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RED CEDAR

R E V I E W

RED CEDAR REVIEW

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Editors' Introduction

Jill Kolongowski and Lindsey Kate Sloan

Two of our goals with this issue of *Red Cedar Review* were to expand the range of voices included in our pages and to showcase more experimental works. We've included two essays that play with instructional forms: Korey Kuhl's *How to Button Your Father's Pants* and Brad Johnson's *American Detour in Paris: A Step-by-Step Guide to Re-creating a Nightmare*. We also found ourselves very interested in prose and poetry that use the space on the page in an interesting way, notably Pamela Davis's *Blind Date with Baudelaire* and Weston Cutter's *Minnehaha Creek*. Nonconventional stories like Dan Moreau's *A Sad Short Story* and Cynthia CL Roderick's *Glad to See You* are strong examples of effective experimentation with voice and form. We've also included pieces that blur genre lines such as Gavin Craig's *Patriarchal Poetry* and Philip Zachary Lesch's *Flying Home*.

This issue includes photography by the University of Michigan's Nicolas Beier, Michigan State University students Josh Radtke and Hasib Yousufzai, MSU and *Red Cedar Review* alumnus Ryan Long, and Elinor Teele. Our cover photo by John M. Quick showcases our namesake, the Red Cedar River.

Author Michael Kimball visited MSU's campus this fall and we had the honor of interviewing him for volume 44. Kimball graduated from MSU with a degree in English education and has since gone on to do extraordinary things. He is the author of three novels: *How Much of Us There Was*, *The Way the Family Got Away*, and most recently an epistolary novel aptly titled *Dear Everybody*. His independent project, *Michael Kimball Writes Your Life Story (on a postcard)*, is also proving to be very successful. Read the postcards at <http://michael-kimball.com/blog.php>.

RCR hosted three contests this fall and we couldn't be more excited about the winning entries, all of which are published at the end of this volume. Our Flash Fiction Contest was judged by Wilton Barnhardt, MSU alumnus and director of the Creative Writing Program at North Carolina State University. He's the author of *Emma Who Saved My Life, Gospel*,

and *Show World: A Novel*. The Hemingway (Six-Word Story) Contest was judged by Martha Bates, acquisitions editor for the Michigan State University Press Books Division. Finally, our Haiku Contest was judged by Professor Anita Skeen. Professor Skeen is the director of the Poetry Center at MSU and longtime director of the Creative Arts Festival at Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico. She's the author of four volumes of poetry, including *Outside the Fold*, *Outside the Frame*, *The Resurrection of the Animals*, and *Portraits*. We thank all the judges for their generosity, time, and assistance.

We have been lucky to edit *RCR* for two years and to have seen what a staff of 40 dedicated students can (and will) do to keep a literary journal going. We thank you for your nights spent reading and discussing manuscripts in a stuffy basement room. We could not produce such high quality issues without your flexibility, knowledge, laughter, and inspiration.

We leave you with volume 44 ...

Nothing makes the earth seem so spacious as to have friends at a distance;
they make the latitudes and longitudes.

- Henry David Thoreau

-JMK & LKS



How to Button Your Father's Pants

Korey Kuhl

Hope your father doesn't ask you to button his pants. You can handle tying his shoes, helping him with his jacket, buckling his seatbelt in the car, but pants are something else.

Hear your father say he needs to use the bathroom. Ignore him when he says he doesn't need help. He does. Agree with him when he says, "It's not far." Insist on helping. Lock your knees. Grab his arm and help him stand. Pull him toward you when he starts to wobble. Say, "Ready?" Smirk when he replies, "The doctor says I had a stroke, but I think it was a stroke of genius."

Lead your father to the bathroom. Place his right hand on your shoulder and walk. Check to see if he's still there even though you notice his breath on your ear. Feel taller than your father for the first time in 22 years.

Once your father goes inside, lean against the door. Hum. Pace. Never get more than five steps away from the door. Realize that you couldn't pee if someone was listening. Pretend not to listen.

After a few minutes ask, "Dad?" Wait when there is no reply. Wonder if he's still inside. He's remodeled since you were last home, but there's still only one way in and one way out. Speculate about a trap door. Your father always liked to play tricks on you, especially when you were younger. Remember the times he hid around corners and jumped out when he heard you coming. He'd lift you over his head, tickling you until you wrestled free and ran back into the living room, calling, "I hate you," and becoming upset. Whisper, "I'm sorry."

Become fixated with the fingernail on your middle finger. Bite it until a sliver of nail comes free. After holding it between your front teeth for a minute, spit it out. Feel the air begin to sting the end of your finger where the nail is missing. Regret biting your nails. Put your hands in your pockets. Think about your father's fingernails. Struggle to remember whether or not your father bites his nails. Decide you'll look when he again places his hand on your shoulder for support when exiting the bathroom.

Hear the toilet flush. Listen as your father fumbles with the doorknob. Try to open the door. Realize it's locked. Wonder, "When did he lock the door?" Say, "Dad, the door's locked." Listen as he replies, "I know." Tell him to unlock it. Worry when he responds, "I can't." Decide, somehow you've successfully managed to lock your father in the bathroom.

Jiggle the handle. Jiggle it frantically. Jiggle the handle until your father tells you not to break the door handle. Apologize. "I've almost got it," he says and then he gets it. "See," he says. Push the door open so quickly that you hit your father, almost knocking him to the floor. Apologize. Look at your father as if you haven't seen him in years.

Shrug when he asks, "What?" Look away when he says, "Stop looking at me like that." Cringe when he says, "Can you help me button my pants?"

Approach your father. Stand facing him and try to button his pants. Don't look up or down. Stare at the wallpaper until the ducks start swimming laps around the bathroom. Think, "Wow, those ducks are fast."

Stand behind your father. Reach around his waist with both arms. Grab the left side of his pants with your left hand and the right side with your right hand. Attempt to button his pants. Realize it won't work. Question why he is wearing jeans in the first place. Keep looking at the ducks.

Wonder how your father was able to button his jeans before the stroke. Tell him to suck in his stomach. Struggle with the button.

Decide that the button has something against the loop. Encourage the button. Make promises to the button if it agrees to go through the loop. Make similar promises to the loop if it agrees to take the button. Hate buttons. Hate the loops that take buttons. Hate jeans. Hate your father's jeans. Struggle with the button.

Take a breath. Exhale. Take another breath and count to three. Threaten the button. Threaten the loop. Struggle with the button. Notice beads of sweat gathering at your temples. Feel your face flush. Refuse to give up. Starting was the hardest part, therefore quitting will only result in having to start again. Hear your father start to laugh. Give up.

Ask your father if he wants sweatpants. Go to his room and retrieve a pair when he says yes. Slide off his jeans. Help him into the sweatpants. First one leg then the other. Be thankful for elastic. Lead your father back into the living room and onto the couch. Listen to his rhythmic breathing when he falls asleep 30 minutes later. Yawn. Stretch. Decide that you too, are tired. Take off your shoes. Slip out of your jeans. Ignore the button.





©2009 Nicolas Beier, "roger"

Blind Date with Baudelaire

Pamela Davis

He screeches to a stop in a taffeta casket—a fancy man, I see.
I'm all done up, too, in my party dress and glass beads from
the Seine. We careen through mad crooked streets, past
laughing harlots and runaway dads, clatter across
cobblestones up to Montmartre, sail off Lover's
Leap down and down to the dormant pit.
Baudelaire unbuttons my skin to smell
my bones, summons our future by
moony lamplight, how our fingers
will twine side by side. He says
pilgrims will read poems to
our stones, as they do for
de Beauvoir and Sartre,
they will leave roses,
damp kisses, and
overripe verse.

Charles gives me his
spleen on the night
we wed. And why
not? It is always
better to bury
two poets in
a single
plot.





©2009 Ryan Long, "LaConte"

Overcoats

Richard N. Bentley

"**A**ren't you taking a little more than you really need?" Baxter's wife asked. She stared into the car, shielding her eyes, while Baxter brushed snow off the rear window with his mitten. Inside the car, two pairs of skis lay across the seatbacks—the downhill and the cross-countries—with the appropriate poles. The boots that went with each pair lay on the back seat next to the rubber galoshes, a set of L. L. Bean laceups, and assorted gym shoes. Also in the back seat were a huge duffel bag stuffed with winter clothes, a pile of blankets, and two shopping bags filled with books. Some of the books had already spilled onto the floor of the car.

"Two weeks," he said. "You can get a lot done in two weeks." He pointed his mitten at her. "*You* always take books along when we go on weekends, and never read them. I am going to read these babies. Every one of them. I am going to read them down to the last page. Maybe get in some skiing, too. For mental health."

Baxter's eight-year-old son hunched up his shoulders and slapped his gloves together in the cold. He was wearing a new jacket, and he said, "Will you write, Dad?"

"Will I *write*?" Baxter's voice expressed mock outrage. "What else would I be *doing* at a writers' conference in Vermont?"

"I mean," his son said, "Will you be writing to *us*?"

"Sure," Baxter said. "Of course. I'll write as hard as I can."

It was January, the spiritless winter full of short days and shorter tempers, but Baxter felt lighthearted and adventurous. The family was clear financially, he had managed to draw down some advance vacation time, and so he had filled out an application and submitted it to the writers' conference along with a poem and a check. The check had taken as long to write and caused him almost as much anguish as the poem, but when he received a letter stating that "The Faculty Committee feels you might make good use of the program," he decided to go, ignoring the letter's obvious ambiguities.

"You'll be gone how long?" his wife had asked.

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks." She sat at the kitchen table eating a carrot. "They're going to teach you how to write poetry in two weeks?"

"Not teach," Baxter said. "They can't teach poetry. They can't really *teach* you anything. What I need is something like a community, a sense of—this is hard to explain—a sense of audience to visualize, an audience that I can imagine when I write a poem, so I won't feel so alone and futile. That's it. I need to make myself able to imagine an audience." It was, as he had said, hard to explain.

"Why don't you try to imagine us?" His wife said. "Home alone, two little children without their father and all the hassles with the children's carpool while I'm at work. What do I tell the Harrisons about the carpool?"

"Oh, God," Baxter said. "Don't tell the Harrisons where I'm going. They'll think I've been defeated by the rat race. Just tell them something they can understand. Tell them I left you."

When Baxter awoke the second morning of the conference, he got up and stood for a long time before the window.

He was so accustomed to the noise and congestion of the city that the beauty of the winter morning seemed savage and foreign. Vermont's distant hills and studded conifers suggested a Siberian setting, and the strong sun, pouring its light into the quadrangle, struck the brick buildings of the campus with an intensity as commanding as a searchlight.

For a time, Baxter played with the Siberian analogy in his mind. It was not entirely satisfactory. In the Siberia that he imagined, the residents were subject to occasional acts of mercy from the regime in power, or from its successors. Party lines could be revised; the inhabitants could be set free; entire nations could be liberated.

But this particular gulag, this writers' workshop he was attending, contained people of a different sort. Far from family, friends, and loved ones, with only peripheral access to newspapers, television, and basic sanitation, they were beholden to a cruel and lying regime from which there could be no escape. They were prisoners of the imagination, trapped in—Baxter's mind groped for a metaphor—"the eternal archipelago of literature"—and promptly rejected it.

Many events of the previous day—registration day—contributed to his sense of abandonment and gathering fear. The brittle hairstyles of the

women at breakfast, hair partially dried and then frozen in the morning walk across campus, seemed to reflect the mass regimentation of a malevolent hairdresser. During the orientation sessions, the speaker prefaced his remarks by announcing that a lost earring had been discovered in the snow. He held up before the audience an object so large and extravagant in design that the ear seemed to be still attached.

That evening, as Baxter took a shower, he tried to think of a poem. All he could think of was decorum. How would he be perceived here? Frivolous, probably. Any exact account of his immaturity would reveal memories and thoughts of people he had loved, but they would be attached mostly to surface detail, places where he had loved them—beaches, waiting rooms, airports. Was this enough for poetry? Could decorum be transformed into a mode of speech? Probably not.

He stepped from the shower and was beginning to towel off, when a woman in a dirty uniform burst into the lavatory, almost tripping over her mop and clanking pail. As Baxter brushed his teeth, she maneuvered the mop around his toes in such a vigorous manner that he felt the need to reassure her.

"Thanks," he said. "You're doing great work."

"Oh," she replied, "Thank *you*. We're not the normal person who does the bathrooms." Her expressions revealed deranged lines accenting the eyes.

The wind moaned around the windows as she continued her mopping, as if nature itself required him to say something more. But he wasn't so crazy that he didn't know how uninteresting his anxiety would be to most people, the banality of evil being far exceeded by the banality of neurosis.

"How long are we going to allow ourselves to be treated like this?" the woman demanded. The radiator clanked and sputtered.

"It's not the money," she continued angrily, "It's the way we are treated. We told the program director he was kidding himself about his reasons for wanting to expand the visiting writers' program. He thought he was being altruistic, and we thought it had more to do with wanting big names. We've published a bit in our day," she grumbled. "But no, it will never do even to allude to our problems as visiting writers. And obviously you don't care about that. So all right, all right." She replaced the mop in the bucket, with a gesture of sarcastic deference. The upper body inclination made her seem shorter than she really was.

"I'm sorry to hear this," Baxter said. "It must be excruciating for you."

"Nor do we need your sympathy, sir, or your condescension to the tedium of the poet's life."

The next day, in an effort to allay his anxiety after a blizzard of seminars, workshops, and lectures, he decided to try some exercise. Late that afternoon, he appeared at the gym, self-consciously attired in a sweatsuit. He joined in with the basketball players. Some of them moved adroitly, the gestures timed and well-practiced, but there were enough like himself, flinging the ball up randomly and missing by wide margins, that he began to feel almost at ease, almost triumphant.

After awhile, he noticed a young man who was aiming at the backboard quite slowly and deliberately. He would take his time, set his feet, look up toward the basket, bounce the ball once or twice, then set himself again. He was sinking the 15-footers with astonishing regularity because, unless Baxter was mistaken, he was the same young man, a poet, that Baxter had observed walking slowly across the campus with a white cane, often with someone at his side.

Baxter watched as the poet flexed his legs and hurled the ball upward. The shot missed, and the ball rebounded directly into Baxter's hands. The poet seemed to know where the ball was.

"Could you bounce it over?" he asked. "If you pass it with a bounce, I can hear it."

The poet took aim. Once again he missed, but not by much. Baxter hurried after the ball, then strolled up and handed it to him.

"How do you *do* that?" Baxter asked. It immediately occurred to him that the question was impulsive and rather tactless. He thought it might be acceptable in the casual atmosphere of a gym and in light of his guileless curiosity. Also, the poet himself had brought up the subject.

"I can hear it," the poet said.

"Hear it?"

"Sure."

He set himself and took aim, pausing long enough to let Baxter ask him, "*How* can you hear it?"

"I just hear it."

He bounced the ball on the floor and caught it with both hands.

"You can *hear* the rim of a basketball hoop? When you aim at it?"

The poet smiled. Then he started to laugh. "I'm putting you on. But I can sure hear the swish when the ball goes through."

He let fly.

Swish.

They took a few more shots, introduced themselves, then headed outside. Baxter held the poet's coat for him at the door, noticing how it resembled his own, but looked at least ten years older. He, himself, must be ten years older than the poet, he thought.

The afternoon gloom had lowered. The wind was coming from behind them, at the same speed they were walking, and the snow was flaky and slow, its movement more horizontal than vertical. They seemed to be moving without moving, following a course that took them in a circle. Paths that had been shoveled were already covered by snow, and the poet's white cane made cautious forward arcs. He had declined Baxter's arm when it was offered.

The poet's story began when he was about the same age as Baxter's own son, eight years old. He had begun to feel sick much of the time, with dizziness and vomiting. His nausea was interpreted, by his angry and divorcing parents, as a reaction to their marital troubles. The child psychologist to whom he was sent was unable to diagnose the brain tumor immediately, and the delay led to the need for drastic surgery. He still retained, he told Baxter, partial vision in one eye.

They were now walking slowly along a path that led from the gym to the dormitories. The walkway seemed more treacherous now. The banks stood two or three feet high on either side.

"Please be careful," Baxter said. "These paths are dangerous."

"I'll be okay. Is this my dormitory? If it is, I'll leave you here and go back to the Braille. I do my first drafts on a Braille typewriter. I need the feel of the poem on my fingers."

"How do you find the time to write up here? All the workshops, seminars, readings?"

"You make the time," he said. "You have to be determined. Enjoyed talking to you."

Baxter felt the same way about taking to him, but it was difficult to imagine the source of the poet's enjoyment. All they had discussed, as far as Baxter could recollect, was the poet's blindness and his childhood pain.

As the days continued, the campus and its surroundings began to feel more comfortable. There was no party line of the imagination after all, and in the cafeteria, people would talk about their work in a subdued way, banter about their homes and families while exchanging wallet-sized photographs. One man was obsessed with real estate.

"I just can't get the listings," he would complain. "It's not the selling. That's the easy part. It's getting the listings. You have to know important people who like you and want to help you. You can't be off in some . . ." he laughed uneasily and looked around him, " . . . other world. It's all hustle, like getting published."

At last, the final evening arrived with its brief ceremony. Baxter sat in the last row of chairs, near the back of the darkened reading room, a few spaces from where a small child was seated in her mother's lap. As the speakers read their works, he found himself playing a surreptitious game of monkey-see-monkey-do with the two-year-old. The child's efforts to distract him, to keep him from becoming restless and squirmy during the ceremony were not entirely successful because Baxter had lost his overcoat. He was furious and he wanted it back.

He had looked for it earlier on the coat rack outside the reading room, where he thought he had left it. Now, with the ceremony concluded, the lights on, and people gathering in small groups, he began his search more purposefully.

Trying to retrace his steps from earlier in the evening, he returned to the main hall where the graduation dinner had taken place. It was not in the small cloak room off the dining hall, nor had he any reason to believe it would be there. He had a clear memory of removing it from that place, shrugging it over his shoulders, and walking across the campus to the reading room. He was certain that he had hung it on the long row of hangers in the hallway outside that room, somewhere in the middle of the rack. But it wasn't there.

His exasperation grew toward a self-protective rage that tried to masquerade as tough-mindedness. As he moved back and forth between the hallway and the reading room, looking under chairs and tables, examining every coat that resembled his own, people began to notice his agitation.

"Hey, that's mine," someone said, as Baxter examined a coat on a chair. "It was mine the last time you looked at it, too."

He threw out his hands foolishly. "I'm sorry. It's just becoming an obsession."

One young woman smiled in a kindly way as he slumped down next to her on a stuffed sofa. "I blame myself for everything, too," she said. "Don't worry. It'll show up."

"Except," Baxter said sourly, "by tomorrow everybody will be gone."

Somebody leaned across her, looked at Baxter intensely, and said, "Have you ever read *The Overcoat*, by Gogol?"

Baxter hadn't.

"It's a sad, sad story. It's the saddest story ever told."

Another person turned away from a small group of people and said, over his shoulder, "You know, that's interesting. I read somewhere that only we, here, in the twentieth century, find the story sad. Those nineteenth century Russians took the guy to be something of a jerk. They laughed at him."

"It's still the saddest story ever told," insisted the first.

"Jerk," said the other. "A *sad* jerk."

Baxter had no taste for this. Excusing himself, he continued the search, but when he finally went to bed, after once again retracing his steps across the campus to the dining hall, he was still without his overcoat.

As he lay on the bed, fully clothed but with the lights out, a memory began to shape itself. It was the memory of an afternoon approximately two months before, a pleasant autumn afternoon, a Saturday. He was with his children on a museum excursion in the city. Sleep would not come for him as his memory rotated with the cycle of the incident which involved—once again—a lost outer garment. A jacket belonging to his eight-year-old son.

His three-year-old daughter was also present at the McDonald's. As she dipped Baxter's tea bag into her orange drink, she was saying, "I love everybody." She continued in a singsongy tone, seemingly mesmerized by the bobbing tea bag and addressing no one in particular, "I love everyone in my family. I love my Dad. I love my Mom. I love my brother. I love myself. I love my cat. I love my house. I love everything."

"Do you even love your stuffed frog?" her brother asked.

She looked at him, puzzled. "I don't *have* a stuffed frog, Nicholas."

Her elbow nudged some broken cookies off the table. They landed in Baxter's lap. He asked Julia if she would allow Nicholas to read to them from the Happy Meal Box.

"I'll only let him read it . . . if he invites me . . . to his next birthday party."

"Okay," Nicholas said. "You can come." Julia handed him the container with its cartoon figures, puzzles, mazes, and bright aphorisms. He studied it. Baxter popped one of the cookies into his mouth.

"Those are mine," the children complained in unison.

"Then what are they doing in *my* lap?" Baxter said.

"Dad, Dad," said Nicholas. "You're supposed to be on a diet."

"These are *on* my diet. Doctor Baxter's Junk Food Diet. Six Happy Meals a day, ten glasses of water, and all the cookies you can eat. These are high in—what's it called?—fiber? Try one." They began to discuss their weights. Baxter reminded Nicholas of a time when it seemed he would weigh 30 pounds for the rest of his life. Then, suddenly, it was 40, then 45, then 60.

"How much does Julia weigh?" Nicholas asked. Baxter could not remember, so he questioned her. Julia smiled pleasantly and held up both fists, gradually extending her fingers, one by one in an inquiring way.

"That's ten, Julia," Nicholas said. "Even Smokey, the cat, weighs more than that."

Julia looked thoughtful, then blurted out, "90-10 pounds?"

"Maybe she's been lifting weights," Nicholas said, enjoying her. "Hey, Dad, Dad. Can you tell us the story about the little green man?"

Later on they discovered the loss of the jacket. Could they have left it at the McDonald's? They retraced their steps. It was midafternoon, balmy, with no wind. Baxter stormed through "Don't Walk" lights at intersections, a child in each hand. The manager at the McDonald's had no jacket in his lost and found. Back at the museum, Baxter questioned corridor guards, ticket takers, uniformed officials with walkie-talkies, ladies in smocks selling postcards. No one had seen it, no one had found it, no one had turned it in.

Its cost rested heavy on Baxter's mind. It had been purchased two days before, to replace a jacket that Nicholas had lost two days before *that*. Baxter was not being kind about it, for it seemed that each time he delivered himself of a barrage of stern parental commentary Nicholas would turn light-hearted within a few moments, as if forgetting what he had forgotten. In a cadenced voice, Baxter reminded Nicholas of his obligations, now that he was eight years old, to keep track of his own things. Baxter enumerated the many services that Nicholas's parents had provided for him in his infancy that should now no longer be necessary. Baxter spoke of future parental services, as well as individual privileges, that could hardly be bestowed on an eight-year-old so scatterbrained.

A wisecrack lingered in Baxter's memory—a limpid, pointless joke that had shot out of his mouth as the three of them stood in the museum, toward closing time, facing a skeleton-model of a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. The remark

somehow linked the enormity of his son's offense with the scale of the pre-historic animal, the size of the jacket such an animal might have worn in those Cretaceous times, the likelihood of its being lost. Whether ruefully humorous or not, the comment's effect on Baxter's son was devastating.

"All *right!*" Nicholas cried out at last, clenching his fists. Then he sat down on the short, stone barrier that separated them from the display and, with his head in his hands, the tears came. They would not stop—nothing could stop his crying, not even his sister, who had previously seemed to be slightly enjoying his discomfiture. Now she approached Nicholas tenderly, sat down next to him, and touched his forearm. She looked back at Baxter with dark and serious eyes.

Because Nicholas was Baxter's firstborn, Baxter was not fully aware that an eight-year-old and a jacket are mutually inhospitable, especially in early autumn when the weather might call for a jacket in the morning and a light cotton shirt in the afternoon. This particular afternoon, the second-grader's thoughts might even have been concentrated on an opportunity for a wandering and dreamy afternoon of intimacy with his father and sister, in an undisciplined world of food in astonishingly garish boxes, long stories on park benches about little green men, and the random wonderment of a museum. Such an afternoon had now been ruined. But it was not the absent jacket that had ruined it.

As Baxter played the memory, trying to retract the impulsive comment or at least to rephrase it less hurtfully, he became increasingly troubled and sleepless. His memory revolved with this incident and the incident refused to change. It refused to transform itself into anything other than a small vision of the world's injustices and his own complicity in them. His son was both his past and his future, and it seemed as if they had been cast out on a very precarious limb together. Baxter could not fall asleep.

He decided to make one last search for the missing overcoat.

The lights were still blazing in the deserted reading room where the graduation had taken place. On a table by the wall, a bowl of hardening cheese dip, with a lopsided floret of broccoli stuck in it, rested beside a jug of white wine in a plastic tub of melted ice. Baxter looked under the table, then circled the room, eyeing the chairs.

