



RC Alumni Journal

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Fall 2017, No. 1

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Welcome!

2017 is the 50th anniversary of the RC, but it's also the 47th anniversary of its creative writing program.

If you figure that at least 10 students a year graduate with a degree in RC creative writing, that's a cohort of over 500! Not including those who took classes but had other majors, or didn't graduate in the RC, or didn't graduate.

It seems an auspicious time to launch this journal. We hope it will be a place for RC creative writing alums to learn about and celebrate each other, but also a place where new graduates can find friendly feedback and a place to begin publishing.

This journal's genesis occurred in the spring of 2014, just before the first of three Voices of the Middle West conferences held at East Quad, with the idea of a separate website for RC creative writing students and alumni. A calendar of readings and other events was developed, with email reminders sent out periodically. Then

This first issue contains a selection of work by RC writing alums from each decade of program history. Enjoy!

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"Banana" performance photos on pages 3-4 are courtesy of Peter Anderson. The photo accompanying Paige Pfleger's "DNA testing" article is courtesy of Paige Pfleger. Dan Madaj took the photo accompanying Alyson Foster's "Fourth Floor."

The drawings accompanying Peter Anderson's "Banana" on page 1 and Dan Madaj's "E.J." on page 117 are by Dan.

The cover is a composite of all these images (except for the rifle from Laura Thomas' piece), plus part of a drawing by Dan from back when the journal was testing the name "Bug Juice."

Head-shot photos for "Program News" are from U-M or personal websites.

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Dan Madaj served as editor, etc. Contact him at dmadaj@umich.edu.

Zillions of thanks to Laura Thomas and the advisory group, which included Laura, Cameron Finch, Elizabeth Schmuhl, and Logan Corey!

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Program News



An excerpt from
**The Banana
 From
 Outer Space**

Peter Anderson

The Banana From Outer Space, a musical comedy, was performed in the RC theater on June 20-23, 1973 to boisterous crowds. Aside from Anderson, at least three RC creative writing students and over 20 other RC or U-M students were involved. Peachy Cream evolved from the Banana experience (and other performances in the Inn and elsewhere), staging comedy- and musical reviews around town over the following three years.

A mute and mysterious banana from outer space named Benny lands his donut-shaped spaceship on the Washington Monument and is promptly befriended by a young janitor Fred and his girlfriend Nancy. Before long the gentle and hapless banana has stirred up strong reactions among spiritual youth, rock and roll fans, the police, the military, and religious extremists. In this excerpt, Zig and Zag are undercover CIA agents, Rev. Cracker a conservative minister running for president on an anti-vegetarian platform, Capt. Zilch the host of the late-night Sci-Fi Thriller TV show broadcasting the movie "The Banana from Outer Space," and Rose and Joe

Spublowski a working class couple watching the movie on TV.

ZAG: (pointing to audience) Hey, look! The National Guard's surrounding the Washington Monument and commanding the donut to surrender.

ZIG: (to Fred) After this, who knows? Benny Banana for President or . . .

NANCY: Fred, if you say no I'll never speak to you again.

FRED: Say no to what?

ZAG: *(menacingly)* Confrontation, man, confrontation.

FRED: I'd lose my job if anybody found out I was at a protest.

(Loud explosion ... they fall down)

REV.: *(coming out of prayer)* Amen.

FLOCK: *(coming out of prayer)* Amen.

FRED: I don't like this, Nancy. If the National Guard'll blow up the Washington Monument, think what they'd do to Benny!

NANCY: Now that you're out of work you can grow your hair long, Fred.

FRED: What?

ZIG: And go on welfare!

ZAG: And smoke dope all the time!

NANCY: And be a hippie!

ZIG, ZAG & NANCY: And live!

FRED: I can't do that ... what would my mother say?

ROSE: Such a nice boy.

ZIG: You don't have to do anything, just let Benny throw this *(a pie)* in Cracker's face.

FRED: Well, I don't know.

ZILCH: *(playing himself in the movie, center stage)* Hi there, this is Capt. Zilch for WOOM woom news

covering Rev. Bill Cracker's pre-election rally in downtown Washington, D.C. *(to Benny)* Excuse me, sir, but who are you voting for in tomorrow's presidential election?

ZIG: *(to Fred)* Whaddya say we communicate nonverbally via mass media? *(hands Benny the cream pie)*

FRED: Benny, I don't think you should.

NANCY: Oh, don't be a stick in the mud, Fred -- he's his own banana.

ZILCH: Rev. Cracker, is it true that the National Guard has blown up the Washington Monument because a spaceship shaped like a donut landed on it?

(Benny stalks Cracker with pie)

REV.: Our planet is the only planet in the universe visited by Jesus Christ and therefore the only planet blessed by God with intelligent life or the brainpower necessary to launch an intergalactic space vehicle.

FRED: I don't think that's logically correct.

REV.: There is no such things as creatures from outer space, giant bananas, ghosts or dreams!

(Benny creams Cracker)

REV.: *(tasting)* Mmm ... banana cream.

(Zig and Zag, until now typical street people, pull out guns and wallets)

ZIG: Alright, everybody freeze, this is the CIA!

(Zig and Zag remove long-haired wigs)

Lt. Zag, frisk that banana!
(to Nancy, Fred and Benny)
You're all under arrest for conspiracy!

FRED: Hey, that's not fair!

ZIG: I'd like to advise you of your rights.

FRED: You're not hippies, you're spies.

ZAG: And you're under federal custody. *(he leads Fred and Benny offstage in handcuffs)*

ZIG: *(to Nancy)* You come with me, chick. *(exits with Nancy)*

ZILCH: This is all too incredible to believe. A giant banana from outer space has just tried to assassinate presidential hopeful Rev. Bill Cracker! And it looks like, yes! The Rev., apparently uninjured, is going to make a statement.

REV.: This only confirms what I've been sayin' all along -- vegetables are the work of Satan! Fruit, too! I am confident that after the votes are counted tomorrow we'll all Eat the Meat!

(Black-out center stage. Spots on Joe and Rose watching tv)

JOE: Hey, that Cracker's alright. A president like him's what this country needs to straighten up.

ROSE: I think he's a monster -- the way he's persecuting that cute banana.

JOE: Cute banana? It's a monster!

ROSE: No, he's not. He's just misunderstood.

JOE: This is a monster movie and he's the monster. Don't you know nothin', Rose? Look, it says right in the tv guide ... "monster banana ..." It don't say "monster reverend ..."

ROSE: I don't care.

JOE: Keerist, Rose, don't you see? All that love crap's a trap to get everyone to drop their defenses ... then POW an invasion lands and because all the liberals are off playin' with their bananas the U.S. is conquered by a fleet of fruitcakes.

ROSE: Does it say all that in the tv guide?

JOE: But then Cracker unleashes this top-secret weapon paid for by decent hardworking citizens like me and single-handedly wipes out the aliens

... then, when everyone sees how right he was, all the lazy jerks and intellectuals are put in a big space ship and sent to Mars.

ROSE: But how could a Man of God do that?

JOE: God don't care about Mars -- go gemme another beer.

Peter Anderson (RC 1972) studied at the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre before moving to Canada in 1977. He's the recipient of six Jessie Richardson Awards, a Bay Area Critics' Circle Award, Leo and Gemini nominations for best performance (The Overcoat), and a NY Drama Desk nomination. He lives in Vancouver with his wife, maskmaker and writer Melody Anderson.



Photos from the original production: Zilch (James Guthrie) watches as Benny (Debby Krant) pies Cracker (Michael Parsons); Cracker orates, with two Nameless Faces (Bob Honeyman and Kathy Brown).



Fred (Nick O'Connor), Zig (Gail Lee Reisman), and Zag (Peter Anderson); Benny with suitcase; Warren Hecht as, of course, God.



Front row: Scott Winter, left, sits next to his biological mom, Nancy Oakes Dewitt, and his older brother, Keith Murphy. In the second row, Charles Murphy, Jeannette Murphy and Lynnae DePaolo. (Paige Pfleger/WHYY)

DNA testing reunites family after 50 years

Paige Pfleger

The night of Sept. 18, 1966, 18-year-old Nancy Oakes Dewitt went into labor in the back seat of her car. Her boyfriend, Patrick, was just 17 at the time. He delivered the baby, cut the umbilical chord, and tied it off with a shoelace. He wrapped the baby in white towels, and left him in a random car parked outside a New Jersey bowling alley.

This was Nancy's second son, but no one would know that. No one knew she was pregnant, and she never told anyone about the baby boy. She hid it because her parents threatened to take away her first son, Keith.

