, but now he couldn't help but smile and giggle at the beauty of it.

His parents emerged from the front door, and Wallace flew lower, hovering at the end of the driveway. His parents walked slowly toward him, using each other for support. They had bewildered and excited looks on their faces. His father's perpetual five o'clock shadow had been shaved, leaving him with only the Hulk Hogan-like mustache Wallace remembered him having once as a kid. His father would do wrestling poses while Wallace laughed himself to tears. This was when Wallace was still young, before he proved to be not entirely interested in sports, before his father grew distant, and before his father started drinking.

Wallace's mother looked younger than he would expect. When he had last seen her, years of smoking had yellowed her teeth and sagged the skin under her sunken eyes, but she was different now. She had formed wrinkles that didn't belong to her; deep lines around her mouth from laughing and smiling and crow's feet from making those smiles mean something. It was a mother he never knew; yet she was instantly recognizable. Wallace suddenly had flashes of memories that

never happened, his mother making a cake from scratch for him on his birthday, attending his chess tournaments in high school, taking him to the zoo and holding him high so he could see the lions. In these memories, she smiled and laughed and cheered his name and hugged him tightly, and it brought tears to Wallace's eyes just looking at her now. In this new reality, she never forgot to pick him up from school, she never gambled his Christmas money away, and she never gave him the scar just above his eye. It was the one she had told the doctors he got from falling off the arm of a chair and hitting his head on the brick fireplace, but had really come from her throwing him into that fireplace when he had interrupted her on the phone.

His parents approached him. Wallace didn't know what to expect. He hadn't spoken to them in years, but he could tell from the tears swelling in their eyes that they were grateful he had arrived, and, suddenly, he too was grateful he stopped by. They looked Wallace up and down, and his mother gasped inward, trying to keep herself from bawling while his father blotted at his eyes with an old handkerchief, giving Wallace an approving nod. Nothing had to be said; somehow Wallace knew they were proud. All the things of the past were just that now: in the past. At this moment, his parents were proud of him; they were happy, he was happy, and he was proud of himself. All the doubt and fear his family had distilled in him years before seemed not to matter any longer.

Still, the sun grew even brighter in the sky. He looked toward it and realized that it did not offend his eyes. He wondered if being told not to look at the sun was always just a myth. Wallace wondered if he and everyone else were told this only because they could not handle the warmth it truly brought. He wondered if birds were able to look at the sun like he could because they too discovered the secret of flight. With these thoughts, he gave his parents a final nod, and they waved good-bye as he flew back into the sky.

Wallace knew that the sun's light was safe as he flew higher and higher, and he felt more and more like he was at a home he had long been separated from. It didn't matter what the people below knew anymore. It didn't matter what people thought of him. It didn't matter that his parents had died long ago or that they never showed him the love he craved. It didn't matter that his quiet demeanor prevented him from ever having any real friendships. It didn't matter that the love he held for Katrina was based in dreams, and it didn't matter that he jumped off that bridge without even leaving a note to explain to his landlord why he would be missing rent. All that mattered was the warmth of the sunlight.

ASH AND EMBER

SOPHIE PANETTI

Last night I dreamt
of blowing air on a dying fire
and the ash scattered
all over the floor,
turned everything to dust --
I was alone in an empty room,
sitting, waiting,
for what I didn't know --
the embers sputtered and glowed,
the heat lazily crawled across the floor,
rolled its neck and
cracked its knuckles,
growled a little until I stroked it,
eased its way between my fingers
and there I sat,
waiting,
just waiting,
for what, I still don't know.

THE CONSCIOUS' ADVICE

BETHANIE SONNEFELD

Whatever you do, don't let him kiss you. The moment he kisses you, you'll be lost. You'll look up into his eyes and realize, although he did hurt you before, you love him and always will. You'll remember that, for the most part, he treated you like a princess, which no man had ever done before, and you'll be afraid—you are afraid now—that no man ever will again. In the moment of the kiss, you'll let yourself forget that he didn't trust you, which was how he hurt you in the first place. Thinking that you would leave him for another guy in an instant, telling you that he knew you were cheating on him in your head, even though you never did. When he kisses you next time, you'll tell yourself that he realized his idiocy in leaving you and has come running back to you because you were, are, and will be the best thing to ever happen to him.

And you'll believe the lies you tell yourself. You'll believe them because you want to, even if some little part of you knows they're false. But you'll believe him because he'll hold you close when life becomes too much for you to handle on your own, let you cry on his shoulder as he strokes your hair, trusting that he won't hurt you again because

how could he when he treats you like his princess? And in those moments when you're upset, but he's not holding you, he'll be making you pasta because he knows it's your favorite comfort food. Or, when you're asleep on his dingy brown couch, curled up under his favorite soft, red plaid blanket, he'll take your hand and stroke it ever so gently with his thumb as he whispers sweet nothings in your ear. But you won't let yourself know that's all they'll ever be: nothing.

