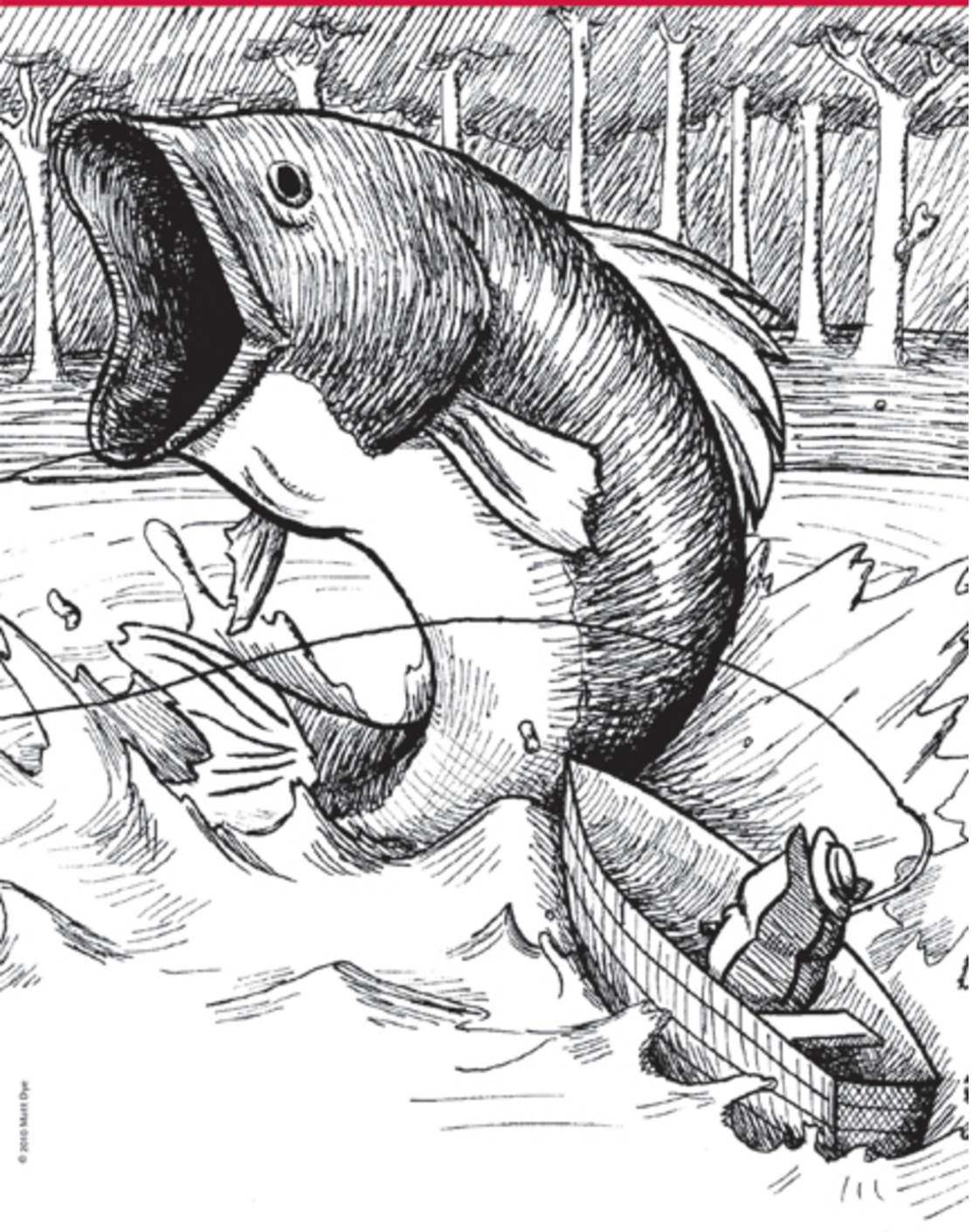
RED CEDAR REVIEW



REDCEDAR REVIEW

2010

Red Cedar Review (ISSN 0034-1967) is an annual literary magazine published in the spring by Michigan State University undergraduates in collaboration with Michigan State University Press with support from the Michigan State University College of Arts and Letters and Department of English.

BUSINESS OFFICE

For subscriptions, change of address, claims for missing issues, advertising inquiries, reprint requests, etc.: Michigan State University Press, Journals Division; 1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25; East Lansing, MI 48823-5245; TEL (517) 355-9543 × 101; FAX (517) 432-7484; EMAIL journals@msu.edu; WEB *www.msupress.msu.edu*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, visit the Red Cedar Review website at *www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/.*
Please do *not* send manuscripts to MSU Press.

2010 SUBSCRIPTION RATES (1 ISSUE)

	1 YEAR	2 YEARS	3 YEARS
Buy 2–3 years and save . . .		*5%*	*20%*
U.S. Individual	*$15*	*$29*	*$36*
International Individual	*$17*	*$31*	*$40*
U.S. Institution	*$30*	*$57*	*$72*
International Institution	*$33*	*$63*	*$79*
Student	*$11*	*$21*	*$27*

SINGLE ISSUE: *$15* · BACK ISSUE: *$10* · AIRMAIL: *Add $8 per year to above rate*

Prepayment required: check, money order, Visa, MasterCard accepted. Payment must be in U.S. currency drawn from a U.S. bank. Domestic claims must be received within 3 months of publication date. International claims must be received within 6 months of publication date.

RETURN, CREDIT, & REFUND POLICY

Returns are not accepted. MSU Press Journals Division can provide full or partial credit only for subscription orders. Credits issued for cancellations will be pro-rated. Credit can be transferred only to other MSU Press journals, not to MSU Press Book products. Pending subscriptions can be refunded in full. Allow 8–12 weeks for processing.

Red Cedar Review participates in Project MUSE®, a Johns Hopkins University initiative that provides online institutional access to leading scholarly publications in the arts, humanities, and social sciences at *http://muse.jhu.edu*.

Red Cedar Review is indexed in the Humanities International Index.

Michigan State University Press is a member of the Green Press Initiative and is committed to developing and encouraging ecologically responsible publishing practices. For more information about the Green Press Initiative and the use of recycled paper in book publishing, please visit *www.greenpressinitiative.org.*

YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN THE

Friends of **RED CEDAR REVIEW**

Please consider becoming a patron of *Red Cedar Review*. For the past 45 years, we have been committed to exploring all genres, by publishing both emerging and established writers. Your generous support will help us continue our mission of promoting excellent writing and providing a forum for creativity within the student literary community. Your tax-deductible contribution* can be made by check or credit card, and unless you wish to remain anonymous you will be gratefully acknowledged in the journal and with a letter of receipt.

FRIENDS OF THE WRITTEN WORD

- ☐ POETRY SECTION SPONSOR . . . . . .$300 *(includes one-year subscription)*
- ☐ FICTION SECTION SPONSOR. . . . . .$300 *(includes one-year subscription)*
- ☐ INTERVIEW SECTION SPONSOR. . . . . .$500 *(includes one-year subscription + 1 guest subscription)*
- ☐ ART & GRAPHICS SPONSOR . . . . . .$600 *(includes one-year subscription + 1 guest subscription)*
- ☐ VOLUME SPONSOR (ANNUAL ISSUE) . . . .$1,000 *(includes one-year subscription + 2 guest subscriptions)*

FRIENDS OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Your gift will support a variety of literary events on campus, including readings and visits from guest authors. Visiting writers have included essayist Tom Lynch and poet Diane Glancy.

- ☐ EVENT CONTRIBUTOR . . . . . $500 *(includes one-year subscription + 1 guest subscription)*
- ☐ EVENT SPONSOR . . . . . $1,000 *(includes one-year subscription + 2 guest subscriptions)*
- ☐ MULTI-YEAR SPONSOR. . . . . .$1,500 *(includes two year subscription + 1 guest subscription)*

GIFTS

Please complete this form, make checks payable to *Michigan State University*, specify *Red Cedar Review* on the memo line, and send to: Michigan State University Press, Journals Division; 1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25; East Lansing, MI 48823-5245. To charge your credit card, fax the completed form to (517) 432-7484.

☐ I WISH TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS

NAME (PLEASE PRINT)

STREET ADDRESS

CITY/STATE/ZIP

E-MAIL ADDRESS

☐ Visa
☐ MasterCard

ACCOUNT NUMBER EXPIRATION DATE

*Contributions to Michigan State University Press are tax-deductible. However, according to IRS guidelines, the value of any goods/services (subscriptions) received in connection with your gift must be deducted from the gross amount of your contribution to determine the amount eligible for tax advantages and employer matching gift programs.

Thank you for your generous support of this exceptional publication!

Top row, left to right: Emily Wollner and Ashley Luster, Managing Editors; *middle row:* Fiction Editor Natalie Eidenier, Poetry Editor Courtney Hilden, Nonfiction Editor Laura Mitchell; *bottom row:* Assistant Poetry Editor Nicole Cillette, Publicist Kelly Caldwell, Assistant Fiction Editor Kate Geiger, Photo Editor Kim Berens

Top row, left to right: Kim Berens, Kate Geiger, Andrea Spykman, Brian Brennan, John Noreen, Natalie Eidenier, Sam Napolitan; *bottom row:* Lori Bates, Sasha Masters Jones, Sarah Jackson, Chrissy Korytowsky, Lauren Ritzler, Lauren Beaver; *not pictured:* Brittany Baker

Top row, left to right: Max Katsarelas, Laura Mitchell, Sarah Dumouchelle; *bottom row:* Hannah Ettema, Danielle Sharp

Top row, left to right: Kyle Kehus, Alex Henderson, Amanda Lewan, Nina Elias, Kelly Caldwell, Rachel Skibbe; *middle row:* Jamie Overbeek, Courtney Hilden, Kelsey Turek; *bottom row:* Nicole Cillette, Laura Portko, Amelia Larson, Irene Stibitz; *not pictured:* Lindsey Hunt, Alexa Hayes

REDCEDAR REVIEW

CONTENTS

Editors' Introduction

Ashley Luster and Emily Wollner

As we embraced our roles as managing editors of *Red Cedar Review*, the journal that we had grown to love over the past few years, we made it a priority to define the nature of the material with which we were working. What does it mean exactly to be a *literary* journal? Associated commonly with dusty library tomes and complex pleonastic prose, the "L" word is one that often frightens away people who lie outside of its writing communities and seemingly elite social circles. It seems, though, that the literary merit of a creative piece is not necessarily a consequence of its form or its language, but is something that lies within the way these factors work in tandem to present an idea. In this way, we strove to expand the definition of literary in this issue of *RCR* to include any spark of creativity that lends itself to ink and paper.

We are pleased to highlight Michigan State University student Matt Dye's charming *Chewski Goes Fishin'*, both within the issue and on the cover, as the first illustrated narrative of its kind to be published in *RCR.* This issue also features the photography of MSU students David Poirier and Meghan Colson, MSU alumnus Melissa Poirier, and Arizona native John M. Quick.

Mirroring its ever growing popularity in the world of literature, creative nonfiction in the journal has grown to represent half of the total prose published in this issue. It runs the gamut in subject matter from prominent social issues like increasing unemployment rates in Alisa Wolf's *Inertia*, to personal meditations on home in Jill Kolongowski's *Becoming Tecciztecatl*. In *Just Here for Littering,* Erin Wisti depicts a father-daughter relationship complicated by an attempt to deny the imminence and unpredictability of death, while Karl S Monroe faces the notion of his eventual demise head-on in his darkly humorous *My Final Resting Place*.

The fiction featured in this issue not only maintains this thematic diversity, but is also coincidentally reminiscent of our own editorial process with the journal. After hours spent poring over dozens of wonderful manuscripts we found ourselves overwhelmed at times, though eager to accomplish the task before us, and even prone to occasional illusions of grandeur like Robert Thomas in Brian Patrick Heston's short story *Super*. And like the characters that taunt the aging actor in Dennis Must's *Going Dark*, we have been haunted and inspired by the dozens of previous issues of *RCR* and the 45 years of legacy that have preceded us and remain in piles and boxes on the floor of our office.

Representing a variety of stylistic and thematic choices, the poetry in this issue features voices that are both new and established. We are pleased to introduce the intimate and graceful poetry of Lia Greenwell that opens and closes this issue. And we are honored to include both *An explanation of time* and *Imagine here a title that calms you down* from the much lauded poet Bob Hicok.

Providing an insightful dialogue on writing and literature is Jim Porter's interview with Richard McCann, author of *Mother of Sorrows*. We are also excited to showcase the winners of our annual writing contests. The Poetry Contest was judged by MSU professor and esteemed poet Diane Wakoski and the Nonfiction Contest was judged by essayist Jane Congdon.

Editing *RCR* has been more challenging and rewarding than either of us could ever have imagined. Our insurmountable gratitude goes to Steve Healey whose constant guidance, confidence, and encouragement enabled us to push through our difficulties and allowed us to turn our lofty goals into realities. And to our staff, whose creativity, enthusiasm, and diligent work lines these pages, we cannot say thank you enough.

It is our hope that all who find these pages will gain the same wisdom from reading them that we have gained from creating them.

rebirth

Lia Greenwell

there must have been language
in the womb. my thin
lucid fingernails must have been
pressed to warm ink on pages
somewhere, maybe near her rib cage
or printed on my umbilical cord,
maybe floating,
apricot light traveling
through the tissue paper skin
of my mother's swollen belly.

letters must have been waiting
in my mother's eggs,
my father's sperm swimming
furiously through dim tunnels
carrying the periods, semi-colons, commas needed
to complete the thought. because
I don't ever remember not

knowing how words could sink
through my transparent hands
and into my blue veins, how
they could fertilize my cortexes
and lobes and hemispheres,
cause them to grow into a network and
make me alive.
there must have been language when

my lids were sealed
shut, my eyes bulging like
black marbles behind them.
I must have known the words to
say when I felt her insides
shaking and rolling,

before I lost them. the words
must have been resting on
the back of my tongue, my
lips shaping the sounds to say
Stop, I'm not ready for this,
just a little more time, but
there was pressure and tugging and sterile
light. all of my words were wiped
away with my blood and chalky
casing until the only syllables
I could sound were screams. I lost
every word in the birth canal and

on the table and on the white tiled
floor, and I am only now
beginning to find exactly
where they landed, cup them
in my hands
and breathe them in.

Going Dark

Dennis Must

I am an aging actor. Well, I was one, but I seldom get opportunities to audition any longer. When I do I'm rarely called back.

Actors are notorious prevaricators. There's a simple explanation for this. We like to think of ourselves as a *tabula rasa* until the script or dialogue is in hand. That's when we come to life. But it isn't ours. Luigi Pirandello wrote about such matters.

So if you were to ask, say, *Where do you live?*—I will lie and recall my most recent role, offering that person's address.

How many children do you have? Then I must think back to when I played a father, and answer: six. He was a German soldier in a little known World War II drama I starred in Off-Off-Broadway. His name was Josef, and he'd hidden his SS Waffen uniform under the attic floorboards for fear that it would be discovered by one of his offspring.

And your wife—who is she? I've had many, but then I picture the comeliest, Alana, whose raven black hair she'd braid in one glorious strand. When she climbed the stairs to bed at night, I'd watch it sweep from the left side of her porcelain back to the right, pendulum-like. In a pre-Technicolor film, I'd taken her home to my widowed mother, who lived in Ohio. That evening when Alana retired to my old bedroom, Mama inquired if she were a "Jewess."

Immediately I visualized my uniform up in our attic. But there was no attic. And my surname is Daugherty. Well, it *was* in a television commercial where I played the bank manager, Christopher Daugherty. When we'd wrapped up the one-day shoot, walking out of the studio, famished, I laughed to myself. I hadn't a dime in my pocket. If I had borrowed the bespoke three-piece and those to die for calfskin cap-toe shoes I wore, posing

before a Chippendale desk, I could have passed myself off in a restaurant as someone of means. When the check arrived, I'd feign I'd left my wallet in my Bank of North America office and would return posthaste with cash.

"And your name, sir?"

"Daugherty . . . Christopher Daugherty." I'd grimace to the waiter. "My wife, Alana, who comes in here often, will be mortified to hear what I've done."

Then I'd gather my overcoat and gesture *Be right back.* But where did I put it? I remember seeing it on a coat tree, a camel's-hair model with bone buttons, alongside the desk. And wasn't there a hat also—a felt narrow-brim Dobbs? Did I forget that?

Christ, Alana will think I'm losing my mind.

Will she inform the neighbor, Mrs. Mueller, who periodically knocks on our side door and hands Alana a tuna fish casserole she's prepared? The two women talk as if they're old friends. But how could they be? Beatrice Mueller is Josef's wife. She must know what he's secreted above their bedroom ceiling. She complains to Alana of severe migraines. Alana commiserates. Of course, I know why she has headaches.

I've suffered from one ever since I watched a chiaroscuro Nazi movie as a 12-year-old. Except when I took on that cinematic role I was a graduate student at the University of Southern California, smoking and seeing women. Not Alana—I hadn't had the pleasure of meeting her yet. But I knew it would happen one day because as I ran through them, the women kept growing lovelier. Once the studio technicians applied my makeup, I was genuinely frightened with what I saw in the mirror. A good 10 years had been lopped off my life. And with them the anxieties of adolescence returned within minutes. From puberty through my early teens I'd suffered this inexplicable anguish that I was about to die. In fact there was this character in my head who owned a basso profundo voice—it could have been Josef Mueller—lecturing me how utterly stupid life was and to save me hurt and heartache I must *"Leap off a trestle bridge."* Of which there were several in our town.

So in truth I was an adult, looking 12 and having to relive the torment that I'd commit suicide if I were honest with myself. Mama—she could have

been the one I mentioned who called Alana a Jewess—preached that to be true to myself, I had to follow my conscience to the letter. Except now my conscience turned out to be a German SS officer who, paralyzed by guilt, had secreted his uniform under the attic floorboards, instructing me to off myself. *"Just fucking do it, Tom!"* he'd command.

But my name wasn't Tom. I mean it isn't today. My name could be any one of these characters who is not prepared to die inside an aging actor . . . *me.*

Already pitched up because of the mirror incident, I was filmed heading off to the movies with my father on a winter evening during the height of World War II when air-raid blackouts in the neighborhood were quite common.

Papa, whose name was Philip, bought us popcorn and we sat in the balcony of a rococo movie house, second row. It too was a black and white film. The script stipulated I was possessed by fear that the Germans were going to bomb our small mill town like they were blitzkrieging London at the time. The SS Waffen offices appeared on the screen 20 feet taller than Papa in jodhpurs, gleaming boots, and officers' caps with black patent leather bills and silver-scull emblems on their crowns. Several wore gold-rimmed glasses. Headlights from their ebony motor cars reflected off the spectacles' lens, shooting sparks of phosphorescence across the screen. At that very moment the real-me and the celluloid-me coalesced.

I knew exactly what Josef, my conscience, looked like

I'd been unable to picture him earlier when he cajoled me on my way to school to forego classes and accompany him off one of the bridges spanning the dark Neshannock River that ran through our hometown. "Tell me what you look like," I'd stall. "I have to see you, to look you in the eyes, if I'm to believe you're for real. Otherwise I won't listen."

But acting this young spectator in the movie house, I *saw* my conscience. He wore an SS Waffen uniform and wire-rimmed glasses with oval lenses that penetrated the soul. When he removed his officer's cap, the moon reflected off his brilliantine hair. One of my finest performances the director, Ernst

Kirchner, exclaimed, adding that he'd never experienced a more authentic melding of actor and character.

I played as if it were nothing.

But now that I'm in the last stage of my life and considering scant roles that I might perform, it's not simply that boyhood memory that haunts me. The numerous other characters I've performed have memories too.

The marque ones hang like so many suits in my closet. There are the winter weights and the summer weights. The more bit roles reside in my bureau drawers alongside fading bow ties and dress shirts yellowing at the collar. It's how I recall their personas. Costumes, uniforms, changes of shirts or ties or even underwear . . . the silk kind, or the practical cotton briefs. Some roles I even compare to the shoes lining my closet floor. How a certain individual walked, or how big I thought his feet were. If he was inclined to have an effeminate side . . . the white and black spectators are stored on a higher shelf for him. The footwear's leather has begun to crack not unlike the film clips I've stored in tin canisters in the attic.

As I lie about my small room in Riverside Suites, just south of Columbia University and a block east of the West End Bar (I once saw Ginsberg and Thomas Merton pettifogging there), hoping for a call to some casting, or while I scour *Variety* . . . it's not just I in attendance. They are sitting waiting, too. Some on the windowsill smoking or alongside me in bed watching the traffic outside. Others with their coats and hats on at the door in case a call should come so they can be the first out.

And since I am a blank slate—at least I was one in the beginning, *bereshit bara Elhoim*—they won't let me be. In fact they squabble among themselves.

Every role I've ever performed is now rising up because they can see where this is all headed. *I'm going to die soon.* Christ, does that word send them into a dither. They stir nervously about the room, sharing smokes. Their chatter a raucous din that causes me to lose even more sleep.

I've begun to anticipate what will unfold.

It involves a couple of the more prominent characters I've played, those where I channeled Stanislavski, say, like Brando and Dean. You would've exclaimed *Josef, you were magnificent.* If Alana were here, she'd confess to you how I broke her damned and precious heart.

These stars are packed and ready to go. They're the ones who have begun to aggressively assert themselves in the scarce days, months, perhaps a year or two that I have remaining. Of course, we are all doomed. When I go, they go. But these personas are not about to exit gently.

One keeps urging, *Go up into the attic and get my film. Pull out the projector from the closet and watch me again. That's who you are, Josef. I live in that cannister. It's number four dated 1968. God, I was magnificent then, don't you recall?* Then as if he were sticking his celluloid tongue in my ear, he whispers . . . *These others are imposters. We can live again. Watch me, Josef. Bring me back alive.*

We can do great things together. We'll go to a thrift shop and dress me up again . Don't you recall how elegant I looked in that white linen two-piece suit in white shoes and the foulard that looked like a Gauguin Tahitian print?

And we'll find Alana. I swear I'll help you. That will bring us alive again.

We can do it all over.

Screw these other characters hanging around as if they are in a union hall. Waiting for the phone to ring.

We make our own phones ring, Josef. Believe me.

And there's something else I've been meaning to tell you now that I can see the blood circulating again in your face. You're listening to me, aren't you? Yes, friend. Now listen up. Alana. You know where she is? In Argentina, Josef.

Does it surprise you?

She's living among those expatriates. Do I need name them for you? Their kind never die.

Why do you look at me so?

As if I'm a casting director. Each day another makes his or her pitch.

Oh, I've played the gentler sex in my time too. Quite convincingly, in fact. I've even wondered if I had performed more women's roles, I'd be in the fix I'm in now. With a man they see what they see.

It hadn't always been this way.

But it truly is too late.

I finally don't much care if the phone rings or a part comes my way. I rather enjoy being *nobody* . . . and *nobody* desiring my services.

But these characters flitting about. Cuddling up to me during the long nights. They want to live in the worst goddamn way.

That's what terrifies me.

The source of my deep anguish.

One morning I'm afraid I'll mount the attic stairs with a crowbar and pry out the floorboards' tenpenny nails then step into my moth-eaten SS Waffen uniform, boots, jodhpurs, patent leather visor cap, . . . the full emblematic works. Lift down the crop that I've hidden in the rafters and, after brushing off the years of dust, snap it against my beefy thighs to tramp back down into my room and announce to all the others their fate.

They know what it is. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then I will head down the apartment stairwell, parade through the marble lobby, and out onto the street to begin hunting for my lovely, my darling, my porcelain-skinned Alana whose neck blushed a rose red before her cheeks did.

What is there to be afraid of? I will cry to the top of my lungs.

And bystanders will drop jeweled rings and eyeglasses in his wake.

An explanation of time

Bob Hicok

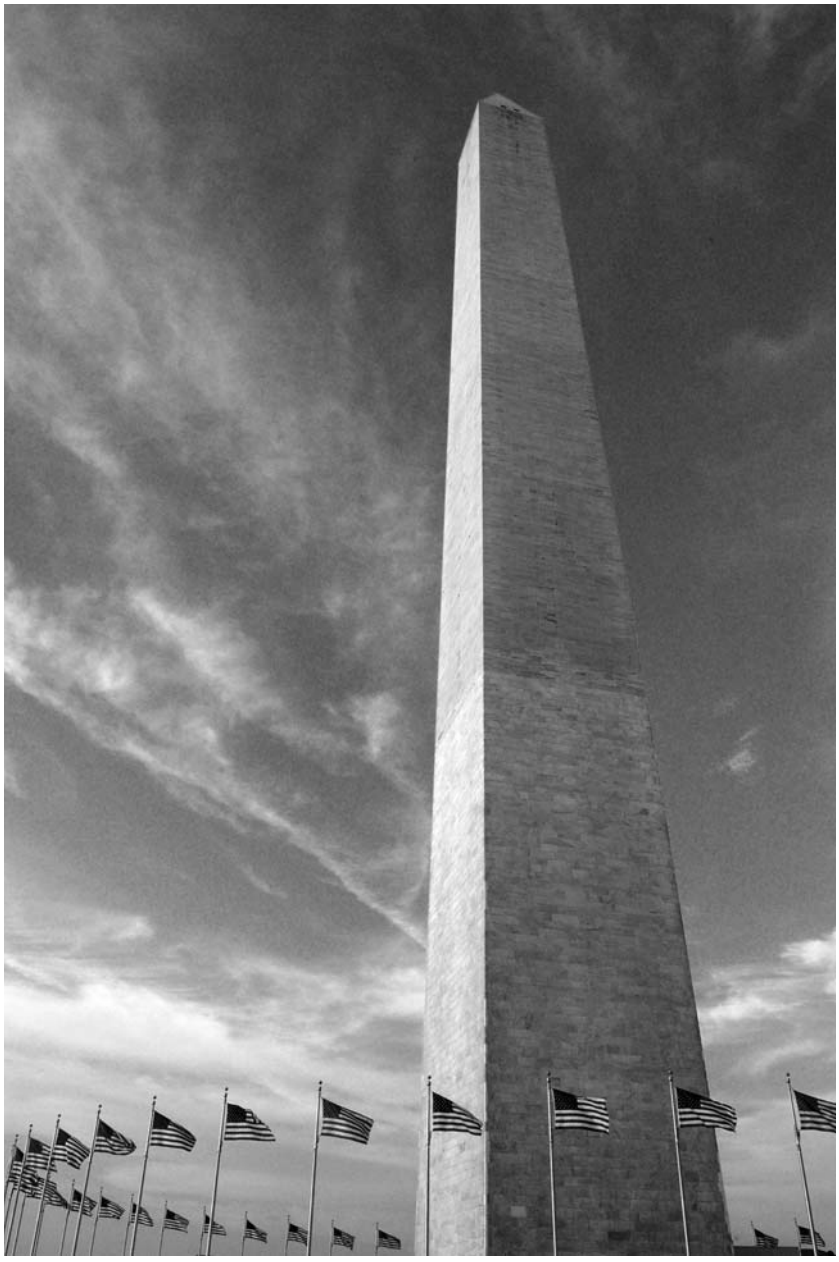
There's this animal which, when frightened,
sheds all its fur at once, hyena-like, in shape,
though its call resembles the blending
of frozen strawberries, that grabgrind
and mash of blades, I've seen it in the dream
I'm pretending to have had, the one in which
I heckle a heckler's heckling, who screams,
"life doesn't work that way, you don't
get to make things up," when I remind him
he's only as real as this scattering
of night-marks across a pasture
of cloud, words have a way
of having their way, then the animal runs
while the predator sniffs for what it thought
was there, food, of course, and follows,
too late by then to do more than wander
into the way life is, now that it has changed.

