RED CEDAR REVIEW

2006

Red Cedar Review (ISSN 0034-1967) is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by Michigan State University undergraduates in collaboration with Michigan State University Press.

Editorial Office

Address all editorial inquiries and manuscript submissions to:
Red Cedar Review; 17C Morrill Hall; Department of English; Michigan State University; East Lansing, MI 48824-1036. Manuscript submission guidelines available on inside back cover or at *http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/.* ***Please do not send manuscripts to MSU Press.***

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For subscriptions, change of address, claims for missing issues, advertising inquiries, reprint requests, etc.
Michigan State University Press, Journals Division
1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25
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REDCEDAR
REVIEW

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Editor's Note

Teal Amthor-Shaffer

Good writers embrace more than the dictionary definitions of words; they understand their weight, their implications, and their possibilities. This takes more than an extensive vocabulary. It requires an innate understanding of people, and a knack for perception. The same way that possession of a mental thesaurus is useless if you don't understand how to use the words, the most intent observer might not possess the capacity to do more than see. Perception leaves room for personal bias and opinion, and that is what makes each writer's perspective unique. I don't think this sort of ability is acquired. It is directly related to a writer's own ability to understand, and it requires a person to be curious, insightful, and introspective. I think you either have it or you don't.

With that said, there is a reason that *Red Cedar Review* Volume 41 is a relatively short issue. Our staff chose the very best of hundreds of manuscripts—each piece is distinctly different, reflecting the unique perspective that each writer brings to the craft. As a collection, the pieces in this issue demonstrate a broad spectrum of experience and style.

If you're in the mood to laugh, I suggest you start with Kurt Ayau's "Calling It Off," which outlines one man's increasing suspicion that he is being persecuted by telemarketers. Conversely, Robert Habermeyer's "The Fertile Yellow" takes a more somber look at eccentricity, introducing us to a couple who has tried everything from holistic medicine to the downright bizarre in an effort to get pregnant. Charles Harper Webb makes another appearance in our journal with "Notes to Myself," a meditation on the possibility that lies in the little scribbles we make throughout the day, only to later wonder what on earth they meant.

A wonderful thing about *Red Cedar Review* is that it's unconcerned with name and title. We publish mostly work by new and emerging voices, although we proudly boast a respectable list of established authors (Neruda, Atwood, and Harrison, to name just a few). One of the most rewarding parts about working on this journal has been providing previously unpublished writers with a venue for their work. Some of them have been my peers here at MSU, others professors, parents, grad students.

Three of the pieces appearing in this issue are first place winners from Michigan State University's 2005 Creative Writing Awards. Colleen Farrow is responsible for two of those pieces, the poem "Minus My Mother" and the nonfiction memoir, "Not Walls But Shelves." The latter is a personal favorite of mine, as it explores her relationship with books and reading. It won't surprise me if many of those who pick up this issue, especially if they are writers, find themselves relating to her accounts of trips to Barnes & Noble or afternoons spent with their nose buried in a book. On a different note, Jared Gerling's nonfiction essay, "Four Years to Live. Six Minutes to Die." takes the reader through the challenge and thrill of a crew regatta, and the sacrifices people make for the things they are passionate about.

RCR 41 is a wonderfully diverse collection that I am proud to have been a part of selecting. I am as grateful to the editorial staff responsible for choosing the pieces that appear in this issue as I am to the writers who wrote them. Not all of the staff are writers, or even English majors, but we all share an enormous appreciation for language. There is not a single member of this staff who does not love to read. Collectively, we are all a part of East Lansing's literary community, which *RCR* has helped to foster. Literary circles such as this one exist in communities of all sizes, and on a broader scale, they are all connected by those who appreciate a good story, whether they are telling it or reading it. Working on this journal has given me the opportunity to help bring the works of writers from all over the country, and sometimes even the world, into print. In doing so, the works selected by the *RCR* 2006 staff link the literary communities of a writer like Jeffrey C. Alfier, stationed in Germany, with Rob Hardy in Minnesota.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Managing Editor of MSU Press's Journals Division, Margot Kielhorn, for her endless patience; and to our faculty advisor, Dr. William Penn, whose classes have had an influence on more than just my writing.

Finally, thanks to you, the reader, for supporting our journal, and East Lansing's literary community.

I hope that when you reach the final pages of Volume 41, you've found something that resonates with you. If there is just one piece in this issue that strikes a chord, that moves you, inspires you, or intrigues you, then the dedication and enthusiasm of *Red Cedar Review's* 2006 staff will have paid off.

&

Midlife Crisis While Watching a Nature Program *(Octopus marginatus)*

Rob Hardy

On the one hand, look at all you've accomplished:
career, house, children, money in the bank.
Your life has taken a certain comfortable shape
and there isn't all that much you'd wish to change.
On the other hand, you will never be a marine biologist,
scanning the ocean floor with your submersible camera,
on the lookout for an octopus walking on two legs.
Your eyes will never widen behind your mask,
and you will never gesture in slow-motion
to your fellow marine biologist, the water champagning
with the excitement of your quickened breath,
because you have just seen what looks like a coconut
sauntering along the ocean floor with a purposeful stride
that makes you think of John Cleese with tentacles
and a coconut suit. No predator with a taste for sushi
will go after a coconut rolling along with the current,
water-logged terrestrial junk, not worth a second glance.
But your human heart goes out to the octopus:
no bones, no spine, nothing but head and feet,
and a brain devoted entirely to escaping notice—
little sea-nerd on rubbery legs, pretending to be tough.
You admire something so soft and determined,
so adaptable. How wonderful not to mind
how ridiculous you look, to be self-contained
like an octopus. How much harder for humans
to adapt. Especially now, when we are who we are,
when we will never be marine biologists looking

in astonishment at the octopus disguised as a coconut—
when we can only look out the window at the boat
our middle-aged neighbor suddenly brought home
when his wife had left him and his children had all grown up.

Calling It Off

Kurt Ayau

I hit *Play.*

Blue screen. Static. Then the neighborhood nutjob shuffles by in housecoat and slippers. Left to right, right to left. He disappears down a hallway, reappears, looms Frankenstein-large in the frame, his hair a greasy mess. Sign of the madman, the freak from whom children should run away, run away! He sidles up to the living room window, inserts two fingers between the Venetian blinds to sneak a peak at the world outside, where the mail spills from the box at the end of the drive and a month's worth of newspapers dot the lawn like some sick and persistent dog's copious, decomposing turds. He mutters to himself. He shuffles.

It is fresh evidence, taken this morning, and it confirms what I fear.

I hit *Stop.*

&

This is me? *This? Me?* Yes: this: me. How?

People might conjecture: genetics? Life's sometimes sad trajectory? Happenstance? A conspiracy? Simpler than that. Crazier.

The path from Norman, the stable guy next door ("What's he do again?" people might say. "An accountant? An adjustor?") to the sour-smelling crazy man with all those cats and the station wagon full of empty milk cartons and the yelling about the government and black helicopters and people not making eye contact with you anymore can be a brutally short and straight one. A matter of minor mistakes. You see, I was never the kind of guy who had *goals* for *being,* you know, like the kinds of things the TV "doctors" preach. I didn't have milestones and performance objectives, five-year plans written down in little notebooks. None of that stuff. I just did my thing. *Lived.* Like my father used to say, you get up and have a cup of coffee and figure out what's what, then you go out and do stuff. That was my motto. Go out and do stuff. So I did. And I think now that when you live like that, when you're just kind of floating like that, well,

you don't have a hold, you don't have a grip. And things can happen. And then things can get out of control. So I guess if you're going to have a motto, you better have a good one.

They must have a motto, too, some pithy sentiment to motivate them as they start the day, limping and scuffling through the special safety glass doors, feeling their way to their desks. Maybe it's a Helen Steiner Rice poem pinned to their cubicle walls or a Rod McKuen screensaver. Or it could be that they have a banner strung across the entire office, some kind of play on words to do with inspiration and brightness and light bulbs. It's got to be something to do with light bulbs, of course, because that's how they get you, after all. That's how they sucked me in. Those wonderful, last-almost-forever, too-good-to-be-true light bulbs. Special emphasis on the "too-good-to-be-true" part, although not quite in the way you might imagine.

I don't turn the lights on anymore. Instead, I creep in the dark, sometimes shuffling carefully along the wall, sometimes on my knees, sometimes even low-crawling like I'm stretched out under barbed wire with machine gun bullets snapping overhead. Or I use the night vision function on my camcorder and wade through a wavering sea-green underwater world that's always a half second too slow. I want to believe that nobody knows I'm here. Who would be at home and leave all that shit on his lawn? Who would be at home and never turn the lights on? But I know they're watching. They've been watching for a while.

I don't turn the lights on because when I start doing that, I'll start burning them out, and when I start burning them out is when they'll try to suck me back in. And they'll work me until they get me because I'm a victim of my own kindness.

See, I'm the guy who never says no. I get that from my father, too. I remember the first time I saw him give some money to a beggar on the street. This guy was propped up against a building with a cardboard sign on his lap. He looked grimey and shiny at the same time, like he had been rolled in the street then shellacked. His sign read: "Public Assestence Needed. Plese Give." He smelled bad. My father dropped a bill in his lap.

"That man can't spell," I said.

"Spelling ain't all it's cracked up to be," my father said.

"But he just sits there. He doesn't do anything," I said.

"Son, there's no telling why that man is sitting there. We probably don't want to ask him to tell his story. Maybe some hard luck or he drinks too much. I see people like that and I feel sorry for them. So I give him a dollar. So what? I guess I'm just a softie."

When we got home and I told my mother the story, she said, "Yeah, soft in the head." They didn't see eye to eye on the philanthropy thing. They didn't see eye to eye on much. His standard joke: "Of course we don't see eye to eye: she's five inches taller than I am!" Some people say that he was henpecked, and that may be right. I just think that rather than being a weak person, he was extremely kind, and steeped in the fine tradition of confrontation avoidance. He never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings.

That's my excuse. That's how it all happened. I've never wanted to be the bad guy, the guy who says "no," the guy who hangs up, the guy who doesn't attend the United Way meeting at work. So I'm the one who buys five boxes of each kind of Girl Scout cookie, who signs up for all the -Thons the neighborhood kids do: Bike-a-Thon, Math-a-Thon, Run-a-Thon, Jump-a-Thon, Slurp-a-Thon, Skate-a-Thon, Kiss-a-Thon. I'm the one who sends the poor kids to summer camp in the Adirondacks. I'm the one who helps the American Indians say no to alcohol and yes to self improvement and casinos. The Kidney Fund, the American Heart Association, the Cancer Society, the lung people. Eyes, feet, irritable bowel, artificial knees, prostate, kidneys, glaucoma, virulent halitosis, the Inverse Flatulence League; you name it, I've got it covered. My cancelled checks are a children's alphabet book of acronyms, a Gray's Anatomy chart of bodily causes. DAW, AWH, SJW, ACS, AHS. If there's a body part in need, I'm the man with the cash. They ask, I give. It's part of the stuff I do.

I became such a sure bet that the neighborhood kids didn't even work for it anymore. They came up the walkway and, yeah, they rang the bell and gave me the spiel, but it was like they were doing me a favor now, rushing through the pitch like it was the Gettysburg Address that they

had memorized for civics class, and they didn't want to appear to be sissies for getting into it *too* much or something. They knew it really didn't matter how they performed, because they knew I always said yes. They could have just held out their hands. And so I learned that there's one thing kindness will get you for sure these days: contempt.

That's the story with the light bulb people, my reward for kindness. They called one day, I said, "yes," the *relationship* began, and now *this.* (Yeah, "a *relationship";* that's what they call it.) You're not just an anonymous donor to the Disabled Laborers of America, a faceless name, a nameless face; no, you are an important part of their manufacturing, sales and distribution self-help program. They told me that the pictures of all Victory Partners (that's what they call you, a Victory Partner, V.P. for short) get put up in the factories and warehouses and call centers. You send them a picture with your first check and they scan it and send it around: Your smiling face looking down upon the lame and the halt as they labor to make their lives, and our country, better. It kind of weirded me out when they first mentioned it. I saw myself like a Big Brother figure watching them, but then I got the newsletter and I could see all these V.P.s on all these boards and so, you know, it wasn't that big a deal or anything. In fact, it made me feel kind of special. If my father were still alive, it would be the kind of thing he'd appreciate.

I gave to the DLA. And I gave. Of course, they send you stuff. Light bulbs. Trash bags. Air freshener. Window cleaner. Incontinence pads. Carpet de-spotter. But there's only so much of that shit you need, unless you're running an adult day care center or something. My house was filling up with all this stuff; everywhere you looked there was a box with DLA stenciled on it. The other causes, well, in a way it was a blessing that all you got from them was a form at tax time. With the disabled people, they wanted to make you feel like you weren't just *giving* them money, so they sent you this stuff. All this stuff.

It started with a phone call, of course. At least they had the decency to wait until after dinner. I was happily digesting, sleepy, when "Handsome Ed" called for the first time. I never knew if he was, indeed, handsome or

not. But he was certainly cheerful. I told him I had never heard of the Disabled Laborers of America.

"Oh, yeah, Norm," Handsome Ed said, "we're the oldest self-sufficient handicapped organization in the country! You know about our light bulbs?"

I didn't know about the light bulbs, so he told me about the light bulbs.

"Wow," I said. "A lifetime guarantee on light bulbs?"

"That's right, sport. If those light bulbs ever, and I mean ever, go out, we'll replace them for the cost of shipping and handling. What you think about them apples?"

What I thought, I can't remember. What I did was order a set of six light bulbs for $50, plus shipping and handling.

"Now, I know you're thinking that $50 is a lot for some light bulbs," Handsome Ed said, "but when you figure that the average light bulb costs you $1.29 and lasts for six months, well, you do the math. You're gonna spend $8 for that same bulb over three years, but the $8 you spend on our bulbs is gonna last you forever. And I don't have to tell you how long forever is, do I, pal? And the best thing? You don't have to pay a cent until you receive the bulbs. How about that?"

When Handsome Ed spoke, it was like listening to a waterfall in the sunlight. You couldn't help but be swept up in his sparkling enthusiasm. I asked him how long it would take for my bulbs to get to me.

"Seven to ten business days, but we can Fed Ex 'em to you if you're sitting there in the dark!" He laughed and I laughed with him. I told him that regular mail would be fine.

"Well, heck, Norm, I've enjoyed fishing with you. Now, I'm going to get my supervisor to give you a call back in about five minutes to verify the order. This is really gonna help us out, pal. So you wait for her call and have a great day!"

With that, he was gone and I was headed down the path of no return.

The light bulbs showed up when promised, I paid my bill, and, I have to tell you, the light bulbs were good. They were great. Bright, clear, and they lasted through the rest of the year while other bulbs I had bought just the week before at the supermarket burned out. When Handsome Ed called me back about five months later, I told him I didn't need any more bulbs.

"Course not, Norm! You're set for life with those bulbs, pal. Just remember to keep your packing slip with your order and account numbers. That way, if the bulbs do burn out, (but they're not, kind of like a reverse Catch-22, you know?) you just call us up, give us the numbers, and we set you up again. Got it?"

"Got it."

And I did really think that I had gotten it, that I was done. But Handsome Ed had other products to sell. Like clockwork he started selling them to me.

"Hey, Norm," the voice would leap into my head from the earpiece, "it's Handsome Ed!! Time to go fishing, old buddy! How've you been? God's been great to me. I got a great deal on stool softener this month, pal!"

I don't know why Handsome Ed always talked about going fishing. I never fished. And we were always talking on the phone. I never had the nerve to ask him just what he meant, though, because he always sounded so upbeat. And, I don't know, something about the way he called me *pal* convinced me he was sincere. He was the first one from ADL to call me. He was how the relationship started. Once he sent me a picture of him in his cubby, and there, over his shoulder, was my picture, watching over him. I felt kind of obligated.

Handsome Ed told me about his life, about his kids and his ex-wife, "the tough old lady with the monthly needs." He told me about the problems he had with his neck and the surgery he was facing. I bought a two-year supply of Dura-Strength Heavy Duty Kitchen and Lawn Trash Bags.

"God bless you, pal!" he said. "People are gonna look at you and say, 'Norm? That guy's got it in the bag!' Get it?"

When the others started calling me, I thought Handsome Ed had gotten fired, or maybe he quit. The thought occurred to me that his surgery hadn't gone well and that he was now crippled. Maybe they moved him to a new division where he didn't have to sit up in a desk and make phone calls. Then he reappeared again, and when I asked him about the other guys, he played it off like he didn't know what I was talking about.

"What other guys, Norm? Hey, I'm your only fishing buddy, ain't I?"

"I'm getting these other calls," I said. I had started my notebook then, so I flipped through it and read him some names.

"Never heard of them. I know everybody here. Those aren't our people."

"Whose people are they?"

The phone went dead for a few seconds, that kind of empty sound when someone puts you on hold. Then Ed came back, chipper as ever.

"Don't know, pal. I asked the supervisor. She'll get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, how about that stool softener?"