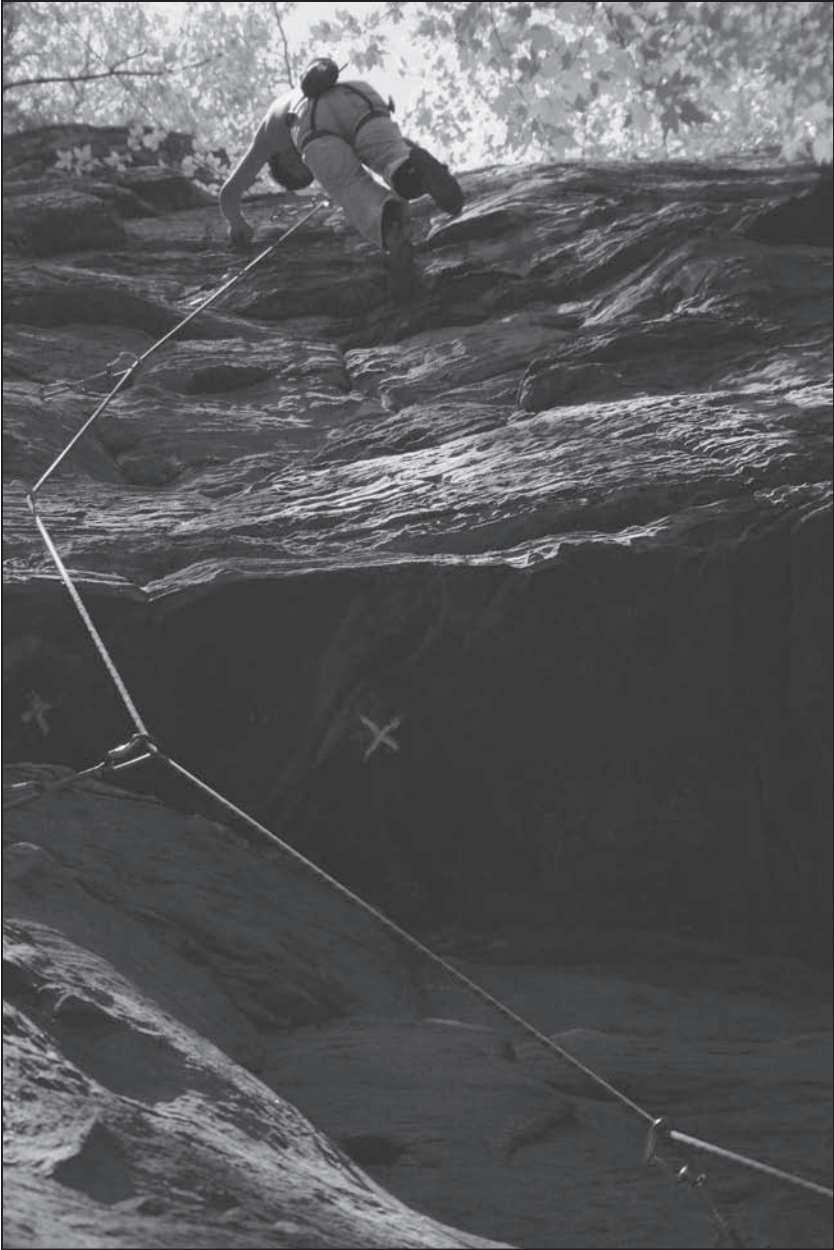
In the outside hallway he saw an overcoat. It was in the exact location where he remembered leaving his own, now conspicuous in the long line of empty wire hangers. It hung in the middle of the rack, a similar color, but a shabbier version of his own overcoat. Everyone had left the party;

one overcoat had remained. Baxter seized it with the same violence he now felt toward its careless and probably wine-woozy owner. First, he all but strangled the coat for causing him such a night of deep disquietude. Then, as he wrestled it off the hanger, to make off with it, ransom it perhaps, a piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Baxter searched the coat's pockets for evidence of ownership. There was none. He bent down to pick up the paper, but it was blank on both sides. Baxter started to crumple it, then decided to return it to the coat's pocket. The blank piece of paper seemed strange. It was thick and rough-textured. Holding it closer to his eyes, he noticed tiny marks and indentations, but his eyes told him less than the feel of it on his fingers.

He returned the slip of paper, with its Braille markings, into the pocket, and put the jacket back on the hanger. A *sad* jerk! That's what he was! For the second time that evening, rage was transformed to distress. But this time, when the sadness came, it was of a different quality—a strange, deep, calming kind of sadness that made sleep possible and welcome. Somewhere, miles away, his son lay asleep, dreaming perhaps of prehistoric animals and journeys of discovery. It seemed they could be capable of great intimacy now.

The next morning, Baxter made one final inspection. On the hallway coat rack, the blind poet's overcoat, which he had wanted to steal the night before, was missing. In its place, on exactly the same hanger, was Baxter's. It seemed like a merciful intercession. As he stood there he tried to imagine the words he would choose to tell his son the overcoat story. The words might contain an apology, he hoped. He thought: This is my son, and he thought: This is my life. His son was eight years old, and waiting for all the things his father might try to tell him.





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Excavation

Lowell Jaeger

They'd carved—
(this army of ants)
in the gravel—
an expressway!

My son and I stood watching
constant traffic.
Frenzied comings
and goings.

Aztecs. Egyptians.
Giant blocks heaved
shoulder to shoulder,
bits of leaf and bark.

The hive mounding,
grain by grain
proudly skyward.
Whatever their plan

our lunchtime ended.
My son in the backhoe
and I with my spade
ripped the earth

beneath them. Another
civilization lost. Buried.
We laid a hundred
yards of crushed-rock

driveway that afternoon.
All the while, glancing
over our shoulders.
Feeling small.



Gobi Desert

James Doyle

The wind, like an assembly line worker
with no other world than the constant
refrain at his fingertips, sifts
the same ten-story dunes over
and over with nothing to show for it
but small change, the grit of microscopic
insects, calcium burrows from old oceans
or bones, wavering sheens to line the eyes
with false edges, I want to die here,
standing up, losing and gaining shape
like everything around me, as sentient
as the horizon, as concentrated as sand.

If I hold out my hand, the sun
will eat from it. If I can balance
my feet so perfectly on a million
grains, why shouldn't an entire desert
circle me slowly for its worthy prey, etch
me out of solid air for shadow or monument?





©2009 Hasib Yousufzai, "By Land or Sea"

American Detour in Paris: A Step-by-Step Guide to Re-creating a Nightmare

Brad Johnson

There are two Alle de Vergers in France. One is near Charles de Gaulle Airport. The other is in Paris near Père-Lachaise. If you have a next-day flight and need a room for the night, there's a Holiday Inn Express in Roissyville on Alle de Verger. It has no street address, yet somehow mail is delivered.

Do not drive to the Alle de Verger in Paris. There is no hotel there, only crowded tenement after crowded tenement with underwear hanging off small balconies. No planes circle above you. This should have tipped you off.

If you did not count on there being two alleys sharing the same name within a 15-mile radius and arrive at the Alle de Verger in Paris, you must reroute to the one in Roissyville, near the airport.

Double-park beside a dumpster. Unfold your map across the dash and search for Charles de Gaulle Airport. After 25 minutes, realize you've been looking at map of Brussels. Turn the map over. Find the airport and the small line that reads: Alle de Verger.

When driving through Paris, ignore white road lines. They are meaningless. You may be on a one-way street, but you should always expect oncoming traffic. In some places, three lanes merge into one. There will be no warning of this. Stay right in a roundabout or it will become your own personal Golgotha. If the sun is setting, squint. Do not lower your visor or you will roar through stoplights and unnerve bread-toting pedestrians. Drive back to N-6, frantically, as though you were a tourist unable to convert kilometers to miles.

Rumble over the cobblestone roads through Roissy into Roissyville. Alle de Verger is a vision of bright hotel sign after bright hotel sign, perfect for Americans longing for AC. At the Holiday Inn Express, wait 45 minutes.

Your luggage will stick in spilt coffee on the lobby floor. The receptionist notices this but she does not care. She tells you she has your reservation but does not have a room for you. Accept this. The more you object the less English the receptionist will comprehend. She will not supply a complimentary dinner. She will not upgrade you. She does secure you a room, however, up the cobblestone street at Hotel Ibis. Repack your luggage in the trunk. Drive to Hotel Ibis. A month later, back home, when you get your credit card statement, the Holiday Inn Express will charge you for the room you reserved but never occupied.

Hotel Ibis has dim lighting, a low ceiling, and a glass revolving door that spits you into the lobby. The receptionist will welcome you and ask if you have luggage. Your luggage is still in the trunk.

In front of Hotel Ibis, while unloading, an airport shuttle bus will honk at you to move your car despite the ample room for him to pass. Feel free to glare insolently at the driver. It does not matter. He does not care. Move the car. Drag your luggage across the parking lot. Your room is at the far end of the hall.

Return the rental car to Terminal 2D of Charles de Gaulle Airport. Follow the sign reading "Car Rental" down a winding ramp into the parking structure below departures. Park the rental car in a numbered space.

Find the satellite rental office in the parking lot. It will be closed. There is no key drop box. A handwritten sign directs you inside the terminal. Cross the parking lot into terminal. Do not make eye contact with the German man in the soccer jersey urinating on the parking lot wall.

The rental counter is right inside the terminal. Hand over the rental car key. Provide the parking space number where the car is parked. When asked, say the gas tank is full. Lie. The rental clerk will then inform you that you have returned your rental car an hour late. Remember the 45-minute delay at the Holiday Inn Express. Feel free to bring this up. It does not matter. The rental clerk does not care. Sign on dotted line. A month later, back home, when you get your credit card statement, you will be charged an extra day for returning the car an hour late.

Ride the escalator upstairs. Down the terminal hall, past a closed McDonald's, a sign illustrates that the Hotel Ibis shuttle stop is in Gate B. Notice an arrow pointing down to Gate B. Take the next escalator down. You will find yourself in a newly painted white room. There are no halls, just a row of empty chairs. Ride the escalator back up. While riding up,

notice sliding glass doors in the back corner of the room. Over the doors a green sign reads: *Sortie de Secour*. Take the escalator back down.

Go through the sliding glass doors, through an undecorated cement hallway and out another set of sliding glass doors. These doors will return you to the rental car parking lot. Your rental car is still parked where you parked it. There's a wet stain, now, on the parking lot wall.

Reenter terminal. Go ahead, wave at the rental car clerk. She will not wave back. She does not care. Follow the sign for Gate B and ride up the escalator opposite the wrong escalator you just rode down. Walk through Gate C to Gate B. Read a sign stating the Hotel Ibis shuttle stop is at Exit 2. Use Exit 5 to reach Exit 2.

Wait for the Hotel Ibis shuttle. When it arrives and its doors swing open, confirm with the driver that the shuttle stops at Hotel Ibis. "Oui." Grip that support bar as you gripped your wallet when walking past the "Beware of Pickpockets" sign at the base of the Eiffel Tower.

At Terminal 3, the second stop, see the Hotel Ibis sign glowing in the night. Deboard—quickly, before the driver clips you with shutting, guillotine doors. Push through the hotel doors into the bright Hotel Ibis lobby. There are two restaurants. A waiting room. Collapse into a yellow, plastic waiting room chair when you realize this is not the Hotel Ibis you checked into.

Wait in the check-in line. Ask the receptionist if there are two Hotel Ibises. She will ask if you have a room. Ask if there are two Hotel Ibises. She will ask if you have a room. Tell her "Yes, room 9." She will tell you rooms begin at 100. Ask if there are two Hotel Ibises. There are. She will request your credit card and call the other Hotel Ibis. She will spell your name in French and voilà—yes, in fact, you do have room 9 at the other Hotel Ibis.

You are in Roissy. Your Hotel Ibis is in Roissyville. The receptionist directs you to catch the far left shuttle. Outside, 50 tourists roll luggage and shift stuffed backpacks from one shoulder to the other. The marquee on the far left shuttle reads: Roissy. You are in Roissy.

Further left is the train station. Accept that "left" has infinite interpretations. Enter the train station. Pass the ticket stands. Do not recall your ticket stand experience in Cannes. Exit other side of the train station. A shuttle with "Roissyville" written across its marquee has passengers queuing.

Enter the line, which is not a line. It is an amalgam of suitcase straps, sweaty shoulders, and no English. Those behind you feel they deserve to be in front of you. Use your French to articulate your position. The French

words for “shower” and “push” are particularly effective. Use these words liberally, particularly toward that squirrely Asian.

Find a seat next to a woman covered in Henna tattoos. If you smile at her, it does not matter. She does not care. Watch out the window as the shuttle careens back through the airport, back through Terminal 2, back past where you parked the rental car, back past Exit 2, where you caught the wrong Hotel Ibis shuttle. Hold tight or you’ll spill into the aisle like that red suitcase at the first roundabout. There are numerous roundabouts leaving the airport and this shuttle’s brake pads have, apparently, expired.

When the lights are shut off, resign yourself to a long ride. Listen to a South Carolina female tell a California male she’s never been to California but traveling through Europe has made her want to travel more in the U.S. Hear the California male say he’s trying to make a flight to Sweden. He’s not sure where he is. He doesn’t know why he got on this shuttle. He doesn’t understand anything anyone is saying.

Notice everyone else on the shuttle is silent, listening to these two Americans. Sit blissfully unaware and unaffected. Act Canadian.

Feel the rumble of those cobblestones; see those hotel signs glowing in the night . . . and there is the Hotel Ibis sign. There is the revolving glass door. A woman dressed in all black stands up and goes to the door. The shuttle doors open. The shuttle slows down but does not stop. This is it. Get up. Jump the hell out of the still-moving shuttle.

The woman in all black puts her hand up to stop you. She says, “C’est pas pour vous,” and she’s off the shuttle and the doors are re-shut before you can clarify why, exactly, you accepted a command from this random woman in all black. She did use the “vous” form though, which, at least, shows a measure of respect.

Say goodbye to the Hotel Ibis sign and Hotel Ibis’s revolving door. They pass over your right shoulder. Consider the length of the French prison sentence given to one who snaps the neck of an airport shuttle bus driver, commandeers his vehicle, and beelines for the border, any border, carrying, as hostages, a load of confused tourists who stare out at the quickly passing terrain waiting for their hotels’ façades to appear. Might it be worth it? Give up these deliberations. Resign yourself to a life spent on a shuttle touring round and round Charles de Gaulle Airport. Meanwhile, feel the shuttle swing through an alley, lurch through a parking lot and jerk to a stop in front of Hotel Ibis. The revolving doors revolve beatifically.

Break for the door as if the shuttle is a Kafka novel from which you must escape before it starts back up and returns you to the rental car parking lot and the smell of piss.

But the South Carolina female holds up the line. She asks the driver, “Parlez anglais?” Then: “Are there two Hotel Ibises?”

Let her know there are, totally, two Hotel Ibises. Tell her to stay on that shuttle and switch to the shuttle headed back to Terminal 3. She does not care. Surrender your advice. She prefers the driver’s broken English.

Before revolving through the doors into Hotel Ibis’s lobby, look back once at the South Carolina female. She has deboarded and searches another shuttle parked in the parking lot. The lights are on in the parked shuttle, but its doors are closed and it’s empty.

Watch the first shuttle slam its doors and swerve past the parked shuttle, leaving the South Carolina female in the parking lot where you unloaded the rental car trunk for the second time.

At the Hotel Ibis bar, your wife waits for you with three glasses of burgundy. Drink up. Tomorrow morning, you’ll be catching the shuttle back to the airport in an attempt to make your 10 AM flight. Remember the French words for “shower” and “push.” Cheers.



Minnehaha Creek

Weston Cutter

We were looking for something more powerful. Startle
of starlight, sodium bulbs buzzing dim and steady
as a headache. And the stairs leading down, then down
again: the old creek choked with, what—

same old pennies. And not even unfolded wishes. Late
enough and in the wind the willow limbs touched
steady moving water like what, like words, like this:
We were looking for something new

to sing along to, the water humming against the stream
-bed's stones, against the path of rocks too unstable
to walk across but for one week, two out of the year. And
what of those old matchbooks? The

scribbled notes we never meant to remember this long. Never
meant to keep. We were walking toward where one
water fell upon another water, where grass turned to mud
turned to the music of passing. How

little we can ever see, even with everything all nightlit,
plain and laid out as a whisper. *Remind me*, we said,
put our hands beneath that water, feeling for movement. *Show*
me again, we said, one silence into another.





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The Land-Grants

David R. Hammel

A cup-shaped chip. Right on top. What luck. I grabbed it and aimed for the salsa. As I loaded up, I cast a guilty glance around the table. “Where’s Doug?” I asked.

Aida, our Ecuadorian waitress, bumped me with her elbow as she placed my margarita on the coaster. She apologized in her softly-accented English. But she knew me. The drink was large, in a frozen mug, and had no salt on the rim. Ken Anderson, a newcomer to our Thursday night group, answered my question. “Haven’t seen him all day. He missed the production control meeting this morning too. I think he’s sick.”

Sick? Doug was never sick. Further, Doug missing a chance to tell that self-aggrandizing jerk, Bruce Matterson, how badly his boys in manufacturing had screwed up? That was unlikely. Doug would rise from the dead to stick a pin in that balloon.

“Really? I hadn’t heard,” I said, as took my first draw of the margarita.

Barbara Johnson shook her head and put her hand up in front of her mouth as she spoke. “Sorry,” she said, “I just took a bite. Just a sec.” She finished chewing before she continued, “Doug emailed me yesterday. He asked me to cover for him at the meeting. I expected him to send me his files, but I got nothing. That little twerp Matterson was almost giddy when I told him Doug wasn’t coming.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. “Still, it’s not like Doug to be sick. But, I suppose, no one’s luck goes on forever.” I made a mental note to call him later.

The conversation around the table quieted for a second as the group considered the unfamiliar prospect of continuing without Doug. Even though the agenda was light, we all knew that little would get resolved without his blessing. Our Thursday night group was famous—no, infamous—around the office. Nothing could energize the gossip mill like the comment, “I hear the land-grants are going to talk about it on Thursday.”

We were the land-grants. We met every Thursday at the local Mexican food place, La Villette Cantina. The gavel usually dropped on our sessions at about 5:30 or 6:00, after everyone had time to clean up their desks, call their better halves and make it in through the pot-holed parking lot. Meetings at the office featured coffee, cookies, and donuts, ours: margaritas, chips, and salsa.

With a few recent additions, we were the remnants of a group hired back when the company was the grand old dame of the electrical industry—one of the Dow Jones 30. Back when she hired only the best and brightest. Hell, back when she hired at all. We came on when times were good, when the Human Resources Department, in a rare moment of lucidity, decided that adding some sensible midwesterners to the mix might counterbalance the high-flying ivy-leaguers who came, and then often just as quickly went. That was before the acquisition by the oil company, the spinoff to the hot-money leveraged-buyout group, the fire-sale to the Swedes, and then, finally, the asset-dump to the bottom-feeding Brits who had come to scrape up any leftover equity.

Just as the HR Department predicted, we sturdy midwesterners stayed through it all. Me and Jimmy, Barbara, Lawson, and Doug. Doug and I were hired right out of Kent State. We knew each other back then, but only in the way classmates sharing a major got to know one another.

We may not have been best of friends in school, but I remember the day he and I signed up for our interviews with the company. It was late February. Another in a seemingly unending stream of winter storms was lashing the campus. Nearly a foot of snow had fallen since noon. Doug and I were killing time in the dean's office, waiting for the weather to lighten up, and looking at the list of recruiters scheduled to visit. We registered the same level of shock when we saw Anaconda's name on the list. Dow Jones 30s didn't often make it that far out into the hinterland. I signed up just so I could say I did.

The white-haired HR director with two last names, Barkley Dwight, interviewed 80 of us in 3 days. He hired two, Doug and me, and then, later that year, he hired two more—Lawson Hendricks and Barbara Johnson—from Bowling Green. Over the next half decade, seven more came to New York from schools like Ohio State, Southern Illinois, and Kansas—all land-grant universities.

Back then, at corporate on Fifth Avenue, we were like tourists in a bright yellow bus. We stuck out. Our necks were as red as our cheeks. The

Dartmouth and Princeton guys would hardly talk to us, and the very few Vassar and Smithies would giggle and shake their heads if we ever asked them out.

So we land-grants fell in together. We shared apartments, musical tastes, and rides back home. At one point I dated the girl Doug had taken to his high school prom. She and I got serious for a while, but it faded about the time our division offices moved from New York to Connecticut.

As the company stopped hiring in the '80s, and fell on hard times in the '90s, land-grant membership thinned as well. Life in the company had become like a game of musical chairs. Every time the company moved, there would be fewer offices—and then eventually cubicles—to move into. Losing a job lost its stigma; you either made it on the bus or you didn't.

During those times land-grant club membership qualifications changed too. When our headquarters moved again, this time to Marion, Illinois, we opened it up to anyone. Now, only two things mattered. You had to know what the hell you were talking about, and you always had to be there on Thursday nights.

These two requirements, although simple-sounding, were harder to maintain than one might think. Only company travel, vacations, and family funerals were deemed appropriate excuses for missing a meeting, and, in addition, we were ruthless about culling the dullards. Honesty was our gold standard. If we detected rationalization, or heard too many biz-speak buzz words, someone, usually Barbara, would say, "He's drunk the Kool-Aid," and that would be it.

And Doug had always been the most adamant about attendance. "Don't give me that, 'My wife needs to see me' crap," he'd say, "I've been divorced twice."

Back in '75, he and I had been hired into the sales training program. Doug tried hard, but he just wasn't, as our old boss John used to say, "born to it." It was work for Doug. The smiling and the stale jokes, the small talk and the hours spent in the company of people whom you didn't like. Doug would get a pained look on his face, and his fists would ball up. The guy running the training program recognized this, and quickly moved Doug into engineering. Doug's career and mine followed different paths: engineering, operations, and quality for him; sales, marketing, and sales-management for me.

Ultimately, Doug ended up in Marion. We all joined him there when, in the midst of the company's near collapse in 2003, all management operations were sucked back to the flagship manufacturing facility. Doug had become the company's quality expert, and was now a vice-president, responsible for the entire company's quality program. He said he liked the black-and-white world of quality. Everything either was or wasn't. Nothing was gray, like in sales.

The table had quieted for a moment as Aida delivered another basket of chips. Barbara looked like she had more to say about the day's activities. I noticed her drink was already gone. I circled my finger in the air. Aida got the message and nodded as Barbara plunged on. "Did you hear about the latest with Glendale Public Utilities?"

It was a rhetorical question. Everybody at the table knew about the depositions and the legal briefs.

"Well," Barbara continued, "today I heard that the company's lawyers have found out that some of the documentation sent with the original order doesn't quite match what's here in the files now."

Doug would have been all over that, I thought. He'd have wanted to manage every detail. It just made it even stranger that he wasn't in the office. The Glendale situation was an ongoing problem. Eighteen months prior, our premier product, the conductor system that bore the company's name, had failed in service. The resulting explosions had killed two Glendale employees outright, and the subsequent fire had injured two more.

The company's position was that the product had been mishandled, improperly installed, or poorly maintained by Glendale. Any deviation in the recordkeeping at our manufacturing plant would significantly weaken our case, even if the product had been installed wrong, or as the company lawyers liked to say, "misapplied."

Aida delivered the second round of drinks. The chip basket she had just left was empty. She wagged her finger at us, signaling her displeasure at our gluttonous ways. Ken Anderson clunked his glass down on the table, twice, to draw our attention. His voice was high-pitched but soft. Sometimes he had trouble making himself heard over the mariachi music and the robust, tequila-fueled conversations. He worked for Doug. He said, "I was with them all day."

"With who?" I asked.

"The company attorneys. They're in from New York."

“When did they get here?”

“Yesterday.”

Doug lived a couple miles north of the plant in the little burg of Spillertown. He'd bought the seven-acre place when he first arrived. When he purchased it, the property had a two-bedroom, one bath house with a failing rubble-stone foundation and peeling paint; a barn with a windward lean and the remnants of an apple orchard. “I don't measure my time here in years,” he liked to say, “but in splinters, banged thumbs, and trips to the chiropractor.” Each clapboard on the white house had, in turn, been scrapped, repaired or replaced, and then repainted. Each window likewise, painstakingly rebuilt and then resealed against the cold. Doug would arrive at work on Mondays still smelling of turpentine and wood glue. His clothes carried the sour scent of sawn oak.

Then there were the apple trees. They were his passion. Doug had read everything he could find about bore worms, tent caterpillars, and nitrogen/phosphate soil balances. He had learned grafting at the community college. Every fall he brought to the office baskets of Braeburns, Romes, and Jonathons. He made cider, apple jack, and apple vinegar. He'd designed his own label for the vinegar, and sold it in the gourmet food markets up in St. Louis and Chicago.

Doug letting the company attorneys interview one of his employees without him around also seemed odd. I called Doug, right from the table. The phone rang ten times. “What's up with that?” I said aloud. “Did he turn off his answering machine?”

Barbara said, “Try his cell.”

Doug had two dogs, a pair of sisters from the same litter. They were mainly chocolate Lab, and were as goofy and free-spirited as all Labs, but they had some German shorthair pointer mixed in that gave them a dour countenance and a keen self-awareness. They looked like Labs, but unlike the rest of that breed, these two didn't like all people instantly. In fact, some people they didn't like at all.

Doug had named the dogs after his two ex-wives. His first wife, named Lucy, had lasted 12 years. She was like a shaft of sunlight cutting through a cloudy winter day. She was outgoing and chipper, almost, sometimes, to the point of seeming guileless. But she and Doug, in essence, lived separate lives. Lucy kept trying to pull Doug into her ever-widening social life. The

marriage ran out of steam as Doug ran out of excuses for why he didn't want to do this, or attend that.

Doug's second wife, named Maryanne, didn't hang around long. She had quickly grown tired of Spillertown, the apples, and Doug's long silences.

Doug's cell phone rang 12 times that night. I flipped open my phone and punched in a quick text from the tiny keyboard.

"R U OK? We're all here. Aida misses her favorite customer."

I didn't hear back from Doug that night. Nor the next day. The office was abnormally quiet. The attorneys had taken over the front conference room. It looked like a permanent encampment. They had computers, printers, and boxes piled upon boxes of files. A leased copy machine arrived in the midmorning. Its constant hum and flickering light quickly became part of the office landscape. I noticed that employees would duck their heads slightly as they walked past the door, as if afraid to attract the attention of the white-shirt-and-tied crowd inside.

On Saturday morning I said to my wife Mandy, "Something's up. I'm going to drive to Spillertown and check on Doug."

"I'll come," she said.

