

# RED CEDAR REVIEW

2008

*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.

## 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 x 130

Fax: 517-432-7484

Email: [journals@msu.edu](mailto:journals@msu.edu)

Web: [www.msupress.msu.edu](http://www.msupress.msu.edu)

For more information, visit the *Red Cedar Review* website at [www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/](http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/).

***Please do not send manuscripts to MSU Press.***

## 2008 SUBSCRIPTION RATES (1 ISSUE)

|                               | 1 Year | 2 Years | 3 Years |
|-------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|
| <i>Buy 2-3 years and save</i> |        | 5%      | 20%     |
| U.S. Individual               | \$15   | \$29    | \$36    |
| Int'l Individual              | \$17   | \$31    | \$40    |
| U.S. Institution              | \$30   | \$57    | \$72    |
| Int'l 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 6 months of publication date. International claims must be received within 12 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](http://www.greenpressinitiative.org).

© 2008 Michigan State University. All Rights Reserved.

## You Are Invited to Join the **FRIENDS OF RED CEDAR REVIEW**

Please consider becoming a patron of *Red Cedar Review*. For the past 43 years, we have been committed to 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 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 + one guest subscription)    |
| Art & Graphics sponsor:        | \$600 (includes one-year subscription + one guest subscription)    |
| Volume sponsor (annual issue): | \$1,000 (includes one-year subscription + two 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 + one guest subscription)    |
| Event sponsor:         | \$1,000 (includes one-year subscription + two guest subscriptions) |
| Multiple year sponsor: | \$1,500 (includes two-year subscription + one guest subscription)  |

### **Gifts**

Please complete this form, make credit card gifts and checks payable to **Michigan State University**, and specify *Red Cedar Review* on the memo line. Send to: Michigan State University Press, Journals Division; 1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25; East Lansing, MI 48823-5245.

|                                                     |                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name _____                                          | Signature _____                                                   |
| Address _____                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Visa <input type="checkbox"/> MasterCard |
| City _____                                          | Credit Card # _____                                               |
| State/Zip _____                                     | Exp. Date _____                                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I wish to remain anonymous | Email _____                                                       |

**\*Tax Deduction Information:** 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.

This form available for download at [www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/](http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/).

*Thank you for your generous support of this exceptional publication!*

## FRIENDS OF *RED CEDAR REVIEW*

*Red Cedar Review* and Michigan State University Press gratefully  
acknowledge the following generous contribution.

Gifts such as these make a critical difference by helping to support  
the publication of the longest running undergraduate-managed  
literary journal in the nation.

2007–2008 Donor

Patron

Etta Abrahams

# REDCEDAR

## R E V I E W

### CONTENTS

|                                                                                                          |    |                                                                                        |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Editor's Introduction<br><i>Lindsey Kate Sloan</i>                                                       | 1  | Pale Moon<br><i>David Sapp</i>                                                         | 33  |
| From the Crooked Timber<br><i>Okla Elliott</i>                                                           | 5  | Words Alone<br><i>Elizabeth Banning</i>                                                | 35  |
| Young Dignity<br><i>Greg Jahn</i>                                                                        | 15 | Papa's Mower<br><i>Charles Grosel</i>                                                  | 45  |
| Enemy Combatant<br><i>Greg Jahn</i>                                                                      | 16 | Bookmark<br><i>Stephen Kopel</i>                                                       | 49  |
| An Open Letter from Emily<br>Dickinson to Billy Collins,<br>Re: A Missing Bonnet<br><i>Nicole Nguyen</i> | 17 | The Forgotten<br><i>Samantha Hederman</i>                                              | 51  |
| Untitled<br><i>Nick Beier</i>                                                                            | 19 | Where Johannes Brahms<br>Was Born<br><i>Eric Gabriel Lehman</i>                        | 53  |
| Untitled<br><i>Nick Beier</i>                                                                            | 20 | Interview with Tom Bissell<br><i>Lindsey Kate Sloan</i><br><i>and Jill Kolongowski</i> | 69  |
| Ode to a Trashcan in Room 108<br><i>Samantha Hederman</i>                                                | 21 | Flash Fiction Contest Winners                                                          |     |
| Beach Run<br><i>Jan Shoemaker</i>                                                                        | 23 | First Place<br><i>Amelia Beamer—Tattoo</i>                                             | 99  |
| Photograph: A Study in Light<br>and Form<br><i>Joan Colby</i>                                            | 29 | Second Place<br><i>Jim Bainbridge—The Blooming</i>                                     | 101 |
| Eiffel Tower with Moon<br><i>David R. Hammel</i>                                                         | 31 | Third Place<br><i>Megan Ayers—I Ruined It All<br/>for Billy Saddle</i>                 | 103 |
|                                                                                                          |    | Contributors                                                                           | 105 |



# Editor's Introduction

---

Lindsey Kate Sloan

When my staff and I first began to pull this issue together for publication, I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of submissions our humble undergraduate-run journal receives in two months. What proved to be more overwhelming than the number of submissions came a few steps down the production line, when it was time for me to organize the pieces. I found myself at my desk with a stack of excellent manuscripts in front of me and with absolutely no idea how to organize them into the coherent unit that you are now reading. Around this time I read an interview in which the poet Billy Collins discusses his intuitive method for organizing poems in his collections. He describes spreading the pieces over the floor, walking around them, and feeling out which poems want to go together. I wish I could claim to have been as inventive as Mr. Collins, though in some ways our methods were very similar. The point being, if the organization seems unconventional, I suggest you blame a certain East Coast poet.

The fiction, poetry, photography, and nonfiction in this volume represent a wide range of voices. This issue of *Red Cedar Review* features nonfiction pieces from Okla Elliott and Jan Shoemaker, which delve into topics ranging from college admissions essays and the loss of a family pet to the devastation of the AIDS virus in Eastern Europe. Within these pages you'll find David Sapp's poem "Pale Moon," a meditation on the night-time sky of his childhood; verse by Mr. Sapp also appeared in *RCR* volume 39. *RCR* is happy to be including a poem by MSU undergraduate Nicole Nguyen, which won first place in the 2007 Jim Cash Creative Writing Awards—a contest that proudly honors one of this journal's founders.

The fiction pieces cover a multitude of topics, from the demeanor of Hamburgers, as Eric Lehman tells us the people of Hamburg, Germany, call themselves, to the acceptance of a relative's passing in Charles Grosel's story "Papa's Mower." An epistolary story by Elizabeth Banning and poems by Stephen Kopel and Joan Colby add to the breadth and depth of this issue.

Photography in this issue comes from a range of experiences and geographical locations, from established photographer and essayist Greg Jahn, who has contributed photos from El Salvador in the mid-1990s, to David

Hammel's "Eiffel Tower with Moon." I'm also proud to be including photography by undergraduates at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, Nick Beier and Samantha Hederman. The cover photo is a beautiful shot captured by Greg Jahn entitled "Lost River Wood"; it was taken in the mountains of central Idaho's Lost River Range.

I'm happy to announce that *RCR* is bringing back a bit of lost tradition that first appeared in volume 38 in 2003. Our first annual Flash Fiction Contest got underway this fall and the top three entries are published near the end of this volume. All entries were 1,000 words or less, and *RCR* couldn't be more excited about including a section of this wonderful and fun emerging genre in our journal.

Lastly, this volume includes an interview with acclaimed author and *RCR* alumnus Tom Bissell. He published his first story "Bars" in *RCR* volume 30 no. 2, and is also the author of a collection of stories called *God Lives in St. Petersburg* (Pantheon 2005), and a memoir about traveling to Vietnam with his father entitled *The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (Pantheon 2007). He has called the *Red Cedar Review* "one of Michigan State University's most important and influential institutions."

The *Red Cedar Review* has been Michigan State University's premiere literary digest for over 40 years and is the most enduring undergraduate-run publication in the United States. I am honored to be carrying on this tradition of literary excellence. I would like to thank everyone involved in the production of volume 43 and all those who make its annual publication possible. Acknowledgments include Jill Kolongowski, my assistant editor, for her countless hours spent working on this volume and for putting up with me during its production, and the genre editors and readers who volunteered to serve on the staff of *RCR* and who read more submissions for volume 43 than novels for their classes, never once complaining. I am grateful to Dr. Gordon Henry, *RCR*'s faculty adviser for his innovative ideas and suggestions, to Dr. Stephen Arch, and to the MSU department of English for its generous support—financial and otherwise. This issue wouldn't exist without the thoughtful guidance and diligence of Margot Kielhorn, Sharon Caldwell, and the rest of the wonderful Journals Division at the MSU Press. I also extend my gratitude to Tom Bissell for his thoughtful words and advice. Finally, a heartfelt thank you must go out to Teal Amthor-Shaffer and Lindsay Tigue, who edited *RCR* before me and



taught me everything I know about running this journal. With all of this said, as the journal enters its 44th year, I proudly present to you the finished product of a year's worth of effort: *Red Cedar Review* volume 43. I'd like to close by echoing the sentiments expressed by Tom Bissell on the *RCR* website—I think we speak for everyone involved by saying: “Long live *RCR*!”





# From the Crooked Timber

---

Okla Elliott

Before the conductors checked our tickets and passports, I knew our train had crossed the border into the Kaliningrad *oblast*. It might have been all the minor shifts in landscape seeping into my unconscious—the ratty lean-tos I could barely see in the distance, the potholed service road running parallel to the train tracks, the leanness of livestock in the fields—but that’s not how it felt; I just knew we were in a sadder place than we had been moments ago. I turned to Natalie and saw that she felt it too; the knowledge of it hung on her normally bright face. The Kaliningrad *oblast* is a place forever separated from itself—a part of Russia (*oblast* is Russian for enclave or province), though separated from the motherland by Lithuania and Latvia, or Lithuania and Belarus, depending on which route you take. And years of neglect after the collapse of the Soviet Union have only served to deepen its native sadness. Natalie and I were headed toward the heart of the Kaliningrad *oblast*, to the city of Kaliningrad, drawn by the thrill of such an unlikely destination.

She squeezed my hand, and I smiled, glad to be having this adventure with her. We’d dated the previous year when she had studied in America. Due to my having earlier studied in Germany, we communicated in an amalgam of English and German, making us at once foreign and familiar to each other, both exciting and comforting. Now that I was at the University of Wrocław, in Poland, and she was back in Germany, she had come to visit. I was supposed to be her tour guide for Eastern Europe. Coming from Western Europe, she saw the East Bloc as exotic, romantic in its downtroddenness. And I’d chosen the Kaliningrad *oblast* as the subject for my semester project—a paper on the effects of poverty in post-Soviet society ranging from poor medical facilities to increases in drug addiction and STD rates.

Kaliningrad was founded as Königsberg in 1255 by the Teutonic Knights. It has an enviable ice-free port on the Baltic Sea, making it strategically

useful for both military and commercial purposes. That's why, after WWI, Königsberg and East Prussia were separated from Germany by a redrawing of Poland's borders, the reunification of which Hitler gave as his primary reason for invading Poland. And that's why, after WWII, Russia annexed it. Russia turned Kaliningrad into a military outpost, housing thousands of soldiers and the massive Soviet Baltic Fleet. The Russification process required the mass deportation of the German-descended residents and changing the Germanic city names to Slavic ones (Tilsit to Sovetsk and Rauschen to Svetlogorsk). Kaliningrad got its name from Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of the Soviet state from 1919 to 1938, who distinguished himself by signing the order for the infamous Katyń Massacre, in which an estimated 21,000 prisoners of war were summarily liquidated.

Talking to a German about WWII is difficult, no matter how well-acquainted you are with her. I wanted to ask Natalie how she felt about being on land that had been, in living memory, German territory, where tens of thousands of Germans died fighting Russians (who lost many more), but I knew it would only make her uncomfortable and force her to search for something appropriate to be feeling. I'd heard that one of the beaches in the Kaliningrad *oblast* held thousands of human skeletons just beneath its sands, and that you could dig up a human femur or jawbone as a souvenir. Though the thought of taking home the knucklebone of some long dead soldier appalled me, I was sickly attracted to the idea of seeing the beach and uncovering the bones. I almost suggested to Natalie that we go there, but thought better of it.

We hadn't seen each other in months. And during those months, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her—her calm and matter-of-fact personality, the way everything in the world dropped away when we were together, the rawness of our attraction. The previous night in my apartment in Wrocław, we'd barely slept at all, and now, whenever the old Russian man who shared our car went to the train's small, smelly toilet, I ran my hand up Natalie's dress, and she smacked my arm, pretending to be offended.

That's the way she and I were, always stealing a few days, maybe a week, together whenever we were on the same continent, and it seemed that no rules applied to us. A few years later, long after our trip to Kaliningrad was over, she would be teaching German at Dillard University, in New Orleans, and I would tell my girlfriend—with whom I'd been living for nearly three

years—that I was going to visit an old high school buddy, and fly down from North Carolina to visit her. (I did see my friend briefly, so my deception was not an outright lie, though even then I knew that excuse was pure bullshit.) My flight, which I'd booked months in advance, was scheduled for four days after 9/11, and my girlfriend suggested that I postpone my trip, considering the circumstances. But I got on the plane and made the risky flight to New Orleans for the tryst with Natalie, faithful as ever to our strange marriage. One of the nights I was there, another lecturer, whom she'd been dating, came to Natalie's door. He asked who I was and what I was doing in her apartment. "It is none of your concern," Natalie told him, her accent making the statement seem all the more cruel.

We got a thousand-ruble room at the Kaliningrad Hotel on Leninskiy Prospekt, a street busy with cars ranging from small Fiats to BMWs and buses spitting black smoke. The woman at the counter spoke only a smattering of English and no German, so I used my broken Russian, stuffing Polish words in the cracks of sentences, hoping that the similarities between the languages would carry my meaning. Just as we were about to finish, another man came up, presumably the manager, who spoke flawless English. I was disappointed to get off so easily, robbed of the excitement of navigating choppy foreign waters. I was like that back then—an adventure or challenge arousing my interest.

In our hotel room we pulled at each other's clothes and kissed. Unbuttoning her dress, I realized that I hadn't brought condoms. By this point Natalie had undone my pants and was squeezing my stiffening penis. "Ich hab' keinen Präser," I said. "It's okay without one," she said and pulled her panties down, revealing her carefully trimmed pubic hair. I was shocked by her willingness—no, eagerness—to take the dual risk of unprotected sex. She was normally the more vigilant one, which I forced myself to be happy about. A part of me saw the use of condoms as mercenary, a way to make an intimate activity into a sterile business transaction in which lovers become safe arbiters of a mutual pleasure. But I had been raised in the '80s and '90s, the age of AIDS, and so had as hefty a paranoia about contracting the disease as anyone else. I've convinced myself several times that I had it, only to be tested and find myself clean, another get-out-jail-free card offered to an undeserving criminal. So I hesitated, stood there with a silly erection pointing nowhere, until she pulled me to her and toppled us onto the bed.

---

That first afternoon in Kaliningrad Hotel, while taking a shower, we discussed what we wanted to do that evening. Natalie washed her hair as I suggested a visit to the Immanuel Kant Museum. I was double-majoring in German and philosophy, so seeing Kant's manuscripts and personal belongings was akin to a teenager in a rock band going to Père Lachaise Cemetery to graffiti Jim Morrison's grave.

Immanuel Kant lived in Königsberg his whole life, leaving only once in order to attend his father's funeral. Somehow this grand Germanic figure survived the Soviet ideological cleansing, and in recent decades, Kant has come to be a major point of pride for the people of Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad University has been renamed Kant State University, and the cathedral that houses the museum dedicated to his life and works is perhaps the best-kept building in the entire *oblast*.

Kaliningrad is not like the famous Eastern European cities. It lacks the regal lion-headed façades and beautifully crafted bridges of Prague; can't boast the bohemian charms of Krakow's street musicians and gypsy palm readers—no Danube Promenade of Budapest. I don't mean to suggest that the city is entirely without charm. Kaliningrad has its share of verdigris statues and cobblestone pathways, but it truly distinguishes itself from its neighbors in unexpected and unenviable ways.

Firstly, the Kaliningrad *oblast* is the world's largest producer of amber. In shops everywhere you can find amber necklaces, brooches studded with amber, rings sporting oversized chunks of the yellowy-brown stuff. (I confess to buying a silver chain necklace with one delicately cut piece of amber for Natalie, a memento of our time together.) The amber mines, along with the export of the substance, account for much of the employment in this depressed region. To this day, when I see a piece of amber at a jewelry shop I nearly buy it, hoping in the pitying way of the privileged that some portion of my money will make it back to Kaliningrad and improve the lives of the people there.

The Kaliningrad *oblast* also boasts the fastest growing rate of AIDS in Europe. It is hard for Americans to understand the ignorance many Eastern Europeans show on the subject. This is because, as usual, we are taking for granted the privilege—both in terms of economic and informational wealth—in which we live. When, during the '80s and '90s, the American Congress okayed billions of dollars in AIDS awareness and

prevention programs, when our celebrity actors, authors, and musicians were doing benefits to raise national understanding of the disease, the Soviet Union fought to cover up the existence of the disease, worried that it would cause too much unrest in an already failing state. And since the fall of the Soviet empire, with the attendant economic collapse, there has been little improvement in the situation.

But walking in the Kant Museum, you can almost pretend that the dirtier outside world isn't there. The spotless, white walls and the intricately carved bust of Kant stand in belligerent relief against the backdrop of Kaliningrad. Natalie and I walked around the museum, pausing to take in a painting of Kant or a glass-covered manuscript of his. Natalie walked beside me, holding my hand. Seeing the sway of her dress made me wonder whether there was a secluded bathroom somewhere in the museum—but I squelched the thought, the way a devout Christian might refuse to have sex in a cathedral.

Kant made many contributions to the world of philosophy, but perhaps his most famous was the ethical proposition known as the categorical imperative, which states, roughly, that one ought to act in any given situation only in such a way that one would be willing to see that way of acting become universal law. It invites the question of whether it would be permissible for everyone to act in such a way. It seems clear that, according to Kant's ethics, engaging in unprotected sex (except in purely monogamous relationships) is unethical. If 100 percent of people practiced unsafe sex 100 percent of the time, the social and personal repercussions would be catastrophic. And so, thus does the patron philosopher of Kaliningrad condemn us from the grave.

How many times have I had unprotected sex? It's an uncomfortable question. Especially if you were raised hearing Magic Johnson warn that it only takes once to get AIDS and that you're sleeping with everyone your partner has ever slept with (which always brought forth orgiastic images for me I'm sure he did not intend). Engaging in unprotected sex is an act akin to drunk driving, sharing needles, playing Russian roulette—we all agree that it's dangerous and, if we take the Kantian view, unethical as well. But, just like drunk driving (if not sharing needles and playing Russian roulette), far too many of us do it.

According to the Santa Cruz-based public health research organization ETR, 48 percent of sexually active teens do not use condoms; that's here

in America, the country where billions are spent in awareness and prevention, the nation of Magic Johnson and AIDS awareness concerts. And the BBC in 2001 reported that 43 percent of Britons used no form of protection, a percentage not much different than most Western European countries. Just try to imagine how such statistics would read (if reliable ones were to exist) on the citizens of Russia—where the very existence of AIDS was covered up and, later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was little money for awareness programs. There are cases of HIV-positive Russians continuing to have unprotected sex because they believed that needles were the only way to contract the disease; or just the opposite, continuing to share needles thinking that it was entirely safe, but rigorously wearing condoms to protect uninfected partners.

To properly illustrate the rampant lack of public information on the subject of AIDS in Russia, all we have to do is look at the Clinical Hospital for Infectious Diseases at Ust-Izhora, just outside of St. Petersburg. There were numerous articles published in St. Petersburg newspapers in the early '90s demanding that the hospital be relocated to distant Siberia. Claims that everyone in nearby neighborhoods of St. Petersburg would be infected were rampant and led to the temporary closure of the hospital.

And one more case, an unimaginably sad one: In the Kaliningrad General Hospital, in 1998, an entire infant ward was infected with HIV because the nurses reused the same needle to administer basic vaccinations. The lack of resources the medical professionals were (and still are) forced to endure, along with a general cultural failure to recognize the dangers of HIV/AIDS led to this dark chapter in Kaliningrad's history.

Natalie and I were having a merry time of it. We dined on *pashtet* (liver paté) and *osetrina po-russki* (sturgeon in tomato and mushroom sauce), along with other delicacies at what seemed to us humorously low prices. We drank brandy and lemon-infused vodka. We also, in order to have an authentic regional experience, smoked Russian cigarettes that tasted like burnt cardboard mixed with dirt and drank cheap vodka that tasted like distilled boot polish, both purchased at a kiosk replete with newspapers, pornographic magazines, and half-rotten fruit.