Soon, I don't know how exactly, I was getting calls from coast to coast. It was like Handsome Ed had gone into a handicapped restroom and written my name on stalls: ("For a quick light bulb sale, call Norman!" "Call Norman: he can't say no!"). My phone was ringing all day, every day, from all these handicapped groups with names sounding vaguely similar. Handicapped Laborers of the United States. And American Laborers with Disabilities. And Workers With Challenges. What did I do? I bought. I'm a softie.

Soon I was in a "relationship" with "Cherlice" and "Bobby" and "Groender." Eventually, I didn't know who was who, where they were calling from, what exactly they were selling. Or even if I could trust them. I started keeping notes in a little binder I had. The acronyms and the names and the products and the prices just piled up. And when I got confused and couldn't remember who it was I was working with, they all claimed that we had been in "a relationship" for a decade. They all said they had my picture "right here in my cubbie." I was confused. I was lost. And my monthly bill for pricey consumables was burning a hole through my bank account.

So I cut them off. All of them. I didn't mean to at first, I thought I would just scale back, regain my equilibrium, pace myself, but I didn't know who was who anymore, because, heck, there were like a dozen or so, and I swear that some of them started calling with different names. Cherlice became Amanda became Twanda became Nancy. And "Barnacle Bob" was really "Handsome Ed," I'd swear. It was just too much to try and keep it all straight. So I had to make a clean break. There's a term they use in

psychology, but I can't remember it anymore. Whatever the term was, it was something I had to do. So I did it. And they got the message, eventually. I was calling it off. I was breaking up with them.

There was a lull, this sweet period when the only time the phone rang it was someone from work asking me about a project or how to get the machines recalibrated. Then it started. First came the calls from the "district supervisors" wanting to confirm my decision, trying to remind me of the *relationship,* all the good I had done, how I had helped pay for children's braces and water heater repairs and overdue rent and a second car so Cherlice could take her mother to dialysis instead of accompanying her on the long bus ride with three transfers. I wavered, I paused for long periods of time before answering. I thought of my father and what he would do. Envisioned his smiling face circled by light bulbs and other helpful household products, but that same kind of indiscriminate kindness was why Mom finally left him, was why his path would be the path to disaster, so though I imagined his frowning face, the sour aroma of heartbreak as he sat in his nursing home barcalounger and heard me tell my tale of "no," I knew I couldn't break. I couldn't. I needed my life, and my closet space, back.

There was some stuff still in the pipeline, things I had ordered before I had made my decision. Slowly it trickled in, and all of it was damaged in some way. Light bulbs were smashed. Boxes full of garbage bags were torn and bags were flapping in the wind on my front porch. I opened a box of air freshener to find the bottle crushed and an oily opalescent scum floating in the shrink-wrapped package. The inescapable, condensed stink of "Mountain Pine" penetrated to the farthest reaches of my house, so strong that it woke me up at night. And everything was accompanied by a packing slip, a bill and a printed card detailing the iron-clad money-back policy. What I should have done was just send all the shit back, but I couldn't even do that. I was paralyzed. If I sent it back and told them it was damaged, they'd probably just send me more. So I decided to just keep the stuff. But, of course, by keeping it all, I owed them money.

That's when they escalated. They were pissed, now, I guess, so they stepped up the pressure. Cars slowed down to a lame man's crawl as they passed my house. My phone rang in the dead hours of the night, but no one was there when I answered. And then somebody burned this weird symbol on my lawn. It looked like a Christmas elf sodomizing a clown. I called the police and I tried to explain who I thought was behind it. The cop taking the report kind of snickered. I thought maybe at first I was just imagining it, but he did it again when I started giving him the names of all the groups I thought might be responsible. I told him I was serious, and then he acted all offended, like I was making some kind of accusation. When he left I knew that nothing was going to happen. He probably didn't even type up the report.

I know it's crazy. I know it's letting things get to me. But by some weird alchemy my generosity became paranoia. I would drive to work and cars would tailgate me, slice in front of me to make a right turn from the left lane, blind me with their high beams, make sudden stops and jagged stunt-driver maneuvers. And from every rearview mirror I'd see the same thing: a handicapped tag dangling like a taunt. I'd go to lunch and be sitting at the end of the table with a big cup of coffee and a big bowl of soup in front of me and someone; a guy with palsy skittering down the aisle, or a blind woman with an erratic cane flailing like she was dowsing, would smack the table and soup and coffee would slosh and run and dribble into my lap, and I wouldn't get so much as an "excuse me" or "sorry."

Finally, I stopped going out. I called in sick, and then called in sick again. Eventually, Slocum called and told me not to bother coming back. It's okay, because the house is paid for, I have money saved up, and I'm not buying all this junk from the disabled people any more. I get stuff from the Internet and I can order food from the grocery store, although the last time they delivered it, the guy who brought the bags to my door had a noticeable limp, and he seemed to sneer at me when I gave him what I thought was a pretty good tip. When I unpacked my bags, all of my meat packages had thumb-sized holes poked through the shrink wrap.

I would ask one of the neighbor kids to bring in the newspapers, because once spring comes they'll start killing the lawn, especially all those huge Sunday editions with the special four-color shopping inserts jammed inside, and it will be impossible for anyone to mow it. But the kids have stopped coming. Nobody wants my -Thon money anymore. Maybe word has gotten out. I wouldn't put it past the disabled people. My last phone conversations with them were pretty tense, and there seemed to be the hint of a threat in their comments. I'm pretty sure one of them said, "We'll take you down, bitch," but it could as easily have been, "We'll take down your picture." I was on my cordless in the basement, so I can't be sure.

Now I'm just waiting. Waiting for a pilot with a club foot to crash his plane into my house. Waiting for a delivery driver with a hearing problem to "lose control" of his van, jump the curb, and knife through my living room wall, pinning me beneath my sofa. Maybe it will be a wheelchair ninja cutting my legs out from under me with some deft turns of his chair, then finishing me off by leaning over and smashing my neck, his hand a steel fist in those special fingerless gloves. Maybe it'll be a sniper with scoliosis. I don't care. I'm ready. I've lost my will to live. I'll turn on all the lights, every last PermaBulb™, and give them an easy target. I'll go out in a blaze of incandescent glory.

A House Near the Stream

Cedric Tai

San Francisco. The Evil Forest. Tire Swing © 2006 Cedric Tai

a deep sigh lies there
pulling on my foundation
don't leave me this way

Not Walls but Shelves

Colleen Farrow

I.

I come from a family of non-readers. My father subscribes to *Sports Illustrated* and the newspaper, but only skims them before bed. Recently he purchased a book about beer (the different kinds, how they are brewed, etc.); he showed it to me proudly the last time I was home. Bobby Knight's autobiography interested him, but only, I think, due to the cornucopia of curse words. My mother reads the Bible and the feature section of the *Midland Daily News* at breakfast. After I graduated high school, I gave my mother the stack of short stories I spent four years composing, my 100-page manuscript, and six months.

She didn't read a single word.

Occasionally, something in the news prompts my parents to pick up a volume from the encyclopedia set my father bought one summer from a door-to-door salesman. If my parents exhibit an abnormal side-effect from a medication, for instance, they are inspired to flip through the *Better Homes and Garden's Guide to Good Health,* a thousand-plus page monster that dominates the top shelf of the family's wooden book case. Other than the encyclopedias and several random reference books (*Mr. Wizard's 101 Experiments You Can Try at Home!*), the shelves are overrun by photo albums, baby books, framed photographs.

The book my older sister is currently reading (straight from the self-help section) promises to both help her read faster and with more pleasure. She despises reading and must mouth the words or say them quietly to herself, which makes the process laborious. Last I checked, the bookmark was tucked, lethargically, an eighth of an inch from the front cover.

Regardless, for birthdays and major holidays, I give my family books. Bobby Knight's was my Father's Day present last year. I gave my father the one Peter Jennings co-wrote, *The Century,* because every night like

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2005 Glendon and Kathryn Swarthout Literary Prize, First Place

clockwork, he turns the television to Channel 11: ABC News Tonight, muting the commercials to make dinner more conducive to conversation. I've given my mother books by Billy Graham (*Unto the Hills*) and Max Lucado (*He Died Just for You*). She likes devotionals and has enough now to see her safely through the next decade, or until the impending Apocalypse. Often I give her cookbooks and sewing books with bright pictures of all possibilities of creation. Knowing my sister Mandy likes inspirational/touchy feely books (*The Prayer of Jabez,* anything by Dr. Phil), I have passed several of Iyanla Vanzant's better books her way. Yet despite my efforts to cater to their interests, the great majority of my gifts remain unread (save for the personalized inscription; my mother may rarely read the books I give her, but she still insists I write the date, occasion, and a brief message on the front cover with a black Sharpie: "June 4, 2003: Happy Birthday, Mom! I hope you enjoy this as much as I did.")

Inevitably, she won't. My mother, my family won't enjoy books—at least not like I do. As a child, I was an abnormality in a family that only seemed to want to read (when it *did* want to read) what was true and proven. My passion was, in my mind, supported, but not really encouraged. I was—and still am—the only one to read fiction: what is imagined.

II.

My parents scolded me frequently for reading at the table, reading instead of doing homework, reading instead of watching the movie my father had rented. I read during every car trip and plane ride. I read *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* when I was supposed to be practicing the piano (which perhaps explains why "Amazing Grace" is the only hymn I can stumble through by heart). I read instead of making friends on the playground and spent summer afternoons stretched out on a beach blanket in my backyard, sipping Kool-Aid and reading R.L. Stine. At night, I went through one AA battery after another to feed the flashlight that allowed me to read—Nancy Drew and the Babysitter's Club—under the covers. I read about half of *The Grapes of Wrath* on the toilet—a habit that's carried over to college. My roommates roll their eyes when they see *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* next to the john, every other page dog-eared. During the summer before my senior year of high school, I went with friends to Wrigley Field and spent all but two innings

immersed in Ben Bradlee's autobiography. My father found out about this, and when he did, I thought he would never forgive me.

In Stephen King's *On Writing,* he says writers should always read, should always be reading, even if that means bringing a book to the dinner table. But if you want to be a writer—which by necessity demands you be well-read—you must be prepared to be perceived as rude by the people who love you. King says if they love you, though, they not only pardon your supposed inconsideration, but actually come to love you for that exact idiosyncratic thing.

My family thinks reading is educational, and therefore good. After all, I could have done worse things as a child, found more horrific rebellions as a teenager. Mostly though my family regards reading as something rather rude; it's as though they think choosing to read in their company means I find any given novel more interesting than them.

My parents *did* read to me when I was young, but not as much as I wanted. And when I became old enough to read to them, I sat in their laps and went through small stacks of stories before bedtime. But not as many as I wanted. My mother faithfully drove me to the library and let me check out books under her name until the day I completed the paperwork to obtain my own card. I asked for visits to the Grace A. Dow Memorial Library at least once a week, and even though I can't remember one instance when she declined my request, she perpetually sought to make library excursions en route to something else. ("If I go down Jefferson, I can stop by LaLonde's and pick up some pork chops for dinner . . . um, how long do you need there? Ten minutes okay?")

III.

But it's different now. I no longer ask to be taken to the library or bookstore. Now I visit as much as I want, stay for as long as I want, and don't worry that my literary desires will interfere with my mother's daily errands.

I have loved every bookstore I have ever entered without exception: big name stores like Waldenbooks, Barnes & Noble, Borders. The used bookstore in my hometown is called Sleepy Hollow—a renovated video rental place whose aisles I remember browsing with my father, holding only his pinkie with my little hand. I was introduced to Schuler's when I first came

to East Lansing, Chapters in Toronto, Bookworks in Madison, Wisconsin. In Dublin, there is a bookstore on every street corner, with romantic names like the Winding Stair, Silvermoon, Hughes & Hughes, Hodges & Figgis, which led to me lining my suitcase for the journey back to Michigan with books on the bottom, Guinness glasses for my father on top, my laundry everywhere in between.

At the Barnes & Noble on Grand River Avenue, I spend hours walking in between the aisles of books, though usually I'll want to sit down and eventually start (or continue reading) one. (I have read several books entirely in Barnes & Noble, thinking them either too expensive or too obscure to purchase.) Usually I begin my shopping with the displays, then ride the escalator down to the fiction section and peruse the shelves. I begin in the As because book shopping is best when begun in the right place. I can't begin anywhere in the middle—in the Ms or Rs for example. No matter the bookstore, I start in the A section and gradually work my way from Margaret Atwood to Oscar Wilde.

I see names and titles. They are familiar and expected. Even the books I haven't read are there, in order, waiting, where I left them. Someday, I hope to say I have read everything, though if I did nothing else with every waking moment of life, the task would still be insurmountable.

Removing the glove from my hand, I touch the spines in some kind of greeting. When I see novels I have read, I give them the "hey, I know *you*" kind of smile my 18-month-old niece gives when she sees me. It's like bumping into an old friend. I want to read books I already have read the same way I want to talk to people I love but haven't heard from for a while.

The novels are perfectly in order, in nice bookstores like Barnes & Noble. When I *do* see something out of place, I correct it; I move copies of books that have been separated from the others—strays. (It's probably obsessive-compulsive, but I like to think I simplify the work for Noble employees. I have three times applied to work at that Barnes & Noble, but their prodigious stack of completed applications leaves me little hope.)

I move through the alphabet: Donleavy, Greene, Irving, Lamb, Morrison, Saramago, and so on. My walk through the shelves of the bookstore is like an afternoon spent flipping through photo albums, scrapbooks, diaries.

If I want to remember my childhood or awkward, middle school years (though who ever wants to reminisce about those?), all I have to do is visit authors like Christopher Pike, Phillip Pullman, and Lurlene McDaniel (in whose books someone is always dying of leukemia). These people I befriended in adolescence. Three weeks ago, I checked *Die Softly* (my favorite Pike book) out of the Michigan State University library, fantasizing about a Saturday spent relaxed and distracted from the inevitability of studies. I realized, after reading the entire story in less than three hours, how the writing is not as amazing as I used to think. Disheartened, I couldn't believe *this* was the book I held so close when I was younger, the kind of literature I used to extol. But the authors were still a presence in my life. They were people who understood me more than my family and friends did, who were pleased I found reading more engaging than anything else. They were the people who didn't think I was weird, anti-social, or crazy; they would love for me to bring a book to the table.

IV.

Months ago my mother wrote me an e-mail that reads, "every time I pass your room down the hallway, I say a prayer for you." I feel, in bookstores, something similar to that—a type of reverence. I do not pray, but I meditate. I am silent, as I am in church. When I browse the shelves, I remember and anticipate. Books already read remind me not only of their characters and content, but of who and where I was when I first read them, of the mindset I was in. Every time I pass John Welter's, *Night of the Avenging Blowfish,* I recall how I woke at three A.M. on the day of an exam and, unable to fall back asleep, read, went to school, and out of anxiety over the fate of the main character, could not concentrate at all. I read *Toilers of the Sea* to get over an ex-boyfriend; I read *Cyrano de Bergerac* before we broke up because he told me I would understand our relationship more if I understood that text. (I still don't get it.) I remember the first book I literally could not put down—Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*—and how I read *Catcher in the Rye* at the most perfect time in my life: a senior in high school, 17, stuck at home but restless, ambitious but directionless, and feeling not quite sane. I read *The Bell Jar* some weekend while visiting my grandparents on their Indiana farm. I sat on the sofa for the entirety of a Saturday, reading, my mother frowning, telling me not to be so *moody.*

Although my family didn't provide the most encouraging atmosphere for my budding bookishness, I found support from English teachers and friendly librarians. At my junior high school, a media specialist, having grown familiar with my fiction-shelf frequenting, copied Radcliffe's list of Top 100 Books for me. It became the list that dictated my reading life. With an orange highlighter, I colored the titles of the books as I read them, pleased to see the first ten knocked off within a month. I read books my family and friends weren't reading—books they hadn't even *heard* of—Sherwood Anderson's, *Winesburg, Ohio,* Robert Penn Warren's, *All the King's Men,* and Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear.* It gave me an unexpected sense of sophistication that may have bordered on literary snobbery. When my best friend in high school, sitting next to me in study hall, wanted to pass notes, I refused; I was too busy reading *Sons and Lovers.*

I felt special, like God had given me something He'd somehow neglected to give to my parents, my sister, my friends. One of the best moments of my life happened when a librarian at Grace A. Dow was forced to procure, at my request, a copy of Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* from a neighboring library in Saginaw, finding Midland's bereft. She asked me how old I was when I checked the book out with my card, happily handing her the 25-cent standard fee for interlibrary loans.

"Thirteen."

She shook her head and smiled, though she was frowning. "This is not a book most thirteen-year-olds just pick up to read."

v.

Radcliffe's list still hangs above my desk, saturated with orange now. I have other lists—Oprah's, for instance. I keep a list of recommendations from people whose opinions I respect. The boyfriend who recommended *Cyrano de Bergerac* still passes titles along to me. My professors will, subtly in class, clue me in on authors whom they adore. Regardless of where the recommendation comes from or what exactly my motivation for reading a particular work is, for every book read, at least ten more exist that seem just as appealing.