The Statues of Vaison-la-Romaine

(for Cece)

Matthew J. Spireng

If only
all statues
were made to
change the heads
when power
shifts, old ones
lined on shelves in some
forgotten crypt like
skulls, those ruling bodies
enduring, constant
and immutable beneath
the ever-changing
heads of state.



© 2010 Melissa Poirier, “Monument”

Sparring Vladimir Putin

Michael Nye

At the beginning of President Clinton's second term, I was waking up in a different European hotel room almost every morning. Ohio, the state of which I'd been governor for eight years, had just elected my handpicked successor in a landslide. I was one of those New Democrats; we all believed we were going to change the world with our progressive policies and union-friendly wink and nods, with our sly JFK-wannabe charm. Kicking off my damp sheets, shaken awake by my own nightmares about shadowy figures outside my window dumping poison into the ventilation system, I'd stare beyond my tangled legs, over the neat piles of luggage, and into the adjacent room where stacks of classified documents and dark brown folders lay on the dining room table. I blinked and remembered the cities I had just seen: Oslo, Tallinn, Riga, Minsk. Squeezing the bridge of my nose, the fear of a hangover sending me in search of vitamins and tomato juice, I vaguely remembered I was flying to Ukraine.

Climbing the stairs to a government-issue Boeing, ready to fly from Vilnius to Kiev, I clutched my attaché case to my chest. Inside was a day-old copy of *The New York Times.* I hurried to the tiny cabin in the back of the plane, closed the door, and poured a hair of the dog drink. Buried on page seventeen next to a half page ad for a Neiman Marcus sale was the news I was looking for: Tony Erpenbeck, perhaps the sole reason I had become mayor of Cincinnati twenty years ago, had just been charged with federal bank fraud, tax evasion, and regulatory violations of building and safety codes in three states. Erpenbeck was the guy who swung the union votes in west Cincinnati to get me elected mayor and, in return, I looked the other way when he violated building and safety codes for his regional development empire. Now, Erpenbeck told the press that he had acted on the orders of Matt Bowman—my handpicked successor as governor who

had won in a landslide, a friend from high school, a political ally for thirty years, and the go-between I had used to secure the deal with Erpenbeck all those years ago. Bowman wasn't talking yet, but I knew that if he did, he would be talking about me.

"You aren't supposed to be reading that," a voice said.

I looked up. Alain Hellmuth stood in the cabin doorway. He was the point man on this trip, my liaison whose job was to report back to the White House that I was cooperating and waving the Stars and Stripes. He was a thin man with a paunch, wispy hair, and frameless glasses, and in every nation I visited he remained stuck to my elbow, a navy blue White House planner tucked under his arm. He loved using words like "feedback" and "monetize." I hadn't heard him come in. To test my ears, I rattled the ice cubes in my glass of scotch.

"Too late now," I said. "Am I in any additional shit, or is this goodwill trip the end of it?" I was supposed to be assigned the ambassadorship to Ireland. I was supposed to be living in Dublin, with a small cottage in County Kilkenny my wife and I could escape to on the weekend, invite our children to take a break from college and visit the Emerald Isle, raise sheep and goats, go dance a few jigs at local pubs. Instead, someone's Big Idea shuttled me out of the country on a contrived five-week swing through Eastern Europe to shake hands with mid-level politicians, assess the fundamentals of each nation's precarious economy, and solemnly tour an endless array of World War II memorials, while the whole budding scandal in Ohio would, in theory, be handled by the Clinton administration. So far, they appeared to have slippery fingers.

"These things are under control," Hellmuth said. "You don't need to worry about it. You need to focus on this trip. You can relax and provide us with a lot of good information."

"You guys know this." I picked up the Lithuania NSA and Economic Viability assessment and flung it at Hellmuth's feet. "I'm not evaluating anything for you. Capitalism good, socialism bad. Join the EU. I know the drill." I finished the last finger of scotch.

"It's a little early for that," Hellmuth said.

"I honestly have no idea what time it is."

"Nine thirty in the morning. And you've been here for four weeks."

"I'm bad with numbers."

Hellmuth sat down across from me, our knees almost touching. I listened to the ignorable hum of the jet engine, and curled my toes on the rug.

"David," Hellmuth said. "I know this is frustrating for you. You will be our next ambassador to Ireland. I promise you that and, more importantly, the President has promised you that. These confirmations take time, especially after a nasty election when the Senate wants to pick apart every single nominee. This is the kind of trip that looks good and makes people happy. We saw how you controlled Ohio for eight years—these meet-and-greet trips are what you excel at. And you know why you sometimes need to do a little acting for the crowds."

This was true: I won Ohio with a slew of barnstorming and impromptu speeches, my pretty wife Lucia at my side, an American flag in the background. I was the first Democrat governor of Ohio in twenty-four years, and my administration accomplished the following: a hold on taxes, wins in education reform, a couple of court appointments that made everyone happy, and a steady stream of white collar jobs into the big C's—Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati—all while keeping the farmers happy with a sly dose of pork from the boys in Washington. Once, I had been bulletproof.

"I haven't seen Lucia in four weeks," I said. "It's January here. We wear three pairs of socks, a wool overcoat, scarves, hats, and I'm still freezing my ass off."

"You're going home in four days and of all the countries we've visited, Ukraine is the most important one to us. Russia wants to keep the countries on its borders, particularly ones with access to open waters, under its thumb."

"And you want me to tell you that Ukraine can be the next Ireland in fifteen years. Yeah, I got it." I cracked my knuckles. "I spent the last three months reading up on Ireland. You know, the Celtic Tiger, their tech boom we don't want to miss out on? Connect with Boston, our biggest tech hub outside of Silicon Valley?" I slumped deeper into my chair.

"You know," Hellmuth said, crossing his legs over his knee. He stared at a point above my head and forced a dream look as if he could see Disney sheep leaping over the moon. "I'm always charmed thinking about your name. When I think that you were named for Davey Crockett. And that last name! Joyce. Wow." He shook his head. "Very Irish. It could be a great asset in Dublin."

I sobered up; I used flattery before threats a thousand times, a song-and-dance routine as familiar to me as the face I saw in the mirror every morning.

"What's your point?" I asked.

"Don't embarrass yourself, David. You've been given a very easy penance." I blinked at that and tightened my jaw. "Slam dunk the last days of this trip and your problems, our problems, go away. You'll be in Dublin by St. Patrick's Day. But you need to play ball."

It had been a few years since I had been on the short end of the political stick. Unsure what to do, I simply stared at the bridge of his nose.

"We touch down in about ninety minutes," Hellmuth continued. "Go shave. Do your exercises, call your wife, whatever you need to do, but get it together." He stood, smoothed his tie, and left the room.

I stood up, and looked around the small cabin. Two chairs faced two others; there was a small sink to my right, cabinets above them. The doors behind me led to the main cabin, the opposite doors led to the small sleeping bunk I had on the plane. I went into that room, and looked at my sad sack of Samsonite luggage, the three bags I had been living out of for a month. I had, barely, enough room to do my Tai Chi exercises, which had been my morning ritual for nearly a dozen years. In my youth, I had been a national champion in judo; at some point in my political career, for appearances, I shifted my studies to Tai Chi. Once a year I let a photographer take shots of me on the back lawn of the governor's mansion so that I could charm women and the twenty-something collegiate crowd with my quasi-Zen and better-than-average looks.

I folded the small uncomfortable bed up against the wall, removed my socks, and took fifteen deep breaths. I bent down to my toes, held the stretch in my hamstrings, then raised my arms high over my head and held that until I was no longer conscious of where I was. I moved smoothly, the stale cabin air batting against the back of my throat and into my lungs, the coarse carpet beneath my feet rubbing my soles as I pivoted. I exhaled, feeling the wonderful looseness of my muscles.

I showered, then called Lucia. No one answered the phone. Like me, she felt the absence of our youngest of three children, Amy, who had just left in the fall for her freshman year at a Harvard, a fact that left my working class roots pulsating with pride. I pictured my empty house. When I left, the kitchen island lay buried under a stack of travel books on Ireland;

beneath those was our last phone bill with the rather large three-figure balance cataloging our recent flurry of phone calls back to Lucia's family in Gweebarra. On mornings like this, standing with my ear pressed against a slim phone that rang and rang, I remembered my wedding, the hundreds of family and cousins there, all Irish, most of whom I had never met, kissing me on the cheek and dancing with me and my wife. I set the receiver down, waited a moment for my loneliness to pass, and prepared myself for Kiev.

The plane taxied to a stop and the stairs led down to the tarmac. The runway and airport looked gray and lifeless; I turned in a circle and looked at the surrounding area, flat and devoid of life. Nobody met the plane. I looked back at my group; twelve bureaucrats in navy suits stared back like spooked wild animals. Someone made a phone call and twenty minutes later, four black Suburbans with tinted windows showed up and we were shuttled off to the embassy. We took Khreshchatik Street and drove past the metro station and the recently renovated Golden Gate, an old fortress structure from centuries ago, and entered Independence Square. A small church sat on its northwestern corner, across from the train station. Next to it was a McDonald's.

After checking our bags, we promptly headed over to the Rada, Ukraine's parliament, and introduced ourselves to President Leonid Kuchma. He was a portly man with thick jowls and bloodshot eyes; his hands twittered nervously as he spoke, and I got the sense that he was somebody's figurehead. Ukraine was, like so many other nations I had seen, a banana republic. Kuchma led us down the hallway, and introduced me to Victor Pinchuk. His face was greasy and his thinning hair looked like it had been combed back with mud. Kuchma stood straight, tried to appear sober and confident, and failed at both, his eyes growing bleary as Pinchuk began to talk. It was pretty obvious who was in charge.

Pinchuk owned a conglomerate called Interpipe Group, which held interests in industry, media, and banking; his core product was supplying steel pipes. His empire also dabbled in politics—he was a deputy in the Rada, hence his corner suite, his official-looking photos on the walls, shaking hands with diplomats and secretaries of state. He employed, he told us (repeatedly), over thirty thousand people, and had power over the rest of the country through his political heft in the parliament.

I nodded at him. "How do you reconcile your business interests with your political interests?"

He shrugged. "If I am a businessman, first I will think about my shirt, because my shirt is closer to my body. In my country they call it corruption. In yours, they call it business as usual, yes?"

He had a point, and I didn't particularly feel like arguing with him.

Pinchuk took us on a tour through the Rada, a thick stately building designed in a blend of Roman and Byzantine influences. From what I had gathered from my meeting with Pinchuk and Kuchma and my late night reading nursed by a couple of brandies, the Rada was a coterie of wealthy power brokers and oligarchs. Heading to the second floor, I looked down into the parliament floor and watched a small cluster of politicians trip over themselves to move away from a man in a gray suit. He strode past them like a lion hunting prey, his eyes bouncing from aisle to aisle, his straight posture and swinging arms conveying power. The Ukrainians, through smiles and cowering, seemed to love and fear him. He glanced up at my entourage and locked eyes with me; I thought he wanted to rip out my jugular. I nodded slightly and he cocked his head, looked ready to yell something that would incite a riot, changed his mind, and disappeared through a set of double doors. I looked back at my entourage to see if they had witnessed the same thing I had; they appeared still shackled to Pinchuk's long diatribe about who knows what. Pinchuk then led us outside and directed our Suburbans to his steel factory on the western edge of town.

We trudged through the drab factory, and I did my best to treat the whole thing like a stroll through a Democrat enclave in Cleveland; Hellmuth, the shift from the Ukraine winter into the stifling factory fogging his glasses, and I appeared to be well known by the manufactured crowds standing along our path, chirping out my name—Mr. Joyce, Mr. Joyce, welcome! Bring us jobs, they'd say, and when it came time for me to eddy by and shake a few gloved hands, they smiled ear to ear. Hellmuth shot me looks like I was Truman himself, unshakeable and misunderstood by everybody, and up we'd go, rising to the next crowd of underpaid workers cheering themselves hoarse, each man rolled off the line to impress the American. Somewhere, a band pumped through a few bars of the Ukrainian anthem and the factory managers stared at us like we were furniture movers. The

local politicians, reeking of booze, yawned. Pinchuk glanced at his workers like they were litter blowing across a vacant street.

"In all the world," Pinchuk said, leading us up steel steps to an office. "Rich people are very unpopular." He had continued in this vein the entire trip and though I was unsure whether he was trying to convince me or just pander to his entourage, I smiled and nodded at the proper inflections of his voice and thought about what Lucia would be doing at home just then. We entered into the floor manager's office, a rust colored room whose scratched windows looked down onto the factory floor. Pinchuk continued to pontificate about his work: an AIDS foundation run by his wife, an orchestra hall he had built in Dnipropetrovsk, a theatre in Moscow, and something he referred to as a "cultural center" there in Kiev. I bit my tongue and muffled the urge to laugh.

There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer, it opened, and the man in the gray suit entered, surrounded by three additional men in black suits. He smiled and seemed more at ease than when I had seen him earlier. Pinchuk started speaking Russian to the smallest of the three men in black who, when he addressed me, spoke in perfect English and called himself Yergushov. He presented me to his boss, the man in gray, Vladimir Putin.

His grip was vice-like, but his palm cool and artificial. I had no idea who he was, but he looked younger than me, perhaps in his forties, and I guessed he spent a great deal of time outside exercising. He had an aquiline face and a look of general amusement with the people around him.

"A pleasure to meet you," he said. "I hear your youngest daughter recently enrolled at Harvard. Congratulations."

"Thank you," I said, trying to remember if my intel junket had said anything about a Russian diplomat swooping in. "I wasn't aware you'd be joining us."

His laugh was like a broken muffler, spastic and metallic, and he smiled at us as if there was no greater pleasure on earth than my weak attempt at politeness. The Ukrainians laughed on cue. It didn't take much for me to figure out they were scared shitless. I glanced at Hellmuth, and with my eyes asked: who the hell is this and why don't you goddamn know?

"Diplomacy can be so boring," Putin said. "A few surprises, that is

what politics needs. Besides, our countries, though allies, are very much competitors, wouldn't you agree?"

"I think both of us are competing with China now."

"Yes, that is true. I'm sad to say that we are not the superpower we once were. But that will change soon."

We toured the design and architecture offices on the opposite end of the plant—why, I don't know. Putin's equivalent of Hellmuth did the majority of the yapping, with Hellmuth himself making pointed remarks punctuated by pointing gestures. Hellmuth made a call on his cell phone, then looked at me blankly, letting me know he was digging up what he could on our new host. Pinchuk fell into a sullen silence, and I was thrilled I no longer had to stare at his unctuous smile. Putin seemed as pleasantly bored as I was, and as soon as the tour was over, we decided to ride in the same Suburban back to the embassy. The security forces looked at us as if we had asked to roll in mint jelly and run through the streets of Kiev in kilts.

So our conversation was delayed until we arrived at the embassy. I excused myself to change shirts, and in my room, on the dining room table, was a slim manila folder about Putin. I flipped quickly: He was KGB for twenty years, working out of East Germany. Law degree, expert in Sambo, which is some kind of Russian judo. For the last three years he was St. Petersburg's first deputy chairman of the city government and chairman of the committee for external relations. Yeltsin had just made him the first official business manager of Russia. I tossed the folder on the table and chewed the inside of my cheek: the folder said I was in deep shit.

I changed from a white shirt to a blue one, skipped the tie, and hurried back downstairs to a large banquet room decorated in gaudy gold and crystal, and paintings of dead Russian luminaries glossed the oak paneled walls. I hurried past the politicians, brushing aside smiles and extended hands, ignored the food, went straight to the bar, and asked for a bottle of vodka and two glasses, then worked my way over to a corner to wait. Putin found me after three drinks, sat down, and threw back two shots as quick as lightning.

He knew all about my problems. He made a crack about home building, and I asked what gulag he had been raised in. I told him about what it was like having a vicious ex-wife and a wonderful current one and trying to

understand what the younger me hadn't been able to see in the first place. He talked about interrogation, the way a person breaks, the distinct pleasure he got in making someone talk. I praised the political machine I had built, the way a few animalistic approaches like staring a man down and leaning in when talking to a state senator could make my bills undefeatable. He bemoaned licking the boots of incompetent politicians, doing the "yes, sir" dance for twenty years, all the while wishing he could get a few of those clowns in his interrogation rooms with no windows or cameras or witnesses. In short, I liked him right away.

"What is your wife doing now?" Putin asked.

"Lucia works for the Columbus Arts Foundation. Community theatre, grant writings, stuff like that." I giggled. "Like Pinchuk."

"Fuck that guy," Putin said. He laughed his muffler laugh. "Ten years ago I'd have had him in a room with no windows, and in five minutes," he said, holding up his left hand, "I would have him signing his miserable life over to me."

He balanced his glass on his right knee. As he talked about mind games and torture, I studied his right hand. His grip on the glass was tenuous and weak like dying worms baking on the sidewalk after a rainstorm.

"More?" he said, nodding at my glass. My tolerance had soared over my last month of drinks at every meal, but I felt the vodka corroding my stomach. Still, the idea that he was weak, that I had found a button on the button-pusher, made me agree with a frat boy's reckless confidence.

"I'll get it," Putin said, dismissing an aide. "I need the fresh cigar-filled air." I leaned back in the club chair, oddly aware of how comfortable and expensive it was, and tried to focus on how to play Putin. I couldn't shake the one thought that despite my intensions, my need to please Washington by securing some victory on a scoreboard that didn't exist, wouldn't vanish: I really liked my unofficial counterpart, my new buddy, Vlad the Interrogator.

Putin appeared, heading toward me, carrying two bottles of vodka in his left arm. His weakness, then, seemed amplified: he dragged the entire right side of his body. From his walk, I imagined he had spent years hiding it. I couldn't imagine how this man, his right arm swinging like a dead fish, his right leg hobbled, could hide it so well. If I hadn't known to look for it, I would never have seen it, but right then, watching his flushed face, his broad grin that I knew I was mirroring, I could see Vladimir as a boy,

training his body to get stronger and fitter, limping through cold Russian winters, battling his body, fighting who he was to be something his own muscles and bones told him he would never be.

Halfway through the second bottle, I decided to hell with it and asked.

"What happened to you?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Alcohol hadn't weakened his studied English accent. I felt like drool rushed down my cracked lips like a broken faucet.

"Your body. Your hand." I pointed. "What happened?"

Putin sat up erect, and he seemed as sober as a priest.

"I'm guessing polio," I said.

"I do not know what you are talking about."

"That's cool," I said, waving my hand. I sucked down another shot, and poured another for both of us. "I'm amazed, that's all. You hide it well. That's what I admire. It's amazing, really. I mean it." I wondered why I was telling him the truth.

Putin crouched down, and rested his elbows on his knees. He waited.

"Neurologically," I said. "It's unheard of. Not a whisper of it in my files. You being KGB, all our CIA Virginia farm boys, and nothing, not a single note about any kind of disability or injury. How did that happen? I'll tell you—they aren't seeing it. They aren't looking for it. They're judging, not understanding, not understanding character." I sipped my vodka. "Character. A constitution. Incorruptible and fearless."

Putin's jaw relaxed. He nodded slowly, then lifted his glass and clinked it against mine.

"Thank you, David." He swallowed his drink, and eased deep into his chair. I did the same, and we sat quietly among the noise, under the curious exchanged glances of the aides protecting us, sitting out of range of hearing.

The weight of the moment, and the vodka in my stomach, too great, I leaned forward and grinned.

"Did I ever tell you I was named after Davy Crockett?"

Putin squinted at me. Then he let loose his Russian laugh and I told him the story.

We finished our last bottle, and with the help of some aides, stood on our shaky feet, allowing them to lead us to the elevators. Putin and I whistled *The Ballad of Davy Crockett,* and then we began to sing it, making up the words we didn't know (which were most of them). We laughed and

stumbled and said our hearty goodbyes with a firm handshake and shoulder slaps, and once Hellmuth deposited me on the couch in my room and left, closing the door with a heavy wooden thud, I staggered to the bathroom and made a pre-emptive strike on a hangover by shoving my finger down my throat and vomiting up a liter of high quality Russian vodka. I then passed out on the floor next to the balcony windows.

In the morning, I woke up with my head pressed against the cool doorframe. I rolled onto my back, and looked around the room. At the dining room table, Hellmuth ate breakfast and read the current *Le Monde.*

"How did you get back in here?"

He smirked and looked up from the paper. "Don't you understand that you're the puppet and I'm the puppeteer? Haven't you caught on?"

I stood, sat down at the table, and took his plate of food. My stomach rumbled, and I pushed the poached eggs and wheat toast back to Hellmuth.

"I like Vladimir," I offered.

"That's super," Hellmuth said, clearing his throat. "Putin would like to be our tour guide today."

"Where to?"

"The monastery caves. It's in the old part of town."

"Good idea?"

"You'd rather tour more steel factories?"

I shrugged and looked out the window. Across the river, I could see old Kiev: the Byzantine spires and churches of the ancient caves. I felt an urgent desire to fly back to Ohio and never seek public office again.

"How soon?" I looked at my watch—it was almost ten and I had no idea what time I had passed out.

"Noon," Hellmuth said, looking over his glasses. "Your drinking buddy doesn't like to get up before eleven."

Two hours later, Putin and his entourage met us down in the lobby. He had a *USA Today* folded under his arm. The line of Suburbans waited for us outside, and this time, they were prepared for Putin and me to ride in the same van.

"You told me you practice Tai Chi, yes?" he asked.

"Not this morning," I said. Through the tinted windows, I could see the unsmiling faces of people scurrying to work, their heads wrapped in thick scarves and bulky hats.

"Head hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Just didn't think of it today." This truth puzzled me; my shoulders, in knots from sleeping on the floor, tightened and I shifted my back for relief. "I passed out on the floor," I admitted. Putin laughed hard, even snorted once.

Our caravan took us out of the new stretch of Kiev; the wide boulevards narrowed and our large caravan squeezed through the narrow streets once designed for pedestrians and street vendors. The taller structures faded away and the city sloped toward the Dnipro. Small freighters dotted the western side of the river, and the water was a spectacular color of blue. My head aching, I tried to remember where Chernobyl was from Kiev.

The eastern side of town was a different world; modern structures vanished, and the Byzantine architecture was everywhere. Russian Orthodox architecture, particularly churches, sprouted on boulevards, and all the brick buildings had beautiful stone archways. The engraved dates on the cornerstones dated back several centuries, and large, glimmering domes peeked over the horizon.

"You'll like this, David," he said. "Very peaceful. Very Tai Chi." I laughed—Putin was busting my balls.

Our caravan pulled to the back of the museum. The driveway was nestled between small, formidable hills. Our security forces swept the immediate area then held the doors for us. Putin met the curator, shook hands, posed for pictures. I remained in the background. I felt like I was watching the Ohio version of myself, the false obsequiousness of a politician charming a crowd. I witnessed myself, and became awash with revulsion and anger. I hated what I saw in myself, what was mirrored in Putin.

The museum was the monastery caves of Pecherska Lavra. Putin guided our group through the collection of golden treasures of the Gaimanov and Tolstaya graves. I had no idea what he was talking about. Still, I was more impressed by how much he seemed to not just know, but that he loved being a guide. He possessed a genuine awe for these ancient people whose lives were nothing more than museum pieces, and I couldn't help feeling that our lives were destined to be the same: something on display for tourists, the fanatical, the lonely.

Putin talked endlessly, and with time, his aides and my aides stopped listening and conversed quietly among themselves; I was his lone audience.

He lectured on the burial mounds of Samaritan queens, the Persian influence on the region, the skill of Kievian jewelers which, he said, could be seen in the temple pendants and golden shoulder bands, and more recently, in the miters and chalices.

"How many people get this personal tour?" I asked.

He shrugged. "My wife used to listen, when we lived in Germany. She finds it amusing now, like a parlor trick. But she does not enjoy the museums as much."

"Is Lyudmila back in Leningrad?"

"Yes. Classes start soon. And your Lucia? Did you talk to her today?"

I hadn't called my wife since I touched down in Kiev. I made up a yarn about Lucia traveling to Boston to visit Amy. Putin seemed pleased with this answer.

We entered a dark room lit only by archaic lamps in the corners, a restored Tolstaya burial grave of a Scythian king buried with his son. Vladimir was silent. To the right, underneath a glass case, was a short akinaka sword and its golden sheath, decorated with jewels. I stared at the akinaka, its steel gleaming sharp and lethal. I looked at the hilt, and wondered how heavy the sword was.

Vladimir walked over and stood next to me.

"Did you fight in wars?" he asked.

"Two tours in Vietnam."

"I remember seeing *Patton.* The movie. Toward the end, Patton looked over the wreckage of the war and he remarked how much he loved it. He hated himself for it, but he did love the battle."

"Do you feel the same way?" I asked.

"I am not big on guns." He shrugged. "The Cold War was a war with no battles, no fights. I was an intelligence officer. It was not the same."

I thought for a moment. "What about judo?"

He tilted his head back and looked to the ceiling, as if he had just finished a deeply satisfying meal. "A great sport. Hand-to-hand. Strength and balance."

"I last did it a few years ago. A group of Chinese businessmen were coming through Columbus, and thought it would be fun. I cracked a rib."

"Since?"

"Just Tai Chi."

He nodded. I looked at him, and sensed, I was certain, contempt, a withering disdain for a slightly older statesman who he believed had let his best years pass him by.

"I'm still good," I said. "My strength is still there."

"Is it?"

I looked around the room, and his eyes followed. The grave's treasures reflected the king's warlord life: golden plaques and pendants, a massive pectoral victory shield detailing victories, swords and iron spears, stolen jeweled chests of Scythian life. For a moment, I thought we could shake off our ties, remove our shoes, and try to beat hell out of each other right there. Putin seemed to be weighing something very carefully. I swung my head back around, and stared him down.

"Tonight, we will spar," he said. "There is space in my hotel. I will make the arrangements."

There always is that rush, the adrenaline, when bullets fly and the ground explodes, and while you and your platoon are still alive and not missing any limbs or screaming for a medic, before the body count and severed limbs, there was something primal in it that I did, I must admit, love.

I said, "I look forward to it."

Around six, a bellhop delivered me a package with a judogi. The white cloth of the jacket and pants was thick and pristine. The black belt was of the same quality. I tried on the uniform, and it fit perfectly. At first I was annoyed that Vladimir could find a uniform in my exact dimensions, but then I remembered he was ex-KGB, and admired how quickly he could get information. I looked in the mirror. Before leaving for Europe, in my garage back in Columbus, I practiced Tai Chi, wearing overpriced workout gear made for health club members and rich tennis-playing executives. I tried to picture what my face looked like in a combat zone—calm, perhaps, or furious, or scared—and I had no idea.

After dinner in my room, Hellmuth and I took our group to Putin's hotel. Like all the hotels in Kiev's business district, it had a large stately quality, European and glamorous. We were directed to a banquet room at the end of a long hallway of thick red carpeting with tiny intricate square patterns, and the walls were decorated with armaments and artwork of

past rulers and noblemen of the region. We entered the room from the far right corner; in the middle was a large blue mat. Folding chairs were set at each corner; Putin's corner and my own had a small table next to the chair. Neat rows of metal folding chairs surrounded the mat on all four sides. Our small group of twelve Americans were bunched around my corner, and after spending four weeks with them, I finally noticed how exhausted they were; how, like me, all they wanted to do at this point was go home. I guessed roughly two hundred people had filled the room: dozens of Rada members, influencial oligarchs, Putin's small entourage. Against the far wall, several tables had been set up for food and drinks; large platters of cold cut meat, plates of caviar, dozens of bottles of alcohol, and in the center, a large roasted pig with an apple in its mouth. Cooks and waiters shuffled out the heated trays of hors d'ouevres. I felt like a circus freak.

"Your idea or his?" Hellmuth asked. "I'm still not clear on that."

"Mine. I think." For a moment, I couldn't remember who suggested it either. I thought, for a moment, of my career. "Should I try to win?"

"Do you think you can win?"

We studied the room for a quiet moment.

"Have you ever punched someone, Alain?"