Our three days in Kaliningrad were much the same. After a night of dinner and drinks, followed by dancing at a club where kids bought and sold black opium in the bathrooms, we'd end up back in our hotel room



drunk, sloppily taking each other's clothes off and engaging in an act that we were educated enough to know the dangers of. But each time I entered her and felt her warm pressure against me, whatever worries I had were perfectly absent.

We didn't discuss what we were doing. Maybe we were . . . who knows? I almost wrote that we were trying to be closer, maybe even trying to get pregnant in order to have an excuse to end up together—which I suspect we both secretly wanted—but that would be projecting a present-day explanation on the inexplicable past. I won't pretend to know what was happening unconsciously.

We can almost absolve Russians of their careless behavior due to their lack of information on the subject of STDs (though I would point out that Soviet propaganda never tried to convince them that unprotected sex didn't lead to unwanted pregnancies). We westerners, however, with our awareness programs and comparatively free media have no excuse. So why do roughly 50 percent of sexually active westerners use no form of protection (and I imagine that much of the other 50 percent surely slips up from time to time)? At first glance, there seem to be two main reasons—the conscious seeking of a more pleasurable experience and the delusional belief that *it* won't happen to *us*. But that can't be all there is to it. Do we humans, no matter our social or political situation, love transgression to the point that we'll risk our lives for its sake? Is it that without risk, there can't be any meaning in an action? But all that strikes me as too blithe to be fully true. There has to be more, doesn't there?

I'm reminded again of Kant, of perhaps his most famous quote: *From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing has ever been made*. That's as close as we'll get to an explanation.

The train ride back to Wrocław was relaxing. Natalie fell asleep against my shoulder as I stared out the window, thinking of nothing in particular, but mulling over all we'd seen and done in the past few days. I touched the cool glass of the window and tingling gooseflesh raised up on my arms. I felt close to Natalie and—as was my wont at that time in my life, a time filled with travel and adventure-seeking—let myself become self-absorbed, solemn, and pensive. Here I was in a train coming back from a part of Russia none of my American friends had even heard of,

with a German girl with whom I might be in love leaning her body against mine. I looked out the window as we careened past dusk-hued buildings and calligraphic trees, and savored the press of Natalie's breasts against my side.

Back in Wrocław, we fell directly asleep, exhausted from the travel, but in the morning, I woke to Natalie kissing my face. As we kissed—our hair tangled and our breath thick with sleep—I felt like a primitive man, in the cave of my room, and I'd found my mate and the outside world didn't mean a thing. But as I rolled on top of her, I remembered the condoms in my desk drawer. I didn't want to wear one, but I knew they were within reach; and out of respect for Natalie, or some unproud sense of chivalry, I grabbed one. She didn't stop me from putting it on, but the eagerness left her face as I tore open the wrapper. The latex was a separating barrier as I slid inside her. When we were done, I threw the filled condom in the trash, where it lay like the carcass of some alien or undersea creature, or the discarded skin of a reptile.

I cooked breakfast, which we ate at the kitchen table, wearing only t-shirts and underwear. As I placed the food on the table, I looked at Natalie's bare legs, sloppy shirt, mussed hair, and I was able to recapture some of the joy I felt while we were in Kaliningrad. We ate fried eggs and *kielbasa* cooked in onions and cabbage and washed it all down with large glasses of milk. It wasn't the rich cuisine we'd stuffed ourselves on in Kaliningrad, but it was hearty and comforting, a more practical continuation of our gluttony.

Her train left that afternoon, and we felt the weight of her departure already; everything we said and did suffered under its inevitability. We went into town and looked in shop windows, stopped for coffee two or three times just for something to do. I told her I had a break coming up and even though I didn't really have the money, I'd try to make it to Stuttgart to visit her. We reminisced about how we'd met in Greensboro, North Carolina, of all places, and how we used to dance to bad hip-hop music at a local bar. "I was surprised," she said. "You didn't look like the kind of person who would dance." Talking about how we met, years earlier, reminded me that we likely wouldn't see each other again for years.

We didn't talk about the possible consequences of our time in Kaliningrad, didn't discuss what we would do if she was pregnant, didn't question our assumption that neither of us was diseased. (Luck would

privilege us, and there would be no pregnancy and no diseases, but luck is no absolution.)

When it was finally time for her to leave, I walked her to the train. We hugged goodbye. Her train pulled slowly out of the station with a creak of cold metal. I walked the two miles back to my apartment instead of taking the tram. I tried to think of my semester project, but every thought of Kaliningrad led to thoughts of Natalie. I wish I could report that I was thinking about how stupid we'd been, or that I felt guilty for our carelessness, but all I could think was how empty my apartment was going to be without her, and that I regretted that morning, regretted ending our reckless honeymoon.







© 2008 Greg Jahn, "Young Dignity"



© 2008 Greg Jahn, "Enemy Combatant." Photograph was taken in Chalatenango Province in El Salvador in 1991.

# An Open Letter from Emily Dickinson to Billy Collins, Re: A Missing Bonnet\*

---

Nicole Nguyen

Dear Mr. Collins,

It has come to my attention  
that you may be in possession  
of a certain bonnet of mine—  
white cotton—white lace—  
white ribbon, tied in a bow  
which you undid,  
*with a light forward pull*  
while I stood—still—  
*on my wide-board, hardwood floor,*  
*facing an open window—*  
watching the lone carriage  
on the street below

A certain slant of light  
*came across my dress,*  
plain and simple and *all white*  
*puddled 'round my feet—*  
you sighed—*in dashes*—not I,  
with every hook unhooked,  
every pearl button undone  
Your hands trembled  
ever so slightly, as you handled  
my whalebone corset  
loosing the ties as I stood,  
afraid that my movement  
would disturb your concentration

My skin tingled from your touch  
 softly stroking, light as air,  
 the pale expanse of my arms—  
 down—to desire's perfect goal,  
 your Paradise, your ecstasy—  
 but no nearer to your reach  
 I tensed—you hesitated—then,  
 I sensed the ocean at my feet,  
 my head immersed in the stars,  
 and it became easy to yield  
 to the bliss of new experience

All was silent when it was over  
*save the Fly buzzing on the windowpane*  
 You groped your way to the door,  
 in the dark—the lamp put away—  
 my bonnet clasped in tight fingers,  
 feet quickly treading, plank by plank—  
 creaking across my Soul




---

\* Please note that phrases in *italics* are versions of lines in Billy Collins's "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* (London: Picador, 2000).





© 2008 Nick Beier



© 2008 Nick Beier

# Ode to a Trashcan in Room 108

---

Samantha Hederman

How much history have you held  
In your shadowed confines  
Before it was bundled up  
In a dark sack and stolen?





# Beach Run

Jan Shoemaker

**M**y daughter Anna and I made a break for the beach a few weeks ago, just the two of us. It was only mid-October but we'd already had it with our separate school lives—hers as a high school student, mine as a high school teacher. So on Saturday we loaded up our van with blankets and books and chocolate and drove west across the Michigan peninsula and stopped when we arrived at Lake Michigan itself.

Anna is a senior in high school and, realizing that in a handful of months she will be gone from me—in some ways forever—I am determined to enjoy every second of her company this year. I can only imagine how put upon she must often feel, how shadowed. Nevertheless, she is a good sport about it, meeting me at our favorite bookstore café a couple of afternoons a week for tea and scones and several hours of homework and book browsing. I am usually correcting papers and she is usually slogging through her art history textbook which is roughly the size and weight of our hard drive, which no one, by any stretch of the imagination, considers portable.

I think it was the bison that drove Anna to the beach or, at any rate, made her jump at the opportunity when I suggested it. She'd been studying cave drawings for what seemed like a geological epoch and she'd had it with bison that seemed to have seized hold of the prehistoric imagination in much the same way that Brad Pitt has nailed down the American tabloids. It was beginning to seem pretty obvious that 15,000 years ago you couldn't scan the bar code on your yak carcass in the checkout line without running into a bison staring vacantly back at you from the cave wall of the A&P.

"Untitled with Two Bison" was the last straw. "I'd give anything for a *title* and *no* bison," she sighed. The best I could do was offer her the beach.

I go to the beach when I want to have a good look at death—to set it apart and give it my full consideration—and this was really what I

had in mind when I suggested the road trip to Anna. When I find myself crying in the car about veal calves, when I wake up in the night weeping about children buried by earthquakes and swept away by tsunamis—that's when I haul death's sorry ass to the beach, to isolate it from its complicated trappings—its whys and what-ifs and if-onlys. There at the beach, whether I'm oceanside or at one of the Great Lakes, I hold death up against an expanse of water too vast to see across, a seamless canvas large enough to minimize it—to outperform it—by evoking eternity.

I needed the barrenness of the beach to clear my head. Too many people and animals whom I loved had recently died or were laboring to do so. I wanted the clean sweep of infinity; I wanted a windless place.

If windlessness is what you are looking for, the Lake Michigan shore in October, it turns out, is no place to go. Hooded and gloved, Anna and I were still unprepared for the near gale that was blowing off the lake. But we bent our heads into it like a couple of Arctic explorers and searched out a hollow among the dunes, which walled out the rushing air, and fashioned ourselves a den in it. By standing up we could watch the whitecaps roiling on the lake; sitting down we could listen to them break against the lighthouse while we read and ate and wrote. Anna dropped her backpack and rolled out an old quilt onto which I set the bread and cheese and olives. We unpacked a book of the letters exchanged by Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh and a collection of poems by Wendell Berry, and tore open a bag of peanuts that had been dipped in chocolate—twice. We unloaded sketchpads and journals and the bare-knuckles camera that Anna's been hauling around for years. It was ample provender and we intended, through it, to indulge all of our appetites and come away nourished. As a bonus, there was a conspicuous absence of bison. We settled in.

Anna, enamored of "the bright young things," had packed the Mitford-Waugh book. I'd brought Wendell Berry's beautiful, often elegiac poems along in part to help me navigate the grief I was feeling over my father's recent death. When you discover someone whose vision surpasses your own, whose intuition is keener, whose cry is more eloquent, it would be foolish to leave him at home. Truth be told, Wendell Berry went most places with me those days, and still does today. He writes of the sleeping ground waking in his lilies, celebrates its singing "in fragile things unnumbered years" and considers his own land where he hopes that

“nothing falls but into life.”<sup>1</sup> He hears in carrion “the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.”<sup>2</sup> I was desperate to know wholeness, to recognize my personal loss as sacred transformation, to believe that death unfolds into life.

Anna, relaxing into the bisonless landscape, was casually scribbling ideas for a college admissions essay into her journal. “I’m supposed to divide people into two categories,” she explained, “and tell why I draw my line where I do. What do you think?” I wasn’t so much thinking as I was awkwardly hacking Double Gloucester into chunks with the blade on my corkscrew, a tool that I keep in the glove compartment of our car next to the windshield scraper. While I disapprove of the homophobic Boy Scouts generally, I do believe in being prepared. “How about cat people and dog people?” I threw out. It was an insipid but almost instinctual response, as inventing new ways of disparaging our cat—an animal whose predatory inclinations rival Dick Cheney’s and whose condescension withers your outstretched hand—is one of the few competitive sports I really enjoy. I’ve more or less horrified my family with the series of nicknames I’ve tried out on her over the years—the Petit Despot, Kurtz, and then (somewhat redundantly) the Horror, but it was with Delirium Tremens that I felt I’d really reached my personal best. Like a furry little Shiva, DTs keeps dancing the Refusin’-Ta-Die rag. “You are *really* not a cat person,” people tell me. Fortunately for little DTs, there are people in our home who are.

Our golden retriever, Buddy, on the other hand, *was* dying and it was this more than anything that had sent me running for the beach. My bones were aching because I had spent the previous night sleeping on the floor beside him; he’d grown too weak to climb into our bed even though my husband, Larry, had built steps for him. Buddy, who had bulked up on our love over the past dozen years, had endured surgery and months of emaciating chemotherapy in our selfish efforts to keep life in him. Something broke in my chest when the last vet’s report had labeled him, “anorexic dog.” I was gulping air and horizon hungrily now, stocking up to see us both through another night’s vigil.

---

1. Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems 1957–1982* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 115.

2. Berry, 151–52.

Anna put down her journal and extracted an oily olive from its slim jar. Despite the amount of time we spend together she is very private about her writing and her painting and well, her life—which I get—she's 18. I had been pointedly keeping my busy fingers off the control panel of her life since she'd practically bitten off my head for mentioning that I liked—*liked* the mural she had painted, like Amy in *Little Women*, on her bedroom wall. But I am no dispassionate Marmie, able to rise above the stormy passions of her young to administer gentle reproofs. Stung, I had reacted—not by shouting any of the outraged and, by the way, completely justifiable retorts clamoring around in my head, things like “I *own* those walls so I’ll look when and where I damn well want to in *my* house!” but by brusquely backing off, which included turning over the complicated college application process entirely to her. I placed the college catalogues in her lap along with the half dozen pocket-folders I had labeled and color-coded according to application deadline. Nothing there to indicate that I might have been a tad overinvolved. *She can get in*, I fumed silently, *or not get in—it’s her life*. I’d been wounded and I was *out*. But that had been weeks ago and this essay topic was teasing me—I’m an English teacher, after all—and I was having trouble keeping my sticky fingers off.

“Orthodox and heretic?” I tried again. Anna, who had set about ripping a baguette into fist-sized chunks, nodded noncommittally—maybe a little interested. “You know, people who recite creeds and people who question them.” I was liking the diversion this essay topic was providing. While I was proving to be entirely powerless to save the humans and dog I loved, I was finding myself to be handy with throwing up a template and slicing up the world to fit into its frames. It was a little like finally understanding that although you’ll never be so erudite as to win the Nobel Prize for physics, you are just clever enough to cut and paste a Word document into your email, only considerably less useful. Still, it seemed like something.

“Or how about people who run away from a disaster and people who run toward one?” Anna and I had recently been in England together, had left London for the Lake District two days before what the British call “bombing outrages” shook the city and killed 52 of its irreplaceable citizens. The London we returned to the same week was altered by police tape and a ubiquitous police force that seemed to have sprouted machine guns like terrifying new appendages. The London *Times* was covered with photographs of



carnage; a few pictures showed terrified people running away from the double-decker bus that had exploded in Tavistock Square while others, incredibly, ran toward it. Some humanitarian impulse too sudden to have sprung from thought propelled those people toward that horrific wreck—that seemed a thing worth considering. It suggested, I thought, some force underlying the material world and perhaps even orchestrating it in odd, unpredictable moments, perhaps even outlasting it. I was all for an argument that would point to eternity showing its hand in the world. But Anna put down her journal, wrapped a scarf around her neck to just below her eyes, and set off to photograph the pier.

That night I spread out my blanket next to Buddy on the floor again and we slept nose to nose—breathing in and returning to each other the same air. *One pneuma—one breath*. He died a day later with his big head in my lap, and a few days after that Larry and I scattered his ashes in the woods where he had loved to walk. We soaked our shoes hauling a rock out of his favorite creek and lugged it home to our hearth where it sits in memorial, black and smooth, uncannily resembling, when the light hits it right, his wise and gentle face.

I sometimes wonder where love goes when the ones we love disappear. Sitting on the bathroom floor, which is where I do my best grieving, I can still feel the love for my good dog and my good dad emanating from my body like a pulse, but it's a current without a receiver. Does it slip through the screen over my head and spiral into space? Could I see it with just the right high-tech, heat-sensitive goggles developed by *NASA* or MIT? What, after all, are the physics of love? Maybe it just falls back to earth and soaks into the ground like rain.

Anna opened her letter of acceptance from the college for which she had written the essay that began at the beach a few weeks later as we sat at a table by the fireplace in our usual café. She had drawn a line between us and had gotten into college just fine without my indispensable assistance. I see now that her intelligence and vision and exuberance are going to carry her beyond borders I have not even conceived of and the certainty of that fills me unequivocally with joy.

I didn't drag Anna to the beach in October looking for answers to explain away loss or negate the fact of death; God knows I am too skeptical to embrace with certainty any theories about what follows our dying. I ran to the coast for breathing space, for a seamless terrain large enough to receive

my sorrow and absorb some of it—a wide beach and a Great Lake will do that for you, will take the run-off when you feel you are drowning in the rising backwaters of your own grief. I was as buoyed by Anna's quiet company that day as I am by her confidence now; it will be difficult and thrilling to watch her go.

I am sure to feel her absence keenly. I am equally sure that I will take my loneliness to the beach and to the woods too, where even now, I tell myself, Buddy's ashes are feeding the ferns and where his redistributed atoms will comprise the coils of early fiddleheads. "Practice resurrection," Wendell Berry urges.<sup>3</sup> I don't think for a minute that he believes it's a simple business picking ourselves up and moving forward in the echoing absence of the ones we love—no easier than it is for a spring shoot to part the heavy April earth. I'll try—that's all, not heroically but with any luck steadily, with occasional setbacks to which, I think, we are all entitled. And this summer I'll walk in the shade of the woods and lower my face to the ferns.

---

3. Berry, *Collected Poems*, 151-52.

# Photograph: A Study in Light and Form

---

Joan Colby

Faint April light,  
the stout woman on the porch  
squinting behind plastic-framed glasses  
looks out at a dazzle of white tutus pirouetting  
upon the Norway maple and imagines  
not the genesis of leaves but bad weather  
stacking in her knees.

She scowls at the mailman  
plodding across lawns, hauling bills  
and solicitations. A bell rings in the blank house  
behind her. She turns to answer, expecting bad news  
or an aggravation of sellers.

What she needs cannot be purchased or remembered  
except in dreams, lying in a cluster of sheets  
in the lost body of girlhood, eyes clenched upon departures,  
sleight-of-hand hummingbirds, immaculate magnolias  
unfolding on leafless limbs.

She is trapped in solids,  
spatula of light, the cheap grainy platter of the sky.  
Grumpy, thick-armed, she faces each foreboding day  
squarely with her door framing a darkness big enough  
to shut over her body.







© 2008 David R. Hammel, "Eiffel Tower with Moon"



# Pale Moon

---

David Sapp

When I was a child  
the moon appeared only  
in the night, in storybooks,  
through a window and surrounded  
by thick, inky black;  
it was full, ripe,  
and radiant in October,  
setting the cornfields ablaze,  
flaming seas of rippling, golden ribbon.

I would gaze at the moon's  
scarred, pale expression  
and wonder if its face  
was ever smooth  
like an unchipped china saucer  
first brought down from  
a high cupboard shelf.

I would squint through the telescope  
on warm summer nights  
for a glimpse  
of the astronauts' craft buzzing  
around the moon's head;  
if the moon had arms  
and quick hands,  
it could swat  
at the shiny, irksome fly.

I cannot recall when  
I first noticed the moon  
on an early morning,  
and even now I'm distracted  
by its thin, diaphanous  
bit of fabric clinging  
to pallid, blue skin  
and slipping,  
as the sun nears,  
from the shoulders of the sky  
to the floor of the horizon.





# Words Alone

Elizabeth Banning

She was a collector. From the day they'd met as children, he'd loved that about her. She showed him the shiny-backed beetles collected from the attic windowsill; the matchboxes recovered from her father's wastebasket; the cloudy chips of green glass from the shore at Sines; the seed-pods like miniature propellers.

When she was 15 and he 17, she showed him the thin strips of colored paper on which she'd written words that had caught in her ear. Words like *jonquil*. *Estuary*. *Infinitesimal*. *Howl*. Rolled tight and deposited for safe-keeping in cotton-lined matchboxes, each word nestled beside its own crisp beetle. For Tiá, solitary words, alone and unadorned by others, were perfect truth, pure and naked and unassailable. Assembled into sentences, she said they were at the mercy of their architect, too often constructed into ugliness and lies. Her father's legal briefs she'd pointed to as proof.

Beetles in matchboxes and words on pastel streamers had long since disappeared. But here, at the bottom of her rosewood jewelry box among random testaments to his wife's incorrigible magpie ways, were different words: letters wrapped in tissue and bound with string whiter than his hair.

He'd brought her jewelry box to the bed and propped himself up with his pillows, leaving Tiá's in place beside him, plump and smooth. Still unused to the idea that he'd be sleeping alone for the rest of his life, the pillows cushioned the distance between getting used to it and knowing it to be true. A distance as far from life as death.