While book shopping, I feel anticipation and desire; seeing all the books lined up like soldiers on shelves makes me want to live in a cabin

Thoreau-style, but with the entire stock of Barnes & Noble, instead of an agenda to write *Walden.* I can only explain my book-buying as this: a way to recreate the at-home feeling I get in the bookstore, or in the library as I did when I was younger. It is a mix of memory and anticipation. Much of life *is* that combination: daily remembering the past, daily looking ahead to the future. The present is spent *looking:* what has been done, what is left to do.

VI.

Normally I shop for books alone. I find the company of others distracting and awkward, and I don't want to carry on conversation. If I do talk to someone while book shopping, chances are I won't remember a thing said in the exchange. If book shopping is my home place, having someone push his or her way in is like having an uninvited neighbor who doesn't notice your restless kitchen pacing, who doesn't detect your desire to be alone.

Justin and I approach Barnes & Noble from the back. I always enter via Grand River, but he chooses the door connected to the alley. Soft music plays from the ceiling speakers, though at times it competes with the café espresso-maker. People politely push past each other between the shelves; some kneel, some sit, some stand, books in hands. I love to see shoppers sitting (sometimes sleeping) in the oversized, striped easy chairs the store provides in certain sections. Even more, I love readers who laugh and smile, unashamed to display the enjoyment derived from reading. I love to see readers' lips moving with the words, relishing the pages. I love the annoying people who talk too loudly in the Starbucks café. I love the people having cell phone conversations, and, on good book shopping days, the people smoking that last cigarette outside the door, making it hazardous for everyone else to breathe. *That* is love.

Immediately Justin's first book shopping inclination is not my own. We ride on different moving steps down the escalator, and begin in the Gs in the fiction section.

Justin's book shopping technique is different than mine, too. I cock my head to the right side in order to better read titles as I pass, something I am sure looks ridiculous to anyone observing. Sometimes it's difficult to read the books on the bottom and so to rectify this, I either kneel or squat

the way I did as catcher in my softball league. He doesn't bend down to see the books on the lower shelves and I wonder if he can even see those books. He *does* straighten crooked displays and pick up fallen paperbacks—two things I do (and would have done, had he failed). He walks not quickly, but not as slowly as I do. Every single book he removes from the shelf for examination is not one I would have selected. His gaze is mostly on the spines, but it strays to other shoppers in the aisles, to wall hangings featuring covers of famous works, to imperfections in the carpet. And though, like the Ouija boards of my childhood, I try not to determine where he goes, he seems in want of my lead to follow.

Back upstairs, we visit some sections I rarely spend time in: Egypt, World War II, Philosophy. Before leaving, we venture downstairs once again to look at Sports and Parenting. Jesting, he picks up a book on children's temper tantrums, grinning as he hands it to me.

"So we'll know what to do with *our* kids."

VII.

He *is* my family: he wants what is true and proven. He does not have a great interest in reading the false or fantasized. From high school, he remembers only a handful of books he was forced to read by teachers: one, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles he barely recalls, except for the part where the swim record is broken. (Phineas himself was one reason I joined the swim team the spring of 7th grade; my stroke: the Butterfly.)

Books are my home, my feeling of it. Barnes & Noble is where I go to be reassured in the buoyancy and perseverance of life, where memories are most strongly evoked and the what-is-to-come most clearly stretched out before me. It is my life history. I see me there, from *Frog and Toad* to *Ulysses.* The A to Z shopping calms me, the consistency of the same titles, the same authors, the same order, pacifies me. This is the place I *feel* welcome.

But so is he. He is home, and someday, he will also be family. I know this. Like my parents and sister, like my closest friends, Justin is glad something in life truly fascinates and engages me. Books have connected me to something bigger than my own little life. They have held me, though I always thought I was the one holding them. In order to love me—and in order for me to love him—we do not need to share the same

sense of comfort and content, the same source of home feelings to be in love. Like others who care about me, Justin may never understand why I feel the way I do about literature. But unlike the others, he is not insulted by my reading. He does not think the people I meet in books are more interesting than him.

While ambling through the aisles, I think about the time Justin and I drove to Wisconsin together in a rental car with the windows down the whole way. In Chicago rush hour traffic, I read him pieces of Nuala O'Faolain's memoir. One of his hands held the wheel; the other held mine. Last December, he gave me a Margaret Atwood book, disguising the gift in a box so big I never could have guessed its contents. We occasionally agree to meet at the store to talk over coffee. One anniversary, I sat in the café annoyed that he was 30 minutes late only to learn later that he'd been in Barnes & Noble the entire time; he'd left me alone because he said I looked too happy reading to interrupt. I think about the Sunday I laid in bed with him reading *Letters Home* while he napped; the book showed me who Sylvia Plath was to her mother in the last months of her life, and the afternoon confirmed that I've never been as understood by anyone—not even books—as I am with him.

Someday, we will have a house with an entire room devoted to them. There will be not walls but shelves. And the space from the floor to the ceiling will be nothing but volumes. Ours. I will stand in the middle of the room and his arms will reach around to hold me from behind. And I will be home.

I hold his full hand with mine. Fingers intertwined, we exit the store and breathe the arctic January air together.

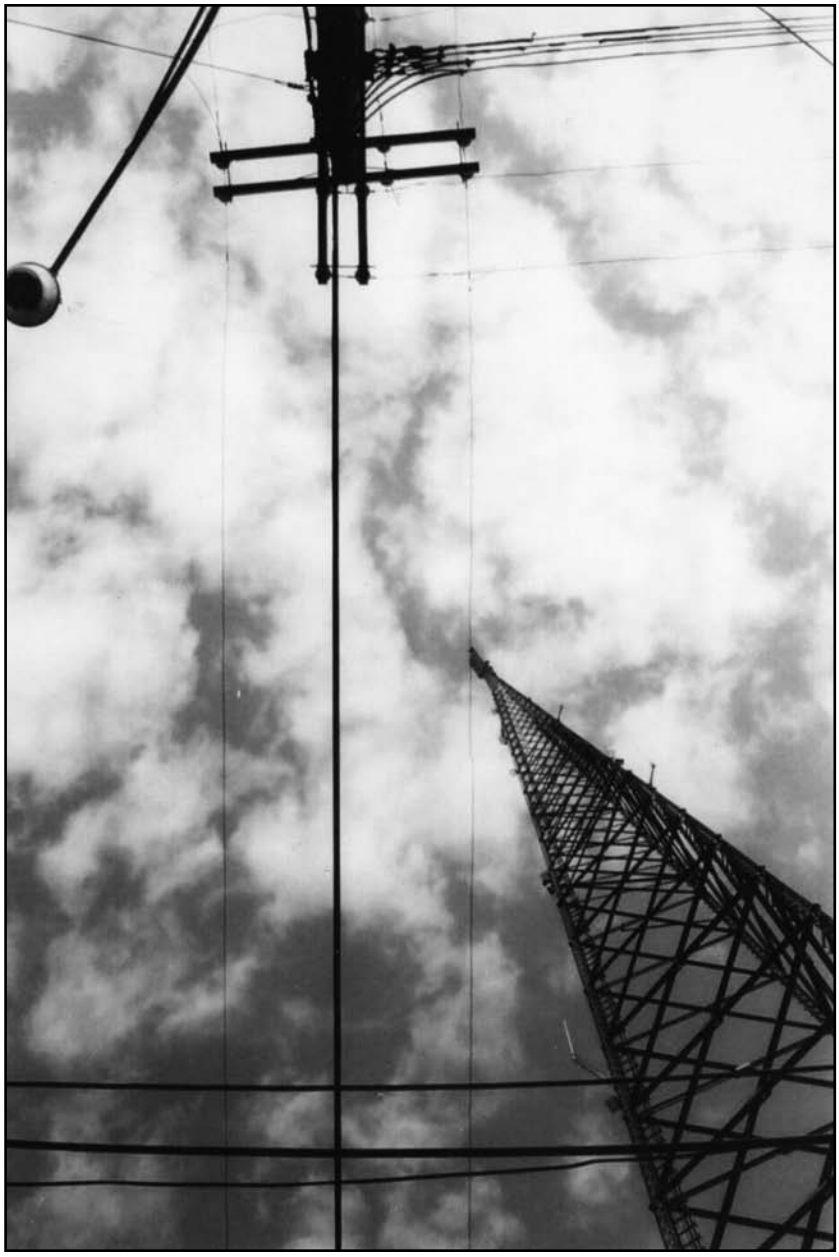
A NASA Behavioral Scientist Lectures on Sex in Space at an International Conference

Michael L. Johnson

This is a golden opportunity,
and yet no experiments
are planned. We could monitor heart rates
and explore the problems microgravity
in such situations presents.

I know ours is a very puritan society,
and admittedly time in space gets
so action-packed romance
would be hard to work in—experiments
take all your libido. Still, the only
data we have derives from rats
studied by Soviet cosmonauts.

Moreover, two of our own shuttle people, newly
married and scheduled to fly in August, are ready
to boogie. But nobody
wants to think about that. Nobody
listens to me.



Brian Hildebrand

Lines

"Lines" is a photograph that was taken in Detroit during the first summer I spent back home. It represents a number of other pieces, that may not necessarily constitute a body of work tied together by a single premise, but do in a sense begin to narrate a story of my experiences in the city. In retrospect of numerous trips made south into Detroit, such experiences seem to focus not so much on the emptiness of Detroit, but instead shift interest from the individual to a more objective landscape. So often, one is confronted by the ambiguity of what has been left behind. Life precedes both the construction and deconstruction of materiality. Therefore, the presence of objects is often misleading, and the assumption of functionality is not always correct. "Lines" presents a composition in which the status of infrastructure is in fact unclear. Using invisibility of both electricity and the transmission of the telephone signal, as well as the invisibility of street lights during the day, we are left only with unstable signifiers of what may be happening.

The Farmer's Wife

Ralph Scherder

Emily stepped from the hot kitchen onto the front porch to catch a cool breeze sweeping through the hemlock planted close to the house. Sweat matted the hair at her temples and she placed her hands at the small of her back the way she'd seen her mother do long ago. She unfastened the top button of her blouse to let the wind play against her skin.

She watched him out in the field. Charles was standing up behind the tractor's steering wheel looking back at the plow cutting the dry, rocky soil. He was a good farmer, perhaps the best in Chester County. Everything he planted seemed to grow. Dry or wet seasons, droughts or floods, their fields of corn dazzled in the sun and were always towering with thick ears of silk-clad produce. They got wheat, two harvests of hay annually, and truck loads of soybean on years he decided to plant it. She was sure he could do anything with the plow, but with her body was another matter.

Some nights he came into her bed and lay beside her. He smelled of earth and seed, the scent of farming rooted deep within his flesh. Callused hands scraped over her body, parted her thighs. Afterwards he spent an hour in the washroom.

The dim light filled the opening under the washroom door. She watched his shadow move within. Finally he turned off the light, came out and climbed into his own bed by the window. He would never talk to her in the night, after they'd made love. He'd always hasten out of her bed to soak his crotch with a damp cloth to stop the blood leaking from the old wound, and he wouldn't even look at her, as though ashamed for what he'd done. But sometimes she heard him crying and saw his chest tremble beneath the blankets and moonlight. She wanted to tell him it was okay, but she was afraid to break the silence.

The day after making love, Charles always worked extra hard in the fields to punish himself, and today was no different. They already had a bumper crop of corn on the way and one harvest of hay in the barn,

and there he was getting ready to plant a field for the second time that summer.

The sun was high. Looking at him seemed as if she were looking through moving air. Heat shimmered out of the ground like invisible smoke. She waved until he saw her and stopped the plow for lunch.

"Something smells delicious, Em" he said, peeking in through the doorway. He kicked mud off his boots before entering the kitchen. He hung his dirty tan hat on the hook by the door and washed his hands in the sink.

"Look what you did to my sink!" she said when she saw the dirt from his hands layering the bottom of the stainless steel basin. She ran water to rinse it clean. Then she cut two strips of meatloaf and two slices of bread, put them on a plate with a tomato, and handed it to him. In turn he passed the plate under his nose.

"This smells good too," he said.

"There's pie for dessert, if you didn't already guess. I'm getting sick of these apples. I'm cooped up baking pies all day. I don't care if that tree has apples for another decade."

He made a sandwich of the meatloaf. She watched his careful exactness as he quartered the tomato with a knife. This was typical of the day after, she thought. He rarely looked at her, directly into her eyes, as he occupied himself with meaningless tasks like cutting up a tomato. She'd tired of trying to cheer him up when he got into this mood. She'd learned that he would have to come back to her a little at a time, bit by bit, on his own accord. Each day he'd smile a little more and laugh with her. Eventually, he'd return to the man who sometimes came up behind her, sweeping her into his muscled arms, saying, "My bride. My beautiful bride."

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked after he finished a slice of pie.

He rubbed his prodigious belly as though he were with child. "I'm stuffed and I've got more work to do before dark." He was already up and reaching for his hat. He turned it in his hands, looked at the floor and then up at her. He smiled.

Bit by bit, she thought.

"You work too hard," she said. "Times are good. You can cut back."

"I work so much because times are good. Never know when the market'll drop or something else." He flipped the hat onto his head where it settled perfectly over the black locks he grew long to cover the blotch of

a birthmark behind his right ear. The birthmark was what made her realize he'd always been self-conscious of his imperfections, even before he went to war and accumulated other scars.

He smiled and then went back to work.

She peered out the window, watching him all the way to the tractor, where he resumed position and put the machine in gear. She knew why he worked so much. She knew what he wanted long before he confessed back in the spring, and he'd only told her then because new life was so abundant everywhere that it became unbearable for him to keep it a secret.

The Johansens owned the neighboring farm, about a mile walk to the west of their 3,500 acres. Niles Johansen had knocked on their door one night, out of breath and panicked, saying something like, "It's coming…need help." At first she and Charles thought he meant his wife was in labor—the Johansens already had four girls and it was about the time of year when another should be on the way—but no, it wasn't Marguerite who needed assistance. It was their two-year-old heifer struggling with its first birth.

As Charles explained to Emily later, Niles had to reach into the heifer's uterus and loop a rope around the unborn calf's front legs. They'd literally wrenched the calf out of its mother, and when it plopped to the ground, Charles broke away the clear sac so the newborn could breathe.

"I've killed a good many things in my time, Em," he told her that night, "but I've never given life."

It amused Emily that watching a calf being born could have that kind of effect on him, and it touched her so completely, the way he talked as if he'd witnessed a miracle. She wanted to give him a miracle of his own, but they'd been trying for quite some time and nothing was happening. He blamed his wound, his imperfection.

But they'd made love even before he went away to The Jungle. Then again, they were always very careful, so it was no surprise she hadn't conceived. They weren't married yet. It had been his idea to wait; when everyone else was rushing to the altar before deployment, he said he wanted to survive first. And he almost didn't. In The Jungle (he never gave specific names of the places where he fought; it was always just The Jungle), enemy fire had been so heavy it shattered trees and sent dagger-like splinters into his chest and a bullet into his groin. The bullet never exited or

bothered him any time except during love-making. The activity irritated the wound so much that it began to bleed again.

"I shouldn't have let you marry me," he said during one of the rare times he spoke of it. He told her about the field surgeon, how he didn't want to dig around "down there" because it wasn't a mortal wound—he'd lucked out in that regard—although he'd probably find it impossible to fulfill any marital obligations, which turned out to only be half-truth. But Charles guessed the real reason for not operating had to do with the way the night sky lit up in those intense flashes of white. Explosions killed more than the surgeon could save. Charles was left alone in the foliage until the enemy retreated. So he lay back, clutching his groin, and put his ear to the ground—and heard a heartbeat. That was why he decided to farm if he made it home alive. Because in those blinding moments of insanity he thought he heard the world's heartbeat.

"What does it look like?" she asked. "The wound."

He told her it was a jagged red line that never really healed. When he ran or they made love, it was like he could feel it grind against his pelvic bone and the scar would reopen. Eventually it would probably heal and enough scar tissue would build up that it wouldn't hurt so much. Eventually.

During those times before he went to war, their love-making often happened in the daylight or with the lights on so they could fully discover each other's bodies. Now he only came to her in darkness, and he would never let her see his wound.

"Maybe there's something wrong with *me,*" she said one day. "Maybe it's not you at all."

"That's silly. There's no reason you shouldn't be able to conceive. All your sisters have children."

"I'm not them."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

And they didn't.

Emily's brother-in-law Paul came to pick her up for the festival, the reason she'd made all those apple pies in the first place. Emily's sister Ashley was already at the fairground overseeing the final arrangements. Ashley was dead set on making it the largest and best festival Chester County had ever seen. She'd even hired a magician.

"I wish you'd come," Emily said.

Charles scuffed his boot through the dirt, not looking up at her. Instead he seemed to be fixed on the tires of Paul's new, canary yellow Buick Roadmaster. The sun sparkled around its silver rims.