Nancy and Patrick got married shortly thereafter and had two daughters and another son. She never planned to tell her kids about their long-lost brother, but Patrick had different plans.

"This was one of the catalysts for his alcoholism, the guilt," Keith said. "My mom found religion, and my dad found the bottle."

Keith was 16 when he realized he had a brother out there somewhere. His father came home drunk, threw a table across the room, and shoved his finger in Nancy's face. He asked

her why she hadn't told the kids about the child they abandoned.

The news sent Keith on a decades-long search for his missing sibling. He collected clues from his father's drunken episodes, trying to patch together the details of that night. He went to the police station, dug through newspaper articles, combed through adoption records, but all he discovered were dead ends.

Eventually, Keith gave up hope.

It's a match

About a year ago, Keith decided to take a DNA test on the website ancestry.com. Curiosity more than anything drove him to take the test — he was trying to compile a family history and was interested in finding out more about his ethnicity.

"The results came in, and you look at the ethnicity at the top and it says 65 percent British. You scroll down to your direct connections, and — lo and behold — I found scottwinter17," Keith said.

The DNA profile said that user scottwinter17 was Keith's sibling. So he did what any self-respecting 21st century person would do — he stalked every single Scott Winter on Facebook and sent them all the same message:

"Scott, my name is Keith Murphy. I'm looking for Scott Winter 17 from ancestry.com. And I believe that if you are him, we are brothers."

'I've been waiting for this phone call all my life'

Across the country in California, 49-year-old Scott Winter was having what he thought would be a pretty typical day. He woke up, got ready for work, and sat down at his computer.

"I logged onto Facebook and saw a thing about how to find these hidden message requests, so I just out of curiosity clicked it," Scott says. He's talking about the folder where messages from people the user hasn't friended are filtered. He opened the folder, and he saw a message from someone named Keith Murphy.

He read Keith's message, checked his ancestry.com profile, and sure enough, there was a notification that said he had been matched with a brother.

"I remember standing, looking at my computer in disbelief for about 10 minutes, going, 'Is this a trick? Is someone playing with me?' It took me about another five or 10 minutes to dial his number," Scott said.

"I still remember that very first phone call," Keith said. "I answered the phone, and he goes 'Keith?' and I said, 'Yeah?' and he goes, 'This is Scott' and I said, 'Man, I've been waiting for this phone call all my life.'"

They talked for hours, and discovered they had a lot of similarities — they're both in sales, grew up in the same part of New Jersey, and share an obsession with shoes and peanut butter.

Their biggest difference was the kind of life each had growing up

"I know the childhood that my four children had, and they did not have what you would call a normal

childhood," Nancy said. "And I was certain that Scott would have a more normal childhood. To this day, I think he probably had the best childhood of any of them."

Scott had a happy life, but admits that one of the most difficult parts of his childhood was all of the questions he had when he found out he was left at a bowling alley.

"Do I have siblings? What are they like?" Scott said. And as for his biological mother, he wondered, "On key dates like birthdays or Christmas, or something, was she out there thinking about me?"

"These last 49 years were very painful," Nancy said. "His birthday, Christmas, the first few years when you saw a little one running around who would have been his age, you always wonder, 'I wonder if that's mine.'"

But this holiday season, 50 years after Scott was left in a car at a bowling alley, the family reunited. When Scott last visited the family, who now live in Pennsylvania, they took the opportunity to celebrate the holidays together. It was Nancy and all of her kids: Keith, Scott, Lynnae, Charles and Jeannette. Their father, Patrick,

passed away a few years ago. They celebrated Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all at once, and they celebrated the 49 birthdays they had missed out on.

"I don't know what I was thinking. I went out and bought a lottery ticket after all this happened," Scott said, laughing alongside his family members on a couch. "I was like, 'What am I thinking? I already hit the lottery.'"

They sit talking together like this for a while. This is only the second time they've all been together, but they don't look anything like strangers. They look like family.

This story was originally published for WHYY's The Pulse and aired nationally on NPR's Here & Now.

Paige Pfleger (RC 2015) also has a degree in Communication Studies from U-M. During her time in Ann Arbor, she worked at NPR member station Michigan Radio. After graduation, she interned at NPR headquarters in Washington D.C., where she reported for the web. Currently, she's the associate producer of WHYY's The Pulse, a national health and science show.



Beautiful Objects

Lauren Stachew

They were walking back from church when they first saw the angels on the side of the road – drenched and muddied in the lake – or rather, what was left of the lake. Little, ornately painted figurines, their bellies pink like salmon, lying head-first in a mass grave. Edith stood behind her mother, watching the pained faces of the townspeople as they began to weep, trudging through the mud to gather the treasures in their arms and wiping the faces of the angels clean from the mud with the sleeves of their tunics. Edith looked up at her mother and tugged at her skirt, but she didn't budge. She remained silent, staring out into the lake puddle. She was clutching one hand onto the other like Edith knows she does when she's nervous or scared. She did it the night they waited

up for their brother to come home (and he never did,) and the day their cow got real sick and almost died, (but she didn't.) All of those times, her mother had her hands clasped together just like she does now. She held her hands tightly, and the tips of her fingers turned white.

Edith peered closer at each of the angels cradled in the dirtied cloths. Their faces were simple. Two black dots for eyes, a pointed, pale nose, and a single stroke of red for a mouth. Their skirts were shaped into ripples by the four craters that were pressed into their sides with fingerprints, glossed with bright orange. The fingers folded together on their hands were implied with thin, black lines,

and their arms wore rows of turquoise curves like waves, elbows flowing into pointed, triangle wings marked with white shapes like fish scales, as though these angels bore fins instead of wings.

The lake puddle used to have a name, but Edith never knew it. Back when her mother and father were as old as her and her sister, it had a shore and a beach, and didn't look so burdensome on the side of the road. She knew it started to dry up some years ago before she was born, and she supposed that it had decided, about three-quarters of the way through its decay, to stop. Ever since then, it remained as it was: soggy, filthy, blistering sludge.

She watched as one of the old folks hobbled towards her and her mother from the puddle – her snarled, gray hair in knots, and dusty clothes in tatters – cradling one of the angels in her hands. Her left arm was exposed from the tears in her sleeve, where her skin was pierced with tiny raised bumps. "Bee stings," her mother had said to her the week before, while they were preparing supper in the kitchen. "Every morning that woman wanders out into the woods and shoves her hand elbow-deep into fallen nests to gather honey. I know some people who tried to stop her at first, but she kept on going – still does. Those bees tear at her arm like dogs. Your father was out in the woods not too long ago and saw her, hunched over by a tree, fishing out handfuls of honey into a bucket. Said it was like she didn't even notice the bees were there.... I don't want you running out in those woods, Edith." She told her she wouldn't – she

didn't want anything to do with that woman.

The bee woman mumbled something incoherent and stuck her hands out in front of Edith. She looked up at her mother, who smiled warmly and said, "It's alright. Take it." She reached out and picked up the angel from her hands. It felt hollow and reeked like the mud. The bee woman's big, droopy mouth fell agape into a toothless smile. She turned on her heel, stumping back towards the mud, and threw her hands up to the sky, wild eyes, sputtering out indecipherable sounds.

She didn't say anything to her mother. She stared at the angel's face, two pitch black dots staring back at her. She blinked at it, but it didn't blink back.

Her little sister threw a fit when they returned home. She hollered throughout the house for a good twenty minutes about how it wasn't fair that Edith got one of the pretty angels and she didn't.

"Here, you can have it," she said, handing her the figurine. "I don't want it." She spit in her face and hurled it at her stomach.

"No! I don't want yours! I want mine!" She burst into tears and ran off into the attic. Her father came in silently from the kitchen and picked up the angel from the floor. He gave it a quizzical look.

"Got some funny eyes, don't it?" She nodded. He walked over to the fireplace and set the angel on the mantle next to her mother's crocheted cross.

The angels in the mud weren't as strange as what had happened a

week later. Night fell, morning rose, and on that day everyone in town began to offer away their belongings to the angels, perched high up on the mantels of the fireplaces. Lamb stew, painted wood bead necklaces, silk scarves, and porcelain china cups. Edith overheard people bragging at church, naming off all the beautiful objects they laid out onto their dining tables for the angels. Their eyes were wide with pleasure – the expressions on their faces sculpted in a permanent, disturbing awe.

The odd thing is that those objects disappeared. The folks would make their offering, and next morning it would be gone – completely vanished – they would say. These angels with fins instead of wings, now worthy of consuming another's possessions, gnawed at the beads and the cups in their flat, pink stomachs. The delight on the faces of those that she watched buried a sick feeling inside of her.