In the filtered sunlight, Tiá's jewelry winked at him. Each had its own memory to share. The amethyst brooch her grandmother had sworn once belonged to the Duchess of Loulé: how she'd tilted her head just so to check her appearance in the mirror the last time she'd worn it. The pearl earrings he'd given her after Stefan was born: how brave she'd been—it had been a hard labor; he'd thought he was going to lose her. The tortoiseshell bracelet: how, despite rationalizing that the poor creature was already dead, she'd recited an apologetic prayer each time she wore it.

Nuno wondered if she'd kept the god-awful plastic charm bracelet the boys had given her the Christmas when Frank was two, and lifted the inset tray to find out.

He never imagined the letters still existed. Written over 65 years ago, when he was barely 20. His sons at that age had still seemed like children, and Nuno supposed he, too, had been just as innocent, none of them old enough to be capable of . . . what? War.

How little the world had changed.



*Tuesday evening—18 (?) August 1936*

*Dear Tiá,*

*I have never known colder nights. Do you remember when we were seven, when you showed me how your teeth chattered when your parents took you to the mountains to see snow? Do you remember how I laughed at you? I am not laughing now and hope you can forgive me—all these years later—for not believing you.*

*The men complain that it is colder than the Devil, but I say the Devil would never venture this close to heaven. On the mountain, water, land, and sky remain—for the most part—undisturbed. I have never seen such beauty. From camp, the whole world spreads below me. Horse chestnut, oak, and pine cover the hills, and all conspire to remind me of home. So similar, yet . . . How is it that borders make one feel so far away?*

*A man named Esteban has befriended me. He's a strange, little man with the face of a ferret and the temperament of a dove. We talk at length (he talks, I listen) about his father's farm and how "bugs are not bad, just misunderstood." Even though I told him I had no use for it, he has entrusted me with his family's "secret recipe" for repelling insects without killing them, which he says is a sin against nature. When I asked him what he will do when called upon to kill a man, he said—I swear to you—men were sinners and deserved to be sent back to their Maker.*

*No doubt influenced by Esteban, or because I'm surrounded by mountains that turn the color of your favorite plums at sunset—how it pains me to write this! I know how much pleasure it will give you—I admit: you are right. You told me once that what is born under the sky is free of sin. That sin is man's creation, not God's. (Heaven help me, I swear I can see your smile.) Do you think men will ever live in peace? If you tell me yes, I will believe you.*

~~This war~~ I have made a promise to myself: someday I will have land of my own and a house with a veranda where I can sit and count the eagles flying by.

I hope you are well. Your father's consent to Carlos's proposal of marriage is news all through camp. All marvel at his good fortune, including me. Especially me.

Now that you are engaged, I hope I may still write to you?

Your friend,

Nuno

P.S. When you see Adella, give her a hug from her big brother, and tell her it may be awhile before I can write again.



15 August 1936

My Darling,

I have discovered that only three others in our company have been to university. One, a fine fellow, tells me his uncle serves in Salazar's cabinet and has promised me an introduction. His is one back you can be certain I shall cover at all costs. Another, an engineer from Lisbon, is a wizard with explosives. The third, also from Lisbon, purports to be a student of economics, but his unsophisticated speech and sloppy thinking betray an unexceptional mind. His crude humor has garnered him the admiration of the rest of the men—it is true that water seeks its own level. He does, however, handle a rifle well.

What I wouldn't give for a hot bath and a clean shirt! Conditions are miserable. The food is barely edible, ammunition and communication are old and in short supply, and we are still waiting for the tanks Germany promised months ago. None of this troubles the rank and file—they bumble on and expect miracles.

Here I have observed for myself what your father refers to as "the ladder of fools." I am convinced now more than ever, Salazar's firm grip is the only way to maintain order at home. You have no idea how disheartening it is that these peasants hold men like me in contempt. Indolence is endemic. I try to stimulate the minds of the better men in our unit, but it is a strong tide against me. One would think they would be eager to learn history's lessons, but they fail to grasp the relevance and mock me behind my back. Imbeciles. If they are determined to ignore the lessons

of the past, then I will teach them one that is more timely: willfully ignorant soldiers are expendable.

We will win this war for Franco in spite of them.

Do not worry about me. I will be home to claim you as my bride before Christmas. I pray my letters reach you from this God-forsaken place.

Yours, as you are mine,

Carlos



*It must be Sunday—I heard bells from across the valley*

*Dear Tía,*

*How can I ever thank you for the photograph of my little Adellita? (It is also a very good likeness of you—the beret suits you.) How in the world did you manage to get my sister in front of a camera? I have known you forever, and still you never cease to amaze me.*

*We are several kilometers from the fighting, and there is grumbling in camp. The men are eager to be a part of it. I, for one, am happy to be right where we are. At night I wake to thunder only to realize it is drumfire from the valley that robs me of my dreams.*

*Yesterday I had the oddest experience. Perhaps you can divine its meaning. Here is what happened: five of us were patrolling the perimeter of camp. Everything that might have been green was almost invisible in the fading light. The scrub, covered with thorns the size of cobblers' needles, seemed intent on eating us alive. When we circled back I smelled something sweet, like those white flowers in your grandmother's garden. It was so strong, Tía. I thought we had stumbled upon the enemy and held up my hand for the men to stop. But what soldier would be fool enough to wear cologne? A woman, then, fleeing disaster (or inviting it)? But there was no one. No man, no woman, no one. And here is what was so strange: none of the others smelled a thing. The men thought I was crazy. I cannot explain it.*

*You know my faith has never been as strong as yours, but I cannot help feeling as though someone—something—is watching over me.*

*I want nothing more than to come home to my sister and my friends. I have lost all sense that we have a legitimate reason for being here. Spain disintegrates from within, while Azaña and Franco each claim to be her salvation. Each embodies politics' moral wasteland. I fear our beloved Portugal is*

*not far behind. Were my parents still alive, they would be disappointed in me for saying such a thing, I know. Father especially. He thrived on conflict, sought it out. I do not. I hope you do not think me a coward. After all the bloody noses I've suffered (and inflicted) defending João, you had better not. How is he doing at university, by the way? A doctor, no less. For him, I can't think of a more fitting livelihood. I wish I could see my future with the same certainty that he sees his.*

*I do not mean to burden you—let me lighten the mood with this: a stray dog has adopted our ragged battalion. The men call him Nunito because the fur that stands up on the top of his head makes him look (they say) like me. I happen to think he is a very handsome hound.*

*Your friend,*

*Nuno*



30 November 1936

Darling Girl,

Your quaint notion of politics has amused many around camp, not the least of whom General Fuentes (you put his name on the guest list as I instructed, didn't you?). He said your naiveté is charming beyond words and remarked how eloquently you reveal why women shouldn't concern themselves with the complexities of international affairs.

I must caution you against being so outspoken. In this climate misconceptions fuel tragedy. While it is true this is Spain's war, there is, for Portugal, no neutrality when it comes to her fate. There are those who say they have Spain's best interest at heart, yet they condemn the Church, denouncing the very foundation of civilization. They stand at our doorstep, Tiá. Would you have us stand idle? Of course not. By protecting Spain's legitimate government—and the Church—we are protecting our own soil from bloodshed.

That acquaintance of yours that I met last Easter—Negreiros I think his name was—he is just the type I am speaking about: quick to curry favor with authority, only to turn around and bite the hand that feeds him. If your father hasn't told you already, avoid him. And his friends. I know you are attracted to their bohemian notion that art can change the world, but as you mature you will see it takes more than that. Have you actually read his poetry? The man is completely full of himself.

As my intended, it is important you understand my future depends not only on my actions but the actions of those around me—especially you. Make me proud, Tiá.

You needn't worry about me; I will be fine. Best you focus on things that make you happy: the wedding (which we will have as soon as I return), that lovely piano piece you played for me when we first met, and your riding (you are still riding, I hope?). There is, I think, nothing more appealing than a woman on horseback.

Remember me in your dreams,  
Carlos



6 December 1936

Dear Adellita,

*I need you to do something for me. I want you to sell the Miró (you hate it, anyway) to Sr. Vaz. Trust him; he will give you a fair price. If he asks, tell him it is to pay off your brother's gambling debt. I cannot say exactly when, but I will come for the money soon. Tell no one. Promise me you will burn this letter, Adella. No one must ever know. Please do this for me. You know I would not ask if it wasn't important.*

*Whatever you hear about me, Adella, it will probably be true. There is no other choice. I cannot live this way.*

*Your loving brother,*  
Nuno



Christmas Eve

My Love,

Did you think the men would not laugh behind my back? Did you think I would not discover your secret? You indulged in a dangerous game, Tiá, but it is over.

I forbid you to write to your "friend" Nuno, not even to explain. I have told him myself he will no longer be receiving letters from you. Your thoughts, your words, and your heart belong to me, Tiá. Tell me, why is it your letters made him smile as though an angel touches his heart? Everyone saw it. Obviously, you did not care what it would do to

my reputation. You will be my wife soon—it is time you started acting like it.

Carlos



All this time, thought Nuno, as he let the past evaporate into the orange grove's fragrant canopy, all this time Tía had held it close, reminding herself with every memento added to her jewelry box: the plastic charm bracelet, Ricardo's mutilated dog tags, Stefan's posthumous Purple Heart, and the "war is not healthy for children and other living things" button. With the photograph taken of her at her 65th birthday party.

With the results of her biopsy, just last year.

She hadn't wanted to forget. Not like him. He hadn't wanted to remember any of it, especially the dog, Nunito.



Wary of jumping shadows and flashlight beams, the dog, its body a serration of ribs, wandered into camp and made straight for Esteban, sitting before him as though it had received an engraved invitation to dinner.

Esteban held out a scrap of gristle and fat.

"Lose your hand for sure, doing that," said Amado from the shadows.

The dog stretched its neck and took the scrap as gently as plucking a petal from a rose.

"More where that comes from," Esteban said to the dog. "I got a whole plate, right here." It stared into Esteban's face, tail tip thumping the ground, trembling with hunger. Waiting.

Soon, others were sharing. Not so much for the dog's sake, but their own, feeding their starving souls an act of decency, even if only a small and inconsequential one. Too, it had been months since anyone—or anything—had shown them gratitude.

Almost as if it knew it would be in the way of human endeavors, during the day the dog disappeared, reappearing in the evening to accept handouts and always with the same impeccable manners. They called the dog Nunito, a sure sign of affection for both the dog and his namesake. For all but one.



"Write to Tiá again, and your balls will feed the buzzards," said Carlos as he leaned against the truck. His casual tone might just as easily have informed Nuno it was a fine day for fishing.

"I know you're engaged," said Nuno, retracting himself from under the hood. "Tiá and I have been friends since childhood." Pulling a rag black with oil from his back pocket, he wiped the grease from his hands. "That's all."

Carlos hooked his right heel onto the truck, regarded Nuno. "Since you are her friend—" He lit his cigarette—"I will let it go." Smoke curled from his nostrils. "This time."



"Dear Tiá,

*The fighting is closer than ever before. I have made whatever peace I can with that part of myself that must not—cannot—hesitate to kill."*

From behind, the words of his letter burned into Nuno's ear.

"Shall I tell you how the rest of it goes?" Under Carlos's polished boot, the bench gave slightly. His toe poked into Nuno's thigh. Carlos leaned closer, his voice soft. "*Without your letters there is no refuge. You are my one, true friend, Tiá, do you know that?*" That's what it says, doesn't it? After I told you no more."

Nuno continued eating, stabbing the soft flesh of the beans swimming in his plate with his fork, each time a miniature bayonet. Swallowing sand would have been easier.

"I thought I'd made myself plain, but perhaps not plain enough. This time I believe my message will be clear. Even for you."

With a *companheiro's* slap on the back, as though they had been discussing maneuvers or materiel, Carlos left Nuno sitting at the table, surrounded by the stink of burnt coffee and cabbage.

Later that evening Esteban returned to camp after patrol. He carried Nunito. The dog's throat had been cut.



How easily it unfolded, moment by moment, like a plan gone right. If the finger of God himself had descended from the clouds to point the way, it wouldn't have surprised Nuno at all.



Heavy mist had been falling all morning. As the company approached a small village outside of Santiago de Campostela, rifle reports from the center of town sent the men diving for cover. Chickens scattered from the scrub. Beside Nuno, a cloud of flies erupted from the shattered face of a mule.

At the all clear, the captain signaled for Carlos, Amado, and Louis to split off, and proceed into town from the right. By the time the captain waved Nuno and Esteban to follow, Carlos and his men were 50 yards down a side street strewn with bricks and ragged timber. But for the random bark of bullets, the town appeared deserted.

Between the bakery and dry goods store, Carlos motioned for Amado and Louis to advance; he began his creep in the opposite direction and took cover behind the bakery. To the north, an exchange of shots; four, maybe five. The falling whistle of heavier artillery sent Nuno and Esteban scrambling for cover behind the churchyard's tumbled wall. Shock waves ruptured the air.

From behind the ruined wall, Nuno watched Carlos wave Amado and Louis toward the store's recessed doorway. Rain darkened Carlos's jacket, like black wings unfolding down his back.

"It is a clean shot," whispered Esteban. "Take it."

Pressure in his ears amplified his stampeding heart. His pulse tapped the trigger beneath his finger. "He's a man, Esteban."

"He's a shit who'll kill you first chance he gets." Esteban snaked closer to the break in the wall. "For Nunito, then," whispered Esteban.

So close that Nuno heard its wings urging the air aside, a frenzied pigeon climbed the bell tower, lighting on the ledge just long enough for Nuno to see, in the shadow of the bell, the tip of the rifle taking aim at the back of the bakery.



*Dearest Tía,*

*How many times have you reminded me to consider all consequences before making an important decision? I have made the most important decision of my life, and there is only one consequence now that truly matters.*

*I am going to America.*

*Come with me. Be my wife. I have loved you since we were children. Not just as friends, but as a man loves a woman. I believe you love me too.*

*I write not because I am afraid to ask you in person, but because I want you to think about your answer. I will know it the moment I see you—your eyes have never lied to me.*

*If you will come with me—and I pray you will—you must be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Adella will let you know when I am coming.*

*If it is not to be, if I have presumed too much of your affection, my heart will be glad just for having your friendship, and I will continue to love you every day of my life.*

*Forever and with all my heart, eu te amo,*

*Nuno*



He folded the letters back into their tissue paper and retied the string as best he could. How much more nimble her fingers were than his! His clever Tía: she knew all along the money to come to America came from the Miró.

Memories, Nuno decided, were like words: some were best left detached from others.

He was glad she never knew what became of the dog.



# Papa's Mower

---

Charles Grosel

They say the first death hits you hardest, but they're wrong. I don't feel a thing. That's why I volunteer to go to the house. Mom thinks the mower might have been left out, the rusty Sears rotary her father was pushing when it happened. Heart attack. Leave it to Mom to think of tidying up after something like that.

There hasn't been much for me to do since I flew in from New Hampshire, where I teach at a prep school. The arrangements have been made here in Cleveland, and I wouldn't have been part of that anyway. Since doing anything else seems somehow disrespectful, we're all just sitting around, my brothers and sisters and me, the five of us waiting to be told what to do and watching TV without talking, without moving, without even blinking, it seems. When Mom announces, "Someone has to go to the house," my brothers and sisters look at me without saying anything, then turn back to the TV. I say, "I'll go," though it takes some time before I can bring myself to leave the couch.

To get to Papa's house, you drive on flat roads for a couple of miles, then you go down a steep hill and curve up to the street where Papa lived with Gramma until her stroke three years ago. She's in a nursing home; Papa just couldn't take care of her by himself anymore. I wonder if she knows what's going on. As I turn up the last stretch toward the house, the lumbering station wagon enters the shadowy vault of maples and oaks that line the street, the snarled woods of a fairy tale. Patches of light flicker through the canopy like ghosts on the windshield, and the air has a charge to it, a density, as if crossing a threshold.

I park at the curb and step onto the potholed street. Now weathered a graying white, the shingle-sided house with its diamond-shaped dormers is built on the side of a hill. The front porch droops like a clown's smile, white posts and gray floorboards listing toward the stone steps. The lawn with its scorched, bare patches falls away in a lazy S to the top of a wall of tumbled sandstone blocks about waist high, the grass still trim

from the last mowing. Tufts of grass shoot out from between the rocks where the mower couldn't reach. Between the bulging wall and tree lawn is a sidewalk of sandstone slabs laid end to end like the dominoes Papa and I used to play. A flat black stump is embedded in the tree lawn, an elm that, before it was claimed by disease, had begun to raise the driveway. The stump's rim is eaten away by weather and years and the bite of the lawnmower.

I ascend the dark tongue of the driveway, oil-patched and crumbling at the point of its greatest slope, pass the tinny screen door on my left, and come up to the low-slung, flat-top garage, set back in its own little bluff. The back end of Papa's great finned car sticks out of the garage, the door half-closed on its trunk as if devouring a gigantic fish.

"Why don't you let us clean it out back there so you can pull it in all the way?" Dad had offered many times.

"Ah, why bother?" Papa always said, slapping his hand at the air, "Where would I put all the crap?"

To the left is the backyard, flat for a stretch beyond the porch, and much smaller than I remember. At the end of the porch, a huge forsythia leans greedily into the neighbor's yard. There's a short hill up to another rectangle of lawn boxed in by a rock wall like the one out front. Terraced, though Papa never would have used that word. Above the wall, even steeper than the lawn, are the woods that climb to the houses at the top of the bluff. The ground is covered in rotting, broken limbs, sprawling vines, and brown, wet leaves, half-decayed, with ivy and pachysandra poking through.

Did we really play football on that tiny patch of lawn with all our cousins, Papa joining in when the ball rolled down the hill toward the grill where he was cooking? He'd snatch up the tumbling ball with two hands, timing the erratic jumps perfectly, then punt the ball back up the hill, getting more loft on the ball than we could ever dream of. "Show us how, show us how," we would beg. "All right," he'd say. "I have a minute." He'd line us up on the second level, show us how to drop the ball to the top of the foot on the inside (not the toe) and let each of us kick the ball down the hill, so that it looked like it went twice as high. Meanwhile, the first round of burgers and hot dogs would burn to charcoal. "Stop playing with the kids and keep your eye on the barbecue," Gramma would

scold out the window. "He thinks he's 12 years old," she'd say as an aside to anyone who cared to listen.

And there's the lawnmower, just where he would have been standing while coaching us, in the middle of the lawn on the first level, stopped in mid-stripe. The taller grass to the right is trampled. A double track leads from where I'm standing to the mower. Must be from its wheels, I think. Then I realize. No, the gurney. I turn away.

On the back porch sits his cooler, one of those red metal types you see only in antique stores, with a bottle opener screwed to one side. He never did yard work without it. An empty bottle, which must have rolled off the porch, lies next to the cross-hatched trellis stitched with spider webs and spattered with dirt. Another bottle, half-finished, stands next to the cooler. Stroh's. Papa's last beer. He wouldn't be happy that he didn't get to finish it.

I do what Papa would have done. I walk to the porch, take off the cooler's lid, and set it aside, the smell of rust and stale water rising from within. Inside I see the rest of what must have been a 12-pack toppled like bowling pins. I reach into the tepid water and pull out a bottle, shake it off and wipe it on my jeans, then pop the cap by shoving it into the bottle opener and pulling down hard, even though it's a screw top. Papa didn't believe in screw tops. I raise the bottle toward the house, then bring it to my lips. The beer is warm and yeasty, more potent, as if it has fermented even more in the last few days.

I walk to the mower, sipping the warm beer. I'm just going to put it away, but when I jostle the handle, I hear the gas slosh in the tank. Someone shut off the mower, at least. Without really planning to, I set the bottle down, grip the mower's handle, and pop a wheelie to free the blade from the grass. With one hand propping up the mower and one hand gripping the cord, I pull once, twice, three times, and with each pull the engine spits and sputters and chokes, closer to ignition. I pull again and again and finally the engine burps and catches, unsyncopated, until I adjust the throttle to a rough roar, still out of timing, but as close as I'm going to get.

I drop the front end to the ground and begin to mow. Slowly, steadily, back and forth on the flats, horizontal on the hill, careful. After the first pass, I'm taken up with it, like reading a good story, only the story is what I'm doing, and I'm lost in it, in the fresh, damp farmers' market smell of

the cut grass, in the oily catch of the exhaust in the back of the throat, in the cushion of sound like a force field around me. I know I should feel bad about the pleasure I'm taking, but I don't. When I finish what Papa left, I go back to what he had already done. The grass has grown since Saturday. I work my way carefully around the borders, weave in and out of the crevices at the base of the wall on the second level, where I shiver in the sudden coolness.