"I sucker-punched our high school quarterback. He took out the girl I had a crush on. I broke his nose. The other guys on the team kicked my ass."

"But you broke his nose."

Alain bounced on his toes. "Damn right I did."

"Did you ever get the girl?"

"Nope. I met my wife at Yale. First and last girlfriend. We've been together for twelve years."

I wondered if Lucia was at home, or if she would have gone to a movie or dinner with some friends, and what time it would be in Columbus if I called her when I got back to my room that night. I smiled; I was beginning to like Alain.

Then, cheering; we swiveled our eyes to the opposite corner. Putin had entered. His contrived insouciance was gone and he stared across the room, past the suits and the bodyguards and the criminal mob in the audience and stared at me with the same animal ferocity he gave me in the Rada. As the cheers from the opposite side of the room carried Putin—and his six surrounding bodyguards in gray suits and sunglasses with Kalashnikovs

hanging from their shoulders—Hellmuth remarked there was no reporters. Near Putin's corner, on a folding chair in the first row, a young man in horn-rimmed glasses sat with a notebook perched across his knee. I pointed him out to Hellmuth, and he said he'd find out. I went to my corner, and sat down. On my table were three white towels, a stainless steel pitcher and a water glass, and a blue band; I attached it to my belt. Hellmuth returned with a smirk on his face.

"Putin's unofficial biographer," he said. I looked over at the scribe. He stared at me for what felt like a long time, then he giggled and scribbled furiously on his notepad.

Someone clapped two wooden sticks together three times, and the crowd took their seats. Two officials sat erect on their stools in opposite corners. The third official, an Asian man with a pointy chin, stood in the center of the ring and signaled us forward. We sat facing each other, insteps flush against the mat, and bowed, neck and back straight. We were two meters apart. The ref signaled to us, and we stood up.

He had been practicing; his technique was more fluid and natural than mine. I shuffled defensively, made some weak moves to counter attack, and basically stalled. He scored two quick half points, and when I realized his grappling technique was much better than mine, I stayed defensive, with the occasional feign to throw him. I was still fast enough to avoid getting pinned too quickly, but eventually he did, taking me down by throwing me in a knee wheel move, and as soon as I hit the canvas, Putin moved me into a headlock, then pinned me on my back. The whole thing lasted maybe three minutes. We returned to our starting positions and bowed, my head spinning as I lowered it towards the ground. The crowd cheered.

"Again?" Putin asked. He looked like a hunter who had just bagged his first six-point buck.

"Sure," I said, a little winded. Judo events normally have quiet respectful crowds, but fueled with alcohol, nationalism, and the obviously superior Putin, the crowd roared even louder. I tried again, once more becoming defensive, trying simply not to get pinned. The Russian cheers sounded boastful, and though I couldn't understand them, I believed they were mocking me, jeering me to be a man and fight and take my whipping. Putin scored a half point when he tossed me over his hip. I landed with my shoulders up, broke his grip on my collar, and tried to counter. He kept

locking my arms as I tried to wrestle him to the ground; we both hit often, neither of us scoring points.

But in the middle of this local brouhaha, with a half point against me, I succeeded in countering Putin's attack. I caught his right hand and shifted his balance forward, bent my knees, lifted him onto my shoulders, pulled my left hand down to my chest, and threw Putin over my body in one fluid motion. He hit the mat hard, and from the look on his face, it was probably the first time he'd really been rattled in years. The ref held his hand straight out; he had scored an obvious victory, a *waza-ari*, a half point. Furious, I asked him what the fuck was his problem, but he didn't seem to understand English or care what I said and looked at me blankly. Putin took his time getting to his feet, his thick torso staggering, and when he attacked again, I grabbed his shoulder, buried my foot in his abdomen, rolled backwards and threw him even harder. Match over.

For the small American crowd it was like I had just stormed Iwo Jima. After Putin hit the canvas and the official signaled a full point ending the match, the crowd noise got higher and higher and the Americans roared with approval only to be drowned out by the Ukrainians and Russians furious yelling, the entire room exploding with noise. We sat and bowed; as we walked to our corners, I focused on the rhythmic slapping of my feet, my cadence a little giddy with a touch of John Wayne swagger.

I looked for the biographer. A Russian in a navy suit whispered harshly to him, and the scribe left the room. A DAI officer waved the kitchen staff into the room and then locked the door. The cooks held items in their hands—frying pans, knives, pewter plates—and stood against the back wall, straining their necks to see into the ring. Everyone was standing in their aisles, screaming. I ignored my stool and stood with my hands on my hips. Hellmuth offered me a shot of vodka. He said, "You deserve it," and I said, "Yes, I do," and sucked it down. I smacked the alcohol from my lips.

Yergushov appeared next to us; he was sweating profusely.

He said, "Putin requests one more match."

I looked across the mat. Putin stared at me.

"A rubber match," I said. Yergushov didn't understand. I ignored him. I stood up, looked at Vladimir, and nodded.

He nodded once and stood. The crowded roared. I could see hands exchanging colored bills and actually felt the hot breaths of all the spectators

around me. The cooks made a wretched noise by banging their culinary equipment together, creating a rhythmic clatter with the occasional scratch of a knife against a stainless pan. The Americans began hollering for another pin. Putin's marble head looked cracked by his own sweat, his face red, the veins in his neck bulging. I wish I could say I had a moment of revelation. I wish I thought of flying back to Ohio, or that I pictured cities like Galway and Cork, traveling there with Lucia, walking the serene beaches of Kilkenny, her sinewy arms locked with mine, or smelled her rich perfume and the way I buried my face in the curls of her hair when I slept at night; or maybe even a romantic train ride south through Ireland, and large banquet tables filled with food and the chatter of the Gaelic language sprinkling my English and the smiles and laughter of dozens of family and friends and their families and friends, my fighting over, a life of lazy nothingness.

But that isn't the truth.

What was true is that there is nothing more honest than a fistfight. What was true is that I loved the combat. I strode back onto the mat, sat down with a great calm, and we performed our bows. I stood up, stared at his sweaty marble face, and mouthed *I'm going to kill you.* He gave me a smile, nodded, and said *And I you.* I would guess that he too took a deep satisfaction in that moment, with no more handshakes and deals and politics, but some kind of pure warrior respect, a gladiator mentality that is stupid only to those who have never fought, and as we took our stances, we each seemed ready for our finest moment, arms flexed into fists, poised, fingers coiled like snakes.

The ref dropped his hand.

© 2010 John M. Quick, “Held in Contempt”

After Wine

Jim Tilley

I thought of the Middle East
as I washed the lone
whole wine glass

after sweeping up
a thousand fragments,
one shard long and jagged

like the boundary
demarcation on a map
where a sacred river

divides a people,
and many tiny crystals
no longer dancing

as they did the night before
in the lancing light
of the near-full moon

that must also have burst
into bedrooms over there
where others were making love.

© 2010 David Poirier, “Flower”

Imagine here a title that calms you down

Bob Hicok

The music stopped. Whatever door we were in front of
opened, we went in, sat down to dinner,
had sex and babies and put the garden hoses
away in October, before the freeze. It was a tune
reminiscent of Ravel. I miss it, my wife misses it,
we miss it together in the evenings
on opposite sides of the dam, one of us
drawing a picture and the other
writing down the word for that picture. We never
get it right: my pony is her forge,
her tree looking at itself in a mirror
is my diamond induced refraction. And there's never
any water behind the dam, as if it had been built
to attract a river too wise for the trap,
nor does the Town Council ever approve
the proposal to fill in the gaps
in our knowledge of human behavior, so the gaps
remain. The closest we got was 7-6. One sentiment
the other way and we'd understand perfectly
why we do what we do. As it is,
we do what we do with this haunting
sense of a tune that didn't want us, that shook us loose
from its hair. She knits scarves
to keep our abstract notions of freedom
warm. I stack rocks on the left side

of falling apart, admire the shape
one time only and move the shape
to the right side of falling apart. I have
incredible forearms: she, a harvest of scarves.
Sometimes we burrow into the harvest
and make love and find a hole to look out from
as we struggle to breathe the itchy air.
It's a good life, though I make this claim
quietly, in a voice that doesn't actually
speak, that keeps to itself, much as the dreams
of fireworks have yet to find a sleeper capable
of withstanding the finale, though many believe
they are that bright vessel, that ahhh
waiting to cross a field as the last birds
of sulfur fall.

Becoming Tecciztecatl

Jill Kolongowski

When we dream of snails, we are dreaming about ourselves, according to Carl Jung. Snails represent home and self spiraled into one. When I was young, I was fascinated by snails—their tiny, gelatinous bodies supporting their shells. How slowly they went, carrying all that was precious. Whenever it drizzled, I went out to look for snails. I bent down to the gravel driveway and traced their glistening trails with my fingers. Their tracks crisscrossed the driveway and I followed them until they had disappeared under the raspberry bushes. But I could never find the snails that had left the tracks.

I wanted to pick one up and pull it out of its shell. I would put them back in, I thought, I only wanted to see the inside of their shells, to see what their homes looked like. It must be some kind of magic, I thought, to make the snail's house good enough to carry with him always. I thought the point of home was to stay in one place.

When the drizzle turned into a downpour, I ran inside my house to escape the thick, cold drops of spring rain, giving up my quest to mutilate gastropods. In the kitchen, I stood at the windows and pressed my nose to the mildewed glass. Steam from my quick breaths fogged the glass while I stared at the driveway. Snails move at an average pace of 1 millimeter per second. I waited and waited for one to appear, to explain what they carried.

I don't remember the apartment I was born in and lived in until I was two, but I do remember the red Oldsmobile. Or was it a Taurus? Everything was red; the chipped paint on the outside, the upholstered seats that left static shocks in my hair, the plastic console. After my parents moved to the first house I remember, the red car disappeared.

My mother tells me that as a baby, I cried because of constant ear infections and an upset stomach. Nothing worked to comfort me—not

a bottle, not a crib, not her arms folded into a cradle, not her whispered words, not her tears—I cried, still.

As a last resort, to escape the walls of the apartment, my mom carried me down to the red car and strapped me, still screaming, into my car seat, and drove in the dark. And then, I slept. Maybe the red car was my first home, the first place where I felt safe and happy enough to fall asleep.

When I moved into my first apartment, I took my bed from the home I grew up in for my boyfriend Charlie and me to share. My dad helped hoist the bed up the stairs and into the new bedroom. It was an island in the middle of the beige carpet. We didn't move the bed from that spot. The mattress was uneven, with a depression from years of my body on the right side of the bed. On the first night, Charlie rolled into the depression, his body taking up the space where mine used to lie. I didn't mind, but gravity pulled me toward him, toward my impression, and our arms and legs tangled and I didn't know what was mine and what was his.

My dad filled up the space in my old bedroom with the loveseat and a flat-screen TV mounted so high on the wall that you had to tip your head up to watch it. I never had a TV in my room. I never really decorated my room, either. My sister ripped the covers off *Rolling Stone* to tack up on her wall, even though the eyelined rockers' eyes scared her during the night. Maybe I was lacking, I worried. Shouldn't I have wanted to express myself with quotes cut out from magazines and books, shining celebrity bodies, poetry, and black and white photos? I wanted to, but something kept the walls blank. Maybe putting too much of myself into the room would make it harder to leave. But my room never felt empty—it filled with the detritus of life I'd begun to acquire: years and years of birthday cards, stuffed animals, souvenirs from places I couldn't remember, sticky notes with reminders that no longer stuck, many unsent love notes. When I moved into that first apartment, I packed up all these things and took them with me. The cardboard boxes populate our bedroom like furniture. I refuse to grow out of them and out of my first home.

When I came home to visit, I didn't sleep on the new loveseat, but on the floor where my bed used to be.

The Aztec moon god Tecciztecatl wore a snail's shell on his back. Like the waxing and waning of the moon, or the turning of the Earth, the way a snail moves in and out of its shell signifies change; rebirth. But what does home become when it moves, when we move? What do we become?

Maybe home is not a stationary anchor for our souls. Maybe it's a transitory creation that we build around ourselves so we have a place to return to. Each new home is a rebirth, a new place to exist in.

A year after moving into my apartment, I left to study on the coast of northern Spain for two months. I overpacked, but there were things about home I couldn't leave behind, that I had to carry. I took the same books and Chapstick that nested permanently on my bedside table. I took a bag of jewelry, not to wear it, but because it always rested on my bathroom shelf.

At the curb outside the airport, I unloaded my two enormous bags. I kissed Charlie goodbye and felt a deep loss as he drove away, taking a bit of home with him.

On the plane from Chicago to Madrid, the seat next to me was empty. Once the captain turned off the Fasten Your Seatbelts sign, I felt free to move about the cabin. I pulled things from my backpack: a book from the library (*back home,* I tried not to think), protein bars (wished I hadn't declined my mom's offer to make snacks. "Nah," I'd said, "I'll get some." I didn't.), mp3 player, and a notebook. I ripped the Iberia blanket from its plastic bag and set it on my lap. I was not tired or cold, but I wanted to wrap the blanket around myself. Swiveling so that I could stretch my legs out on the empty seat, I tucked the blanket in around me. A stewardess passed in a hurry, staggering beneath the large stack of newspapers she carried. "Spanish newspaper?" she asked in English, short of breath.

"*Sí*," I said. She dumped an *El País* onto my calves and thumped away. I pulled the newspaper into my nest and rearranged the two tiny, yellowed pillows around me to make room for it. And the plane was home. I began to read, comforted with all my things arranged around me to make the roaring cabin and the tray table and the ergonomic headrest familiar. I waited to feel frightened or homesick, leaning my head against the seat. It will come eventually, I thought.

I could not sleep.

I watched a woman on the other side of the plane sleep instead. Her blanket was wrapped around her body like mine, and she leaned against the vibrating plane wall. She wore a black sleeping mask that I coveted—maybe it was only the light that kept me from sleeping. Her body was long but folded easily, the way a tired child's body weighs in your arms. Her lips were relaxed, not open, but slack, without tension from smiling or frowning or keeping words back. She had nothing around her besides her blanket and yet she slept. I needed to set up my things to create my home around me, even for only a day. Did she carry her home so strongly inside that she didn't need anything to touch, to create? Or maybe she was on her way home, the airplane's hum lulling her back to sleep in the dark, like the muffled sound of tires spinning on the highway while headlights blink past.

After nine sleepless hours on a plane and six more on a bus through winding mountain passes, I stood outside the bus station in the gray afternoon drizzle. My body told me that it should be dark but the sun was up anyway, and I felt dizzy. One suitcase, the size of a small whale, lay at my feet and I clutched the matching duffle to my side. Several cabs idled at the curb, but their drivers stood outside, smoking and laughing, speaking Spanish that my jetlagged brain refused to absorb. Were they on break? Should I interrupt them to ask them to please, take me to my hostel? Would I be able to ask them? I couldn't remember why I'd thought leaving home for two months to study was a good idea.

I leaned against the station wall and pretended I was waiting for someone to pick me up, hoping irrationally that one of the drivers would beckon me. Then I would pretend to be frustrated with the friends that hadn't shown up. As if my solitude would fool anyone but myself. I couldn't relax my hands from their grip around my bag and they clutched at the shapes and edges of the familiar things I carried.

I thought about trudging, and nomads, and snails; how we imitate snails when we're nomadic, when we carry the things that make home with us, in U-Hauls, backpacks, duffle bags. But snails don't struggle to carry their homes around with them. They don't crawl into abandoned homes like squatters or hermit crabs or renters; more than that—they *are* their own home. I thought of the woman on the plane and her languid security as she slept, carrying all that she needed within.

Snails grow their shells on their backs. As the shells grow, so do the snails. Everything in their homes is one, inherently theirs. Not split into objects, not in bed sheets or cracking foundations or penciled growth charts or basements or picture frames. If I had ever been able to pull a snail out of his shell, he would have died without it.

The next morning, I got out of my second cab in front of the university to meet my host mother. I was half an hour late because I couldn't get my suitcases down the hostel stairs fast enough. My first cab left without me. Helping the driver heave my suitcases out of the trunk, I immediately broke into a sweat in the humid air. The taxi driver grunted as I dropped a corner onto his foot. I tried to make a joke about all my pairs of shoes I'd just *had* to bring (a lie—I'd only brought four pairs, but I tried to break the ice with a stereotype). He held out his hand for the money.

My suitcase toppled over again as he pulled away and I cursed most of the things I'd brought. I couldn't remember what was so important about them. But I hoisted my duffle bag over my shoulder with a gesture that began to feel familiar and inched down the sidewalk. I was getting used to carrying everything. I still wasn't homesick.

A program director who spoke English but whom I didn't recognize brought a thin, red-haired woman with large eyes to stand next to me. My host mother greeted me with a large smile, even as she grimaced, shoving my suitcases into her tiny trunk. It was raining again when we reached her apartment. My apartment. She refused to let me carry my body-bag-sized suitcase, even though she was shorter than I was and could barely lift it. As I watched her cram my bags into the elevator, I felt odd. I carried nothing. Stepping into the elevator next to her, I put a hand on my suitcase to keep it from tipping, suddenly protective.

The elevator shuddered to the seventh floor, where my host father opened the door. I had to bend down for him to kiss me on both cheeks. His kind face wrinkled into a smile and he reached up to pat me on the head. I was tempted to reciprocate. It took both of them to drag my suitcases up the stairs and into my bedroom.

While my host mom clattered around in the kitchen, I ran my hands over the hotel-neat bedspread. I pulled my things out one by one and

relocated them, stuffing my clothes into drawers and dumping my shorted-out appliances into the closet. The closet was still almost bare even after I was finished. With my hands empty, I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to imagine my things behind the closet door. I felt as if I should still be moving. I kicked my empty suitcases under the bed. Dust settled where my things had been.

My host mom called me down and I lethargically pushed myself off the bed and tried not to trip down the spiral staircase. She gestured at the table where steam rose from a large bowl of soup, and at the salad and basket of bread beside it. The silverware lay on a folded paper napkin. My throat tightened and I realized I was in danger of bursting into tears at this sight, after days of protein bars. I wanted to hug her but all I could stammer was "muchas gracias" over and over. She shooed me toward the table. "Nada," she answered. It's nothing. *This is your home now,* she told me. Squeezing my arm, she left me alone in the kitchen. I ate slowly, stopping to watch the afternoon sun beam through the drizzle. The kitchen filled with light and the wind blew across my face from the open window. The small city breathed with the quiet of its afternoon siesta, and I did not miss home.

I set my dishes in the sink and crossed the hallway to where my host dad dozed in front of the jabbering television. The wooden floor creaked under my feet as I tried to step backward. He opened his eyes and smiled. "¿Disfrutaste la comida?" Did you enjoy your lunch? I nodded. "¿Y tomarás la siesta ahora?" I shook my head, no. I wasn't ready to sleep. Would he point me toward the ocean? He put a hand on my back and led me upstairs to my window. He pointed down at the road I needed, explaining more times than necessary. Patting my cheek, he said *Don't worry. This is your home now.* "Yo sé," I said. I know.

The streets were empty while I walked, except for a very old man walking beside his very old dog, the leash swinging loosely between them. He passed by me and the city drowsed. I was not lonely.

Even in the sunshine, short-lived in such a rainy climate, the white sand was as empty as the streets. Only two or three solitary people dotted the sand. I took my shoes off and watched the waves curl and break into swirls of foam. The book I'd brought from home lay unopened beside me. I touched the wave-worn edge of a broken white shell.

In psychology, the hard shell the snail carries represents the conscious—what we know. Our homes are shells made to shield our interiors, created

from things we know, to make us feel safe. I picked up the white shell and dropped it in my pocket. The thick bone tocked against my thigh as I carried it home.

The apartment was empty when I got back. Upstairs, I pulled the sheets back. It was 4:00 in the afternoon. Spreading my arms and legs across the bed, I fell asleep.

In Spain, I didn't have to wait for the rain to find snails. They clung in bunches like grapes to the undersides of vine leaves that hung in tangled masses from the sides of stone bridges. One night I crunched one underfoot and felt terrible as I knelt next to him, buried in the rubble of his home. Half-moons of shell pieces, curved like flower petals, lay on the concrete and I began to pick one up, to finally look inside. Only smooth, blank white shell. Nothing, really, but he carried it anyway, needed it to survive. I didn't look at the snail again, but instead looked more carefully around my own feet, to save the tiny houses they carried. I walked home in the dark.

I left my second apartment to return to my first. I stopped in the doorway. Charlie stood behind me and held all my suitcases. Everything felt wrong, like when my dad used to sneak into my bedroom while I was outside on St. Patrick's Day, and flip all my furniture upside-down. Everything looked like it had been shifted an inch, but I couldn't tell where.

I took off my shoes and rubbed my feet on the carpet. I walked slowly around the apartment, touching things—the arm of the couch, the edge of the countertop, the stack of unopened mail, turned on the kitchen sink and stuck my fingers into the stream of cold water. I touched the edge of the unmade bed. Charlie dropped my suitcases on the bedroom floor. They overflowed there for several weeks while I learned to find places for things again. I found that I didn't care where they went. At home, they belonged everywhere.

I carried the bone-white shell in my pocket, detritus that I could not grow out of. Home is there, a mosaic of what you left and what you take with you. At 10:00 that night, it was 4:00 in the afternoon in Spain. I crawled into my uneven bed and slept for hours and hours.

To the Penthouse

Cara Seitchek

"Going up." Miles stabbed the "Door Open" button with his forefinger and glanced over his shoulder. "Anyone want the fourth floor?"

No one moved. The teenager leaning against the back wall cracked her gum and rolled her eyes. Miles moved his finger to the "5" button, and the doors closed with a soft hiss.

Today, the elevator hummed faintly as it slid between floors. *Never sure what this machine's going to do*, Miles thought. Some days it had a mind of its own, skipping floors or just hovering at one level. At first, the elevator's peculiarities had annoyed Miles because he wanted to provide a smooth ride for his passengers. But several repairmen had been unable to find the cause for the hiccups, so Miles accepted the irregular nature of the elevator, just as he would accept the quirks of an old friend.

"Fifth floor. Anyone want the fifth floor?" This time, we had a winner. The tired-looking couple with the baby in a stroller jerked to alertness.

"Yes, we're getting off here." They gathered their belongings—a diaper bag, knapsack, purse, and multicolored umbrella.

Miles knew that they would take twice as long to exit and kept the doors open, placing his hand over the retracted metal to reinforce the button's command.

"Thank you." The parents exited the elevator, leaving a space quickly filled by the remaining occupants.

The elevator continued up, dispensing people at every floor until it hit the top, empty. Miles peered out the open door, searching the corridor for new riders. No one in sight. He pushed "Door Close" and rode the elevator all the way down in one smooth ride. Like a slide on the playground, he thought.

He settled back on his stool, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes for a minute. He'd been surprised at how tired this job made him. Who would have thought that sitting in one place and exercising one finger could be so exhausting?

When Miles had applied to be an elevator operator, he thought he'd found the perfect job to supplement his retirement. Plenty of people to talk to, no paperwork, and he could read between loads. Not like his days as a file clerk when he couldn't talk much with his fellow workers, constantly had paper cuts, and didn't feel like reading when his day ended.

At first, running the elevator had been fun. He'd chatted with everybody, holding the door open longer than his supervisor liked so that he could finish a conversation. Sometimes, he had brought stickers to hand out to the children. He'd felt energized, alive. People listened when he spoke. But some days were like today, filled with sullen teenagers, distracted adults, and noisy children. He couldn't wait until they exited his cell. At the end of some shifts, he would drag himself home to his efficiency, microwave a TV dinner, and fall asleep in his cushioned armchair, waking when the noise of a late-night cop show penetrated his dozing mind.

"Going up?" The question broke his reflections, and Miles opened his eyes.

"Yes sir. What floor do you want?" Miles sat up with the erect military posture inculcated in him as an eighteen-year-old. He almost snapped a salute at the man in front of him. Although wearing a natty pinstripe suit and carrying a slim leather envelope, his customer exuded the controlled air of a soldier. The man's close-cut black hair and trim physique confirmed Miles's impression.

The man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and glanced at it. "Let's see . . . the penthouse, please." He stepped into the elevator and turned to face front. "Is this an express elevator?"

Miles gave his companion a sideways glance before venturing a smile. "No sir, but I can make an express run, if you'd like. You could say," he paused, "it's an espresso."

His attempt at humor hit a receptive target. The man laughed, a big hearty chuckle that softened his stern exterior.

"That's a good one. Have you heard the one about the man who buys a cup of coffee and asks if the shop uses 'has beans?'"

This day's looking up, Miles thought. *Haven't had a talkative passenger in days.* He listened closely, smiling or chuckling in the appropriate parts. Too soon, they reached the penthouse.

"Thank you for the ride and for the audience. That's one of my favorite jokes." The suited man patted his pockets before withdrawing a cigar. "Here. Have a cigar on me."

Miles accepted the gift, holding the door open to see whether his passenger was received at the penthouse apartment. He wouldn't want the man to wait for the elevator to return if his party wasn't home. While he paused, Miles noticed the new carpet smell of the hallway. He approved of the midnight blue runner, which blended well with the golden oak door of the apartment. He saw the man lift the heavy pineapple-shaped door knocker and slam it with a confident thump that reverberated in the enclosed space. The door opened and the man disappeared from Miles's sight.

Miles pushed the "Ground" button and rode down in thoughtful silence. For the first time, he wondered about the inhabitants of the penthouse and who their visitor might be. He couldn't remember taking anyone to the penthouse before. Maybe the residents didn't live there full time, he thought.

Miles fingered the cigar, playing with it in an imitation of Groucho Marx. The rich, dusky odor of the cigar filled the elevator, and Miles pulled it into his lungs. The smell matched the crisp autumn weather outside. *I'll smoke it on the way home*, he thought, and tucked it into his coat pocket.

Naturally incurious, Miles had been trained to accept life on a "need to know basis," first in the military and then in the government. He never questioned anything he encountered, just acknowledged things as they appeared to be. After five years of operating an elevator, he knew the faces of most of the building's occupants, but not much about them. Elevator rides didn't create close relationships, and the anonymity of living in a large city seemed more intense in a city like New York.

Back at the lobby, Miles opened the door to a mass of squealing children, anxious to get home and rip off their school clothes. For the rest of his shift, he ferried children and parents to their apartments, followed by the rush hour of workers returning home after a day in the office.

When his replacement arrived, Miles signed out and left through the back door, covering his uniform with a worn topcoat. He lit his cigar

and walked home on autopilot, his mind occupied by the gentleman in the penthouse. Normally, he savored the beauty of the New York skyline, enjoying the varied architecture and colorful signs in every language, but tonight he saw only the polished appearance of the young man who rode to the penthouse.

Opening the door to his apartment, Miles caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror at the end of the hall. Compared to the man with the pinstripe suit, Miles looked faded and rumpled. After years of being given clothes by the Army, he had gravitated toward khakis and olives, easy choices he didn't have to think about. Miles scrutinized his face, its pasty color a byproduct of shorter days of sunlight and his windowless "office." The man, in contrast, had had a tan, as if he'd been somewhere sunny and bright.

That evening, Miles felt keyed up, nervous almost. He cooked beef stew from scratch and scrubbed the stove until it shone. He didn't fall asleep by the television. Instead he read the newspaper, checking it for department store sales. He opened the doors to his closet, examined his wardrobe, and made a list of clothes to get rid of and to buy.

Within a few days, he'd purchased some new clothes, retired others, and with the help of a book from the library, re-learned how to iron a crisp pleat in his uniform trousers. The next time he saw the penthouse man, Miles had shoes so shiny he could see his reflection in them, a neat haircut, and a colorful red tie that, while not regulation, gave his uniform a fresh look.

"Penthouse please." Today, the man wore a charcoal gray suit with a maroon tie. He looked at Miles and his eyes lit with recognition. "Mr. Espresso, how are you today?"