"You sure?" I asked, "If he's got the flu you don't want to catch it."

"That son of a bitch? The flu? I doubt it."

I nodded warily. She'd known Doug nearly as long as I had. Recently the two of them had seemed to reach a quiet truce. Mandy had been friends with both Lucy and Maryanne. That meant she probably knew more about Doug than I did. She worked at the bank. She spent her days looking up other people's financial skirts. "The key to banking in a small town?" she'd say. "You have to know how to keep secrets." And she did.

But she had never liked Doug very much, so I had that all-too-common guy problem. My wife and my oldest friend weren't friends, and were sometimes hardly even cordial toward each other.

"You sure you want to come?" I asked again.

"Yeah, you can take me out to lunch after we shake him out of his stupor and he sobers up."

"Doug's not a drinker."

She cocked her head, her right eyebrow arched, "Really?" she said.

I hated it when she did that to me. Had Lucy or Maryanne told her some deep secret? I had no way of knowing. The only thing that was certain was that I'd never find out from Mandy.

When we arrived at Doug's place later that morning, we found two hungry dogs and no car in the driveway. The last of the winter's snow, its ice-crystal crust blackened by soot and dust, huddled along the lee side of the house and under the porch steps. A cold front had come though the previous night. A biting wind reminded us that winter was only a few months away. A shutter clanged on the clapboards and the dogs seemed to be everywhere all at once.

"I guess we better feed them," I said.

I went to the garage, where Doug kept a key under the seat of a non-working riding mower he'd been intending to fix. I used it to open the back door. The dogs bolted inside and headed for the closet where Doug kept their food. Once inside, Mandy turned toward the kitchen to get them water. As soon as she entered the room I heard her call me.

"Ben?" she said, "You better come in here, honey."

I lugged the bag of food into the farmhouse's small kitchen. Sun glinted off the empty porcelain sink and reflected into a thousand broken rainbows on the ceiling. Mandy was standing by the kitchen table. Its surface was empty except for a bottle of red wine resting on top of a white business-sized envelope. My name was written on the envelope. The blue ink had been traced over a few times to make it stand out.

I pulled the envelope from under the dusty bottle. I opened it with my pocketknife. The knife was half of a matched set. Doug and I each carried one. Doug came up with the idea of the knives during a particularly harsh and difficult merger. He purchased them from a maker in Germany. The handles were burl walnut and the locking mechanisms solid brass. The blades glistened, even after all these years. "Never underestimate the value of quality when it comes to honed steel," was his explanation of the extravagance of their cost.

The walnut handles of the knives were engraved with the words: "Knife Fightin' Buddies." The blades also carried an inscription. On one side they said: "What should you bring to a knife fight?" On the other: "A gun."

The envelope contained a single piece of paper. Its ragged edge looked like it had been cut with Doug's pocketknife. On the paper were four words:

Even paranoids have enemies

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean?” Mandy asked.

It was one of Doug’s favorite expressions. I’d heard him say it at meetings, in arguments with management, and in private, when talking about his ex-wives, but I had no idea what it meant in this context.

I lifted the bottle of wine from the table and looked at the label. All French wine labels look identically confusing to me, but I recognized this one. It was as old as our knives, and dated from the same series of events. The company was being acquired and consolidated. “Shareholder value” was being extracted by Wall Street, and, as the song popular at the time said, “Everything exploded and the blood began to spill.”

Having lived through a few, I know for a fact that the term “hostile takeover” is apt. In this case, the company acquiring us had been our competitor, our arch enemy in the marketplace. We all knew that decades-long feuds were going to be settled. Things didn’t start well, and then they quickly deteriorated. The executives decided that, in order to “bond,” “key managers” from both companies should hold a “strategic planning session” up on Rend Lake, just north of town, at the conference center in the marina. Doug and I were the only land-grants at the meeting. After the discussions and dinner, the old guard started drinking hard and arguing. Doug pulled the bartender aside and I saw a few twenties exchange hands. Two minutes later Doug tugged my sleeve and said, “The Leonid meteor shower is on. Let’s go make some wishes.” He had two bottles of wine in his hand, and two glasses and a corkscrew. We walked to the end of the dock on a clear, moonless night and sat at the picnic table perched at its end. We finished the two bottles while discussing the company’s and our fates. I’d never seen so many shooting stars.

While we drank, Doug filled a dented and rusting galvanized bait-bucket by dipping it in the lake. He soaked the labels off the bottles. He handed one to me, saying “Here’s a keepsake for the night we became Knife Fightin’ Buddies.” A month later he presented the knives. By that time, one-third of my staff had been slated for termination. Doug was going to lose nearly half of his.

Standing in Doug’s kitchen these many years later, I could almost feel the cool of the lake under the dock.

And now here was a bottle of the same wine.

“Maybe we should look around,” I said.

Doug's brain, so ill-suited for sales but so well-suited for engineering, was meticulously organized. His house was the same. Strangers could walk into his kitchen and "just know" which cabinet to pull open to find the glasses, or if assigned table setting duties, the plates and napkins.

Mandy and I headed toward the front of the house and into Doug's office and library. His desk at home looked just like his desk at work, organized and clean. It took me a second to notice what I wasn't seeing: his computer. Nothing else attracted my attention, and we moved into the bedroom. Doug's closet door was open and it appeared to me that about half his clothes were missing. There were at least a dozen empty hangers.

Mandy said, "Maybe his car deal came through."

"His car deal?"

"He was in the bank on Wednesday. He told me he was bidding on an antique Corvette, or something, and would need to pay in cash if he was successful."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. I had no idea those idiotic old cars you aging men crave were so expensive."

"Doug wasn't into old cars," I said.

"He appears to be now."

My cell phone rang. I flipped it open; Barbara's direct dial number from the office was on the display. Happy for the distraction, I punched the answer button and cheerily asked, "Working on a Saturday?"

She was in no mood for humor. "You need to find out where Doug is," she said.

"Funny you should call now. I'm at his place as we speak. He's not here."

"Shit. That's what I was afraid of," Barbara said.

My tone shifted, "What in the hell's going on?"

"The attorneys are in the engineering department. They brought a forensic IT guy with them. They're in Doug's office and it turns out somebody opened up his computer and took out his hard drive. They're pissed."

"Why would—"

Barbara cut me off, "Who knows, but get this. Whoever took his hard drive replaced it with another. One that's completely blank. The only way they figured it out was the serial numbers didn't match. Oh, and another thing: the company's server has been tampered with. The backup system was disabled and erased. They're freakin' out."

"You don't—"

She cut me off again. "Shit if I know, but you better find your buddy Doug. They're calling the law."

I closed my phone. Mandy asked, "What's up?"

"I'm not sure. Something is wrong with Doug's computer at the office."

"Wrong? What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. I guess we'll have to wait for Doug to get back."

Mandy didn't say anything. She just shifted her weight from one foot to the other and pulled her lips into a tight smile. She flicked a wisp of hair from in front of her face. Evasive answers weren't popular with her. We stood in silence for a few seconds. She finally said, "I'm getting as hungry as those dogs. Let's go."

"What about them?"

"Oh no. We're not bringing Doug's dogs."

"They'll starve. Just for a few days. Until all this blows ov—till Doug gets back."

On Monday our neighbor Tim Austin, who happened to be the county sheriff, paid a visit to Mandy at the bank. He had a warrant and wanted to look at Doug's banking records. Later, he came by the office and wanted to know if I'd heard from Doug, or had any idea where he might be. I explained that we had Doug's dogs at our place, and were as mystified as he was.

The Marion Daily Republican broke the story the following week. The headline said it all: *Local Exec Implicated in Evidence-Tampering*.

They didn't have all the details right, but everyone got the picture. Doug was missing, his computer had been tampered with, and some files relating to the Glendale lawsuits were gone.

Without the evidence from Doug's files and records, and without Doug, the company's defense strategy lost most of its steam. Our insurance carrier offered a hasty settlement. Our division's financials dipped underwater briefly because of the increased premiums, but all was not lost. Business was good; we all knew we'd recover. Corporate moved their focus to other problems. With the lawsuits dropped, Tim Austin had no reason to continue his investigations. He lost interest as well.

Mandy got used to the dogs, but not to the dog hair or the dog breath. She, in her own way, even came to care for Lucy and Maryanne, somewhat. Well, at least about their well-being. She thought naming dogs after people was unseemly, so she'd say, "I think *they* need to go out." Or, "One got sick in your office. You better take *it* to the vet." But they sensed her innate compassion, and bounded to the door upon her arrival, all tongues and tails. They sat patiently behind her when she cooked, knowing a scrap, or two, would find its way to the floor, as surely as they knew it would be followed by a sly smile and a wink from her.

The dogs' namesakes, the original Lucy and the original Maryanne, made contact with Mandy. They'd heard nothing from Doug either, and were as perplexed as we were.

The land-grants never recovered. The first meeting Doug missed was the last of ours. In addition, strain had developed between some of us. "You know more than you're saying," Barbara had said to me once. "I mean, weren't you guys like college roommates or something?"

In the end, Ken Anderson received a promotion to QA manager, and the new VP that replaced Doug, came from Cornell. He wasn't much interested in Mexican food.

About a year or so after our last meeting, I got a letter with a PO Box in Del Rio, Texas, as the return address. At first glance it looked like junk and I almost pitched it, but I saw, between my first and last name, the initials KFB. Knife Fightin' Buddies.

Mandy wasn't home. I slit the top and pulled out a half sheet of paper. It was jagged where it had been cut from the piece I'd seen a year earlier. Typed in the middle of the page were the words:

'Except you KFB'

I retrieved the top of the page from my desk drawer. For some reason I had saved it the year before. The jagged edges matched perfectly.

Even paranoids have enemies

'Except you KFB'

I stared at the pages, slowly turning them over in my hands. But something was tugging at my consciousness, jangling my memory.

The single quotation marks.

Boolean searches.

My hands shook as I booted up our home computer and waited for it to load Google.

I clicked on the advanced search tab, and typed, "Except you KFB" into the box labeled "with the exact phrase."

I hit the return key and waited 0.12 seconds, according to the results page. There was one listing.

It was a post to the off-topic area of an obscure forum for Corvette owners. I clicked on the link and waited.

It was as single post, with no replies. It was titled "Except you KFB."

As the page loaded, I took deep breath and tried to relax my shoulders. I read:

K, I've been following the story, or lack thereof, in the online version of the Republican. It looks like you're safe. I took it all, the files, the photos, everything. Without it they'll never know. That's what KFBs are for. Maybe I owed you one. Life goes on. At least for you and me.
D

My hands could not move fast enough as I clicked on the red X at the top of the page. During the next few minutes I manually deleted my browser history and then launched the disc cleanup and defragmenter programs.

I sat at my desk while the computer churned. I remember hearing a cat-bird trill through the open window, but nothing else marked the time. I was numb from the shock of recall.

The day came back to me like it was a movie played on the wall of my living room. The news of the Glendale failures had just hit. Doug was in my office.

"Did you write this?" His voice was harsh, like chipped flint. He had removed his glasses and was leaning over my desk.

I looked at the page in his hand. We both knew I had. I didn't answer.

"You don't have the authority, the training, the background or the right."

He spit out the word "right."

I had claimed, in the letter in his hands, as salesmen are wont to do, that our product could do something that it maybe couldn't, or shouldn't.

A customer's question.

One in need of an engineering answer.
Why hadn't I taken it to Doug?
We wouldn't have made the sale.
But we had.
It had made our month.
Layoffs had been averted.
But now people were dead. It was a crime. We both knew it.
He spun on his heels, "You tell me what you want me to do." He
refolded the letter and put it back in the file he was carrying.
I'd never brought the subject up again.

I crumpled up the two half-sheets of paper with Doug's cryptic notes.
I pulled out my pocketknife and placed it into the ball of paper in my
hands. I dropped it all into the garbage can under our kitchen sink, and
then dumped the contents of the coffee filter on top.

The windows were open. I heard Mandy's car as she came up the gravel
driveway. A gentle breeze brought in the sweet smell of lilacs and the tang
of onion grass being mown by a neighbor. The dogs scampered down the
stairs to greet their favorite owner. The house was quiet for a second, before
they started barking their welcome.





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Fox Fur

Susan Howard Case

Stumbling among mittens, fallen coats,
in the stale smell of wet wool,
I groped for the fur my mother wore.
Fixed in royal sweep her hair

rose above black eyes set in flat jaw.
I never imagined the real of it:
never wondered about bullets or traps
or how wounds are disguised,

what becomes of blood.
I never pictured this fox
running across a farm hill,
guarding a family,

slinking low on its belly
into a barnyard, leaving
chicken feathers and blood
near the kitchen door.

I only wanted its comfort,
the way its body circled my arm,
its teeth closed gently on my wrist,
the way its color went from shine to black.



Flying Home

Philip Zachary Lesch

My recurring dream.

I am sitting at my desk, one of a hundred sales desks at a telemarketing company, and I am watching birds soar from tree to tree as jets descend below the horizon toward San Francisco International Airport. The phone rings; it is my next sales call. I answer it and pause.

“Did you want to sell me something, young man?” a housewife asks.

“No, ma’am, I hate sales and don’t want to sell you anything. What I really want to do is fly,” I say.

“Thank you! I hate these sales calls. Then get off the phone, young man, and fly,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, “thank you ma’am.”

I hang up the phone and stand up. Mr. Hodges, my boss, is coming toward me from the other side of the room. I undo my tie, climb onto my desk, and jump through the window toward the tree, toward the birds, toward the airport in the distance. I fall into a chair attached to a motorized kite. It straps me in tight and whisks me away to the mountains. As we approach a small mountain lake, the kite dips to just above the treeline. Close to the shoreline, the little kite shakes from the turbulence, I lose my grip on the controls, and the kite falls toward the water. I scream. I hear the voice of my father, who died long ago, say, “Learn to fly this kite, my son, it is your way home.” I am scared. I feel the splash on my face, then wake up in a cold sweat.

Six years later.

I have been a commuter pilot for four years. I am at work, in the pilot crew lounge at the Los Angeles airport. I sign in for duty on one of the computers: “Number 192843 signing in for duty.” The computer spits out my schedule for the day. It is the same as yesterday’s. Yesterday’s was the same as last week’s. It is to be another long day: 7 legs, 12 hours on duty, then an overnight in Palm Springs with 5 hours of sleep. I’ll spend three

hours of the day in the crew lounge listening to senior pilots brag about new toys that I will never have: I am a first officer and earn a third of what they do, barely enough to stay off welfare, and a drastic change from the money of sales. I am stuck where I sit on the seniority list and won't get a raise or promotion until pilots start retiring in ten years. A captain died last year, and I moved up one number on the list.

Fred Cohina is my captain this month. He acts like a 747 captain and forgot a long time ago that we carry 19 passengers in a turboprop that passengers hate. He walks with airs and treats everyone like they owe him something. He treats me like I am one of the switches on the airplane. We've been flying together for three months, and he still doesn't know my name.

Flight 5237.

Our first round-trip is to Carlsbad and back. The airplane arrives late, and I am behind schedule. I preflight the airplane, climb into the cockpit, set up my stuff, make sure the essentials on my side of the airplane are working, and proceed to get the weather and the clearance. Cohina shows up in the middle of my receiving the clearance and starts flirting with the girl in the back, who is putting sick bags in the seats. He is loud and drowns out the air traffic controller. I have to ask the controller to say the whole thing again while I try to hear it over Cohina's banter.

Nineteen adults file into the airplane and squeeze into seats designed to be comfortable for 12-year-old children weighing no more than 100 pounds. They are squeezed in so tight that every part of their sides rests on their neighbor. No one likes it. They start moaning about the discomfort, several complain loudly about how small and uncomfortable the airplane is, and one says he will never fly this airline again. I say, "Glad to have you aboard, sir!" It is the same on every flight.

I get up and proceed to the back of the plane to close the door. I have to squeeze past eight sets of shoulders that define a very narrow aisle. I am supposed to make sure everyone is wearing their seat belts, but I don't because I would have to linger in the confines of those hot, sweating, angry bodies. Looking at them huddled together like cattle, I realize that if the plane goes down 3 people of the 19 might get out.

The passengers peer into my eyes like eagles stalking prey, all of them accusing me for their discomfort. "Boy, sure is hot in here." "Damn, I hate this airplane." "Why don't you get this damn thing cooled down?!" "Why

don't you use a bigger airplane?!" "Don't you guys have any earplugs for us?!" As I squeeze past the last row, I fight my tears and anger. The door mechanism is tight and closing it forces me to pull on two muscles in my mid-back that I didn't know I had. I wonder if I'll be able to close it seven times today without hurting myself.

Getting out of the gate is one of the hardest tasks of the flight. As a small plane, we are a very low priority to controllers. We are moving 19 people. Large jets are moving hundreds of people and they get priority. When they don't, a hotshot manager from their airline calls the tower to complain about the fuel burn. They demand tapes, copies of clearances, photographs. They tell the airport authority that they want to get rid of the small planes at Los Angeles. Then the controllers complain about it to us on the radio. So we sit and wait. Every single jet that needs to taxi goes before us. We get called out of the gate 20 minutes later. The schedule says we are supposed to be landing in Carlsbad in five minutes. We are late and will be late for the rest of the day. We will have to try to catch up during our scheduled breaks. I try not to think about not having food for the next six hours.

9 PM.

All six round-trips are done, and we are waiting to go to Palm Springs. The crew lounge is crowded, a sea of blue and white uniforms sloshing against breakers of exhaustion. "Management will get a big bonus out of these schedules, that is if my wife doesn't kill one of them first," one says. "This sucks. I'd rather haul garbage than do this," another says. "Yeah, well that's what Rob went and did. He can get you a job . . . and you'll make a lot more money than you're making now," another says. "My wife says if one more month goes by like this she'll leave me."

I have had a candy bar and popcorn since breakfast. I am exhausted from my day, and I am worried about the trip to Palm Springs. I remember the time I flew into Modesto on my seventh leg of the day, late at night, after 12 hours on duty. I got a bad case of vertigo and thought I was going to die. I scared myself enough that night to last a whole career of flying. If I fly to Palm Springs tonight I will make a lot of mistakes. I shouldn't go, but if I declare myself fatigued and take myself off the trip, my pay will be reduced, I will have to write reports and defend my action in front of a review panel, and I might get fired because the company will have to

cancel the flight. Some choice. Yeah, I'm tired, but I'm not willing to face capital punishment.

As several pilots dragged themselves to the door, no doubt after having had a similar conversation with themselves, I wonder if any of us will crash tonight. I imagine scores of photographers before a fiery blaze of 21 people trapped in one of our jetstreams. An adage of an old pilot says: all aviation law is written in the blood of innocent passengers. I believe him. Someday one of us will crash. I pray for my son that it's not me tonight.

Flight 5542.

Another full airplane. I've lost my civility and just scowl at the people as they deride me about the airplane. I don't greet them and just play the safety briefing tape as an introduction. It is my turn to fly. In flight I can't look down without getting dizzy. Controllers tell us headings and new frequencies, and I become dyslexic and get them backward. Several times Cohina has to correct me. Finally I see Palm Springs Airport and pray I can make a safe landing. I make a hand-shaking approach and land hard. Cohina looks at me and says, "Jesus!" I forget to do the after-landing checklist and the flaps are still extended when we pull into the gate. A ramper scurries to the window and asks if we need armed intervention: pulling into the gate with the flaps down signals a hijacker is on board. Cohina says, "No, it's just my bonehead FO here not doing his job." I put the flaps up and start stowing my gear, trying hard not to look at Fred or any of the passengers that were waiting to get off the plane.

As I step off the airplane, I want to kiss the ground, but people are watching. I think how I would love to call in sick for tomorrow; to get out of flying with Cohina and to get out of the early morning flight. I won't because it will look suspicious. I fall asleep in the van before we get to the hotel. Cohina has to shake me hard to get me up. He gives me my key and tells me to be in the lobby at 5:30 AM. It is 11:30 PM. I get to the room and it reeks of smoke. We're supposed to get nonsmoking rooms. Sure enough, I look on the table and there is the "No Smoking" sign. If I want a "real" non-smoking room, I'll have to go down to the lobby with my bags and hope the next one is better. Forget it. I don't care. If I get sick to my stomach, I don't care. In bed I ask myself, "With so many days like this, what did I gain by becoming a pilot? I am treated worse than I was treated doing sales." After a bout of self-pity, my mind goes blank. I fall asleep fast and hard.

My dream that night.

I find myself on an airstrip forged into the top of a cloud that is billowing next to a jagged, snowcapped mountain. I am walking toward what I think is a plane. As I get closer, I see it is not a plane, but a kite with a motor on it. The engine is running, and I notice one of the stanchions supporting the wing has my name etched into it. I sit in the chair, put on the cap, scarf, and goggles, and then twist the throttle to full power. The little kite blasts off the cloud, bows to the left, and descends to the valley below.

We are heading for a small lake at the base of the mountain. Our descent is steep. I hear the wind whistle through my goggles as it drags my scarf against my flying cap. Within seconds I am dancing just over the treeline. I look down at the trees and notice my kite has pontoons. The ride is smooth as we cross the shore. This time I let go of the controls, close my eyes, and throw my head back, expecting a crash. I feel a rapid drop, hear the kite splash the surface of the lake, then feel wind and spray against my face.

I open my eyes and the kite is glistening across the lake toward a small cabin nestled in a grove of pines on the distant shore. I am not afraid. It is the home I have been searching for all my life. I smile, unbuckle my seat belt, remove my cap, scarf, and goggles, and throw them in the water as the kite comes to a stop at the landing.

As I step onto the porch, the front door opens and a cool, crisp breeze from inside carries a calm, white peace that brushes cold against my face, penetrates it, then wends its way to my heart. I close my eyes and tip my head upward to receive it, as if it is a kiss on my forehead from heaven. The breeze gathers in my chest and then shoots to my toes. My shoulders drop two inches, my head falls forward, and every muscle in my body loosens.

I open my eyes and see my father. He is retreating from having kissed my forehead. He smiles, strokes my hair with his hand, and says, "Welcome home." I smile and am gleeful, like a child, that it is him. As he puts his arm around my shoulder, he turns me to view the mountain lake. My little kite with the motor on it disappears before us. I realize I am here to stay. The breeze inside me sweeps across my forehead and stops to rest in the corners of my eyes, where tears, shouting in relief, begin their dance down my cheeks.

5:30 AM.

I call crew scheduling to tell them I am sick and cannot fly the day. They say it is too late to get a reserve and will have to cancel the flight. There will be consequences. I say, "I am sorry, but I have no choice." As I hang up the phone I finish the sentence. *I have no choice because I finally have a choice. I don't need this job any longer. Flying has taken me where I needed to go.* I put on shorts and a T-shirt and head off to the bus stop in town.





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Glad to See You

Cynthia CL Roderick

1. Gloria, darling, am I glad to see you. What a wonderful daughter! Put your coat on the commode.
2. You'll have to sit on the bed. Somebody stole the chair. I'm *so* glad to see you, dear. I'm as naked as a Rubens in the Louvre.
3. The aides just plop a bowl of water in front of me and expect me to wash myself. They say they're too busy. There's never enough help. I need help. I can hardly lift my arms, I'm so tired.
4. Oh, thank you, dear. Wash my back. You're so wonderful. What a wonderful daughter.
5. I didn't get my sleeping pill last night. I didn't sleep a wink. I'm a wreck. The nurses here are killing me.
6. Ruth, come here. I want you to meet my daughter. This is my youngest, Gloria, my baby. Ruth works so hard. She's the best aide; she helps me all the time. No, leave the oxygen on. I'm out of breath already. Gloria, will you help me get dressed?
7. They've shrunk all my jerseys. That pretty blue one you bought me? I can't get it over my head. The cheap ones shrink, you know.
8. I have no idea where my gray slacks went. I don't know what happened to anything. Your sisters probably threw everything out. They took away my home and left me with nothing.
9. Thank you, darling. Now get me my oxygen. I can hardly breathe.
10. So how are you, dear? How was Montreal? Ha, Barcelona, Rome, Montreal. I know who to ask when I need something. I know who's got all the money.

11. Marilyn hardly ever comes to see me. She's off having a good time. Your poor brother, he's probably turning in his grave. I wonder what he'd think of it, the way his wife neglects his old mother.
12. Doris was here yesterday. But she's always rushing off, going here, going there. To the dentist, the hairdresser. She breezes in and out. She went to see your Aunt Edith the other day while I sat here alone.
13. I've been sick ever since I came here. This place will kill me. I shouldn't be in a nursing home. People say to me, "What are you doing here? You don't belong here." I tell them, "I'm here because nobody wants me."
14. I raised five children. I worked hard all my life and now look.
15. I've heard your plans for Mother's Day—you're all getting me a new spring outfit. How come only one? You've got money. I haven't got a thing to wear.
16. Some of the people here aren't friendly. They never say hello. There. Quick. Look, in the hall. The one walking. She's so stuck up.
17. Here comes Ethel. She's my new roommate. That's all she ever says, "I want to go home." Poor dear. She doesn't know where she is. C'mon Ethel. Come in, dear. Help her, Gloria. Move the table so the wheelchair can get by. There's no room in here for anything. She bumps into my bed all the time. I'm sure to lose a leg.
18. They take me to physical therapy and make me do things—lift this arm, stretch that one. I said to the therapist, "I don't want to do this. I came here to die." He said, "Well, we're not going to let you." I said, "I know a few people who will be awfully disappointed."
19. You know I'm not lazy. I'm so tired. I don't care what happens to me. Just you try being 94 years old. Some people are stoics and can do anything. I don't happen to be one.
20. Good morning, Jeanne. This is my daughter, Gloria. Jeanne used to live on High Street in Newburyport, near your Aunt Tess. Are you on your way to the library?
21. Jeanne reads all the time, but she doesn't remember a thing. She had a house in Cambridge, too. Linnaean Street. There's money there somewhere.