I don't want it to end, but there's nothing left to mow. I let the mower freefall down the hill, running after it like a kid, my chest huffing. Once I catch it, I veer toward the driveway, still running, then skid to a stop just behind the car with wings. The engine is louder on the asphalt, and higher pitched. I listen to its harsh music, and finally I've had enough and cut the throttle. The engine coughs to a halt. Into the vacuum created by this sudden absence rushes everything I haven't been thinking since Mom called. To my surprise, I find that I am weeping.



# Bookmark

---

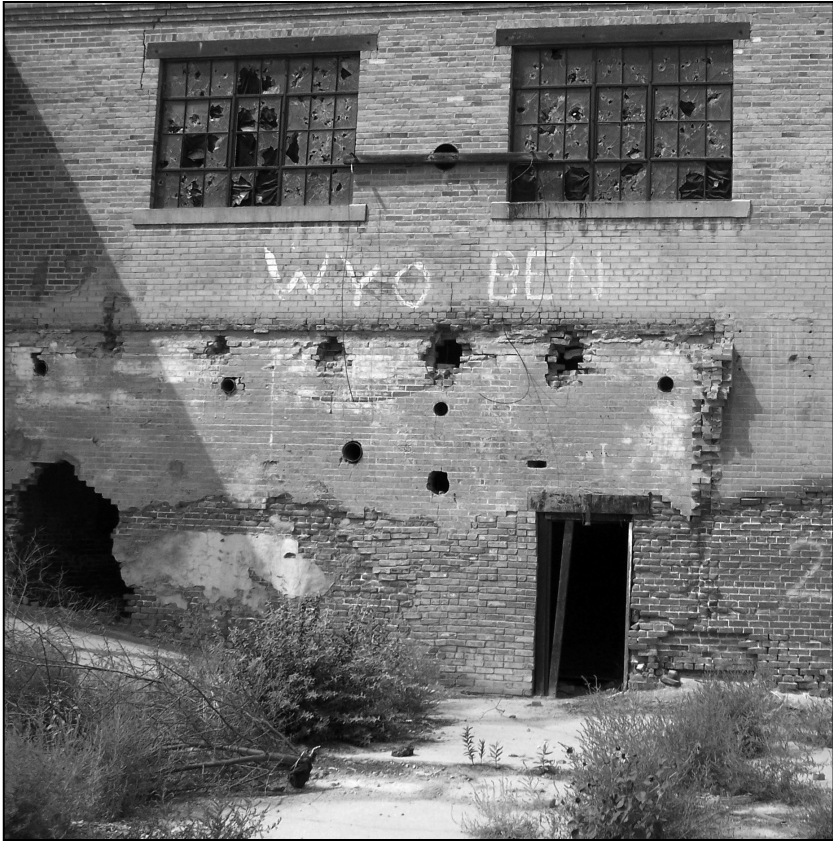
Stephen Kopel

in her,  
all those book stories  
had ignited fires and  
every cinder lay layered  
like cerebral strata . . .  
lit within,  
his eldest daughter  
avoided bright lights,  
soft flicker of candle  
and from a distance  
resembled a heron at rest,  
detached, observing its own kind,  
not displeased . . .  
her large hands  
spoke to each other,  
silencing her voice only  
when the impetus to scream  
became unbearable . . .  
like moths  
scouting dark terrain  
for a luminous lure,  
men circled her eyes  
assessing contents,  
departing sang . . .  
and, only at his final visit,  
before balcony's railing launched  
eldest daughter into air,  
did her father bring those books—  
spineless, holding no terror—  
in which she had so  
thoroughly lived . . .









© 2008 Samantha Hederman, "The Forgotten"



# Where Johannes Brahms Was Born

---

Eric Gabriel Lehman

Joel pauses on the little terrace before Hanne's front door. She'll certainly shoot him a look with those large eyes of hers when he waltzes in at 11 in the morning, even if it is Pascal, her wild 14-year-old, who needs the talking-to. But Hanne has been around the block. She understands what it means to search for love.

The courtyard is strewn with bottles and plastic cups from last night's Bastille Day celebrations. Buildings on either side of the courtyard are laced together by strings of colored bulbs, their light feeble in the sun. Once a third building enclosed the courtyard but it didn't survive the war and now the yard opens to the street like a window. Hanne claimed to have rented the house because of the yellow plum tree that arches over it and bears translucent, golden fruit.

"*Morgen.*" Pascal sits naked, framed by his window, writing in a notebook, song lyrics for his band perhaps. The sill is where he used to chat with Sybille, his girlfriend from across the courtyard until she dumped him the week before. One leg shields from view what is not meant to be seen, but only just, an arrangement of discretion and tease executed by someone who knows people look at him. A shell hangs from a leather thong around his neck and a sliver of earring shines through thickets of hair. He is tall for his age, lithe, and dark-eyed. His position has him lit to the best advantage; sunlight burnishes his calf and dabs a shoulder. Joel imagines standing close enough to breathe in the naked Pascal as he might a handsome stranger waking beside him. Pascal's knowing smile reads Joel's mind. "Congratulations. You're the first *schwul* American I've met," he had said after Joel moved in. He let Joel know that he'd had erotic encounters with male friends, even if he is drawn to women "at the moment." It is hard imagining a kid his age in Dubuque speaking with such poise, and Pascal clearly enjoys playing the enlightened northern European. He returns to his writing, allowing Joel—and Sybille—to observe him so engaged. He'll be the first thing

she sees when she looks out of her window, part of Pascal's plan to get her back, Joel supposes.

Joel feels like a native with a paper bag of *Brötchen* from the local bakery, ordered in German, more or less. He has been in Hamburg for a little over a year and sleeps on Hanne's couch in return for hauling cases of mineral water down to her basement cabaret, working the espresso maker and sweeping up, and he fills in if a singer needs a pianist, too. Hanne's cabaret is stuck in an anarchist/hippie-flavored time warp of the sort Joel associates with college coffeehouses. Last night Beate Schumacher sang blues with a distinctly Prussian lilt: *Sommertihme, when ze living ist eassy* . . . Hanne has asked her back in a couple of weeks. Germans love *die Blues*. Beate Schumacher told Joel that when she goes to New York in the fall she will head straight to Harlem and not waste time in museums. "Blacks, zey are ze real Americans," she says. "Zey have soul."

The large front room is clear of last night's debris left over from post-show carousing; so Hanne must have gotten up especially early that morning, a bad sign, because it also means that Todd hadn't stayed over. Pascal's artwork fills the living room walls and an entire corner is taken up by his drum set. A radio crackles in the kitchen. "*Bonjour, mon petit.*" Hanne's French is left over from her time in Lyon when she still lived with Pascal's father. Her cigarette is gummed between her lips as she heaves a large cooking pot into the dish drainer. "You look half asleep, Liebling. There's coffee." Her henna-red hair is the color of the velvet used to line jewelry boxes and is pulled back, shiny as an LP. Large marcasite earrings dangle on either side of her face, and she wears a matching neck chain, ballerina slippers and a dark dress. She has thickened in her early 40s but moves tautly, still the European hippie-goddess. "Me too," she says as Joel pours himself a cup. "So where were you last night?"

"Rudy's."

"*Mein Gott!*" Her eyebrows arch in exaggerated horror. Rudy's Night Club on semi-sleazy Steindamm, near the main station and a stone's throw from Hansaplatz's open-air drug market, is a kind of drain that collects people from other bars: lecherous, middle-aged civil servants in baggy corduroys, droopy sweaters, and gold-buckled loafers as well as randy 20-year-old plumber's apprentices in stonewashed jeans and mullets, and the occasional hustler. Its magenta carpeting, wall sconces, and circular bar might have been the brainchild of a syndicate boss.

"I wasn't there long. And afterwards I went to see where Johannes Brahms was born," he says as much to arouse her curiosity as to lend his exploits some class. "Is Todd here?"

Hanne grabs some soapy silverware, runs it under the water and crashes it into the drainer in response. Todd is in his early 30s, not much older than Joel, but a good ten years younger than Hanne and quite handsome. He has been in Hamburg since his college days and now works for a bank. He and Hanne have been seeing each other on and off for the past three years. "Have you eaten?" Hanne asks. Joel holds up the bag from the bakery. "*Wunderbar*. Help me finish with this and we'll have breakfast. Get the bucket, will you? It should be in the bathroom."

Joel came to Europe when a friend offered him an unused plane ticket that a travel-agent aunt was able to reassign. He arrived in Hamburg, a refugee from an East Village summer of humidity and Fourth of July firecrackers starting June first. Germany was not the first European country that Joel Meyerson of the Bronx, alumnus of the Jewish Center of Highbridge's Talmud Torah, would have chosen; Germany: the land of *Hogan's Heroes* and Zyklon-B and everything in between. Still, a free trip to Europe cost nothing. Hamburg had a train station and Germany bordered France and Holland; he would not go to Deutschland to settle there, only to sojourn, and unlike his forbears he would outwit history by self-deporting. But Hamburg grew on him, with streets named Beim Schlump and Bäckerbreitergang and Steintwietenhof and canals that fingered past old brick warehouses like blind men feeling their way. The city was snug, simple, unfussy, including many bars. Suburban trains clattered peacefully below viaducts and further out they slipped past little forests that stopped, politely, just short of the tracks. Hamburgers—it's what they called themselves—weren't back-slappingly friendly, but they were Europeans, after all. On some days, however, a street sign's ur-German *ß* or the sight of old men wearing yellow armbands—wounded war veterans—conjured up spectral thoughts. His eyes perversely sought the swastika and eagle capping the entrance to a leftover bomb shelter, now a bar. On such days train tracks gleamed ominously and the crowd rushing into the gigantic plaza supermarket was a relentless, goose-stepping horde.

He hasn't been able to snag a boyfriend, either.

---

She makes her way with the little boy who clamors down the Passerelle Saint Vincent. He will be tired a third of the way up the hill, but it doesn't pay to ask him to slow down; he is always seeking to delight her, impress her, and in any case they will rest once they reach the top. She loves the old part of the city; they go there often. The basilica is up ahead. *Komm! Viens!* She and Michel speak to the boy in both languages. He looks more like his father, large, dark eyes and lips stained the color of Burgundy. *Komm! Viens!* Is her child French or German? Her mother keeps asking, and she tells her that it makes no difference. Lately she has begun to wonder. The boy wants her to hurry up, but she is content to stroll. It is the first day that is warm enough to wear only sandals, and her flea-market peasant dress flounces around her. Michel will be at the university most of the day. The little boy loves the view of the city from high up, its two rivers snaking through it. Later she will have a cup of coffee and head off to the market. She thinks about getting some kind of work, but her French isn't that good. Still, Michel doesn't pressure her, and the apartment he rents through the university is cheap and big enough for the three of them. She has sewn a curtain around their corner of the apartment for some privacy, even if it never stops the boy, whose curiosity and energy are boundless. He is like his father. He waits at the foot of the stone steps, although she would prefer to continue by way of the road, since it passes through a pretty park. She is in no hurry to reach the top, because when she does, she will come to a decision about whether or not she will remain in France.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" Joel recoils from the sight of a naked woman in the bathtub. Gabi is a wet island ringed by a coral reef of soap bubbles. She is thickly set and frankly maternal, around 20.

*"Entschuldigung."* The long word is hard to get out when under stress. Joel begins to leave.

"*Ach*, don't worry about it, I'm just giving you a hard time," she laughs. "Be careful." She points to two-year-old Elsabet, nestled in a mound of blanket on the floor. "But while you're here, you might as well learn something." She cups her right breast and jiggles it like custard.

Joel glances only briefly before looking away. Gabi enjoys taunting him about his preference, although sometimes it feels like flirting. The pail is beside the tub, and reaching for it brings him within inches of her face.

The breast flops back into the water like a fish given a second chance. "And this," she says as her fingers circle her mound of pubic hair, darkly dense as soil after a rainstorm.

"I've been with women, Gabi."

"Yes? How many times? What did you do with them?" Just as Joel reaches for the bucket, she gives him a little splash.

"Stop!"

"It's just water. You're not made of cotton candy, are you? So who's your new lover?" She uses the English word, which she pronounces *luh-vah*.

"How do you know there is one?"

"Your face. Your *mouth*. Women can tell these things."

But he doesn't want to talk about the previous night. He doesn't quite know what to make of his encounter with Heinz, a clarinetist studying at the music conservatory with a face like polished stone of the sort easily smudged. His hair was bleached a stringent yellow-white and his eyes were the gray of metal submerged in water. Their gazes locked in Rudy's and moments later they were leaving, but instead of getting into a cab Heinz suggested that they go down to the harbor to watch the sun rise.

"Did you do it?"

"Gabi!"

"Gabeee," she imitates. "So tell me: yes or no?"

They didn't, but to his surprise it doesn't bother him. This might have made him feel cheated in New York, but in the Old World it leaves him oddly elated. Heinz's finely honed voice rills deep within his brain. He still feels their long walk in his legs. "Hanne doesn't seem too happy."

"Todd was here last night, what do you expect? It was still mobbed long after you left. Beate brought her friends along. Do you think she can sing? I don't. I told Hanne to break things off with Todd a long time ago. She never knows where she is with him. Always ready to go back to England. He's made passes at me, too, you know, but I won't have any of it. Men like him can never make up their minds. At first I thought they were getting along. Hanne was sitting in his lap and laughing. Finally everyone left, it was just the two of them. I was in my room with Elsabet, but I heard them. All right, I listened. I wanted to know what was going on. Hanne's like my sister, and I worry about her. The next thing I knew there were shouts and something crashed. Hanne must have thrown something at him." Gabi lifts a heavy leg to inspect what looks to

be a bruise and water pours off like a log. Elsabet lets out a little whimper. “*Na, mein Süßlein?* Are you hungry? We’ll eat soon. Hand me the scrub brush, will you? Better yet, would you mind—” She sits up to offer him her back and her belly settles around her. “That feels good,” she coos as he works the suds into her skin. Elsabet looks anxious as she tries to figure out what is being done to her mother.

“Do you think Hanne wants to marry Todd?”

Gabi’s hands ripple through the water. “*Ach*, I don’t know.”

“What ever happened to Pascal’s father?”

“Michel, you mean? Still in France, I guess. They never married. Pascal likes to joke about being illegitimate. He is too wild sometimes. Hanne likes you. She’d marry you if you weren’t *schwul*. You say you have been with women, so how do you know you are really *schwul*?”

“Gabi—”

“You still haven’t told me about last night.”

The door pushes open. The naked Pascal stands there. “*Oopla!*” he cries but doesn’t retreat.

“Hoopaa,” Elsabet imitates, clapping her hands in delight.

“Pascal, go back before your mother catches you like that,” Gabi tells him.

“She knows what I look like. She gave birth to me, remember? We used to take baths together all the time when I was younger.” He climbs onto the rim of the tub and begins walking around its edge as if it were a tightrope, arms airplaned on either side.

“Get down from there, will you?” Gabi laughs as she splashes between his legs.

“Stop, it tickles!” Pascal rounds the rim with a dexterous flick of his heels. He hits a wet spot, his foot slips, and he teeters against the wall.

“Watch out, *verdammte!*” Gabi leans out to grab Elsabet and sets her out of danger in a far corner just as Pascal rights himself with a foot on either side of the tub, a teenaged Colossus at Rhodes.

Elsabet starts crying. “See, you’ve scared her. Now get out of here and wait until I’m done, will you?”

“What’s this?” Hanne stands in the doorway. Her eyes meet the boy, poised monumentally above her. “Get down from there!”

“I want to take a bath but Gabi’s hogging the tub.” He looks right at her, his *schwanz* dangling playfully.



"That's enough." Hanne lowers her eyes and points to the door. Her son slithers past his mother, narrowly escaping her slap on his bare rump.

"You too," she says sharply, gesturing for Joel to scam.

They sit around a table on the terrace beneath the yellow plum tree. Thin crusts of bread like eggshells litter their little wooden breakfast boards. Hanne wears a jester's cap, its bells tinkling merrily each time she has some coffee. Sunlight through the trees patterns her bare arms like lace. Elsabet snuggles in Gabi's lap. A hint of green soap wafts from the mop dripping on its nail on the side of the house. The courtyard is quiet; the traffic of nearby Grindelallee has lessened, for it is almost one o'clock and stores are shut for the weekend. The city is calm as no American city ever is.

"Todd was here last night," Hanne says.

Joel and Gabi exchange glances.

"He asked me to go to England with him again. I reminded him that I had a son, and do you know what that man said? It was time I accepted that Pascal wasn't a baby anymore. How dare he tell me what I am to accept? He's never been a parent. He's never been a *mother*. What do men know about children, anyway?"

"Todd's right," Gabi tells her. "Pascal's no baby anymore. He's sitting for his *Habitur* next month."

"Todd has no right telling me what I should do."

"If Pascal gets into that acting school he'll be living in Hannover anyway."

"Not if he doesn't pass his *Habitur*."

"It almost sounds as if you'd rather he not go."

"Are you saying that I should just pick up and go with Todd? I've known Pascal far longer than I've known Todd, you know." The jester cap bells reflect sharp points of sunlight.

There are early photographs of mother and son where they might be brother and older sister. Their eyes swim with the same mischief and they look ready to play a joke on the person behind the camera. Hanne has filled her house with Pascal: his artwork, his drum set, his will. It's hard to imagine a man fitting into all of it. Joel has met Todd, who is nice enough but clearly no Michel, a free-spirit literary type who fathered Pascal one a night on a hillside overlooking the ocean in Brittany. For Hanne, accepting

that Pascal is no longer a baby means accepting that France and Michel are gone forever. Joel spies a girl at a window a story above the uppermost branches of the plum tree, so still she might be a statue; her blonde hair is nearly white. In her nightgown she is a fairy princess in her tower.

Hanne turns to Joel. "You never finished telling me about last night."

After watching the sun rise Heinz proposed taking Joel to his favorite spot in Hamburg. They made their way through the older parts of the city past Bismarck Monument and the blackened ruin of the Nicholai Church until they came to a parking lot behind the *Stern* magazine building. "The birthplace of Johannes Brahms," he announced, gesturing to a field of asphalt painted with grids of thick white lines. A solitary Opal was parked at the far end. A white plastic shopping bag danced in the breeze. His house once stood here but was destroyed in the war, Heinz explained. Joel knew the usual about Brahms from his piano-lesson days: the heavy face with its Biblical beard, the Hungarian dances, his infatuation with Robert Schumann's wife. Joel said it was a shame about the house, but Heinz said he preferred it this way, since if the house still stood, it would have become a museum; it would have become kitsch. This way it remained a concept, an idea: pure. Brahms was very German; for the true German sought the symbolic in everything. "A missing house and *Stern* magazine. Destruction and advertising. Dialectical, yes?" Heinz said.

Joel says nothing, only smiles.

"Look at him," Gabi says. "*Die Liebe*. I remember that."

"You're only 20," Hanne says. "You talk like you'll never fall in love again."

"I don't have to. I have you, don't I?" She gives Elsabet a snuggle. "We don't need men, anyway, you and me, now do we?"

"Any coffee?" Pascal stands barefoot in the doorway wearing tight jeans and a clinging t-shirt that stops just before his navel, no more than a nick in the taut wall of his stomach. Curls of damp hair mass on either side of his face.

"There will be coffee if you make some." Hanne gestures to the Melitta pot, doing her best to sound firm. Pascal shrugs, takes the pot and goes back inside. Coffee for a 14-year-old? Joel once thought. But Pascal was Hanne's child.

"All he does is listen to music, play the drums, and hang out with his girlfriend," Gabi says. She points to the window, empty now, where Joel had seen the girl in white. "He should be studying for his exams."

"I know. I let him get away with too much." Hanne looks at the window. "The girl's mother calls me," Hanne says. "'Tell your son to stop coming over all the time,'" she imitates in a high, unpleasant voice. "'My Sybille must study.' As if I didn't care about my child doing well in school. Let her try raising a child by herself and see how easy it is. The little *Prinzessin*. I don't know what he sees in her."

"She's pretty," Joel suggests.

"Sybille, what a horrible name, a name for a poodle. But she's broken things off, so that's the end of that."

"Where are the filters?" Pascal's languid slouch in the doorway is almost feminine.

Joel thinks he might have misplaced them while helping Hanne earlier and is about to stand up, but she gestures for him to stay put. "Let him find them himself," she says, talking to Pascal via Joel.

Pascal emerges with the Melitta pot, its ceramic cone filter wobbling. "Your mother has already asked you not to carry it that way," Gabi tells him. "It's how the last one broke, remember?"

"*Calme toi*," he says. He sets the filter onto the table and replaces it with the lid.