"Too much to do," he said. "I still have the south field to plant."

She hated leaving him like that, before he was fully back to her. Before she could say anything else, though, he was walking down toward the south field. His hands were in his pockets and he was still looking at the ground. Several times she waved, but he never saw.

"Is he okay?" Paul asked.

She lowered her arm and folded her hands in her lap. "I don't know."

Paul started the Roadmaster and Emily watched the farm slip away behind them. The rows of tall corn, the waves of shimmering wheat. This was the first time since they married, six months ago, that they'd be spending the night apart. The farmhouse sunk lower behind the curve of the hill—the porch, the front door, the second floor windows that reminded her of hollow eyes, and then the rooftop—as if the ground split open to pull the house down into the earth. Only after it was completely gone did she stop watching.

"Ashley's excited you're staying the night," Paul said. "So am I." He reached over and placed his hand over hers, the way Charles sometimes did when they were driving into town. Paul reminded her of Charles in other ways too. They were about the same height and build, except Paul had a more drawn face, thin lips that rarely broke into a smile, and eyes that always seemed to be calculating—like they were now.

"What?" she said.

"Oh, nothing," he said, removing his hand. "It's good to see you, is all. We're going to have fun tonight." He said it in a familiar tone that brought back a haunting memory—the way some war veterans claimed a loud shriek could send them ducking for cover.

"Paul?" she said. "Did you ever tell Ashley about . . . you know . . . that time?"

He took his hand back, placed it on the steering wheel. But he couldn't take the grin off his face. "I'm glad you still remember, Em."

"That was before Charles and I were serious. You know that, right?"

"I do." He took his hand off the wheel again, this time setting it in the space between them. "I don't regret it, though, if that's what you're getting

at. Ashley and I were going through some tough times and you were there. You've always been there for me, Em, even when you're not."

Emily didn't know exactly what Paul meant by that, but he was grinning again.

"I needed this," Emily said to Ashley. And then to a passing gentleman, "Can I interest you in an apple pie? It's for a good cause. Only two bucks apiece; all proceeds benefit St. Andrew's."

The man wanted to stop, but his wife tugged him toward the white, chalet tent where the magic show would soon start. All he could do was shrug his shoulders, which made Emily laugh because the man looked utterly helpless. It didn't take much to make her laugh this evening. Laughter came up on her suddenly and often, like she'd been drinking too much homemade wine. She could sense Charles' sadness even across all that distance. She wished there was some part of the fun she could take home to him.

"I knew you needed this," Ashley said. She was the taller of the two sisters, and slender as a cornstalk. Yet she possessed a sturdiness and strength that Emily physically lacked. "It's Charles again, isn't it?"

Emily nodded shyly. "I don't know how to help him. If I could only conceive. I don't even know if it's completely his fault I haven't." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Paul edging around a tent post, strolling from table to table, but more often looking at her than at the merchandise for sale. He had a fierceness about him that was at once frightening and enchanting—a man who knew what he wanted and was self-confident enough to get it. At first she thought it was just a game and returned his stare. Maybe that's when the idea for what happened later began to form in her mind.

"Give it time," Ashley said. "He'll come around."

As the sky turned dusk and dark blue crushed out the pink of setting sun in the west, a trumpet player announced the commencement of the magic show. A hundred or so people flocked toward the large gray tent. A hundred or so more still meandered between tables.

"Let's go, Ash," Emily said.

"I can't," Ashley said. "Look at all the people still here and all the pies we have left. If I don't sell them, they'll go to waste."

Emily felt an arm slip up from behind and hook her own. "Come on," Paul said. "I'll be your date tonight."

The show wasn't anything special. From her vantage point in the far left bleachers, she could see the truth behind the magic. Someone was crouched beneath the elevated stage, reaching up through a small trap door to put the rabbits and doves and impossibly long scarves into the black hat. It all seemed pretty ridiculous.

She glanced over at Paul. Again she thought of how much he reminded her of Charles. Paul's hair was straighter and not as black, but the facial features were uncanny, the slope of the nose, the cleft chin. And later, when she could stand the show no more and asked him to walk with her in the field behind the fairground, she almost called him Charles by mistake. It happened as an extension of her thoughts—she'd been imagining him sitting all alone in their house right now, eating leftover meatloaf or a slab of salted ham.

"Has his wound healed yet?" Paul asked.

"You know about the wound?"

"Of course I know. I was there when it happened."

Strange, she thought. She knew they'd served together, but she hadn't realized they'd fought together in The Jungle. She took for granted that he had no scars and very few soldiers survived The Jungle without at least one.

They'd stopped by a spring, the only cool place in the summer night, and water spilled from pool to small pool. They sat side by side on a huge tree stump. The crickets were clicking and the sound blended well with the running water.

"It's killing him," she said finally.

Paul looked alarmed. "I had no idea it was still a threat."

"Oh, no, no," she said, grabbing his hand. Paul's hands were much softer than Charles.' "Inside, I mean. It's tearing him apart because he wants a child and he thinks the bullet's made it so he can't.

Paul nodded sympathetically and placed a hand where her dress had hiked up to her thighs. "I wish there was something I could do."

Out here, away from the fairground, there was no light to give away the color of his hair. She reached up into the dark and touched his face.

So similar. Almost the same person. She'd considered this earlier, perhaps even before today.

"There is," she said.

When Paul and Ashley brought her home the next evening, Charles was nowhere to be found. The faded blue pickup was in the driveway and the south field was all planted. He must've worked till midnight, she thought.

"Should we wait with you?" Ashley asked.

"No," Emily said. "I'll be fine."

Ashley didn't look so sure. After all, Emily's crying probably kept her awake most of the night. Through the wall, Emily could hear Ashley's muffled voice asking Paul what could possibly be the matter.

Emily carried her carpet bag of clothes upstairs to the bedroom. His bed was still made but the covers were imprinted with his shape, so she knew he'd slept here. She set her clothes on her bed and gazed out the window. The Roadmaster was just a speck vanishing over the hilltop. She scanned the fields for another speck that might be her husband, but nothing was there except corn and wheat. She thought she'd gotten it all out of her system last night, but she fell onto her bed and began to cry again.

An hour passed, the sky was clear and full of stars. The moon peeked above the trees. Where was he? Did he know? Did he somehow find out about what she'd done last night?

She paced by the kitchen table, picking her fingernails, sweat building on her neck and dripping down her back. Occasionally she ran a nervous hand over her belly—had one time been enough? Once was all she could do it. After that she could no longer imagine his hands belonged to Charles. She was scared, suddenly doubting that she'd made a mistake. What if he found out? She knew Paul would never tell, but what if Charles guessed it on her face, the way she paced now, frantic with her own failure. And even if he never knew, did she really think she could make him happy? All she had to give was this. What if it wasn't enough? And where was he now, her sweet Charles, her sweet wounded man?

The door knob clicked and the door opened inward. Charles appeared, damp stains hanging around the collar of his shirt and below his armpits. He hung his hat on the hook and his hair was matted to his head, but his eyes glittered in the light like an animal's.

"Where were you?" she asked, throwing her arms around his thick neck. He reeked of earth.

"At the Johansen's place. He needed help planting a field."

"I was worried," she said, still hugging him. She'd already decided she might never let him go.

He pulled her arms down, though, taking hold of her hands and kissing her palms. Then he reached into his trouser pocket. "Mrs. Johansen gave me this." He brought out a burgundy-colored cloth bag pursed shut with gold braided twine. He undid the twine and emptied the contents into her cupped hands.

She held the necklace to the light, the heavy silver chain laced around her fingers. From the chain hung large, teardrop-shaped turquoise gems fringed with the same silver as the chain. Unlike diamonds, which were clear, these gems were opaque in appearance yet still seemed to sparkle as if from some other magic.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"It's a squash blossom necklace," he said. "The Navajo use it for fertility. Mrs. Johansen believes in it, too—all four times, she said. And she says you're supposed to wear it when we … while we're … you know." His eyes lowered to the floor.

"Don't," she said softly, placing her hand over his. "Here. Put it on me."

His fingers were trembling as she handed him the necklace. She turned around and lifted her long blonde hair off the back of her neck. She felt his shaking fingers against her skin as he fastened the chain. The gems hung heavy and solid from her neck like giant turquoise teardrops falling toward her breasts.

Later, when they came together, she cried.

Shortly after their son was born, they exchanged their two separate beds for one large one. Now, if she woke up through the night, she could reach over and touch him and be comforted. Often, though, he was not there and when she rolled over she'd see him bent over the crib, arms reaching in to pick up his son. He'd raise the boy into the moonlight for all the stars to see the perfect little being he'd helped create. She'd never seen him so proud, especially when he held the child for the first time and pointed to the small blotch of a birthmark behind the boy's right ear.

4 Years to Live. 6 Minutes to Die.

Jared Gerling

The butterflies in my stomach felt more like angry hummingbirds.

"Lane 6, give me half a stroke."

My heart was thrumming in my ribcage.

"We have alignment. We will be going on a five-count command."

I sat up and moved to three-quarter slide, that cocked position where the rowers' legs are bunched almost completely to the front end and the oar is extended out in front of him. I met the eyes of my coxswain briefly. She gave me the slightest of nods, her eyes fierce, her expression grim and determined.

"All rowers sit ready," the official said. I heard my stern four breathing in slow, measured breaths. My bow four I could only presume were doing the same. I forced my hands to relax around the oar handle. Rowing with a death grip like that can cause cramping and worse.

"Five."

I glanced over to my right. Wisconsin. Beyond them Purdue.

"Four."

I looked to my left. U of M. Temple University. Army.

"Three."

I got my head back in my shell and tensed my body for that first stroke, the first of a couple hundred.

"Two."

Grand Final. Varsity 8. Two thousand meters to go. Six minutes to die.

"One."

Breathe.

"*Row!*"

2005 George B. Lawson Essay Award, First Place

David Halberstam in his book, *The Amateurs,* follows the lives of amateur rowers, all of whom have Olympic aspirations. In it he describes rowing as a process of tearing yourself down every day at practice and then voluntarily waking up the next morning to do it all over again. Halberstam compares the lives of collegiate rowers to those of soldiers who knew terrible hardships and sacrifice that only fellow soldiers could understand.

> During their college years the oarsmen put in terribly long hours, often showing up at the boathouse at 6:00 AM for pre-class practices. Both physically and psychologically, they were separated from their classmates. Events that seemed earth-shattering to them—for example, who was demoted from the varsity to the junior varsity—went almost unnoticed by the rest of the students. In many ways they were like combat veterans coming back from a small, bitter, and distant war, able to talk only to other veterans.[1]

I found that Halberstam was right, the sport of rowing takes something more than just physical prowess or being as strong as an ox. It takes mental prowess as well, and having a will that's more like a vein of iron running through the rower's core. More, it takes sacrifice. One of our favorite sayings that we stole from a t-shirt at a regatta in Cleveland is, "I can't, I have crew."

The first few weeks and months you have to get used to your free time being slowly siphoned away like air from a balloon. You have to realize this is a commitment, a very, very large and taxing commitment. The sport chews up and spits out more athletes than a farmer chews tobacco.

If you can hang on for those first few months, you know you have that iron will needed to hang on till the last. Even if you get there and you can't breathe.

The first 40 strokes I came to the realization I wasn't going to make it. This was normal. This is how every race starts. Needles were pushing themselves into my legs on every stroke. My shoulders ached. My arms were going to fall off. My chest heaved and my lungs burned. And this was only the first few hundred meters. This was with five minutes or so left go.

I was sitting stroke, that is the person the other seven guys follow. I was in the stern, my coxswain hunched over in front of me, and we had taken

it off the line like monkeys on speed. Those first 40 strokes are about pure horsepower, prying the boat to its maximum speed and then hanging onto every stroke after that. Water flew all around me, coxswains screamed.

"Are you giving up now? This race just started! I want everything you have right now! Empty the tank on every stroke!"

It was chaos regimented into six lanes.

I knew if I could just hang on, and my guys behind me did the same, we might be able to finish this race alive.

The flyer I got read, "We aren't a Varsity team, we just row like one." Which is true enough. But the part that really caught my eye was a smaller caption at the bottom. Three words that always seem to suck people in no matter what's being advertised. "No experience necessary." So, I was sucked.

At the informational meeting, the coach, soon to become the illustrious "Coach," said something that kind of made sense. Kids go to college to get the "college experience." Now, you can interpret this any number of ways. Getting drunk, partying, hanging with friends. More getting drunk. More partying. All of that stuff, I guess. But, these experiences are no longer unique, if they ever were. Almost every kid comes to college thinking he's going to do things that no one has ever done, experience things that no one has experienced, but that's bullshit. It's all been done before. So I opted to try something new, something only a few have dared to try; brave the harsh realities of the collegiate rowing world. Or maybe I was brainwashed as well, but in a different way.

"There's the halfway mark! Focus guys, focus! We're right here! We're pulling away, keep these boats off of us! Power 20 for pushing it through!"

If I finished I was going to have to be dragged from the boat. We were settled at 34 strokes per minute. To keep that up for six minutes is crazy, but it's how we were trained. The occasional grunt blasted out from one of the guys behind me. To do anything more was just a waste of energy. There is no yelling or screaming by rowers in a race.

We had two seats on the other boats in the race with 1,000 meters left. We were halfway home. I couldn't really feel my legs. I felt the smooth wood of the oar handle and the fire building in my lungs. I could feel the run of the boat as we tapped our blades out of the water, the click of the oarlocks as eight blades were feathered off at the same time. We glided to the front end, arms extended, knees bending. We were eight giant springs ready to unload all of our energy through the water. Our blades sliced back into the water in unison, and we unloaded.

Legs. Back. Arms. Tap out. Do it again.

I could only see my feet. I never look up in a race.

How many kids with genuine "college experience" can say they've competed physically with some of the best teams in the nation? How many have anything to show for four years of classes, homework, and horrible papers besides a diploma and some hazy memories of a drunken weekend that could be any weekend, that could be every weekend?

I nearly lost my mind my freshman year during winter training. Since crew is a year-round sport, you obviously can't row outside in January. We head indoors to our erg-room; a small concrete bunker with 15 or so ergs. Ergometer is the technical name for a rowing machine. They are the devil. We sit on these machines for two hours a day, every day, from Thanksgiving break till Spring Break. The coxswains yell at you. The coach yells at you. You stare at numbers. You stare at the wall. You hurt. You spit. You puke. It is the most mind-numbing, physically demanding experience an athlete can endure.

But day in and day out, there we are. And my freshman year, I nearly went insane.

I was huffing and puffing like a dying locomotive. My legs had feeling again, but it was more than needles, it was swords skewering my legs. It was us and one other boat, I didn't know who.

We both had a few seats on the other four boats in the race. I risked a glance up at my cox. She was shouting into the mic that's connected to the speakers in the boat. Most of the race, I don't hear what she says. It's like someone yelling underwater. I pick up the inflections and the general

meaning. Numbers help, that is when she counts out a ten (ten strokes) or something to that effect.

"I want you to pick it up six beats in two strokes. We sprint from here to the finish! I want you to die! I want everything you have!"

"One!" I strained my arm muscles just that little bit more.

"Two!" I pushed that much harder with my legs against my stretchers, my muscles stood out like cords on my thighs. We made the move, but I knew I wouldn't make it. My mind was screaming for me to stop, but we kept going like some kind of macabre insect with eight legs crawling its way down the river. We were a machine running in the red. But, we were almost home.

To balance both the sport and the academic life is like juggling fire; if you screw up on one, the other is going to come down and burn you. But if you can manage it, it makes you all the tougher. I come home from practice in the morning, shower, eat, go to class. Sometimes I fall asleep in class, but I still go and I study and I learn. I work at papers, I work at practices, always active, always in motion. The spring months fly by as we compete every weekend to come home to class after class. Emotionally I become drained, physically I'm perpetually exhausted. My pen blurs, my mind sweats. But I keep going, keep moving, keep writing.

My vision is blurry. Sweat pours from every part of my body. I hear coxswains screaming. I can barely hold onto my oar. I can barely push with my legs. I wonder absently how the rest of the guys are doing. I pull. I pull. I keep pulling. Then. Is that a horn?

"Paddle down, guys! Good job! Hell yea guys! That was amazing!" My head swims and I fall over backwards. I gulp down air. My hand drags through the water as I let go of my blade. I hear cheering. I see a bird fly into the sun, to disappear within its hot eye. We did it. I made it.