Her mother and father were unfortunately afflicted, too, by the gift-giving. Edith woke up each morning to see them kneeling in front of the mantle, always a different object held in their hands. Her concern didn't settle in until the day she saw her mother holding her grandmother's ivory jewelry box with the painted red elephants to the angel's dotted eyes. Her grandfather had it specially made for her as a wedding gift. She remembered when her grandmother died, her mother had sworn that box was the last thing she'd ever rid of, even more than the family rosary. Edith stepped back behind the door and watched them through the gap in between the wall. They stood up

after a few minutes and set the box on the table. She waited for them to leave, then approached the box. She reached out to lay a finger on the lid, when she heard her mother hiss, "Edith! That is for the angel! Don't you touch it!" She rushed over to her and swatted hard at her hand. Edith could hear her growling irritably under her breath.

As expected, the box was gone when she woke the next morning. She asked her mother about it, but she replied that she didn't know where it had disappeared to. Her face showed no remorse. Edith shifted her glance to the angel, its praying hands folded proudly over its stomach, still flat and pink, but guilty. Its quiet face lay unchanged, but she knew.

Edith and her mother stepped into total uproar upon laying foot in the church that following Sunday. Among the commotion of stressed, chaotic shouting, Edith overheard a woman say that a young couple living in the bungalows near the river had offered their angel their newborn baby girl. The loss of necklaces, scarves, and tiny cups didn't bother anyone, but the loss of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity over everyone that what they had been doing was wrong. The townspeople quieted down and settled the matter: everyone was to go home at once, remove their angel from their mantles, and return them to where they were found. Edith and her mother fled home along with the rest of the town, and without a word to anyone, her mother burst into the house and snatched the angel from its venerated spot like a feral cat. Her little sister jumped from

the couch and trotted after them, wailing, "No, Mama! Don't throw that pretty angel away!"

The town gathered around the lake puddle with the angels gripped in their hands. The voice of an older man called out, "Now!" and Edith watched silently from behind her mother's skirt, holding her sister's tear-soaked hand, as everyone flung the angels back into the mud. The bee woman stood silently among the crowd.

Within three days, the lake puddle had buried the angels within a massive dome of dirt. The lake was a lake, then a puddle, and now a mound. No one was reckless enough to dig and see if the angels were still there. The mound concealed the sight of anything that might be hidden beneath, and that was enough.

But the mound was angry, perhaps, at its neglect by the townspeople, for on the third Sunday following its arrival, the townspeople quietly disappeared. The mound, previously puddle, previously lake, now a slightly larger mound, was certainly involved, Edith thought. She was left behind in the consumption, along with the bee woman, who stomped circles around the mound, punching hard at its sides. Edith accompanied her to the woods the next morning to help in the honey-gathering. She squatted, holding the bucket between her knees, far enough away so that the bees didn't sting her. The bee woman whittled out

a hole big enough for her arm with a sharpened stick, and reached inside. Edith could hear the soft, low roar of swarming as the bee woman swam her fingers through the hive. Once she gathered up a handful in her fist, she crawled on her knees over to Edith and sat her arm in the bucket, scraping off the honey with her other hand. Sometimes the bees would get stuck in the honey on her arm, their last moments spent wriggling desperately in the sticky trap. She didn't pay attention to them. She merely scraped them off of her arm, right into the bucket. When the bee woman wasn't looking, Edith tried to scoop them out with a stick, even though they were usually already dead. Their bodies, encapsulated in the glimmering, golden tar, looked like perfect fossils, the curvature of their wings remained untouched and immaculate. Wings, not fins, built for the air and not the sea, shining in their yellowy sweetness, but useless in their too-heavy weight and their death. Too bad, Edith thought. She looked up at the bee woman, who was staring back at her, arms elbow-deep in the bucket.

"They can't fly away," Edith said, and held up the dead creature in her palm. "They're stuck here." The bee woman nodded her head and, yes, she blinked. Edith could be sure of that.

Lauren Stachew (RC 2017) minored in Russian Language, Literature, and Culture. This story appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of RC Review. Her nonfiction is forthcoming in Oleander Review.

Four Poems

Matthew Rohrer

Poets With History/Poets Without History

I have a secret which I will now reveal
I believe it is possible to tell if someone is interesting
or not simply by looking into their eyes
on the train each morning it is hard for me
not to stare at each person variously sleeping
or listening to music, to see who they really are
but this is difficult to pull off
among the guarded patriots, the fearful,
everyone talks all day on their little phones
to their mothers, mama, they say,
mama, I had a bad dream
when they haven't slept,
in the rumble of big cars moving slowly
on the city streets a ghost removes his heart
and falls through the clouds
and the melting icebergs crumple
like a prisoner shot in the side
I move through the days remarkably sinuously
and spinning inside
I wash the dishes 2 or 3 times a day
with the hot water on and on
like a dream behind the yellow gloves
from which I too cannot awaken
though my son is done with school
and holds my hand on the walk home
the feeling of falling backwards
into the bed at night fills me
each time
with sweet content
all the people rounded up in camps
have a look in their eyes
that can't reach us now

Mary Wollstonecraft Traveling With Her Kids

Mary Wollstonecraft
traveling with her kids.
She was very brave.
They rolled over the Earth
underneath the sun
only rarely drawing attention to themselves.
Or they floated like a cork in a great bay
of cognac. That is why
I haven't called.

The sun is furiously at it again
when you are still asleep.
In my mind it is all green
and gold where we were,
as a light through a mug of beer.
Or I am driving you to Queens
sick at heart and high
in the backseat
in the sere heat off the BQE.
A window has been left open.
The poppies give you confidence
and they take it away, that is all
I have to say about them,
I can't be their friend anymore.
2:32 PM. My mouth is watering.
A darkness on my heart
despite the weather,
nothing between
my hat and the planets.
I walked through the park
to the library writhing
like a terrible serpent.
I felt like Shelley. To love
the world and hate its face.
Then Planned Parenthood called.
I gave them \$50 more.
This calmed me down.
To stay out of the fight,
but to egg it on.

What Is More Distracting Than Clouds

Everything is more distracting than the clouds
they are never there they move on
no one can say remember that cloud
we saw in college it's still there
let's go see it again they walk their dogs in the park
they raise the plastic shade on the airplane window
and see a low region surrounded by thin peaks
all of it unreal white needle shaped mountains like a scroll
of Chinese painting a landscape not even imagined
which disappears when the plane flies through it
and emerges in the blue air over the monotonous sorghum fields below
and everything changes a diet coke sprays open
the distracting flight attendant glides past
but the clouds continue to gather
they fail and dissipate they come from the east
where the sea makes them foam
or they come from the west
full of ragweed and pollen too small to see
everyone breathes it all day
distracted by a song a friend sings
over and over white miraculous shifts overhead
the clouds reflected in the surface of a cocktail
completely ignored drink and cloud ignored
while a woman takes her clothes off in front of a man
who smiles shaded by the passing helicopter's rotors
tearing up the stratus clouds and flinging now
her shirt at him
rain falling in her almost unnaturally light blue eyes
when he looks closely reflected there
in the morning the whole sky
is a lusty pink lamp turned on
a little girl stands open-mouthed in her pajamas
she is his daughter it is five o'clock in the morning
the city still sleeps the clouds fly out to sea
how many people saw them this morning
the citizens who turn their backs on the leaves and insects
who turn their faces to the light of their rooms
when the clouds are the color and shape of flaming brigantines
gone up in a dark harbor but they're distracted

from the mares' tails if they looked up they'd see
there's nothing to be afraid of
a high pressure system is moving in the air is cooler now
the sky is a mild blue something
has changed

Like A Sausage

At the top of the park
I lean back on the bench
and survey the entire cosmos.
It is time to understand
my poetry.
The squirrels half-heartedly hide
from the young doberman pincer
who hovers over the grass
in a blur.
Like a sausage.
Despite the squall
the world bursts into mirth.
I want the dog to bite the squirrel in half,
but my poetry does not.

Matthew Rohrer (RC 1992) is the author of several books of poems, most recently The Others and Surrounded By Friends (published by Wave Books). His first book A Hummock in the Malookas was a winner of the National Poetry Series Open Competition, and A Green Light was shortlisted for the Griffin International Poetry Prize. Two of his tattoos appear in books on literary tattoos. He was a co-founder of Fence Magazine, and now lives in Brooklyn and teaches creative Writing at NYU. These poems have previously been published.