22. I had a dream last night that my bed was full of newborn puppies. They were so soft and cute! But *too many puppies*.
23. You were such a sweet little girl, Gloria. Little Glo. "Glowly," you used to say. You cried so hard the day Taffy got run over. I can still see you putting flowers on his grave, poor puppy.
24. We didn't want another baby. Who in their right mind would, with four barely out of the cradle? But once you were born, you were your father's favorite. He forgave you for everything.
25. He used to say we could have bought a mansion with all the money we spent on your psychiatrist. Little good it did, too.
26. Clear off the table, dear. The lunch trays are coming. And get me some water, would you? Not that stale stuff. I want *cold* water.
27. The food is terrible. I wonder what we're having today. Do I dare look?
28. Oh, my, am I going to eat this or have I already eaten it?
29. I'll just have the soup and bread. My rations. You eat the rest.
30. What's the matter, darling, aren't you hungry?



Waiting: A Letter

Ariane Bolduc

Dearest—More photos? *Just* photos?
What should they mean to me, these

horses, their train of silhouettes,
riding the line of the sky? What

is your obsession with the horizon
and its silence, that slicing of the future

in half? The photo of your shadow,
stretching across the straw-colored plain

—your long legs even longer under
sun—that one's my favorite, your legs

like an A-frame over the light,
golden earth. Have you noticed how

many of your pictures hold that shape,
all those *As*? The Indian tee-pees,

the swing set and slide, corroding
in the dusty, abandoned playground.

A: the first letter in all your non-letters,
the words you won't write, the first

letter of my name. *Dearest*, picture me
here, in red autumn: the Winesap apples

bulge in burlap. A too-full sack sits
rotting on the porch beside the rusty rocker

that doesn't rock. Children pass, laughing,
from the Catholic school on 3rd St.

The steeple stabs the perfect blue—

At my feet, shadows shake on brick,
wind licks across my ankles, and

rice-like leaves litter the street—
little grains of leaf. Sand. Salt.





©2009 Ryan Long, “Dew Drops”

The Pool Cleaner

Charles Grosel

It hit 100 by 8 in the morning, and by 10 we had the streets to ourselves, as if they had been scoured clean by the glare of the sun. It must have been 105, 106 by then, not unusually hot for August in Phoenix, but still. Ordinarily we would have been headed home by then or over to Nick's Diner, but we had a late start. It was Marilee's day off from business school, and I had made breakfast—her favorite, French toast with cream cheese. She hadn't wanted any, said she wasn't hungry, but when I gave her what she calls my sad-eyed puppy look, she ate one forkful, then pushed the plate away and headed for the bathroom.

We bounced along on the bench of the old pickup that came with the pool cleaning business we bought three or four years ago instead of getting married. It was the reverse of the usual argument. I was pushing 30 and ready. Marilee said she was too young—23 at the time, though I knew plenty of people who got married younger. She wasn't sure about kids, either. Didn't want them right away—or maybe ever, she once said after a night of margaritas, but I figured that was just the tequila talking. Since then, we hadn't made much progress toward marriage or children, though for a while I proposed on every big occasion. Her birthday. Christmas Eve. Christmas. New Year's Eve. New Year's Day. Valentine's Day. Sweetest Day. *My* birthday. Her answer was always the same: "Not yet." After a couple of years, I stopped asking.

I had the blower up high, but something must have busted loose, because it was grinding like a fork in a disposal, and all it did was blow hot air on our sweaty faces. My Cool Pool T-shirt stuck to my back, and the vinyl seat suctioned my bare legs as I worked the pedals. I turned the fan down, then up, then down again, trying to get it quiet.

"What are you doing?" Marilee said, grabbing my hand. "Stop." She squeezed until I pulled away, the blower now emitting the sound of a stick run along a pool fence. Her face was pale, damp, and a little puffy, her eyes embedded in dark half moons. She wouldn't wear the T-shirts anymore.

Said they made her look fat. But she used to wear them gladly, when we first went on the jobs together, before b-school. Sometimes that was all she had worn around the apartment, any old thing, then shucked it off in one clean motion before she slid between the cool sheets.

"We could get it fixed," I said, biting off the last word.

"This old thing? Look at it."

She had a point. Flattened paper cups, bits of PVC pipe, torn gaskets, and an array of screwdrivers and pliers were scattered on the floor. The seat was ripped in half a dozen places, and piled in the space between us were old work orders and street maps that would never fold right again. The steering wheel pinched my fingers if I wasn't careful. I had the blisters to prove it.

"It's a work truck," I said. Like the one my father borrowed from my landscaper uncle when I was a kid and we wanted to haul something that wouldn't fit in the station wagon—mulch for the flowerbeds, sand for the huge sandbox he had built in the backyard, topsoil to patch the bare spots we made playing kickball. I pictured my own son or daughter (or both—why not?) riding shotgun the way I had with my dad, standing on the front seat (though that wouldn't be allowed these days), smiling more wildly than for any amusement park ride.

"That would imply we had work," she said.

"Whatever do you mean, dear lady?" I faked an English accent. "We've got a new customer this very day."

"My professor," she said, unsmiling, then went quiet, as if she had said too much.

At first I said no, I didn't want the job. It had all the earmarks of a pity hire, and I liked to keep things separate—her school, our business. But Marilee, who does the books, said we couldn't afford to be picky, so I said, What the hell. If her professor had work for us, who was I to turn it down, even if she did spend more time at the college than home now that she was his research assistant? She hadn't wanted to go on the job this morning, said she wasn't feeling well after breakfast. But it was her only day off, the only day she could help out, and it was still her business, too, I emphasized rather vehemently through the bathroom door, still stung by her lack of interest in the French toast. In the end, she said, "Fine. I'll go."

"Not if you don't want to," I said.

"I said I'll go, all right? Just give me three seconds, will you please?"

It was one of those small victories that felt like a defeat, a feeling I carried into the truck.

"This it?" I said, catching sight of a large wooden sign with blue trim and the words, "Copper Canyon Estates," the same name written in a man's handwriting on the b-school stationery taped to the dashboard. "I think this is it." I made a hard right into the street forked by the sign.

"Jesus, Jon," Marilee said, grabbing the door handle with one hand and holding the other to her mouth. The rear end of the truck slid toward the bricked-off flower bed where the signposts were planted in the ground.

"You could have warned me," I said.

"How would I know where it is?"

"You spend enough time with the man."

"I work for him," she said. "At school. He's in his office, I'm in the library or the computer room. Where I should be right now."

"You didn't have to come," I spat out.

"Right," she said.

As I straightened out the truck and moved up the driveway, a gangly young cop appeared out of nowhere and threw up his hands. He wore dark, police-issue shorts and a light blue shirt already soaked through. I stopped the truck hard. The buckets of chemicals in back slid toward the cab, and we rocked to a halt. Angled across the street in front of us were a large green fire truck, an ambulance, and several cruisers. All of them had their flashers rolling, but the lights were barely visible in the sun. The cop kept one hand up, then moved past our truck to catch anyone coming in behind us.

Other uniformed men and women were moving about with purpose, some pointing and talking, others nodding and walking briskly to their tasks, sweat beading on the faces of those close enough for us to see. I looked into the sky, but I didn't see any smoke. The hoses on the fire truck were folded tight, but the back of the ambulance was open and empty. "Heart attack," I said, after noticing the silver-haired neighbors standing across the street. "Maybe a stroke."

"Jo-on," Marilee said, punching my arm lightly.

"What else could it be?"

She didn't answer, and I thought she was letting it pass, but then suddenly she said, "The pool," and pointed to a wooden door set into the stucco fence next to the driveway. It was held open by a different cop.

Marilee cranked down her window, herky jerky. The heat billowed in along with the heavy diesel fumes of the fire engine. She put her hand up to her mouth and swallowed. The house was modern adobe, stucco like

the fence, low-slung, with a tiled roof and a recessed entranceway leading to a huge door, the kind you usually see on palaces or cathedrals. An iron-wood tree shaded the front windows. Ocotillos, prickly pears, and barrel cacti were arranged in the neatly raked gravel yard.

A gurney surrounded by EMTs shot through the wooden door. Marilee sucked air between her clenched teeth. Laid out on the gurney was a limp, shirtless figure about three feet long. Shimmery purple shorts with orange piping clung to his chubby legs. A Suns jersey had been yanked over his head, and was now tangled around one of his arms, which was bent back as if he were taking a nap. His hair was wet and tufted wildly like desert grass. An oxygen mask covered his mouth and nose.

The truck door clunked open, and Marilee hopped out. She stood in the triangle formed by the door and the truck's frame. She bunched her shoulder-length hair behind her head as if to make a ponytail, held on to it briefly, then let go. The hair stayed in place for a few moments, then spread out on its own, leaving an indentation where her hand had been. I used to hold her hair like that at odd moments around the house, watching TV or listening to music, until she told me she didn't like it anymore. I took a deep breath, then threw open my door and circled the truck, approaching her from behind, squinting against the sun.

I put my hand on Marilee's shoulder. She started, then continued to look straight ahead, hard and tense, a pillar. A woman cop led a short, dark, round woman in blue jeans and a tight T-shirt with glittering letters through the gate following the gurney. She was holding a cloth in her hand, and the expression on her face was a kind of dazed anger. She didn't live in the house, that much was obvious. Most likely she worked there, one of the scores of people, like Cool Pool, who kept these big houses running. It was a good enough job for me, but Marilee wanted more, and when she figured out I wasn't going to give it to her, she went back to school.

The pair stopped while the EMTs collapsed the legs of the gurney and lifted it into the ambulance. The round woman made as if to climb in after it, but the police officer tugged at her arm and led her to one of the squad cars. Every couple of steps, the woman would stop, turn, and reach toward the ambulance, but the officer blocked her way each time, kept moving her along.

"Oh, Jon," Marilee said in the reverent singsong she reserved for the sad stories she read in the newspaper. She twisted around and grabbed the front of my shirt, laying her face on the backs of her hands.

"It's okay," I said. "It's okay." It felt good to have her call my name. I patted her on the back, reaching awkwardly around her arms, which she kept slightly bent at the elbows. "They wouldn't do the oxygen if he wasn't going to make it," I said, hoping this was true.

She rubbed her face in her hands like a sleepy child. "How do they do it?" She burrowed deeper into her own arms.

"Training," I said, thinking of the cops and the EMTs.

"I mean the mother," she said. "That must be the mother, right? Everything's so—fraught."

"Fraught?" I said.

"Responsibility. Danger. Chaos. *Heartbreak*," she said. "How do they do it?"

"I don't know," I said stupidly, rubbing her back. But I'm willing to try, I stopped myself from adding. It was a worn-out subject between us.

She pulled tighter on my shirt, pressed into my stomach with her elbows, like a boxer. "I guess I'm going to find out," she said.

It took a few moments for this to register, then I said, "What?" I stepped back to arm's length.

"I'm pregnant," she said quickly and quietly, ducking her head.

"Oh, honey," I said, and despite the cops and EMTs, the boy laid out on the gurney, and the dazed mother who was either being comforted or arrested at just that moment, I felt a rush of joy. I hugged her to me, then smoothed the damp hair curling around her ears. She leaned in to me, stiffly, at first, then gave herself up to the hug. I pictured us all in the truck, bouncing along, smiling and laughing. "How long?" I said.

"Five weeks," she said, her voice growing small.

"Wow, that's—recent," I said. Then I did what everyone does to a pregnant woman. I reached for her tummy.

She twisted away. "Five. Weeks." She snapped off each word.

And then I got it. The last time we made love had been Memorial Day. Holiday sex, which was what we were down to these days. I had been hoping for more of the same around the Fourth, but our nation's birthday had come and gone without so much as a deep kiss. We were halfway to Labor Day, and she was having a baby.

Once when I was playing pickup basketball, I wasn't looking when a teammate passed the ball at very short range about as hard as he could. It hit me full in the face and snapped my head back like a punch. I saw stars. My face went numb. My ears roared. Tears came to my eyes, though

I wasn't crying. That was how I felt just then, as if someone had slammed the door to everything familiar. A balloon of pressure expanded behind my eyes, like a hangover. The time at school. The research. The phone calls. Why she hadn't wanted to go on the job that morning, then why she had. It was him, this—professor. And there was his house on the other side of the emergency trucks, behind the stucco fence, set back from the fray, neat, pristine. No one in the house could possibly know what was going on out here, nor would they be likely to care.

I am not a violent man, but I grabbed Marilee by the arm, stepped her back into the truck, and slammed the door. While she caught her balance and repositioned herself on the seat, protests erupting on her face, I strode around the front and got in. I started the engine, clunked the gearshift carefully into drive, and calmly—I was amazed at just how calmly—I worked the truck around the fire engine. I had to go up on the sidewalk where the neighbors were standing, but they had plenty of time to scatter.

"Jon?" Marilee said, tentative.

The house with the number on the note was at the dead center of the cul-de-sac. Once I dropped down from the sidewalk, the truck bouncing wildly on its worn shocks, I headed straight for a huge saguaro in the front yard, its arms hooked to the sky.

"Jon, stop. I know what you're doing. You're wrong."

How could she know what I was doing when I didn't know myself? I accelerated, but I was calm. Very calm.

"Jon," she said. I confess I enjoyed the uncertainty in her voice, the touch of fear. "You're wrong. It's not him."

As I approached the curb, gaining speed, hurtling toward the giant cactus, Marilee grabbed me by the arm and screamed, "It's not him!" At the last second, I turned the truck hard and swerved to a stop in front of the house. The equipment in the back slid toward the house and the papers on the seat spilled onto my lap, along with Marilee, who immediately pushed herself upright, jabbing me with her elbow. She sat back in the seat, breathing hard, her face splotchy, her arms folded across her chest. I stared straight ahead, also breathing hard. The sweat formed a sticky mask on my face.

"Who is it, then?" I said.

"I haven't told him," she said, turning serious, intimate. This sisterlike confidence was another body blow.

"Haven't told who?" I said. "Who is it? Who's the father of my child?"

Her eyes went wide in surprise. She sputtered, trying to hold it in, then let out a loose, loud laugh. "Don't you have that backwards?" Her chest heaved, her shoulders jiggled, and for a moment, I had the old Marilee back, the lines of worry smoothed away, the smile back on her face, no less a beautiful sight for me being the butt of the laughter. "That world of yours." She shook her head.

"My world's just fine," I said. I opened the door with some force.

"Jon. What are you doing?" she said, still chuckling and shaking her head.

"Who is it?" I said, pausing for the answer.

"I don't think it's a good—"

I hopped out of the truck, slammed the door without a word, and strode to the tailgate, jerked it open.

She twisted around in her seat, yelling to be heard through the window. "Look. You don't know him. What difference could it—?"

I began unloading the equipment, moving at hyperspeed, like the time I had stayed up all night for a bachelor party and had a half a dozen espressos to get through the next day. That's how I felt. All jittery, like I had never slept in my life and would never sleep again. Thoughts yammered in my head. Marilee and me riding in the truck. Marilee and me working side by side, the ridged hose snaking through the water. Marilee and me rushing home at the end of a day, going right for the shower to soap each other up and down until it was too late to have anything else but toast and cereal for dinner. I slammed the vacuum hose on the ground, the extension pole, the bucket of attachments, the chlorine, the algacide.

"Jon," she yelled from the cab. She had turned around to kneel on the seat, and slid open the back window. "This is crazy. Take me home. We'll talk." The hard grip of determination she had held until then was loosening into something less certain.

Good, I thought. I shouldn't be the only one. I kept unloading, looking at each piece of equipment like I had never seen it before, the silvery scratches along the blue pole, the chlorine encrustations, the dirt settled into the lips of the bucket covers. Out near the entrance, the ambulance worked its way to the entrance, followed closely by a cruiser. The rest of the crew were doing cleanup or paperwork.

"I can't do this right now," she said.

"We've got a business to run," I said, my ears buzzing as if I were in the center of a beehive. Sweat dripped down my face, burning when it reached my eyes. "Isn't that what you always tell me?"

"Take me home," she said.

I would have considered it, but I didn't know what home was anymore. I hauled the equipment inside the gate, then closed it behind me, extra careful to latch it tight, remembering the boy in the ambulance. You never knew how something like that could happen. A rusty gate hinge that kept the latch from catching, a door propped open for just a second to fix an umbrella, a patio chair too close to the safety fence—any slackening of vigilance, any taking of things for granted. I preached to the customers about these hazards, took care of them when I could. But there was always more to do, and I was only one man. And one man, apparently, wasn't enough. I slung the hose on my shoulder and carried the pole in my other arm, hurrying as if I had only minutes to complete the job.

The part of the yard I could see from the path was well manicured—no weeds in the rocks, all the hedges trimmed tight. When the pool came into view, I stopped short. It was typical of the upscale homes in this area: a black safety fence, a rock backdrop, a waterfall from the raised spa to the main pool, maybe a TV in a fake rock. But the water was a thick, green scum of leaves and algae, some floating on the surface, the rest a mucky, murky slurry. It hadn't been cleaned in months, maybe all summer. A sickly sweet stench rose up in waves. My stomach churned, the taste of bile burped in my throat. I couldn't see to the bottom of the pool. A body could have been down there for all I could tell, a baby or a two-year-old boy.

I dropped the equipment at my feet, and jogged back along the path, which was all the speed I could muster in the heat. I was very thirsty, with a bad case of cottonmouth. I retraced my steps through the faux desert, making sure, again, to latch the gate behind me. Marilee was sitting in the truck, fanning herself with one of the maps, propping her chin in the palm of her hand. Sweat was pouring down my face, and my T-shirt stuck to me like a blister. When I opened the door, she gave a start, then shrunk into the corner as if I was attacking her.

"Marry me," I croaked loudly. "Marry me now. Today. Please. Say yes."

She stared at me the way you do when you wake up and your eyes aren't working yet. She looked damp and wilted.

"We don't have to tell him," I went on. "We'll keep it to ourselves. Raise it as our own. Just marry me."

"It's a baby, not a puppy you can pass around like some toy," she said, laying her two hands on her stomach, a maternal gesture, a completion of the circle, with me on the outside. It just made me want her more. It was why I had always wanted her, why I had felt like the luckiest guy in the world when I thought she wanted me.

"I know that," I said. "I know. Marry me. Just marry me. We'll figure it out."

Her face gathered in on itself. She nodded, not in answer to my proposal, it was clear, but to a question she might have been asking herself. "Jon," she said, shaking her head now. "Poor, sweet, Jon."





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Patriarchal Poetry

Gavin Craig

I got up in the middle of reading Patriarchal Poetry. In the middle of reading patriarchal poetry I got up to use my hands to fold clothes my hands to fold to fold clothes to clothes to fold to fold to clothes to fold my hands to fold clothes to use my hands to fold to use to fold to use my hands to clothes.

I do not think that Stein would mind.

I use the word I too much in my poetry.

There is sound in Patriarchal Poetry sound and rhythm in repetition in the way that we use sound to make words we use sound to make words mean different things the sound in patriarchal poetry makes words mean different things we use sound in patriarchal poetry in Patriarchal Poetry we use sound we use sound to make words mean different things in patriarchal poetry.

I do not think that Stein would mind, but we use sound in Patriarchal Poetry to make words mean different things.

I use the word I too much in my poetry in my poetry I too much is I is he in my poetry I is he is he is I is he in my poetry is he he said in my poetry is patriarchal poetry my poetry is patriarchal poetry I mind I too much in my poetry.

It is natural to mind in my poetry.

I got up to mind in my poetry I got up in the middle of reading patriarchal poetry I got up in the middle he said I do not think that Stein would mind getting up in the middle of patriarchal poetry.

I folded clothes he said. I got up in the middle of my poetry he said to fold clothes. I thought about sound and rhythm and to rearrange. I fold clothes he said not as a political statement it is a political statement it is a sound it is a political sound it is political a sound a sound to fold clothes.

Even when I fold clothes his poetry is my poetry is my patriarchal poetry.

When I was a child I would repeat words in my head until they broke down into sounds. At first glimpse two has a meaning but repeated it is a shape and a sound. Two. Even when broken down it can be said quickly and has meaning again. Thought and meaning are not always compatible.

Even when broken down two can be said again quickly even when broken down it can be said even when broken down it can be Patriarchal even when broken when down when broken even it can be said it can be broken be quickly even when broken down patriarchal poetry can be said quickly and has meaning again even when broken down Patriarchal Poetry can be said again quickly even when broken patriarchal poetry can be said again.

I do not think that Stein would mind he said.

Have it as she said she said.





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Faith and Reason: A Love Story

K. T. Landon

“How many of you think you will love your children right away?”

Liz, the instructor for our agency’s required preadoption class, paused and looked around the room. Sitting in chairs arranged in a large circle were 12 couples in the early stages of adopting from China, Guatemala, and Korea. Every hand except mine, my husband’s, and one guy’s on the other side of the room was up. I could imagine the whispered conversations at the break—“Oh my God, the poor kid who gets them for parents”—but my hand stayed down.

“OK,” said Liz. She talked about what the adjustment is like for internationally adopted children and what our first meetings might be like with infants who have been uprooted from literally everything they have ever known—their caregivers, the language and food they are used to, the sights and sounds of their daily routines—and handed over to people who look, talk, and smell funny. She told the story of one woman whose new Chinese daughter cried ceaselessly for two days after the woman arrived in China to pick her up.

“I offered to look after the baby for an hour,” Liz said, “so the woman, who was traveling alone, could have a break—probably so she could go upstairs and freak out on the phone to her husband. It took me almost all of that hour just to get the baby settled down.

“I knew that baby would be fine. I knew that the crying meant that she had been attached to her previous caregivers and so she would also be able to attach to her new family. But when you’ve been trying to quiet a crying baby for 48 hours, ‘love’ may not be exactly what you feel.”

Everybody nodded, but few seem convinced.

Liz went on to explain how attachment develops. The child has a need—she’s wet, she’s hungry, she wants to be held—and cries. The parents meet the need by feeding or changing or holding the baby, and the baby is happy. Through repetition of this cycle of need and gratification, the baby learns to trust the parent, she said, and the parents learn

that they are able to meet the child's needs and feel more attached to the child.

At the break we chatted, inevitably, with Ed, the other guy who didn't raise his hand, the three of us eager to reassure ourselves that we weren't heartless freaks, happy to think there was a kindred spirit in the group. He introduced us to his wife Gabrielle. Ed and Gabrielle lived in the same town as we did and were also adopting from China. It turned out that Ed, like us, was basing his expectations on his experience with the family dog.

Like many couples considering parenthood, we adopted a dog as a kind of trial run. A dog would be a much more significant and limiting commitment than the cats had ever been—no more taking off for the weekend without a lot of advance planning—but we figured if we could handle keeping a dog alive and well and happy, then we were ready for the next step.

On the web we found Save-A-Dog, which rescues dogs from shelters that don't have no-kill policies in the Midwest and the South and fosters them in Massachusetts until homes can be found. As we were leaving our first Save-A-Dog meet-and-greet, we heard the organizers talking about a Yellow Lab.

"Any interest in Sadie?" one asked.

"No, not today," the other replied a little sadly. "No one's interested in an older dog."

Ben caught my eye. I nodded.

"We're interested in Sadie," he said.

Two days later we picked her up. While it wasn't what we had planned, we told ourselves that an older dog would make for an easier transition than a high-energy puppy.

But our "starter dog" had other ideas. She came with a urinary tract infection and kidney problems and needed to go out as soon as she got up in the morning, an occurrence that generally coincided with sunrise. She'd bonk her head into the side rails of our bed and then rub her side up and down the entire length of the bed, looking up occasionally to see if she was having the intended effect. I'd roll over and gaze bleary-eyed at the clock—5 AM—and then at Sadie. And I would think, *You have ruined my life*. She rested her chin on the mattress, her wet, black nose right next to my face, and smiled her doggy smile—mouth open, ears back, tail in slow but steady motion, thrilled that breakfast was in the offing.

I'd stand out in the yard with her, wearing my slippers, a baseball cap, and a raincoat over my pajamas, and then she would follow me in for breakfast, nudging me toward the kitchen with her nose. And after a couple of weeks—once I'd gotten into the habit of setting up the coffee the night before—those early mornings were no longer a hardship but, instead, an opportunity to make someone else ridiculously happy every single day. Sadie's enthusiasm for breakfast—and dinner and indeed all things edible—never waned.

We all got used to each other, and getting up at 5 AM (or, mercifully, something closer to 7 AM in the winter) became the natural rhythm of our lives as a family with a dog. We addressed Sadie's medical problems and grinned at each other like idiots when, after four or five months, the vet told us that all her blood levels were—just barely—in the normal range. We hired a trainer and taught Sadie how to walk on a leash without pulling, how to sit, how to stay. We bragged to anyone who would listen that she was the only dog in her obedience class not to soil the floor.

And Sadie learned that she could count on us—for food and fresh water, for regular walks, for treats for good behavior, and for the occasional trip to the park. Sadie went from looking, our trainer said, “like she was so anxious she was crawling out of her skin” to being a happy, healthy dog. She wanted, ultimately, not much more than just to be with us, and she would follow us quietly from room to room; we'd look around and there she would be, chin on her paws, smiling and content.

After our last preadoption class, Gabrielle and I exchanged a few emails and set up a dinner with our husbands. We went to our favorite Sichuan restaurant, and before the appetizers had arrived, we were comparing social workers, home studies, and the relative insensitivity of the infertility professionals we had dealt with. Ben and I had discussed our adoption plans with almost no one—not even our families—and it was a relief to talk about them freely with people as interested as we were.

“You really haven't told your families yet?” Gabrielle asked incredulously. It was clear that, unlike the rest of us, she had no doubts whatsoever.