In the moment when he steals your kiss, everything will be set to come crashing down. He'll ask you to be his girlfriend one night as he drops you off, but you, playing coy, will ask for a day or two to think about it. "Take all the time you need," he'll say, and you'll believe him, so you'll keep him waiting for your answer—curious, tense, anxious. But before you can answer him, you'll find he wants to see another girl, far away. The one he's told you all about. The one he grew up with. The one he became a better man to impress. Then you'll realize you're not the girl of his dreams. She is.

And you'll know it was all a lie, a lie that started with a kiss one night when he was feeling lonely. As this recognition dawns, you'll realize that you aren't his princess, weren't his princess, never will be his princess. Your world will crumble as you understand he played you; he lied and betrayed you after all the trust and second chances you gave him. He'll say he feels horrible, but you'll know that it's only because you found out about the other girl. You'll know he'll never care and never did because you're not her. He'll betray your trust and you'll have let him because you convinced yourself that he kissed you because he loved you. But you'll realize that was a lie—he never loved you—and that lie will make you cynical, untrusting; that lie will hurt you.

And while hurting, you'll turn your back on the world, on your friends, on me. You'll forget there are still people who care about you, even if he doesn't. You'll spiral downwards in self-destructive thoughts, focusing only on how he hurt you, how he lied, how he betrayed you. You'll focus on the negatives, imagining him with her and their happiness, which makes your misery more potent in contrast. You'll question your worth, your intelligence, your beauty and conclude they don't actually exist. Your self-conception, the image you fed yourself for years was skewed, inaccurate, false. I'll try to tell you otherwise, tell you exactly how I see you; as beautiful, fun, smart, brilliant, but you won't listen to me because in your depression you'll only see the flaws.

I'll try to tell you that you're what any sane man would want, but you won't listen to me despite repeated attempts to convince you that I'm telling you the truth. I'll

always tell you the truth. You'll shut out the world and wrap yourself up in your head, rebuild the emotional wall that took weeks to break down after he hurt you last time, isolate yourself from the positive voices that could be around you if you let them. You'll listen to the lies in your head that tell you that you're nothing and you're uncared for, letting him control your future instead of seeing the people around you who appreciate the happiness that you bring to their lives, to my life.

If you don't want to slip into a deep depression, don't kiss him. It would be better not to see him ever again, to run to the other side of the earth to avoid the situation altogether, though that may seem extreme. The choice is in your hands, so make sure he doesn't kiss you, and, whatever you do, make sure not to kiss him back.

MAKING THEM OVER HARD IN APRIL

CHRISTINE DEGENAARS

Emily's in the kitchen making eggs
for herself and for the old Husky she's had
since high school. He was old then and older
now, and she feeds him just about everything
she'd eat herself. She's looking down

at those runny yolks, those half-born
almost-things. She can nearly see a scrap

of a feather, a piece of a wing, a crooked
could-have-been beak. She's looking
at all of it now, at the whites surrounding
each yellowed blob like the ghostly parts
of an eye, and she thinks of them as such.

Jason loved eggs, loved scraping them
to the edge of his plate, loved eating most of it
and tossing the rest to the dog even before
it was okay for him to do that. Emily's trying
to remember him now, remember his face as it was
back then, how his mouth and teeth curled
and what color they were when they reflected
the overhead light.

She wants me to bring him up,
to make it okay for her to talk about him
and that could-have-been life: what it might
have been like, what it would have looked like
at the kitchen table, or how it might have liked
its eggs. But I won't. It isn't worth the trouble,
and I've only told her that too many times this week.

The morning is gray and cool, too cool
for this time of year. It's lasted three hundred years,
but Emily's promised herself she'd stop counting
it like that—stop thinking of the aftermath of all
of it like that.

INTERVIEW WITH JILL TALBOT

PHILLIP RUSSELL

Jill Talbot is the author of *Loaded: Women and Addiction* (Seal Press, 2007), the co-editor of *The Art of Friction: Where (Non) Fictions Come Together* (University of Texas, 2008), and the editor of *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* (University of Iowa, 2012). Her work has appeared in journals such as *Brevity*, *DIAGRAM*, *Ecotone*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *The Pinch*, *The Rumpus*, and *Under the Sun*. Her memoir, *The Way We Weren't*, was published by Counterpoint/Soft Skull Press in Summer 2015. Talbot spent time at MSU in March 2015 as a guest reader and judge of the creative writing awards, and graciously agreed to an interview with creative writing intern Phillip Russell. She currently lives in Texas.