The View from the Fourth Floor

Alyson Foster

Here's the first time I stopped thinking about the possibility of Sam dying:

It was the day before Christmas, and Washington, D.C. was in the middle of a freakish heat wave, the air so balmy and humid, we opened up all the windows and the doors.

We hadn't bought a tree. The doctors had advised us against having one in the house. Any mold or fungus it carried with it, they said, could be dangerous to the baby, with his freshly rebooted immune system. So my husband, Michael, had decided to set up luminarias on the railing of our porch, and he'd spent the afternoon pouring the sand into the brown paper bags out on the driveway in nothing but his T-shirt.

After dusk fell and the candles were

lit, I carried Sam out on my hip so he could see. He'd been home from the hospital for over a month by then and was still struck dumb by the great outdoors, all that sky and open space that he'd barely seen.

His hair was growing back; it was now a velvet buzz cut that appeared nearly black from certain angles and an angelic silver from others, less like hair than a faint aura, though one still too tentative to read. The two of us stood together outside for a long time looking at the lights, until he got too heavy, and then I carried him back inside.

I had just bought a copy of Lauren Groff's novel, *Fates and Furies*. After I put Sam down, I stretched out on the bed, in between the piles of jeans and onesies and I opened the book to the

first page. A newly-married couple was walking up a beach somewhere in Maine, a man and a woman in a green bikini. It was raining there and the birds were screaming overhead.

All my thoughts were obliterated then. They blew from my head like dust. I just turned one page after another, and when I stopped and looked up at the alarm clock on the dresser, an hour had passed.

It was the first book I had read in almost a year.

Before and during my pregnancy, I had all the run-of-the-mill reservations about having a baby, including the ones about losing the extravagant amounts of time I had to myself. In my head, I made a bargain. I would give up all other things: my sleep, my (admittedly few) nights out, all my leisurely hot showers, as long as I kept reading. I knew other women, smarter and better read than I was, who had stopped reading when they had babies, and more than anything I did not want to join their ranks. I was a writer, after all. Reading was like breathing. It didn't matter how noble the calling of motherhood. If I gave up books I was as good as dead. Anything but that, I silently vowed.

At first, I made good on my word. About a week after Sam was born, as soon as I got the hang of nursing and could manage a free hand, I picked up reading right where I had left off. I sat in the cheap, squeaky glider we'd acquired, and rocked what was probably the seated equivalent of miles, a novel in one hand, baby in the other. I was beyond sleep-deprived and yet also weirdly focused. While

the glider shrieked and squealed, and Sam shifted between napping and gnawing my nipples raw, I plowed my way through Thomas Hardy and Dan Chaon. There's a picture of me Michael took around that time. I'm sitting in that glider, a burp cloth on one shoulder and Sam on the other. My face is tilted toward the window, bright with late-May sunlight, my eyes are closed and purpled with exhaustion. You can't see the copy of *The Empathy Exams* spread open on my lap but trust me, it's there. I remember, because it's the last breath I took before I went under.

About a week later, Sam woke up one morning with a bruise the size of a quarter on the top of his left foot. I was changing him out of his pajamas when I first spotted it: a sinister red circle, flecked with a darker violet at its heart. I lifted it up to the light to inspect it. For a second or two, there was no concern, just reflexive curiosity, the way there is when you catch the flicker of a shadow out of the corner of your eye. Wait a second, what's that? you think. And you turn your head, expecting nothing but a simple explanation.

That moment, standing there with Sam's foot cradled in the palm of my hand, was something I would return to again and again in the months that followed. About seventy-two hours later, in the ICU of Children's National the attending hematologist gave us his diagnosis: Sam had an extremely rare, fatal autoimmune disease. A bone marrow transplant might save him. It might not. My father and mother, my sister and brother-in-law

were all there. Everyone in the room was crying except for me.

The doctor had a great deal to tell us; I heard almost none of it. I just stared through the prison-like metal railing of Sam's hospital crib. If I had only known, I thought. I would have lingered there at the changing table, reveling in the most mundane of tasks and trying to draw them out as long as possible: painstakingly securing the tabs of my baby's diaper, carefully snapping all the snaps on his onesie. I would have paused to caress his tiny toes, marveling at the lovely ordinary life that had so briefly been ours and now was about to be lost.

From Sam's room on the fourth floor of Children's, you could see a reservoir, sparkling and chopping, like a miniature ocean, and a large, empty field studded with storm drains. On any given day, you could watch the bright yellow medevac chopper as it ferried in children who were on the verge of death. I would sit with my back to the door, my bare chest draped in an afghan while I used the hospital-grade pump the lactation consultant had procured for me when the chemo made Sam stop eating. I would watch the helicopter as it descended cautiously down through the wind, until it disappeared past the jutting wing of the building, covered with its galaxy of dark windows.

Somewhere in the bowels of my purse was a Nadine Gordimer novel, a tale about struggle and strife in a country half a world away. I had tried a few times to start it without success. On their own, the sentences made sense, but together, they failed

to cohere, to draw me in. Or maybe they were drowned out by my own thoughts. My whole life, I had used stories, both my own and other people's, to check out: of grocery store lines and long bus trips, of stints in doctors' waiting rooms, of heartache, of my own depression, and finally of the tedious exhaustion of new motherhood. Now, here I was in this 15-by-20 room, where monitors and alarms were constantly beeping, and there was no way out, except the unimaginable.

Life in a hospital requires you to continuously exist in a sort of survival mode. It was like we were living in an internment camp. We survived its discomforts without complaining because we couldn't escape, because we had no other choice.

We had to live strategically, to ration out our sleeping time, to concentrate on procuring the necessary supplies: cups of coffee and caches of gummy bears, the orange pacifiers that Sam liked, batteries for the psychedelic firefly mobile that he loved, the one that looked as though it had been designed during a bad 70s acid trip. We had to scrounge for sustenance in the cafeteria, choking down servings of the scabrous macaroni and cheese or congealed prepackaged sushi. In the halls, I avoided the gazes of the other parents, our fellow inmates. I didn't want to hear what they were in for. I didn't want to know what worse things might lie still ahead.

We learned to ignore the muffled wailing we could sometimes hear through the walls.

Or we desperately tried to, anyway.

There were other ways to self-medicate besides books, of course. Drinking was the obvious one. There was watching TV. There was stuffing yourself with ice cream bars. One could always luxuriate in self-recriminations – God knows, there were no end to those.

I didn't blame myself for what had happened to Sam. I knew his fate had been sealed the moment sperm met egg—the biological version of a Greek tragedy. In hindsight it was clear that we, the mortal fools, had all been rejoicing when we should have been weeping, when we should have been steeling ourselves for an ambush, a battle, a long period of wandering in an existential wilderness, far from comfort of any kind. But I did think about those weeks in the rocking chair, all that obsessive reading, and its uncomfortable resemblance to flight, all that time when my mind was not on my new baby, but somewhere else, somewhere he was not. It was hard to remember, but I think I had been trying to prove something. What it was I could no longer say.

The days ground on and Sam's counts dropped toward zero. This was the most treacherous period, the weeks between the time the doctors decimated Sam's immune system with a regimen of intensive drugs and the time before his new T-cells, donated by a 20-something-year-old stranger in California, began to proliferate and function well enough to keep him safe, both from himself and the outside world. Death loomed as an invader in the form of a single,

invisible microbe or fungal spore. Everyone coming into the room wore gloves and lavender paper masks. Michael and I scrubbed down the crib rails with hospital antiseptic so strong we later discovered it was carcinogenic. We were constantly dowsing ourselves in Purell. It looked like we were perpetually wringing our hands. Which, of course, we were.

With our days whittled down to logistics, governed by a single, all-consuming goal, keep Sam from dying, I found myself reduced to a wordless, almost unthinking state, which even now is hard to describe. People were always asking me how I was doing, and I was always answering, OK, when what I really meant was: terrible. But there were long, disorienting stretches of time when I wasn't sure if these two states weren't somehow actually the same. I believed I had lost most of my basic feelings, even those good old atavistic standbys, grief and fear. It was like dropping a stone down into a well or the long, black shaft of a mine, and listening and listening and having no sound come back.

There were moments though. Sometimes leaning over the rails of Sam's crib, I would study the expressions passing like clouds across his face. As young as he was, he could emote with a startling amount of nuance and force: skepticism, indignation, outrage, the impish appreciation of a joke.