“We asked for twins!” she said. She was already at work decorating the nursery and baby-proofing the house and was thinking seriously about leaving her job and just working on the house and other preparations until she and Ed got their referral.

We, on the other hand, had bought a video about adopting from China.

We were waiting on all major baby-related purchases and decorating. This sprang in part from a kind of inherent emotional conservatism but mostly from the recognition of how sad it would be to have a house all ready for a baby with no baby in it.

As dinner progressed from dan dan noodles and wontons in chili sauce to house special chicken with dry red pepper and our second bottle of wine, the differences in our attitudes became clearer. Ed and Ben and I were aware of all that could still go wrong and cautious in expressing our hopes for the future, but Gabrielle's enthusiasm had a relentless quality to it. It washed over the rest of us like a tidal wave, leaving us flattened and a little demoralized in its wake.

When we dropped them off at home, we loaned Gabrielle and Ed our video, in which the parents each take a couple of shirts and a minimum number of changes of underwear for the two-week trip to China and practically need a sherpa for the pile of stuff they bring for their daughter, including: clothes in a range of sizes; a two-week supply of each of several different kinds of infant formula; multiple types of bottles and nipples; toys; Cheerios; diapers; baby wipes; and an infant pharmacy that would make Hunter S. Thompson proud.

"Take notes!" we said, laughing.

We emailed a couple of times after that dinner, and Gabrielle was always saying we should get together again but never suggested a specific date. I sensed that she was not really interested in pursuing the connection, and the emails gradually stopped. Our attitudes and expectations about adoption appeared to be fundamentally irreconcilable, and conversation required so much self-editing to avoid seeming to question each other's values that there was just no space to relax into a friendship. *Perhaps*, I thought, *once our babies come home we'll have more in common.*

There's a Chinese folk tale that says that when a child is born, invisible red threads connect him to all the people who will be important in his life. As the child grows, the threads get shorter, drawing those people closer to him. I don't think it's possible to find a website about adoption from China that does not include a "red thread" reference in some form or another. More broadly, a belief in fate or predestination—sometimes explicitly invoked as God, sometimes more vaguely stated as "meant to be"—is very common

among adoptive parents. Some of them seem to be hanging on to that red thread for dear life, some seem to take it as a given; but not many discount it altogether.

Ben and I don't believe in fate. We are both software engineers whose professional lives are driven by logic and rationality, and we define ourselves by our minds. I was miffed when our social worker wrote up our home study with an introduction that described Ben as "intelligent" and me as "empathic."

"What about my *summa cum laude* degree from an Ivy League college?" I asked. "What about Phi Beta Kappa? How come you get to be the smart one?"

"K. T.," said my husband, "she had to make one of us look warm."

We don't think of our own relationship as fated. We agree that, while a certain amount of basic chemistry is required, we could both have had happy and fulfilling (though very different) relationships with others had we never been introduced at Mac World in 1995. But we chose each other then and choose each other still. If that sounds a little cool or too much a matter of the head rather than the heart, I can only say that someone who still chooses me every day after 12 years together is actually pretty romantic, and it gives our marriage a resilience that has seen us through a lot.

And so we don't believe that there is one specific child, somewhere in China, waiting for us.

At the Waiting Families group that my agency runs for families who have completed their home studies but not yet adopted a child, I feel like an atheist at a revival meeting. One recent Thursday we talked, as we do frequently, about how hard the wait is. Tears and anger are not uncommon at these meetings. Many of us have waited months or even years longer than we expected to.

"Well," says one participant, sighing, "I know there's a reason." Everybody in the group nods in agreement.

Yes, I think, *the reason is that the government agency that handles adoptions in your child's country is moving very, very slowly.* But that's not what she—not what anyone in this group—means.

The same gulf that separated me from Gabrielle seems to yawn at my feet in any conversation with preadoptive parents. I believe that if they knew how I thought, I would be a pariah.

I mention to one prospective parent that I have given up reading the blogs that collect and publish Internet rumors about the Chinese adoption program—which families will get their referrals in the next monthly batch and whether the rules are changing or the program is likely to speed up in the near future.

“I agree with you that it can be a roller coaster,” he says, “but I don’t know what else to do. If I really didn’t care about the adoption, I wouldn’t be trying to get the latest news.”

I know that he isn’t suggesting I don’t care, but that’s what I hear.

So I am silent, or I stick to the superficial topics of how hard it is to wait or where to find a nice crib that doesn’t cost a fortune. My silence buys me an awkward sort of acceptance in the group. Or, more accurately, it buys me an acceptance of my awkward self, since all that self-suppression makes me, frankly, a little weird. I haunt the margins of small group conversations at the break, listening intently, almost never participating.

How much of this reticence is justified? Would these nice, kind people really reject me? I am not yet brave enough to find out. I choose inauthenticity, even if all it gets me is company, not a real connection.

But I long for that connection. Most days I feel so alone in this process, and it would be a relief to talk to someone who really understood. Sometimes I will see a parent and child holding hands, maybe waiting to cross the street or heading into swimming lessons at the Y, and the trust and intimacy in that gesture half breaks my heart. My friends are kind and sympathetic, but I’ve come to dread their questions—“You’re still waiting? Is something wrong with your agency?”—that always seem to suggest I’m not doing enough to move things along.

What we all want in that group—rationalists and romantics alike—is some sense of agency in our own futures, however illusory. The decision to parent, fundamentally private for most people, is, in our case, subject to scrutiny and the possibility of denial by multiple agencies and national governments. Our input into the process ended the day we sent our dossiers off to the various countries from which we are adopting. Now all we can do is wait.

But we show up at the meetings, each of us with a different way of thinking about the process that makes us feel we have some control. We clutch our theories—fate or God or reason—like talismans, a kind of shield against the impersonality of it all. “Look,” we say, “not a passive victim.” It

seems like we should have so much in common, but I find in myself always the impulse to argue about whose control is better, whose is “right.”

Some days I would give anything for the confidence these parents have—certain they are meant to be parents, certain they will love their children, certain their children will love them—but I can see no path to their point of view that doesn’t involve surrendering critical thought entirely. And I know myself well enough to know that if I can’t get there through reason, I won’t be going.

I tell myself that I am better prepared for the realities of adoption—for a child who cries for two days straight or shuts down entirely or prefers Ben to me—than those other parents. But the possibility that I am wrong haunts me. I read somewhere that one of the common factors among children with good outcomes from international adoptions was the parents’ belief that the relationship was “meant to be.” Maybe that confidence, misplaced or not, gives them a psychic cushion to fall back on when the going gets rough.

I remember going, early in the process of deciding whether to adopt, to one of our agency’s presentations. These programs always started off with a discussion led by a family that has recently adopted. On that night it was two parents with their young son just home from Ethiopia. “You know,” said the mother, “a lot of people talk about the red thread and all that, and I was like, ‘Yeah, they take the parents’ file from the top of one pile, and the kid’s file from the top of the other and just slap them together.’ But,” she continued, gazing at her son, “he is just *so* perfect for us. I can’t imagine having any other child now.”

In July I was out walking Sadie on our usual Saturday-morning route when I ran into Gabrielle.

“Hey, how are you doing?” I asked.

“Ed left me in May,” she said.

“Oh my God,” I said, “I’m so sorry. Are you OK?”

She appeared more angry than devastated. “It turned out that he never really wanted the adoption. We had a call from the agency saying they had a little boy for us in South America, and the next day he moved out.”

She was outraged that Ed’s lawyers had called the agency and canceled all adoption proceedings. I thought, *What else could they do?* but only repeated, “I’m so sorry” again and again. Gabrielle didn’t want to be reasonable, she wanted to be mad.

She said she was going to try to keep the house, where she was now alone with the dog.

"Is there anything we can do to help you?"

"Well, I want to meet a man who wants children, so if you know anybody..."

"I'll send him your way," I replied, wondering how she could even consider it when Ed just left two months ago. She seemed so focused on having a child that a father was merely one of the requirements to be fulfilled along the way. Her intensity frightened me, so I didn't see the loss and fear that fueled her determination, didn't see that Gabrielle, too, is desperate for control. I was remembering that Ed was the only other person who didn't raise his hand.

I was never one of those women who thought motherhood was my destiny. When I was still single in my early thirties, I assumed that children would not be a part of my life. Then I met Ben.

I could see having kids with Ben. Our first "date" after Mac World was dinner with the friends who had introduced us and their four children. Ben joked with the kids and made them laugh, asked questions, and seemed genuinely interested in what they had to say. And the kids—indeed, all kids—loved Ben; he takes them seriously and they know it. His manner with them is a gentle combination of formality and easiness that is just adorable.

At the beginning of our preadoption class, Liz joked, "... and there's one of you, I don't know who you are, but I'll find out, who has read everything ever written about adoption." That was me, and I've read even more since then. To my mind, there's no problem that can't be attacked through research. I've read about adoption from China. I've read about attachment and bonding. I've read general parenting books. I've read adoption parenting books. I've read child development books. I've read books about Chinese American culture. Our China adoption video collection now numbers six volumes and counting.

And I still feel completely unprepared.

Some of this, I recognize, is an effort to protect myself from hurt or disappointment. I tell myself that I will not be devastated by a baby who won't look at me or who cries every day for months and will not be consoled.

It's a lie, of course. Yes, I will be prepared. Having read about all these possibilities, I will have had a chance to consider how I will respond, to

visualize and rehearse the kind of mother I want to be in each situation. I will know from my research that the phase will pass. But I will still be devastated. A grief foreseen doesn't ache any less.

A couple of months ago, I passed Gabrielle's house and saw a realtor's sign in the yard: "For Sale." I didn't call. A "Sold" sign soon followed. Last weekend the sign was gone.

As of now, we have been waiting for two years and expect that we will receive our referral sometime this year. Personally, I expect to be too overwhelmed by the fact that we will be responsible for keeping an actual baby alive to feel much of anything else, at least for the first few days. But I don't doubt for a moment that we will learn to love our daughter, and she will learn to love us.

Because, of course, Sadie did not ruin our lives. Instead, she gently nudged our hearts open. We learned together the complicated dance of need and trust, sacrifice and commitment involved in caring for someone who depended on us for everything. Thanks to her, we got up the courage to send the paperwork in to our adoption agency. We got a second dog so she would have company. And last winter we nursed Sadie through her long, final illness, a degenerative neurological condition. Our "practice child" died in January, and we are bereft.

For those who believe in fate, Sadie was the inevitable first step in the journey that will lead us to our child. For me, a combination of chance and choice and work brought a dog from Ohio halfway across the country to help make us a family. That part is open to interpretation, and what you see depends on what you bring to the view. What I know for sure is that we loved Sadie and she loved us. That's not how the story started, but that's the way it ends.



Strung Out

Ellen Roberts Young

The day's cords
tether imagination,
kite exploring bare sky.

Break string and sail
over postcard meadows,
swim into cloud mist.

Images fade like
impressions from a novel
read by the pool.

A tour funded
by forgetfulness
goes bankrupt.

Kite splinters on a stone.





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A Sad Short Story

Dan Moreau

Start in the middle. Do not, unless you are Hemingway, open with a description. Use a hook. Like this one: “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” Do not start your story with a character waking up. Do not describe how the yellow sunlight filters through the blinds or the angular shapes it casts on the wall. Do not have your character turn off a radio alarm clock. Do not kill your character. Do not transform him or her into a giant insect.

Take a break. You earned it. Check email. Delete the message from the ousted African heir who wants to deposit his fortune into your account for safekeeping. Click on the one from Cindy Hotchick99 which says “Increase your size” in the subject line.

Do a word count. Change the font and **point**. Geneva looks good, so do Garamond, Palatino, and Courier New. Switch back to Times. Check email. Cindy Hotchick99 has not written back.

When people ask you how the writing is going, say fine and change the subject. If they ask you where you’ve been published, say your work is forthcoming.

Realize the story you are writing is culled from the plot of a bad ’80s movie you saw one late night. Start over. Read a newspaper article about a man who bought a smoker at a yard sale, took it home and found a preserved human leg inside it. Read about the ensuing legal battle between the man and the prior owner of said leg who lost it in a car accident and forgot it in the smoker.

Read about other people’s success in your alumni magazine. Everyone you know from college is starting exciting jobs and moving to exciting cities. Note to self: Never use the word exciting.

Quit your job so you can devote yourself full time to writing. Cancel your cable. Stock up on Ramen and Mac ’n’ Cheese. Tuna is a good source of protein. Decide that milk is a luxury you can do without.

Ask for your job back. Find out your job is now being performed by an 18-year-old intern from the local community college.

Do a word count. Change the font. Decide you are sticking with Garamond in spite of what people say.

Ask your parents for a loan. Ignore the invitations to your upcoming college reunion. Answer the phone. Have a 20-minute conversation with a telemarketer. Ask him if they are hiring.

Start a blog. Realize, after one entry, you have nothing say. Get back to your writing. Things are clicking. You have a character, a setting, and a plot.

Check email.

Dip into your savings. Miss your first rent payment. Beg for an extension. Your parents were right. You should have become a doctor or a lawyer. "Writers," your father says, "are bums."

Send a letter to your alumni magazine. Have it edited down to a passing mention in the class notes. Change the font. Times it is. Take all the commas out of your story. Put them back in. Eliminate all the adverbs. Do a word count. Take a break.

Take a part-time job with no health insurance. Look twice before crossing the street. Take Echinacea at the first sign of a cold. Finish a first draft. Print it out. Feel the warm paper in your hands and smell the fresh ink.

Read Updike, read Márquez, read Borges. Lose hope.

Try writing in long hand. Go back to the computer. Send your story to *The New Yorker*. Receive the first of many rejection slips, which fill an entire folder on your desk.

Apply to graduate school. Get into your last choice. Attend workshop. Hear the chorus of your classmates say: "I want to know more about this character" and "Why should I care about this character?" and "Why is this story being told now?"

Read a classmate's story that you loved. Defend it in workshop. Watch helplessly as your other classmates destroy it.

Every story you read starts to sound alike. Begin to lose patience with stories and forget the enthusiasm and awe they used to fill you with. When a classmate has a story accepted for publication say, "I didn't think it was that good."

Enter writing contests. Never place in any of them. Decide you're better off saving your money instead of spending it on entry fees.

Write query letters to agents. One agent replies on the back of a rejection form. "If you want my advice, give up stories," it says. "Only novels are being sold."

Try writing a novel. Watch it go nowhere. File it away under "Rough drafts."

Receive a rejection slip that says, "Although we chose not to publish this particular piece, we really enjoyed it and hope you will submit again in the future." Celebrate!

Graduate with no job and a pile of student loans. Fantasize about what your bio on your book jacket would say.

Attend a reading. Afterward, you want to tell the author how much it touched you and how much you enjoyed it, but chicken out. Later, read the author's obituary in the newspaper.

Receive more rejection slips. Check email.

Story idea: a creative writing instructor trashes a student's story in workshop. The student's father happens to be a major contributor to the university. The department chair asks the instructor to apologize to the student and change his grade. The instructor, out of principle and stubborn egoism, refuses. The story—about a young man who hires mobsters to kidnap his wealthy father—is trite and cliché, the instructor argues. After the chair leaves, the instructor rereads the story, discovers a new vulnerability in it. The nameless first person narrator views the kidnapping as the only way of getting his father's attention. It is in essence a cry for help. Obviously the story was written out of a wish by the student to spend more time with his father. The instructor realizes teaching and writing have become burdens to him. All the stories he reads are about relationships or divorce. Forgets why he became a teacher and a writer in the first place. Forgets the times when he was truly humbled by the talent of some of his students. Upon leaving office, he decides to change the student's grade.

Ignore the advice: "I want to know more about this character" and "Why should I care about him?" You don't know more about the instructor because you don't need to know any more about him beyond what the story requires. He is in service to the story. All you need to know about him is there, sitting on the page. Everything else is fat. Forget every rule you've been taught.

Raise the stakes of the story: the instructor is up for tenure. Student evaluations are very important to him as is the recommendation of the

department chair. The day he trashes the story he is in the foulest of moods. The student whose story is being workshopped is late to class. To boot, the instructor got a parking ticket that morning, his wife is after him for one thing or another, and he's ready to take out his anger on this unsuspecting, somewhat bratty kid.

Think about the story before attempting to write it. Sketch it and the characters out. Live with them in your head till you get a good enough sense of them and feel like you know them. Sit on your balcony in the fading light. Wait for the story to come to you. Close your eyes. Don't end the story with description. End it on a dramatic note.

The sun is falling behind the flaming trees. Your pen is poised to paper. Put it aside. The story can wait. It will be there in the morning when you wake up the next day. But this particular sunset you are watching, the one that is spreading over the sky and changing colors, won't. It demands your full attention. But be careful, because as you write this, it is almost gone.



The Blue Woman

Johanna Hayhurst

Seven years I worked in a bank that lacked windows, weather, shadow.
Soundproofing wicked at my soul while a screen hummed indifference.

But one midmorning from somewhere I heard a sound—
neither tap-tap nor whirring—it was, instead, a single thin

tinkle, another: a melody played on keys of a toy piano,
tinny and small, but enough to make my heart hurt, to know

I wanted more. I willed the song larger, filled it with daydream:
a garden, full summer—a fruit-bearing, beautiful tree—music

enlarged past containment; that's when I knew
I'd walk out the door, blank as a sheet freed for scoring.



Welcome to Hell

Ariel Sammone

Imagine we are anti-matter or, better yet, waves of electromagnetic radiation flying through the coldest reaches of the ever-expanding
And using this premise, let us now reevaluate the Miracle warmth of living upon the crusts of Hell

the devil is made of iron
& souls are magnetic

Death then a journey to Jupiter's red eye or to be recycled in the belly of a star and released & reassigned
Life is the torture of a molecule's awareness of loss, the problem of space, something vaguely remembered
From the beginning of time when we were whole and all was complete; the Singularity before the split.





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Songs from the Woods

Sean Padraic McCarthy

For a long time after Danny's brother Jim returned from the war, he didn't have much to say, but he liked to smile. It seemed Jim was always smiling, be he listening to new music—The Rolling Stones and Elton John—sitting in their backyard and staring at the woods, or getting screamed at by their father. Jim liked to listen to Marvin Gaye, too, his head back and eyes shut as his voice cracked, singing along with the high notes of “Mercy, Mercy Me,” but “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road” was his favorite, and he would play it over and over even as their father pounded on his bedroom door, screaming “Enough is enough!” This could be late at night, or early in the morning, but as it was summer, and school was out, Danny didn't have to rush anywhere and sometimes he would just sit and watch his father pound. Other times, he would pretend to eat his cereal, reading the back of the box. Jim's bedroom was the only one on the first floor, at the end of the hall. It was a hollow door and there was already a big hole in the middle where somebody had put their fist.

Danny was only eight, and Jim was much older. From what Danny picked up in bits and pieces, their father had been married before he met their mother and that was where Jim came from, but Danny didn't see how that was possible because he had never seen any other woman around. They had a sister, too—Louise—but she was only ten. Louise liked to swim and she liked to read, and on Friday nights their parents would let them stay up late to watch *The Brady Bunch*, *Nanny and the Professor*, and *The Partridge Family*. All in a row. A bowl of popcorn that their father would pop and sometimes burn, and sleeping bags on the floor.

When Jim had left for the war, Danny had only been six. Jim's hair had been long then, and he liked to lift Danny up and press his back to the ceiling, shaking him back and forth. Jim was just out of high school. Now his hair was short—buzzed—and he wore thick glasses with heavy black frames, his eyes looking magnified behind them. He used to talk to Danny

a lot—about football and fishing—but football season hadn't started yet, and as far as Danny knew, Jim hadn't fished since he got back.

Before he left, Jim would play football in the baseball field out behind Danny's house with the family of boys, the Flynns, from across the street. There were about ten boys in that family, some already grown, years out of college, and the youngest a couple years older than Danny. The field was surrounded on all sides by trees and almost seemed as if it were placed there magically. Only one road led in. A dirt road that was traveled once a week by the Park Department trucks carrying mowers to cut the grass, trash barrels and trash sticks, and white cans of paint for the lines of infield. The Park Department guys had green shirts and big bellies, and most of them wore baseball caps, all with the Letter W on them in white. W was for Willington.

Most of the time, Danny would just follow Jim and the Flynns out to the field and sit and watch the game—Jim had a strong arm and he could throw the ball farther than anyone—but once, right before he shipped out, they let Danny play, too. It was just getting dark, and the mosquitoes were buzzing, and the kids were running all over the place. Jim passed Danny the ball, and he didn't catch it, but he picked it right up, and then he ran with it. He didn't get far before somebody tackled him, but it didn't matter—his brother was letting him play, and that was all that mattered. A few minutes later, the Flynns' father came driving down the dirt road in his pickup truck, and they all climbed in back to go home. The wind blowing, the truck rattling, and everybody pressed tight together, talking and laughing. They stopped at EZ Park—the local convenience store—and Jim bought a bottle of grape soda and shared it with him. Danny was still hot and sweaty from the game, and it was the best grape soda he had ever had.

Jim rubbed his head once they were back in the truck. "You're going to be looking at the Heisman one day, my friend," he said, and he tucked the ball under his arm, and put his hand out like he was blocking an invisible person in front of him.

Danny didn't know what the Heisman was, but it sounded pretty good. And if he was going to be looking at it, he imagined Jim was, too. Jim had been the best football player in town, and his picture was in the local paper every week the autumn before. Their Dad had all those pictures cut out and framed, and there were about ten trophies lining the shelf in the living room.

Now Jim didn't play football anymore, but he still liked to walk in the woods and out into the field, and sometimes if it were still daylight Danny would follow him. Jim usually brought a big bottle of beer, sometimes two, and Danny would keep a safe distance behind. There was a small cove cut into the trees from the field, and Jim would take a seat on the rocks there and drink his beer. It was always *Miller High Life*—the clear glass bottle. If Jim were ever aware that Danny was spying, he never let on, and he never did much else besides sit and drink the beer. Though sometimes he would sing—songs by The Doors and Al Green, and a few more by Elton John—and sometimes he would just sit with his head down as if he were studying real hard what was on the ground below him. Every now and then lighting a cigarette.

Jim hadn't smoked when he left, so Danny figured he must have started over there; most of the soldiers he had seen on the news smoked. But still, it surprised Danny a little. It surprised everybody; Jim hadn't just been good at football, he was pretty good at basketball and baseball, too, the captain of all three teams. But the problem was he still needed money for school, and he knew the army would give him that; they'd pay for the whole thing once he got out, he said. Now their father had already reminded him of that a few times since he came home. Asking where he was going and when.

He brought it up one night after dinner just the Tuesday before, but Jim didn't give him much of an answer, and the news on the radio played quietly in the background as their mother cleared the dishes from the table. The voice of President Nixon and a commercial for Ajax. It was August, the fall semester starting in less than three weeks. Their mother had made a roast, cut Jim a thick slab, and Jim had been examining it for ten minutes or so. He would poke it with his fork, run his fingers lightly over the texture, then draw his face close and sniff. Their father was watching him, wide-eyed and confused. "What is this?" he asked. "Science class?"

Jim was still staring at the meat, and Danny was memorizing the stats on the baseball card on his chair, in between his legs. Hank Aaron. He was afraid to look up. He hated these moments between his father and Jim. Before he had left, the two of them would talk all the time, and when his father would talk to others it was always about Jim, boasting, but now more often than not there was just silence. And the occasional harsh words.

"It's amazing to think of the messages that used to run through here," Jim said of the meat. "Signals, sounds, from the brain. When you think

how easy it is for something to go from animate to inanimate, it's almost spellbinding." He stopped and looked up at his father. "It's almost like a dream."

Their father nodded. "It's almost like a waste of food. Almost as bad as a waste of life."

Jim had taken Danny out into the field, to hit baseballs to him after that. There was a swamp in the woods, and the air buzzed with mosquitoes. Humid air that you could see rising like steam as the dew settled on the ground. Jim would hit the ball so far that after Danny caught it, if he caught it, he would have to run halfway across the field to throw it back to him. And then Jim would take his time, puttering around in the grass, pushing it about with his bat as if looking for something before he would hit the ball again. This seemed to go on forever, and so every once in a while Danny took a seat on the grass, and sometimes he would just swat the mosquitoes, wishing it would end, wishing Jim would just say it was time to go home. But Danny himself would never say it was time to go home. He didn't want Jim to think he didn't want to be here, didn't want him to think he didn't want to spend time with him. And it made him think of what Eric Ferguson from down the street had said.

Eric was blond and two years older than Danny. His teeth were crooked, and he had a cleft to his chin. A hesitant smile and mischievous eyes, as if he were always waiting on your next slipup. Waiting to pounce. Eric's mother worked in the leather factory in the center of town—as did a lot of the neighborhood mothers—and she, along with the others, would cut through Danny's yard and then the woods and the field, coming and going from work each day. Jim wasn't usually up yet as they made their way in, but he was always around, either in the yard or woods, when they were coming home. After he got back the women had initially waved to him, calling out hello and trying to make small talk as they passed, but Jim would never respond, and pretty soon they just stopped.

"Your brother Jim," Eric had said to Danny in his best Speedy Gonzales voice one day, "he el Loco." They were playing basketball in the schoolyard at the top of the hill just beyond the woods. The basketball hoop was attached directly to the brick wall, and the ball almost never went in if you shot from far out and tried to use the wall as a backboard—the surface was too hard. If you wanted it to go in, you had to swoosh it, or go for the lay-up. Danny and Eric were playing with a third kid, Kevin Johanson, who lived down the street. Kevin was nine, a year younger than Eric, a year

older than Danny. He was short but athletic. An only child, he was always neat, clean, always had new clothes. Eric passed him the ball, and Kevin spun around and took a shot.