"Just fine, sir. Bit of a nip in the air today." Miles pressed the "P" button and turned to face his companion.

"I like when the seasons change, don't you? No retirement in Florida for me." The man leaned against the side wall, turning his shoulders toward Miles. "You're ex-military, aren't you?"

Miles nodded.

"Thought so. Where were you stationed?"

Miles listed his posts to his captive audience. "Fort Lewis, Washington; Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And then I ended up in Alabama. Nice place, but I'm a northerner at heart." He sighed.

"Never went anywhere exotic. Always hoped to go to Hawaii, but didn't get closer than Washington."

Ding! The elevator announced their arrival at the top. Reluctantly, Miles opened the doors. His passenger remained against the wall.

"If you can't get there in person, you can always go in your mind. Try James Michener's book on Hawaii. It's cheaper than a plane ticket." He reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat. "Thanks for the lift. Here's a chocolate bar to eat while you read."

Miles protested, shaking his head and waving his hands, but the man insisted.

"Bought it from some kids outside the building who are trying to raise money for their school. Don't need the calories." He smiled and left before Miles could object again.

Miles sat in the elevator, doors closed, but not moving. He smelled the candy bar, drawing it under his nose like the cigar. His mouth watered. Placing the chocolate in the science fiction thriller under his stool, Miles sent the elevator down the shaft. He studied the pale cream walls of the elevator, their sameness echoed by every other elevator in the building. He could be in any elevator in the world, Miles thought. Why not one in Hawaii?

That night, he altered his routine. Instead of mechanically heading home, he stopped at the bookstore down the street from the building. Used to the dusty smells and quiet of a library, Miles blinked in surprise at the noise and bustle of the crowded store. At first he wandered aimlessly through the aisles, amazed at the bright bindings and new ink smell. Then, purposefully, he started looking for the fiction section and the "M" authors. Within minutes, he resumed his walk back to his apartment, a plastic bag weighted by the Michener book at his side.

Miles' television stayed silent that night and the nights that followed. He savored the thick book instead, reading and re-reading passages describing the Islands. He stopped by the library over the weekend and picked up some travel and history books to continue his research.

"No science fiction today?" The gray-haired librarian cocked an eyebrow at Miles.

"Not today." Momentarily surprised at being recognized, he paused before continuing. "Doing some research on Hawaii. Thinking of taking a trip." He could feel the back of his neck reddening.

The librarian nodded. "I hear it's beautiful." She swiped his library card under a red beam. Miles noticed, for the first time, her cherry red nail polish. Her wooden bracelet hit the edge of the counter with a clunk.

"I'm reading James Michener's book about the Hawaiian Islands. It's really good. You should read it." Miles stopped, suddenly embarrassed to be recommending a book to a librarian, of all people.

But she smiled, making her face look younger than what the wrinkles suggested. "I might just pick it up. Reading about somewhere warm and sunny would be a good escape from the weather."

Later that day as Miles pored over his books, he would occasionally look up and remember his conversation with the librarian. He'd never been adept at talking to or flirting with the opposite sex. But today, he'd been okay, hadn't he? Marking his place with an orange plastic bookmark, Miles walked to his hall closet and opened the door, revealing a full-length mirror. He posed in front of it, self-consciously checking himself out. No Clark Gable, but no Gilligan either. Miles nodded at his reflection, noting the new glint in his eyes and lift of his chin.

By the time he saw Mr. Penthouse Man again, Miles considered himself an amateur expert on Hawaii. He'd read every book he could find in the library. Some, he'd ordered through interlibrary loan, a service he didn't know existed until the nice librarian told him about it. He'd been so excited when he realized that one book had traveled all the way from California so that he could read it. Now he feverishly scanned every book to see where it came from, vicariously experiencing the thrill of travel to distant places.

"Penthouse, please." Dressed impeccably as usual, the man seemed a little more relaxed and casual in a black leather jacket, turtleneck, and slacks. "Mr. Hawaii, how are you this fine winter day?"

"Doing good, sir. How are you?" Miles waited for a response before sending the elevator to the roof. He wanted to extend their visit this time.

"Great. Going to be traveling, partly business, partly pleasure. I hate to stay in one place for too long." He outlined his itinerary for Miles, adding, "My girlfriend will be waiting for me in Italy. Going to propose to her."

Miles congratulated the man, hiding his rising dismay that he wouldn't be talking to his "friend" for several weeks. He stayed professional though, announcing the penthouse in clear tones.

"Thanks again, Elevator Man." Exuberantly, the man shook Miles'

hand. "Appreciate your listening to me ramble." He exited, then quickly turned back, wedging his body in the opening. "I won't need these. Enjoy yourself and take a friend." He thrust something at Miles, winked, then rushed down the hall.

Returning to the depths of the building, Miles opened his hand and saw two pieces of blue paper. Theater tickets for the following night. A play called *Holiday Memories,* written by someone named Truman Capote. Odd name for a writer, but the play sounded normal enough. Miles sat stunned. *Who would go to the theater with me*, he asked himself. He thought about it, then blushed.

One warm spring day, Miles rode the elevator to the penthouse floor. Pushing the "Stop" button, he got out, straightening his tie. He hadn't seen Mr. Penthouse Man in weeks, but knew that he had to have returned from his travels by now.

In the time since he'd last seen the man, Miles' life had changed. When he'd asked the librarian to go to the theater with him, she'd said yes. Now, he and Elizabeth had been dating for several weeks and were planning a trip to Hawaii in the summer. They'd shunned the travel agent's suggestion of a package tour, deciding to plan the itinerary themselves. Miles wanted to see Pearl Harbor, and Elizabeth insisted on climbing a volcano. And in between, they hoped to visit a pineapple factory, the Bishop Museum, and the island of Maui. Their lists kept growing every time they talked.

Miles felt that he had an obligation to tell Mr. Penthouse Man how the tickets had changed his life. So here he stood at the apartment door, hoping the person inside could tell him how to reach the man.

Miles pushed the doorbell, then waited. No response. He knocked, politely at first, then more forcefully. The door opened, and Miles almost fell through the doorway.

"Hello, I'm Miles Grafton," he said, "the elevator man."

"Is there a problem?" A workman in overalls stood in the foyer, holding a hammer. Behind him, Miles could see drop cloths covering the floor, and half-painted walls.

"No, I was hoping to speak to the person who lives here."

"Well, they haven't moved in yet. I just started renovating it this week. They got a laundry list of things for me to do." He swung the hammer idly in the air.

Miles frowned. "Would you know who lived here before the new tenants?"

"Gosh, I don't know. It's been empty for almost a year. Some old woman died and it took forever for her heirs to sell the place." He coughed. "I got a lot of work to finish today. You might want to talk to the landlord."

Miles thanked the workman and returned to his elevator. He looked down the hallway, positive that the apartment he'd just left was the same one that Mr. Penthouse Man would enter. Same oak door, same brass pineapple knocker, same midnight blue carpet. Even the elevator was the same one he always rode.

Shaking his head, he unstopped the elevator and descended. The bland walls offered no answers, nor did the penthouse mailbox label on the first floor. Miles scratched his head then threw his hands up in the air. Who was Mr. Penthouse Man visiting?

Miles checked his watch. Quitting time. He had to leave promptly tonight. He'd invited Elizabeth for dinner at his apartment and needed to start the lasagna the minute he got home.

He'd ask Elizabeth what she thought about Mr. Penthouse Man. Well, maybe not tonight, but sometime soon.

The Stake

Joanne Lowery

A tall pine was pared of branches and bark
to bare fragrant wood that would snap

from the heat of trans fat oil
and a bushel of *New Yorkers* gone through the shredder
arranged around my feet.

One lump of coal commemorated every Christmas
I was bad. It was good to hoard them.

I used to read books where a girl was clad
in just her shift. Did I ever clad?
Did I know how to shift inside linen?

They bound my hands with the braids
I grew until I was ten, saved by my mother

for this event, the blue satin ribbons
at their ends frayed to thread.

At my end smoke festooned my ears.
The popping sap of pine drowned out the crowd.
One August years ago the afternoon heated

beyond bearing and all the apples fell
from tree to bare dirt. I bore the rest.

Each apple was fleshed to a stem
that remained after its sweet mush
fed hornets, deer, and bystanders.

© 2010 Meghan Colson, “Construction”

Inertia

Alisa Wolf

Maybe a spaceship has landed on our building—or else that's how it feels to be acquired: There's a heart-stopping crash overhead, an anxious rush to the elevators, a tie-up at the revolving doors, and a frantic dash across the street for a better view. Security guards armed only with cell phones alert the authorities. Passing tourists clutch their children to their chests. Clusters of colleagues stand huddled together, speculating about whether the aliens, disguised as business tycoons, herald doom or redemption.

It's unnerving, having a spaceship dangling above us, but it's nothing new. Over my 17 years of working in offices, such craft have come and gone with all manner of alien intent: restructurings, management shakeups, mergers, and acquisitions. No matter what their ultimate purpose, the aliens inevitably cut jobs, and benefits go away forever. During the last acquisition, free coffee and filtered water came to a stop. Then the pension plan was shut down and the matching gifts program scaled back. The red pens I'd used for years were dropped from the approved list of supplies, and I had to settle for the cheap ones that gave me a sore middle finger. That was back when we were able to order supplies. Now I've resorted to rummaging through vacant desks and sparse storage cabinets for pens and pads of paper, or else, like today's school teachers, I buy them myself.

I shouldn't complain. I should be grateful to have a job—and I am. But this ship is the biggest, shiniest, and most impregnable craft I've seen, and with only its underside to go by, it's hard to judge exactly what it's made of. Like the spaceship in the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* it orbited for days before landing. Now it hangs over the edge of the roof at an artistic angle, like a beret worn over one ear. But from below, not much is visible. A silvery edge catches a gleam of light. A shadow is cast on the sidewalk.

Our new leader is dressed in a plain gray suit that says he doesn't have to impress anyone. Waiting for clearance at the security desk, he blends in, like "Klaatu," the alien in *The Day the Earth Stood Still.* While Klaatu stays in disguise because the populace doesn't know who they're looking for, we recognize our new leader's face from the acquirers' Web site. Besides, he gives himself away with his proprietary glances at the marble walls and the benevolent smile he bestows on us as we return from the street and file back into the lobby through the revolving doors.

He's attended by a young woman with a mane of black hair, flawless skin, and perfect posture. She sparkles with youth and job security—later, we learn she's in Human Resources. In this role, she has powers in common with Klaatu's robot sidekick, "Gort," the megaton weapon that vaporizes guns, tanks, and, later in the movie, human beings. Though un-Gortlike in appearance, she could zap my paycheck into oblivion without breaking a sweat.

The folding chairs in front of the podium are lined up tightly. I'm dressed to meet the acquirers in a new black pantsuit and a shirt that's a shade of blue I've been told looks good on me, especially now that I've grown the dye out of my hair and have let myself go white—a bright white that I hope might be mistaken, in some lights, for sun-bleached blond. Going gray might have been a mistake in this diminished job market, where my age could work against me. My scalp warms with self-consciousness when I picture my gray head among the blonds and brunettes, not to mention the jet black of the woman from Human Resources, who sits in the front row, leaning slightly forward.

We imitate her posture, the better to hear our new leader, who speaks in a voice so soft that one rustle or cough renders him inaudible. Even so, he makes his meaning clear. He lists other companies he and his crew have acquired, ending with our company—their biggest conquest so far. In fact, the combined organization, he says, has become one of the largest and strongest of its kind in the nation. (Our former CEO built an empire too,

but he made one spectacularly bad deal that brought the markets' wrath down on us, sending our ship into freefall.) Our new leader admits that he and his crew have made mistakes in the past, but they've learned from their blunders, and, as a result (I'm paraphrasing here because I didn't catch every word), they've become more thoughtful and deliberate in their merger activities. Yet even some of the worthy among us will have to be cut loose.

No one's surprised by this announcement. Even before our former CEO sent out a distress call, rumors of alien interest in our assets and debits were leaked on the Web, sending ripples of job insecurity through our cubicle rows. Then, when our company plunged toward ruin, the acquirers set their warp-speed course toward us. Their mission: to salvage what was left of us—a considerable treasure, despite our losses.

Now our times are being compared to the Great Depression, the unemployment rate is going gangbusters, and "hug your paycheck" passes for career advice at the office. We've fallen into a collective state of inertia, a concept that Klaatu helpfully defines in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as "a property of matter that remains constant until it is acted upon." We've become the constant in the equation, the human resources who show up at our jobs until such time as we're told to "pursue other opportunities" or "spend more time with family"—unless we can convince the acquirers to keep us.

We've debated how best to achieve this end. Some say "lay low"—the acquirers might not take kindly to our blatant concerns about our own backsides. Others advise boldness. They say, "Stand up and let them know who you are." This is the approach taken by the only other gray-haired woman in the room, a manager who's many levels up from me on the organizational chart. On her way out, she introduces herself to the new leader and shakes his hand. I take the opposite tack and slip by him, unnoticed. This might prove to be a mistake. She's been awarded a position in the new company. And I'm still waiting for the thumbs up or down.

The acquirers start their cuts at the top. First they prune back jobs, for example, by turning six positions into one. They call the remaining position a "bucket" and invite the six people doing the job—or one much like it—to

vie for a chance to fill it. The bucket is hard to define since the merged organization has yet to take shape. How can we tell if the bucket is one that we genuinely want to fill? At a meeting, one of us dares to ask, "If I don't interview for the bucket, can I still get the severance package?" The answer is "no." It's widely speculated that this guy will flub his interview and get the package anyway.

But most take the interviews seriously. I receive two requests for "360-degree" reviews via e-mail from middle managers who've turned to a coaching service. They want insight into what their colleagues think of their strengths and weaknesses so that they can create their own "brands" and market themselves to their potential new managers the way companies market themselves to customers.

"If X were a car, what kind of car would she be, and why? If X were a dog, what kind of dog would she be, and why?"

I know more about cats than I do dogs; more about buses, subway stations, and walking shoes than I do about cars. I've always had a used car I shared with my spouse for errands or weekend trips—first a rusty Mercury Comet, then a Mercury Tracer hatchback, and now a Ford Focus, well broken-in by a teenager who'd raced it on a local track. If my cars were people they'd be tried and true; practical, persistent, and long-suffering. It seems I end up describing myself in these reviews, which is why, though I don't sign my name, I'm sure the recipients—who hand-pick their reviewers—can figure out which evaluation I've authored. To minimize hurt feelings, I couch my criticisms in the language of Myers-Briggs, using personality descriptors such as "confrontational" and "forceful" instead of the ones I use at home—raving, toxic, insane—words that, on some days, I could use to describe myself.

Those of us lower on the organizational chart wait for the managers to settle in and create the buckets we'll be eligible to fill—or not. In the meantime, the acquirers offer a class in change management. I don't sign up. I've been conditioned by numerous reorganizations, and a glut of reality television shows, to expect to be found wanting and booted out eventually, but I can't bring myself to believe that I'll truly be let go. Is it because the acquirers seem so nice? Or is it because my imagination fails me when I think beyond the boundaries of my work life, defined by my commute, my paychecks, and the company of my colleagues? All I can see in their place is

a starry night in which I float, untethered, breathing in and breathing out through a mouthpiece in my bubble helmet.

Like an earthling in *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* I'm confused about how to respond to the aliens' agenda. On one hand, I want the acquirers to grant me a shot at a career with them. On the other hand, I harbor a sliver of giddy hope that a layoff might force changes in my life that I haven't had the courage to make on my own. Freed from this job, I could teach English overseas, join the Peace Corps, work with the homeless, or write a novel.

Back in my cubicle, I surf the Web for stories of people who've transformed their lives in these ways. The search leads me to the "Careers" section of the newspaper and photographs of some of the economy's newest victims, featured along with their stories. Their clothes are clean. They don't look hungry. But their quotes show that they're scared. To join their ranks willingly with no severance package or new job prospect would be irresponsible.

In the end, inertia, an "indisposition to motion, exertion, or change," according to *Merriam-Webster*, trumps change management. It seems there's nothing I can do but wait for the next thing to happen.

On a Friday, the elevator I'm on falls from the 19th floor to the seventh, and with a sickening bounce, it stops. I'm reminded of the part in the movie when Klaatu turns the power off all over the world, except where doing so would cause harm: he lets the sick keep their life support, for example, and keeps airplanes airborne. He tells the widowed young mother who's stuck on an elevator with him that he's brought the world to a screeching halt for 30 minutes to back up his warning: If we humans don't correct our irrational, aggressive ways, he will use his superior intelligence and Gort's incredible strength to obliterate us. Change or die: the choice is ours. When the half-hour is up, the elevator starts moving again. Life goes on. The moment of truth is put off.

My elevator also descends safely. But during the long minute while I wait, suspended just shy of the seventh floor, the thought crosses my mind:

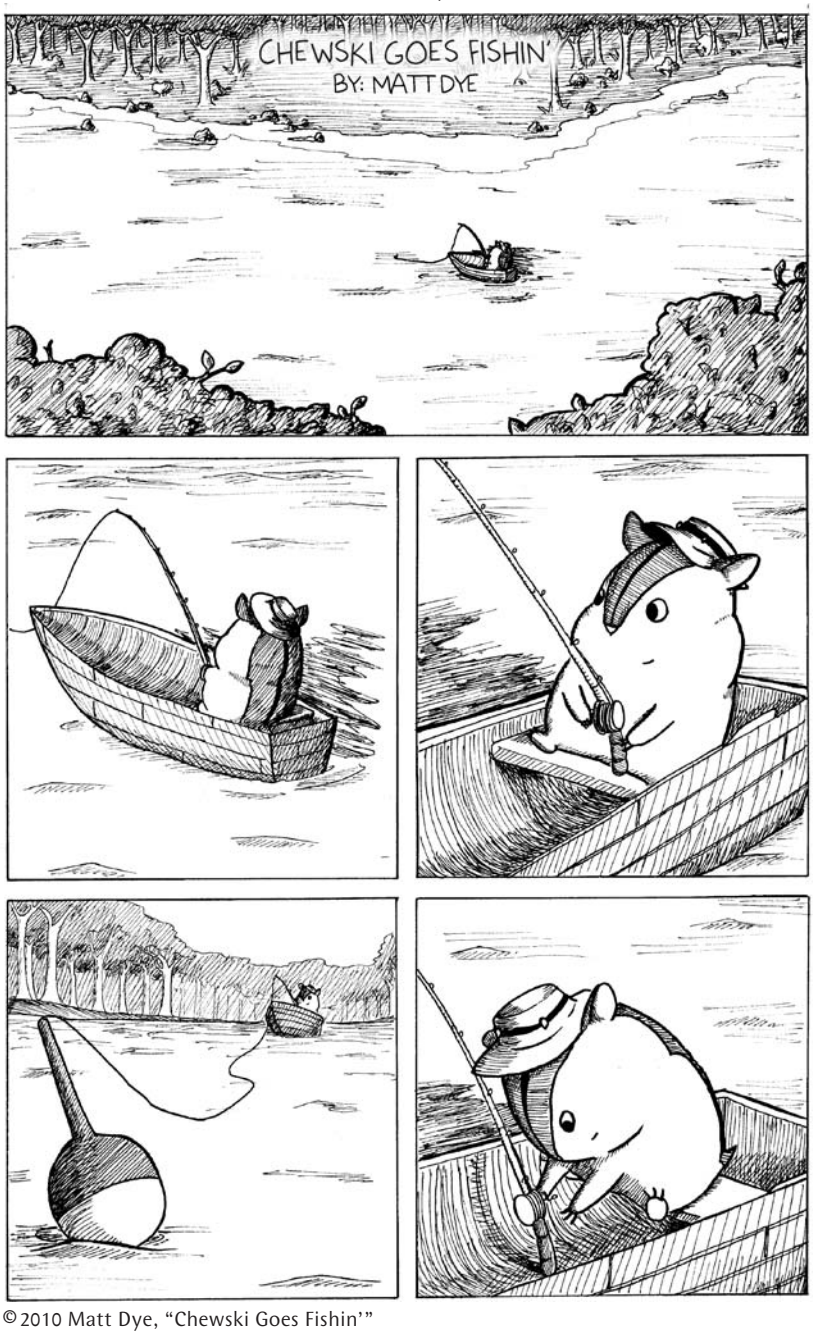
If this elevator plunges to the ground, I won't have to interview for a bucket. How nice it would feel—I feel it now, as I make my way through the lobby and head home for the weekend—to separate myself from the circumstances this recession binds me to. But everyone can't be an artist or entrepreneur. Someone has to man the ship—someone like me, a reliable American four-cylinder; a standard poodle with white curls and a streak of fatalism.

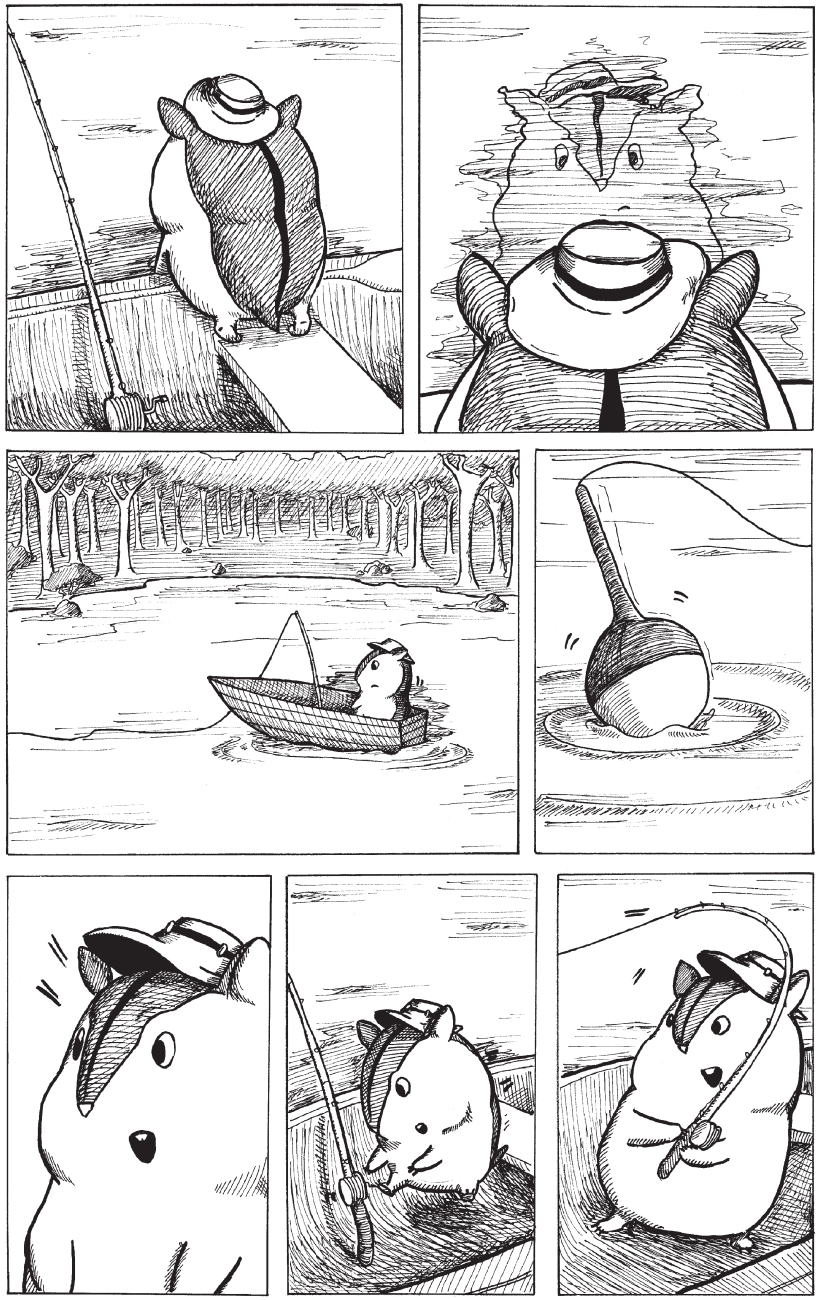
The acquirers have delivered on their promise to be thoughtful and deliberate. It's been nine months since they've landed, and I'm still wondering whether my position "maps" into the new organizational structure. I congratulate colleagues who are chosen to stay and commiserate with those who are let go. Who'll be better off in the long run? It's too soon to say.

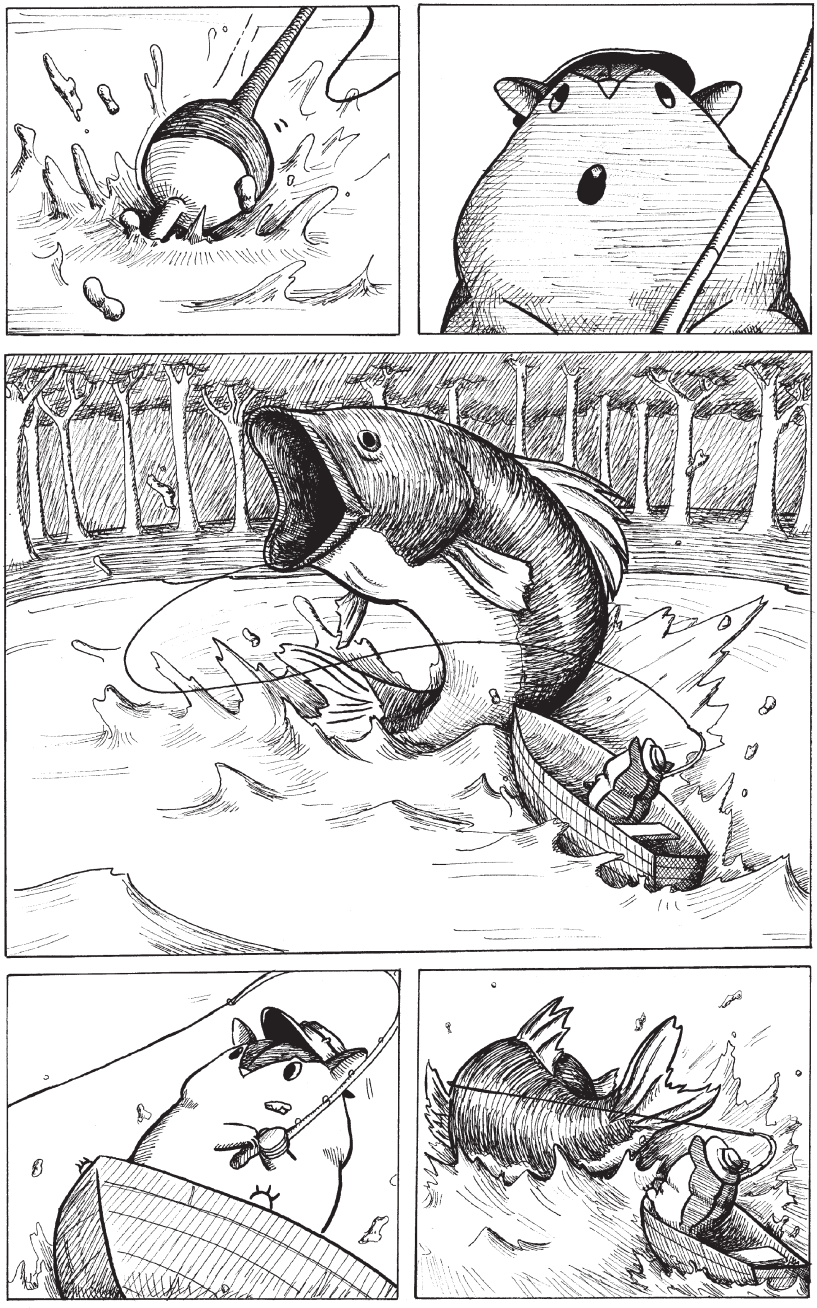
Meanwhile, the spaceship has become a permanent feature of the skyline. Like the smokers who lean up against the building's polished granite frontage, I take its presence in stride. There's nothing more to learn of the acquirers by looking up at their saucer. Even so, I track the shadow it casts on the sidewalk over the course of the day, noting how the crescent shifts when I go in and out for coffee, errands, and lunch. The ship's inaction mirrors my own, and though keeping tabs on its presence doesn't move me forward, it makes me feel, at least, as if I'm doing something.