NOTE

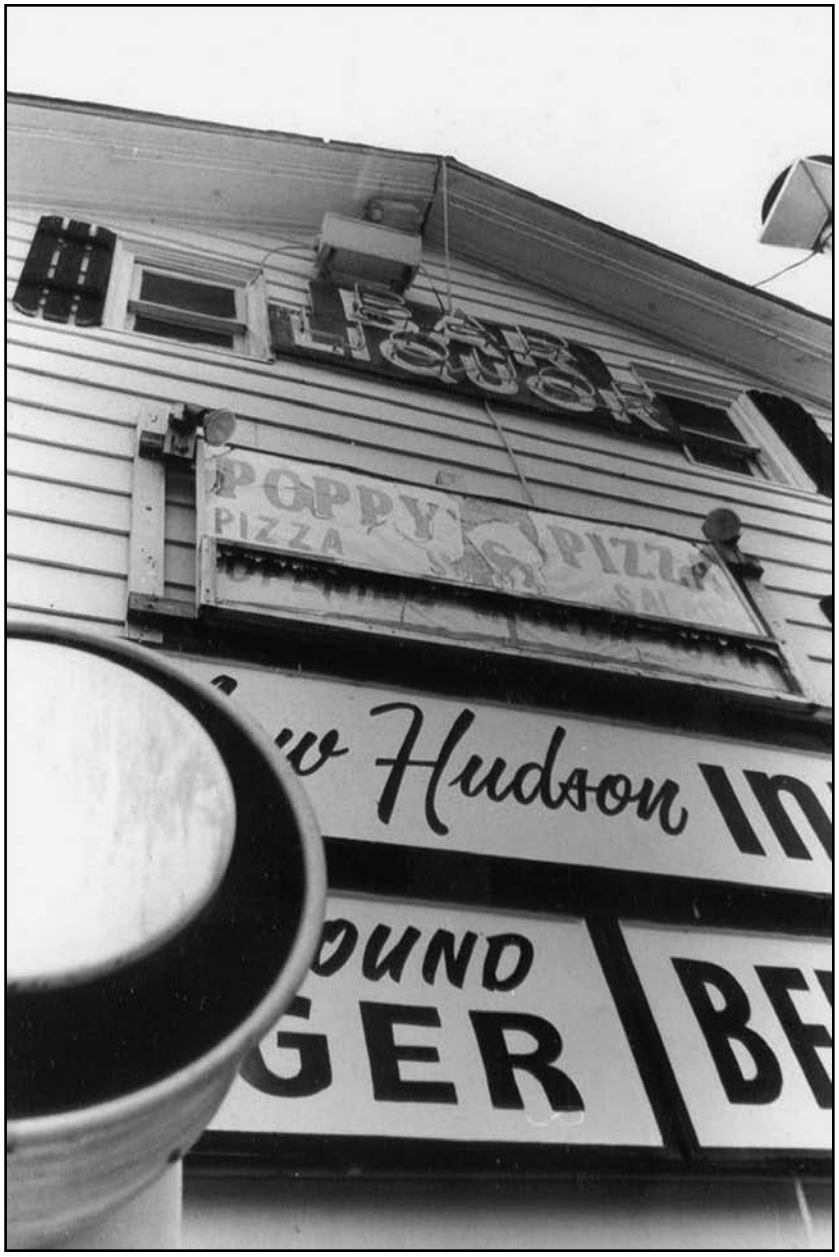
1. David Halberstam. *The Amateurs* (Random House Publishing Group, 1996).

Akira. Wilco - Via Chicago. Sixteen-second exposure © 2006 Cedric Tai

Frequency Chicago

Cedric Tai

angels don't live in
brightly lit rooms with TV
they only watch You.



Dish-washing. Overcast. Clues © 2006 Cedric Tai

Advertise

Cedric Tai

on motorcycle
stop to get a moment's rest
hit on a waitress

The Last Drifter from Flagstaff

Jeffrey C. Alfier

With his backcountry permit long expired
and running from cops or bad love or both,
he told hotel clerks he came to see stars
from trailheads at night atop Humphreys Peak.

Since we locals have seen all kinds float through–
the dreamers and the dead-enders, preachers
with the latest distortion of Jesus–
we liked this drifter without a gospel.

But death can't hide from towns of five-hundred,
so when he turned up dead here in Ash Fork
even elk hunters came in from the fields
to ponder the riddles he left behind:

timetables for trains that long quit running,
or old keys for locks he swore went to rust;
snapshots of children he never spoke of,
folded and unfolded a thousand times.

The Alligator Wrestler

Richie Smith

Marion and I hug, but it no longer feels right.

"We don't talk enough,"

"You don't listen to me," she says.

"I listen all the time," I say. "You don't laugh at my jokes anymore."

Marion smiles.

We stare at each other for a minute. The skin around the corners of her eyes has formed the shape of playful stars, from those dozens of summers spent on the open decks of boats, at the club playing bridge or reading historical romances with her ankles soaking in an antique wading pool.

I smile back. Both of us know that in the old days, this would be time to have sex.

It doesn't happen.

Two months later, I'm at the urologist's office.

"You have erectile dysfunction," Dr. Shapiro says. He stares at me with the pretentious glee of an urban professional. One with a newly-laminated diploma and a young man's prick.

"Have you ever had this problem before?"

He doesn't give me a chance to answer, not that I am willing to reveal the story of the drunken college stupor, when I blew my only chance with the visiting cheerleader in her licorice scented panties.

"Could there be a psychological reason for it?"

"Have you had trouble performing before?"

"Does your penis engorge fully when you sleep and retain its thickened shape in the morning when you have to fiercely urinate?"

I don't remember my answers to his questions, but eventually Dr. Shapiro hands me an octagonal pill.

"Take one of these an hour before you plan on having sex."

An hour seems like a pretty long time.

I imagine myself passing Marion in the hallway again.

"How can you wait an hour after you decide to have sex?"

Dr. Shapiro gives me a patronizing smile. "If you can wait for sex as long as you waited to see me in the waiting room, things will probably work themselves out."

Weeks later, the night before the night of Marion's birthday, we try to be extra nice to one another.

We sip on velvety wine and dip the ends of stale pita bread into a garlicky paste of hummus.

We both speak and actually listen.

Marion even laughs at a few of my jokes, and I assume it is time to take one of the pills. Of course, it's hard to know for sure, but if I have to wait a whole hour, I can't take any chances.

The bathroom smells from mildewed towels, and there are lumpy streaks of dried Crest on the corner of the nearly rusted porcelain basin. One of the florescent light bulbs is out, and the other gives my face a half-shaven, sallow look as if I'm painted with one of those inferior quick-tanning lotions or, even worse, have an undiagnosed case of pancreatic cancer.

I think back to my virile days with Marion.

I would awaken with powerful erections. At times, even after a night of award-winning performance, on my way to work, I recalled fighting the unyielding serpent, forcing its sinewy, leathery body back under the waste-band of my Jockeys.

Those were the days when we both looked our best.

I had no gut, Marion's thighs were trim, and we were able to tolerate huge doses of lactose in milkshakes and croissants.

I take the octagonal pill without thinking much about it.

I take a second octagonal pill and then another.

I know it should make me dizzy, so I return to bed immediately. Marion has consumed the remainder of the hummus platter, and the television is on again. There is a pornography star from the 70s, gone politician, debating with an alligator wrestler over misuse of the American flag.

I turn to my wife of thirty-nine years and touch her on the shoulder, because I don't know where else to begin.

It's too soon. The medicine has not yet kicked in. I ask her if it's okay to flick the channel. She doesn't stop me. I flip passed images of a rare species of aardvarks engorging themselves on colonies of army ants and status reports on the war in Iraq. I settle for the channel linked to a

security camera at the front of the apartment entrance. It shows an empty foyer and a darkened street. Fog arrives in wisps. The snowy black-and-white images remind me of a cross between the original Apollo moon landing footage and an old Dracula movie.

I stroke along Marion's flank where the diet shakes, fat-free muffins, tofu sandwiches and "sensible low-carb dinners" have accumulated like rings around the trunk of a great, aging oak. She is only slightly plump, not yet unattractive; in fact, she is in better shape than I am, her groin muscles tight from all those Kegel exercises.

I wonder if the medicine is working and look down to check. The thought of Marion going to the obstetrician shortly after the conception of Henry excites me. As if rewinding an old porno movie, I recall the time she performed fellatio while we were on the Ferris wheel. How she rubbed her drooling chin along the soft underbelly of my still-functional phallus.

I'm not sure if it's the thoughts of those earlier lustful days or something wonderful with this medication, but my penis begins to grow, and it does so in different directions, first at the bottom and then towards the middle as if it is being injected with some kind of molten silicone. I feel the spongy layer thickening, and there are new muscle fibers that seem to swell from the area at the base where it attaches itself into my loosening pelvis. My testicles seem to roll up inside like I've taken a dip in an icy Finnish whirlpool. For a second, I worry that perhaps I'm the one with the weakened pelvic floor, although I'm sure it must have something to do with my prostate.

From the security surveillance camera out front, a Korean man enters with an armful of groceries. I wonder if he is delivering for someone, or if he lives in the building. A woman slides by him. She is young, might be attractive, but it is too hard to say, at least from the surveillance camera footage.

I wonder how much time has gone by since I've taken the pills and look down from the television back to my groin.

Now there's a monstrous protrusion extending from areas of the groin I never knew I had. For the first time it becomes a bit painful, and I am almost tempted to run to the family medical manual to see if this is normal.

Then again, perhaps this is unnatural after all. Just like a sixty-year-old woman shouldn't become pregnant with in vitro fertilization techniques or donor eggs, maybe it's not normal for a man nearly sixty-five years old to have such an overwhelming rigid and steel-like hard on.

And what if this thing won't go down afterwards?

The fear only lasts a few seconds.

Soon I am back to my thoughts of lust, and I keep picturing that blowjob on the Ferris wheel.

I'm still not sure Marion is ready.

I move my hands down below the thick brown mat near the area that I think is called the moons pubis, and I try to work my way in there to loosen things up a bit and get ready to put this reptile back to work.

I work hard at pleasing Marion long after my own pleasure has subsided.

The television still reveals closed circuit snow and departures from some of the younger kids in the building, off to take advantage of their own unassisted, unaltered sexuality.

Finally, Marion climbs off and washes herself in the bathroom, leaving me alone with the flashing surveillance images on the black-and-white screen. My phallus is still exposed, reddened, almost denuded along its length. I wait patiently for it to settle down, but it is almost as if the more I push it down to get it back into my pajama bottoms, the more rigid and painful it becomes, like some kind of bizarre wicker, green-and-red woven pair of faulty Chinese handcuffs.

I am concerned, so I get out of bed and make my way, with the pajama bottoms around my ankles, towards the dining room bookshelf where we keep the family medical advisor. I open to the section on sexual enhancers and locate the small, octagonal orange pill. I wonder why such an evil thing made it into a family medical handbook in the first place. Then I open to the section on side effects and read past the warnings about precipitating heart attacks and death from certain drug interactions.

At the bottom, in small print, is a section about painful erections that fail to subside after hours, days, and weeks. Something called "priapism," and I call out to Marion, "I think I've got it."

I call Dr. Shapiro's office and wait for the emergency service to call me back promptly while Marion gets ready for bed in her post-coital shower cap and matching flowered housecoat. She flicks the remote back to the talk show where the alligator wrestler is now pushed off to the side, forced to listen to other people's memoirs.

Dr. Shapiro's service calls back. It is an old woman with a guttural five-pack-per-day cigarette voice and oscillating phlegm. She asks me what is the problem and I am too embarrassed to tell her that I have a painful,

throbbing penis surrounded with the late middle-aged man's equivalent of diaper rash. Instead of asking for her advice and for an emergency call to Dr. Shapiro, I simply ask about his office hours. I pretend I have a question about my PSA, and she directs me to call back in the morning and speak to the office staff since it is a "routine" matter.

Some half-hour later Marion is asleep. The surveillance camera is back on screen and the bulbous tip of my vital organ turns a more menacing shade of blue. It is so tender that I can't even stand the weight of the sheet covers. It reminds me a bit of the stories I once read about FDR and the pain he had in his legs after the polio, only this is not polio, and the penis has to be more sensitive than the legs.

I try to devise some kind of tent with my knees on either side supporting the blankets like I used to do when I snuck comic books and a flashlight during childhood, or when I first hid myself in the same bed years later with women's fashion magazines during my earlier experiments with masturbation.

Sometime soon, Marion wakes up and sees that I am not getting any better. She throws off the covers and tells me to get out of bed.

"I am taking you to the emergency room," she says.

I put on a baggy, gray-and-white print rayon shirt with large flowers, not unlike Marion's mangy housecoat. It was last worn twelve years ago on a cruise during a week that we had sex twice. I pull sweat pants up around my painful member, leaving it, unfortunately, still exposed.

We make our way into the car. My seat is inclined. It is the first time my Taurus has seen a naked penis.

Once at the hospital I wait in the car. Marion goes inside and returns with a Jamaican man in braids pushing a wheel chair. I am embarrassed at first, so I hold an empty tennis ball can to shield my genitalia as he wheels me into the emergency room.

We pass a shivering homeless man. He reeks of alcohol and vomit. A brown liquid oozes from a wound in his leg like giblet gravy. Alongside, a woman with a beehive hairdo wheezes musically into a nebulizer.

After quite some time, Dr. Lee, a Korean doctor in the emergency room, approaches with a shiny part across his black hair.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"I took this pill," I say, and remove the tennis ball can. "Now this won't go down."

Dr. Lee swallows. I stare hard to see if he is trying to conceal a smile.

"What kind of pill?"

Marion opens her purse and shows him the remaining few.

"This one."

"How many of these did you take?"

"Three."

He eyes me suspiciously. "Three at the same time or three times separate?"

"Three pills thirty seconds apart," I say.

"So really three pills together?"

"Yes, shortly thereafter."

"Why did you take the second and third pills so soon?"

"I am a big guy," I say. "Usually medications don't work too well on me."

Marion cuts in, "It was the day before my birthday." She shrugs, "I think he was trying to impress me."

Dr. Lee doesn't seem to understand. If he does, he doesn't find it very funny.

He hands me an ice pack and comes back a few minutes later for an injection.

Somewhere along the way, I am also given a sedative or two, perhaps some Tylenol or something stronger. Whatever the case, I fall asleep and soon see myself pounding reptiles with my own swollen erection, until Marion rips off her flowered housecoat and forces me back onto the Ferris wheel.

When I awaken, a puddle of melted ice and recently discharged semen runs off my thigh to the edge of the gurney.

Soon we are back at home.

The television still glares from across the room, only this time, Marion cuddles next to me.

Outside, the surveillance camera captures the return of an early morning tenant.

I'm not surprised to learn that the alligator wrestler actually lives in our building.

The Field Was Still

Cedric Tai

Maybury Park. Engrish. Pas Cal © 2006 Cedric Tai

bask in morning air
run on never-ending hills
hold tight onto time.

A Minor Casualty of the Cold War

Jesse Reid Lawson

When World War II ended, Vienna, like Berlin, was partitioned into three zones—American, British, Russian. It became, if it wasn't already, an espionage hub, the main crossing point of spies and information between East and West. By the time I got to Germany, 12 years later in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (our horses had tank treads), the partitions had been recently dissolved, and the Russians officially had moved to Czechoslovakia, where it was our job to monitor them through binoculars, radar, and radio interception from the German side of the border. Some of them, a year before our arrival, had rumbled into Hungary and snuffed a revolution there.

Our counter-intelligence corps had an office in Vienna, but we hadn't heard of it then. If anybody knew about it, it was the Russians. Soldiers looking like civilians, with backpacks on BMW motorcycles and maybe Motoguzzis, would emerge from the city mornings, ride due east into the hinterlands, snap shots of Russian installations, and return evenings. There were, of course, other activities, but they were understandably kept under wraps. Of this, though, we knew nothing then.

I found myself at an Army post called Fort Skelly, in Regensburg, once used by German Luftwaffe pilots, an old, old city on the Danube in Bavaria. Regensburg was almost as old as Vienna, which could trace its lineage back two millennia to a Roman army outpost on "the frozen Danube." In June, I think it was, 1957, my roommate Jack and I took a two-day pass to Vienna. If we'd had the inclination and the time, we could have dropped a canoe onto the Danube in Regensburg and paddled our way to Vienna in a couple of days, helped along by the current on its way from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. By train the trip took about three hours.

Jack and I detrained in the Vienna bahnhof about 5:00 in the evening and set out to discover a hotel, dinner, some wine or beer, and Viennese

women. We found all of these things, except the women, by about 9:00 and decided to chance a dance club we were directed to called the Graben Cafe. From the sidewalk we could walk up half a flight of steps to the entrance to a coffee house. Also from the sidewalk we could see, through tall, uncurtained windows there, a few solitary, hatted men and women at tables reading newspapers over their coffee, looking a lot like my view of World War II. (My memory has unsmiling women, their eyes disclosing nothing, wearing '40s hats). Or we could walk down half a flight of stairs to drinks and perhaps dance partners, so we did. We found a small dance floor, a music trio, and cabaret tables, at about a third of which two or three women per table sat sipping drinks and chatting. Without hats. Couples were at a few of the others. Jack and I sat down at an empty one, ordered drinks, and began smiling at the women, most about our age—early 20s.