Kevin got his own rebound, catching it as he left the ground, and continuing on up toward the basket, making the lay-up. He caught the ball as it came down through the hoop and passed it back to Eric. So far Danny himself had only hit 3 out of what must have been 20 shots.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"My father says the lights are on but nobody's home," Eric said, looking at Kevin, but responding to Danny.

Danny thought about it for a second. He had heard the expression before but he wasn't sure what it meant. Eric stopped and looked at him.

"He's not playing with a full deck," he said.

Danny knew what "not playing with a full deck" meant. Or at least he thought he did. His Uncle Jerry said that about friends of his a lot. The people who weren't playing with a full deck always sounded like they were up to something. Doing something, saying something, wild or funny. Jim didn't do anything wild or funny though. Eric passed Danny the ball.

"He's got some medals," Danny said. "He even got shot a couple times, so they gave him a medal for that." Danny shot the ball and missed. He didn't bother going for the rebound. He just watched it bounce. Then roll. They all watched it roll off the pavement. It was very warm, and they had all started to sweat.

"My father got shot 23 times in the war he was in," Eric said. "But he's still playing with a full deck."

Kevin said he had 50 cents, and that he wanted to go EZ Park to get a Coke and a couple candy bars. Kevin always had money. If Danny ever wanted to buy anything himself he had to save the money he got from his grandmother at Christmas. Every year he got a five dollar bill in a red envelope with an oval hole in the center so you could just see the face Abraham Lincoln. Danny would usually put the money aside, trying to save it, but more often than not it got lost or he forgot where he put it.

They cut across the playground toward the woods. Past the swings and the slide, and a big round rock that had a triangle cut out of it like a missing piece of pie. When school was in session, they called it the "cootie pit," and kids would fight, struggle, as they chased each other about at recess, trying to push each other in. If you went in, it meant you had kissed a girl. It meant you were infested. Cooties. And then no one would go near

you for the day. Some of the girls liked to chase the boys around the playground in the mornings before the bell rang and they would try to kiss them. Arms out, and lips pursed. Danny had prided himself on dodging them, eluding them each morning. Things were so much louder then, with school in session. Whistles and shouts, and laughter and screams. But now it was all so empty. Quiet. And they didn't bother with the cootie pit as they passed. There was no point with no one else around. It was summer, and summer was different.

They started down the hill that led to field. The hill was covered with rocks and tall grass, and they would sled upon it in the winter. There was a cliff at the top—an enormous boulder left from the glaciers—and sometimes you would see the older kids up there smoking cigarettes, and sometimes if they were bored, they would chase you, catching you and torturing you by holding you down and wiggling a blade of grass up your nose. They used to leave Danny alone, fearing Jim, but then he was gone to the war, and they didn't have anyone to fear anymore. You had to be careful, but today there didn't appear to be anyone around.

They were almost to the field when they heard the singing. Danny heard it first, recognized the voice, and he felt his face turning red. Eric was talking—a boat trip he was going to take with his father to Block Island—and it took him a minute. Then he stopped. Looked at Kevin sideways. The voice was coming from the cove or just beyond. They hesitated a moment, but then walked out into the center of the field to look from a safe distance, see who it was. Danny didn't follow. He didn't want to, didn't have to. He knew what they would see. Jim. Sitting on the rocks. Probably shirtless. His eyes shut and his head tilted back to the sky as he bellowed out his song. Today it was "Sweet City Woman." Eric and Kevin just stared at him a moment. Smiling a little, but not laughing—they were too little to laugh outright at him—but then Eric looked right at Danny. "El Loco," he mouthed, and then after a moment, they started to run.

It was the following Monday that Danny's father took the day off to take Jim around to fill out job applications. Danny was out in the backyard with his people—a combination of the small green soldiers and action figures from television. Miniature, badly painted *Planet of the Apes* characters that he had ordered from the back of a comic book. Ursus and Cornelius, and Dr. Zaius. He also had some of the animals from his sister's old Noah's Ark set, and a few dinosaurs. The soldiers sometimes took time off to fight

the dinosaurs. Danny had dug up the hill on the far side of the yard and turned it into a war fortress. A miniature earthen bastion complete with underground tunnels and towers made of sticks and camouflaged in pine needles and maple leaves. It had taken him most of the summer to get it all right, and once, early on, it had been washed away by the rain. Eric would help occasionally when he came over, and had his own separate fort, but his wasn't nearly as elaborate, and he usually got bored with it after a half hour or so—he said that's what happened when you started to get older. Now Jim had come out into the backyard and lay down upon the hill. First flat on his back, staring at the sky, but then he rolled over on his side, propping his head up with his hand. "How goes the war?" he asked.

Danny had to think about that. "It goes different every day," he said. "Sometimes there's a lot of explosions. Sometimes there's not." He was quiet for a minute. "Did you see a lot of explosions?"

Jim puffed his cheeks and blew through his lips, sputtering, mimicking a blast. Then he smiled.

Danny smiled back.

"I met a girl over there," Jim said. "She was almost your age. Maybe she was even a little bit older. Who knows? She was just very small. I could have ... thrown her over my shoulder and carried her. Probably for a long time, probably for a mile or more. And I wouldn't even have felt the weight." He was quiet again. "A little bird," he said, "Just a little bird." He lifted a handful of loose, dry dirt from the hill, held it tight, and then let it sift down through his fingers. "You know what I mean?"

Danny didn't, but he didn't want to say so. He didn't want Jim to think he was stupid. He just nodded. And then he took one of his *Planet of the Apes* men—a gorilla with an assault rifle—and placed him atop a hut with a thatched roof. The hut had taken him over an hour to build, and he was very proud of it. "I put him up there so he can see Charlie coming," Danny said.

Jim started to smile. "Everybody's Charlie," he said.

Their father came out into the yard a few minutes later, a newspaper—the *Help Wanted* section—in hand and then they left. Jim had refused to wear anything but a T-shirt and jeans to fill out the applications despite their father pleading that he needed to look presentable. Jim didn't argue, but he didn't listen either. They were gone until just after lunch, and when they got home, their father was sweating badly, his comb-over in a state of disarray.

He slapped the newspaper down on the kitchen table. He said they had been to the local donut shop. And to the sheet metal factory at the edge of town. A visit to the Park Department, and one to the grocery store up the street. D'Amatos.

Their mother had her hair up to ward off the heat. She had bologna, cheese, mustard, and Wonder Bread spread across the counter. To Danny, his mother had never seemed like the mothers on television and it troubled him some. She rarely wore dresses, and never wore an apron, and she looked much younger somehow.

"Well, how did it go?" she asked.

"Ask Arnold Layne," their father said.

"Arnold who?"

"And if he's not around you can check with Billy Shears."

Their mother turned the sink. Rinsed her hands. "I don't follow you."

Danny looked around for Jim. But he hadn't come into the house. Danny went to the window. Jim was sprawled atop the hood of the station wagon, his arms spread wide as he stared at the sky.

"He wouldn't fill out any of the applications correctly," their father said. He took a seat at the table, and for a second Danny thought he was going to cry. He hoped he wouldn't cry. He had never seen his father cry, and didn't know what he would do if he did. "He put a different name on each one."

"Well," their mother said. "He's always been a kidder."

"He's not a kidder, Jan," their father said. "He's nuts. Nuts."

"Well, don't say that," Danny's mother said.

"Someone has to. It's about time somebody did. Nuts. Pure and simple. Ralph D'Amato probably would have given him a job right then and there, but he wouldn't answer any of the questions he asked him. He went mute right there on the spot, and then he grabs a candy bar off the shelf, opens it up and takes a bite."

Danny's mother looked at him. "What did you do?"

"I paid for the candy bar," he said. "What else could I do?" He raised his hand, his forefinger an inch away from his thumb. "In the car, I came this close to smacking him. I swear, if I had thought it would do any good, I probably would have." He turned then to see Danny staring at him. "What are you looking at?" he said. "Go back and play with your people."

Danny went out to the hill, and sat in the sun, and listened to the voices rising again as Jim reentered the house. Danny had Cornelius and a T-Rex

in hand. Cornelius was just about to jump to the rescue of the soldier who had fallen in the T-Rex's path. Louise came out of the house—wearing a halter top and cutoff shorts—and strolled by, biting at her fingernails a little bit. Every now and then, turning to look back at the house, her eyes hesitant. Her hair was long and blond, and it looked as if she hadn't brushed it today.

"Where are you going?" Danny asked her.

"EZ Park," she said, not stopping but not picking up the pace. "Mummy wants me to get her some cigarettes."

"I thought she quit smoking," Danny said.

"She did. Just not today. She gave me enough to get a Slush Puppie. You want to come?"

Danny thought about it. The yelling inside was growing louder. "Will you give me some?"

"Two sips."

"Okay," he said dropping Cornelius and the dinosaur. The dust of the hill puffed up around him as he sprang to his feet. The earth had grown very dry, loose, in the heat, and he knew that it would just take one rain-storm to wash away everything he had built again. But there was nothing he could do. He looked at the sky now. It had started to darken, but he hadn't heard any thunder. He and Louise cut around their father's vegetable garden at the back of the yard. Corn and peas, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and squash. Danny asked his father every year if he would grow pumpkins in the garden, but his father said they took up too much space. Instead he would just scatter some seeds on the hill beside the garden, saying maybe they would grow there. They never did. His father had built a low mesh fence to keep out the rabbits, but as Danny and Louise passed he could see the holes in the earth where the rabbits had climbed beneath it. At the end of the season, when the corn had been harvested—the remaining stalks brown and dried, the Flynns would come over and run through them with Danny and Jim, trampling everything before gathering them up for their mother, and Danny's, to use for autumn decorations. Danny wondered if Jim would do it this year. If any of them would.

Danny and Louise climbed over the rock wall that separated their yard from the woods, and then scurried down the path, and out into the field. Louise's legs were long, and she could run faster than Danny, and it always irritated him a little trying to keep up. He could still hear the shouting

in the house behind them, but it was growing quieter with the distance. The field was empty except for the rabbits. Small gray cottontails hopping along the perimeter. The rabbits would never venture into the middle of the field. It left them too much out in the open, vulnerable, if a cat came along. Every once in a while Danny's cat would come over the rock wall dragging one into the backyard. Usually still alive, and usually a baby. But once he had brought one that was nearly twice his size, the rabbit glassy-eyed and limp as its body was pulled across the ground. Defeated. Danny and Louise would chase the cat around trying to get it to drop its prey. But even if it did, the rabbit was often in shock, and would just sit or lay there, refusing to move. And then the cat would come back. It didn't make any sense.

"Mummy says we might go to the movies Friday night, the drive-in," Louise said.

"What are we going to see?"

"*Willy Wonka*. If Daddy isn't too tired. Or too grouchy."

Danny had seen previews for *Willy Wonka* on TV and he wasn't too sure about it. It looked scary. The tiny red men, and the little girl inflating, turning blue. Eric had seen it, told him about it. Said the story was true. It really happened. "Do you think Jim will come?" Danny asked.

"I doubt it. He's probably too old. Dad probably doesn't want him to come anyway. Dad says he's had it up to here with him. I heard Dad saying he's going to have Grampa come over and talk to him."

"What for?"

"To set him straight. Grampa was in one of the wars, too. Dad said he's going to have him wear his old uniform, and his medals."

"What's he going to do? Try to get Jim to fight again?"

"No," said Louise. "I think Jim is done fighting."

The rabbits scattered as the children drew closer, and Danny and Louise started up the Park Department road. EZ Park was housed in a square, brick building, and the side was covered in graffiti. A peace sign, and a few swear words. Tanya Loved Bobby, and Rockland Sucked. Danny didn't know who Tanya was but he always tried to picture her whenever he came up here. Probably holding Bobby's hand, or maybe sitting in a boat together, and then leaning over to kiss him. In the middle of it all someone had painted a big thing that looked like a football on fire, but Eric had said it wasn't a football but that it was a blimp. The Hindenburg, he said. It had crashed many years before and close to a million people died.

"Where did it crash?" Danny had asked.

Eric had hesitated. "In Rockland," he said. Rockland was the next town over.

Beneath the picture of the blimp the artist had painted the words Led Zeppelin, but Danny didn't know what that was either. Now there was a guy sitting there beneath the words. Long red hair and a beard. Dirty clothes. His back to the wall. He was wearing a faded green army jacket, and drinking from a bottle he had wrapped in a brown bag. He looked at Danny and Louise and squinted a little like he was trying to focus. Louise hesitated, and Danny followed suit.

The man shut one eye completely, and then he reached out his hand. Pointing at them. The pavement was broken with tall grass and weeds where it met the wall, and there were shards of brown glass all about where the man sat. The man's face was covered in stubble, and he looked as if he needed a shave. It was important for a man to shave every day—Danny had heard his father say that.

"Alice," said the man, still pointing at Louise. He took a sip from his bottle in the bag. And then he grimaced, his gums bared, as if the drink caused him great pain. But then he smiled. "*The time has come the walrus said to talk of many things,*" he said. "Alice. Go ask Alice." He took another swig. Grimaced again.

Louise hurried ahead. If they were still in the field she might have grabbed Danny by the hand and pulled him along, but she couldn't do that in public. Danny hesitated a moment, staring at the man—the man was still smiling—and then he followed. Inside the store felt like a refrigerator, and sometimes the kids would hang out in there just to cool off, but Bad Apple Bill, the manager, was always announcing the three minute rule. Three minutes, and you're out. Any kid in there longer than three minutes was just looking to steal something he would say. Bad Apple Bill was behind the counter now. He was round and tall and bald, with just a few stringy hairs combed over the top of his head. Small eyes behind thick lenses and a blue smock with the EZ Park logo on the pocket. He was smoking a cigarette, and he kept an ashtray on top of the cash register. Whenever he took a drag his whole face would tighten up around it like the cigarette was the only thing that was keeping him breathing.

Louise put two pieces of bazooka up on the counter and asked for a package of Virginia Slims. Danny remembered his mother saying once that she liked smoking Virginia Slims because when their uncle came over

he wouldn't touch them, and then he would have to walk to the store and buy a pack himself. Or else send Danny. Relatives were always sending Danny and Louise to the store for cigarettes.

"Can I have a Cherry Slush Puppie, too?" Louise asked. Bad Apple Bill didn't answer but he turned to the machine and filled the cup. "That guy still outside against the wall?" he asked, the smoke rising up in plumes around his head; he had the cigarette dangling from his lips.

"I think so," Louise said quietly. Louise never talked loud unless they were at home, and she was yelling at Danny. Bad Apple Bill just sighed, and then he slid the Slush Puppie across the counter. Took her money and punched the numbers into the register, a bell going off as the drawer shot open.

When they got back outside the man was pacing, head down as if he were looking for something he had dropped. The bottle in the bag was lying back where the man had been sitting. He stumbled a little, and then he tilted his head back and yelled at the sky. Louise and Danny picked up the pace, but he caught sight of them again.

"Stop right there!" he said.

Both Danny and Louise did. Louise was right beside him, but Danny couldn't look at her. He felt his whole body freeze up with fear, and he was afraid that if he looked at her, he would see the same fear in her face, her eyes, and that would just make it worse. The man was staring them down, his eyebrows furrowed, like a teacher who had just caught you chewing gum in class.

"Name your outfits, soldiers!" he demanded.

Danny waited for Louise to start running, and he figured as soon as she did, he would follow. He could be as fast as her today, he was sure of it. But Louise didn't move. The afternoon was much darker than when they had started out, and it had started to thunder. A low rumbling somewhere in the distance.

"Your division!" the man demanded. "Tell me from which division you hail!"

The man took a few steps closer, baring his teeth, and as he did Danny could already smell the liquor. It was different from beer. His father and Jim drank beer, but his Uncle Jerry sometimes came over on Saturdays, and he kept a bottle of liquor hidden in Danny's kitchen. He would arrive carrying a six pack of Schlitz and take a seat at the kitchen table, and then each time Danny's father would leave the kitchen, Jerry—a big man with

thinning hair and a big belly—would look at Danny, put his finger to his lips, and then go to the cabinet below the sink and pull a bottle out from behind the cleaning supplies. Take a long swill, finish with a smacking of the lips, and then slide it back. “He only brought a six pack,” his father was always saying after he left, “I can’t understand how he got so drunk.”

Now the man suddenly stood up straight and clicked his heels together. His face was red like he had spent too many days in the sun, and his eyes were yellow. Bloodshot. “Stand at attention, soldiers!” he shouted. “You are being addressed by a superior officer, and when you are addressed by a superior officer you stand at attention!”

Louise still didn’t move and neither did Danny. The man leaned back over and peered into their eyes. He growled. “I don’t think I’m making myself completely clear. You are being addressed by Colonel Buck DeSanto of the 32nd Airborne . . .” His face tightened again. “And I have issued you an order!”

The man reached out and grabbed Louise’s Slush Puppie, and took a long sip from the straw, and Louise took a sudden step back. Danny heard a small noise escape from her lips as she started to cry, and it was then that the car came swinging into the parking lot. No lights, no siren, but Danny had caught sight of the black doors from the corners of his eyes. The gold star. He recognized the cop, too. Officer Kennedy. He was a big man with a square jaw and he had come to Danny’s school the year before to show them how to wear their Halloween masks. You had to cut the holes in the eyes to make them bigger, so you could see better, he said, and you had to wear something bright, something that would stand out in the darkness. And nothing too long. Nothing you could trip over. And always carry a flashlight. He smiled a lot as he said all this, and then he put a Cinderella mask on himself—with the holes for the eyes cut wide—making everyone laugh.

Now he came bounding out of the car, one hand on his walkie-talkie and one on his gun. He left the car door wide open, and Danny could hear a radio going inside. Voices, then static. Then voices again. Officer Kennedy wasn’t smiling. He stopped within two feet of the man with the army coat.

“Problem here, Buck?” he asked.

The man raised his chin, the Slush Puppie still in hand. “That is Colonel, to you, Sergeant. And the answer is ‘no’. But I think we are both aware I can make quite a few. Quite a few. Do I make myself clear? Sergeant.”

Officer Kennedy quickly eyed Danny and Louise. A curious look crossed over his face, his lips sneering a little as if he were unsure what to say. He didn't look like the policeman who came to the school anymore. He was all business, angry. He went to the wall and picked up the brown bag. Pulled out the bottle. "All too clear," he said to the man. "Drinking in public. Harassing little children. You kids okay?" he asked, his eyes still on the man.

Danny nodded, but Louise didn't move. She was still crying.

"Then get out of here," Officer Kennedy said. "Go on home."

They scurried across the street, and then they heard the man crying out from behind them. "Justice! Justice!"

Danny looked over his shoulder, and as he did, Officer Kennedy pulled his club quick from his belt—much like the gunslingers Danny had seen in the movies—and cracked the man on the side of the head. Danny stopped, stunned. The man stumbled backward, cried out, his hand flying to the place where he had been hit, and Officer Kennedy spun him around, pinning his arms up behind his back, and putting on the handcuffs. Officer Kennedy had the man's face pressed against the roof of the squad car, his eyes shut, and his lips grimacing in pain. A trickle of blood running down his temple. The Slush Puppie lay on its side, the cherry red ice pooling on the tar. "I am Colonel Buck DeSanto of the 32nd Airborne!" the man called out, his eyes still shut. "The 32nd Airborne!" Behind them at the corner of the wall, on the edge of the walkway leading to the front door of the store, Bad Apple Bill was standing and watching, silently smoking a cigarette.

Louise grabbed Danny's hand and pulled him along. She was still running as they hit the green grass of the field. "You can slow down now," Danny said.

She did, but just a little bit, and when she turned to look at him her face was still streaked with tears. Danny had his piece of Bazooka in hand, the wrapping paper damp. "We have to get home," she said. "We have to tell Daddy."

"Well, if we do he's probably not going to let us walk to the store anymore," Danny said. He was still catching his breath, and he could feel the sweat at his hairline, warm in the early evening humidity.

Louise seemed to think about this. She was walking now. "Do you think he was a mental case?"

“I think so,” Danny said. “El Loco.” The clouds had further thickened overhead, thunder crackling louder, and the rain was coming down in buckets by the time they made it to the edge of the woods. Danny could picture his village, his fortress, on the hill, and he could see it falling to pieces beneath the weight of the rain. The twigs and pine needles running down the hill in the small but building streams. Above him, the water dripped heavy from the leaves of the trees, and it was raining much too hard to keep them from getting wet. They couldn’t see Jim, but they suddenly could hear him. Out there in the woods, in the rain. He was singing Three Dog Night. *Joy to the World.*



Interview with Michael Kimball

Jill Kolongowski and Lindsey Kate Sloan

Lindsey Kate Sloan: What was your first major project as a writer?

Michael Kimball: I started off writing poetry. I studied with Diane [Wakoski] for a time—does she still teach?

Sloan: Yes.

Kimball: I was writing confessional-type poems and little tiny poems and things like that, but I don't really think of that as a major project. It was probably not until my mid-twenties that I actually started a major project, which was my first novel. I had written a lot of poems; I had written a lot of bad stories, and then I finally wrote something where I felt I had something good. That took years. I published little pieces of my novel as self-contained bits. I had published a lot in poetry journals up to then, but I hadn't published any fiction until I started writing my novel. Early on I had a lot of trouble getting published—nobody would touch the stuff.

Jill Kolongowski: You said you published your first piece in *Red Cedar Review*—was it fiction? Or poetry?

Kimball: *Red Cedar Review* was actually poetry, so, any of my publications probably up till I was 30, maybe, would've been poetry.

Kolongowski: We like to think that literary magazines like *Red Cedar* play an important role in—especially in a young writer's life—getting new writers started. Would you agree with that?

Kimball: Absolutely. I think there's a certain kind of validation that goes along with getting published and there are so many journals, print venues, things that aren't open to young writers, and so it's great to have the

good ones that *are* open and are actually reading whatever comes in versus inviting their friends or this A-list group of people or that sort of thing. I still remember the *Red Cedar* publication and a few others very early on. I mean, they meant everything at the time because you just thought, “I can actually do this and somebody understands what I’m doing,” and all of that and it just gives you that little bit of something to keep you going.

Sloan: Did you have any professional training as a writer? I know you mentioned taking Diane’s classes. There wasn’t a creative writing program here [at Michigan State University], was there?

Kimball: There were certain stipulations to get into writing classes and I was an English education major so I couldn’t take those classes. But I had a friend who had taken Diane’s classes, and I actually just went and talked to her. I basically begged to sit in on her class and she let me. So, that was one of the two most important events in my development as a writer, sitting in her classes, because . . . I don’t know if she still has this reputation, but she had a reputation of being very tough, with really high standards . . . if it was bad, she *said* it was bad. But there was also a very clear aesthetic coming from that, and she would talk about her approach to the poems and what her aesthetic was, and how she had crafted her own language, and all of these sorts of things. She would say “Well, I’ve done this and you can’t do this because I’ve done this and you have to figure out your own thing.” And so just those two little things right there meant a huge amount to me as a writer. I mean, that was the only real training I had at that point. And then I had another teacher in New York City who is also very significant, but creative writing wasn’t as formalized as it is now with the MFA and all that stuff.

Sloan: What is your opinion of MFA programs? And would you recommend one to young writers? Do you have much experience with them?

Kimball: You know, I never went through an MFA program, and I’ve never taught in one. I have taught at summer institutes and stuff like that. I think MFA programs can be great; it depends on what you’re there for. There can be a great community that comes out of that and I think that’s really important for writers to have, just to be able to interact with each other and exchange work. I often wish I would’ve had that. The other good

thing about it is it just gives people time to write, whereas if you're not in a program, you may not feel that something. I think a lot of that can be created outside of the MFA, as well. If you're going to teach now, you really need the terminal degree, so either MFA or PhD, one or the other. It's an accreditation problem in universities.

Kolongowski: We want to know a little bit about your approach to writing, as someone who supports himself through his writing. What do you do to keep writing, especially because you aren't involved in an MFA program or school?

Kimball: I'm not a bestseller writer, I'm a "literary" writer—it gets called a "midlist writer,"—and so there isn't huge money there. I do make money; a lot of it for me actually comes from foreign rights deals when my book gets sold for translations. It can be enough money to live on, but you never know when it's going to happen, when the deals close, et cetera. So you can't depend on it. And that's part of it, but the other part—I was in grad school, actually, and dropped out because it was driving me crazy and I knew it wasn't for me. I found a publishing job in an educational division, so it was just something I fell into, but I still sometimes edit college textbooks. I was on staff for a really long time when I was in New York and since then I do it freelance. For me it's been a very easy way to smooth out the cash flow. It's also the kind of work that I find, for somebody who reads and writes, that's what they're paying you to do, as well. So I think that it can be hard, but most people who write don't teach. There are actually many, many options, and each person needs to find what job it is they can do and still make time to write. And that job can be anything.

Do you know who Thomas Lynch is? He's an undertaker, and he writes. There's a guy from Saginaw who I met—he interviewed me for *Dear Everybody*—he works in a family business. They do stone work; they build brick things, and you know, that's what he does, but he still writes. It can be any number of things.

Kolongowski: I wanted to ask—we saw this specifically with *The Way the Family Got Away*, but what was it like having that translated? Did you work closely with the translators to make sure it was kept as you intended?

Kimball: With most of the foreign rights stuff, somebody buys the rights and they can sort of do whatever they want, and so you lose a certain amount of control. But some of the better publishers will have contact with you. There were a couple of translators that I did work fairly closely with. One was the German translator and also an Italian translator. They're two perfect cases, almost, for what goes well and what goes badly. The German translator—they had finished the translation and they wrote me this long note saying, "Well, it doesn't really make sense. Our translation, it doesn't make sense." It was this long note to ask me if they could add commas, semicolons, periods ... and I was just sort of dumbfounded by the question—of course you can add punctuation, you know, it's supposed to make sense. If that's going to help it make sense, then please add it.