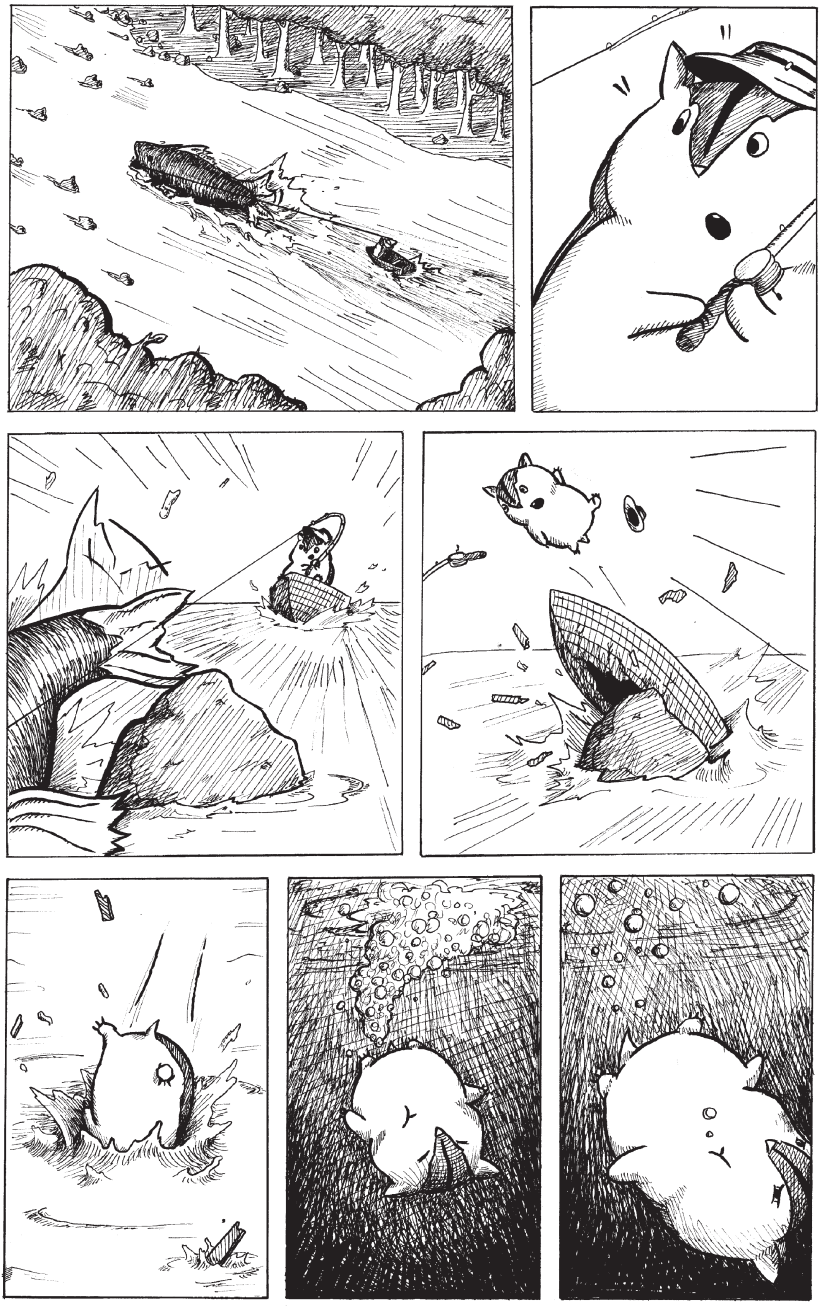
Chewski Goes Fishin'

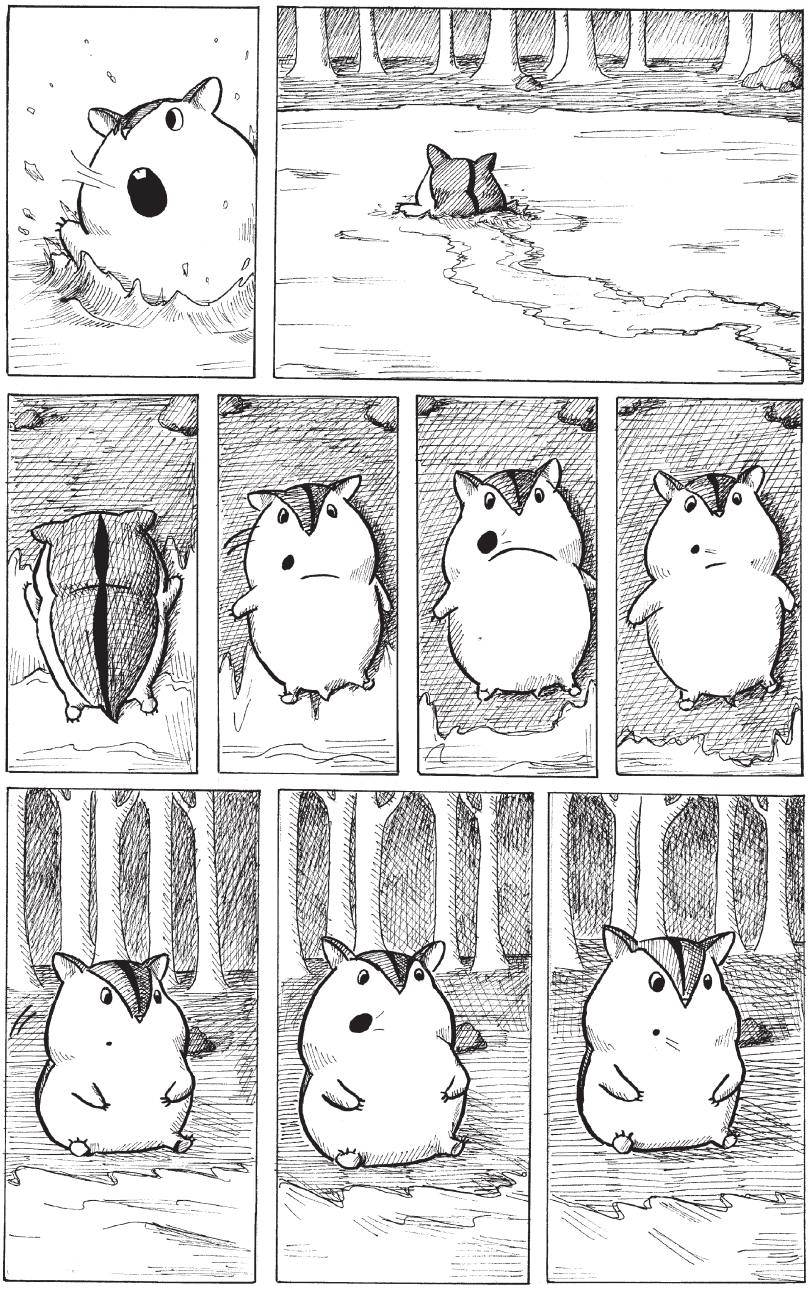
Matt Dye

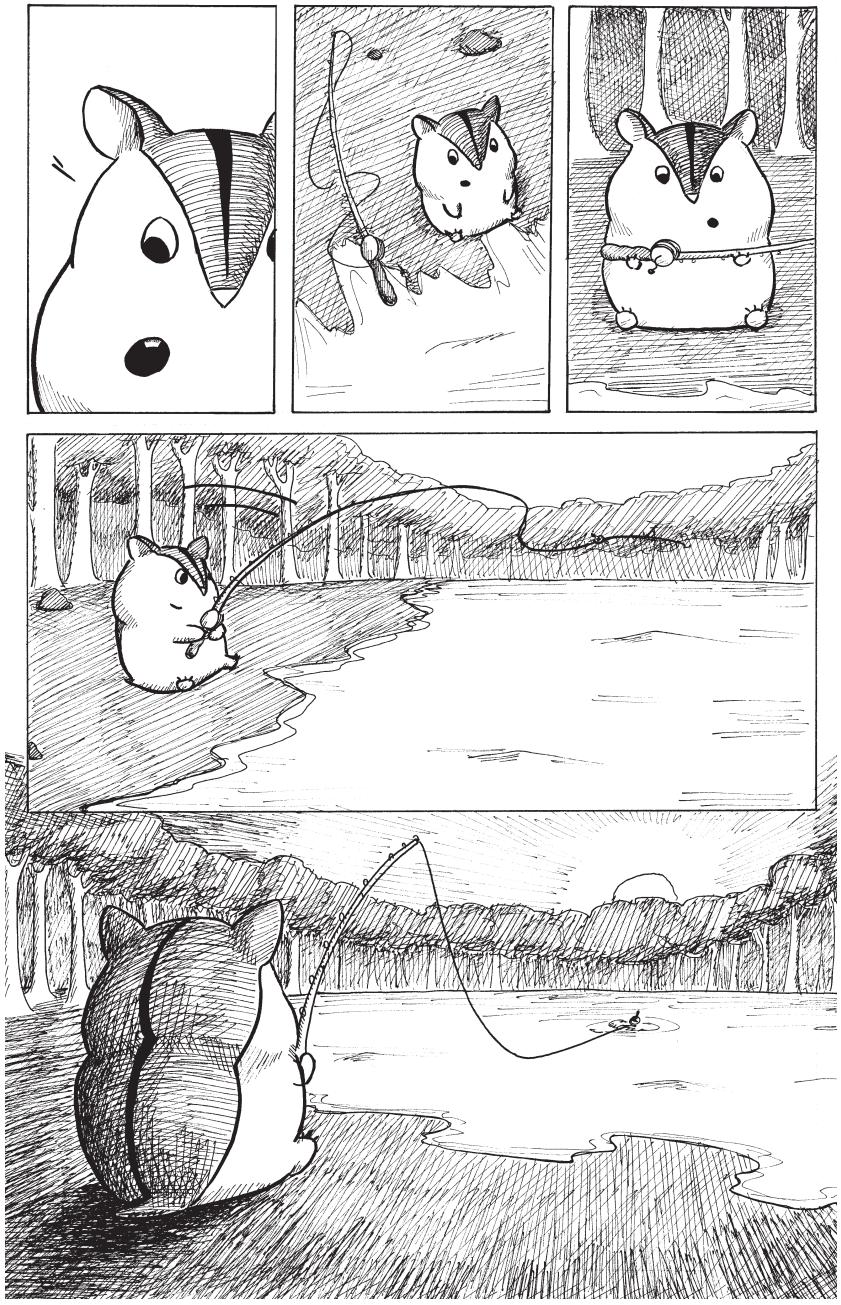












The Unknowable

D. Lifland

The membrane is thinning.
Soon thoughts will cross
& never return. After that
is anyone's guess. He looks
into his wife's eyes
& wonders if she knows.

Just Here for Littering

Erin Wisti

I wanted to say no. I hated Starbucks. The entire place smelled like it was wrapped in plastic, sealing the customers inside a shell of coffee beans and artificial flavoring. It was free of any conversation that didn't involve the ordering of frappuccinos or mocha lattes. Everyone was plugged into iPods or laptops as they roasted in the far too bright overhead lighting, clattering away on their keyboards and iPhones. Plus, you couldn't use the bathroom without buying something. This always seemed unfriendly. Generally, I tried to avoid the place, but on that day I could not have said no. My mother taught me sick people should always get whatever they want. I had no choice but to take him.

He sat across from me at our table, reading a copy of *Watchmen.* The glossy, yellow and black cover reflected the fluorescent lighting onto his glasses. I called them his "Henry Kissinger glasses" because large frames and thick rims resting on a wrinkled, fifty-one year old nose are always reminiscent of Kissinger. My father's face, square-like with a pronounced nose and untraceable jaw line, also reminded me of Nixon's ancient secretary of state. I studied his face as he read. My choice of book for the day—*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*—had proved uninspiring and it was clear no conversation was going to take place on our outing. A small beam of white light trickled down the golden frames and swept across the lenses as he turned the book's page.

We were at a Barnes and Noble that housed a Starbucks in its center, a common feature of bookstores in the Midwest. We were away in Rochester, Minnesota, the land of romantic imagery. Bright green trees filled with fresh purple lilacs lined the Zumbro River, where slender black and tan Canadian geese floated alongside canoes. These canoes were driven by happy suburban families who looked like they were posing for ads in Eddie Bauer or JC

Penney's, donning new spring clothing in coordinated shades of pastels. I walked down the asphalt path by this river many times that week, puttering behind my father. In his light gray sweat pants which sagged at his crotch, he marched in front of me, taking long, sweeping strides while periodically checking his heart rate. He wore expensive, Nike-brand running shoes, one of the many new toys we bought for him when we found out he was sick. He was quite pleased with how they improved his pace. I, however, wore cheap plastic flip-flops from CVS and waddled behind him and took pictures. I photographed the lilacs and the geese and the suburbanites, the whole time wondering if taking pictures was morbid considering the nature of my visit. I was visiting because he was sick and because he was sick, I had to take him to Starbucks.

His phone rang. It had been ringing all morning, even before we left Hope Lodge to get coffee. I wasn't following the conversation closely. It was lawyer talk, a phenomenon I had been familiar with since childhood. He would waltz through the hallway at night in his tattered red robe, barking legal terms into our cordless phone while making his way through a pack of Marlboros. He was always talking to Sammy, his brother and business partner. Sammy relied on my father's help with his cases, which I knew never to ask questions about. I knew most of them were illegal to answer. That day, it was something about a bowling alley, something his brother couldn't handle alone and so, even though he was sick, he took the calls from Sammy's clients.

"I gotta go, Chuck," he said, "No. I really gotta go. I'm with my daughter." He sputtered a few rushed goodbyes and then snapped his phone shut and slipped it into the large, floppy pockets of his sweatpants.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"What?" I asked.

"Listen," he said, "Don't ever be a lawyer. Being a lawyer means people expect you to solve all their problems all the time, and if you can't, then you're a bad lawyer."

"What makes you think people think that?"

"Twenty-two years' experience in law."

His phone rang again. The default sound of the clunky Nokia ring tone disrupted the quiet buzz of the coffee shop. He abandoned *Watchmen* and took the call in the parking lot. By the time it was through, we had to leave.

We were late for the potluck dinner at the Hope Lodge and I needed to drive him back. I did most of the driving that week because radiation made him sleepy. On the way back, he made me make a stop downtown to pick up two chocolate pies. These pies were always a large success. He got them made fresh each week from a local, family-owned bakery. They were fairly expensive—roughly fifteen dollars each—but this was his weekly contribution because he couldn't cook. They contained eight slices of dark chocolate pudding topped with a large mound of whipped cream, all contained within the pie's light, flaky crust. The Candy Man patted me on the shoulder as I set the pies out on the dessert table, between a tray of chocolate chip cookies and some frosted brownies dotted with M & M's.

"Look forward to your father's pies every week," he said. The Candy Man looked like Richard Simmons. He had a light brown afro and always wore blue and white knee-length nylon shorts. These revealed his lanky, pale legs covered with thin hairs. His name stemmed from the fact he worked at a candy store in Wisconsin. He brought boxes of gummy worms and licorice sticks with him each week, then set them out in the community kitchens in little periwinkle bowls with yellow polka-dots. He had two years left.

The snowmobiler also liked the pies. He always ate two slices. He was a heavy man and usually wore a trucker hat and some kind of navy blue windbreaker. He liked to talk about the outdoors, about fishing, snowmobiling and generally being rustic. He was loud and my father was annoyed by him, but felt bad about this because the snowmobiler only had six months left.

Then there were the patients with a few days or weeks left. They were gaunt and pale and constantly attached to IVs. They were usually accompanied by a nurse or family member. They wandered into the wrong rooms at night and forgot the subjects of conversations halfway through. They had lawyers come visit them to work on their wills. They held prayer sessions in the common room every night and asked God to grant them the serenity to accept the things they could not change, the courage to change the things they could, and the wisdom to know the difference. They usually didn't have any pie.

My father used to say that, in the presence of these terminal patients, he felt like the narrator in "Alice's Restaurant."

"You know that scene when they're having the background check done for the military?" he'd say, "And he gets put in with all the criminals? That's

how I feel. He's surrounded by all these rapists and murderers and he's in for littering. I feel like all the guys here are in for something serious, but I'm just here for littering."

The amount of years my father had left was ambiguous. If the chemo didn't work, he had three to four. But if the chemo did work, as it almost certainly would, he had as many years left as any fifty-one-year-old slightly overweight chain smoker. I estimated twenty to twenty-five. He was the odd man out, not yet kin to the terminal cases he dined with each Tuesday night.

His phone began to ring again at dinner and he ignored the call, and turned it on vibrate. He could no longer overlook its continual jittering when we returned to the room, which I hated. Despite all efforts to hide the fact Hope Lodge was a hospital, it still reeked of one. It smelled like latex and antiseptic and the bathroom had two emergency phones, one by the tub and one by the sink. It was a sick person's room, a sick person who was talking on his cell phone as he paced in front of our television set.

"I don't know what to do Sammy! Figure it out yourself."

The Sopranos flickered in the background. This was his favorite show and I bought him the first season on DVD when I found out he was sick. We had been watching it all week. When he came home for the weekends, we watched it on our new fifty-inch plasma HDTV, another new toy purchased when the sickness began. On weekends, we never turned it off and watched old documentaries and cancelled TV shows for the entirety of our Fridays and Saturdays.

"If the company went bankrupt, they're bankrupt. No one's getting their money back."

I wondered if I should pause the DVD. Tony Soprano was choking someone to death with a piece of fence wire and I didn't want my father to miss this pivotal moment.

"I don't control the bowling alley, Sammy."

The victim's limbs sputtered about. He looked like a malfunctioning wind-up doll. He clawed wildly at Tony's face and arms, trying to free himself from his assailant's grasp, but it was hopeless.

"Well I can't do anything about it."

Slowly, the sputtering stopped and his arms fell limp. I wondered if people really died like that. It seemed like, in reality, it should be more messy and complicated, more drawn out, but Tony's victim simply stopped

moving. His head tilted to his side and his eyes closed. Tony lowered him to the ground. I paused the DVD.

"No, Sammy. I really can't help you from here."

He hung up his phone, then set it down on the bedside table next to an empty bottle of Gatorade.

"I'm not going back," he said. "Twenty years is enough."

"What will you do?" I asked.

"Run for judge and if I don't win, we'll figure it out. But I can't work with Uncle Sammy anymore. I just can't. I never get a God damn break."

He lowered himself onto the bed, and flinched as he made contact with the cool white sheets. He had burns covering his backside from the radiation. While the process would eventually clear out his body's pollutants, every stage was nevertheless painful.

"And I mean, for God's sakes," he said, "I don't know how much time I have left. I could die." He looked at me. I was leaning against my bed frame, thumbing through a battered copy of *Nine Stories* that had once belonged to my older brother.

"Do you think I'll die?" he asked.

It was the million-dollar question. We all assumed the answer was no, but there was that chance, that haunting ten to twenty percent chance, that it would be yes. It was a fear that all his new toys—the running shoes, the television, the expensive coffee—could not silence. Although we were probably only there for a quick clean up, there was a chance it could escalate to something more and I would lose him.

My first impulse was to say eventually, but I decided against this. Instead I replied with a firm, "No."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because the doctor said you wouldn't."

"There's a twenty percent chance I will."

"You won't," I said and then hit the play button. We watched Tony check his victim's pulse. Nothing. He shuffled back out of the forest and into his motel room. His daughter, Meadow, was waiting. They were on a college trip together. After we reached the end of the episode and the credits began to roll, my father rolled over to go to sleep.

The next morning, he wanted to go to Starbucks again, so I drove us back to the downtown mall. I took my seat at our table—the one in the

corner close to the "Exit" sign—wondering what book he'd pick that week. To my surprise, he decided he didn't want to read, so we carried our paper coffee cups with us and wandered around the mall.

Besides Barnes and Noble, none of the stores appealed to us. There were a lot of candle shops, some stores selling novelty hats and mugs, and a couple clothing chains. He quickly grew bored, so we decided to head outside. Toward the exit, we saw a large, glass display containing a giant plush teddy bear. One could enter a sweepstakes to win the bear, which was apparently a five hundred dollar value. He grabbed a slip of paper.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

I watched as he filled in my brother's name, address, and cell phone number. He also checked "Yes" under the box asking if he wanted to be notified via e-mail about exciting travel opportunities from Expedia.

"Seth was whiny the whole time he was here," he explained, "And now he'll pay." I laughed as we walked back out into the parking lot. His white Lincoln Town Car was sitting in the handicap spot, one of the few advantages of being a Mayo Clinic patient. The sun lit up the light gray chrome paint. I was prepared to drive back to the Hope Lodge and watch more *Sopranos,* but was surprised when he requested we go somewhere.

I drove to the edge of the Zumbro River and we climbed out of the car. Instead of taking pictures, we watched the Canadian geese as they glided past the canoes containing the Eddie Bauer families, who we waved at to see how many of them would wave back. Uncle Sammy's clients continued to call, but we both knew this would not last another twenty-two years.

He would pluck Uncle Sammy and the law firm out of his life, and set them on the side of the road for the garbage man to collect. Then, he would run for judge and hope there would be twenty years left.

© 2010 John M. Quick, “Eternal Embrace”

Rows

James B. Nicola

I used to stroll the smelly rows
of Farmer Mason's field:
In spring to see how fast seed grows;
in summer for the yield;

in autumn for the turning in,
the latest not too late,
that next spring all might rebegin;
then winter, for the wait.

But now the grocer takes what's sent;
exotic food enchants.
We dine on the development
of once unheard-of plants.

And I can wheel through aisles and aisles
of plastic, cellophane,
and cardboard things for miles and miles
where it will never rain.

Tonight I drive through files of homes,
the browns and greens now gray:
Mason's Condominiums
sold out the second day.

© 2010 Melissa Poirier, “Barn with Tree”

Man Cave

Laura Gabel-Hartman

When he heard Renée's flip-flops on the stairs, Barry started the coffee. She didn't talk before she had her caffeine, just sat at the table looking sleepy, an imprint of the sheets on her cheek. Her hair wasn't slicked back as usual, but eddied all over her head. Renée was one fourth African-American and three quarters Irish, and Barry understood that this mixture was important to her, a huge part of her personal trajectory. Even for work she straddled communities—as a city planner and grant overseer, she acted as a bridge. Barry swelled with pride over that. He was more proud of her work than he was his own. He knew the names of most of the Irish step dancers in Quincy, he knew which businesses were black-owned in Boston, he'd vacationed on Martha's Vineyard. He felt privileged, if only by proxy, to be an insider with several communities when he was selling office furniture, with a specialty in chairs.

"It's nice to have a minute with you," Barry said. "I know with Lynnie gone we have endless time together, but this weekend, we may not get a chance to talk."

As he said this, he realized that it didn't quite ring true. It wasn't like they'd been talking a lot lately.

He leaned his hip against the counter, waiting in front of the coffee pot. He crossed his legs.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm just butt-tired. Lynnie and I sat up and talked."

"Talked about old times?" Barry asked.

"More about the present," Renée said.

"Did she say anything last night? Any news?" Sometimes Renée was the bridge between Barry and Lynnie too, a thought that gave him a pang, that he was the one who had to ask for the news of his daughter.

"Her roommate sounds," she gave a little, fake shiver, "Creepy, I guess." She stretched.

The pot quieted, and Barry fixed them each a cup. They stood at the counter fixing their cream and sugar. They were close to the same height, right around five feet ten inches. He relished that symmetry of them. He'd dated short girls before Renée, but it was more relaxing to not have to look down.

They moved to the family room and sat on the couch. This year Renée had redecorated the house with splashy colors and contemporary furniture. He liked the way it looked now. He was glad she wasn't into tiny floral patterns anymore. Or large floral ones, for that matter. He cracked the window behind them, letting in fresh air from a chilly September day. He could smell a fire burning in some neighbor's fireplace, first time he'd smelled that this year. This was the first morning he'd worn slippers, first one she'd worn her robe. They were quiet. Renée rustled her locket back and forth to shift the clasp to the back of her neck. He'd seen her do this countless times and thought, what a beautiful neck.

He considered telling Renée his orthopedist's bad sex joke, but he thought better of it. The week before, Barry had had trouble not choking up as he left the orthopedist's. "So that means no running?"

"That's right," the white-haired doctor said. "Walking, biking, swimming—those are good choices. Low-impact. Tell your wife I said more sex would be good."

Barry made it halfway through the waiting area and then turned around, letting himself back into the doctor's quarters. The orthopedist stood at a counter speaking into a Dictaphone—about Barry—summarizing the appointment for his records.

When Barry cleared his throat, the orthopedist swiveled to face him.

"Would orthotics help?" Barry asked. "I went to this runner's clinic . . ."

"Orthotics wouldn't help. You've got arthritis. You've got a systemic problem. Plus some injury. Pounding will damage that knee, orthotics or not."

Renée reached over and fingered Barry's wedding band, fat yellow gold. "It might be time to change this band," she said. "It looks out of date. How about a skinny white gold thing?"

"This, out of date? It's the most basic band possible."

"You haven't been paying attention." She put her hand over his. "That's one of the things I like about you."

Showered and dressed, Barry stood in the front hall organizing his thoughts for the day. Lynnie was still asleep; he hadn't even seen her yet. He felt Renée looking at him from the couch, phone in hand. "Don't forget your wallet, baby." She flicked her eyes toward the top of the bookshelf, where he emptied his pockets at night.

"That would help," he said. He gathered the contents of his pockets, then returned to the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee to-go and heard Renée on the phone. She'd fit in her work while Lynnie slept.

He went to the bathroom. Today he'd be driving all over creation trying to sell these chairs, and he didn't want to have to stop in the first half hour to take a piss.

Years ago Barry had decided he wasn't going to be a fireball getting up at five o'clock and getting home sometime after dinner. When they had Lynnie, he made the conscious decision to be more a part of her life than that. He backed out of the driveway by eight-thirty and made his first appointment at nine, selling workstations, file storage systems, Aeron seating, Hermann Miller brand, often. He believed that no manufacturer had the best products for everybody. For upper level management, he might use Harvard seating, which averaged sixty dollars more than for mid-level, Luxe. For guest chairs, Dolphine. They all had similar fabric coverings. He liked Haskell systems. He'd put in a couple hundred workstations just that month. He'd go meet one executive assistant, then another. Sometimes the office manager. That was important enough. He could be the solution to people's back or carpal tunnel problems. He'd come to believe that, contrary to popular opinion, bodies aged from the inside out. In late August he'd been to a runner's clinic and found out he was biomechanically imperfect. Three of the stations recommended orthotics. He'd just invested in new shoes and multiple pairs of his favorite running shorts, which looked a lot like the ones he'd worn for cross-country meets in high school, solid with stripes down the sides, everything being retro these days.

Renée responded to her phone conversation with, "Glamorous twenty-something. That's over. Let's just start a new chapter."

"Let's not and say we did," he said to his reflection in the mirror.

When Barry got home from work, Renée and Lynnie sat on opposite ends of the couch, talking. Lynnie stood up, and they hugged. She looked older, even after a few weeks, more mature, her face less babyish. She was a young woman, she'd figured out how to dress herself, finally, how to fix her hair. Man, she'd gone through some awkward stages. The poor girl had had seriously bucked teeth after sucking her thumb so long. He remembered that Renée took her to get her ears pierced right when she got her braces, and what a change that made in her. She looked so much older that day, and so feminine. When Lynnie was born, people kept asking if he'd wanted a boy.

"She's a person, a baby, an individual," he'd said. "I don't even think of her as boy or girl."