He was stalled out in those series of milestones American parents obsess about: rolling over, sitting up, learning how to swallow spoonfuls of puréed

peas and applesauce. But he had figured out how to clasp his hands together, to raise them to his mouth when he smiled with delight. It was his own little utterance of overwhelming joy. That's when I knew I was still feeling something, that's when I could hear the booming reverberation of the stone traveling back toward me with such a terrible and ferocious force that I had to put my hands over my ears and turn away.

The days ground on and Sam's counts started coming back up. We were too exhausted and leery to allow ourselves to think maybe we'd survived the worst. One day we brought his car seat back to the hospital. We strapped him into it and then we drove him home.

The day after Christmas, I finished reading *Fates and Furies*. I started another book. Then I finished it and started another.

I've read stories like this one over the years, well enough to have a sense of the form.

I know this is the place where the triumphal note is supposed to sound. My son survived; it seems, perhaps, we have found our way back to the country of the fortunate ones. We're supposed to have brought back a souvenir with us, a handful or two of dark and harrowing grit to spin into gold. But on the subject of redemption I only have this to say: sometimes there is none.

Still. It's spring here in D.C. as I'm

writing this, a trite piece of symbolism if ever there was one, but true nevertheless. The trees outside our kitchen window are coming into flower. In another couple of days, they'll be in the kind of full bloom that makes them appear as though they're emitting light.

That old restless writer's habit of trying to inhabit other people's lives is back with a renewed, unsettling force. On the walk from work this week, under a gloomy overcast sky, I was passed by a teenage girl driving a decrepit minivan. Something about her face caused me to conjure up her life, the slick feel of the worn steering wheel under her palms, the particulars of the home she was driving toward. I was trying to bestow upon her a problem, her blessing or her curse, the one mysterious and secret pivot on which her life might turn and suddenly become unrecognizable.

The thoughts were so vivid that I got distracted. I wasn't looking where I was going and I almost ran head on into a jogger and her dog coming out of nowhere over the crest of the hill. As they passed, they both bestowed upon me a warning look.

My heart was thundering away. I lifted my head up and looked back over my shoulder all the rest of the way home.

Alyson Foster (RC 2004) has had two books published by Bloomberg: The Place of the Holy, a collection of stories (May 2016), and God Is An Astronaut, a novel (2014). This essay first appeared in Guernica.



Frozen Locks

Cameron Finch

Here's what she brings with her when she goes to work: a walkie-talkie, a can of pepper spray, a plastic bag of peanuts and green M&M's (green because it makes her feel healthier), an extra pair of mittens that are too big for my hands, and her ring of keys. She has forty-eight keys on that little bent moon of metal. I counted them once while she ran into the gas station to buy an emergency rain poncho. I still wonder what a person could do with that amount of keys.

Even when she wears her keys on the loop of her pants, my mother grips them tightly, as if she doesn't trust the strength of the fabric. Her hands are stained with their oily smudge, but she doesn't mind. The ability to unlock any hidden world is worth a little dirty work. Except she

won't be able to find me in the world I entered tonight. That is unless she believes in an afterlife. Which I know she doesn't.

I watch her from the car window. The cold has disabled my view, its breath drawing chicken-scratch on the glass. I can just make out her blurry figure. My mother childlocks the car. This is her time to be in control. But she doesn't know that I'm there. She also hasn't realized that she's left the window open a crack. I flatten out and slide through with ease.

When I was alive, it wasn't often that I saw her. She worked all the time. It seemed she was always on duty, always being called to bring replacement keys, to make repairs. Sometimes I wondered why she had been a mom in the first place if she

never had the time to spend with me. Most days I spent alone in the house, doing homework after school, making dinner for myself, watching Adult TV and later, practicing what I saw on myself upstairs until Mom came home. I had never met my dad. Mom never said much about him either. All I knew was that he lived in Florida now with a woman named Kathleen.

My mother never talked about her job, except one time, when she took my friend, Jocelyn, and me ice skating at the local lake. It was my birthday and I had never seen her like this. I thought she had forgotten. Mondays, she said, she opened the local history museum for school field trips. There was a couple in #11 at the Super 8 that she habitually had to let in. They always smelled of weed and wore fluffy bathrobes. With nothing underneath! Jocelyn and I giggled. A week ago, she was called to lock up the gates of Bloomfield Park. Two teenage punks had battered down the chainlink fence, waffle ironed the grass, charred the log cabin Jocelyn and I had played House in long ago. They even had pummeled the wildflowers to an ashy pulp; the same wildflowers I would run through when I was young and my mom took the time to be there.

Tonight, we are not at any of these places, my mom and I.

She's taken us to the Mt. Evergreen Cemetery. I wonder if she comes here often during her rounds. I wonder about what crosses her mind when she comes here. Does she think of dying, or perhaps, is she motivated to keep on with life? I wonder if she

is one of those people who wander through headstones, selecting names and creating a life for them, together or apart. A life that was never theirs to have.

It had not been snowing when she started her rounds today; when I broke through the ice.

She is not wearing an overcoat, only a thin t-shirt and a lime green safety vest to show she is a city worker. The snow is blinding, biting her skin. The snow goes right through me. My spirit slows down the flakes' path for a second before releasing them on their way.

In a few days, when the divers drag my body out of the lake, my mother will realize that no coat, no vest can keep you truly safe and warm in this world.

It is after hours. She's not supposed to be here. She could get in it with the police if they find her, breaking in to the graveyard. It's not technically breaking in if she has the keys, right? After all, she is the keeper of these portal openers. She looks behind her suspiciously. But it's just me. I'm invisible to her and anyway, ghosts can't tattle. My mom drops the green neon to the ground. It is swallowed up by the blizzard and disappears completely.

*

The priests will tell you that hell is a firepit, but they are wrong. Hell is a place where you're home by yourself... all the time. Hell is a place where you make Nutella sandwiches for dinner and pick up the phone to hear a man asking for your mom. Hell is a place where your father calls and can't identify his own daughter's voice.

I lived in this hell in the hours before I learned how to ghost. I slammed down the phone, took my sandwich with me and ran down to the dock at the edge of our backyard. I started out onto the frozen lake because the outdoors knew nothing about me. It couldn't talk to me or ignore me. I was allowed to just be me. Some might say it's dangerous to be alone amongst all that ice, but the key is to know when the risk of living is worth stepping where the ice is thinnest.

The stars were out and I liked to hear the birds overhead. I inhaled fresh air and felt instantly better. My stomach growled, so I bit into my sandwich hard. My teeth punctured the bread. Nutella smeared onto my palms. The ice glistened and refracted the moonlight on its surface. I sat down in the middle of the lake. My mind couldn't leave alone the phone call with my dad. Why after all these years was my dad calling our house anyway? Every time I asked about him and who he was and what he smelled like, Mom said no, she didn't want any contact with him. I didn't know what he did to deserve that, but I never questioned her. But, maybe I should have. Couldn't she at least have called him to tell him he had a daughter? Unless, my mother never told him she was pregnant. I had heard about a phenomenon called the "oops baby." Was I one of those unfortunates who was never meant to be born and grows up to be just a tumorous burden? Maybe that's why she always grabbed extra shifts - to avoid seeing me so often. I wondered if I looked like my dad. I

secretly hoped so.

I took another bite of my sandwich and then pitched the other half as far as I could. It landed with a thud a few yards away. It felt good to throw something. It felt good to be alone in the winter night with only the stars and the trees and the church bells of St. Mary's in the distance. I was good at being alone.

I wasn't sure how much time had gone by. My mom was probably going to be back from work soon, and I was beginning to get cold. And that's when I took the wrong step. My foot cracked the ice as if breaking into the caramelized top of a crême brûlée. I lost my balance and fell into the surge of black water. I felt the heat of my body firing up in fight. Adrenaline pulsed to my temples. Then came the utter cold. To my fingers, to my knees, and then to the knobby bones of my elbows. My legs, then my torso, numbed as I continued to sink. My throat narrowed. There was nothing but coldness. Nothing but coldness. I looked up just in time to feel a hot drop of rain land on my forehead. And then nothing.

*

My spirit left my drowned body that same night only to find my mom still at work. She goes about, repairing and unlocking, totally oblivious. I want to tell her that my dad called. I want to know the truth of my existence. I want to tell my mom that I didn't want to die, that it was an accident, a mistake.

I imagine her future now, her future without me. I know that she will continue to childlock the door. She

will sometimes drive by my school. I'll spy on her snuggling under my covers, curling them up to her chin. She will continue to go through the motions like I'm alive. Because it is easier to love someone you never meant to birth when they're gone. You see, it won't be me she'll be missing. No, I don't think so. She'll fall in love with my memory. I can see the way that the neighbors will stare at her. She will gain a new identity - the mother of the dead child. She will be ignored by most, because no one knows how to talk to a wounded animal. Some will go so far as to say, "I'm so sorry for you." But I'm not sorry for you, Mom.