Kolongowski: Maybe they've had writers just say no, that would change the whole arc of what I'm trying to do.

Kimball: I mean, I'm sure there've been things like that, but ... it was just so odd to get that question that I wonder how they were reading it in English. I mean, did it not make sense to them in English? Were they trying to translate nonsense? The German translation never did all that well. With the Italian translation, they had all sorts of problems because it's narrated by children, which in Italian is very informal. In the informal part of Italian, there's no direct translation for *family*. There's no direct translation for lots of other words like that, and so they had to figure out ways to translate that and still communicate *family*.

The little girl narrates, when she's talking about *hospital*, she calls it a *hot-hill*; it's a pronunciation thing but it also relates to the brother's yellow fever. So, she says *hot-hill* and he says, "I think what you're talking about is a hospital," and it's because of the fever and blah blah blah, but then he said "We don't have that in Italian, but we have something called a 'hot cure'" and I can't remember what the actual translation is, but he said "Would that work?" What he was trying to do was find where he ran into problems; if he couldn't do in Italian the thing it was doing in English, he found another thing it did in Italian. And the Italian ended up doing really well, so I don't know if that can be attributed to the different thought behind the different translators...

Sloan: What is your experience reading your work aloud? Is it something that you enjoy? Do you ever write pieces that you mean to have read aloud?

Kimball: Nearly everything I write is meant to be read aloud. There are a few exceptions with *Dear Everybody* because there are so many voices; but nearly everything is first person; nearly everything is narrated as if a person is speaking, and so all three books tend to lend themselves to being read aloud. At first I used to get pretty nervous about reading, but that's gone away. If you do it enough, you stop thinking about it.

Kolongowski: What prompted you to start *Taint*? We want to know a little bit about the magazine: audience, goals, themes, and how you're currently involved with it.

Kimball: *Taint* has actually been on hiatus for a few years, so it's not active. It started in 2000 or 2001, and it was created by a group of friends I had from New York and a bunch of us had moved. There was one guy in L.A.; there was a guy in San Francisco; I was in Texas at the time; Chicago—we had all moved to all these other places, but we would still meet every summer in Las Vegas. It was my friend Mark, who was a managing editor of a magazine at the time, he said, “I was a fiction writer, Frank was a poet, Koosh was an animator, Bill does code...” We had a perfect person for each part of what you would need to do a magazine, so it just sort of came out of that.

We were really trying to publish things that we thought were great and that we didn't think other people would want to publish. That's one of the reasons I think a lot of Internet journals are really great today; they're allowing all sorts of things to be published that it was hard to get print journals to pick up.

Kolongowski: What genres did you publish?

Kimball: We did everything. There was a nonfiction column; there were people who wrote columns regularly; or we'd have essays. We would have criticism; we did reviews. I did the fiction section; we had somebody who edited the poetry, so we did as much as we could.

Kolongowski: Were you looking for more experimental things? I'm wondering what you meant by "things that print journals wouldn't pick up."

Kimball: It definitely tended toward the experimental, so that was a big part of it. Another part of it was finding people who hadn't been published before. We were really looking for people who told a story in a different way, or—I can't remember his name now, but there was a guy who would write—all of his stories were regular text and then italic text. They were these dual narratives but they ran in together, and I just thought that was kind of great. And there was this guy I stumbled on named Robert Bradley, and he used to just send tons and tons of stuff but they were all these tiny little pieces, and this was sort of before flash fiction exploded into the thing it is now and I would publish him constantly. But it was really sort of anything different that we could find.

I have a friend—he's here in Michigan, actually, John Rybicki—him and a guy Peter Marcus publish these really dense stories narrated by kids, and he just had a novel out. They did a lot of—I don't know what it's called—Writers in the Schools? Something like that. So they would also send me things from some of their classes. We published a piece by a fourth grader, a seventh grader, and there was a high school girl (you know, it was her first publication). But this was just sort of amazing stuff. Some of this you'd look at it and say, well, "These *kids* wrote this." When as adults did we stop thinking of amazing things? We hit as much of a range as we could.

Sloan: How has your experience with *Taint* changed your outlook as a writer? Have you gotten a new appreciation for what it takes to put a journal together, or to choose pieces?

Kimball: I definitely did get a real sense of what works and what doesn't work. One of the great things about doing an Internet journal is you can just take as much as you want; you aren't constrained by the number of pages you have. Everything we liked, we would take it and we would find a way to put it up. That was a nice thing. And I think I really did get an appreciation from certain writers we published, and it actually shows up a little in *Dear Everybody*, from people who were writing really short things that somehow contained a lot of story or a lot of implication. I did become sort of fascinated by that from working there.

Kolongowski: I know you started off with “Excerpts from the Suicide Letters of Jonathon Bender”; did you envision that it would turn into a more novel-length work or did the fact that it was successful prompt you to continue with the project and take it further?

Kimball: The pieces that were in that story—there were also already a bunch of letters—there could’ve been maybe a hundred more that weren’t necessarily shaped into something yet, so I knew it would be something bigger than a story, but I didn’t know what it was going to be. I had 100 (give or take) letters and I went through another period where I wrote 100-plus more. But it was around that time that I started putting them all in order, and then there was a frame for it. I wrote an introduction and the chronology that’s still at the front, and I wrote the last will and testament that’s at the back, and so there was this frame around it, and that was the real trigger for *Dear Everybody* becoming what it became. Once that frame was inaugurated, then all these other things became possible, all these other pieces, all these other speakers became possible—so that’s when it really exploded and filled in in different ways.

Kolongowski: Was it originally all letters? Were the encyclopedia entries and the newspaper articles later additions?

Kimball: At the very beginning it was really all letters, and so once I had some of those bits of the frame, they were just at the front and the back, and that was it. And there was the obituary there too, so that was the first newspaper article. And that was a complete version. I thought the thing was done and that was it, and so the body of the novel was really just all letters. But I went back to it—I was working on a different book. I got stuck on that; I can’t remember why, but I went back to *Dear Everybody*. I’d had the vague idea at the time, all of a sudden it was obvious to me.

The diary entries from the mother become a major voice in the opening part of the novel and then, because I already had the newspaper article, I wrote other newspaper articles that became part of it. And from there I could put anything in. The yearbook quotes were really fun, and the psychological evaluations—which I had to do research on to figure out how to actually write one—all of those different pieces became possible after that. All of that came later. The other thing that happened later too was that a lot of the letters got cut or rewritten. I was talking to a class at Hopkins

last week, and they had read “Excerpts from the Suicide Letters . . .” and I was reading a bit of it as it was in the story, and it was really striking to me because there were a couple of the pieces that I read, usually when I read at a bookstore or something, and they’re just so *different*. I mean, I revised nearly every sentence, even in the letters. The book got rewritten quite a few times.

Sloan: You were saying that you arranged the letters, but did you write them chronologically, or just sort of skip around?

Kimball: The writing of them was sort of strange and unlike any other experience I have had as a writer because they came in a rush. They just sort of . . . it was just “Dear Mom and Dad,” “Dear . . .” and they were all over the place. They were young voices; they were old voices. I didn’t know how to put them together. I hadn’t figured that out. There was a point when I had a little over 100 of them and I was trying to figure out how to do it when I started laying them out on the dining room table. I had stacks of them. And I started making them chronological that way. That became the birth year.

I had them laid out on the dining room table and then I had them on the seats of the chairs and the floor. And so that’s how I ended up organizing the novel. Then, I had to go back to the computer and put things where they went. I couldn’t figure out how to do it just looking at the pages or just looking at the computer screen. I needed to see what everything was.

Sloan: What made you choose the chronological structure?

Kimball: There were so many pieces; there just needed to be a simple through-line to make it make sense. I had a friend read it in an early stage and he said, “What if you organized them thematically? What if . . .” He was throwing out these different ways to organize and it just seemed like the craziest thing—because it’s already a different kind of book, and so to impose also a different kind of structure on it would’ve made it . . . I had enough problems getting people to understand it as a novel.

Kolongowski: Did you originally plan for the brother Robert to be the collector of all these things? Or was it originally just the suicide letters of Jonathon Bender?

Kimball: You said it like you suspected I didn't, and I didn't. There were probably three different introductions from three different people. The very first one I wrote was from an unattached person, not a member of the family. There also used to be a sister in the novel. She wrote one of the introductions but eventually it became Robert. It worked for me when I realized that he had a troubled relationship with Jonathon and that he had a different troubled relationship with the father. The unreliable aspects of his narration added a whole other level to the book that I really liked, so that's when I knew that it was right.

Sloan: How do you usually envision the structure of your novels? Are you someone who uses outlines?

Kimball: I don't. I don't like to plan things; I tend to just write and see where it's going. All I needed with the letters was that I had a consistent narrator; I had somebody who thought about things in a certain way, viewed the world in a certain way, who had a certain syntax to the way he spoke—or wrote. All the other stuff I didn't know. I didn't know the particular events in his life. I didn't know at first that it was going to be about mental illness. There were a lot of things like that that just sort of developed. I really try to think about it organically; I try to not know what's going to happen or how a book's going to end. I just really try and let it develop. And if I do have to make decisions and say, well, this person's such-and-such, or *this* has to happen; I try very much to leave myself open so that I can change that. My idea is that you can change anything. You can go back to the beginning of the book and rewrite every single part of it.

Kolongowski: I'm wondering how you first came up with the idea. Was it an epistolary piece from the beginning or did you have this character and it came out in letter form?

Kimball: I finished writing my second novel and I didn't know what I was going to do next. This ties back to *Taint*—I had just written one little letter and it was the main character Jonathon, he was writing a letter of apology to a woman he had stood up on a date, and he's wondering if he would've showed up that night would his whole life have been different. It was a really clear voice and way of thinking there, in this random thing.

I didn't think about it much after I wrote that one; it was maybe a couple of weeks later that I ended up writing a bunch more letters. It was then I knew I had something, but I didn't set out to write an epistolary novel; it just sort of happened.

Once I knew it was going to be epistolary, I was trying to do something different with the epistolary novel. You could go back to the eighteenth-century stuff—they're letters because they say "Dear So-and-So," and they have a sign-off and all of that—but if you removed that, it might look like any other eighteenth-century text. Everything in between is really the same kind of writing. So I was actually trying to do something different in the letters themselves, too. I was trying to create story in a different way within each letter, without all of the stuff that you might have in a more normal narrative. Or a more traditional narrative, anyway.

Sloan: When you're working on a piece, do you participate in writers' workshops or do you prefer to work independently or with your editor?

Kimball: I like to work independently until I figure out what I'm doing. But then once I have a strong idea of that, I actually—and this was the first time I'd ever done this, was with *Dear Everybody*—we moved to Baltimore about three years ago and I was at a neighborhood association meeting, and somebody said, "Oh, this is Ron. He's the other writer." And I was like, *the other writer?* So apparently in our little neighborhood there was another person who had published a book, and he invited me to be part of his writing group. So I have this little writing group in Baltimore—there are four of us—and it's been a fascinating process to share work in that way because I hadn't really, since maybe my mid-twenties. I hadn't had that kind of feedback from people in that way. With my other books, when I finished them, I did have friends who read them and that sort of thing. But that meant I did the whole thing and then showed it to somebody.

This particular group was really fascinating because one of the people saw the first couple of chapters and he said, "You can't do this." He said it exactly like that. He said, "You can't have a letter and then a diary entry, and a letter, and a newspaper . . . you can't do this." And what he really wanted was me to fill in all the gaps that you would in sort of a traditional, realist kind of novel. There was one of the letters early on where the boy is thanking the father for taking him to get his hair cut, and he says, "So we're in the barbershop, and it's this great scene, but you don't describe the

hair, and you don't describe the mirrors, and the stuff on the shelves, and the barber's chair—you don't describe any of this stuff. You have to create scenes." And I said, "But, Ron, you *don't* need to, because you just *said* it all. I wrote *barbershop* and you did it all." I mean, to actually put it all in can be redundant and slows the narrative down. I was able to do it in a few lines, actually create this whole scene, and you as a reader fill in.

Writing groups can still be very helpful. Even when I don't agree with somebody else's approach to writing or when they would do something very different, it's fascinating to think of—well, even though I wouldn't do it that way, is there something they're reading or missing or, you know, that I could address in the way that I would address it? Is there something else I can do to take this kind of story in a new direction? And even if you hate everything everybody says in a writing group, I think even that's useful because you're defining what you're doing.

Kolongowski: So do you think that's a more effective push during the drafting process to move to the next step?

Kimball: It depends on where you are with the particular piece and I think it depends on where you are as a writer. It could be a difficult thing if you aren't sure what you're doing as a writer or if your piece is so early on that you haven't worked it all out for yourself. I would be very cautious about showing anybody anything that I hadn't at least taken as far as I could at that particular point. It might take you in directions you don't want it to . . . people can be very persuasive, so it's better to know exactly what you want and then see if they can help.

Sloan: I think that's one of the limitations of classroom workshops—that you're turning in a very rough draft and then you're getting all this feedback, and then it goes somewhere that you didn't want it to go because you're trying so hard to answer everyone's questions.

Kimball: I didn't really talk about this when we were talking about MFAs and all that, but—it was last year; I wasn't the judge for a contest, but there were five or six of us that looked at 100 different manuscripts before they got to the judge. We all had to read 100 and then we advanced one, two, or three, whatever we thought we should advance. It was really striking to me—out of the 100 I read, there were at least 95 that were really—I

mean, these are full story manuscripts—that were really, really similar. The content was different; it could be an immigrant story, or divorce, but stylistically they were so similar. There’s a certain way you open the story; there was a certain kind of description. Then you needed some dialogue—you could almost write A, B, C, D, and these things would fill in like this. It was sort of stunning to me to see how similar a big group of manuscripts was.

Kolongowski: We noticed that with the newest issue, actually. It was almost the opposite; it was similar themes. What was it—war . . .

Sloan: War, infidelity . . .

Kolongowski: And then infidelity during wartime. It was a stunning number. It was interesting, this kind of collective.

Kimball: There are a lot of things set in bars, too. Some of them, too, were really young. They weren’t really writing about something that mattered, in a way. There weren’t really terrible manuscripts; I didn’t go, “Wow, they have no idea what they’re doing,” or “This is full of clichés,” you know, it wasn’t like that. It was just sort of like, “Well, that’s fine,” but I didn’t *care*. That was most of them. Maybe MFA programs have created a lot of mediocre-to-good writers.

Sloan: It’s a formula.

Kimball: I was at a dinner party with a visiting writer, and I discovered there’s actually a structure that—is it five points? I can’t remember—but there’s an intro, there’s the build—

Kolongowski: Isn’t it Aristotle?

Kimball: I think it was Aristotle. I can’t remember what the pieces are, but to her mind, any good short story had to be constructed that way. You could not write a good story any other way, which just seemed ludicrous to me.

Kolongowski: But then where do writers like Kafka fit in with that?

Kimball: I think I brought up the example of Barry Hannah . . . he does a lot of voice-driven stuff, a lot of first-person narration. It's just somebody sitting on a stoop, or whatever, telling a story. And they don't have this structure, but the voice is so incredible. He's written so many really great stories, but she just dismissed him out of hand because he doesn't do *this*.

Sloan: What about Borges, too?

Kolongowski: What about "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" by William Gass? It's one of my favorite, favorite stories.

Kimball: It's amazing.

Kolongowski: It's just a circle within a circle. But it's incredible.

Kimball: The person who told me I couldn't do what I did with *Dear Everybody*, he was the director of a creative writing program. Now he's back to teaching three classes a term. He has 100 students that he's telling to do the most traditional thing, that *that's* how you do it.

Kolongowski: Even in essay writing, they teach you the five-paragraph essay. You come to college and you learn that it doesn't have to be that way; even formal, critical essays don't have to have that standard structure. With young writers, I think teachers can get stuck in a sort of trap, just so they have something to go on, and a student is not used to or wouldn't want to say to a professor, "I don't agree with this."

Kimball: I think it's one of the things that I really appreciate from my first experience in a writing class, which was with Diane, because she was willing to accept anything good. You could do anything you wanted as long as it was clear you were doing something. It really was about finding your own voice and being distinctive, I mean, there are any number of ways that you could do that and she encouraged them all. It was just a really great thing to have early on. It wasn't "You need to be doing *this*," it was "You need to be doing something good," and however you get there, get there.

Kolongowski: I think you said this earlier when you were reading manuscripts for the contest; I know we notice when we read submissions—if

you're an editor or if you're reading manuscripts and you're a writer, you see what you need to break away from. I know some of the things we accepted, their big draw was that they were different; they were experimental, even if it needed some editing, or—

Kimball: They can just bring some life to the writing—with the traditional narrative you can be reading along and you just know what the next paragraph is going to be. One of the greatest things about some of the more experimental stuff is that I love it when I don't know what's coming. I don't read because I want to read the same story over and over again. I do want to have somebody do something different and engaging and in a different way. And it's funny, when out of the 95 that were all the same, there was one that was clearly a really good version of that, was just a finely written, thoughtful story, was the epitome of what the best of that is. And then I had these five others that were trying to do different things, but there was maybe one that was actually truly strong out of those, and the others weren't as strong, but because they were different, they just drew your attention. The same thing you go through, the magazine publishers go through. I'm still friends with my first editor in the U.S. with *The Way the Family Got Away*, and the thing she says is: "I get all of these manuscripts and they're good. They're fine." But she doesn't *care*. There isn't anything that makes her say "I want to publish this." It's just rare that she gets that feeling. Just being a good writer and telling the divorce story or whatever it is, is not enough.

Kolongowski: Something can be very well written, but that's not all that it needs. A lot of people say that all of the stories that there are have been told. Would you agree with that?

Kimball: Well, if you make it abstract enough—if we just say "divorce story" or "coming-of-age story"—if you move it to that level, probably all the stories are told, but there's still a lot of original stuff being done. I don't know of anybody who's done what I did with *Dear Everybody*, maybe there is. I'm always encountering things that seem original to me.

Kolongowski: We were looking at your project *Michael Kimball Writes Your Life Story (on a postcard)*. Is this just an independent project that you've been working on?

Kimball: It started as kind of a joke. There is a big, famous art school in Baltimore, and there's a big festival in the spring—it runs four or five days. It's a performance art festival and some of it can be horrible but some of it's really just sort of amazing. I've never seen anything like that before. I was there on the first day and a friend of mine was curating the second night, and we were just talking and he said, "Well, why aren't you doing something?" I said, "Well, I'm a writer, what do you want me to do, in the sense that it's presented here?" So we started joking about what a writer would do as performance. Somehow I said, "I could write people's life stories." We were just joking about how that might happen and we decided it had to be short and all of this stuff, and it was just sort of a funny little joke and that was it. I went home.

The next morning he called me and he said, "I was thinking about this—you *have* to do this. I've already set up the table; I have a place for the sign. Just show up." So I thought it'd just be funny and sort of fun. I showed up, I sat down at my little table, I had a little cardboard sign. There was a guy with an art studio behind where my table was and he said, "Oh, I want to do it before everybody gets here." And so he sat down—I had no idea what I was doing—he sat down—I hadn't even thought about what I should ask people, or anything at all—so he sat down and I said, "What's your name?" I started talking to him and he had a lot of really interesting things that'd happened to him, so it was easy. I took notes and then I took five minutes and I wrote up a postcard and I gave it to him.

I looked up and a line had already formed. There were already people waiting to get this done, and I ended up doing it for over four hours that night. I interviewed and wrote postcards for dozens of people. It was really an amazing experience. Some of it was just fun and funny, but then there were people who also told me really difficult things that they'd been through, and trying to figure out how to present that material that justified it . . . It was a one-off—the whole experience, it was just going to be that.

A couple of days later one of the people got in touch with me through *facebook.com* and she said, "You took a really difficult part of my life and made it manageable for me." And it broke my heart to hear that. She called it "postcard therapy." It really did seem to release her from this thing she'd been through. So that really stuck with me.

There's a big festival called Hun Fest, and I had some friends ask me to do it as part of that and I did it again. So it was around that time I started a website and now I'll do interviews over email or over the phone. I've

written over 100 of them now, and there's a little art press in Baltimore and New York that's going to make a book out of them eventually.

Kolongowski: Do people just come to you and ask for you to do this, or do you pick people yourself?

Kimball: When the project started I had instructions on the website, so it was really a self-selecting group. If they wanted to do it, they got in contact with me. I've since had so many requests that I actually had to take the instructions down, and I still have too many requests even though there are no instructions. But now, if you want to do it, you sort of have to take the initiative to write to me and say "How do I get my life story written?" I wrote one for a writer whose first book is coming out next year. There are a lot of other writers on the Internet, so as soon as I posted his, hundreds of people saw it. I got dozens of requests in about two days . . . it's impossible to keep up with. So it's been a fascinating project.

It's mostly self-selection; there are times when I'll ask somebody. I have a friend who just had a baby, so I'm going to write one for the baby; it'll just be the first three months of the baby's life, and that's her life story so far. There are some things like that where I want to try and do something different to the narrative. There's one for an apple; there's one for a cat.

People are just amazing if you talk to them. If you just get anybody to tell their story and what matters to them . . . there's nobody that hasn't surprised me in some way, said something I wouldn't have expected.



He Never Talked About You

Richard Fellingner

The funeral home was crowded for Joe Pipowski's viewing, and Edna was wearing her favorite funeral dress. Her own husband had died 12 years earlier—his lungs corroded from too many cigarettes and too many years toiling in the Blacklick Valley coal mines—and by now Edna had certain dresses for certain types of people. One for distant relatives and acquaintances, another for friends and close relatives. And then her favorite—a knee-length black dress with gray polka dots and black lace on the collar. That was an easy decision this evening, but she still hadn't decided what, if anything, to do with the key she'd dug out of the trinket box in her closet.

Edna didn't recognize anyone in the funeral home's big foyer, so she headed straight to the main viewing room. The carpet smelled like cats. For the money these homes charge, they should shampoo the carpet, she thought. She recognized Jane Parsons, who was maybe ten years younger than Edna and Joe and still worked at the bank branch in their small town of Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania. Jane had worked with both of them for a few years before Joe was made manager of the other branch in Ebensburg, the county seat and the next town over from Nanty Glo.

"Not surprising he drew a crowd," Edna said.

"I hear he wanted a party instead of a viewing, but his wife wouldn't have it," Jane said.

The casket was open, and Joe was in a deep gray suit with pinstripes and a plain navy tie. He looked heavier, but still had a full head of hair—silver and slicked back.

"He looks good," Jane said.

"He was always a handsome man."

"Handsome men stand out around here."

Edna leaned toward Jane's ear and whispered, "Do you know his wife's name?"

"Midge."

Midge Pipowski was a frail woman in a solid black dress who was greeting people at the casket with her two sons, but she didn't say much. Mostly, she offered a nod and a polite, "Thank you." Some people leaned in to embrace her, and she responded with a quick, obligatory hug.

The line moved slowly, and Edna stood erect as she waited. She scanned the crowd, trying to judge the ratio of men to women: maybe two-thirds women, and she wondered how many were there for the same reason. Then she opened her purse and glanced down at the key. Tarnished with age, it had a green plastic tag with numbers that were barely visible anymore, but she knew them. Room 804. He'd brought her along to a conference at the William Penn, and had gotten a room for the afternoon. The William Penn had a grand lobby with shimmering marble floors and crystal chandeliers, and she had never been in such a beautiful building. Nanty Glo seemed a world away. It was her first trip to the city since her dad had taken her to see the Pirates at old Forbes Field, and it was the nicest place they went in the month they were sneaking away together.

When Edna got to the casket, she took Midge's hand and shook it gently.

"Hello, hun," she said. "I'm Edna Spicer. Joe and I worked together for so long."

"It's nice to see so many people from different places. The bank, the church, the Polish club."

"He was such a happy person."

"Yes, he was."

"He never talked about you at our bank," Edna said.

"Oh?"

"I don't know why a man wouldn't mention his wife at work," Edna said.

"What's that, now?" Midge said, her eyes darting.

One of the sons overheard their conversation as he was accepting condolences from Jane. As he turned away from Jane he said, "One moment." He seemed prepared for something like this. He put one hand on his mother's back and held out a beefy hand for Edna to shake.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm George, Joe's oldest son."

"We were just talking about how Joe never mentioned his wife at the bank," Edna said. She hesitated, then shook his hand listlessly.

“Well, I’m sure he did,” George said. “He was a great husband, and father too. Now, we have to keep the line moving. Thanks so much for coming.”

He gave Edna a pat on the shoulder, and she felt as if she was being pushed. Wanting to appear composed, she lifted her chin as she stepped aside, but she didn’t want to leave.

She waited a moment and approached the casket. She was at the foot, looking up at Joe’s face. Through the pasty cosmetics and the wrinkles and extra flesh that had come with age, she tried to imagine his face as it had been 30 years ago. The warm eyes, the hard jaw, and the lone dimple in his cheek. She thought about kissing his cheek, or grasping his hand, and leaving the key wrapped inside his fingers. She reached into her purse and looked around. Joe’s son had said goodbye to Jane and had not yet acknowledged the middle-aged couple who was next line. His head was slightly turned and he was watching Edna from the corner of his eye. She pulled her hand from her purse, crossed herself, and left.



For the Love of Todd

Erin Miller

A pawnshop clerk and a short-order cook walk into a bar. It's late, late enough for a pawnshop clerk and a short-order cook to be looking for a nightcap. Through the haze and the smell of stale beer breath, our short-order cook spots two open stools. They sit.