Phillip Russell

I'm always interested in hearing writers talk about their writing process. What's yours usually consist of? Are you someone who sits down every day and has a set word count that you write toward, or is it a more organic thing for you?

Jill Talbot

I once knew a composer who described her process in writing piano arrangements: she didn't sit down at the piano until she had the notes and could hear the music in her head. My process is very similar—though it took me years to recognize that. I'm not an everyday writer or a consistent writer. I hear notes in the distance, and I drive and wander the grocery aisles and run the treadmill until they sift down into chords I can hold onto, and then I sit down and I play.

Russell

In your essay, “All or Nothing, A Self-Portrait of Twenty Seven,” you describe twenty-seven as: “It's running away from yourself knowing it's something you can never really do.” Do you think that could be said about writing creative nonfiction as a whole? Do you find that what you're writing about are things that you simply can't get away from? Things that need to come out?

Talbot

What a fantastic question. I don't know about all writers of creative nonfiction, but for me it's the opposite—when I write, I run toward. I run down into the self or the moment or the memory that is most often the darkest and difficult of what I carry, what I must bear. One of my mentors once asked, “What are you running from?” It's one of the questions that keeps me writing.

Russell

One thing I really admire about your writing and work ethic is your willingness to experiment with form (your syllabus essay in *DLAGRAM* is wonderful!) Lately, I've seen you dabble in creative nonfiction using social media and technology (such as iPhone Emojis and Twitter) to tell stories. Do you think we will see more writers experimenting with these more short-form social media mediums? Do you think there are stories that can only be told through these avenues?

Talbot

I received a letter from a fellow writer today, thanking me for writing about a subject again and again because she once stopped writing because she felt like she could only write about one thing, and she worried it had become obsession, not writing. She articulates this well: “If the energy is still there and the attention

to language persists, it doesn't matter the subject, and what better way to write about the well-worn paths of our brains ... [than toward the] undiscovered." So if I'm going to write about losing Kenny again or the house in Utah again or that one trip to Bottomless Lakes again, I better find a way into it that's different. Writing the same subject in various forms and mediums allows me to transform the "well-worn" into the "undiscovered."

Russell

How did you get into writing creative nonfiction? Was it something you were always interested in or did you start writing fiction or poetry first and transition to it? For me, I started writing fiction primarily, and found my niche writing in nonfiction once I came to MSU.

Talbot

I wrote poems until I took a creative nonfiction workshop in graduate school in my final semester (I had taken all the other workshops and needed one more. I didn't even know what "creative nonfiction" was or what it meant.) I even had a draft of my poetry thesis and was in the process of revising it. On the first day of class, the professor gave us excerpts from various texts and asked us which was the essay. I had no idea, but I shuffled the pages in some attempt not to look like I had no idea what I was looking for, but then I found it when he assigned us Phillip Lopate's introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*. When I read Lopate's description of the essayist—the candor, the intimacy, the competing thoughts, the world-weariness of the persona, the way the writer follows an "intuitive, groping path"—I couldn't even wait until the next class. I rushed into my professor's office, book clutched to my chest, and whispered as in confession: "This is me." The whole time I was writing poems or reading them, it felt as if I were stumbling into a room with a blindfold, feeling my way around, bumping into furniture, not quite sure where the couch was or if an end table was supposed to be there. The first essay I wrote was for an assignment to write something inspired by Seneca's "On Noise." I wrote "On Longing," and it felt like I had settled into my seat hours into a drive along a stretch of highway, and I leaned back and pushed down the gas and followed the road of my thoughts. When I got that essay back from my professor, there was only one line in his slanted writing beneath my words: "You intuitively understand this form. Keep with it." After that, I wrote a new thesis, a collection of essays, and I've kept with it ever since.

Russell

Could you tell me a little about *The Way We Weren't*?

Talbot

I'll answer in three ways. First, the intrigue, the story itself: I was with a man for four years, and we were very much in love (were we? one of the questions of the memoir), but when I had our daughter, it wasn't long (four months) before he vanished. At the time, I was finishing graduate school and looking for a tenure-track position, and the memoir traces the ten years I chased that (still) elusive tenure-track job, moving me and my daughter across seven states, moving from one adjunct or visiting position to another and struggling financially as a single parent while raising a daughter on my own.