I wonder if she will feel guilty when she finds out I'm gone. Will she realize she wasn't present enough to actually be considered my mom? Will she believe that she's the one at fault? She might think that if she can keep me a phantasmic youth forever, she'll have a chance at a doover. But even ghosts grow old.

The cemetery lock is sheathed in frost and looks like the glazed donuts they sell at Hinkley's bakery. The ice has filled in the keyhole with impenetrable crystals. The lockkeeper has been outdone tonight. The elements prevent her from finding her way inside the graveyard.

I'm hovering behind her now, still wondering why she is here.

Her hands let go of the keys. They clang to her thigh and silence. Her hands, bare, slide over the padlock. It is slippery in her sooty hands and

her thumbs rub over its face. I had a stuffed bunny once with a pink satin bow. I rubbed the bow until it was streaked with dirt and more brown than pink. But there was something in the motion, a soothing circling comfort that the satin would always be there. Even when the color ran out. This is how I hold her hands now. They are cold, statuesque, teal-marbled with veins. I can't remember the last time she held me in her arms.

She drops her hands, then wraps her fingers around the gates. She shakes. Her keys respond. Chattering their teeth, too. The vibrations echo through the eery quiet of the plaques and stones sticking up and out from the earth. Then, suddenly, she palms the top bar of the gates and scales it swiftly, shimmying her ass and legs up and over. She jumps down and pats off her hands.

I never knew how strong, how lithe my mother could be. The lockkeeper has overcome the need for locks. I watch her through the slits of the fence. She wanders down the cemetery path until the blizzard makes it impossible for even a ghost to see through.

The night, my witness, has undoubtedly whispered my death through the wind, through the trees. Tell her gently, I advise. She is still my mother, whether she wants to be or not.

Cameron Finch (RC 2016) is a short story writer and poet. While at U-M, she was the Editor-in-Chief of the RC Review. She is currently a candidate for an MFA in Writing and Publishing at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Three Poems

Marty Sherman

1.

Woke up alive with plans rewrote.
Boiled water, clicked the quiet door
shut, turned, tiptoed
and watched the news unfold.
The holiday could just be right or
pass away. Twenty years old

Pidge was adroop. A drunk
the forenigh roiled
his small body. Quintets of sobriquets
raced liked a sea wall, sunk
like a mermaid waltz, boiled
like a morning dip. Cast a net.

We cannot hold a moment or
define the 'tweens of afterteens
but timing makes us all more
a less. Those great spans where
walkers perching wires careen
and fall into the air.

2.

Reason and rhyme, reason and rhyme.
Who got the patience, the bother, the time?
Hook my shoes to a twelve-bar blues
my mind to a dendrite wire.
To the time elapse of a nerve synapse
Set my memory to fire.

Let a flame play deep in your heart
Let a tune burn deep in your blue blue heart.
The ice age veins insist
on stalling,
Yet you persist like water
falling.

Why you want water when I got wine?
- The unstilled spirits'll suit me fine.
Where you gonna be the day I die?
- Bottom o' the barroom stinkin' o' rye
How you got an answer whatever I ask?
- I cheats. I looks behind da mask.

3.

Stepping with brisk swirl, late,
into unions arranged, a trio
of loosely hung joints to unmarked
organs, with a whisk and chill, swept
our bloods in pumping heart of wood
and whiskeys, a history of tentacles tackling
a thought, a ticking throughout our limbs
a thrashing for life, lashed flash and fine wire
mesh, a grid of fire along the capillaries of a lung
a breath sharply inhaled
and a rearranged union.

His back catty-cornered and muted the edges of the walls,
a trail of cigarette smoke flew out the reaches
of a distant thought, a recovered nightmare.
Whitewashing his future, I stole the pattern
juggling a wind of time and events
their networked nerves
played a line of pain along the Dresden heart.

Marty Sherman (RC 1974) lives in Seattle with his wife Linda Wallen. Linda and one of their three children, daughter Rachel, are also RC grads. Among other things, Marty has worked as a truck driver, a wine salesman, and a clown at Ringling Bros./Barnum and Bailey Circus. He is the proprietor of Seaport Sellers, a small Seattle winery. NeWest published Elephant Hook, a collection of Marty's stories, in 1992.



Third and Manageable, or Why I Bought My Son a Rifle

Laura Hulthen Thomas

This holiday season, the thorniest gift decision my husband and I faced had little to do with Lego sets or video games, our two sons' longtime play staples. In between detailed web searches comparing ammunition, scope specs, and trigger locks—the best deals, we learned, were advertised on CheapasDirt.com—we debated whether to gift our eldest his longed-for target rifle on Christmas Day or on his birthday two weeks later.

The timing of the gift would make a big difference. My son would turn eighteen in early January. If we gave

him the gun on this milestone day, the registration would be in his name. If the rifle appeared under the Christmas tree, ownership would rest with us, at least on the official paperwork. Each choice, we felt, would bestow its own message about parental oversight. On the gut level, where so much of parenting lives, retaining ownership felt like a duty of care to our child, a backstop to any lapse in safety or judgment. But at eighteen our son would be able to purchase a rifle on his own. Wasn't the impulse to have our name on the paperwork another overprotective cling-wrap our

son had outgrown? Besides, transferring the registration at a future time might prove complicated, not worth the Christmas Day delight and the days off from school to shoot at the brand new mall-sized shooting range that had just opened down the street from our home.

That Ron and I were debating whether our son should own the rifle outright, not whether he should own one at all, had long since ceased to worry or amaze us. Months of struggle and wonder about how we really feel about guns had surrendered, in the manner of things you think you'll never do as a parent, to an uneasy, tacit acceptance that our decision had less to do with our moral position on weapons, and everything to do with loving our son.

* * *

Before the demands of raising babies sidelined any hobby not homebound, Ron and I hunted pheasant on my in-laws' land outside of Marquette in the Upper Peninsula, shot skeet at a friend's cottage near Lewiston, and kicked up grouse from the ghost town Deward's grassy rail beds. In the years since our shotguns have been locked up away from our kids, epidemic gun violence and the gridlock over commonsense public policy remedies have left us with little appetite to return to shooting now that our kids are grown. Last October, a recent graduate of my sons' school brought an open carry to the choir's Choral Cavalcade concert.

The young man in arms, a grandson of the former superintendent of

schools, sat front and center in the auditorium straight across from my son onstage. Like the other parents present, we were appalled at the gunslinger holster and overkill bandolier of ammunition this young man had strapped to his chest. He claimed to have brought the gun to protect his sister from bullies. The former superintendent of schools apparently held no objection to this lopsided display of protectiveness, and spoke out in support of his grandson at the next week's open public meeting to ban weapons from Ann Arbor's school campuses.

My son held no objections, either, to singing the high bass line of a Bach cantata to a Glock in the front row. His defense of the open carry might merely have been teenage bravado. But recently we've come to see his view as more about investigating the emotional impulse behind carrying the weapon than defending the weapon itself. The occasional target shooting my son enjoyed with his Boy Scout troop had lately, he told us, become more essential than a sometime hobby. This past autumn, a lingering bought of the summertime blues had become unshakeable. As he struggled to keep his footing, our son discovered that achieving good aim transcended skill and discipline. Focusing on the bull's-eye had come to mean attaining peace. He quoted from articles on flow and the healing power of meditation. He wrote his college application essay on the joys of taming his reflexes in the crosshairs. He urged us to buy him a rifle so he could shoot more often, join competitions, make everyday grasps

at this fleeting peace. "I know you're anti-gun. But you're not anti-sport," he argued, as if this dichotomy didn't share the connective tissue of a weapon.

Since our son has also been in treatment for depression, our ownership dilemma felt like more than just a concern of convenience. I had convinced myself that whose name we attached to this firearm amounted to a hope of influence over our son's emotional health. Our name on the papers might bestow on this weapon our protection, our authority, our moral outlook on life and death. We were contemplating handing over the means to make a suicidal impulse an irrevocable one; my thinking, wishful more than magical, was that a lack of ownership of those means would translate to a lack of power to use this weapon for harm.

But our son wasn't suicidal, his therapist reassured me. Gifting the gun into my son's direct ownership might be an empowering act, even a loving one, I was counseled. We admire your passion for this sport, this gesture might say. We trust you with this firearm. We trust you as an adult. We trust you as a man.