Renée held her computer on her lap. She plucked a piece of candy from the dish on the coffee table and began to suck on it, since she couldn't bite it because of her laminated teeth. She used to chew hard candy and ice. She'd had her teeth redone, and Barry wasn't used to them. He felt an odd nostalgia for her imperfect, grooved yellowish teeth, not these white, rounded, smooth ones.

"My favorite way to dress is jeans and black," Lynnie told Renée.

"I hope you wear color once in a while," Renée said.

"Mom," she said.

Renée was showing Lynnie music videos from her past. Michael Jackson had just died, so they searched "Thriller," "Beat It," and "Billie Jean." "I'd forgotten that. Barry do you remember this?" she asked. She angled the screen toward him so he could see the opening of "Thriller," a fifties couple, the girl in a pink poodle skirt. He'd forgotten that, and the zombie part too.

"Next let's look up The Grateful Dead," he said. "How about 'Sugar Magnolia?'" He'd bobbed his head to The Dead all the way to college, eight hours there and back, in the Nissan 280Z he'd bought with his own money in high school. The women were in no rush to search YouTube for The Dead, when a mechanical knocking sound came from the basement.

"What's that?" Renée asked.

"I think it's the furnace. I'll go check," Barry said. It wasn't the usual sound the furnace made, but maybe it was just gearing up for winter.

The basement was unfinished, its walls simply the backside of the granite foundation. The industrial floor, coated with the rubbery gray paint of a ship's deck, was clear and clean; the utility sink would serve better for wringing out a mop or filling a bucket with water than any of the ones upstairs; and the light tended toward dim, a respite from the fluorescent-lit office environments he visited for work. He pulled the string to light the bare bulb over the washing machine, and then the one over the sink, and then the one near the furnace, which still clanked, although irregularly now. He'd like to reconfigure the lights, add switches. It would make a great man cave. He'd have to lose the floral couch Renée had jettisoned down here about the time Lynnie was born. Although that couch from several re-decoratings ago held a memory for him, a day when Lynnie was entranced by a video, and they'd sneaked down here and fooled around.

One of the chair companies had just offered a session on man caves. There were tool man caves, caves for smoking, for technology, for movies (women called that a "home theater"). His Uncle Arthur had had a man cave in his garage: a special chair, a pipe, books, collections.

The furnace quieted before he had a chance to diagnose anything, and then he heard his wife upstairs, flip-flopping between the table and the sink, dropping melamine dishes into it. Over the month and a half his daughter had been gone for her freshman year, he'd wanted to say this to his wife—this thing about not being soul mates, about needing to rediscover some passion in their relationship. He wanted to be closer. They could go days, even a month, without talking about anything real. They got together with friends. They drank their coffee on the couch together. But she had her laptop in front of her, checking her email and then reading the news. They both focused on work. When she looked at him, she didn't look relaxed and laughing, rather she looked intense, even angry. He wondered if it was something he'd done. Could be she was just stressed about work, with a big new pharmacy project demanding her attention, but he didn't want to lose her. She hadn't had a vacation in a while. She was acting a little mid-life crisis-y, which was how he explained it when she redecorated or changed her style, or even her eating habits. Recently she'd become a vegetarian. For days he'd composed what he wanted to say to her, but he didn't want

the argument that might follow. She'd be too angry to fool around, and he would upset the balance of everything. Sometimes it was best to leave discontent under the surface.

He couldn't hear specific words from their conversation, just the buzz of their voices. The furnace sputtered once more, then was quiet. Let's be real, he thought. He had no idea how to maintain it. He left that up to the oil people. It wasn't like he had extra time for home repair or improvement.

Finally he ventured back into the family room. The women sat at opposite ends of the couch, reading. "Women born in twenty other countries tell the story of their lives," Lynnie said, as though reading the title or subtitle. "Oh, here's one—she's a doctor."

He could still picture Lynnie poring over the *Guinness Book of World Records*, from about age seven to age eleven. She'd tried for a month or two to grow her nails curly and striated like the man with the longest nails in the book. When younger, she'd been a counselor at basketball camp, and she played golf and clarinet. Now she played sax and studied a lot. Although she was a good student, he'd spent a fortune on SAT prep courses. He did for Lynnie what he wished had been done for him. For eighteen years he dedicated himself to that.

He moved a lime green pillow to the side chair before sitting on the couch between them, in front of the laptop.

"Dad," Lynnie whined in two syllables. "I can't see." She leaned forward to be able to see around him.

He moved to the side chair.

"She does have extreme highs and lows," Renée said. "I wouldn't want her to hurt you while you were sleeping or something."

They both lowered their books.

"She has these screaming conversations with her mother that last at least an hour. It gets uncomfortable. I have to leave the room."

"Can you request a new roommate?" Renée asked.

"I don't think so," she said.

Everything was different now with Lynnie on her own. Curfews would make no sense. They had no idea where she was or at what time she'd return, and they couldn't do anything about it. At the end of the summer, just weeks before, she'd come home from a party smelling like booze and perched on the end of their bed, working hard to keep from

slurring. She told them innocent bits about the evening. She named one prudish friend, and just the name of that friend gave Barry and Renée relief. She always had a good excuse for being fifteen minutes late or more: had to stop at an ATM; needed gas; lost track of time because of Daylight Savings. She alleged that her cell phone was rarely charged, or at least not when it needed to be.

Barry leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs while they talked about Parents' Weekend, only two weekends off; Lynnie had come home for this one anyway. They'd bought her ticket as soon as she'd been accepted back in early spring, a guarantee they'd see her before Thanksgiving. They hadn't counted on Parents' Weekend.

"There's a reception," Lynnie said.

"Where?" Renée asked.

"The Student Union. Did you notice how much the art sucks in that place? Did you see that one, 'Reef Man,' the guy holding a trident in front of a cave in a coral reef?" Lynnie shook her head. She twisted her feet out of her clogs and propped them on the coffee table. "What kind of developments are you working on?" she asked.

"Carney's," Renée said.

"That's one of my favorite stores."

"This'll be the first twenty-four-hour store in the black community."

Renée and Lynnie swooned over that. Then they got back on the topic of the roommate. Barry could not think of what to add to the conversation. He'd had fine roommates, none he'd grown close to, but they'd always been compatible.

"She calls me 'roomie,'" Lynnie said.

"Roomie," Renée repeated, as though that alone proved the roommate completely sick.

"How about if I cook dinner tonight?" Barry asked. He'd rather feel useful. He'd rather cook and let Renée keep visiting with Lynnie. If it weren't for his knees, he might be running right now.

On Sunday morning they had to return Lynnie to the airport. When she came downstairs ready to go in a pink chenille sweater and her kinky caramel hair twisted into a messy swoop held by a claw, the word he thought of

was "fizzy." They hung out in a coffee shop until it was time for her to go to her gate.

"Physics going okay?" Renée asked her.

"I got two 5s on the last quiz, but my grade right now is a B+."

"Five out of how many?" Barry asked.

"Five out of five."

"Well, I think that's wonderful," Renée said.

"I worked hard," Lynnie said. "The teaching assistant graded it and gave me a perfect score. But a B+? Maybe it's because of class participation."

"You might have to lower your expectations," Barry said.

"He wrote nice comments. I just wanted an A."

Renée pointed out that it was time for Lynnie to go through security.

"Okay, honey," Renée said, hugging Lynnie. "We're going to miss you even if it is just two weeks. Take care. Be good."

Barry hugged her, too. He wished they'd had more time, wished he'd made better use of it.

"Love you," he said.

"Love you too, Dad."

They watched her sling her purse off her shoulder and collapse the handle of her wheelie bag. The back pockets of her jeans had been ripped off—by the jeans company or by Lynnie herself, he didn't know. She placed her things on the x-ray belt, then turned and waved. While they watched her recede down the long corridor, Barry felt a vague fear, having her fly alone. Next time they were together he would make sure to show her The Dead on YouTube.

In the car Barry was aware of it just being them again. He even checked the back seat, empty. Renée tossed her purse where Lynnie had sat. He glanced over at her. She turned the temperature up to 'High.'

"You know that doesn't warm it up any faster."

"I know. You've told me that a million times."

"Then why do you turn it to 'High?'"

"It helps me psychologically," she said.

He nodded slowly. She kicked off her shoes.

"Why would you tell her to lower her expectations?" she asked.

"I don't know. She tried her best. That's all."

He checked the classical station, busy advertising cultural events, and the talk station, which was in the midst of a fund drive. He clicked off the radio and slid his fingers between Renée's thigh and her seat. "What should we do today?" he asked Renée.

"I'm afraid I have a lot to take care of. I dropped everything for Lynnie."

"I'll cook dinner again," he offered.

"Great." She smiled at him with those unfamiliar teeth.

"How about fish?" he proposed.

"I'm over fish."

"How about tofu?" He meant it as a joke.

"Good. Tofu!" She unlocked the glove compartment, took out her sunglasses, and put them on.

"We could go out tonight."

"We could."

Now that Lynnie wasn't sitting behind her, she backed up her seat.

Barry took back his hand. "I've been wanting to say this thing, this thing about our not being soul mates."

"Of course I'm going to pay attention to Lynnie when she's home." Renée looked at him. "This has been a big adjustment for me too, you know." Then she fingered the contents of her bag, picked out a binder, and swapped her sunglasses for reading glasses.

"It's been an adjustment," he repeated slowly. "I'm not just talking about this weekend, though." He rubbed the back of his neck and turned on the classic rock station. "We've got to talk to each other. Now that Lynnie's gone."

"You're right." She twisted toward him in her seat. "Let's talk."

Barry suddenly wondered what they would talk about.

"How did Lynnie seem to you?" he asked.

"Good—different, but good," Renée said.

"How different?"

"More herself—but distant from us," she said.

"I thought so too."

"On her own particular path," she said.

"I agree."

Renée put her hand on his knee.

On Friday afternoon Barry and Renée flew to Parents' Weekend. Renée's luggage got lost. Lynnie's room was too small for the three of them to hang out in, especially with the roommate, who was eating raw chocolate chip cookie dough out of a plastic tube. Lynnie suggested a vegetarian restaurant on Main Street, where Barry found himself checking out other parents. A woman with gray, shoulder-length hair and glasses with bluish translucent frames turned his head. He felt Renée scanning the other parents too. He couldn't believe this was his age bracket, that he was now the older generation in this deal. He had to ask what a vegan was, and Lynnie explained it. He must have made a face because when Lynnie went to the restroom, Renée said, "Use the ugly vegan face, and may it freeze that way." He ate his bean salad without complaining. They kept having to wave away fruit flies.

Leaving the restaurant, Lynnie pointed to a boutique next door. "Oh, let's go in here," she said.

A bong stood in the window display. Twenty or thirty years ago that wouldn't have bothered him, but now with Lynnie the target customer, bongs in windows bothered him a lot. They followed Lynnie inside, and she directed Barry to hold their jackets.

The clothes looked skimpy, mostly strapless shirts with strings as sleeves. Shiny pickup clothes, Barry thought, while Lynnie sifted through them. She held up a shirt to show her mother—black, with shortened sleeves and body, as if it had been preshrunk in the dryer. The zipper was asymmetrical, off the shoulder. Barry rolled his eyes at Renée, but she was busy looking at cheap jewelry, holding one piece after another up to her neck. Lynnie sidled up to her.

"Too dark against my neck? Does it disappear there?" Renée asked Lynnie.

"Yeah, 'fraid so," she said.

"What about this?"

All the necklaces cost $9.99. That signified something. Too cheap for a grown woman, Barry thought.

After Renée bought Lynnie the miniature shirt, they went back to the

hotel room instead of the dorm. Lynnie thought that would be easier than making conversation with her roommate. Barry wondered if they should adopt the strange girl, whose parents hadn't come for the weekend. They propped themselves on the bed and watched TV. Lynnie sat between them, talking about the event for the evening. They could skip the campus tour since they'd been on it last year. Maybe they'd go to the lecture on college life, go to the game, or hear the freshman bands, cobbled together in little more than a month.

By five-thirty Renée pointed out that her suitcase still had not come. "I need that shirt out of my suitcase," Renée said. "The one with the sparkles woven through."

Lynnie gave her a funny look.

"Subtle sparkles, of course."

Barry hadn't considered what he might wear. He clicked the remote control and stopped at something about economic crime against senior citizens.

"Senior citizens?" Lynnie protested.

"AARP starts at fifty-five," Barry said.

Renée looked at Barry. "You're not dead yet." But then she squeezed his hand. She let go to tuck in her shirt. "That store's open until seven. I might get something. Wanna come?" she asked Lynnie.

Lynnie put on her jacket, which was denim with a wooly inside. "I just want to be with you guys." She smiled at them, her lips shiny with gloss.

Renée twisted a gauzy scarf around her neck. Barry stood up. "I'll go, too."

Outside the store, Lynnie ran into two boys and a girl who acted like they'd been waiting for her all along. The boys had longish hair and looked like babies, with flushed cheeks and smooth faces, skinny legs and shorts in cool weather. The girl wore a ring in her eyebrow. Renée shifted from one foot to another, waiting for Lynnie, or possibly waiting to be introduced. She lengthened the strap of her purse, then rearranged it from over the shoulder to across her chest. Lynnie didn't look their way, and eventually Renée rolled her eyes at Barry.

"It's hypocritical," Renée said. "She said she just wanted to be with us."

They both watched Lynnie, who still didn't take any notice of them.

"That's just the way kids are," he said. "Peers will always trump parents." He for once understood what was going on. He felt bad for Renée then, and he reached for her dry, warm hand and squeezed it. Renée leaned her head against his.

"Look," Barry said. "A bong."

Renée nodded. She held his hand loosely.

"Maybe I'll buy it and get some weed, and we can see what happens. I'll set it up in the man cave I'm making in the basement. I might move down there."

At last Renée began to chuckle, and after a minute she started to laugh. She knew exactly who he was now, that he wouldn't buy a bong, that it would not be desirable to move into a man cave in the basement, especially since he'd have to replace that floral couch with a leather one, that he just wanted to stay connected with the two women he loved. It felt so good to make his wife laugh.

Renée walked to the circle of kids and tugged on Lynnie's sleeve. "I'm going in," she said.

"Sure," Lynnie said. She re-twisted her hair into the claw, making that look effortless.

Barry followed Renée as she sifted through the racks, then walked over to check out the bong. It was a cheap plastic thing, tinted pink. He looked at his wife who was evaluating a fabric between her thumb and forefinger. He couldn't help her, but he could stand around and look supportive. Finally she settled on two things to try: a dress, less slinky than most in the shop but of a cheap-looking nubby fabric, like some chair covering, and an olive green sweater with pompoms hanging from the ties at the neck. The olive would look good against her skin, Barry thought. He followed Renée into the dressing room feeling strangely subversive, as he had on that day when he and Renée had slipped down to their basement, with Lynnie singing along to a video. They had sneaked down there, where the granite rubble foundation exhaled cool air even in summer, they'd closed the door to the kitchen with a subtle click, they'd stretched out, alongside each other on the discarded floral couch, and they'd begun again.

Bastards

Richard Mack

his name was Billy Ballard
but kids called him Billy Bastard
denim shirts, brown stains
smell of urine, small red eyes
parents said he was “bad”
teacher said “bad”
when he fell in beside me
in the alley after school
I didn’t run
when he flung paint inside garages
I joined him
slick paint colors running
down our wrists and
under our shirt cuffs
the sweet smell of guilt
and lust drove us
when we heard
“stop you bastards”
we ran
later I cried, copiously
and gave it up
gave up myself
and gave up Billy
cleaning garages for a month
I worked with a half-smile
one part righteous restitution
one part bastard

Super

Brian Patrick Heston

Robert Thomas walks through the shiny glass doors of *DiBartolo's Costumes Inc.,* the fifteenth company he will have worked for in the last two years. All of these companies have become more symbols than places now to him, representations of one all-encompassing corporation that seems to run the whole kit and caboodle. This particular place is just a shadow on a wall. Like Plato, he thinks. Or maybe it is more like Heraclites, a river in constant change. Either way, it's bigger than he is. No matter where he has gone in his ingenious guise as a temp, it has been the same, drudging away days in the bowels of office buildings. He has braved many environments in his time. Once, he was even placed in a dark, damp basement swarming with mice and roaches. He arrived each day at 9:00 on the dot, taking his customary seat at a foldout table. As the hours passed, he shooed mice and squashed bugs. Weeks passed, then two months. Toward the end, he stopped shooing and squashing. Instead, he left little pieces of crumbs for both. He came to understand the true meaning of community. Then his term was up, as it always happens, just as he was becoming comfortable with village life.

The receptionist who greets him is pretty and perky. Maybe that's her superpower, to exhibit perk at 8:30 in the morning, leap boredom in a single bound. Beside her desk is a tall, leafy plant, the kind that you can't ever figure out whether it's real or not. Other workers come in. They already work here, so they move right past her without a word to wide-open-spaces offices or boxy compact cubicles. Not even the men look at her. As far as they are concerned, she may as well be the plant. After telling her who he is, she picks up a brightly colored phone to tell the other end that he's arrived—yes, him, the unquestioned hero of the story. She then tells him to take a seat.

As Robert waits, a security guard comes in, a big hulking man with linebacker shoulders and arms like clubs.

"Morning, Liz," he says.

"Oh, hey, you. How was your weekend?"

"Real nice. Went to see my sister and her kids in Jersey. Been a real long time since I seen them last."

"Oh good for you."

"I'll tell you, that little girl of hers gets more adorable every time I see her."

The conversation goes on like this: the receptionist describing her weekend with her fiancé; the security guard telling her about his desire to buy a house; the whole while people in business formal streaming in, saying nothing to either. Finally, the boss calls for him. He's sent up a glistening chrome stairway to the left of the receptionist. As he walks up, he notices soft musical stylings of an unknown origin trickling down from above. He tries to separate the different sounds he hears. There's a horn-like instrument. Also something that resembles wind chimes. He wasn't even aware that wind chimes could be used as a musical instrument.

When he gets to the top of the stairs, a squat little woman with stringy brown hair is waiting for him. Her dress is some strange color that mixes aqua and teal. Unlike the younger girls he has seen at the offices, her shoes are sensible and flat. That's probably why she is the boss—a tough go-getter hell-bent on being taken seriously.

"This way," she says, without a bit of banter.

Robert follows her through gray halls, passing cubicles and closed doors. The further she takes him into this place's belly, the colder it gets. Air conditioning pumps constant cycles of processed air even though summer is still two months away. Such arctic paradises placate computers and copiers, all the bold machinery of business. Robert is prepared, though. He's brought a thick woolly sweater with him. The closer to 5:00 it gets, however, the more the sweater's resistance to cold weakens, until it disappears altogether like Cinderella's glass slippers.

He has come to the room where he'll spend the day. It's large and orange, resembling a public school lunchroom. He wonders what this room's purpose was before he arrived. Boxes upon boxes are stacked around a tiny

desk. Beneath the desk is a plastic, uncomfortable-looking chair much too small for most fully-grown humans. There's a computer snuggled in the crevice between the boxes. At least there's a window across from the desk where he'll be working.

"Okay," says Boss Lady. "Organize these files in numerical order. Highest number followed by lowest. Every file must be entered into Excel. If at all possible, I'd like it done before the close of the business day."

Numerical order, Robert thinks. *My specialty.* He wants desperately to tell her how he's broken records, how no one else can come close to his prowess at numerical order. She is already walking away before he gets the chance. He sits in the hard chair, cracks his knuckles, then goes to work. First, he creates an Excel file. The blue screen of the computer is like a sky, he thinks. Not such a wild thought. After all, they create skies all the time in movies by the clever manipulations of machines like this. Yes, the rectangular boxes in the Excel file are clouds. The numbers he will type into them will be rain.

He starts with the box closest to him.

"200 in the same box as 15! How did these poor bastards ever get along without me?"

The first two boxes go quickly, leaving only 98 more. Before moving onto the next box, Robert remembers the window across from him. It looks out onto Chestnut Street and the tallest building in the city, Liberty Place. For a moment, he lets himself imagine climbing its glistening blue glass with sucker fingers then buzzing around its steeple like a giant fly. Down below, an ambulance maneuvers through traffic. If only he were designed for flight and speed, then he could propel rocket-like through the clouds to help the person in the ambulance before they needed an ambulance. What a pity. *Too much time given to daydreaming,* he thinks. *Back to work.*

After a few hours, he has done 20 boxes, and it's time for lunch. In the office universe, lunch is always open for debate. Some take it at 1:00, others at 2:00. Some even take it at 10:00 and don't come back until 2:00. It depends on where you fall in the pecking order, whether you're a raptor tearing the throat from some unfortunate rodent, or a little gray pigeon pecking breadcrumbs from some geezer's hand. Robert is a traditionalist, an old-fashioned sort. Lunch was at 12:00 for Grandpappy Thomas, and he'll be damned if it's not going to be at 12:00 for him, too. And when he comes back, it will be 1:00—right on the dot. No questions asked. He takes

one last look at the 80 boxes he has remaining. He's definitely behind, but it's lunchtime—out of his hands now.

A bag lunch hangs from his fist as he dips and dodges fellow pedestrians. There are days he thinks he might take lunch at a restaurant. Then he remembers that each of his paychecks is a holy relic kept in the tabernacle of his bank account, only to be released for specific occasions during any given month: grocery shopping and rent on the 1st; electric, gas, and telephone on the 5th; credit card on the 10th; and insurance on the 15th. No matter.

The day is mild, spring having breathed a breath of cherry blossoms into the exhaust-clogged air. People are out walking sun-slick sidewalks, talking and laughing as though the day has been made pleasant for their benefit. He decides to eat at Rittenhouse Park. He's ecstatic at this prospect and is proud of himself for thinking of it. When he gets there, he finds that his idea isn't so original after all, because every bench is taken. Robert can't help but brood over this. This is how it is for him, it seems, a great idea always to be squashed by fellow workers with similar ideas. He makes a place in the damp grass beneath the bloated white blossoms of a stubby dogwood.

He opens the brown bag and takes from it: one ham and cheese sandwich (no mayonnaise), one apple (starting to brown, but still good), one diet Coke (have to watch that waistline), and one sandwich bag filled with Oreos (after all, he's got to live a little). He's tempted to start with the Oreos, but that wouldn't be prudent. After all, would Grandpappy Thomas have started with Oreos? No way, Jose. He spent 40 years on the banks of the Delaware loading and unloading freight from ships. He would've eaten the sandwich then the apple. Hell, good 'ole pappy probably wouldn't even have a sandwich bag filled with cookies. Instead, he would've had a thermos of coffee for dessert, a squirt of whiskey to sweeten it.

When finished with the sandwich, Robert moves on to the apple. Apples have always been a crapshoot for him. If they're good, they're really good. Usually, they're long past their prime, making it so he has to bite them in spots, just to avoid the sour brown parts. He's been sipping the Coke occasionally through the entire lunch, and now the can is close to empty. This depresses him. It's not hot out, but it is warm, and he's enjoyed sipping from that frosty can immensely. If only one of those smarty scientists who can send a man to the moon or clone a sheep would invent a can of Coke that would last as long as you need it to last. If he were a scientist, that's

exactly what he'd be working on. Screw fiber optics. It's the bottomless can of Coke that is the wave of the future.

He finally gets to his reward: that bag of chocolaty Oreos. The intake of sugar gives him a shot in the arm. His good mood returns. Now everyone is beautiful to him. Well, except for the homeless guy sitting on the edge of the fountain, soaking his feet in its gritty water. Other than him, it seems his eyes can't get enough beauty. A gurgling pigeon horde surrounds one woman as she tosses them pieces of a sandwich. Her sheer legs are crossed as she dangles one pump from the toes of a stockinged foot. Beside her is a man. He is tall and boyish—painfully handsome—probably only a few years out of college. Both are lean and glowing. Robert envies the man's height. If only he had such height, the world would have been his oyster long ago. He, too, would be sitting in a park with a woman with such legs. Robert checks his watch. It's 12:45, which really means 12:55. The watch has been ten minutes off for two years, and he has no conceivable idea how to fix it, so he simply calculates his life ten minutes slow.

Back at the office, five minutes later than he had intended, he returns to the boxes. Most have great difficulty gearing up for work after lunch. The body gets used to rest and abandoning mindless tasks. Robert, however, doesn't suffer from the same frailties other humans do. Well, he suffers from most of them, just not this particular one. Put him in the ring with Dr. Octopus and he'll be torn into lean strips. Put him into a room with files in a state of total chaos and he turns into The Flash.

"How demanding the world is of us chosen few," he sighs as he lifts box 21 onto the table. Beside him are several stacks containing files from boxes 1 through 20. Now it dawns on him that he has completely forgotten to enter them into Excel. Drats! Foiled again by his feeble memory, the kryptonite of his existence. Bills have gone unpaid, birthdays uncelebrated, phone calls uncalled. Now he must go back and enter the completed files. This will undoubtedly test his resolve and quite possibly bring his reputation to the brink of extinction. It's his spotless record in temping achievement that keeps employment rolling in. Once he fails to meet a deadline or screws up, the work will slow. Some new go-getter will receive top billing.

The computer's dull glow beckons, and he wonders if it's hooked to the Internet. He clicks the mouse's pointer on Explorer, but it doesn't connect.

No, this computer is all business. Its sole purpose is to receive, not to give. This is a blessing of the disguised variety. He must get back to work.

File after file enters then leaves his hand into order with such speed and precision that he hardly realizes his body is in motion. There are times he lets himself admire his hands. He can't do this too long, because he must pay close attention to each file's specific number. If he were to miss even one number, the whole day's work would be destroyed, because he'd have to go back to every stack to see where his ordering broke down. Still, if only his power transferred over to a different body part, like his legs. What if he could run as fast as he filed? Not a single bullet could catch him. Days would belong to the job, but his nights would be spent chasing down potential rapists, murderers, and terrorists.

Boxes 21 through 39 are now under his belt, and it's only 3:00. This time, he remembers to enter them into Excel as he goes. His pace has definitely sped up. Seeing how well he is doing, he gives himself a little break. He stands to stretch out his tight back and leg muscles. Before sitting back down, he notices a closet on the other side of the room. He eyes it. The unknown of it, its what-can-be-in-there-ness tugs at him. Curiosity is his other kryptonite. From Kindergarten through college, it kept him from getting the best grades because while he should have been listening to what was to be on tests, he was staring out windows, looking through open doors, or strolling through his mind. Not this time. He will get this job done by 5:00. Nothing is going to stop him. Sure, they will probably let him come in and finish tomorrow if need be. That's not what he's known for, though. His reputation is at stake. Some can invent light bulbs. Others can run miles in under four minutes. But only he, Robert Thomas, can finish filing projects in record time. He again sits, but the closet's presence taps incessantly at his skull. The effects of that unknown place are already apparent. Sloth has sapped his speed. He is powerless against its ravages. He must know. He promises himself that he won't spend a single moment more than he needs to. He'll find out what's in there then get right back to work.

The door creaks when he opens it. He looks around to see if anyone heard. No one has, so he goes in. The closet is enormous, and it's filled with rows and rows of clothes on hangers inside dry cleaning bags. Now he knows. Good. That's the end of it. That tap continues, though, because he

can only make out hints of the clothing, so he walks down the rows, lifting the plastic: chambermaid outfit, alien mask and gown, and even a gorilla suit. His curiosity quenched, he can finally put the closet behind him. On his way out, he sees hints of red fabric glinting in the fluorescent light. He lifts the plastic to see the blue spandex shirt and pants. More importantly, he sees the cape. A cape! There's the feeling of falling in his stomach. The little voice of his conscience whispers that he could be caught, but he ignores it. He takes the cape from its hanger and holds it before him. It flutters slightly from an air conditioning vent beneath his feet. He throws it over his back then ties it around his neck. When fastened securely, he lets it hang, feeling its slight weight pull at his shoulders. When he walks, it rubs at the back of his legs, making a faint whooshing sound. In fact, it's pretty awkward to walk with. This doesn't surprise him. After all, capes aren't worn for taking long walks in the park. No, capes are worn for action, for speed, for the sheer velocity of saving lives. He peeks from the closet to see if anyone has come into the room. All clear.