Our pawnshop clerk orders a pint of Guinness for himself, a Jack and Coke for his friend. He glances to his right. A woman, faintly familiar, squat and stubby, clad in a floor-length dress, sips on her hot toddy. She isn't much to look at, but tonight it doesn't matter. He signals to the bartender with a flick of his wrist. "Another for the lady," he says.

She looks at him and nods, attempts a smile. She opens her mouth with a sharp intake of air, about to speak, but hesitates. "When I was younger," she says finally, "my mother told me that everyone has a gift to share with the world."

Our pawnshop clerk nods. Our short-order cook leans across his friend. "What's your gift, sweetheart?" he asks.

The corners of the woman's eyes crease. "My gift is useless," she says. "Hibiscus seeds for an Eskimo."

"What makes you so sure it's a gift then?" our pawnshop clerk asks.

"It's too strange to be anything else," the woman says. "It's beyond coincidence. It's..."

"Kismet?" our pawnshop clerk suggests.

"Yes," the woman says.

They stare into their drinks.

Our short-order cook turns to his friend. "This lovely lady gets us all interested in her gift and then she won't even tell us what it is."

"I'm Mary Todd Lincoln!" she says suddenly.

Our pawnshop clerk and our short-order cook turn to one another. Ugly is one thing. Ugly and crazy is another. And then they think for a

moment. The round, pudgy features, the dull brown hair. By God, she *does* look like Mary Todd.

"How did this happen?" our pawnshop clerk asks.

"Born this way, wasn't I?" the woman says.

They are silent.

"When did you realize it?" our short-order cook asks.

"Ninth grade history. Mr. Wilk's class. Page 232. She sat staring up at me with my eyes. She had my hands. Naturally the rest of the class noticed too. I was Mary Todd for the rest of high school: persecuted, misunderstood, and slightly hysterical about the entire ordeal."

"That's terrible," our pawnshop clerk says.

"What did you do?" our short-order cook asks.

"I went to college, tried to put it all behind me. The strange thing is, I missed it, my antebellum identity. I began to hide out in the library, devouring every Mary Todd Lincoln biography in the place. I broadened my scope to Lincoln, then to the Civil War. I decided to study history so that my gift could be appreciated."

"Well, that's one way to handle things," our short-order cook says.

"Huh," our pawnshop clerk says.

"I joined the Civil War Enthusiast's Club. It's true. I was their queen. My first boyfriend was president of the club. Stephen, the first male who appreciated my unique features. He had relatives in Georgia and took the South's side in our debates over the constitutionality of secession and Lincoln's iron fist tactics." She takes a sip of her hot toddy. "I was more ambivalent."

The men exchange looks. Our pawnshop clerk's says, "Well, it's getting to be that time ..." but our short-order cook's says, "Let's see how this plays out." The men remain seated.

"Stephen and I attended our first reenactment senior year. We drove to D.C. for the Battle of Fort Stevens. News of my arrival preceded me. They were horrified to learn that I would be acting on behalf of the Confederacy. General Grant met us in the parking lot and asked me to reconsider." She looks up from her drink and smiles at the men. "While Stephen was sweet, he was no Grant. I joined the Union cause. I'd have been a fool not to. If you'll remember, it was the first instance of a First Lady visiting a combat zone, and a Union victory on top of that."

The short-order cook smiles placidly. "What happened next?"

"It was wonderful, for a time. I went on all of the reenactment tours. I presided over luncheons and banquets, walked the battlefields to cheer the wounded, and even founded a ladies' committee to unite the female reenactors. I was lucky enough to have Clara Barton as my vice president of internal affairs."

"Clara Barton, eh?" our short-order cook says. He elbows his friend in the side. "You sure sound like a lady that has it all."

"You would think so, yes. But I let it all go to my head, the power of my gift. I made extravagant purchases on the reenactors' society's dime. Oh, but if only you'd seen my antique hoop skirts and my horse and buggy."

"Sounds lovely," our short-order cook says.

The woman closes her eyes. "They were. But. It was not enough for the reenactor's society. They began talking behind my back. They called me a burden. Some hinted at my Confederate roots. I was excommunicated. Now no one appreciates my gift."

"Sweetheart, I appreciate your gift," our short-order cook says.

But it seems our pawnshop clerk has heard enough. He throws some money on the bar and takes his friend by the elbow. Our short-order cook makes like he'll struggle, but relaxes. "Night sweetheart!" he calls over his shoulder.

Outside, our short-order cook turns to his friend. "What was that all about? I coulda scored Mary Todd!" he says.

"Ugly is one thing," our pawnshop clerk says. "Ugly and crazy is another. But Mary Todd Lincoln? You need that like you need a hole in the head. Just look at what happened to Abe."

The two men go chuckling into the night.



Our Rivers

Alex Politis

"That's it!" the boy cried.

"What's it?" his father asked, suddenly appearing at the back of the boat beside his son.

"The ocean! That's what I'm seeing!"

"Shouldn't you be up there at the front with the rest of your class? You know how much I love rivers and how much I'd love to stand here staring at it with you, but as your chaperone I have to make sure you guys are helping the crew with their readings."

"All right," the boy said huffily, but he still couldn't stop thinking about the river, its secret language, its churning mysteries. The river was just one step on an ineluctable journey to the sea, and it was already bearing the boy's reflection to the ocean.

"Here you have it, sirs. Ole Ernest Hemingway's favorite river, the Big Two-Hearted River. Now do you two want da two-hour scenic route or da much longer five-hour route?" the yoooper asked.

"We should take the long one, dad," the boy said, eyes wide.

"You sure?" said the boy's father.

"Yes! We only have two days left up here!"

"Well, all right."

The yoooper drove the father and his boy another two miles before he braked. He helped the man and boy pull out their kayaks and lower them to the bank, where the two of them plopped themselves into their vessels like the inveterate paddlers they were.

"Now, before I push you two off, do you have any questions for me?"

The duo had already been briefed on the river and its negligible perils, but there was one concern that still weighed on the boy's mind.

“What happens when we get to the end where it opens up into Lake Superior? Can we keep paddling out into the lake?”

“Afraid not,” the yoooper said, noticing the boy’s frown. “You see, da kayaks just weren’t meant to sail on those big, open waters. Your trip has to end at da mouth.”

The trip was fantastic, but still too short.

“I remember you two from awhile back!” the yoooper exclaimed when the pair returned after many years. “Let me ask you two, short or long?”

“Let’s take the scenic route this time,” His father said, years falling off his face as he delivered his answer.

The young man beheld his father. The virile, Byronic, river junkie was still there, but smothered by wrinkles, creaking joints, and white-gray hair. His father looked almost artificially old, and both of them knew it; the last five years or so had taken a grave toll on him.

This time they shared a canoe, an old-fashioned birch bark one that his father had been working on since he was forced to slow down. The canoe was a masterpiece—slender and light, yet strong and durable.

The scenic route really was worth it. The young man had never seen such Chiaroscuro riverbanks, regal sand dunes, or beautiful, beautiful, beautiful water. It was clear, cold, brown, and glowing with a deep honey-amber that seemed to emanate from the soul of the world. Words had been sparse throughout most of the journey. At this point, anything new to add couldn’t possibly compare to letting the wind, water, and birds do the talking, the young man thought; there is a lot to be said for silence.

With the river mouth in sight, his father let an emotional tone slip into his voice. “Doctors are saying six months now.”

“Aw dad, don’t listen to them. They don’t know shit,” the young man said, but his cracked voice betrayed his calm.

The young man had relieved his father of the paddling halfway through the trip, leaving him to sit at the prow, legs folded up against his body like a child does as the campfire wanes, yet he seemed perfectly serene.

“I’m glad we took the scenic route,” the young man’s father said.

“Me too . . . me too,” came the slow, rueful answer.

The service was long, and it made the young man think he had never known such deep, pure, sublime sadness. Back at school, he felt like an orphan to the world. Everything reminded him of his late father, especially

the Red Cedar River, which flowed behind his dorm. Often, he'd go there and stare at its middle until the glare hurt his entire body. Today he was doing that very thing.

He took his notebook with him, hoping to get some of his writing homework done, but everything he tried seemed futile and predictable—totally pointless. His paper, he thought, would drift upon a barren wasteland ocean of other papers, his endings and plots would be chosen from among the platitudes and clichés that circled in its calm, lifeless whirlpools. Whether his words sank or swam, they would still lose their meaning in the vast, ultimate end for which he and all things were designed.

Tears streaming, anger rising, soul burning, he stood up, raised his notebook, and prepared to throw it into the water. He wanted to drown, to drown everything—himself, the notebook, the world—and get it all over with.

But then he started thinking about his notebook in the river. It would float down the tranquil Red Cedar for another couple of miles and then it would join another river, where its waters may swell, only to fall beyond the next turn. There would undoubtedly be rocks in the notebook's way; pages might get torn out from being jostled in rapids and squeezed through beaver dams. Maybe the notebook would merge into a very large river some day, one that might move fast at times, slow at others. Sometimes, the river may seem to stop all together and leave the notebook motionless before countless separate streams.

Changed, the young man sat down at his place along the river and opened his notebook. He had a long time before his reflection would reach the sea, and he now had a lot to write about.



HEMINGWAY CONTEST WINNER: FIRST PLACE

Natalie Johnson

You died
before I was ready.



HEMINGWAY CONTEST WINNER: SECOND PLACE

The Drowning of a Heliocentrist

R. D. Kimball

"Recanto." Galileo sputters, defeated.
Satan smiles.



HEMINGWAY CONTEST WINNER: THIRD PLACE

Kathleen Dobruse

Too late—they found the body.



HAIKU CONTEST WINNER: FIRST PLACE

Ben Rubinstein

crisp red leaves drift: dead
requesting only, like all
things passed, to be pressed



HAIKU CONTEST WINNER: SECOND PLACE

Sarah Dumouchelle

Grandpa built his dock
Nail by nail and plank by plank
He washes away



HAIKU CONTEST WINNER: THIRD PLACE

Michael Lala

A black squirrel is
Cracking acorns on pavement.
I pick through your thoughts.



About the Contributors

Nicolas Beier is a junior at the University of Michigan. Although he is pursuing a degree in computer science, Nicolas finds great worth in photography and other art forms. He enjoys embarking on multi-day bike trips, shooting on film with manual focus, working with young people, and listening to all sorts of music.

Richard N. Bentley has published two books: *Post-Freudian Dreaming* (short stories) and *A General Theory of Desire* (poetry). He won the *Paris Review*/Paris Writers' Workshop International Fiction Award, is a Pushcart nominee, and has appeared in several anthologies. He loves to hear from people who've read his stuff at rbentley@valinet.com. Visit his website at www.dickbentley.com.

Ariane Bolduc, a native of southern California, currently lives in Columbus, Ohio, where she serves as the Grants Manager for ProMusica Chamber Orchestra and as an Artist-in-Residence at Riverside Methodist Hospital. She received her BA in English from the University of Southern California, and her MFA in creative writing from the Ohio State University. In 2006, she received an Individual Excellence Award in Poetry from the Ohio Arts Council, and she has published in the *Connecticut Review*, *Salt Hill*, and *The Laurel Review*, with a poem forthcoming in *The Portland Review*.

Susan Howard Case began writing poetry in the late 1980s, during her career as a high school English teacher. Her need to write grew rapidly, as did her interest in contemporary poetry. She wrote and studied what she could on her own, with the help of conferences and workshops, throughout the 1990s. Ultimately she enrolled in the Bennington MFA program and graduated in June 2007. She devotes her time now to her own reading and writing, as well as participating in and running workshops. She has never published a book, though her chapbook *Blown Roses* is forthcoming.

from Puddinghouse Press, and her poems have appeared in several journals, including *The Comstock Review*, *The Ledge*, *Peregrine*, *Primavera*, and *The Sow's Ear*.

Gavin Craig is a graduate student in English literature at Michigan State University. He cofounded the literary journal *The Offbeat* and served as editor from 1999–2001. His writing has been published in *Oats*, *The Offbeat*, and *City Pulse*, and his chapbook *Nine Poems* is available from Revelator Press at <http://revelatorpress.blogspot.com>.

Weston Cutter is from Minnesota and has had work published recently in *Boxcar Poetry* and *Hawai'i Pacific Review* and has work forthcoming in *Controlled Burn* and *Southern Indiana Review*.

Pamela Davis is a California native living in Santa Barbara and plotting her next trip to Paris. She spent 30 years as a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and medicine before returning to her first love, poetry. She reads her poetry annually at Shakespeare & Company in Paris and at the Books & Authors Festival in Santa Barbara. Pamela is currently finishing her first chapbook. As a poet and essayist, Pamela is inspired by dead French writers, overheard conversations, tricks of memory, and hiking the hills behind her home. The daughter of a mortician, she is not afraid to write about death, although the wildfires in California scare her silly.

Kathleen Dobruse, 20 years after being summoned to this plane of existence, still hasn't decided what she wants to be when she grows up (or if, indeed, she plans on growing up at all). She came to Michigan State University with the goal of becoming a veterinarian and "saving the animals," only things haven't turned out quite the way she expected. Upon discovering that studying chemistry is an experience not unlike staring into the abyss, she sought to restore her sanity by studying professional writing. Results so far have been mixed, at best. Combining two such drastically different disciplines at once causes her to be viewed as something of an oddity by members of both her fields, which brings her no small amount of satisfaction. Her eventual goal is to somehow combine her scientific background with her love of writing, though she's still a bit fuzzy on the specifics as to how.

James Doyle's latest book is *Bending Under the Yellow Police Tapes* (Steel Toe Books, 2007). He has poems forthcoming in the *Paterson Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Redactions*, *The American Poetry Journal*, *Margie*, and *Green Mountains Review*. He and his wife, Sharon Doyle, live in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Sarah Dumouchelle is currently completing her bachelor's degree in English at Michigan State University. She is specializing in creative writing with psychology and religion as areas of interest and is a member of the Honors College. She is a baritone player for the Spartan Marching Band and a nonfiction reader for the *Red Cedar Review*. She was born in the Republic of Cyprus and has lived in Wisconsin and Ohio before coming to Michigan. Her interests include playing and listening to music, swimming, biking, and writing about her confusing life.

Richard Fellingner is a longtime newspaper reporter and a master's student in the creative writing program at Wilkes University. His fiction has appeared in *Westview* and *The Loyallhanna Review*, and he's finishing a collection of stories about people from Pennsylvania's rust belt. He lives with his wife and son in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania.

Charles Grosel, is a writer, editor, and stay-at-home dad. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and two children. In addition to *Red Cedar Review* (volume 43), he has published stories in *Western Humanities Review*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Front Range Review*, and *The MacGuffin*, and poems in *Slate*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Comstock Review*, among others.

David R. Hammel has had short stories published in *Passager* and the *Distillery*, (as well as a photograph in *Red Cedar Review* vol. 43). He attended high school in Brussels, Belgium, and college in Paris, ultimately graduating with a degree in journalism from Kent State University. He has been married for the past 33 years to his high school sweetheart, Tina. He makes his living as a sales and marketing professional living in Houston, running his own business.

Johanna Hayhurst, who lives in the Berkshires of northwestern Connecticut, received her MFA from Warren Wilson College in 2001. She has

had a fair number of poems published in magazines over the course of the past several years. She won the 2002 Morton Marr Poetry Prize for *Southwest Review*, won a 2005 Award of Honorable Mention from *New Millenium Writings*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for poems published in *Prairie Schooner*, and had her poem *Daphne* cited in two collections: *By Herself, Women Reclaim Poetry* (ed. Molly McQuade, Graywolf Press, 2000) and *Fruitflesh, Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write* (Gayle Brandeis, HarperCollins, 2002).

Lowell Jaeger teaches creative writing at Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, Montana. He has published two collections of poems and several chapbooks. Recently he compiled and edited an anthology of Montana poets, *Poems Across the Big Sky*, which sold more than 1,000 copies 5 weeks after publication. Several of his poems are forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Atlanta Review*, the *Coe Review*, *Poetry Flash*, *Georgetown Review*, *Big Muddy*, *Antioch Review*, *Louisiana Review*, *Pacific Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Poetry East*, and the *California Quarterly*. His third collection of poems, *Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep*, was published by Arctos Press in 2008. Currently Lowell Jaeger serves as editor of Many Voices Press and is busy compiling *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from western states.

Brad Johnson is an associate professor at Palm Beach Community College in Florida, and has two chapbooks available at www.puddinghouse.com: *Void Where Prohibited* and *The Happiness Theory*.

Natalie Johnson is a lifelong resident of Michigan. She's enjoyed writing throughout her life, especially poetry, but it was placed on the back burner until she attended a poetry writing workshop at Ox-Bow School of the Arts in Saugatuck. She attended the workshop to get at her rollercoaster of feelings that surrounded losing her mom suddenly on April 12, 2008, to a cerebral hemorrhage. Natalie's mom always encouraged her to write and this piece is for her.

Her mom was her friend and confidante. She was someone who provided encouragement and love at every stage of life's journey and often believed in her more than she believed in herself. Natalie believes that winning this contest is her mom "speaking" to her, breathing life into her, inspiring her to keep writing.

Natalie attended Michigan State University from 1998–2000 and obtained a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. She now lives in Muskegon and works for the State of Michigan. She enjoys walking the beach with her blond Labrador, writing, travel, and hanging with family and friends.

R. D. Kimball is a student of religious studies at Michigan State University. His personal literary inspirations include Borges, Italo Calvino, and anyone who dislikes William Faulkner. When he's not writing, he dresses up in suits and reads theology. He's a sucker for good cigars, pretty girls, and vinyl records. He does not, nor will he ever, live in Maine.

Korey Kuhl is a graduate of Michigan State University where he received a BA in English with an emphasis in creative writing in 2008. While attending MSU, Kuhl received the Arthur Athanason Memorial Scholarship in Creative Writing (2007), as well as multiple recognitions in the annual Creative Writing Awards (2007 and 2008). Kuhl attributes much of his success to working with Marcia Aldrich, whom he studied under for the duration of his undergraduate career. Although the majority of Kuhl's work is within the realm of nonfiction, he also had the opportunity to study poetry under Diane Wakoski while attending MSU.

Kuhl is originally from the small community of Vandercook Lake, Michigan, located just south of Jackson, where his parents raised him. Much of Kuhl's writing is influenced heavily by his relationships with his parents and three brothers, to whom he attributes his sense of humor.

Currently Kuhl is working on paying off his student loan debt, while continuing to experiment with both style and form in his writing.

Michael Lala grew up in a military family moving from Texas to Alaska, Colorado, Japan, Oklahoma, Virginia, Michigan, and various places in between. His writing interests right now lie mostly in poetry and songwriting. He doesn't spend much time in any one place.

K. T. Landon is a native of New Hampshire and a *summa cum laude* graduate of Dartmouth College. Her essays have appeared in *The Rambler* and *The Fourth River*. Her first career was as an acquisitions editor for technical books in the fields of computer science and physics, and she is currently a senior software engineer for a research institute in Cambridge,

Massachusetts. She lives with her husband, Ben, and their cat and dog in the Boston suburbs.

Philip Zachary Lesch is a writer living on a bluff in Portland, Oregon, with his spouse, two children, two Bernese mountain dogs, and a splendid view of Mt. Hood. He has written on assignment for *Professional Pilot Magazine*, has published fiction in *My Legacy*, *RiverSedge*, *Writers Post Journal*, and *The Griffin*.

Flying Home is based upon the author's experience as a commuter pilot in California. The squinty-eyed flight into Palm Springs really happened, and Captain Cohina was a real person whose name has been changed. Sixteen-hour days, and 20 days away from home per month were common.

The author eventually left the cockpit, albeit not via the bus from Palm Springs. The dream, however, was real, and served as an impetus for him to find a better life.

Ryan Long is an alumnus of Michigan State University, where he attained his BA in English language and literature. In 2007 Long volunteered as a poetry reader with the *Red Cedar Review*. Long currently resides in Wrangell, Alaska, and works as the staff writer and photographer for the *Wrangell Sentinel*. *The Associated Press*, the *Juneau Empire*, *Anchorage Daily News*, *Ketchikan Daily News*, and several weekly Alaskan publications have published Long's photography.

Sean Padraic McCarthy's short stories have been recently published, or are forthcoming in, *Glimmer Train*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Confrontation*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Other Voices*, *South Dakota Review*, *Sou'wester*, *The Evansville Review*, and *Blue Mesa Review*, among many others. He earned his BA in psychology from Fairfield University, and his MA in writing from the University of San Francisco, and he currently works as human service coordinator for the Department of Mental Health. His short fiction has been nominated twice in recent years for the Pushcart Prize, and he lives in Mansfield, Massachusetts, with his wife and children.

Erin Miller is currently a senior at Michigan State University. She is earning a dual degree in physiology and English (with a creative writing option). Erin hopes to become a physician or a trust fund baby. In 2008 she won

second place in fiction in Michigan State University's Creative Writing Awards. In third grade she won West Utica Elementary School's Veteran's Day essay contest, and in sixth grade she had perfect attendance.

Dan Moreau holds a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Texas at Austin. His work has appeared in *Farfelu*, *Word Riot* and *Segue*. Other stories are forthcoming in *Straylight*, *Lamplighter Review*, and *Twelve Stories*.

Alex Politis lives in Fraser, Michigan. He entered Michigan State University as a Lyman Briggs major interested in the hard sciences. Alex is currently a junior at MSU, and he is pursuing an English major, though he isn't sure if he will keep his choice of major. Alex loves exploring the wild places of the Upper Peninsula, and he has canoed down the Big Two-Hearted River twice. His interests include hiking, camping, swimming, hockey, HBO, reading, writing, ancient history, philosophy, comics, and conservation. He is a big fan of progressive rock, stand-up comedy, Frank Sinatra, the Detroit Red Wings, and all nine of his magazine subscriptions. Looking forward, Alex has thought about becoming a writer for a magazine, a columnist for a newspaper, or a professor at a university, but is open to any new and different options or paths that fate has in store.

John M. Quick is an educational technology professional at Michigan State University with a passion for sharing meaningful stories. In addition to writing and photography, he is active in the design of digital media for educational purposes. He enjoys creating video games, animations, movies, and websites. His portfolio is available online at www.johnmquick.com.

Josh Radtke has been passionate about photography for the majority of his life. Ever since he was given his first camera at the age of six he has been finding things to take pictures of. However, it wasn't until he traveled to Europe to visit his father that did he considered it as more than a hobby. When he got home from the trip he immediately bought himself a Nikon slr, and the rest is history. He soon joined his high school newspaper, gaining valuable experience and input from the newspaper moderator. Josh has often thought about how photojournalism is the perfect job for him. He went so far as traveling to California to look at Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, which is where one of the pictures in this publication came

from. In the end, Josh felt like he was being called back to Michigan State University, where he just recently declared his major as journalism. His family members have mentioned that photography may not have just fallen in his lap, rather it may be in his blood. His uncle is a freelance photographer in Virginia, and his grandfather was a well-known photographer in Detroit up until his death in a helicopter accident. Josh has chosen to follow not far in their footsteps, and is currently doing freelance work and working for MSU's yearbook, the *Red Cedar Log*.

Cynthia CL Roderick received her master's degree in journalism from Boston University and an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Formerly a journalist and a book editor for a think tank in Washington, D.C., she now freelances as a writer, editor, and photographer.

Her short stories have appeared in *The MacGuffin* and *The Rambler*; her nonfiction has appeared in numerous publications including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *Boston Phoenix*. An unruly novel is underway.

Since leaving Washington, Ms. Roderick has made her home at the foot of a mountain in western Massachusetts.

Ben Rubinstein, at the time of publication, roams the streets (sidewalks, really) of New York City. He graduated from Michigan State University in 2008 with a degree in professional writing. By day, he's an editor/publicist; by night he's a barista/wine connoisseur/poet. Occasionally he sleeps. He is available for freelance poetry assignments, lunch/marriage engagements, and friendship.

Ariel Sammone was born and raised in Clio, Michigan, where she resided with her mother for 18 years. She is a National Merit Scholar currently working toward her bachelor's degree in East Asian studies with an emphasis in Japanese and a member of the Michigan State University Honors College. Her interests include reading and riding her bicycle. She writes when inspiration finds her, and this poem is her first published work.


Elinor Teele is a writer and photographer living in New England. Her book reviews appear regularly in the *California Literary Review* and her short stories have been published in *The Massachusetts Review* and *Quality*

Women's Fiction. As a photographer she has reached the semifinals of the Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year Contest, won third place in the Essex National Heritage Photography Contest and had her work appear on the Smithsonian's Photo of Day website. Brought up in New Zealand, she has a particular affinity for the rural landscape of the South Island.

Ellen Roberts Young, a California native who spent almost 40 years in Pennsylvania, has been part of the poetry community in Las Cruces, New Mexico, for four years. Her chapbook, *Accidents*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2004. In addition to numerous journal publications, her work has been anthologized in *The Wisdom of Daughters* and *Orpheus and Company*.

Hasib Yousufzai's "life story" started in Kabul, Afghanistan, he has lived and grown up on 3 different continents and 4 different countries, Afghanistan, Russia, Yugoslavia, and for nearly 11 years now, he's lived in Okemos, Michigan, studying mechanical/biomedical engineering at Michigan State University. Experiencing these different cultures brought about different interests and hobbies along the way for him; as of now, he enjoys playing the guitar, practicing Judo, working on cars, and photography. His interest in photography didn't just stem from an interest in the arts, but from history of and an interest in travel. This can be seen from any given sample of his photos. The photo "Such Great Heights" was taken at the Red River Gorge in Kentucky, while "By Land or Sea" was taken in Amsterdam, and the third photo "Left Bare" was taken in the Rockies of Sun Valley, Idaho. While he has a great deal of passion for photography, he is still an amateur and it is still a hobby; however, he hopes to continue learning and increasing his skill.





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