"By the way, when do you propose to start studying for your exams, young man? What about your French, *par exemple*?"

"You used to speak French with me all the time, *ma chère Maman*. How am I supposed to learn a language if I don't hear it?"

"I actually don't like speaking French anymore," she says to Joel confidentially. She turns back to the boy. "But what about maths? What about German? You don't study any of that, either."

Pascal pours himself some coffee and leans back in his chair. "School bores me. And besides, wasn't it you who once told me that most of your teachers just wanted to brainwash you into conforming, *chère Maman*? Didn't you take off right after *Gymnasium*?" He stretches out his legs and rests them on the table, exposing long, white soles.

"*Stop*," says Hanne, referring as much to what he says as his position. "Joel doesn't need to look at the bottom of your feet over breakfast."

Pascal smiles at Joel. "I'm sure he's seen the soles of a man's feet before."

"I need you to help me unpack a delivery later," she tells him.

"He can help." Pascal winks at Joel. "I have a date with Sybille."

"I thought that was over. Her mother told you to stay away, remember?"

"Temporary setbacks. I have plans." He has a sip of coffee as his eyes float toward Sybille's window. His head tilts back; he stretches his long legs in the sun and he smiles, savoring his thoughts, looking ready to receive the girl when she magically descends from the window. Hanne watches him, and soon Joel is watching too, drawn to Pascal's reverie. Gabi alone remains unaffected as she nuzzles Elsabet.

"I came back to Germany because of him," Hanne says after Gabi and Pascal have left the table. She yanks off the fool's cap, which falls to the table with a sad jingle. "His father wanted us to stay and I loved France. But I didn't want to raise a child there. I had left Germany without even telling my parents. I ran away, actually, and then I had a child without bothering to get married. I didn't want to live in Germany anymore, I was sick of it. But I started feeling a little homesick after all, or maybe I felt guilty, so I returned. Only when I got here did I realize how much I missed France, but by then it was too late to go back. I opened a cabaret because there was one I went to in the old part of the city. In France people knew how to smile, so I thought that I would have a place in Hamburg where people could smile, too. I would have a place where it would be acceptable to smile for no reason at all."

A little later Pascal appears with a soccer ball that he kicks around the courtyard, his concession to his mother's request that he stay close to home, even if he refuses to help out. Each bounce echoes between the blank walls. It is not long before Sybille's mother throws her head out the window to complain about the noise. Pascal goes inside and starts playing the drums, and for the next hour the apartment rumbles. Hanne invites Joel into her room for a joint, lights a candle or two, and lies back onto her bed's many little pillows. Gold-threaded fabric is draped from the ceiling and Pascal's watercolors cover the walls. He is everywhere; Hanne cannot escape him, a constant reminder of her regrets. She has reached the age when decisions settle and become too heavy to move. Joel begins to feel the joint. Johannes Brahms walks across the empty parking lot, mumbling into his beard as he looks for his Opal. Heinz is nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe you have the right idea, not having children," Hanne says, staring at the ceiling as if it held an explanation, all the while Pascal's drumming brims just outside the door, ready to spill over.

The boy likes the metal radio tower, so they climb the many steps that approach the basilica from the rear just to pass by it. The little boy loves heights because up high he is able to understand everything. Soon they are on the top of the hill overlooking the city. She wraps her shawl around her against the chill and worries that the boy's thin jacket is not enough. He runs to the railing, enraptured by the view. She will miss all of this when they leave. The bells of the basilica chime as if a great cage has been flung open. The river glistens. Perhaps she and Michel will work something out, but for now her decision seems clear. *Pascal, komm! Viens!* She must get to the market while the old woman selling spices is still there. The boy clutches the railing until it looks like the bars of a prison. What if he doesn't like Hamburg? She thinks of the spice woman and her magnificently oily oregano, her marjoram. Hanne can taste them upon her tongue. She will never find such spices in Hamburg. People in Hamburg do not concern themselves with how things taste. The city is flat. There is little to see from on high. She will take the boy to where St. Pauli overlooks the harbor, behind the brewery. On a clear day they will look out and see all the way to the Four Lands. They will see as far as it is possible to see in Hamburg. It is already decided. *Pascalchen, komm hier!*

"I like the music of water," Heinz says when Joel appears.

It is just after nine in the evening. Heinz sits on the granite lip of a fountain below the ornate statue of a woman holding a trident high over Hansaplatz. The florid sculpture and its fountain are sentimental holdovers from the turn of the century, now surrounded by concrete apartment buildings. Heinz's brilliant yellow hair is a chemical hue in the blue of the streetlamps. He wears what he'd had on the other night in Rudy's: leather pants, t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and something heavy and shiny punched into one earlobe. The square is deserted but for a cluster of Turkish teenage boys in one corner.

Joel had waited two full weeks without hearing from Heinz before seeking him out. He looked up Heinz's address and telephone number and called but no one ever answered, nor was there a machine, so he went to where

Heinz lived but never saw a light in his window. Did he really exist, or was he a manifestation of Joel's longing, another German symbol, right down to the blue eyes and blond hair, even if Heinz's was bleached? Maybe he was no different from the other men Joel has met in Hamburg, often distant and inscrutable, virile yet sterile. But Joel couldn't quite put him out of his mind. He took a detour through Hansaplatz to put off returning to Hanne's. These days she is moody whenever Todd calls but moody if he doesn't. Pascal is too preoccupied with Sybille to study for his *Habitur*. He has tried going up to where the girl lives, only to have the door slammed in his face, once by the girl's mother and then by Sybille herself. But he is undeterred. The girl's mother is brainwashing her, he says. She is too *spießig*, too bourgeois. He will triumph in the end. Love will have its day. He will get up there somehow. He has written a song about it entitled "I Will Break Open Your Heart."

"Sit down." Heinz takes out tobacco and papers to roll a cigarette. "You don't smoke, right?" He seeds the paper with dark brown flakes, rolls and draws his tongue across the seal. After a long, satisfied drag he studies Joel. "You are taller now than before. You are very tall, in fact."

Does Heinz like tall men? He doesn't say. He exchanges glances with one of the Turkish kids. "Do you know him?" Joel asks.

"Hansaplatz is a village."

Heinz seems even quieter than the first night, or perhaps he is stoned. Joel yearns to put his arms around him, to run his fingers through his yellow-white hair. He hopes Heinz will not start talking about symbols and suggests going for a walk. Heinz thinks for a moment and says yes but stays where he is. He glances in the direction of one of the boys.

"Who is he?" Joel is irritated.

"We all know each other here." Heinz gets up. "We go and eat something, yes?" Joel's mood lightens until the Turkish boy comes near as if he has been waiting for a signal. "This is Ahmed." Heinz throws what is left of his cigarette into the fountain. Ahmed's face is the color of cocoa, and his hair is very dark. "Joel is an American," Heinz says, and the boy nods appreciatively. Heinz suggests that they go to his house and he will cook something for the three of them. But Joel isn't hungry. He hasn't come to watch Heinz ogling this boy.

"Wait," Heinz calls after him when Joel starts walking away.

Joel doesn't stop until reaching the edge of the Alster, which has turned the color of slate.

What is he doing in Hamburg? It was nice at first: the novelty of Europe, the change from New York, the pleasant privacies of the foreigner. He loved staying put at Hanne's instead of traipsing across Europe on a railpass. But Hamburg is chilly. No wonder the sensitive Brahms fled to gentler Vienna: people don't smile here. Hanne had to open a cabaret where people might do it. Pascal's search for love seems doomed in a city that needs an excuse to smile. Joel misses New York's static electricity; Hamburg feels wired to a switch that turns the city off when not in use. He keeps walking until he's back at the Brahms parking lot. It is empty as before. The asphalt's many painted lines resemble stick figures, skeletons of the unreachable and inaccessible: Heinz. Michel. Sybille.

Hanne is sitting on the terrace smoking a cigarette when he gets back. Before her are a half-filled bottle of red wine and two glasses, one untouched. "Todd left for England," she says. "Tonight, on that new tunnel train." When Joel puts his arms around her she weeps softly. "I guess it's better like this." The house rumbles like a ramshackle heart with Pascal's drumming. "Here." She pours some wine into the second glass for Joel. "Right after I got the call from Todd I asked Pascal to help me get the piano onto the stage and he told me to ask my boyfriend. I thought I would lose my mind. I slapped him. I have never, ever lifted a hand to Pascal until today. Now he won't speak to me. Not a word."

"Hanne—"

"Regret is worse than shame. Far worse. Hungry?"

At the mention of food Joel realizes that he hasn't eaten anything since the afternoon. Hanne picks up the bottle of wine. "Get the glasses, will you?"

Pascal doesn't look up from his drumming as they pass. Hanne keeps her eyes grimly forward. She closes the kitchen door to dampen the sound and starts making omelets. Her many bracelets clack against the bowl as she whisks the eggs.

"I wanted Heinz to fall in love with me," Joel says as they eat.

"Who's Heinz?"

He realizes that he hasn't told her anything about him. "Just some guy. I was wondering. What if that French man had agreed to come to Germany?"

"You mean Michel? I don't know. I left Germany to get away from myself but I wound up coming along anyway." The eggs slide from the

bowl and hit the melted butter with a sizzle. Pascal's drumming becomes a solid drone. Hanne throws her head through the doorway and shouts, "Enough!"

The drumming ceases instantly, but something in the air keeps going, like people thrust forward in a car after braking. Mother and son look at each other for a single, fragile moment. Joel isn't sure what they'll do, what they'll say. "I'm making eggs," Hanne says quietly, "If you want any." Pascal looks at Joel as if to say 'Look after her, will you?' He shakes his head no. Hanne pulls back into the kitchen. "I'm so tired, Joel. So very tired. Please. Stay with me tonight, will you? Oh, don't worry. I'm not like Gabi. I just need someone nice to fill up the rest of the bed. I don't snore. *Bitte*." Joel says he will. He's glad not to be sleeping alone that night. "You know, only afterwards did I realize that when Pascal referred to my boyfriend he might have been referring to you and not Todd." She kisses him on the forehead. "I'm a fool. So, do you sleep in the nude? You don't snore, do you?"

"I'm a fool, too," Joel says.

Joel comes upon Pascal sitting on the terrace steps when he goes for a glass of water later that night. He sits down beside him, both of them in their underwear. The lights strung across the courtyard color Pascal's skin. "The sky is so bright from the moon," the boy says. They look upward but their eyes stop at the girl's vacant window.

"I'm not angry at my mother anymore, if that's what she sent you to find out."

"She didn't. She really loves you." Joel pauses. "People only bother being angry at those they love," Joel says. Or at those who don't love them, he adds silently.

"How about you? Who do you love?"

"I love Brahms. He used to live in Hamburg, you know."

Beate Schumacher's accompanist cancels the day before her gig, so Joel agrees to fill in, and they spend one whole afternoon rehearsing. *Sommertihme, ant ze living ist eassy* . . . Her large front teeth clap the mike, but Joel's German isn't up to the delicate task of telling the touchy Frau Schumacher about it.

Hanne asks where Pascal is. Joel hasn't seen the boy since the night before and volunteers to look for him but Hanne throws up a braceleted



hand. "Pascal can take care of himself," she says, but Joel hears worry in her voice. He goes out for some air before the show begins. He's always found the cabaret's ceiling a bit low—it is a basement, after all—but tonight it suffocates. The night before as they were tidying up the cabaret Hanne recalled scurrying down to the basement of her family's apartment with her mother and the neighbors after the air raid sirens went off. It was stifling, and on the third day they ran out of water. The portable radio broadcast nothing but military music and news of German victories. Hanne asked why they had to stay down there and a neighbor said that the city was being cleaned. When everything was all nice and clean, they would go back outside.

Almost all of the dozen or so tables in the cabaret are taken, each with its candle and single carnation in a small San Pelligrino bottle: La Schumacher has a loyal following. Hanne is in full regalia: black dress, armloads of noisy bracelets, a string of bright-colored stones around her neck, darkly lidded eyes. The audience quiets down and Beate begins slowly, thinking about each word, each *sy/lable*, overly poignant and *Weltschmerz*y, but the audience eats it up, especially when she throws back a glass of whiskey onstage, part Joplin, part Tom Waits. Hanne's eyes keep returning to the door, on the lookout for Pascal, who often wanders down in the middle of a show, but there is no sign of him. No wonder Todd split: as long Pascal is around Hanne needs no other man.

They're in the middle of "Since You Went Away" when a scream from the courtyard hits Beate's high note, and her voice flutters down like something shot from the sky. People in the audience rush outside to a figure sprawled below the yellow plum tree. It's Pascal, who has fallen below Sybille's window. His face is perfect except for an error of blood down one temple. The blonde-haired girl from across the way rushes toward him, followed by Gabi, but only when Hanne appears do the boy's dark, heavy lips begin moving, since she alone will understand what her son did in the heartless city of Hamburg and why.





# Interview with Tom Bissell

---

Lindsey Kate Sloan and Jill Kolongowski

On December 3, 2007, the editors of the *Red Cedar Review*, Lindsey Sloan and Jill Kolongowski, sat down with former *RCR* editor and writer Tom Bissell. Bissell was born in Escanaba, Michigan, in 1974, and attended Michigan State University. In his time at MSU Tom majored in English and coedited the *Red Cedar Review* with Laura Klynstra. His relationship with *RCR* began in 1994, when his short story “Bars,” the first story he ever published, appeared in volume 30 number 2. He then went on to edit *RCR* from 1994 to 1996 (vols. 31, 32, and 33).

Tom won the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his short story collection *God Lives in St. Petersburg*, and spent most of 2007 living in Rome. His first book, *Chasing the Sea*, was recently selected (August 2007) by *Condé Nast Traveler* as one of the 86 best travel books of all time. *Salon.com* named *The Father of All Things* one of the ten best books of 2007.

He is currently living and working in Las Vegas, where he is a Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute at the University of Nevada. His current projects are a novel set in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and a nonfiction book provisionally titled *Bones That Shine Like Fire: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve Apostles*.

His essays, fiction, and journalism have appeared in *Agni*, the *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Believer*, *Best American Science Writing* 2004, *Best American Short Stories* 2005, *Best American Travel Writing* 2003, 2005, and 2006, *BOMB*, the *Boston Review*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *Harper's Magazine*, *McSweeney's*, *Men's Journal*, *New York Times Book Review*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Salon*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

He has published the books *Chasing the Sea* (Pantheon 2003); *Speak, Commentary* (co-authored with Jeff Alexander; *McSweeney's* 2003); *God Lives in St. Petersburg and Other Stories* (Pantheon 2005); and *The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (Pantheon 2007).

---

**Sloan:** In your book *God Lives in St. Petersburg*, how did you choose the order of your stories in the manuscript? And did the publisher retain this order when it was published?

**Bissell:** They did retain the order that I suggested. There's a real art to arranging stories in a collection and I'm afraid to say that the artistic parts of that process were pretty scrambled when I did it. I really didn't have a good order. The first story in the collection is a long story, so really the only question to me was what starts it. The long story first or the long story last? Those are really the only two options for a 60-page story, first or last. And I realized I probably didn't want to end the collection on a story that ends with the protagonist getting his leg blown off, so really the only option was for it to start the book. And then, for the other ones, it was maybe an afternoon of moving them around, and then I kind of hit on the combination that seemed to make the most sense to me. I've since realized that I should've swapped the order of a couple of them, because two of them deal with missionaries right in a row, and that was not what I wanted, in retrospect.

**Sloan:** For *Red Cedar* this year I had a really hard time—but my concern was: “What should I end it with?” and then, “What should I start it with?”

**Kolongowski:** I know they say to end with a strong piece, but I'm almost inclined to say you want to start with an equally strong one, too, to keep people reading, you know—when they pick it up they go to the front.

In the same vein, did you already have the stories for *God Lives in St. Petersburg* written and then decide to make a collection, or did you write them specifically for the book as a whole?

**Bissell:** I had another collection prior to this. It was half stories set in Central Asia, half stories that weren't. And when I tried to sell the collection, it didn't sell. One editor said, “You need all the stories about one thing,” which is an example of the crappy publishing logic that goes into such decisions. I didn't really think much about it at the time; I never thought I had more Central Asia stories in me, and then the war in

Afghanistan began and I was lucky enough, if that's the phrase, to get to report on it as a journalist. The journalistic story I wrote about my experience in Afghanistan may have set a record. I was given 6,000 words, which is about 25 pages; I wrote a 235-page first draft of the article. Obviously, the version that got published was considerably shorter than that. It was about a 30-page story. So I had literally 200 pages of stuff that I never used. And so, I thought, "Well, here's something—I could write a short story just using a lot of the material, stuff that I wrote that didn't find its way into the journalism." And so I tried to imagine a character and a series of events to hang a story around all this observational stuff. And so when I wrote *that* story, I realized I had enough for a Central Asia-themed collection; but there was an odd man out, which was the last story in the collection, which is called "Animals in Our Lives," and that did not have a Central Asia subtext. So I basically created one. I then had this Central Asia collection. My publisher still wasn't crazy about the idea of a collection. My sense was that they didn't want me to do a collection of fiction, for whatever reason. I suppose because they're hard, and I was, in their minds, a nonfiction writer. But, they did it. I'm not saying any of this to badmouth Pantheon at all, they're wonderful—but it is hard to publish story collections. Were I a college student looking at myself now, I would think, "Well, this is a writer who obviously can do what he wants, and isn't that wonderful and lucky?" But I can tell you that it doesn't feel that way when you're there. You still feel constantly frustrated, constantly blockaded, constantly flummoxed, constantly thwarted in what you're looking to do. I don't think you ever—I don't think any writer, and no matter what level of achievement they hit, even if you're Stephen King—gets beyond feeling frustrated. There's just something weirdly and cruelly endemic to writing that makes you feel like you're not getting, not achieving, what you want. The story collection was not originally a Central Asia story collection and it became one, and now I'm really thrilled, obviously, but at the time it just felt like I was being sort of twisted to do something I wasn't sure I wanted to—

**Kolongowski:** Being forced a little bit.

**Bissell:** Yeah, but now it seems totally wonderful, and what a gift for someone to have given me that piece of advice, but at the time I got the advice it was different.

**Sloan:** My next question is about titles. Do you have a process for titling your work, or do the titles just come to you? Do you ever model your titles off of other titles, or reference other works in your titles? And do you find it useful to do this? I'm thinking about the Eggers reference in your essay *Up the Mountain, Slowly, Very Slowly* (*New York Times*, October 28, 2007). That is one of my favorite Dave Eggers stories. [The story being referenced is "Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly," in *How We Are Hungry* (McSweeney's 2004).]

**Bissell:** It's an amazing story. When I climbed Kilimanjaro, he was the person I asked for advice before I left. And he gave me good advice, which was, "Enjoy yourself." But only later did I realize that when you're throwing up at 16,000 feet and you feel like you're going to die, you realize, "Hey, I'm supposed to be doing this because it's fun." Anyway, titles. Titles to me are very, very, very important. I put a lot of thought into titles. And the first-draft title is very rarely what winds up being the final-draft title—and what happens almost always is after I write the thing, I have the crap title that I gave it—

**Sloan:** Your working title.

**Bissell:** The working title. Slightly more elegant phrase than "crap title."

**Sloan:** That's what I call them. It means crap.

**Bissell:** Let's go with "crap title." I have a crap title, and then I'll literally go title-hunting and look for a title-ish phrase that sort of jumps out at me. For my first book *Chasing the Sea*, oh my God, we had literally 20 titles for that book. And the title that we ultimately came up with is in the book, five pages from the end. "Chasing the sea" is a phrase that they use in Central Asia to describe the process by which fisherman chased the receding Aral Sea as it was shrinking.

**Sloan:** It's a good title.

**Bissell:** It wasn't my idea, funnily enough. We had some titles that were just abominable. My editor and I still make fun of each other for our respective

titles. I had one that was called *Dust and Russians, Cotton and Khans*; he had one that was called *In Tamerlane's Shadow*. I mean, these are just abysmal titles. And literally the day before the title was due, the final working title was *A Hole in the Heart of the World*. Not a great title, but not a terrible title.

Anyway, the day before the title was due, I was describing some of the book to an editor friend and he asked about the sea shrinking; he's like, "What do the fisherman do?" And I said, "Oh, that's funny, they called it 'chasing the sea' as they moved their boats closer and closer to the receding sea." And he said, "Well, *that's* the title." And I was like, "Oh snap." I went and called my editor and said, "Chasing the sea, chasing the sea!" and he said, "Yeah, that's it." And so there's an example of a title resulting from a chance conversation I had with someone the day before the final title was due.