From the doorway, he places one foot behind the other as he reaches his arms out in front of him. With a deep concentrated breath, he leaps. Then he's running and shushing around the room. The cape flaps at his back as he maneuvers through thunderheads. Lightning bursts from all sides. No concern. Only those without superpowers have to worry about such things. With his precise telescopic vision, he sees a car chase spiraling through the streets. He plummets down. The chased car trips the curb, heading straight for a pack of orphans and nuns, here, no doubt, to see the Liberty Bell or Independence Hall. The car gets closer and closer, but just as its headlights are to plow said unfortunate orphans and nuns, he lands in front of them, taking the hammering blow. Car is totaled. Villain is bruised but alive. And the cops nab him with a smile and salute to Robert. All cheer as he shoots up over the buildings to disappear into the clouds.

An angry voice calls from the crowd. Must be the voice of the villain, of course, telling him that revenge is eminent. It's to be expected. Yet, this voice mentions nothing of revenge.

"It's a quarter to five," it says. "Who the hell has this agency sent us?"

This is when Robert stops and sees all the faces staring at him. Many are suppressing laughter. Others gape in awe. The angry face comes into focus. It's Boss Lady.

"What in the hell are you doing?" she asks.

He doesn't know what to say. Sweat drools down his stomach and back, seeping through his white dress shirt. He's out of breath. A throbbing sun of fear pulsates in his chest. Boss Lady is over by the table now, examining his effort.

"You're not even halfway through these."

"That's what you get when you hire a temp," a man says with a grin.

Boss Lady glares and his grin goes away.

"This just isn't acceptable."

Of course, he will not officially be fired by the agency. They simply will be unable to find him work. If he calls, they'll swear to be doing all they can to drum something up for him, that he just needs to be patient. He will apply to other agencies and jobs. But this will follow him. Everything ultimately does.

Boss Lady's eyes are filled with remorseless contempt. Robert stands frozen in the high beams of her gaze. Then his body makes a decision. It runs. From the large orange room, through the halls, down the chrome stairs, through the lobby where the pretty receptionist says "hi" even as he blows by her at what seems to him is warp speed. His momentous velocity stops when he has to wait for an elevator going down. He doesn't even consider the stairs. Traversing 15 flights just doesn't seem plausible. As he waits, he keeps turning his head to see the round-up posse headed by Boss Lady. Yet no one is coming. The elevator finally arrives, and he gets on quickly. He clutches the cape's smooth fabric to his chest.

Making his way through the main lobby, he imagines burly security guards lined up, arms folded, stony eyes chiseled into their no-nonsense faces. He swarms them with blurry kicks and punches, dropping them all in one mad, single attack. He gets to the building's exit without a problem, then steps through the swivel doors onto the busy street. A few people look up briefly. Most don't look at all. He looks behind him to see if anyone is chasing him, then into the clotted, honking traffic for police. All clear on each front. Triumphant, he aims his arms at the blue sky and runs up Chestnut, the cape flapping mightily at his back.

© 2010 Meghan Colson, “Legs”

City Night Scene

Maura Gage Cavell

Young women all dressed up in the latest fashion roam.
Men watch women as they go by.
Cars screech to a halt as lights change fast.
Everyone seems to have a destination.

Men watch women as they go by.
Boutiques and businesses begin to close.
Everyone seems to have a destination.
Restaurants, bars, and clubs swing doors wide.

Boutiques and businesses begin to close.
Music pulsates all over town.
Restaurants, bars, and clubs swing doors wide.
The city's buildings are a concrete forest at night.

Music pulsates all over town.
Cars screech to a halt as lights change fast.
The City's buildings are a concrete forest at night.
Young men all dressed up in the latest fashion roam.

© 2010 Melissa Poirier, “City Lights”

My Final Resting Place

Karl S Monroe

When I first thought of dying into the marsh at Juanita Bay, I was sitting on Vic Roe's memorial bench.[1,2] It was a fine winter day. I could see across and into the marsh, for the burgeoning spring had not yet obliterated the view. I had been visiting and writing about the marsh frequently for more than a year.

Really, the thought of dying came as a vision of my own future. One day I find myself on the central boardwalk, gazing over a railing, hoping to glimpse—just once—the furtive streak of a shrew or a vole in the undergrowth. Suddenly, I am contorted by a massive heart attack. Instinctually, as if to rise out of my body and escape the pain, I bolt upward, catapulting my body over the railing and into the marsh. I'm dead before my body splats into the peat. It's early evening, and over the next few hours the bog gently engulfs my remains. By the time early-morning visitors enter the park, I have vanished completely.

Maybe this sounds insanely macabre, a fantasy of deranged depression, but please understand. Consider that the risk factors for heart disease are essentially the same as for Alzheimer's disease. Which ending would you choose: quick and oddly poetic, or a lingering and excruciating descent away from yourself? An eradicating coronary could be attractive, if I could just choose the time and place.

1. Juanita Bay nestles in northern Kirkland on the eastern shore of Lake Washington—directly across from Warren G. Magnuson Park in Seattle. The marsh is the heart of a 120-acre nature preserve.
2. Vic's bench stands alone along the approach to the west boardwalk. His plaque reads: *Vic Roe / 1922 to 1996 / He loved this place.*

Dying into the marsh. The beginning of a great adventure—not for me, but for my remains. We read of mummies cast forth by other bogs or melting glaciers, and how they set archaeologists all atwitter. Oh, they would give me a name! And think about me as they went to sleep!

But alas, impediments beset my vision. For one, when I lean over Juanita Bay railings, it's usually to peer into Lilypad Inlet or the Great Beaver Pond. Both are too wet for instant interment, and park workers would discover my body in the morning. *Hey, Joe, there's another stiff over here in the shallows.*

Even if the marsh did swallow me up, it couldn't keep me. I always drive to the park, and the search would start with my car. I'd hate to have the entire marsh exhumed in a quixotic search for my body, especially since someone might be slipping my ashes into the peat in just a few weeks. This might be avoided by taking a bus to the park.[3] Still, telltale clues might betray my location. Some light object, maybe a ballpoint pen, would float to the top. *Yes, he favored that brand,* my wife might tell rescue workers, as if the pen were scrawling the first phrase of her widowhood upon the marsh.

Juanita Bay is not ideally suited to preserve corpses. Riding on the edge of a giant lake, our marsh faces too many volatile, destabilizing influences. Ideally, you want an isolated blackwater bog. There's a great one about 25 miles away at Snoqualmie Ridge. But if the homeowners' association there got wind of this idea, it might take offense.

Okay, so mummification is very unlikely. I'm just saying that it *could* happen, right here.[4]

Say it *did* happen. I would become a relic, a time traveler whose peculiar qualities could help foment theories about his own, long-ago society. Noting evidence of mild cerebral palsy, the researchers might conclude that this man lived in a society too primitive to make effective use of psycho-neural-kinetic medications, which will have virtually eliminated such deformities. Further

3. Such aberrant behavior as taking the bus might suggest a suicidal intent, which would subtly taint the value of the remains to the archaeologists, even if they were oblivious to this complication.
4. If you're really interested in the hypothetical issues raised by the idea of allowing interment in a marsh, please see my unpublished essays, "Interment Comes to the Policy Wonk" and "The Birth of Compassion: Speculation on the Cross Species Discovery of the Remains of Intelligent Life."

observing signs that this man had led a pampered and sedentary life, they may speculate that his primitive society viewed its disabled brethren with a particular honor and deference, as if they had been touched by the gods. I think of having a haiku tattooed on my rump:

Life was so easy
lolling over Sunday brunch
then dying of stress[5]

I show an early version of this essay to my wife, and she sniffs: *It's such an ego trip.* At first I'm offended. I want to answer*: It's not ego-tripping. If this were about ego, I would be carting my essays around in an airtight container, as if some future aeon would regard them as Beowulf.* But I hold my tongue. You learn to do this in marriage, especially when you fear that your position is flawed. This allows you to carry on a conversation with your spouse even when you're apart, burnishing your fallible arguments, hoping she'll concede that you might have a point.

I know it looks as if this idea is all about me, but that only reflects the crabbed limitations of my mind. It's really hard for me to conceive of something before I can picture it happening to me. I mean, isn't it weird to say to yourself, wouldn't it be great if *someone* fell into the marsh? But strange as it sounds, that is where I'm headed—toward an emissary from our time, maybe a photographer whose camera's digital memory card is overflowing with images. So this is my proposal: Let everyone who frequents the marsh visualize the act of planting an ideal emissary in the peat—a biomass time capsule for the ages.[6,7]

Maybe we don't need to fret over making an ideal selection. Future

5. Will I have to cover my entire torso with a codicil explaining "Sunday brunch?"
6. When repeating this affirmation, be sure to envision this discovery being made *before* the next glacial period. Otherwise, our relic would be torn asunder and rendered useless.
7. Admittedly, there are ethical and legal issues here. What if our collective affirmation resulted in the sacrifice of a person in the prime of life—say, a mother of preschoolers? Sure, being chosen by fate for interment is a distinct honor, but it might ring hollow in the case of a 35-year-old, as compared to a prematurely aged 62-year-old man astride a fantastic hobby horse. And what if the pattern of affirmations became known to heirs of the deceased? What a delicious class-action suit might ensue: *The Estate of Jane Doe vs. Adam and Eve Roe, et al, worshippers of the future at Juanita Bay Park.*

generations of archaeologists will have tools we can't even imagine. When we think of communicating with the future, we trap ourselves in preoccupation with narrow issues of technology transfer. So we focus on the medium of transmission, instead of deciding *what* to say. Who cares if our means of delivery become obsolete almost as fast as we adopt them: Let the discoverers of our artifacts search for *our* Rosetta Stone.

I imagine a future in which access to knowledge may be instant and intuitive. For instance, where now many view the theory of morphological fields as speculative and romantic, future researchers may wonder how the biological sciences managed to function without this critical concept. Their scientists will be able—merely upon entering a particular geographical site—to read these fields and produce a detailed account of the species once found here, replete with their customs, relations with one another, and their distinct and separate fates.

Just picture the company of archaeologists as they discover our mummy, our delegate to their time. A fully ennobled intuitive[8] places a single finger upon the fragile, mummified skull of our courier. In just a moment he—or she[9]—will comprehend all of the individual's principal patterns of thought, with special clarity regarding the last few hours of life.

And then a very strange occurrence unfolds. The likeness and consciousness of the departed materialize over the marsh to observe what follows—echoing the reports of near-death survivors who recall hovering above their lifeless forms in emergency rooms.[10]

The intuitive reports it all.[11] The subject suffered a notable deterioration in his sense of balance during his final few days. He had been working on a creative project—some writing about this very marsh, in which his intimate personal experience was interlaced with observed phenomena in the marsh

8. How can I demonstrate the respect such a worthy commands? It exceeds the awe we hold for a quadruple-degreed post-doc, and carries no underlying disdain for the eggheaded.
9. He or she? Certainly by then they'll have devised gender-neutral personal pronouns!
10. It *is* me! I have been chosen! I have to rein in my sense of gratification, so strong across all these centuries, so I can see what happens next.
11. The intuitive reports all this in the present sense, as if it were happening at the moment the intuitive detects it. But out of respect for our own grammatical conventions, I attempt to render it in the past tense.

in a very curious[12] way. There was a sense of profound agony. On one hand, the being felt his writing was the best he could do; on the other, he was sure it fell far short of his initial vision. Over his final few days, the being was locked in a paroxysm of repetitive behavior. The intuitive reaches for a description: Some kind of primitive digital device. The being characterizes his obsession as *computer games.*[13] The subject believes that playing them represents a symbolic avoidance of basic life issues.

The intuitive continues: In the moments before the being fell from the bridge, a dramatic change of consciousness swept over him. From the outside he appeared to have swooned—but the being himself realized that he had achieved absolute identification with the marsh. He died into the peat not because his body failed him, but because he had realized his fate. It was time to make this union physical, not simply spiritual.

Hovering above the marsh, I feel as if I am gasping for breath. Do I know this? Why does it feel as if I am just now learning it, centuries later? Below, events continue to unfold. *Now the fun will begin,* I tell myself. I'm ready for all the internecine battles that will ensue—just as, in my time, tribes and governments battled bitterly for dominion over the remains of a human dubbed "Kennewick Man." Who will own my remains? Where will they lie?

I cannot understand what happens next. The troupe of archaeologists withdraws a respectful distance and bivouacs on high ground. They spend the next three days in what appears to be meditative colloquy. They send for equipment. They repair again and again to the site, as if seeking some confirmation from the being. And then, on the morning of the fourth day, they re-gather with all their equipment on the site. It is as if they are fashioning an open-air sepulcher. Around the perimeter they embed a series of lights. A trio of archaeologists bends over each station, programming it, brow to database. As the work progresses, a holographic image of my world, as I understood it, rises over the marsh, replete with sounds and odors—it even evokes my feelings and my projected understanding of others' feelings. A museum takes shape, *in situ.* I understand that when

12. Or did the intuitive say "incongruous?" I wish I could play it back—as if I have anyone to share it with.
13. The archaeologists look at one another and shrug in bewilderment.

people in this intuitive society visit here, they will simultaneously see the untrammeled site as discovered by the archaeologists, as it appeared to me in my time and as it exists for the visitors, all in real time. Will they see Native Americans encamped to fish and gather valuable plants? What about the glaciers? I can't tell.

Like a high priest, the chief intuitive steps back into the site. She holds my skull and speaks tenderly to my spirit, like a mother laying an infant down to sleep. She thanks me for answering their summons. She says they know that I may feel obliged to remain at the site, to ensure that its spirit remains whole. But they have their understanding, which is all they need—and I am free to come and go as I will. She brings her brow close to mine, really a kiss good-bye, and lays me in my final resting place.

© 2010 David Poirier, “Posts in Water”

Twice-born

Lia Greenwell

I.

The thyroid gland
is shaped like a butterfly,
stretching its lobes like wings
across the sides of the neck,
so that the shaking of one wing,
even a minor fluttering, might
cause it to lift off
through the top of the head.

II.

When they opened my mother's
neck to cut hers out,
they found it shriveled,
broken-winged. The cut
on her neck looked like someone
wanted the breath
right out of her.

III.

The butterfly,
usually twice-born,
falls tired and curls a head
toward a tail, dissolving into the material
of itself, its fresh green skin
melting to flashing scales. Her thyroid
folded its wings around its body sleepily,

and dreamt that it was more
than itself.

IV.

My mother was reborn
silently, growing
from the material of herself,
all of this chaotic multiplying.

This is metamorphosis gone wrong,
cancer, that unstoppable
birth, cells born, born,
born-again,
a swarm of butterflies bursting
from a single cell.

V.

One million chrysalises
hang like a row of bats on a branch.
Newly alive, they crack
through their clear cages,
the booming sound
of that many wings breaking
through. Millions of dark
shining bodies hover
above, diving and swirling,
swarms of shadows in motion.

Lepidoptery

Lia Greenwell

I yelled at my mother
tonight. She asked
why she couldn't
hear what I had
written. Is it

about me?
she asked.

No,
no,
my stupid lying lips
yelled at her,
at her kind voice,
at her wrinkling face.

In playing out my dark
scenarios I had written her
sick body into
butterflies,

into fireflies. I made her into
things with wings.

I could not tell her
in her now well body
that she had been written

into a glass cage,
placed there with metal
instruments, with my shaking
little hands. I pinned her
with a tag, her name.
I hung her dead on the wall.

Interview with Richard McCann

Jim Porter

Richard McCann came to MSU in March of 2009 as the judge of the English Department's annual Creative Writing Awards. On his visit he worked with creative writing students and gave a reading from his current work-in-progress, *The Resurrectionist*, a memoir about his experience as a liver transplant patient. Richard McCann's creative nonfiction has appeared in *Best American Essays*, and his collection of short stories, *Mother of Sorrows*, won the John C. Zacharis/Ploughshares Award in 2005. *Ghost Letters*, a collection of his poetry, won the Beatrice Hawley and Capricorn Awards. This transcript is from an interview conducted by Jim Porter, a former student of McCann's.

Jim Porter: I'd like you to talk about how you work across genre: in fiction, in poetry, in creative nonfiction. I remember Henry Taylor talking about when he was stuck with a poem, he'd switch to fiction and he'd write a story as a sort of exercise. Or he'd write a story in earnest and that would get him unstuck and then he'd go back to his poem. For him fiction was a tool to get him back into poetry. That doesn't seem to be how you do it. Everything you do is for keeps.

Richard McCann: No, that's not true. It's not all for keeps. It's all an exercise . . . until something is good [laughs]; it's nothing but exercise.

Porter: How do you make decisions about what mode you're going to work in: poetry versus fiction versus creative nonfiction?

McCann: It's not a decision. It really isn't. I write mostly in prose now. But I

still work as if it were a poem. That is to say, I don't write in lines, but I still work by asking 'what are the key images that have depth that can be explored and unpacked?' Then, I'll try and get some phrases or lines and sentences that feel strong and that present an image. And I try to get a voice going. Then once I have that, I can start. So, actually I still feel like I'm working in a poetic method by starting with an image and a voice.

Porter: In another interview you talked about trying to make the language "crystallize"; is that working in that poetic sense too—getting the prose as concentrated, as dense as possible?

McCann: That's exactly what I meant: concentrated. Or "distilled" is the word I've always used. The chemical process of distillation involves bringing together volatile compounds, so that's always appealed to me as a metaphor. But, I actually wouldn't mind leaving that somewhat and writing a little looser. My original idea of what was good was like a Louise Gluck poem: something that was very hard-surfaced. I mean hard-surfaced like a gem—extremely compact—and yet that also had a kind of vortex leading to blackness. It's a kind of black-hole method, I guess.

There's a short story in *Mother of Sorrows* written in a different mode: "My Brother in the Basement." I've been trying to follow some of that way of working more, trying to get intensity from places other than distillation.

Porter: I remember you told me once that part of your writing and revising process was walking. You would rent a cabin in Virginia, right? And you would walk a lot, and that got you deeper into your material. Maybe that was part of generating the material, maybe it was part of revising the material? Do you still work like that?

McCann: We haven't been back to that place in Virginia in a long time. It's a sore point between my partner and me [laughs]. I'm sick of it. But I do need to walk a lot. I don't know why that is. It doesn't have to be that place in Virginia. I think partly it's because my work is very inward. I get really caught up inside my head and I need to go out. But I'm also really looking for rhythm of voice. I have to find that, and if I can't find it then all I've got is prose, which is not something I'm interested in doing. By 'prose' I

mean I'm not interested in writing a workman-like, serviceable sentence which moves a plot forward. I want a more distinctive sentence and a more distinctive voice. So if there isn't a voice, then I'm nowhere. I often memorize my work as I'm working on it, so I walk around and try to just replay the sentences. It helps me get away from the desk because then I don't get stuck writing it down. I actually memorize, go home and then write it down and fix it again . . . to keep myself from starting the endless process of erasing. Because what would I do otherwise? Write some things, erase them, write a few more things, erase them. And then the day is gone [laughs].

Porter: You speak it to yourself, memorize it, then write it? I'm not sure I've ever talked to anyone who works like that.

McCann: You know people who mutter to themselves on the street? In *Ghost Letters* there's this joke. There's a line—"Occupation: mutterer, walker of median strips," or something like that. That was the joke of me. And with walking, there's something probably about being embodied that's important, but I don't know what it is.

Porter: Writing with a voice is a way of being embodied, too. I'm drawn to the rhythm of voice in your prose. It's apparent in every line of *Mother of Sorrows*. In the second story, "School of Beauty and Shame," there's a part that moves almost like a litany—with the repetition of a litany. You use these sorts of cadences and very intentional repetition. I think repetition is a lot of what you use to get a voice going. Do you agree with that?

McCann: This gives me an opportunity to talk about Diane Wakoski. I've been thinking about her and I was re-reading *Inside the Blood Factory* and I was very aware—even before re-reading it—that one of the things I got from her when I first read her was repetition. She wrote a poem called "Blue Monday" which was: "Blue, blue, blue, blue, blue, blue, blue, blue." It had a drive and it looked very risky to me and I think she was a kind of permission for repetition. But once the permission was there, I saw it was already in me. I grew up in a pretty Catholic environment, you know, not just periodic Catholicism, and so prayer—the saying of the rosary, the saying of the mass, things said in groups of three—was all around me. It's highly

meditative. Highly meditative, and ritualistic. It's probably the ritual that's most interesting to me.

Porter: But how does all that translate into prose voice? Does it have to do with cueing the reader? Does the reader come to know the writer better when they can lock into those patterns? And is that when voice becomes personality?

McCann: I think that's exactly it and I also think that in repetition there's something performative, where the language goes past its meaning. Take the Mass for instance. There is a highly significant difference between saying "*mea culpa"* and "*mea culpa*, *mea culpa*, *mea maxima culpa*." The first one is like, "Sorry," you know, "my fault," "my bad" as we say in Mass now, in the New English Mass. "My bad" [laughs]. Whereas the second is the *enactment* of that. This is what I've learned as a writer: I don't want to just say something; I want things to be enacted.

Porter: That makes great sense. Here's another question that comes out of *Mother of Sorrows*; it's a question about the "danger" of story. Is that a concern, an idea that you work with? There's a moment in here, right after Davis has died and the mother is looking through photographs and wants the story to be about how he was a "blue baby" deprived of air for precious minutes at his birth. She wants *that* story to explain what ends up happening to Davis. But the narrator rejects that or wants to guard against that being the only way to read that event. And that, to me, seems to be a commentary on the danger of narrative in a way. Is that something that you come back to in your work?

McCann: I never thought about it as danger, Jim. I guess it is in a way, yeah, though that's not the language I'd use. And I haven't thought about that story as being a part of a motif, although now that you say it, it seems to me clearly that that story is almost about what the book is about. That is to say: the competition among stories. To speak more personally, like that narrator—I mean I'm not him exactly, but there are things we share—I grew up so fused with my mother. When I left home, and I had an urge to tell stories—not to write them, just to tell them—I would tell my family

stories *exactly* the way my mother had told them to me. Like the story of my great-grandfather walking across the Brooklyn Bridge and his driver below on the bridge, walking into our bright millionaire American future. Her version became my version. And when I first started writing prose, I was older, in my mid-to-late thirties. I think I actually could not have started writing earlier because the very act of writing stories to me was an act of trying to find out what *my* version was. And that required fictionalizing at times, not because I wanted to make a new life, but because I felt I was trying to reach into what I thought had actually happened, and fiction is a means of doing that. So yes, I guess, I'm aware of the danger, but I also don't know what the alternative is. Except, the one thing I really hope for as a writer is that everything is being interrogated as it goes along. Sometimes stories do that actively. They'll stop and talk about the language they're using. And that comes out of a kind of distrust of falling into a pre-made, generic, formulaic story. Or someone else's story.

Porter: But it seems that maybe your mother was your first writing teacher, or your first teacher in story, right? Because part of that learning is imitating, right? Imitating the storytellers that we like?

McCann: Also because she was captivating. I mean my father was *officially* the storyteller of our house. They used to take public speaking classes together, and my father, who was a colonel in the army, would often put on his uniform for his speeches. He looked very handsome and he'd give a very organized speech. My mother, however… She had a pair of huge cut glass vases—I guess they're about four feet tall, I have them now—and my mother took one of them off the shelf and performed for me and my brother her public speaking speech for the night. She held the vase in front of her and she whispered 'I am a vase [laughs]. I sat on the mantel watching heartbreak and sorrow.' And I remember feeling chills. So she was the better storyteller. I think what I got from her also, luckily, was that the aim of the story was to captivate and to move.

Porter: Tell me about your new memoir you're working on, *The Resurrectionist*, and how it's going. How has it gone from an essay to something that's moving toward a collection?

McCann: By doing more essays [laughs]. Which has been hard because I've been working on the essays individually and I have a feeling that maybe I should desert that plan. When I started, I had in mind a series of essays in Andre Dubus's *Meditations from a Movable Chair*. He was in a wheel chair because he'd had this terrible accident on the interstate south of Boston. He saw a car stopped on the side lane, and the person needed help. Dubus got out to help them, was struck by a car and left paralyzed from the waist down. So he wrote a lot about what it meant to be in a chair, what it meant in relation to God. So many great essays. They were part of what I had in mind, but I noticed when I read his that he had a set piece that he would have to perform over and over again, telling in some way—usually small—what the accident had been.

Porter: In each of his essays?

McCann: Yeah, he published them separately. Now I've discovered I'm having to do that over and over again, too, and I don't want to keep doing it. So I'm not really sure where I am with this right now. But my original aim—right now it's a big question mark, but I can keep a question mark alive for a long time—was to write a series of essays that would fold together. I still like that idea. It's just that this is a book that's based on my experience with having a liver transplant, and I've never wanted to see it as the story of a liver transplant. It's never been a medical adventure to me. To write the story that way, to me, would be as appalling as writing a case history.

Porter: When you say medical adventure, you mean a tour through the process?

McCann: Yes, that, but also the way my friends see it. The basic narrative of transplantation—what people believe—is: you are sick, you get an organ by the grace of God or whatever, and now you're well. But transplantation is not a restoration narrative. It's not a narrative of a break and then a resumption. Your narrative is altered, utterly, from the experience. You go on immunosuppressive drugs, which are highly toxic, for the rest of your life. You trade in your imminent death for—as time goes on—a series of simultaneously more manageable and more life-threatening conditions. So,

it's a very complicated thing. Also transplantation is unlike many medical narratives which are about successful scientific intervention…

Porter: The miracle of technology.

McCann: Exactly. But behind all that, behind the transplantation, is a dead person. Unless you're talking about a living donor. But I had a cadaveric donor, so, for me, transplantation is not just about the intervention of technology; it's about our basic relations to human bodies, our own bodies and the bodies of others. There are ancient myths, you know, like the myth of Saints Cosmas and Damian. They were surgeons and they performed a transplant, as it were. There was a wealthy Italian who was dying and whose leg needed to be cut off. So they cut it off and went and got another leg from a dying—or was he already dead?—Moorish man and sewed the Moor's leg onto the Italian. Start right from there, that very thought about who gets to live and who gets to be the dead person, who receives and who gives. It's like, "Oh, let's get a leg from the Moor." Why is it the Moor who gives his leg to the European and not the other way around? It's already beyond science.

Porter: I think ["The Resurrectionist"]is a fascinating essay. It becomes a meditation on the interdependence of life and death—that one doesn't happen without the other. I think too the essay for me is about body and identity and the degree to which maybe I have changed if I've taken in someone else's liver. So that identity is not seated in the head. It could be seated anywhere or in all parts of the body in a way.

McCann: Years ago, Dee Morris, one of my teachers at The University of Iowa and a scholar of modern and contemporary poetry, published an essay in *Ms*. about her own breast cancer experience. She started off by saying we have many bodies in a lifetime, and I've never forgotten that. I feel like she was talking about the child's body, the lover's body, and so on, and that stayed with me all this time. I'm thinking about it while I'm working on this. I *had* a different body than I have now. It's biologically distinct. But it's also true that the aged body is different from the pregnant body, which is different from the child's body, which is different from the sexual body,

which is different from the wounded body. The same person has different bodies through his or her lifetime. And I'm not sure if this is where I've been sometimes defeated by this memoir, but I've wanted it to be as much a metaphysic as a narrative.

As it happened there were ten days between the death of my former partner and my going on the transplant list. So over the course of a couple years I had been watching a very handsome man—he died when he was forty-nine, so he was very handsome in his forties—become, particularly, in his last year, a terrifying looking man who seemed to be in his mid-to-late seventies. The transformations of his body terrified me, to be honest…

Porter: He died *ten days* before you went onto the transplant list?