The empty tables, when we came in, seemed to be across the dance floor from the single women. Now, as we sipped the full-bodied Austrian beer, we tried to look cool, not an easy thing to do, because as soon as we sat down we found we were the objects of their attention, not the other way around. If you're an American, even in your civilian clothes you stand out elsewhere in the world like Donald Duck in a tintype. Or used to. Yes, there was conversation, but all the single women were gazing at us as they spoke. Well, we were the only two single men there—it was early. We settled upon two sitting together and decided we'd start with them. We asked, we danced, we joined them at their table, and an hour later all four of us were out on the sidewalk, laughing and teasing (this was when I discovered Austrian beer was more than six percent), escorting Marion and Elena to a club of their choosing.

Marion (there they say *Mah-ri-own*) had dark, dark brown hair, a natural complexion darker than "white"—and now, in summer, deepened a bit by tan—with brown eyes that contained a quiet depth I did not want to tear my gaze away from. A slight smile seemed to be constant, but she didn't laugh easily, rather wore a mild reserve. I had chosen her at the first, and Jack chose Elena, who had the blond hair of the north, a ready laugh, and flashing blue eyes that seemed not to hide anything but, of course, did.

They were walking us to a club they knew that offered a comedian and a stripper. Jack and I thought that was a bit strange and were suspicious it

might be a sucker trap, with overpriced drinks and cover charge, the women shills out trolling for young American soldiers. We balked at the idea with banter and a teasing refusal to cross streets and such, but they assured us the comedian was very good. So we went along. As it turned out, the prices weren't outrageous. Jack and I chose a table a couple of rows back from the dance floor, but signals from the management urged the girls to choose a cabaret table at the edge of the dance floor, me closest to that edge.

There was a reason. Although the Graben Cafe was well attended, this was not. There was another couple, silent, on our side of the floor, but all the other onlookers were staff. It was a Friday night, now about 11:00, which wasn't early in those days. Jack and I definitely felt we were in the fishbowl. Drinks were brought, the lights dimmed, and the stripper began her act. She started opposite us, made a twirl or two on the way over, heading obviously for us, dressed in a bustier, lacy bottoms, nylons, and heels. She stopped directly in front of me, offered me her back, and gestured, undulating to the music and evoking laughter from the others, for me to undo her hooks.

Now, let me just say that I contain a fair amount of theatrical ham, which led me to play the overprotected bumbler who at first refuses but, with urges from the crowd, manages, all thumbs, to finally, red-faced and muttering, get the hooks separated. But I took too long. The stripper's frustration with my shenanigans was apparent to everyone—her timing had been wiped out, which I had not foreseen as a problem—and the rest of her act suffered. On her way to her dressing room, parts of costume in hand, she stopped to say a few words to a man of about 45, whose face grew grim and who turned out to be the comedian. He began his act with a greeting in German, which neither Jack nor I understood, then switched to English, the words clearly directed at us, mostly me.

"Where are you stationed?" He didn't have to ask if we were soldiers, and his English was not heavily accented.

"Bavaria," we both said.

"Ah. So you speak German?"

We shook our heads no.

"Then how did you win the war?"

There was laughter all around. He was clearly taking scalps for his friend the stripper. I felt it was time for us to eat crow. Jack and I looked at each other and contributed our laughs.

Later, on the street, we couples separated to talk. I asked Marion if she could spend the night with me. She wasn't prepared to. She had told her mother, with whom she lived, that she was spending the night with Elena, who lived with her parents. They couldn't get out of it.

"But next time I promise," Marion told me. "Okay?" We exchanged addresses, and I told her I would write to let her know when I could come next. Jack didn't ask for Elena's address. Jack and I saw the city the next day and evening, and on Sunday, around noon, boarded a train for Regensburg.

I came back alone for the second visit, about a month later, arriving again on a Friday evening. Marion met me at the station, and we went together to the same hotel Jack and I stayed at before, which we had chosen from a list the Army made available. Just before entering the lobby, I asked her if she would go with me to the room.

"I don't think they will let me," she said. She knew. The desk nixed the idea. She had to wait in the lobby for me to deposit my bag and freshen up.

After a walk through the city, lingering on a bridge over the canal, which is a man-made branch coming off the Danube and then reconnecting on the eastern side of the city, we chose an outdoor table at a small restaurant off the main avenue. I discovered *gemütlichkeit* that evening. The table rested under an arbor whose leaves were at their prime—it was July but pleasantly mild. The sun had been down for half an hour, candles provided the only light, traffic sounded distant, and the music was classical, turned low. We had the timbre of our own quiet voices. Those from other tables washed over us, the words meaningless. The wine untethered us, the meal delighted, our words caressed, our gazes warmed, the ambience curved around us. We wanted to be no place else with no one else. Cares melted. *Gemütlichkeit*. One doesn't have to fall in love here, but I was falling.

Marion explained that she had to spend this night at home, with her mother. She knew a hotel for us the next night. On the sidewalk I asked her if she wanted me to escort her to her door.

"It will be about an hour more for you," she said. No matter, I said, I wish to.

We boarded an electric train at about 11:30. She lived in what had lately been the Russian sector—had always lived there. On the way she pointed at an open space in a park—there had been a huge statue of Stalin there,

she said. It had been quietly hated. When the partitioning ended, it lay toppled on the grass before the sun rose next morning. For a while we were traveling ten feet or so above the ground, and then the train stopped at a high platform under bright lights, where we stepped out and descended stairs to the ground. We crossed the street and were practically in front of her house. There was a walk through an arched-over carport beneath one end of the building that led to a door a pace or two away from the rear of it. She stopped and kissed me goodnight.

"My mother is sleeping, so I will not let you in. Tomorrow, in the morning, I will meet you in the hotel lobby at ten o'clock. That is all right?" I could hear a mild depression beneath her words.

"That's fine," I said. We kissed again, and she went inside. It was midnight. I wondered if I had taken a risk coming out there, but the ride back, though solitary, was well lighted, uneventful.

We spent most of the next day on our feet. There were the Belvedere Gardens on the edge of the city, once belonging to the Hapsburgs. As we strolled between rows of manicured hedges, a sculpture would suddenly peek out, but not until we were practically upon it. A garden of delight and surprise. The palace, seeming larger than Buckingham, looked down a long and wide grassy slope, and beyond that to a large pool landscaped into the slope, and then to the gardens—gravel paths between shrubs and flower beds and the surprising statues ensconced in evergreen alcoves.

And there was the huge quadrangle of a commons, in the center of the city, lined on all four sides by government buildings, shoulder to shoulder, from the 19th century. Stone sculptures graced building fronts every few yards, it seemed. Arches at the corners framed the only entrances to the quadrangle. I had brought my camera, and at one spot Marion, posing me, took extraordinary pains. "Move to the right. That's too far—back a little. Stop! No, wait. Just a little to the left now. Stop! Don't move."

"What's going on?"

"You will see when you develop the film." When I finally saw it, there was a gold halo adorning my head, borrowed from a bas-relief behind me.

We held hands, teased, romped our way through the day. The evening meal became sensual, even with the plain Austrian fare of those days. But the wine and the day and, I think, the foreignness of each of us to the other conspired to heat up our twenty-something libidos. We looked into

each other's eyes while we tongued vegetables, nibbled lasciviously at bones, tore meat off the fork, slurped desserts, and rolled wine around in our mouths. And, of course, constantly gazed at each other.

We decided to walk to the hotel. On the way Marion said, abruptly, "Let's sit in the park a little while." She took my arm and wheeled me around a corner onto a darker side street. No more than ten steps later, "There is a black car behind us, going slow; don't look at it," she said.

"What?"

"It is an old man who wants me to be his mistress. He keeps asking me, following me. I am sick of it. He is coming by now. Don't look."

I couldn't restrain myself. I took a casual glance, as if I were simply gazing about me, then turned my head calmly to the front again. It was an expensive black sedan, not American-made, nor German, at least not any make I knew. It was spotless, with a chauffeur, and couldn't have been doing more than 10 miles an hour. In the back passenger window the face of a man in a homburg, maybe 60, looked straight at me, intense. The nape of my neck prickled. The car continued slowly to the end of the block and turned right. Reaching the corner, Marion took us straight across the avenue and into a park. In a minute or so we came upon a bench under a bright streetlamp, nothing but bushes behind us and across the path in front. We sat. No one ambled by. As Marion talked about the man in the car pursuing her, the nape of my neck prickled again; the bushes behind us rustled, being shoved aside by something much larger than a squirrel or even a dog.

"There's somebody behind us," I said, "in the bushes."

"It is nothing. There is a . . . how do you say, slow mind?"

"Retarded?"

"Yes? A retarded man who lives near here and who likes to come into the park and watch lovers. He is harmless. He just sits and listens and watches."

"He understands English?"

"Yes, probably." She chuckled.

The rustling was clearly not stealthy, so I tried to ignore it. But I couldn't. There were too many grisly possibilities, it seemed to me. Marion stopped talking. The rustling grew closer. "Let's go," I said. "This is making me nervous."

"Please don't worry, it's nothing."

"Marion, it's the loudest nothing I've ever heard."

After a moment, "All right," she said, "you are uncomfortable." We went out to the street again and headed for the hotel. The desk clerk there had no questions about who was who. Once in the room, I kissed her immediately. She kissed me back, then put a finger to my lips. "You have a rubber?"

It hit like a mallet. "Oh no!" I groaned. "Dammit!"

"It's all right," she said.

"No it isn't. I'll go buy some."

"It's too late."

"Maybe the desk clerk has one."

"No." She began to unbutton my shirt. "Don't worry about it. It's all right."

"What do you mean?"

"We will do without it."

"We can't. What if you become pregnant?"

"Then you won't hear from me again."

"What!" That astounded me. It was nonsensical. "Marion, I don't want that."

"Sssh," she said. "I will not get pregnant. Don't worry."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

I looked into her face—it was calm, confident. We kissed again, fell onto the bed and made love without care. Except for the nagging rustling of the bushes. I don't know why neither of us suggested any of the myriad ways to enjoy sex without penetration. It never occurred to us. The sexual revolution had not yet arrived. We were young. Eager. Hungry. Naive.

We didn't spend the entire night. Marion said it would be unwise for her to be seen leaving the hotel in the morning. There were people just looking to report those things. At about 1:00 A.M. we left the hotel and got on the train to her sector. For me it was a bittersweet ride. This would be the last train we would be on together for a while. We got off at the well-lighted platform. I walked her to her door, and we kissed for a long time.

In her first letter after I got back, she told me she had a modeling job to do in Italy that would last a month. She said she wanted to leave Vienna and asked me if I could find work for her in Regensburg. I asked

around but could find nothing except housework or nursemaid work for the officers' families. That would be all right, she said, to start. I had collected a few phone numbers and told her she should come spend a week in Regensburg. "If I come there," she added, "it will be for always. I will not want to go back. But first I must go to Italy." She sent me an address in Italy that I could send letters to. I waited a couple of weeks, but there was nothing. I wrote to the Italian address, waited another two weeks. Still no letter. And none had been returned. I couldn't wait any longer; I had to go back to the light-filled platform, and I got a pass the following weekend.

I arrived in Vienna around 3:00 in the afternoon, returned to my usual hotel to drop my bag, freshen up, and get a bite to eat, and by the time I got to the old Russian sector, it was nearly 6:00. I walked to the door of her house and knocked. There was a wait. Finally the door opened, and a middle-aged woman in a shapeless housedress greeted me. *"Ja?"*

"Guten Abend," I asked. *"Ist hier Marion?"*

"Nein," the woman said abruptly.

"Marion Relke. She lives here."

"*Nein.* There is here no Marion Relke."

I thought I misunderstood. "She is in Italy?"

"Marion Relke does not live here," said the woman.

"There is some mistake," I said.

"Ja," said the woman, "that is right." And she closed the door.

"Wait!" The door did not open. I tried to turn the handle, but it was locked.

I know I did not mistake the place—I had been there too recently for that. I don't remember the ride back into the other sector, nor the return trip to Regensburg the next day. My mind would do nothing but sift through the evidence, looking for a key. There had been a race against the clock somehow, and she had lost. Was that it? That's as far as I could get. We both lost. And the question of whether I have a child living in Europe has stayed on my mind ever since.

There is a coda. I returned Stateside and mustered out in June of 1958. No later than August, an issue of Life magazine arrived at my parents' house. The feature article covered the East-West espionage activity of Vienna. There was a half-page photo of the main point of information exchange—it was the Graben Cafe. And I recalled suddenly that just

before I returned from Europe, a common soldier had been kidnapped by Russians who suspected he was a spy. They were mistaken, but they had kept him for a month or so before they returned him. He had been grabbed in a park in Berlin. I scoured the Life photos with a magnifying glass, looking for Marion's face.

In 1960 I married a New York girl, and we rented an apartment in Brooklyn. One day a friend I had taught school with the year before came for dinner and told me he was going to spend a month in Europe. He loved Vienna and would stay there at least two weeks. He spoke German well. While my new wife was in the kitchen, I told him my dilemma—in fact, I think I had told him when we worked together—and I asked him if he would go to the old Russian sector for me and do some detective work. I was desperate to have closure in the matter. He said he would.

When he returned, months later, we invited him again, and in a guarded moment I asked him what he had found. He was blasé about it all and seemed a bit surprised that I was still interested.

"Did you go to the house?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I found nothing."

"Nothing at all? She wasn't there?"

"You don't want to know," he said. I started to interrupt, but he quickly added, "There's nothing to know."

No matter what I did or said, he would give me no information and refused to move from his position that he had found nothing. I have convinced myself that no child existed, but my certainty, of course, is not 100 percent.

What are the possibilities? There are too many. One is that she stuck by her promise—broken off all contact with me because of pregnancy—which didn't make much sense if she wanted to marry an American. Another is that she did some low-level work for the Russians, such as maneuvering Americans arriving in Vienna to places where they could be checked out or possibly kidnaped. Did she really have a modeling job in Italy? Or she didn't become pregnant, but her work involving me had ended. Other people—the old man, Russian agents, the modeling agency—persuaded or forced her to drop me, refusing to let her leave. Or she stayed in Italy.

Well, my friend brought as much closure as he could. Now, 48 years later, I am single, and my curiosity, though faded, is growing again. I find myself picking through those shards in the quiet moments.

Notes to Myself

Charles Harper Webb

Who are *Don* and *Jan*? What did they want with me?
Why does *Hawk* soar, in my cramped cursive,
above a water bill? Would this number call some lost

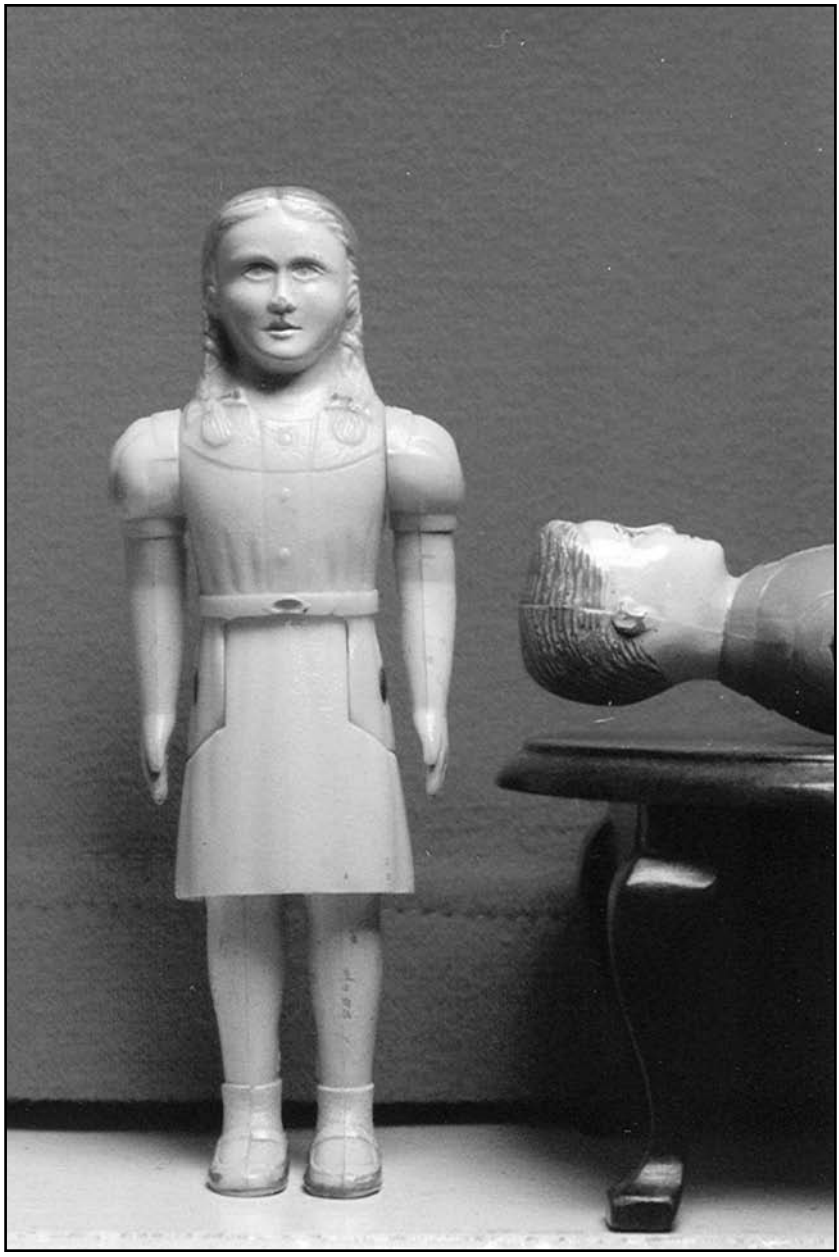
or future love? Would it wake a jealous man
who'd slit my throat? Did *Polish!* mean Chopin's
nationality? Was it a reminder to tell a joke,

or attend to my scuffed shoes before meeting
the ambassador? Is *Stuart—LA—Fence*
a builder of chain-link barriers, a teacher

of swordsmanship, or the guy to help dispose
of something hot? Was I supposed to meet Stuart
at a fence in L.A., fight a duel with Stuart *from* L.A.,

or build a fence around both Stuart *and* L.A.?
If I *Drive down Central, left at Culver,*
right at Birch, left at Inglewood, house on right,

will I step out of my car into a life that fits
snug as pajamas held by a woman and two kids
crying, "We've missed you so much"?