For *God Lives in St. Petersburg*, the story and what became the title of the collection—that wasn't the crap title. It wasn't even the second-draft title, which was "A Great and Motionless Light." That is a phrase on the last page, but it just seemed a little pretentious to me. And then I was rereading the story, and one character says "God lives for Russians only in St. Petersburg." It's a weird phrase; I don't even know if Russians think that, you know, it's just something I made up. And I've since had some Russians tell me that no Russian would ever say that God lives in St. Petersburg. Well, it's still a good title, so what the hell. Nonetheless, the process through which you find titles is to me really exciting. You're hunting through your own work. How strange, isn't it? The title's in there somewhere and you can't find it, and yet you wrote it.

**Kolongowski:** I have heard of some authors who write a title first, and then write the story after. I could never do that. It's always the very last thing that I do.

**Bissell:** I've done that a couple times, but usually the title comes at the end. With the book I'm working on now, I had no title, and I just found a title a couple months ago; it just jumped out of something I was reading. The title is *Bones that Shine like Fire*; it's from a piece of legendary material associated with the apostles. And I think it's a wonderful title, really evocative. You know, Steinbeck and Hemingway and all these great 1920s and '30s modernist writers used to page through the King James Bible for titles.

**Sloan:** That's a good idea.

**Bissell:** Well, there are vastly worse ways to do it. I never understand people who title their stories or books "Walking" or "Sunshine" or "Rain." I think a title has to do a lot of work—a *lot* of work.

**Sloan:** In a poem, the title is another line. That's a chance that you're missing if you don't do it right.

**Bissell:** Exactly.

**Sloan:** Just on a quick related note—I keep reading these interviews and reviews of your books where you're being compared to Hemingway, and you're being compared to Eggers. How do you feel about those comparisons? Not only being compared to anyone in general, but also who you're being compared to. And do you have a favorite—would you rather be compared to Eggers than Hemingway?

**Bissell:** You know, the Hemingway comparison troubles me for a couple of reasons. One, because not even Hemingway could survive that comparison, as it turned out. Two, because I'm not a huge Hemingway fan. I love his stories. I love his early stories in particular, and I love *The Sun Also Rises*. Once you get beyond that, I have a really hard time with Hemingway. I've read several biographies of him; I'm fascinated by the guy, but, I mean, the stuff you read about him reveals a guy that, at his best, was insufferable. But there's obviously something in his mode of working that I find very seductive. One of the stories in my collection is a straight rewrite of a Hemingway story, and why would I do that if I don't feel some strange magnetic pull to him? But it's not necessarily from a deep admiration, it's more from a fascination with who he is, not necessarily the writer he is. And Eggers. Well, Dave is a wonderful writer and a terrific guy, and if you're going to be compared to a writer around your own age, you could do a lot worse than that. I was compared to Graham Greene once, and that was the most delightful thing ever, because I love Graham Greene. It's nice being compared to writers you love; I won't deny that, but at the same time, the minute you start—here's the thing—getting compared to Graham Greene in a review, you feel good for ten minutes. Then you sit



at your computer and your screen's blank and all the Graham Greene or Hemingway comparisons in the world do not fill up that screen, so it's a nice thing that ultimately doesn't do much for you as a writer. But it's a nice thing to have happen. Sometimes you get compared to writers that you haven't really read that much of. Paul Bowles is another writer I've been compared to, and I've only read one thing by Bowles, and I barely remember reading it; so sometimes I think reviewers are just reaching for the simplest associative connections they can make.

**Sloan:** Do you know who Carolyn Forché is?

**Bissell:** Yeah, of course.

**Sloan:** I met her a few weeks ago—she was talking about how she no longer submits to small journals because they'll publish anything that she writes, and this is very scary to her because she doesn't want bad poems published. Do you still submit to small journals?

**Bissell:** I wish I had that problem. No, no, people are not publishing anything I write. I've written a couple short stories in the last few months, the first stories that I've written really in five years, and they've all been roundly rejected multiple times now, so . . . no, would that I were in the position that Carolyn Forché is in. I submit my stuff to magazines I like to read.

**Sloan:** That's a good rule.

**Kolongowski:** And then you know what they're looking for.

**Bissell:** Yeah, and I think it's part of being a good literary citizen, supporting magazines you like to read, buying them or getting subscriptions to them, and trying to be a part of their conversation. And I did this, you know, when I was starting out too, so I'm certainly not saying this is the worst thing in the world, but, you know, napalming the entire small journal world with your stories in the hopes that someone takes one, that's a necessary part of the process, but ideally one will winnow one's focus down eventually.

I've had a lot more luck with my nonfiction than I've had with my fiction. My collection won a couple prizes, but all the stories came out in tiny little magazines. I've had no luck publishing my fiction in the bigger venues, but my nonfiction gets consistently published in sort of the big, glossy magazines, so it's kind of weird and sometimes frustrating.

**Sloan:** Do you consider yourself a fiction writer?

**Bissell:** I just consider myself a writer. I struggled with that—am I a fiction writer? Am I a nonfiction writer? And now I think I'm just a writer—sometimes I write fiction, sometimes I write nonfiction.

**Kolongowski:** Have you ever considered publishing poetry, or do you work with it at all?

**Bissell:** I read a fair amount of poetry; I like a lot of poets, but I'm not a poet, you know? The same way I'm not a screenwriter. Poetry's not a form I feel any competitive impulse to engage in. It's something I can consume with pleasure, but I can't hope to contribute to in that way. It's just—I'm not a poet. I tried to be; when I was here at MSU I wrote a lot of poems for Diane Wakoski, and never got much beyond "pretty good."

**Kolongowski:** In your fiction, do you have any favorite or returning characters that you write?

**Bissell:** No, I've never really done that. I have a returning place, which is called Flatrock, Michigan, which is the literal translation from Ojibwa of Escanaba, Michigan, my hometown. Flatrock comes up in a few stories that I've written. I wrote a whole novel set in Flatrock. The new novel I'm writing is set in Flatrock. Here's the funny thing: I'm talking about all the appearances of Flatrock in my fiction, but you'd have to search pretty hard for them in the published stuff, since virtually none of my Flatrock stories have been published. I can assure you that Flatrock occupies a very big place in here [*gesturing toward his heart*], but not so much in the books yet. So, no recurring characters, but one thing I do is I give characters the same last or first name a lot, but they're not necessarily the same person. I got addicted to the name "Teddy." When I first started writing I was naming everyone Teddy.

**Sloan:** Salinger has a story named “Teddy.” Many of his stories are interconnected; you’ll find the connections if you read *Nine Stories* a few times.

**Bissell:** Yeah, I like when other writers do it—and there’s actually a couple places in my collection where I realized I could’ve done things like that, way after the fact. There’s one moment where a character is writing a letter, and after the book came out I realized that I wish I would’ve made the letter to a character in another story. And then I would’ve gotten that nice, shiny, postmodern veneer, but I blew it.

**Kolongowski:** You still had the thought, though.

**Bissell:** I still had the thought which, you know, counts for something. Something I can talk about in an interview.

**Sloan:** Do you have any recurring themes in your work, or important issues that you try to highlight in your stories? Other than Flatrock?

**Bissell:** A lot of my stories tend to be about people who are in over their heads, relationships coming to grief, the modes of thinking in which our culture has trapped us, other cultures, and the inevitable disconnect between what you’d like to believe about yourself and what you actually are. I seem to not be able to get too far beyond any of those themes in my stuff, and I’m not complaining. They’re fun themes; they’re pretty rich themes to revolve around.

**Kolongowski:** You can go a lot of different ways.

**Bissell:** I haven’t written a lot of fiction lately about this country; it’s usually about Americans outside of this country. I like writing about that. There are not a lot of people doing that right now, and for me it’s been great. I think, because I’m a traveler myself, I feel these things; I feel lost and confused, like the protagonists in my stories, and so I feel like art is, as someone said to me today, “describing something common in a way that is surprising.” I think that’s a great description of it, and I try to express the shock of the “other,” from both sides of that exchange. When you take two people from different places, they’re both the “other.” Or we’re all the

“other,” I guess. Even when you’re very intimate with someone and you know them well, they’re still the “other,” and taking that very basic human problem and expanding it, particularly in a time that’s as politically fraught as this one, is interesting. I hope I never work this theme out completely because that would probably mean my career is over.

**Kolongowski:** You touched on this a little bit, but who are some of your favorite authors and what stories have inspired you, and why?

**Bissell:** My favorite novel of all time is absolutely George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. I don’t know if you guys have read it. If you haven’t, read it. Tomorrow. Start it tonight. It was published in 1872 by a woman who took a man’s nom de plume. She was probably the most brilliant woman in the nineteenth century. She wrote nineteenth-century fiction with a sort of early-twentieth-century sensibility—parts of it are so contemporary-feeling that your breath is taken away. She sort of foresaw everything a novel could do. *Moby Dick* is that way too, even though parts of *Moby Dick* are absolutely interminable. I mean, there’s stuff that he’s doing in *Moby Dick* that didn’t really seem to be on the nineteenth-century menu when it came to novels. And *Middlemarch* is like that, but it’s not a sea story, it’s a domestic story; it’s a relationship story. It’s about a town in England, and it’s just a perfect novel. I could literally read the book over and over again, it’s so good. It’s so funny and beautiful, and the characters are amazing.

George Eliot, for all of her brilliance, was possibly one of the homeliest human beings to have ever walked the planet Earth. I mean, she was truly homely, in the most tragic sense of that word. And her main character, Dorothea, is this really beautiful girl, but no one knows it yet. And so, amidst all the awesomeness and intellectual brilliance of the novel is this incredibly human story, which is the pure authorial projection of the author—what she feels inside herself—onto this character, Dorothea. And it’s totally heartbreaking. When you can be as wonderful and brilliant as George Eliot was, and still feel as she felt about herself—crippled by this thing completely beyond her control—what this does is create a tension in the text of someone who is gifted in every imaginable way but feels cosmically slighted in this one way. To me, *Middlemarch* is the book that ends all books.

Contemporary novelists that I love are Thomas McGuane, an MSU writer who's one of the funniest writers I've ever read. Zadie Smith's great.

**Sloan:** She's fantastic.

**Bissell:** Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* is the book that just knocked my socks off. I love Martin Amis, even though lately his politics have taken an alarmingly right-wing turn. I love Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Polish journalist—do you know him? He sort of changed the way I felt about what nonfiction could do and sort of awakened me to its possibilities. I love David Foster Wallace's work. I also love Laurie Moore because she's so funny. To me, as I get older, I lose my patience for things that aren't funny. To me, if it's funny, it's automatically good, you know? Particularly when we live in such a grim, humorless time, the necessity for writing stuff that actually makes people laugh seems to be more important.

**Kolongowski:** Definitely.

**Sloan:** Do you read David Sedaris?

**Bissell:** You know, I read him when he's in the *New Yorker*, and he always makes me laugh, but I can't say I'm a huge fan of his.

**Sloan:** Have you read "Six to Eight Black Men?" It's probably the funniest David Sedaris story.

**Bissell:** I read a story about him being asked to move, on a plane. Did you read that one? A woman wanted David Sedaris to switch seats with her husband. And in arguing with her, he coughed up a cough drop onto her. That's pretty freakin' funny. So, yeah, I like David Sedaris—I owe him for life because when I was a book editor, I published a book called *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*, and he—totally on his own volition—went around the country talking about how great the book was, and who knows how many copies it sold because of David Sedaris backing it, so I feel an immense fondness toward him for that. He's one of the good guys.

**Sloan:** Do you ever read Amy Hempel?

**Bissell:** Yeah, I teach with Amy in Bennington's MFA program.

**Sloan:** I love Amy Hempel.

**Bissell:** She's great. She's a great story writer.

**Sloan:** They're just perfect, every single story is just—it's perfect.

**Bissell:** It's hard to find a writer who does more with less than she does. I mean, she's extraordinary in that way.

**Sloan:** I read—it was in the *Believer*—that she writes the last line of every story first. When she was cleaning out her apartment, she found this box of last lines of stories. It's fantastic. Which I thought was really interesting, because it's not what I do at all.

**Bissell:** Yeah, that's—wow. I'm going to ask her if that's really true. It probably is.

**Sloan:** Do you outline your novels prior to writing them, or do they just come to you as you write? I know that you've written multiple novels.

**Bissell:** Sadly, none of them are any good.

**Sloan:** No, not that they're not good, but that no one—

**Bissell:** No, they're not good. Trust me, they're not good. Parts of them, ahem, are excellent. As a whole, they don't work as novels. Anyway, I outline stuff, but not in a dogmatic way. And if I ever want to abandon the outline for a while, I'll try that. To me, when you're writing something that's long, you're basically in a boat and you're in the middle of the ocean, and you have no clue where you're going. And only an idiot would turn down the possibility to look at a map occasionally in that situation. So I think stuff like that is just smart preparation. You need a map. It doesn't mean that the map is going to be right all the time; maybe it's a bad map or it's an outdated map, but I think it helps to have a map.

I try to be as undoctinaire as possible when talking about writing because everyone has a different way of doing things, but I do think that, for the most part, it's probably a good idea to have some idea of what you're doing as you're doing it—with the complete freedom to abandon it at any moment.

**Kolongowski:** I read in an interview that you didn't originally intend to become a travel writer. I was wondering what made you decide to start doing that—obviously all the traveling you did with the Peace Corps, but—what made you decide to write about those experiences?

**Bissell:** Well, a gentleman named George W. Bush really helped me become a travel writer in that I had a contract to write this book about Central Asia before the awful, tragic events of September 11. Suddenly this thing happened and, as a result, a part of the world that I was deeply invested in was on the front page of every newspaper, and the American military was headed there and everyone knew it. And so I went to Afghanistan and began my, sort of, career as someone who would go to a place and write about it in that kind of a way, and from that I kind of spun out into writing pieces about places that your average person would not be crazy about going to. And I've really loved it.

I never had any plans to be a travel writer; it's all just circumstance and being at the right place at the right time, or wrong time, as it were, I don't even know, wrong place at the right time, right place at the wrong time, I couldn't tell you—but it was never anything I planned. One of the travel writers I like is a guy named Redmond O'Hanlon. He's a British travel writer who writes about really messed-up places like Borneo, and the Congo, Sumatra, and he made me think, when I was fresh out of college, "This seems like a really cool thing to do." But I never for a minute imagined myself falling into that way of doing things.

I really love travel writing. I think it's a wonderful thing to actually go to these places and try to rip out of your experience a story that can maybe broaden people's understanding of a place, or maybe whet someone's interest. The nicest letters I've ever gotten from people—that doesn't happen that often—but I've gotten a couple letters from people who've told me: "After I read your book I went to Uzbekistan and had a great time." And that to me is the most awesome thing imaginable—that I actually made someone want

to go to this place. I mean, what more could you ask for? It's just wonderful. So I think of travel writing as kind of a kind of holy endeavor in that way. Take my mom, who imagines there's a terrorist in every city outside the United States, waiting to kidnap her son. I keep going to these places and I keep writing about them, and my mom reads about these places. That my mom's come around and kind of recognized that there may be some pretty good, friendly people out there in the world has also been nice. These are old-fashioned liberal ideas, like the brotherhood of man, or something like that. I certainly don't mind trying to write stuff that could be reasonably construed as falling into that tradition: how are we alike, how are we different.

**Kolongowski:** Have you read, or heard of, *Three Cups of Tea*? It's about Greg Mortenson, a man who traveled—I believe it was to Pakistan, but to other places in the Middle East too—building schools for all students, but also for women specifically, and it's really uplifting.

**Bissell:** Three cups of tea is the number of cups they pour for you in that part of the world before you have to leave the house.

**Kolongowski:** Yes. It's really great. He came across this village named Korphe and you see, from the people he meets there, that the stereotypes are just so wrong that people have about those societies.

**Bissell:** Yeah. There are some horrid people out in the world but the vast majority of them are—even people who have politics and personal beliefs that in many cases I find, you know, alarming to loathsome—even those people treat you with respect and hospitality, most of the time. And it just makes you realize how transitory all the crap that we associate with these judgments truly is. We come from our culture and we project onto theirs. I'm not saying this as a cultural relativist. I do not like that women in a lot of these places have essentially zero rights and get treated like bullshit, but the fact of the matter remains that we're all trapped within our own cultural precepts and it takes a heroic imagination to imagine your way out of that. It really does. It took heroic people to imagine their way out of slavery in this country. Heroic people turned the tide against this, and it's going to take the same kind of imaginative heroism to transform those societies. And you can't hold it against the society that it does not yet have



the requisite heroes to transform it, as much as we all wish that could be the case. It's not now, but maybe we'll live to see it. But, you know, to get off-topic, the methods in which we've been engaging lately to change these societies are probably not the ticket either.

So I guess I consider travel writing as a middle ground between something really awful and bellicose and something really awful and wishy-washy, which is to say the kind of milque-toast liberalism that believes, "Oh, every culture is equally worthy." I mean, some cultures engage in practices that I think any of us sitting at this table would just be horrified to see enacted. You see what I'm saying: travel writing's a way to go right up between one unacceptable response, which is war, and another, which is nihilistic relativism. It tries to mediate a place where we can all recognize our shared humanity, I guess.

**Sloan:** Does the strain of using international encounter as a primary narrative motivation reflect a dissatisfaction with American domestic experience or with American fiction, which often has little concern for experience outside of its borders?\*

**Bissell:** A lot of the reviews that my collection got when it came out, because it came out in 2005, were reading the stories as allegories about George Bush's America. But I wrote most of these stories before anyone knew that George Bush was going to lead our great nation into infernal fires of . . . George Bush's America. So, obviously the stories being published when they were created this electricity around them that otherwise would not have been quite so evident. I have a personal dissatisfaction with the American domestic experience, and maybe that comes out in my fiction, but it's never anything political. It's never that I don't like domestic American fiction. In fact, I imagined I would be a fiction writer who wrote about primarily domestic themes, and it's only the caprice of my own life that has led me down a completely different path. There's no value judgment there. I would happily read a novel about a woman washing dishes, thinking about feeding her cat, if it were brilliantly written. I have no thematic prejudice in that sense.

**Sloan:** I think there are those brilliant domestic works like *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

**Bissell:** You can write great stuff about almost anything. *Almost* anything. I primarily read American fiction. I have very little dissatisfaction with American fiction in general. I think it may not be a good time to be a writer, but it's certainly a pretty good time to be a reader. There's an awful lot of good books out there. I walk into a decent bookstore, particularly one that has a lot of contemporary fiction, and I both want to cry for joy and just cry out of sheer horror that there's all this stuff that exists that's totally superlative and I'll get to read so little of it.

**Sloan:** You published your first story in *Red Cedar*.

**Bissell:** I did. God bless *Red Cedar*.

**Sloan:** Do you ever look back at your earlier writings—you were talking about this a little bit—and want to make changes, or are you proud of everything that you've published? Because I read the story in *Red Cedar* and I liked it.

**Bissell:** Early, early stuff that I've written I basically read like I have no idea who wrote it, because, you know, we all are narcissists, essentially, and you go back and read something you wrote and occasionally you think, "Oh, how clever. Wow, I didn't know I was that smart." But usually you're reading older stuff and thinking, "Gah! Oh, no!" And you really can't believe what you're reading. *Chasing the Sea* is my first book—that just came out four years ago, right? And I have a hard time reading parts of that now, because I just think there's something about it that missed the mark, you know?

**Kolongowski:** Well, how many times have you looked at it, too?

**Bissell:** Hundreds, hundreds of times. You're never finished with anything. I'm not the first person to say this: you're not finished with anything, you just stop working on it. There are a few things that I've written that I'm objectively proud of, that I wouldn't change a word in, but very few, very few. Most of the things are stuff I just gave up on because they were due, I needed the money, someone was saying, "This needs to be turned in now."

Actually, I don't think enough thought goes into this aspect of how books are actually written. Dickens, for instance, was someone who was *constantly* writing under the gun. A lot of the great literature from the nineteenth century was so market-driven. Like Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad*—which was one of the first American travel books—and which was serialized. In the book Twain goes to Gibraltar, and he goes to Italy, and he goes to Jerusalem, and he goes to Egypt, and he comes back. It's one of the funniest books I've ever read. It also has such a bad case of literary elephantism because he was writing it for a company that was selling subscriptions to the book chapter by chapter, as it was being written. So he was being *encouraged* to overwrite by hundreds of pages. And reading it, you can really tell that this is a guy who is just riffing for the sake of riffing. And it's kind of awesome because it's Mark Twain, and who wouldn't want to hear Mark Twain riff? But at the same time, it forces you into realizing that even great writing—even great classic writing by undisputed geniuses—have had their work compromised by all these extraliterary things. If I hadn't read the introduction to *Innocents Abroad*, I never would have known any of this. I only would have thought, "Why the hell is this book so long?" But then when you read about the creation of the book, you realize, Mark Twain was actually selling out, you know? He was doing the bidding of his corporate masters!