Intellect: The memoir is inspired by E.L. Doctorow's "Notes on the History of Fiction," which appeared in *The Atlantic's* 2006 Fiction Issue, in which he points out, "That the public figure of historical consequence makes a fiction of himself long before the novelist gets to him is almost beside the point. Once the novel is written, the rendering made, the historical presence is doubled. There is the person and there is the portrait. They are not the same, nor can they be." I couldn't help but recognize the overlap in the way I write Kenny and myself as portraits, as separate entities (characters) from the people we were, hence the title, *The Way We Weren't*.

Invention: Doctorow also notes, "The [essayist] is not alone in understanding that reality is amenable to any construction placed upon it." I am drawn to the way reality and memory may be enhanced, altered, or deconstructed via different structures and forms. So not only do I have essays in the memoir in the form of a wine list or a syllabus or a hearing transcript, I'm also working to deconstruct the memoir itself—the assumption that it's an accurate rendering—because I include Kenny's version of our history (via a letter to the court) in order to disrupt the notion that the memoirist carries the only truth. Sure, it's my truth, but he has his, too, and I'm a character in his story just as much as he's one in mine. As I write in the memoir: "Fiction and history are neighbors. The stories we tell about our own histories might as well be fiction—for what we tell, what we don't."

Russell

Now that *The Way We Weren't* has been on store shelves for a while and you've had time to work on other projects, how does it feel to have those stories out in the wild? Additionally, what do you think was your biggest take-away from the project--what's that something you've learned that you see yourself applying in the writing you're doing currently?

Talbot

Sometimes when I ask other writers about some aspect of their lives, they preface their answer with, "I've written about this." Now that *The Way We Weren't* is in the world, I feel this way, too. When I moved to Texas last summer and met new colleagues and new people who asked questions like, "How does your daughter feel about moving so much?" "Where else have you lived?" or "Is it just the two of you?" I have this impulse to hand over a copy of *The Way We Weren't* and say, "Here, read this." I gave a reading recently and prefaced a section from *TWWW* by providing some autobiographical context, specifically that the father of my daughter abandoned us when she was four years old. Then I sighed heavily into the microphone and said, "God, I'm so tired of talking about this." And I am, but I'll never stop writing about it—never stop trying to figure out what went wrong.

I think with each book, even each essay I write, I'm digging down deeper beneath the surface of what I've written before. So I'm going back into the gaps of *The Way We Weren't*, what I chose not to include about my life in that memoir because it wasn't relative to the concerns or the concept of the book. But it feels false not to address it, so I'm facing those aspects of myself in the new work.

Russell

You're someone whose name I feel is constantly showing up in publications. Do you have any advice for aspiring writers who may not know where to start in terms of breaking into the publishing world? Do you think there is a right time to start publishing?

Talbot

When I was a little girl, probably about five, I taught myself to roller skate by reading a book about a girl who learns to roller skate. I had read this great story

and wanted to enjoy the feeling the girl seemed to enjoy as she zoomed down her sidewalk on skates. So I sat on the driveway while my dad mowed the yard, and I opened the book to the first page, and I laced up my skates. I turned each page and took a few wobbly steps, my attempts matching each one the girl on the page made. By the time I finished the book, I was zooming out the drive and up and down the alley behind our house. This approach has helped me as a writer, too.

Many journals have submission guidelines encouraging writers to read an issue, and this is the best advice. I remember getting my first issue of what is now my favorite print journal, *The Normal School*, and I didn't just read it, I studied it. I read and I noted patterns—so when I went to submit, I worked within the framework of the journal's aesthetic. I've now had two essays accepted by *TJS*. Another strategy is to hone the form you're writing. For years, I gathered a train of rejections from *Brevity*, and that's because I didn't understand the flash essay form. I remember the editor, Dinty W. Moore, once added a note in a rejection to clarify: "This reads like a part of a longer piece rather than a stand-alone flash." So I set out to study the form—I sat on my porch reading and underlining insights from Moore's *The Rose Metal Press Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*. It was like learning to roller skate.

I'd say the time to publish is now. But only if you know what it is you're writing and who is going to read it once you hit SEND.

Russell

We've talked a lot about your writing, your process, and what the written word means to you, but what do you fill your time with when you aren't writing? What are some of your hobbies? Do you find that you need times to decompress from the page or is writing the very decompression you go to?

Talbot

I have a writer friend who once told me, "I think the reason I drink is to shut down my mind. I'm always thinking about the writing, always writing in my head." I feel that way, too, not about the drinking (because drinking often makes me think more), but that I'm always thinking about the writing. The other day I was in an airport I had been in a few years before, and I e-mailed a dear friend, "I'm sitting in the — airport feeling like I'm sitting inside a future essay. The last time I was here I was on my way to — and, for some reason, I'm a bit atremble.