* * *

As the only daughter embedded with three brothers, football was both my first fascination and bewilderment with a sport devoted to men. When my parents relocated from a liberal New Hampshire college city to a sulphur-aired Wisconsin paper mill town, rooting for the Green Bay Packers over the Patriots became a way to

slough off the Eastern pizzazz and resilience of the passing game for the slow, methodical Midwestern power drive. Pro games ran on our television all weekend long, a continuous stream my brothers and father shared as devoutly as a religious ritual. To the uninitiated, the offensive drives down the field were exasperatingly opaque. I was attempting to decipher these plays in the days before sharp-image television screens made the ball visible even to clumsy viewers like me. Brightly colored digitized highlights on the line of scrimmage and the next down would, after 1998, the year of my son's birth, make the ball's trudge downfield obvious. But as a kid all I had to guide me on our 24 inch black and white television were the confusing sideline hash marks and measuring chains the men in my family seemed to interpret without effort. My older brother could even leave the den entirely to fetch another pop and still absorb the down with his head in the fridge as if the play was just another snack.

"But where *is* the ball?" I would pester Dad after every snap, pass, and drive.

"How many yards are left?"

"Just *watch*." This while my dad kept up with the game from behind a newspaper or the latest Book of the Month Club selection. Despite squinting at the plays, the only times I was certain of what I was seeing was when the chains came out to pinpoint the exact yard. My favorite play was when the ball was just shy of the down, because the television camera would swoop on to the ball, locking focus for a brief moment. The

ball looked nothing like the cheap leatherette bomb my older brother would whip at me in the yard during half-time. The leather looked pliable, the stitching uniform, the laces crafted to the correct grip. Then the official would make the call, the camera would cut away, and the offensive line would once more swallow the ball from view.

The blame for my play blindness, I decided, lay with my crummy aim. Since we lived out from town a bit in Wisconsin Rapids, and later, on the rural outskirts of Ann Arbor, when my older brother wanted to whip that cheap ball around, or fling a Frisbee, I was his only pick. His aim was so true I never had to move from my spot on the lawn to catch his perfect toss. But after a half hour spent running to and fro across his side of the yard, leaping for my wild, ragged throws like a desperate end zone receiver grasping for the Hail Mary, we'd rejoin the televised game with my skin bone dry and his weeping perspiration and disgust. "What's so hard about throwing straight?" he'd grumble, as if aim were as natural as watching the football change hands on a monochromatic screen.

At least, that's the connection I drew. A few weeks back, when I WhatsApped my brothers, now living in California and Texas, to ask how they could keep track of every single game stat during the height of the season, the Frisbee victim replied, "We're men. We're hard wired to care about football." He was joking, but I thought back to how the men in my family dissected every play I couldn't see almost before it happened. They

could divine the movement of the ball, while I lost track of the play at the snap almost every time. Years later, the hardwire explanation still makes a certain sense of my play blindness.

* * *

When I'd asked my son's therapist whether buying a gun for a depressed child amounted to a breach of parental duty, she talked about how the gun might be my son's best course of treatment. He has a passion for the sport, and goals for competition. He immerses himself in the flow of the moment between aiming and pulling the trigger, feels the healing serotonin when he hits his mark. He feels pride, not anxiety, about his performance. These sensations and motivations are exactly what he needs to counter his depression, she advised. The therapist's rationale was more treatment plan than argument, and matched what we've been counseling our son. Find a passion. Heal through a sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed we wouldn't support it? Besides, I'd seen him shoot targets at a forested range at the local Boy Scout camp. The shooting pavilion is located in a peaceful meadow surrounded by tall golden grass, maples and birch. While my son loaded his borrowed rifle, I'd watched fathers show their young scouts the basics of aiming and firing. I'd seen how the intense focus of good aim relaxed my son, soothed the unhappy knot along his jaw. I'd learned that his restless comic spirit can achieve absolute stillness in the moments before pressing the

trigger, and that he never flinched at the gun's kick.

I'd found out something else, too. When target practice would end and we fetched the paper targets from the clothespins clamped to the field stand, the bull's-eye would be shredded. A precise shot pattern would ring the hole like a neat row of eyelashes.

My son, I'd learned, is an excellent shot

* * *

During my son's slipping away days, he quite literally blinks out. The light in his blue eyes, his rod iron posture, his speech, all dim and slacken until he's a ghost floating through the rooms of our home. This winding down lasts for a few days before reversing itself. By now, my son has found ways to coax a recovery from these cyclical depressions. He lays out his knife collection, the one we locked in the garage at the onset of his troubles. He shuns Call of Duty and logs on with other players to League of Legends. He bakes cookies and sautés onions in sesame oil for handmade pizza. He drives out to the camp to shoot. His healing comes down to a series of small recoveries, slow step by slow step.

The football announcers call this small progress that's well within reach third and manageable. Third and manageable signals a confidence in the almost-there.

The smart strategy is to fight for possession, buy one more shot at the goal line.

By the time we first seriously

discussed buying a rifle for our child, Ron and I were desperate to help our son with his incremental healing. I'd never sanctioned the knife collection, the violent video games, the fascination for rifle firepower and specs he traded in conversation like the stats on a favorite sports hero. Despite hating the knives, the games, and, now, the shooting, I'd allowed him to acquire them. I can't explain why I indulged hobbies so antithetical to my beliefs. Perhaps out of guilt as much as conviction, I'd had the conversations about our firm belief in non-violence and gun control. As far I could tell, my son agreed with these values. He talked about the need for a sensible gun control policy. He agreed that military-style assault rifles belonged in the military, not in civilian life. Wasn't this proof that my son is a level-headed, gentle person? If a careful, responsible aim brings him peace, shouldn't I oversee the careful, responsible means to pursue his sport?

My parents gave birth to their children during the Vietnam War. They put guns in the same immoral category as the war. Arming in personal self-defense they viewed as a nullification, not a protection, of civil order. So when, during a midlife crisis when I was eleven, my dad signed on to the Ann Arbor auxiliary police force and brought a handgun home in a white shoebox, my mother insisted he return it. By then my parents were ensnared in a tumultuous marital meltdown that I later learned sometimes turned violent. Looking back, my mother's demand was not out of conviction, but out of fear for her, and

our, safety.

On the day Dad turned in the weapon, I drove to the police station in downtown Ann Arbor with him. The shoebox holding the gun rested between us. I'd never seen a real live gun, so I was desperate to peek under the lid, but was afraid I'd be yelled at. Because my parents divorced soon after, I never did ask my dad what impulse, or desire, drove him to want the gun. As far as I know, he has owned nunchuks and a pair of Japanese Sai, but never, again, a gun. The closest our family would ever come to embracing a violent pastime, I thought, was watching football.

On the first cold day this past December, when Ron and I finally decided to purchase a rifle from Cabela's to place under the Christmas tree for my son, my sister-in-law happened to put out a question on our family WhatsApp chat group. *I'm thinking of buying a handgun for self-protection. Any recs?* She's asking the wrong crowd, I thought, and put down the phone. My screen flashed; my eldest brother had sent a snapshot of his handgun, a shiny Sig P226. A few moments later, my younger brother, the husband of the questioner, sent a photo of his 357 Magnum.

And a few moments later, my stepdad's Smith and Wesson R1 filled my screen.

Of nearly all my family members, I realized, I was the only one who did not own a handgun.

Since my mother is on this chat group, my father is not. If he were,

would Dad, too, contribute a snap of a handgun to this family arsenal I didn't know existed?

* * *

When I watch football now with my sons, I don't have to be hardwired to see the plays. Thanks to those bright lines overlaying the field, the ball's strategic journey is perfectly clear. I see the flight from the snap, the faked hand-off, the exact distance the ball comes to rest from the next down. What was once a confusing mass of bodies oriented around an invisible target, I now see strategy, patterns set into motion by cues of hand or glance, each player's arrival at the ball choreographed in advance. I've come to understand that the real challenger isn't the opposing team, but the execution of a perfect play. I'm now able to follow the ball from snap to down as effortlessly as the men in the room. But the cure for my play blindness coincides with the NFL's long-denied acknowledgement about the devastating effects of concussion on the sport's players. I wonder if next season I will find it immoral, even cruel, to cheer the Packers and hold out hope for the Lions.

One habit hasn't changed since I was a kid squinting through traces of electronic snow on a black and white screen. I am most alert in the moments after the men on the field settle into position and before the snap, moments of stillness when restless, powerful bodies fall motionless, focused utterly on the next play.