**Kolongowski:** It's very human, too.

**Bissell:** It's very human. I hate books that are sort of airlessly perfect. I like books that have some kind of tragic flaw in them.

**Kolongowski:** Yeah. You know, he wasn't writing completely from the motivation of "This is what I want to be doing."

**Bissell:** Exactly! He was like, "I need to send my kids to private school."

**Sloan:** How do you feel about authors who—so I'm thinking of *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius*—but authors who—I guess he did it for a purpose, and I really loved his book—but there's like this one section where he's talking about playing Frisbee with his brother—

**Bissell:** Yeah, I know the part you're talking about.

**Sloan:**—and he's just describing and describing and describing, and it was great, but . . . it was a lot of description.

**Bissell:** Well, he was trying to do something . . . different, I guess. He was obviously thinking, "I want to describe a 20-page Frisbee scene," and he did it. And he *can* do it because he's so talented.

**Sloan:** Right.

**Bissell:** There's a scene in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, I don't know if you've ever read that, I think it's like an 80-page section—I love that book; it's a great book—but there's an 80-page section where these kids are playing this game called Eschaton, from eschatology, from eschatological, the end of the world, and it's this nuclear-warfare simulation game where these kids are playing it, and it's like a full body role-playing game, and it's like 80 pages of absolute agony of this game that Wallace invented and is clearly loving describing all the intricate rules of. And reading it I could not stop thinking, "Dude, no one cares."

**Kolongowski:** It's like Dungeons and Dragons.

**Bissell:** Dungeons and Dragons with nuclear weapons. And I was complaining about that section of the book to a friend, who also loves Wallace, and he said something very wise, which is, "Not everything in a great book can be the best part." That's something I've taken with me. If the book is great, the book is great. And some parts are going to not be great. And like I said, books that have some sort of big flaw in them, I'm just instantly warmed to them, because it means they were made by someone who is a human being. And there's something about books that have flaws, just like people who have flaws. You know how when you feel attracted to someone or when you love someone, you often find yourself thinking about their imperfections, and the ways you find them kind of cute? Well, I think it's the same thing with books and writers that you like. You're drawn to the things that are vulnerable. And I really think that that is very analogous to how we read, because when you're reading, you *are* forming an

intense emotional attachment to something—at least I am. And so it's no surprise that a lot of those attachments work themselves out in weirdly similar ways to the way you forge friendships with people.

**Kolongowski:** In light of the whole James Frey debacle, I want to know what your take is on the issue of “truth” in nonfiction writing and how you define truth.

**Bissell:** Here's what I think. Obviously, the stuff Frey did was unacceptable. He created events that did not happen. And the book is not good enough to be good without thinking it's true. And that's a very subjective, weird process, when a book's value is based on the fact that it happened.

**Kolongowski:** If he hadn't labeled it a memoir, it wouldn't have been a problem.

**Bissell:** But it wouldn't be a very good book if he said it was fiction. It's a reductive, hectoring, emotionally dictatorial, preachy book about a not very likable guy who hangs his whole story on the precept that this is the unvarnished, noble truth, and you have to be a real fucking moron or a con man to sell your book on that kind of a hook when it's filled with fabrication. I mean, that's all I can say.

**Kolongowski:** And when you get Oprah involved . . .

**Bissell:** When Oprah had him on, that was one of the most disgraceful things I've ever seen. She should've been ashamed of herself. I mean, at no point in that discussion did anyone acknowledge that many great, beloved classics of nonfiction have tons of invention in them.

**Kolongowski:** I mean, aren't quotations technically invention? Can you remember *exactly* what was said?

**Bissell:** If you didn't record it, no. You're right. All representation in story form is an invention, because there's no such thing as a story in real life. We're all going to tell different stories about our interview today. For me, maybe it begins earlier this afternoon. For you, maybe it begins when you

leave and go to your playwriting class. You see what I mean? There's no such thing as a story unless there's a presiding consciousness deciding what the story is—that is a creation that is an invention that is an imposition of an artificial sense of order upon events that have no intrinsic or natural order. So to me, telling a story is itself an abandonment of the truth. It doesn't mean that I think all truths are equally valuable. I'm not trying to be a theoretician here, but I do think that people think way too simplistically about this. My first book, *Chasing the Sea*, has nothing in it that's made up, but it does have chronological things that did not happen in quite the order that I say they did. There are events that are transposed; there are characters that are renamed.

**Sloan:** But they're events that happened.

**Bissell:** Nothing in it is made up, but there's stuff that I think would not pass the same kind of reading that the Smoking Gun gave James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. I admit this in another essay that I published elsewhere about one of my favorite travel books, *The Road to Oxiana*, which is a book about a British journalist who traveled from Beirut to Kabul in the 1930s, which is absolutely hysterical, and which I read while I was in Afghanistan, all the while thinking, "God, this is *so* like what I'm experiencing now," and then I later found out that large parts of it are essentially invented. But it's representationally accurate. And he didn't make anything up either, he really took the trip. And he's clearly writing stuff that has some rough echo of felt experience, but he's adumbrating it, he's elaborating on it; he's doing what writers do. And so to me it seems like this is a spectrum. On one side there's clearly stuff that's acceptable, and then on one side there's clearly stuff that's not acceptable, and then there's stuff in the middle that can kind of go either way. It seems to me that when talking about this, you really, really, really have to think hard about where your own personal Geiger counter is.

I have talked to newspaper journalists in particular about this, and they're always saying something along the lines of, "But if you allow yourself to do one thing, how do you know when to stop?" And that's the stupidest question in the world. I mean, how do you know when to keep from punching someone in the face when you're having an argument with them? I mean, you just know! You just know. In this country in particular,

it seems to me kind of willfully childish the way we talk about nonfiction, fiction, and the difference. I brought up this example in a class I visited today: I've written journalism that is entirely about other peoples' experience, and I've written short stories that are very thinly veiled autobiographical fiction. So here you get into a very interesting area. One is labeled as fiction, and yet it has a lot more direct relationship to my own experience than this "nonfiction" about someone's reported experience to me, on which I am then just putting my own interpretation. These two examples alone just let you see how completely inadequate "fiction" and "nonfiction" are as artistic labels for something.

**Kolongowski:** Well then you have "creative nonfiction"; how does that fit in? How do you define "creative"?

**Bissell:** I like "narrative journalism"; I like "writerly nonfiction," which is like nonfiction by people who care about what sentences sound like.

**Sloan:** That's always nice.

**Bissell:** I consider myself someone who writes "writerly nonfiction," and fiction. Obviously, I'm fascinated by this question, and I think about it a lot. And I tell you, as I've gotten older, I'm a lot less willing to monkey around than I was when I wrote *Chasing the Sea*. I'm more careful because I do see now how losing track of where these lines are can become a problem and I never, ever, ever would want my career to implode because of, you know, stupid indiscretions that you make when you're a young writer. But at the same time, I think that the way that the whole Frey thing got talked about with Oprah just revealed to me how people are so willing to be outraged about completely stupid things, you know? How's that for eloquence, completely stupid things?

**Kolongowski:** Well, it was stupid.

**Sloan:** I read this book called *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater, and this whole book is about how she has epilepsy, and then you get to the end of the book and she doesn't have epilepsy. It was really interesting to deal with that—well, because she calls the book *Lying* is it ok that,

you know, she makes up her doctor, she makes up her diagnosis, she makes up her epileptic fits—

**Bissell:** And she's been accused of making up stuff in her more straight nonfiction. Probably because of that memoir.

**Sloan:** Yeah. I had a hard time dealing with that book.

**Bissell:** Well, you can become a zealot so easily on this question. Something doesn't have to be absolutely literally true, but it can be true to the spirit of what you the writer experienced, without distorting. As long as you're not telling lies about people and trying to hurt them—I think you have some leeway about how you choose to represent things. That's my view.

**Kolongowski:** I wrote an essay where I combined—it was nonfiction—and I combined two people; they kind of served the same purpose in the story, so I combined them—

**Bissell:** A composite character.

**Kolongowski:** Yes. And used dialogue that they had both said for one person, and a lot of people were upset about that. I was surprised, because I felt it would have been tedious to have essentially this person who—they were just duplicates of each other, at least in the story—

**Bissell:** If it doesn't damage the truth about the person, if you're not distorting anything people said, it's totally, to me, it's a legitimate form of nonfiction.

**Kolongowski:** Exactly.

**Bissell:** Like Michael Finkel. He was a hugely talented, hot young journalist for a while. He was writing pieces about everywhere, about the most awful places imaginable; he was braver than hell—he would go anywhere, write anything. He wrote a piece about kids in Africa who were being sold into slavery and he took three of these kids and turned them into one kid—took three sets of experiences and turned them into one, and as soon



as some aid groups tried to find this kid, they quickly realized that he'd done this. They reported it to *New York Times Magazine*; Finkel got fired and called a liar. But here's the thing: in doing that—

**Sloan:** Those were the experiences.

**Bissell:** Those were the experiences of actual human beings. The point wasn't that this kid existed. The point was that this situation was happening.

**Kolongowski:** And I'm sure he had—if it was necessary, wouldn't he have had the information anyway, to find them?

**Bissell:** Yeah. I think each case in which an author does this—I think they should all be judged on the merits of what the author is trying to do and to what purpose. And if none of this is obvious to you, then maybe you shouldn't be reading, because obviously subtleties are beyond you.

**Sloan:** I know a lot of people were taking issue with *What Is the What* by Dave Eggers, and it's presented as fiction; it's very up front about what it's doing, he's true to his story.

**Bissell:** And people attacked it.

**Sloan:** And people attacked it. People are just ripping this book apart and it's—I think it's great what he's doing.

**Bissell:** It's stupidity. The attacks, that is.

**Sloan:** I mean, he's helping someone get a voice and getting his story out there.

**Bissell:** The kid's not a writer, he's not a professional writer, probably never thought about being a writer . . .

**Sloan:** And—didn't he spend months interviewing him? These are his experiences.

**Kolongowski:** If he's up front about it, what's the problem?

**Sloan:** It's presented as fiction. And people are taking *issue* with this, I mean—

**Bissell:** People accused him of . . .

**Sloan:** Capitalizing on the story.

**Bissell:** Yeah.

**Sloan:** Though he's donating the profits . . .

**Bissell:** It's just pure jealousy. There are certain kinds of folks who you can never please, particularly if you're a young, famous writer like Dave is. You can't win. No matter what he does, he'll be attacked by some idiot, so God bless him for doing what he does. It's just hard to know we live a world in which you can tell the wrenching story of the Lost Boys of Sudan in an unbelievably successful, completely moving, utterly absorbing way, and still find these vampire bats attached to yourself, you know, sucking your blood, complaining about it. I don't get it, but it just goes to show you that people don't really necessarily believe in the morality of their argument; they're just looking for outrage. And there's a lot of that in the world and a lot of that in the literary world, unfortunately. But luckily my books have not nearly been successful enough to attract any of that attention.

**Sloan:** As an author who writes both fiction and nonfiction, how would you describe your approach to each genre? And do you often find yourself blurring lines as much in your fiction, would you say, as in your nonfiction?

**Bissell:** Since I started writing magazine journalism, I never write fiction in the first person anymore. Because when I write in the first person, I find myself going into the voice of Tom Bissell, the magazine writer. And it's very limiting, because I find it very hard to abandon my own consciousness in the first person and try to imagine my way into another

person's, whereas when I'm writing in the third person, I don't feel myself in my head as much. So one thing writing nonfiction has done is completely vanquished the impulse to write fiction in the first person for me. And it's kind of weird that first-person writing for me is, now, associated with what I do when I'm writing magazine journalism, whereas fiction I'm always writing in the third person. Not that this is of much interest to anyone but me and my mom, but . . .

I think having a fiction background made me conscious that I liked to write sentences that are beautiful. In my experience, a lot of journalistic-type folks think that's pansy stuff—they just want to go write the “story.”

**Sloan:** MSU (Michigan State University) journalism students taking English courses are famous for that.

**Bissell:** You need to actually have some opinions. And you need to write well.

**Sloan:** This isn't an objective paper.

**Bissell:** I know I wouldn't be a nonfiction writer if it weren't for the fiction stuff—it just wouldn't have happened. I've never had a journalism class in my life. I couldn't tell you the first thing about journalism. I don't know how to write nonfiction; all I know how to do is tell stories and that's because of the fiction. So I didn't have to reconsider myself at all. I did have to reconsider the genre of nonfiction, though, as being a much richer and more open thing than I had previously imagined it to be.

**Sloan:** Is there a difference between doing justice to factual events and people in nonfiction and doing justice to emotional events or characters in fiction?\*

**Bissell:** Yes, there is a difference in that the actual people you're writing about in nonfiction tend to call you afterwards whereas imaginary people don't tend to complain if you somehow get it wrong. But in the long run there's no difference at all. In the short term there's a huge difference.

**Sloan:** Have your jobs in editing affected the way you write? And do you find yourself more critical of your own writing, or are you able to separate that?

**Bissell:** It made me a much better self-editor. It made me a lot more willing to cut myself. The biggest impact being an editor has had on my work is that it's made me a lot less freaked out and panic-stricken during the publication process than a lot of my writer friends who've not had that background. I think that's because it's given me a sense of what publishers can or really can't do during the publication process. The people who don't have the publishing background assume that publishers are incompetent fools who, if they really want a book to sell, just have to snap their fingers and it'll sell. It's not the case. Publishers can take the ball up to about the 15-yard line, but gaining those last 15 yards are complicated by a set of completely unpredictable factors. And I feel like my publisher has gotten me up the field pretty far, and those last few yards have just not happened, not because of anything anyone's done, just because that's the way it goes. So it's made me a lot more understanding about the process of what actually happens when a book is published and I'm very grateful to my work in publishing for that, and I think it's made me a lot less of a basket case than I may have been had I not had that experience going into it. I mean, I just, I feel for editors. They're in an impossible situation.

**Sloan:** For me, editing for the MSU Press has taught me about the constraints editors deal with, such as deadlines and contractual obligations. I don't think that's a lesson I would have learned as an author. What are you reading right now?

**Bissell:** *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* for my current book project, and Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*, which just won the National Book Award. I just read John Updike's *Couples*—I reread it for like the first time since eighth grade, and it has just as much sex in it as I remember. One thing I'm dying to read is Zadie Smith's introduction to *Middlemarch*—she's writing the introduction to the new edition that is coming out in 2008. That's the thing I'm most keenly anticipating reading right now. I'm reading *The Great War for Civilization* by Robert Fisk: a history of the Western and Muslim worlds' collisions through time. The last novel that

I read that I really loved is *What Is the What*—I thought that was great. It made me so crushingly sad when I finished it. And *On Beauty*, too, I read both those last spring.

**Sloan:** How would you compare your writing process for articles versus fiction and nonfiction?

**Bissell:** I used to think that writing fiction was a lot harder, but as you write and publish more your bag of tricks becomes ever smaller. You find yourself not wanting to repeat yourself, or not wanting to resort to the same kind of structural stuff. The last few nonfiction pieces I've written have been a real struggle, and I've had the kinds of difficulties I've associated with writing fiction. At this point the process is horrifying because—this unfortunately is very true—you never really have any idea what you're doing. I don't, at least. Writers that I think have some idea what they're doing are like James Michener, Anne Rice—I think she knows what she's doing. I think actually knowing what you're doing may be artistic suicide.

**Sloan:** Because that's all that you do.

**Bissell:** There's something really exciting about not fully knowing what any piece of writing is. And this is the objection I have to critics of traditional writing. For me just creating a believable situation with imaginary people is enough of a trick.

**Sloan:** Are you still with the *Virginia Quarterly Review*? What is your position there?

**Bissell:** I still write for them and I always suggest things to them. I'm a contributing editor which means . . .

**Sloan:** You're on the masthead.

**Bissell:** Right, and that the editor, Ted Genoways, returns my phone calls. But it's a great magazine and I've loved everything I've gotten to do with them. It's really weird that a literary quarterly has made the splash that it has. And I feel very fortunate; I met Ted at a writing conference and he

said, “Can I put you on the masthead of this magazine that I’ve just become editor of?” and I said, “Yeah, all right”—I had no idea the stuff he had planned for this magazine. It’s been really amazing watching him work his magic; he’s really extraordinary.

**Sloan:** Do you think it is helpful for authors to be involved with the production of literary journals?

**Bissell:** Sure, just in the sense of . . .

**Sloan:** Being a good literary citizen?

**Bissell:** Yeah, and if you’re interested in the magazine, and you care about what you read, and you want the magazines you’re associated with to do well. This notion where the writer is this individual solitary genius is totally bullshit. There’s no historical precedent for it. Almost every kind of solitary lone-wolf writer you can think of had a little school around him. Writers like other writers, they do; it always has been the case; it always will be the case. I like to think of myself as someone who is enthusiastic about things and I like meeting other people who are enthusiastic and want to do things. Rapport of this sort is a great thing. Any time you can find yourself attached to something that looks really fulfilling and interesting you should do it.

**Sloan:** How did your work with the *Red Cedar Review* play a role in shaping your future?

**Bissell:** It made me interested in what an editor does, how an editor works, and how an editor interacts with writers. It gave me immense empathy for people who send their stuff in, and it made me a little less snooty about my own work landing in slush piles. It made me realize that it’s really hard to publish a magazine. It made me realize that I love being on that side of things. So, yeah, as far as I can tell, *Red Cedar* had a determinative impact on my life.

When I wanted to do it, it was just Laura [Klynstra] and one other person, and the other person graduated, so then it was just Laura, and I said, “Can I help you?” And she let me do the fiction editing. It was just us,

we didn't have any readers. It was just the two of us for the first year we did it together.

**Sloan:** Did you get a lot of submissions?

**Bissell:** We got a *lot* of submissions. When I went to Harper's as an intern I was the only intern there who was really into, say, literary things. The other interns were kind of hard news, journalism people. And I was the literary one, and I just liked reading the slush pile. I found it very beautiful just looking through it. It's very rare that you find anything that just jumps out at you, but almost always you find stuff that have parts that are excellent and I remember writing those people letters. I remember getting letters, too—and I still get rejection letters—that say something nice about something, and it makes a big difference. Very few people should be discouraged; very few people should be really encouraged. Everyone in the middle deserves something a little better than complete dismissal, and I think editing the *RCR* made me a better human being in general.

When you're young and you want to be a writer you tend to think of anyone else as the enemy, really. I did, at least, because you think that only a limited number of people get to be writers.

In the class I spoke to today, I said: "In this classroom about five people are good enough to be professional writers, and get paid for it, but the fact is the most talented person in this room probably won't be one of them unless he or she is also the most demonically driven person." It really takes just an insane, crazy amount of drive. I'm not saying this to cast myself as a martyr, but I can remember all the New Year's Eves I've spent at home writing my novel that never got published. And I remember feeling both really happy and crushingly miserable that this was my lot in life. It's New Year's Eve and I'm writing this novel—writing is a lot of nights like that, a lot of nights that you're just utterly alone, totally within your own head trying to create something beautiful or something moving or something awful. That's the kind of drive you have to feel, otherwise I don't think you have a shot. At least that's what I did, and every writer I know, literally every writer I know, would tell you the same thing. And I don't think that's a coincidence. I think you just have to be nuts about it.

**Sloan:** You have to feel like there's nothing else you can do.

**Bissell:** That's how writers feel. There's nothing else they could do. You're utterly unemployable in some basic sense. So you need to just find something to do while you're waiting, while you're writing. Just looking for that thing to fill up time.



---

\* These questions were submitted by Gavin Craig, a graduate student at MSU.



## Tattoo

Amelia Beamer

The man to the right of my place in the line, the tattoo on the back of his neck says *and*. The man on the other side of me, his tattoo says *girl*. The morning sun is bright, and the line of people is long.

"You're 1,203, right?" I ask *and*. "I'm 1,204."

"Yes. Are you? You're awfully young," *and* says.

"Let her alone," a woman on the other side of him says, "It's not just the '09 babies that were born with tattoos."

"Just mostly us," *and* says.

"I remember my mother said she was so afraid that there was something wrong with me, with this tattoo on the back of my neck." The woman laughs. She reminds me of my own mother, dark hair and soft, capable arms.