I keep thinking of ---, wishing on some level I could go back in time—not get on certain planes.” It’s a bifurcated existence, moving through the world and essaying it simultaneously.

But I love to run—my (now defunct) AOL account password from 2000 was readrun. And that’s what I still do. I read and I run, or sometimes I do them at the same time. Lately I upload a podcast from *Mr. Bear’s Violet Hour Saloon*, an NPR *Fresh Air* interview with a writer, or a *New Yorker Fiction* podcast, and I go run and listen and think about writing, about craft.

Fallow periods are necessary—those periods of non-writing that usually come after completing a significant new piece of writing. I finished a long essay a couple of weeks ago, and I’m sitting inside one of those fallow periods now—allowing space between that essay and the next one. It’s important for me to get away from the page until a new essay or new form idea emerges.

Russell

One thing I really enjoy about you as a writer is your willingness to collaborate with others. Where do you think your interest for collaboration and genre bending comes from? Having personally contributed writing to one of your collaborative projects, I can attest to the wonderfully creative themes you and your collaborators often explore. Any advice for young writers looking to try and start a collaborative project?

Talbot

I think a big part of it is that, as a single parent on what has been, for years, a Visiting or a Writer-in-Residence salary, I am unable to attend conferences or apply to residences or attend collaborative experiences such as Bread Loaf. Technology allows me to create my own engagement with other writers, which is necessary to my life as a writer, those intellectual and artistic conversations that challenge and inspire my own work.

I’ve co-edited two collaborative projects with the wonderful Eric LeMay. “Memory Collective,” includes Jenny Bouilly, Dinty W. Moore, Elena Passarello, Kristen Radtke, Dana Tommasino, and Ryan Van Meter, who all wrote fragmented memories and re-imagined the memory of another writer. It began with an idea I had one night about the gaps in memory, and I e-mailed Eric, who I have never met but admire for his digital work, to see if he wanted

to put something together. We each picked three essayists we wanted to work with, which is one of the rewards of collaborating, the opportunity to work with another writer. For our second project, “conjunctions: experiments in collaboration,” Eric had the idea to push the boundaries of the essay form beyond writing, so we chose essayists (Marcia Aldrich, J. R. Carpenter, Matthew Gavin Frank, Stephanie Elizondo Griest, and Brian Oliu) and asked them to choose a non-writing artisan to co-create, which resulted in video, music, dance, recipe, photography, and a wine list. The thrill of that was waiting to see what each essayist would do. I’m telling you all of this to show how a few exchanged e-mails can result in conference-like experience (without the need for airfare or sharing a hotel room with a near-stranger).

My main collaborative work has been with the talented Justin Lawrence Daugherty, a writer I’ve never met (actually out of all of these writers, I only know Aldrich, Bouilly, and Griest). About three years ago, we discovered each other via Twitter. We read each other’s work, recognized echoes, and decided to set our writing against each other’s in conversation. With each piece we write (essay, short story, hybrid), one of us chooses the concept and begins with a segment then e-mails it to the other, and we go back and forth until we’re done. We try to keep the momentum of a piece going by responding within three-to-four days. I always go with my gut when I respond to what Justin has written—he once called it “answering back.” I follow where my mind goes, which is an incredibly essayistic approach to writing. I tend to trust my thought movement more when I’m writing with him, to be honest, and that helps me when I go back to my own pages.

Advice? Find a writer whose writing you get and ask. This semester my students will collaborate with another writer in the class [who] they have not gotten to know well—the goal is to have them write with that person and follow only what they know on the page.

Russell

What’s next for Jill Talbot?

Talbot

Justin and I are working to complete a collection currently called, “On Distance, Like Desire,” which we hope will result in a book.

As for my own writing, I have begun an essay collection (or maybe another memoir-in-essays) about the body, namely my body. I want to explore the consciousness, physical and mental, that derives from inhabiting a sexless body. Not celibate, because to me that implies a conscientious choice or a commitment, but after the years of grief I stumbled through after Kenny left, raising my daughter and promising myself not to have men come and go (one is enough for her lifetime), and living such a transient existence, it just happened (or didn't happen, hasn't happened except in fleeting, unsatisfactory flashes over the years). Now that my daughter is older and the horizon of her leaving home nears, my mind and my body are in transition, as if waking up. I want not only to interrogate my inactions and indecisions, I also plan to research the affects, psychologically, emotionally, and even metaphysically, on a body that goes years without engaging with another body. What happens to us when no one touches us or admires us sexually or traces the slip of our shoulder in a sensual way? I want to find that out, and I want to show readers how I've carved out this secret space for myself all these years.

CONTRIBUTORS

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