McCann: Yeah. A lot of my friends had died of AIDS, so I went onto the transplant list not believing it was possible to have a serious illness and live. That was not what I had seen in my life. The essayist Richard Rodriguez once pointed out that with the AIDS epidemic, one was living in two eras simultaneously. He said most people—those who had not been affected by AIDS—were still living in modernity. This was an early nineties essay, mid-nineties. But people who *had* been affected—he was speaking largely of gay men in San Francisco—were living simultaneously in the modern and the medieval era—the pre-modern era—in terms of their relationship to physical horror. So I went onto the transplant list with that and with a pretty Catholic sense of the body, which is a pre-modern sensibility, too.

Porter: Did that leave you with anything like survivor guilt, that so many friends had died?

McCann: Yeah. Yes. The thing about survivor guilt is not just that the other people die. It's that you know what you would do to stay alive.

Porter: What we all would do.

McCann: Yep. You can see your own avaricious nature in your desire for your own life.

Porter: That seems like an important lesson in a way.

McCann: I remember before transplantation, sitting in a room, part of a standard seminar for people waiting for transplants. This would mean, given the statistics, that most people in there were waiting for kidneys. Kidneys have always been a very long wait; it's very difficult to match a kidney. But I remember sitting in that room and somebody, a patient, raising a question: "How long do you think I'll have to wait?" The person answering said, "The average wait is . . ." I remember looking around the room and thinking nobody here is interested in the average, and if someone were to throw one kidney into this room, we—like a pack of dogs—would go for it [laughs]. That's all it would take. And I don't mean by that "so I got to see something really extraordinary." All I mean was that I got to see something hidden become a little more exposed.

Porter: "Average" is just a number and this is about *my* acute need.

McCann: We're in a boat together, you and me, and there's one sea biscuit left. Who gets it? Now, let's change the sea biscuit into a kidney . . .

Porter: I wanted to ask you, too, about your experience living abroad, and how that might have been formative for you. I know you lived in Sweden, and you mentioned you had lived in Spain and studied in Germany, too. Were those experiences important to your development as a writer? Did you feel a real desire to get out of the US? What did those experiences feel like to you?

McCann: They felt like a lot of things. I grew up in a family that had once had a lot of money but was now a working class family. And we were an Irish family. Irish-Americans in those days were not interested in things like, "let's go to the continent." Or "let's return to Ireland." It's just not something one did. And as for me, I didn't have money. I just didn't come from that sort of household, so I never had the generic undergraduate European trip. So I understood that to go to Europe, I needed to get a job, and that was a big part of why I was there so long. Well, what did it mean? I was

in graduate school, in Iowa City, working on my doctorate, and it seemed unbearable that I had become a person working on his doctorate. And I actually believed that if I moved to Europe, I'd have this romantic, sunny life. I didn't understand that you did laundry there, too.

I think also for me those years are about a dividing line: pre-AIDS life and post-AIDS life. I often revisit those years in Europe because when I came back to America, AIDS was well known there, but it had been very remote to me in Europe. I didn't live in a gay community there. I remember being on the tram in Sweden one day and reading the newspaper over a woman's shoulder: *US soldier dies of strange disease in Frankfurt*. AIDS was just very remote to me then. But when I came back to the US, I came back to a country that had changed and into a life that was radically different: people I had met or known for a while were already dying. So for me a lot of this "going back" in my writing to my time in Europe is because it feels like the moment between a before and an after.

Porter: Was it a sort of cue from Baldwin, or someone like that: going to Spain, going to Sweden, leaving the US? Were you over there "to be a writer?"

McCann: I had stopped writing for a lot of years. I wrote when I was young, stopped for a bunch of years, then started again. Part of the stopping was the doctoral program. There were other reasons—that may not have been the primary reason—but it was the convenient reason. I really stopped thinking of myself as a writer. And whether it was Baldwin or whether it was Hemingway or whatever, I think part of it was to leave the US, to move to Europe and to cut ties with Iowa City. Eventually I came back for the summer to do my comprehensive exams but I wrote my dissertation elsewhere. I thought that simply to cut those ties would be to become a writer again. And yet that wasn't true because what I really wanted, as my friend Henry Sloss used to say to me, was to serve "the great god, Experience."

Porter: That's a great phrase.

McCann: I had a really hard job, but I also spent a lot of time traveling, having sex and drinking. And that's pretty much what I was doing. So, while

I wasn't actually writing, I was building a warehouse of images I could later use [laughs]. Much of *Ghost Letters*, the imagery in there, is taken from those years.

Porter: How many years ago was that?

McCann: How humiliating [laughs]. 'How old are your images? How old is that moth-eaten mink that you haul out from time to time?'

Porter: [Laughs] It's just interesting to me how far we reach back for the images we use. I guess we all reach back as far as we can.

McCann: There's a beautiful poem by Ruth Stone. Her husband died really early and she wrote about him for the rest of her life. There's one poem of hers that goes something like "Now I dig you up again" [laughs]. It's this endless exhumation.

CONTEST WINNER

How to Stitch Your Sails

Kelsey Jenko

Preface—*in other words*, be patient, *the story will start soon*.

Here are all the pieces, I am stitching them together for you: I have lived part of every summer in a tiny town with a big blue back yard—Great Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay. There, in Au Gres, Michigan, is where my grandpa and his thirty-two foot sailboat (circa 1988, same as me!) reside. This bit of the story happened mostly on a week-long vacation in 2006.

How to Stitch Your Sails

"*Without patience, a sailor I would never be.*"

Lee Allred

"Your presence is peaceful, Kelsey. Very peaceful. Did you hear me?"

"Uh huh."

"O.K. You're a good girl."

Grandpa tells me to take it easy, *patience,* or I'll rip the sail. Funny, since we were trying to take it down, fold it up, take it to the trailer and stitch it. I have waited all year to be on the boat, and here I am, bare feet on the warm fiberglass hull. Though lines anchor it to the skinny wood dock, my small movements rock the boat back and forth in the murky water of J-channel. I am anxious to be out on the water, to sail around Saginaw Bay. Already I have asked if we can go out without repairing the jib (the smaller sail at

the bow) and have been told it wasn't a good idea. We need all the sails in working order and the jib stitching is ripping.

"If the wind gets a hold of just the right spot, it will rip the entire sail in one gust. Then you really won't be out on the water for a while," Grandpa says.

When I was younger, Gramma or Mom would paint my fingernails bright red. My hair was cut like a boy then, and I would often scamper around without a t-shirt on, but my little red nails were a clear designation of my girlhood. Never was I good at waiting for them to dry; the smudges my antsy child hands produced would harden to dents and creases.

Gramma and Grandpa have the ideal location in the mobile home park: a stone's throw from the wide slatted dock of J-channel, but not backing it directly. The early-rising fishermen do not wake them in the morning with their hoses filling buckets for fish, or their gurgling engines. Yet a short walk across the hot asphalt road and between two neighbors' houses takes them right to the sailboat.

Uncle George's (Grandpa's younger brother) trailer is next door to Gramma and Grandpa's, and was left to them when he died in 2005. There is a little covered porch room attached to the trailer that houses the computer. This area is mostly windows, with dusty brown blinds always closed. A mobile made of shells hangs in one corner. A table, a few chairs with latticed backs, and two booths covered with blue velvety fabric fill the remaining space. We unfold the jib in here. The damage is worse than expected, yards and yards of tiny cross hatched stitches frayed and disintegrating. I sit on a booth and spread a section across my lap. The jib has never sat on me like this before. It is so close I see the effect that summers of sun, rain, and wind have on even the strongest of thread. I observe the rest of the sail, how big it is; it fills up the entire porch.

STEP 1: Rip out the failing stitches.
STEP 2: Pick out all the extra thread.
STEP 3: Use a tool to poke through the holes where you want to send your needle; along the hem the sail is three layers thick where you must stitch.

STEP 4: Thread your needle with dental floss.
STEP 5: Re-stitch.

For his coming of age (13th birthday) I made my best friend David a quilt. I cannot say how many times I jammed the sewing machine. I floored that control pedal like I do the one in my car, when I am trying to get to Au Gres, Michigan for a summer weekend to sail. All the thread would become tangled, resembling a cat's hairball, and I would be forced to slow down for cause of my quickness. Much of the quilt's detail work should have been done by hand, but a crooked manufactured hem fills these places instead.

The door to Uncle George's porch always scrapes across the deck. It has one of those pump things at the top with a chain that prevents slamming and provides propping if you need it; this creates a sound like someone sucking in breath whenever it is opened. As I tug the door shut behind me, the pump sounds like a slowly deflating balloon. It is evening and some of the cracks in the blinds let in orange sunlight. I notice two things: the dust in the air, and the stripes of illumination across Grandpa's face. The sun's presence reveals its work of almost eighty years: wrinkles around deep set, almost black eyes, dark tanned skin, and sun spots. I look like a smooth white pebble in comparison after I wade through the sail and sit on the booth beside him. Without a word I pick up a tool and start poking holes just ahead of his stitching progress.

"You don't have to do that, Kelsey."

"I want to."

Grandpa chuckles, it is a mix of deep low throatiness and a higher brighter tone. It sounds slightly pinched since his lips are pressed together holding a needle while he reaches for thread. Deftly, his dark sausage fingers with wide flat nails, untwine some floss. He pats my thigh.

"You're a funny girl."

I dream about sailing as I sleep on the boat. My space is the aft cabin on the starboard side that I share only with the big gray and brown spiders. Their webs, half a dozen old fishing rods, and some spilled coffee stains, are the decorations. The smell is like old dried up lake water—literally. The boat,

aptly named *Once Over*, spent a three day furlough belly up in Great Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay. This night I dream the boat has both of her sails in working order. They are bright and clean and tempting the wind to push her over. I dream she harnesses the wind's inertia into a thrilling forward journey. I am at the helm. The waves charging across the bow spit cool water onto my shoulders and face, and the sun drinks them up, leaving fresh brown freckles in their wake. I am in power, not to say I am in charge, but that I am embraced by energy and life, fully engulfed in nature's game. From my vantage point, there is no end as to where I might go. Maybe to the Mediterranean, to Madagascar or Peru.

Grandpa had the opportunity once to sail around the world. He was eighteen then, same age as me. He didn't take it. I ask him why. He says if he had gone he probably would not have come back.

"Then I wouldn't be here," I tell him.

He smiles. "You're a smart girl."

There is still more stitching to be done. I work blisters on odd places across my fingers. Most of my spare time I spend wrapped in the jib. But in this spare moment I have walked past the boat-filled docks of the marina to the point. My feet are tender like my fingers from the barefoot trek across the gravel of this rocky break wall, which serves as protection for the marina's No Wake Zone. Looking back I observe the old CITGO sign—what used to be a good landmark from the bay, and an encouragement to fill your gas tank, is now unreadable. It looks like a giant sea creature swung its tail up out of the water and smashed a hole right through it. Not that a giant creature could hide very well there; the water has been so low these past years that it is impossible sometimes to even get the sailboat into the lake.

I can see the beach from here, though the lake does not reach it any longer. Rushes and thick grass have extended all the way to where I am standing on the end of the point. I turn myself to the bay and I look out across the gentle waves. Stepping carefully across the big, flat concrete slabs and boulders to the water I wade in until it reaches the middle of my shins. Even here, half a mile from shore, the water is still so shallow. I sigh. I look far ahead, past the green and red buoys that mark the rest of the channel, past the two treed points that mark the end of our little bay, past the Charity

Island Lighthouse that guides the big freighters in the shipping channel, out into Saginaw Bay. It is where I know the wind must be stronger than the warm breeze tugging at my braided hair, and where the waves could carry me wherever I wanted to go.

Grandpa said he was probably a wave in a past life. I think he told me he was a sailor too, died at sea. I smile to myself. *I bet he was a pirate,* I think. *I bet I was a cat on his ship. I bet I liked him the best, and always lay curled on his stomach as his hammock and the sea rocked him to sleep.*

I am too selfish to truly believe in reincarnation though. I don't want Grandpa to change form and forget me after death. I don't want to start over, with us being simply Grandfather and little Granddaughter. I don't want him to forget me as *Friend*.

When I return to the jib, Mom cannot pass up the opportunity to snap a picture. I am so used to this that I don't look up from my work. Grandpa probably did not hear her when she asked us to smile. He is concentrating too. Both of us bent in effort, but peaceful in our combined labor.

Grandpa and I are always the first on deck when it is time to set sail. I turn the key and start the engine. It vibrates under our feet, *chicka chicka chicka*. Water pours out into J-channel from a little pipe sticking out from the boat's aft. It is very hot and bright outside. The faded red sail cover is warm as I climb up to it, hug around the boom and unlatch it.

Grandpa climbs up from down below and I tap his head with my toe as he does.

"Bah!" This noise conveys entertained surprise.

When he looks at me he grins. The sun causes a squint that buries his deep-set eyes in wrinkles.

"I am a lot like you Grandpa," I say matter-of-factly as he grabs my foot.

"Poor girl," he says with a chuckle.

"Uh uh!"

"You're an interesting girl, Kelsey." I can tell he means this in a good way.

The jib sail is stitched and unrolls as it should when I tug the appropriate lines. Its silky gray and white body complements the larger main sail that Grandpa it coaxing up the mast with the halyard. It is nice to see the two

as they always have been. The jib is stretching ahead, impatient to catch the wind, smaller, but working hard to help the main. The main sail is sturdy, solidly attached to the mast. It is the boat's center and strength.

Summer is gone. Fall trees hug yellow and orange leaves to themselves in one last embrace before winter. The wind that finally tugs the trees' cover to the ground always reminds me of sailing. Wanting to return to summer, I pull out a photo, one I had not given much attention to earlier.

When I see the photo I notice the hands: one pair a hard-worked, hard-loved life has made patient; patient enough to teach the youthful restlessness of the other pair the necessity of preparation. Grandpa's hands are the color of dark chocolate mixed with caramel (the same flavor of the hard candies always stowed in the breast pocket of his shirt). My uncolored nails reveal my decision to give up trying to maintain red polish; they are blank and flat like Grandpa's. Although each of his fingers is three times thicker than mine, he is able to work with a similar precision as my own. I notice Grandpa and my similar postures, similar looks of concentration. I see a similarity of purpose, a similarity of observation that goes beyond the sail in our lap.

The photo, like the scene it has collected in ink, is quiet and simple. It is a small memory I can tuck in my pocket, like the small porch I can tuck myself into when outside it is storming. The door in the picture is covered in raindrops. Its glass pane frames a larger world, a place where the crumpled sail on the floor is able to stretch to its capacity and go where the wind takes it. But like me, the jib sail needs time with Grandpa, on his lap, held in his hands. He is perfecting it, stitching it for its journey.

CONTEST WINNER

Allograft

Courtney Hilden

To get in here, I needed to enter with a passport. I had to be searched,
had to have your eyes wander up and down me,
wondering what I was aiming to steal. The answer? Nothing,
or at least nothing so small that it could be sewn into the lining of my
skin in the
night when the streetlights outside press through the blinds,
illuminating the upper half of
the tiniest scar.
Instead, I am wondering if this forbid
-ding place is where I need to reside,
if I should forget the passport and the previous
citizenship,
if I should switch our hearts instead,
since I find even now,
even now that
you have let me in, it is not enough to know the marks upon you,
the secrets,
the curves
of this nation,
the tickle of mustache with kiss.
I want to identify as you,
want to speak the same lilt, to be mistaken as
a native, an insider, an always was.
I want your heart to thud against my chest cage,
want your gates to usher my blood,

want you to jolt me awake every morning, especially
this morning, when you slip
back into bed, having seen
the new imperfection I created upon you in the night.
I want you to notice it, trace it with your calloused fingers, realize how
different it is to have a foreign muscle
nestled in that pericardium shell, to beat a little faster,
a little higher in the chest,
to be glad one of us was brave enough to cradle both hearts,
not as different as you'd expect, but delicate as water
balloons and yet fierce as
lovers who simply refuse to let go.

About the Contributors

Maura Gage Cavell is Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at Louisiana State University at Eunice. She resides in Crowley with her husband Jeff. They have four children: Claire, 20; Nick, 16; Tom, 14; and Sally Kate, 12. They also have a German Shepherd, Magnum. She's published widely in journals and magazines and most recently in *Abbey*, *Big Scream*, *Krax*, *Chiron Review*, *The Aurorean*, *Timber Creek Review*, *Black Magnolias*, *The Cape Rock*, *Taproot Literary Review*, and *Barbaric Yawp*.

Meghan Colson is an MSU senior studying studio art and advertising. Photography is her passion and she strives to recreate the world around her on a variety of photographic media. To her, photography is about appreciating the world and sharing the things she finds significant with other people.

Jane Congdon spent 30 years as a textbook editor for a publishing company. Prior to that, she taught English and walked a beat as a newspaper reporter. Jane has participated in writing workshops including The Split Rock Arts Program and the Ghost Ranch October Writing Festival. She is writing a travel memoir of Romania titled *It Started with Dracula*. A selection is published in the anthology *Once Upon a Place: Writing from Ghost Ranch*. Jane was the Visiting Artist for the MSU Residential Option in Arts and Letters (ROIAL) Program in September 2006. She returned to Michigan State in September 2009 for a reading, "Two Voices," sponsored by the Center for Poetry. Jane lives near Cincinnati, Ohio.

Matt Dye is a junior Graphic Design student at Michigan State University. Creating and enjoying comics has always been a big part of his life and keeps

getting bigger as he continues to write, illustrate, and release comics. Aside from the *Red Cedar Review*, Matt's comic artwork has also been featured in an exhibit at Michigan State University and has been sold at East Lansing's own 21st Century Comics and Games.

Laura Gabel-Hartman is a native Floridian living in the Boston area. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Carve Magazine*, *Feedback*, *MAKE Literary Magazine*, *Rio Grande Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*.

Lia Greenwell is a third year student at Michigan State University majoring in English and Arts & Humanities. She has worked in The Center for Poetry at MSU for the last three years. This is her first publication.

Brian Patrick Heston has an MFA in Fiction from George Mason University and also a Master's in English and Poetry from the University of New Hampshire. His poetry has appeared in such publications as *West Branch, The Bitter Oleander, Many Mountains Moving, Slipstream, Confrontation, Portland Review,* and *Gargoyle*. His fiction has appeared in *OurStories*, *Flash!Point Magazine*, and is upcoming in *Many Mountains Moving*. Presently, he teaches composition and creative writing at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey.

Bob Hicok's sixth collection, *Words for Empty and Words for Full*, will be published by Pitt in 2010. His last book, *This Clumsy Living* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2007), received the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry from the Library of Congress.

Courtney Hilden is a senior at Michigan State University, a staff member at the Center for Poetry, the former Poetry Editor of the *Offbeat*, and the Managaing Poetry Editor of *The Red Cedar Review*. When she's not busy being a member of the community, she studies English and history, reads trashy books, and sings pop songs obnoxiously loud.

Kelsey Jenko was homeschooled from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Presently she is a Michigan State University junior majoring in English with

a concentration in creative writing, and a minor in Spanish. Her interests include writing, sailing, and good conversations.

Jill Kolongowski lives in Boston and works for an educational publishing company. She graduated from Michigan State University in 2009 with degrees in Creative Writing and Spanish. She won third place in nonfiction in the Jim Cash Creative Writing Awards in 2008 and 2009. She enjoys ignoring the state of things and reading, writing, waterskiing, and people-watching instead.

D. Lifland is a writer on the East Coast. He attended college with the goal of becoming a playwright. At college, he also wrote short fiction and poetry. For the past decade, he has focused solely on poetry. He has poems that have or will be published in *Main Street Rag*, *PANK Magazine*, *Tertulia*, *descant*, *Caveat Lector*, *Endicott Review*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *The Litchfield Review*, and *Prism Review*. As an artist, he greatly admires John Coltrane, Stanley Kubrick, and Antoni Gaudí.

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Eclipse, Smartish Pace*, *Cimarron Review, roger,* and *Poetry East.* Her chapbook *Call Me Misfit* won the 2009 Frank Cat Poetry Prize. She lives in Michigan.

Richard Mack is the author of a book of poetry and essays, *Against a Western Sky*, and his prose and poetry have been published in such journals as *Wind Literary Review*, *South Dakota Review, Salal Review*, *Cape Rock*, *Green's Magazine*, *Denver Post*, and others. He and his wife operate a horse boarding facility in Eastern Oregon.

Richard McCann is the author, most recently, of *Mother of Sorrows*, a collection of linked stories that Michael Cunningham described as "almost unbearably beautiful." He is also the author of *Ghost Letters*, a collection of poems, and the editor (with Michael Klein) of *Things Shaped in Passing*: *More 'Poets for Life' Writing For the AIDS Pandemic*. His work has appeared in such magazines and anthologies as *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Ms.*, *Tin House*,

Best American Essays 2000, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2007*. For his work, he has received awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, the Christopher Isherwood Foundation, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. He serves on the Board of Directors of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation and is a member of the Corporation of Yaddo.

Karl S Monroe claims to have been conceived in the front seat of a 1992 Mazda Protégé. He sidesteps evidence that he labored as a journalist for 26 years, worked for the Alzheimer's Association, and was a hospice volunteer. "My Final Resting Place" is part of an unpublished collection of essays about Juanita Bay, *The Last of the Ice Ages.*

Dennis Must is the author of two short story collections: *Oh, Don't Ask Why*, Red Hen Press, Los Angeles, California (2007), and *Banjo Grease*, Creative Arts Book Company, Berkeley, California (2000), plus a forthcoming novel, *The World's Smallest Bible*, to be published by Red Hen Press. His plays have been performed Off-Off-Broadway and his fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary reviews. He resides with his wife in Salem, Massachusetts.

James B. Nicola has had over ninety poems appear in a score of publications including *The Lyric*, *Nimrod*, *Upstart Crow*, *Mobius*, and *Cider Press Review*, and received the Dana Literary Award for poetry. A stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* Award as one of the best books of the year. Also a composer, lyricist, and playwright, his musical *Chimes: A Christmas Vaudeville* premiered in Fairbanks, Alaska, with Santa Claus in attendance on opening night.

Michael Nye is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. His stories have recently appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Thin Air*, and *Timber Creek Review*. He lives in Missouri.

David Poirier is a senior at Michigan State University majoring in biological sciences. He enjoys photography as a hobby and recently studied in Switzerland where he captured many amazing photos of the scenery. After

graduation, he will be teaching middle school science and loving every single minute of it.

Melissa Poirier is a 2007 Michigan State University graduate. She has always had an interest in photography, and it has been a hobby of hers for about 10 years now. It began with a Nikon FM10 and a black-and-white darkroom in high school shooting mostly stuff for the yearbook and of her friends. Over the past year or so she has moved to digital, but she still likes getting out her film camera now and again . . . when she can find film. These days she spends more time documenting memorable experiences and every vacation she takes.

Jim Porter earned his MFA in creative writing from American University and more recently taught literature and creative writing at MSU from 2004–2009. He is currently seeking publication of *Train Song,* a novel about a failed guitar virtuoso and the transformative, even metamorphic, qualities of music.

John M. Quick is an Educational Technology PHD student at Arizona State University, who is interested in the design, research, and use of educational innovations. Currently, his work focuses on mixed-reality environments, interactive media, and innovation adoption. His portfolio is available online at www.johnmquick.com.

Cara Seitchek is a Washington, DC–based freelance writer and editor. She teaches writing classes for UCLA Extension and the Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland. A graduate of the Johns Hopkins University with an MA in writing, she also has an MA in history and an MPA.

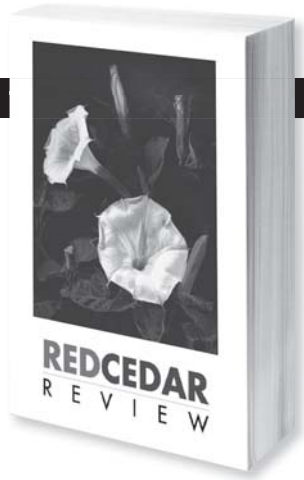
Matthew J. Spireng's book *Out of Body*, winner of the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award, was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His chapbooks are *Young Farmer* (2007), *Encounters* (2005), *Just This* (2003), and *Inspiration Point* (2002), winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Chapbook Award.

Jim Tilley earned a doctorate in Physics from Harvard University. He retired in 2001 after a 25-year career in insurance and investment banking. In 2008, he won *Sycamore Review*'s Wabash Prize for Poetry, and in 2009, he was named co-winner of the New England Poetry Club's Firman Houghton Award. His poems have been published in *Southern Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *New Delta Review*, and other journals. He resides with his wife in Bedford Corners, New York.

Diane Wakoski, who was born in Southern California and educated at UC, Berkeley, lived and began her poetry career in New York City from 1960–1973. Since 1975, she has been Poet-in-Residence at Michigan State University, where she continues to teach as a University Distinguished Professor. Her work has been published in more than twenty collections and many slim volumes of poetry since her first book, *Coins & Coffins*, was published by Hawk's Well Press in 1962. Her selected poems, *Emerald Ice*, won the William Carlos Williams prize from the Poetry Society of America in 1989. A new poetry collection, *The Diamond Dog*, will be published by Anhinga Press in Spring 2010.

Erin Wisti is a third year English major at Michigan State University. She grew up in the Upper Peninsula and would like to emphasize the fact this does not make her a Yooper. She has a number of unusual phobias, including one of dirty napkins. She hopes to do Teach For America after graduation, while writing on the side.

Alisa Wolf has worked as a writer and editor on the staff of three magazines and, more recently, as a financial services marketing writer. She also teaches adult education classes in memoir and essay writing. A Boston native, she lives with her partner in Medford, Massachusetts.



LIBRARY RECOMMENDATION FORM

RED CEDAR REVIEW

ISSN 0034-1967

I'd like to recommend the acquisition of *Red Cedar Review* (ISSN 0034-1967), published one (1) time per year by Michigan State University Press. Subscription prices for U.S. institutions: $30 for 1 year, $57 for 2 years, $72 for 3 years. Prices for international institutions: $33 for 1 year, $63 for 2 years, $79 for 3 years. Add $8 per year for air mail delivery.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

PRINT NAME

SIGNATURE

E-MAIL ADDRESS

INSTITUTION

DEPARTMENT

To subscribe, send purchase order or payment to: Michigan State University Press, Journals Division, 1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25, East Lansing, MI 48823-5245; TEL (517) 355-9543 ext. 101; FAX (517) 432-7484; EMAIL journals@msu.edu.

Copy, complete, and submit this form to the appropriate collection specialist at your library.

SUBSCRIPTION / RENEWAL FORM

RED CEDAR REVIEW

2010 SUBSCRIPTION RATES (1 ISSUE)	1 YEAR	2 YEARS	3 YEARS
Buy 2–3 years and save:		*5%*	*20%*
U.S. Individual	$15	$29	$36
U.S. Institution	$30	$57	$72
Int'l Individual	$17	$31	$40
Int'l Institution	$33	$63	$79
Student	$11	$21	$27

Single copy: $15 • Airmail: add $8 to above rate

Print and (individual) electronic subscriptions are available online at www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr. Save 30% when you order both.

☐ Yes! I would like to subscribe to *Red Cedar Review*.

☐ Please renew my subscription.

NAME

STREET ADDRESS

CITY / STATE / ZIP

PHONE FAX

EMAIL

☐ Check enclosed, made payable to *Michigan State University Press*
(All amounts must be in U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank.)

☐ Please charge my: ☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard

ACCOUNT NUMBER EXP. DATE

SIGNATURE

Mail completed form to: Michigan State University Press, Journals Division, 1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25, East Lansing, MI 48823-5245; TEL: (517) 355-9543 × 101; FAX: (517) 432-7484; EMAIL: journals@msu.edu.