"Like it was the end of the world or something," *girl* says softly. He's a big guy, gruff-looking, but with a deep, calm voice. He must have been teased with that tat, growing up.

The woman nods. "Exactly. And every baby in the ward. Well, you know, the words were different. They tested mine and told my mom it was a birthmark—that there was no actual ink there." The wind picks up, and I can smell her perfume: cinnamon and warm earth.

"My best friend, Carrie, she just had a baby, Sera," I say. "The baby was born with a tattoo. To replace someone who died, Carrie said. So she had to hire a sitter for today to stand in line and say Sera's word because all of our friends are here and none of us are close to Sera's space in the line."

"Most of my friends are tattooed, too," the woman says, looking up the line. Her hair covers her neck. "Is the story going right to left again this time, does anyone know?"

"Right to left, yes," says *girl*. "They think they got it right this time."

*and* yawns, then runs his fingers over the stubble on his chin. "What are you, hon?" he asks me.

*“the.”* I slap at a mosquito. “Anyone got bug spray?”

“Here,” *and* says. He hands me a can and I spray it on my bare arms, on my shorts and my legs. My new white shoes have grass stains on the toes. *and* takes the can and sprays the back of my legs. He rubs it into my neck, though it doesn’t need to be rubbed in.

I nod thanks and move away from him.

“You remember the last time—you wouldn’t, child—the story made no sense,” *and* says. “Do they really have it right this time?”

“Does it matter?” *girl* says. His voice is thoughtful. “No one knows why or how we have the tattoos, to be honest, or what the larger meaning is, if there is one.”

“Do you know, am I supposed to say the whole story or just my word?” I ask. I wonder if I’ll be able to remember the story well enough to tell it.

“You’ve heard the one that says that if the story is told in the right order, the aliens that gave us the tattoos will come back and take us away,” a man near us says. He smiles like it’s a joke.

“Oh, please,” the woman says. “Aliens. The doctors that delivered all of us did it as a game, and are giving tattoos to babies like your friend’s in order to keep it up.”

“If it looks like a conspiracy, it’s probably just incompetence,” *and* says.

I smile at the joke, but turn away so he can’t see.

We’re quiet for a while, looking up and down the line.

I squat on the grass, placing my palms down on it, as if I could absorb the whole story through my hands. The grass moves; there is an ant colony. I move my hands away and watch their tiny comings and goings, hoping I haven’t ruined their chemical trails. They move surely, unaware that they are about to be trampled.

The chatter gets louder all at once. I look up, ask: “Has it started?”

“Everyone’s talking,” the woman says. “I can’t hear.”

“Look,” *girl* points. I squint, following the gesture. The people to the right are walking toward us, following the story. They move slowly, listening, conferring over the story so far. Each person in turn adds his or her word, shouting with ownership. The story draws closer.

I reach for *girl’s* arm. We stop breathing, straining to hear.



## The Blooming

Jim Bainbridge

A retired professor of Japanese literature suffers a stroke that paralyzes him almost entirely, leaving him unable to communicate other than by moving his eyes. His vital organs begin to fail. Doctors give him only a week or so to live. He indicates that he wants his 16-year-old grandson to take him home to Kyōto, where cherry trees are beginning to bloom.

The boy takes care of his grandfather, a formerly austere and powerful man—bathes him, changes his position regularly to prevent bedsores, reads to him from *The Tale of Genji*, cleans the soiled sheets and clothes—and is repeatedly awed while massaging his arms and legs by how soft they are, how yielding.

One afternoon in the garden—the grandfather in a wheelchair, the boy sitting beside him, holding his hand—clouds gather over nearby mountains; and as they do, the boy gets a feeling, which seems to be coming through the paralyzed hand he is holding, that his grandfather wants to write a death poem. The boy asks if this is so, and his grandfather's eyes move to the right—yes.

Just then the boy sees a cherry blossom fall and thinks: A few days ago there were no blossoms; a few days from now there again will be no blossoms. He looks up at the darkening sky and is surprised to hear himself saying:

Rain clouds overhead  
a deep, black silence—a flash  
we live and are gone.

“Was that your death poem, Grandfather?”

Eyes move to the left—no.

The boy looks again at the cherry tree, sees in it pink, white, gray. He feels a tingling from his grandfather's hand and speaks another haiku:

To life's eastering  
shadow, how great the speed of  
color through the trees.

"Was that your death poem, Grandfather?"

The grandfather slowly lifts his eyelids. No.

Now, the boy looks carefully at the cold, bony, withered hand he is holding, and discovers in its frailty an exquisite beauty, perfect like a blossom on a tree, so fleeting. In the next moment he feels that he is in his grandfather's body, unable to move or talk. Looking out of those tired old eyes, he experiences neither fear nor anxiety. What he sees is his young self blooming with youth, sitting close to him, holding his wizened hand in a young hand, and he thinks during an exhale that seems never to end:

Exuberant spring—  
so soon crow's feet at your eyes  
and withered desires.

Returned suddenly to his accustomed self, the boy asks, "Was that your death poem, Grandfather?"—but he receives no answer.



## 1 Ruined It All for Billy Saddle

---

Megan Ayers

God is angry at me again for letting Billy touch me. I know this because he made the sun come early this morning, shine right in my eyes, and because he killed Billy's dad. I had only been asleep maybe three hours, 'cause Billy left when his mother called to tell him that his dad had a heart attack and was in the hospital. When the phone rang, I told him not to answer it cause we were almost in the middle of things, the way I like, him on top with me staring at the posters of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin on the wall, who Mom and Dad say play the devil's music; but he had seen that it was his mom, and answered anyway. I was next to him, curled around some pillows and stuffed animals and blankets to cover myself 'cause somehow it feels indecent to sit around naked when someone's talking to their mom on the phone, when he started to cry. He sat on my bed naked, his dick drooping with the sadness of it all, so I stood up and collected his clothes from the floor while he shook, sobbing with his face in his hands. I tossed the clothes on the bed behind him, sat down next to him, and threw an awkward arm around his shoulder. He turned to me, his eyelashes matted and wet, and he kissed me on the mouth, and then on my face and neck and belly and thighs. He cried into my neck and hair, sobbed all over me for a good ten minutes until we finished; and then he rolled off of me, grabbed his clothes, and was out the door before he'd even gotten his shirt over his head. I didn't ask him if he had wanted me to go to the hospital with him 'cause he was gone by the time I could even think of it. Next thing I know, the sun is slitting into my room, and before I can open my eyes, I hear a whisper that Billy's dad is dead, and it's all because of me.





## About the Contributors

---

**Megan Ayers** is currently pursuing an MFA at Bowling Green State University where she is an assistant editor for *Mid-American Review*.

**Jim Bainbridge** is a graduate of Harvard Law School and a recipient of a National Science Foundation fellowship for graduate studies at UC Berkeley. He has recently completed a literary speculative fiction novel for which he hopes to find a home in the coming year.

**Elizabeth Banning** was born and raised in Los Angeles, but now lives in northern California with her husband. When she's not off gallivanting with fictitious characters, you'll find her working in her garden or hiking on the nearby mountain. She's currently completing her second novel and a collection of interrelated short stories about California's central valley. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Talking River Review*, *descant*, *Willard & Maple*, *Zone 3*, and *Global City Review*.

**Amelia Beamer** works as an editor and reviewer for the newsmagazine *Locus*. Her fiction has appeared in publications including *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *Oats*.

**Nick Beier** is a sophomore at the University of Michigan pursuing an undergraduate degree in Computer Science Engineering. He is one of the tallest people you'll ever meet. He attended Pioneer High School and has lived in Ann Arbor his whole life. In addition to photography, Nick enjoys reading, slacklining, listening to a wide variety of music, and eating his popcorn with sugar. He shoots both film and digital, depending on his mood.

**Joan Colby** has published seven books of poetry including *The Atrocity Book*, *The Lonely Heart Killers*, and *How the Sky Begins to Fall*. Over 800 of her poems have been published in such journals as *Poetry*, *the new renaissance*, *Atlanta Review*, *Epoch*, *Hollins Critic*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*.

She was the recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She was a finalist in the 2007 *GSU Review* Poetry Contest. She works as an editor for *Illinois Racing News*, a publication for the Illinois Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Foundation and lives on a small horse farm with her family.

**Okla Elliott** is an MFA student at Ohio State University. He also holds an MA from UNC-Greensboro. In addition to his American education, he has studied at the University of Mannheim, Germany, and at the University of Wroclaw, Poland. His nonfiction, poetry, and short fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *International Poetry Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *The Rambler*, and the *Sewanee Theological Review*, among others. He is the author of *The Mutable Wheel* and *Lucid Bodies and Other Poems*.

**Charles Grosel** is a writer, editor, and stay-at-home dad. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and two children. He has published stories in *Western Humanities Review*, *Water-Stone*, *Front Range Review*, and *The MacGuffin*, and poems in *The Threepenny Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Slant*, and *The Comstock Review*, among other publications.

**David R. Hammel** runs a sales and marketing company in Houston, Texas. He is the author of several short stories, and an (as of yet) unpublished novel set in Paris. Mr. Hammel attended high school in Brussels, Belgium, and college in Paris, ultimately graduating with a degree in journalism from Kent State University. He has been married for the past 32 years to his high school sweetheart, Tina. They return to France each year to relive their youth, and to pretend they never left. His photograph was taken November 11, 2006.

**Samantha Hederman**, a sophomore at MSU, is a liberal arts student with a pervasive love of theoretical physics and mathematics. She is an assistant director for the ROIAL Players, while still managing to find time to be a general nuisance and plan total world domination. She is unhappy with Calliope, because the muse is a fickle being and has a tendency to



forget about Samantha for long stretches of time before showing up at the most inopportune moment. As such, most of Samantha's poetry can be traced back to a pile of scribbled-on napkins stuffed in a desk drawer.

**Greg Jahn** is a photographer living in the mountains in Idaho, where he has made the discovery of remote, mysterious, and untouched natural places his primary passion. In the past 20 years these explorations have grown to include experiencing the lands and cultures of other countries, including volunteer humanitarian work in El Salvador and for the Tibetan Government in exile in north India. An extensive collection of his images can be viewed at [www.GregJahnPhoto.com](http://www.GregJahnPhoto.com).

**Stephen Kopel** is a teacher, cyclist, art collector, and devoted wordsmith. He was a nominee for Pushcart Prize XXV and San Francisco Poet Laureate 2006/07. He is the author of *crux, crax* (calliope press—No. Beach) and books *Spritz and Tender Absurdities* (Meridien PressWorks). He was included in *Who's Who 2006*; and has work residing in publications such as *MARGIE*, *ONTHEBUS*, *Antigonish Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *BPR*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *580 Split*, *Coe Review*, *Porcupine*, and the *Dalhousie Review*. He is the creator of Word Painters poetry programs presented at branch libraries, and the host of "Poetry Scene" at the Lighthouse live on Friday, at 10:30 AM (PT) at: [www.lighthouse-sf.org/audio/streaming.php](http://www.lighthouse-sf.org/audio/streaming.php). He's proudly called the punmaster par excellence!

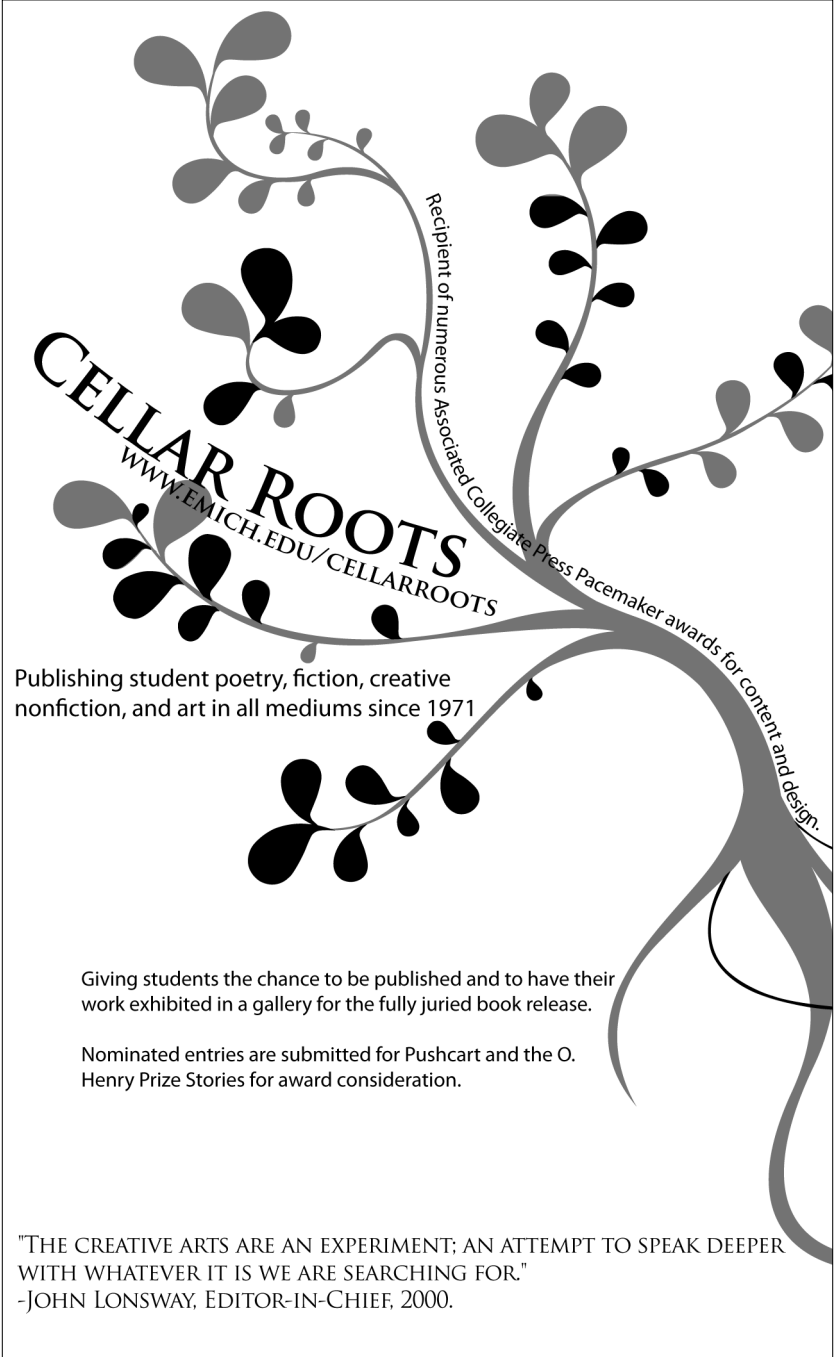
**Eric Gabriel Lehman** is the author of three published novels, *Waterboys*, *Quaspeck*, and *Summer's House*, and the forthcoming *Fear of Trains*. His short stories and essays have appeared in *Raritan*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *River Styx*, *Turnrow* and the *New York Times*, among others. He teaches literature and creative writing at Queens College in New York City, where he lives.

**Nicole Nguyen** is a junior at Michigan State University working toward degrees in English/creative writing and professional writing. She is a Texas native, and generally likes living in Michigan, except in the winter, which seems to take up half of the calendar year. In addition to writing, she enjoys web design, coffee, and traveling.

**David Sapp** is an artist and writer living near Lake Erie. He teaches studio art and art history at Firelands College, Bowling Green State University, in Huron, Ohio. He creates graphite drawings and writes poetry. His poems have appeared in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *The Licking River Review*, *The Hurricane Review*, *Sidewalks*, *The Bad Henry Review*, *Meat Whistle Quarterly*, *Limestone*, *Red Cedar Review* (volume 39), and elsewhere. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Creative Behavior*. He has published a chapbook, *Close to Home*, and a novel, *Flying Over Erie*.

**Jan Shoemaker** teaches and writes in mid-Michigan. Her work has appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *The Sun*, *The Rambler*, *The Other Side*, *The Redwood Coast Review*, *Karamu*, *Driftwood*, and in other magazines and journals. She lives with two fine and gentle males: her affable husband, Larry, and her perfect golden retriever, Atticus.





# CELLAR ROOTS

WWW.EMICH.EDU/CELLARROOTS

Publishing student poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and art in all mediums since 1971

Giving students the chance to be published and to have their work exhibited in a gallery for the fully juried book release.

Nominated entries are submitted for Pushcart and the O. Henry Prize Stories for award consideration.

"THE CREATIVE ARTS ARE AN EXPERIMENT; AN ATTEMPT TO SPEAK DEEPER WITH WHATEVER IT IS WE ARE SEARCHING FOR."

-JOHN LONSWAY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, 2000.

# Fourth Genre

*This literary journal is devoted to works of contemporary nonfiction, from the personal essay to memoir, literary journalism, and personal cultural criticism. Featured are interviews with prominent nonfiction writers, roundtable discussions of topical genre issues, short stories, reviews, and more.*



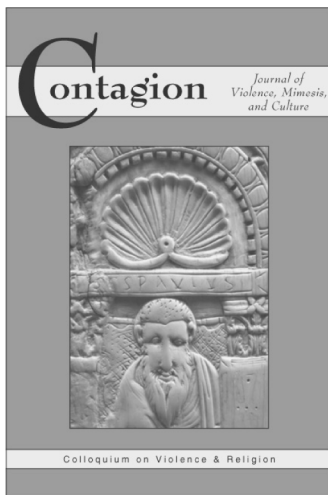
© Jane Rosemont

*For more information, please visit [www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/fg](http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/fg)*

*Editor: Marcia Aldrich, Michigan State University*  
*Founding Editor: Michael Steinberg, Michigan State University*

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Journals Division  
1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25  
East Lansing, MI 48823-5245





## Religion, Violence, and the Latest in Girardian Scholarship

***Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture***  
**Editor: William A. Johnsen, Michigan State University**

*Contagion* is the journal of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R), an international association of scholars dedicated to the exploration, criticism, and development of René Girard's mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture.

Recent and forthcoming articles by Michel Serres, Eric Gans, Lucien Scubla, Martha J. Reineke, and Robert M. Doran.

For more information on *Contagion* and COV&R, please visit:  
<http://msupress.msu.edu/journals/cont/>

Michigan State University Press  
Journals Division  
1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25  
East Lansing, MI 48823-5245





### Praise for JSR:

"The most exciting new scholarly journal I've encountered in years. With the growing interest in interdisciplinary approaches to social movements, JSR could not be more timely; and the inaugural essays are penetrating and provocative—a pleasure to read."

—John Stauffer,  
Harvard University

"Radicalism continues to inspire the human imagination. JSR provides a vital forum to ensure that scholarship on radicalism comes to term with its past legacy, and tackles the intellectual challenges ahead."

—Frank Furedi,  
University of Kent,  
England, author of  
*Culture of Fear*,  
*Politics of Fear*

# Journal for the Study of Radicalism

### Editors:

- Ann Larabee, *Michigan State University*
- Arthur Versluis, *Michigan State University*

The *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* engages in serious, scholarly exploration of the forms, representations, meanings, and historical influences of radical social movements.

This exciting new journal, now in its second year, has already produced volumes devoted to the study of radicalism and violence, radicalism and music, and ecological radicalism. They include interviews with Lawrence Robert "Pun" Plamondon, John Sinclair, and John Zerzan.

Future issues will examine, among other topics, Christian radicalism, international dimensions of radicalism, and terrorism.

For more information, visit:  
[www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/jsr](http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/jsr)

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Journals Division  
1405 S. Harrison Rd., Ste. 25  
East Lansing, MI 48823-5245





**Library Recommendation Form  
for**

**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:** \_\_\_\_\_

**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  
Phone: (517) 355-9543 x 130  
Fax: (517) 432-2611  
Email: [journals@msu.edu](mailto:journals@msu.edu)

**—Print, complete, and forward this form to your library—**

# REDCEDAR

## R E V I E W

---

### 2008 Subscription Rates (1 issue)

|                                | 1 Year | 2 Years       | 3 Years |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------------|---------|
| Buy 2-3 years at a savings of: |        | 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   | Circle choice |         |

*Air Mail: Add \$8 per year to above rate*

Print and electronic subscriptions available online at [www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/](http://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 \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Country \_\_\_\_\_ Zip/Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Payment enclosed; check made payable to Michigan State University Press

Please charge my:

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard

Acct # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Mail completed form to:

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS JOURNALS DIVISION

1405 S. HARRISON RD., STE. 25

EAST LANSING, MI 48823-5245, USA

TEL: (517) 355-9543 x 130

FAX: (517) 432-7484

EMAIL: [journals@msu.edu](mailto:journals@msu.edu)

WEBSITE: [www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/](http://www.msupress.msu.edu/journals/rcr/)