Arrangement

Jo Powers

The job of making art, to me, is manual labor fueled by ideas. The two processes drive one another. Ideas motivate me to mine the media and my immediate surroundings for visual references, to garbage pick for wood window frames and cupboard door panels, and to head for the garage to build my own wood panels. While I saw and sand, my ideas brew. When I stand before my easel and begin to paint, I must be physically up for the job. The motion of my arm, my stance, and the turn of my hand affect the communication of my idea.

An artist's job title could be defined as a purveyor of images. It can be difficult for artists to say why they are drawn to certain imagery, like people yelling and throwing punches, a lone figure framed in a window, a shoe on the roadside. Sometime in childhood we may discover that the drunken brawl spilling from a neighbor's house to the sidewalk is actually visually interesting.

I had always drawn to entertain myself. My father, a sign painter and artist, had all the goods to make that possible: huge rolls of layout paper, fat jars of thick tempera paint, from which he would pour gleaming dollops of primary colors. My favorite medium, though, was the humble ballpoint pen. For eighth grade graduation my parents gave me a Kodak Instamatic camera, and I discovered another way to satisfy the image-making impulse. I turned that compact little gadget in all directions: toward the sky, into the kitchen sink, at my mother's hands, and to small dolls. I posed the dolls in front of my father's paintings or out in the garden and could hardly wait to get the pictures developed.

My professional work has always involved staging the human figure. My themes have ranged from isolation to confrontation, from urban industrial to domestic interiors, from stilled figures, to figures in motion, from the poignant to the ridiculous. For figurative artists, the challenge is to find the right visual references for our ideas. I have always aspired to the pre-photography standard of working from life, but my ten years of

freelance deadlines forced me to compromise that luxury. I turned to photographic references and discovered that the trick was to work from the photo as if from life, with a sense of immediacy to keep the work fresh.

Recently, I've begun to recognize my reference drawings and photographs as legitimate ends in themselves, especially after realizing that I'd ruined so many of them with paint splatters and oily fingerprints. And I've returned to those small dolls, regarding them the same way I do people, as characters in an ongoing drama, played out everyday, all around us.

Minus My Mother

Colleen Farrow

My father 6 feet 4 inches tall
236 pounds, 56 years old and
4 months
minus my mother. Waiting.
For dinner he would feed me
minus my mother
salad from a bag,
ravioli, broccoli.
Frustrated at my meatless eating
at my ceaseless food-on-plate pushing
and me, at his ground-beef glaring

he asked,
"Can you eat anything else?"
"No.
I can't."

One evening I came home to him
alone on the couch.
Wrinkled. Shrinking
without my mother. Waiting.
My barely-worn striped sweater
woolen, dryer-shrunk
occupied his hands
the way his wife's absence
had taken new permanent residence.
In a scene someone else seemed
to compose, lacking her

he asked,
"Can you still wear this?"
"No.
I can't."

2005 Jim Cash Creative Writing Award in Poetry, First Place. This poem previously appeared in The Offbeat*/2005.*

The Fertile Yellow

Ryan Habermeyer

We're getting pregnant tonight, my wife says. She places a hand over the soft midsection of her abdomen. You remember, right? Don't keep me waiting, baby. Baby, baby, she says. She is dancing: hips and shoulders, sway and sway. She balances a glass mixing bowl in her hand. The batter rolls over the white end of the spatula in coagulated bulbs and folds.

I stand waiting. Wives and pregnancy are terrible things.

Murderous, she calls me. Murderer, murderer. These are delectable, laughing words for her. She shows raw teeth. One laugh, another. Kiss, kiss, she says. She nibbles at my earlobes, places lips over white crested knuckles. She nods, pleased, knife in one hand and carelessness eroded over her fluffy cheek bones and wax lips, chopped walnuts on the cutting board. It's after midnight and Claire is sending me out for eggs and vanilla. She insists: Do not forget the goddamn eggs, Jack.

I love my wife. Her love is a menace. How can I face her? How do you walk around as a murderer? Like you own it, I suppose.

Ann gloats: Give her your seed, give her that seed, Jack. I retire to the stairs, sit, listen to rain.

These nights have given way.

I have been delivered into mad bouts of pregnancy.

We had to lose the cat. Litter is sterile. Nothing sterile abides here, no, a mausoleum. There are consequences to consider. There are tiny thalidomide newborns. Three fingers, two nubs, wrists like Lego blocks and shovel hands.

Count them, she said. Count the fingers. She held the picture close. It was in color. One and two. Half of a third. See, she said, see them. I have ten fingers. Feet shaped like spears. Claire likes my fat toes. She wants children with fat toes, not ones with nubs and stumps. She wants them to play the piano. She wants to be able to suck on them.

Months, years even, without the cat. She yelled and I listened. There wasn't space to fit in any more words, apologies, space to even breathe. She kept coming, coming. I was trying to ruin our marriage, she said. There was fear in her voice, sustained and sung like wayward melodies, surging in strength with each dull thud of a kick, the back of her hand embracing the chalky residue of counters when aimed for my forehead, my cheeks, and me sweeping clean, swept clear of her wingspan. She bit. I still have the faint traces of marks, treasures and trophies, errant reminders, call them what you wish. She cornered me with a rolling pin, its smooth rounds crisp with flour, and I can remember not wanting to touch her because I was afraid for the baby. You could just begin to see the bulge in her stomach, the belly button in its first days of poking out like a miniature nose. Careful, I cautioned. Three months, first trimester: murderer, murderer. There was a nausea in my throat: a cluster of them hibernating, sulking and thick enough to pull out a single strand at a time. We pulled together, one body to the next.

But it happened there anyway—right there with arms circling, screams and kicks like the mad cries of Spanish conquistadores. She miscarried from hurting *me.*

Then everything was pale and cold and ambulances and Claire bleeding. I had first imagined puddles of blood from a miscarriage, blood to fill a room—there wasn't. I was surprised, amused at how clean the bathroom tile gradually appeared as Claire kept soaking it up with sponges, one after the next: green scrub, green scrub, yellow sponge, purge–water, blood, fleshy intangibles—she let all of them slip off her fingers into the garbage, down a drain.

I took a chair, acted as the man. Calm. Supportive. I lent a shoulder. She rose like a wave, lay there, bent on the tile, immobile.

By the time the ambulance arrived, I swear, and let me tell you I swear to *God,* she had been on her feet for twenty minutes making those damn sugar cookies. Even without the ingredients, she was trying to make them. By then there was nothing left to do but cry and say *fuck* and *shit* and hold each other. *God* and *damn* in the same sentence.

Sunday now. Dark after midnight, listening to rain and thunder which drip easily as music across the sky. I stare at Claire, my wife.

Yes, yes! I say. The goddamn eggs! The boots lace up easily. I feel the cords dig at my palms, the way my father taught me. Sometimes I hear his voice telling me the way to treat a woman; the way to love a woman is this, this, and more of this. I pull the sweater over my head and let the hood cover my ears. I look like a turkey. Claire rolls her eyes. Ann laughs, cradles the unborn child still wrapped in her skin, the dead weight of water and uterus and child a veritable solar plexus.

Ann is her younger sister. She is fat with someone's child. She's been living with us since the second trimester, eating our saltines and E-Z cheese, plowing through bottles of salsa and sticks of salami. People talk. At night I stare at them through a bedroom window, a red silk curtain: neighbors are always watching. In the beginning, Claire asked me to spy on her.

See what she buys at the store, what magazines she reads, how often she goes to the bathroom. I want to know everything. I want details, Claire said.

God, yes, yes, I told her. Brilliant, I screamed. I took notes; I kept her tabs, her information, performed my friendly neighborhood watch. Booklets and pamphlets. I followed, thankless and willing, god-willing I went. I have notebooks and notebooks full in drawers, drawers hidden from my wife. She cannot read my chicken scratch ink.

She is a gift; Ann, a human manna: flesh and blood, fat pregnant belly. They share gossip, muse over details about their father, relive trips to Lake Tahoe. Tonight they lick chocolate frosting from the bowl with their fingers. They decide on baby names. Claire rolls chocolate over a jungle tongue. It's dark chocolate because that makes Claire fertile. There is a long list of holistic remedies for women of Claire's size. There are ways to conceive, you must know: raw steaks and three glasses of whole milk every day for a month, a three hundred percent increase in cabbage consumption and no Mexican food on Friday nights. I've even tossed four hundred pounds of rock salt on the roof, an omen to the gods, any gods. I was up there for two days, evening it out, rimming it around edges and rain gutters until our house looked like a giant margarita. I have met with professors of strange languages, African, Near-Eastern, professors of cultures. I know the remedies.

There are pie tins and mixing bowls all along the floor. Cigarette butts, torn recipe pages wet with oil and flour. Claire chews nuts. She is an effortless glow. These nuts are strewn over the counters, nuts of all kinds:

blanched almonds, blisters, jumbo cashews, pecans, filberts, glazed redskins. One month's worth of nuts every two hours. Her chews smack against the flesh of her cheeks.

We are still awaiting our answer from the gods.

Ann wafts the smoke from Claire's cigarette out of her face complaining that smoking kills. It comes down on me.

Ann says, If this baby pushes its way out of my vagina to be subject to a lifetime of humiliation and retardation, I'm going to blame *you,* Jack. This baby isn't going to live in my uterus for nine months, Jack, then shoot out my vagina, *my* vagina mind you, Jack, to be retarded. I won't have it, she says. Can you listen, Jack? Then she glares. She is finished. The rain falls in quick bursts. I am not thinking of Ann's vagina. I still have nightmares of the thalidomide babies in the *National Geographic.*

We must have a subscription.

Ann likes the word vagina. She is obsessed. Her vagina must not be excluded from any civilized conversation. Ever since she's been pregnant she's been using the word freely: noun, adjective, sometimes even a verb. My vagina dilates ten centimeters when the baby comes, she says. I vagina-ed to the store, have you ever vagina-ed like that before? What a vagina day, don't you think? Or when driving: What the hell were they thinking that cross-eyed vagina vagina? It aches, it's sore, it burns; my vagina's lonely and talks to me at night; it needs a father. Lately it seems Ann is eating dinner for three and on more than one occasion I've looked under the table to make sure she's not sneaking it any food.

I feel for her. Christ, I really do.

But now my business is the goddamn eggs, the vanilla.

Oh God, Ann, Claire sighs. Perhaps she regrets extending her the invitation to stay with us until the baby comes. She shakes her head and then smiles at me. Just bring the goddamn eggs, she smirks. She blows a cloud of smoke towards Ann who gets up screaming about her uterus and Claire laughs and I smile. Claire is like that.

I am a man consumed of details: two miscarriages in nine months, eleven visits with her gynecologist, three wet nurses, six on-call midwives, four meetings with an unlicensed pregnancy specialist, and fourteen office visits at the fertility clinic. We don't speak of the miscarriages. If it isn't her ovaries, it's something else: my penis is *too* erect my sperm

too fertile or we're not in the right position I don't feel clean enough to impregnate morning is the best time to conceive but only after four shots of Listerine three flossings mid-day is a productive hour so leave work and drive forty-eight minutes in gridlock traffic. Feel stale, loathsome, tired; you want a baby, right?

Amen.

Listen. Listen.

Listen, Jack.

Or maybe my balls are retarded, my briefs are suffocating my testicles so either I'm killing them or producing retard sperm with three heads and no tails that swim frantic, obsessed, burrowing into the walls of her tubes like they're stoned, grooving with pics as they listen to *Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.*

It's someone's fault, make no mistake: her goddamn eggs, maybe a faulty uterus, frightened and lonely; lame balls, a dysfunctional penis—there are ways to find out, things to be done, pages and pages of tests and scientists to hire to analyze our data. But I'm not that kind of man. We love each other, me and Claire do—love culled with fever, a romance someone ought to make into a nice, clean comedy with bits of passion. But sometimes it just isn't enough to tear each other down while you cling to hope. You need the soft love, the kind my father used to talk about, the kind you only hear about in movies like *From Here to Eternity.* When we go to the doctor, it can be unbearable to listen to him, to each other. The anticipation kills us. Marriages can be like that.

Claire pulls me close, presses my lips to her neck, hands at her sides, feeling her, smelling smoke and perfume, watching the glittered spackle of sugar dance across her lips. Bone pressed to bone, her skin feeling of dry pine thistles. She laughs, hesitates to speak, then feeds me fingers of chocolate batter. She glides them around the rim of the glass bowl: one finger for Ann, two for me; chocolate that drizzles off her nails.

Then we are motionless. Her face looks stretched, ageless. It lasts seconds and then I know we've held each other too long. She knows, too. I move outside into the rain, the smell of skin on my lips.

Lucelli's has been in the neighborhood for generations. It is one of those places men of all kinds go to lose their minds and lose them at ease and

peace with the world. It is full of discounts and menthol cigarettes, golden bottles of liquor that sell at a two-hundred percent mark-up to teenagers and the cheap ice cream sandwiches, the ones my father used to take me out for as a kid.

I'm expecting a crowd. I find Bud, a stack of empty lawn chairs.

They're running behind? I say.

Bud shakes his head. Stopped, he says. Closed down.

No?

Bud nods. He sucks and chews the cigarette filter, hands deep inside his pockets. He itches his face with a fat finger. The rain gets heavy.

They're finished? I ask.

Finished. Christ, he says. What do they think we'll do now?

I can only shrug, look helpless.

Lucelli's belongs to Mom and Pop. Mom was raised here, spent her beautiful years milking cows, long walks through dry desert air, collecting eggs, hoping for golden ones to sell to fairies and princes. Pop was a failed door-to-door salesman, loved his wife, the land, wanted children, something to hold and call his own. She bore him chicken farms and a store with sad floorboards that won't even make noise when you step on them.

The process comes from East Germany, home to Mom and Pop's heritage. It was a small village, not many people. Every month like clockwork, military precision, this store is flooded with sixteen thousand gallons of yolk. It is all tradition. You might have read about it, seen our photograph. We became famous in the *North Star Gazette:* a mythical, cutting-edge society. Community of the future, they say. The photographer's name was Cuthbert. I remember his silly little English tie, the tweed jacket. Do you see the man in the upper corner of the photo? The man with a white baseball cap and muddy sneakers? I am that man. You know me.

Women take their children, husbands. Grandparents and lovers bring lawn chairs, make love in the bushes, careful not to make noise. We pretend not to hear their old skin clasping together as it carries on the jesting wrestle. It is approved by the County Health Department. Recommended. The miracles of sanitation explored through yolk. Sixteen thousand gallons of thickly stirred swimming yolks. Monstrous steel vat

in full motion: rims and side panels digesting copper rust, strange cyclic movements tumbling forward against the glass panes creating grooves and yellow bland foam.

Sputtering. Rapid volumes of yolk generating liquid faces that quickly dissolve and are lost. But the draw of it all, the reason why people come, is to step along that floor once the yolk has been vacuum-sucked dry. Sterile, spotless, fresh. Walking through the doors after the yolk is like being born. It gives a man purpose, destiny. It smells like the interior of a new car, a bullet exploded down the vaginal canal; of fresh cut pine, raw sewage, even; the ocean breeze and a barbershop. Different people, different smells. To me, it is always onions. Red. Organic. I love the feel of yolk on the skin. Relieves the itch. Dead itch. There's a cousin of Claire's who spent his whole summer in a chicken coop telling tales with the roosters, stealing eggs from the hens. Eventually they evicted him. Kid's a dumbshit really. But the women loved him. He swore by that yolk. Knocked up three girls. Couldn't be happier as a father, taking care of all those babies with his idiot nose, Polack smile. They published his story in the *New Yorker.* People love the damndest things.

There is no wisp of onions tonight. The floor looks pale. A draft of humidity, that's all. It cools as I get near the dairy section. I look through the window and see Bud still there, a small crowd of old regulars behind him. They have the look of a band of Vietnam vets thirty years late for the rally.

Pop approaches, looks glum with heavy eyelids. We having problems tonight? he asks. There is still German in him. Thick accents. Not even Pop can explain.

No, Pop, no problems, I tell him. I show him empty hands as an omen of good will.

You know the wife can't take any more episodes, he says, points a finger at Mom at the register. I wave, she ignores. Nearly killed her the last time, he says. I can't have her dead. She's no good to me that way, Pop says. There is a careless accent in his voice, maybe Scottish, not German at all. I picture Pop in a kilt, beady beef legs covered in Scottish hair, a pint of Dublin's finest red bitter brewing over his lips.

Right. Of course, I say. I assure Pop everything is under control. I am only coming for eggs and vanilla.

No more yolk? No more wash? I ask as he leaves.

Finished, he says.

There are ten rows of eggs packaged neatly in their gray cartons: Grade A, large and medium, white and brown, hundreds to choose from. I'm not sure if there's any difference. In the end, they're all just embryos. The gallons of milk look depressed: skim, non-fat, buttermilk, one percent, two percent; a world of lactose at my fingertips.

I'm hoping for Grade AA, something with a brutal punch. Nothing. I stay with the eggs, brown and white, open six, seven cartons until I find twelve that look immaculate, the holy grail of eggs.

There is a woman next to me with a cart and child, a tall woman with curves and a prominent chin and a boy, about a year, maybe two, who doesn't resemble her in any way and I can't help but wonder what in God's name she's doing with a boy. He stares at me. He's been coerced into coming here, duped into putting on his pajamas and out of his crib. His eyes are entirely smug, peeved at my sudden appearance, perhaps at my neurotic necessity to look through carton after carton, frantic, desperate calm written on my face, my swinging movements. He has dug into a bag of baby carrots, the orange flesh hanging loosely around his lips. He does his best to frown.

He is throwing carrots: grunting, later growling and when his face tightens all the blood rushes up, higher, higher. The size of it paralyzes me. It is like a giant tomato waiting to have a knife thrust into it. I hold out an egg between two fingers and display it for him, a great white nodule gleaming like a cancerous polyp. It falls on the floor and shatters.

Uh-oh, the boy says. He giggles.

I take off my shoes and sit, Indian-like. The tile is cold. After a few minutes I'm well into my second carton, a nice thick layer of yolk spread over the floor. Steady it roams, like an amoeba. The mother gives me a fat, disgusted look. I drop four more eggs. An even two dozen.

Then standing, I crunch the shells into the yolk and whites under my bare feet, creating one layer of mixture and spread it around. I dance. It continues to move, slow, deliberate. When the dancing picks up, just when I'm beginning to feel the music, the woman moves to push the cart. She looks, terrified, picks up her pace. The boy throws his carrots, claps and bounces, rattles the cart. It's his smile that gets me. Maybe the carrot up his nose.

I was a hockey player in high school, but with the egg in my hand damned if I don't give a full wind-up like Sandy Koufax and hurl that son

of a bitch egg right at his face where it connects just above his left eye. His head whips back, there is a sound—dry, like bone parting over rocks, and it comes down, that gargantuan spectacle, snapping forward and he screams, his mother falling into hysterics and the egg is still exploding everywhere—bits of shell, yolk and egg white—all of it suspended in animation. He's covered in yolk and tears. The mother takes him in her arms and pulling him out of the cart, she runs.

I can't even be sure of what I've just done. I feel like I am hanging from wires on a stage of papier-maché. What I do know is that the average conception rate among women is just over six percent. Claire has printed reports from the library, stacks of them taped to the walls of our home, the telephones, all on the national fertility rates among women. There were 8,192,000 pregnancies alone reported in the United States last year. Black women in Ohio age twenty to thirty-four were the most fertile women in all of the United States, boasting a rate of sixty-two percent. More than forty percent of all pregnancies were reported as unintentional. *Ohio,* of all places.

I have experience swimming with eggs, drowning in yolk. Typical night, like any other: dark, soured, and frustrated. I was trapped in that vat of steel cleansing: that yolk, the swirling, the rusted panels and foam. I wasn't scared, never afraid of death or the sensation of drowning. I let it come to me.

Claire didn't believe. She turned rabid, frightened. She couldn't listen, raised, coming, coming after me, more and then more again. But it was true, it happened; only she didn't want to believe.

I made wind sprints down each aisle, past rows of black beans and cornmeal. One wall to the other, the other. My legs were heavy, like fly fishing on the moon. I had come for yolk, found myself trapped in gallons of yolk, awaiting the release drowning would assure. I did not want to go home.

Danced and danced in slowly filling yolk cages. She couldn't begin to understand, to know why I was there, and dancing? Puckered lips, inverted knees and swayed hips. She said later, You don't dance, do you, Jack, baby, baby Jack, do you have hips to sway? and I held her, let her feel those hips and knees, prove my love. She wouldn't make love to me for weeks after, the two of us, terrified.

The yolk rose, I told her. And I awaited the inevitable.

Baby, baby; believe, you got to believe.

It was drowning—that and nothing less. It was not swimming or snow angels. The yolk rose, swarmed over me and lolled like a child's tongue over a lollipop. This I described for her, asked her to envision the landscape. She couldn't and easily she grew impatient, coming, coming.

I drifted for some time, hours maybe, waiting for the cycle to finish, struggled to keep my head above yolk, fought for air, ventilation. In minutes the store had filled and I was thrown and caught in the tumbling spins, aware, excited, alive; me, Jack, in the midst of it, pressed against the glass.

Swimming: backstroke, breast, free-style, butterfly, butterfly.

Outside Lucelli's they had cheered, God, how they roared. Crowds of them, wild with lust. Huzzah! Huzzah!

And then deep breaths. I did not want to go home. I did not want to be naked, be made naked under skylight. At whatever cost, whatever price. I could not have survived.

There was yolk to fill the streets, eight blocks, perhaps a quarter mile. Sixteen-thousand gallons. Women could have come to bathe in it; just a touch to make them lush with pregnancy. It could have sanctified their wombs and I would have simply breathed on Claire and she was going to conceive.

The police waited outside for me, beyond the bubble of the glass, used a megaphone to reason with me.

The tide of yolk crashed through glass panes and out the front door, spilled like a tidal wave into the streets—a massive swell of fertility. I glided through the waves, risen, raised from the dead, charged with a head down, shoulders tight and those arms of mine like rubber, stretched and reaching. My head swelled like a balloon and my body, wet and slippery tried to wiggle free, lunged at a sea of fertile yellow.

The house is a marina of odors. Melted tin and smoky cocoa, filtered cigarettes, rum. The last wafts of them are sipped through the mesh screen. It doesn't remind me of home. It is like a Mexican cantina with no Mexicans.

Ann is wound in a tight ball on the couch. I have my carton of eggs, bottles of vanilla, a pink citation slip from a police officer who was kind enough to drive me home. Only disturbing the peace, no need for panic,

he said. He was gentle with the cuffs. The lights spun round full like tiny carousels, blue and white and blue again, hardly red.

In the kitchen I glance at the eggs blank, stare at them somber. What will she do with them tomorrow, God and only God knows, or does he even bother?

Perhaps the roof needs more salt.

I have lost my shovel. No matter; I have hands.

I hold an egg, delicate, lovingly, burst it under my palm on the counter into shell and whites and yolk.

There was a time after the miscarriage, with Claire, after Lucelli's, after a night in county jail, a moment worth pausing for here and now to recollect, a time before the rock salt, before the start of Ann's third trimester. I went around the neighborhood and borrowed three dozen eggs, accepted condolences from her close friends who knew about the miscarriage, felt guilty for myself. Then I sat on the kitchen floor and shattered them, each carefully and precise, just like this one here. I stripped naked and laid on my back in the bits of shell and yolk practicing my snow angels, the way I would teach my little boy in the winter months. That is how Claire found me: her yellow angel. She smiled and we made forgiving love in it. It was something else.

I can't bring myself to make snow angels now. Claire is upstairs. She is waiting. Instead, I take an egg and swallow yolk and shell and white in one slick swallow. It goes down, but only with effort.

I pull the blanket over Ann, kiss her forehead and wish her a goodnight, even though I know she cannot hear me. She holds my fingers, pulls me back to the sofa, asks me not to go, asks me to come to bed. She is asleep. I stare into her open eyes, full like beads. She isn't breathing. Pregnant women don't need to breathe. They have everything they need. I go up the stairs. I make the walk slow, each step, every movement owned. The sounds of floor boards pressing remains preciously held. Looking back, I see her rise in the darkness of living room walls, like a wave, like a wave. Crashing, gone. I might have let her pull me. I might have enjoyed that, wished for it.

I have soft skin. It would have been easy to even out. Tomorrow. At morning, before coffee, I will let her then.

Tuesday nights Claire waits for me naked under the sheets, soft music, dim lights, waiting for me to savor every corner of her body, treating her

like a melted chocolate candy bar, the folds of her skin, the smell of her neck, the thin areas and the thicker ones, loving them all, loving her more if she could only get pregnant and I could rub her beautiful, round stomach, lick her belly-button, suck it out.

She is there in the darkness. No music, just Claire. All of her. I remove each piece of clothing with thought, fold them carefully. I pause for a final smell. They have no odor. But Claire: she is blooming.

I drift into her warmth, naked bodies, wading between sheets and skins, unaware of consequences and expectations. We are making a baby, two murderers, creating life. In the blackness I see her body as strips of connected flesh and words of I love you.

Tell me you love me, I say. Tell me I am your husband.

She hesitates.

Tell me you love me, I say. I hear her swallow. Her lips are fat as watermelon. Her taste is strangely metallic.

I attempt to ingest her shoulder. Kisses are painful. It is a treacherous task to find the corners of her mouth, align them correctly. I kiss her, willingly. It is so easy to miss with kisses but I go blind, bent with courage. This is heroism, but only if you know marriages. Waiting to feel her in the gully of my stomach, where she will be safe, where I can carry her through to term, both of them: wife and child. Mounting her from behind, watching the slope of her back ascend up, condense into shadow.

One shoulder at a time, twisted, and there she goes, wide mouth for collars and elbows, rows of exceptionally fine teeth. Bones and sinews, whatever fits. Her serrated seraph tongue, grooves and divots and glands, a thousand wounds and war emblems of the marriage I've given her; that tongue fights back. She refuses to surrender quietly. Her tongue is fresh, greying in the moonlight.

It takes time to swallow her, cradle her in me: the dusk and bliss wound, like an onion cusp lodged deep in the gallows of our throat.

About the Contributors

Jeffrey C. Alfier is an Air Force officer stationed in Germany. He was formerly a technical writer and functional analyst, and he once taught history with City College of Chicago's European Division. A first place award-winner with the Redrock Writer's Guild of Utah, his publication credits include *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Black Rock & Sage*, *The Cape Rock*, *Concho River Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *Pacific Review*, *RE:AL*, and *The Santa Clara Review*. He is the author of a chapbook of poems, *Strangers Within the Gate* (The Moon Publishing, 2005). Alfier is from Tucson, Arizona, and much of his poetry reflects an American Southwest regionalism.

Kurt Ayau is an associate professor of English at Virginia Military Institute. With his writing partner, David Rachels, he has authored the award-winning novel, *What the Shadow Told Me* (Eastern Washington University Press), and a half dozen stories that have appeared in *The North American Review*, *The Southeast Review*, and other journals. His solo work has appeared in *The Roanoke Review*, *The Front Range Review*, *Descant*, and *The William and Mary Review*. His novel-in-progress, *Morna*, a multigenerational story of Cape Verdean American immigrants on Cape Cod in the twentieth century, has twice been a finalist in the Dana Awards novel-in-progress competition.

Colleen Farrow is a recent graduate of Michigan State University. She writes fiction and poetry, though mostly just for fun.

Jared Gerling is a self-made millionaire. He made his money in the biologically engineered egg market and pseudo-pharmaceutical . . . ah this isn't fooling anyone. Jared is a poor college student at MSU. He is so poor in fact that he collects cans on the weekends for food. He's currently an English major and has no idea what he's going to do after college is over. He'd better start thinking about it since he is now a senior and graduation is coming up fast. Jared enjoys writing and reading, though not at the

same time. He's currently auditioning for WWF under the name 'The Crushinator.' Maybe then he will earn his millions and be able to live on a beach somewhere, sit on a chair in the sand, and watch the waves roll in, one by one.

Ryan Habermeyer is a second-year MFA candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and was born and raised near Los Angeles, California. He attended Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah where he studied Spanish Translation and Latin American Literature. His travels have taken him to the far stretches of the Yucatan peninsula where he lived in obscure pueblos learning ancient Mayan dialects and Mexican folklore and culture. A freelance translator involved in various literary translation projects, he currently divides his time between his graduate studies and trying to devise ways to survive the brutal New England winters. It has been said he longs for California. He is married and his wife—whose passion and belief in unicorns is a source of inspiration—is expecting their first child.

Rob Hardy's chapbook, *The Collecting Jar,* was the winner of the 2004 Grayson Books Poetry Chapbook Competition. He has been a stay-at-home father, a substitute teacher, a freelance writer for Minnesota Public Radio, a college professor, and a middle school poet-in-residence. He currently teaches Latin and leads a homeschool writing group in St. Paul, Minnesota. A QuickTime movie of *octopus marginatus* imitating a coconut can be found at *http://www.sciencemag.org/feature/misc/hp_jumps/octopus/marg.html.*

Brian Hildebrand was born in the Metro Detroit area. There he spent all of his childhood until he became a student at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2003. He is currently a third year student in the Department of Architecture.

Michael L. Johnson, a professor of English at the University of Kansas, is a recipient of numerous literary awards, among them a Spur Award, a Seaton Award, a Frederick Manfred Prize, and a Ben Franklin Award. The author of fourteen books, including six collections of poetry and poetic translations, he is now at work on a cycle of poems about the Southwest, a memoir, and a cultural history of the American West.

Jesse Reid Lawson began as a feature writer for the *Havana Post*, Havana, Cuba. He worked the hotel beat, interviewing such luminaries as Frankie Laine, Joe DiMaggio, Jimmy Jemail, Dorothy Dandridge, chefs, and great white hunters. Later, he was at the *New York Herald Tribune*'s Sunday magazine, in charge of house style. He was also a freelance editor, mainly for Macmillan (NY), and later the editor of a Sunday magazine for a Hudson Valley newspaper. In between, he has worked in other vocations, such as English teacher, truck driver, carpenter's helper and actor. He now lives in the Hudson Valley, happily able to develop his own material.

Jo Powers was born in Detroit and raised in a creative family that encouraged art, music, and language. Her formal study of art began at Wayne State University where she earned a BFA in painting. Included in her undergraduate studies was a year in Germany at both the University of Freiburg and at the State Academy of the Plastics Arts. For graduate school she headed to Syracuse University where she earned an MFA in painting. Upon completion of this degree, she returned to Germany where she worked for a theatre group and taught on military bases. In the years since, she has freelanced in illustration, exhibited her paintings, benefited from several Michigan Council for the Arts grants, and taught drawing and painting at local universities and colleges.

Ralph Scherder's book *The Taxidermist's Son* was published in October 2005 by Rock Spring Press. Recent work has appeared in *The Iconoclast*, *The Literary Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Timber Creek Review*, and many others. He lives in Herman, PA, and writes full time. Visit him online at *http://www.ralphscherder.com.*

Richie Smith is a writer, performer and physician. As a practicing cardiologist and an assistant professor of medicine at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, he is known for incorporating humor into the art of medicine. Dr. Smith's fiction and poetry have appeared or are upcoming in *Ducts.org, Poet's Podium, Sulphur River Literary Review* and *Breakfast All Day*. He has performed in a variety of venues from university hospitals to The Poetry Project in Manhattan, has had multiple publications in scientific journals and is currently completing his first novel. He lives in New York with his wife and son.

Cedric Tai. (See-drick). Age 20. Pre-Service Art Educator. Started photography in high school back in Northville, Michigan. Took photo trips with Janine listening to Modest Mouse. Ran darkroom in Abbot Hall, at Michigan State University, since freshman year. Joined many clubs to fuel creativity. Helps friends through photography with CD covers and portfolios. Last year, received a Nora Sager Stackhouse Award, received 2nd place in Michigan State University's undergraduate art show, and received 2nd place in a Celebration of the Arts competition. Will soon be running a workshop for building pinhole cameras. Screen printed his own shirts including one of his dad, Tony Tai. Current favorite artist: Mel Chin. See more at *http://www.fuzzyasian.deviantart.com.*

Charles Harper Webb's fifth book of poems, *Hot Popsicles*, was published in 2005 by The University of Wisconsin Press. His sixth, *Amplified Dog*, won the Benjamin Saltman Prize and will be published in 2006 by Red Hen Press. Winner of the S.F. Morse Prize, the Pollak Prize, and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, as well as recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb edited *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology*, and directs the MFA program at California State University, Long Beach.

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