* * *

The neon sign decorating Ann Arbor Arms' new showroom says Prepare Defend Survive in bright pink, purple, and green lights. As my son fills out the forms for the range to shoot with his new rifle, I wonder which verb he would choose to describe what he is about to do. We watch the required safety video, slip in foam earplugs, snap on ear protection over the orange nubs. The range dedicated to rifle shooting is separate from the handgun range. When we enter the range, I see that assault rifles are lumped in with the .22 my son is prepping at his station.

I see, too, that besides my son, everyone is shooting an assault rifle. To my son's left, a bald, beefy man in short sleeves, a line of pimples erupting at the folds of his neck, is shredding his target 15 yards away. Flames pop from his barrel, and the quick reports sound like cannon shot. Shells pop from his weapon and fly to the spot where I am pressed against the back wall. To my son's right, a young man and his girlfriend are less expertly tearing up their target with an assault rifle.

Flames, too, lick their barrel, and the noise from their shots is deafening. They are pals with another couple in the next bay, laughing and horsing around, trading places and rifles like taking turns at the joyride wheel. A lone man, skinny in plaid and jeans, fills the last bay, methodically peppering his target with careful trigger squeezes. Two employees, handguns holstered on their belts in plain sight, keep a careful watch and admonish anyone who infracts even the slightest rule. The security patrol guys

are vigilant but relaxed, overseeing a typical Sunday afternoon at the local range.

I promised to watch my son, but I'm not built to be in the same room with the assault weapons. The *blamblam* wall of sound, the smoke and fire, the quiet pings of the shells as they fly back to land at my boots, sets me on edge. What prevents any of these shooters from turning around and shredding the room as they are shredding these paper targets? I can't help but think that if someone snapped, the handguns the employees sport below their folded arms and spread eagle stances would stand no chance at all. This sport bears no resemblance to hunting on those crisp autumn days in the hardwood forests and tan grassy fields where Ron and I used to comb for grouse. That sport had our rifles' noses to the ground until the moment our pointer would flush a bird and there would be a reason to fire a shot at a swift, fleeting shadow against a clean blue sky.

Experiencing these assault rifles in the close space, barely better than an echo chamber, makes me ashamed to remember my walks in the woods with a shotgun slung at my hip. I'm part of the lineage that has brought to my son's choir concert a handgun in a holster and filled these bays before me with assault rifle shooters.

It's as difficult to recall the uncomplicated joy of shooting at those birds, even though I missed them all, as it is to recall the joy of watching football in the days before brain scans revealed the effect of that sport on the men who play it.

I'm on the verge of tapping my son

on the shoulder to mouth, *I'll wait for you outside* when he settles into his shooting stance on a stool, tennis shoes balanced on the concrete, stock firm to his shoulder, eye pressed to the scope. He's perfectly still, aiming at the target 25 yards away, ten yards farther away than the assault shooters' targets. He's here for the hard shot, not the easy one. I can't disturb him now, so I press back against the wall.

Just watch, I hear. And so I do.

In the swirl of noise and smoke surrounding him, my son is motionless.

Where I flinch at every report, he doesn't move a muscle. For every twenty blasts that shake the range, my son shoots a single time, pop, and then aims again. He is calm, unhurried, studious. If the chaos is interfering with his concentration, you wouldn't know it by the neat, careful patterns on the target, and once more, I'm reminded. My son is an excellent shot.

The young couples clear out, swinging their gear. One of the patrol guys cleaning up the bay next to my son unhooks the thick cardboard form that clips on the targets. He flaps it back and forth. The bullet-ridden cardboard snaps in two like a neck violently shaken. The patrol guy rolls his eyes at me.

Kids thought they were Rambo, he mouths.

And I remember a moment from my shooting days when Ron and I shot skeet at that friend's cottage near Lewiston. Our friend had not yet arrived home when we hiked to a clearing with a few other guys we knew. I was the only woman, and

expected to be the only one to fail to hit a target. My aim hadn't improved since my Frisbee days. Despite my practice sighting ahead of the disc and shooting into the arc's apex, I could never hold my arms still enough for an accurate aim. After missing a few, and watching the guys hit a few, I hefted my shotgun while my husband loaded the trap. The sky was bottle blue, laced with wispy clouds. At the crack of the launch, I tensed and followed with my barrel not the skeet, barely visible against the white clouds, but the curve of the target's whistle. I squeezed the trigger. The disc exploded. Shards rained from the sky like shattered bone china.

I lowered my gun to the sound of whoops from the guys, a class of cheering I'd never heard before, or since, from men. Grinning, I turned to see our friend standing in the canopy of birch trees rimming the clearing, watching me with open admiration and respect. This particular man had never looked at me in this particular way before. He was not my brother, or my father. But as I enjoyed an unfamiliar surge of triumph at the different way this man was viewing me, I wished all of the men who have ever underestimated my aim could have seen this shot.

When my son wraps up his session, we collect our driver's licenses from the front desk and spend a few moments browsing the handguns and assault rifles for sale in the showroom. Thanks to my brothers and stepdad, I recognize some of the models. A pink weapon catches my eye. I wonder if my sister-in-law ever bought a hand-

gun. If so, they would be a family of two handguns and three young children.

They live in Texas, where it is now legal to conceal carry almost anywhere. At my son's choir concert, the firearm was in plain sight for parent and child to see. I'm still not sure which set of laws bothers me more.

Post shoot, my son's eyes are bright, his shoulders relaxed. He smiles and talks easily, almost his old self again. We chat about the range. Were you bothered by all the noise the assault rifles made? I ask.

It's great practice to learn to tune it out, he tells me.

* * *

Ron and I are still fighting worry and grief over our son's depression. Our son is fighting to make the incremental progress toward peace that is so often the only progress left to fight for in our struggle to make good, reasonable sense out of what we conceal and what we carry in the open. Shooting still gives him some fleeting moments of satisfaction. When I think of the progress that lies before us, and question the wisdom of buying my son a rifle, I wonder if the real heart of my concern lies not in accepting that my son owns a gun, but accepting that he is, perhaps,

hardwired to find peace in firing a weapon.

But my son's happiness after a shoot gives me the only peace I, too, can find these days. Perhaps, I remind myself, our gift of gun ownership says what I know my son most wants to hear. We trust you with this sport. We trust your aim. We trust you as a man.

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Laura Thomas is the program head for the Residential College's creative writing program, and the author of *States of Motion, a collection of eight stories (Wayne State University Press, May 2017). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and received an honorable mention in the 2009 Nimrod Literary Awards. Thomas is also a contributor to* *Ghost Writers: Us Haunting Them, an award-winning collection of stories by noted Michigan authors published by Wayne State University Press. Thomas holds an MA in Slavic Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. She is the recipient of U-M's Individual Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education, as well as a number of University grants for her creative work and professional activities.*



An excerpt from **Heartland**

Ellen Dreyer

Chapter 1 Show Day

Friggin' hell, she was late, flying through the doors of the swine barn and crashing into barrel-bellied Earl Nettle.

"Get caught in a cat fight, Little Miss Bit?"

Earl smiled, but there was no time to be neighborly, even with a

neighbor.

"I'm good." Faith stripped a long, corkscrew strand from her forehead. She'd had trouble falling asleep after getting home past midnight, and overslept the alarm. Now there was only an hour and a half before show time. She had to wash her pigs so they looked their best. Senior 4-H kids had to set an example.

Why didn't you bring a cot to the

barn and sleep over? she could hear Grandma ask in her head.

Because of the stink, she answered, and saw Grandma's blue eyes laughing behind her white-framed glasses.

She grabbed the hose from the wall. A wet nuzzle at the back of her bare knees, and another, greeted her as she stepped inside the pen. Two Yorkshire hogs and a banded Hampshire gilt. Three pigs. Three snouts. Eight hundred pounds of swine were crammed into the show pen. She couldn't see most of their parts; there was barely room to turn around, the pen was that small.

Sure, they were cute. She would have named them after the Three Stooges if they'd all been boys, but as it happened they were Mo, Larry, and Velvet.

Look how pretty they are, Grandma. And your first year of showing pigs, Grandma would have added.

True enough. She'd read every single pork pamphlet the 4-H could dish up, relying on memorization and mnemonics to learn the living parts, the retail cuts, the breeds, the feeds, the diseases.

Fore rib. Back. Rump. Loin.

Not that Faith had chosen to switch from cows, which she'd shown since she was a five-year-old in oversized boots, leading a balky calf. When her dad started calling around to get a few good piglets to raise, she hesitated.

"We're diversifying," he told her. "Schultes can do swine as well as dairy. Diversification will put us in the black. Plus, market prices for pork are on the rise. So."

"Milk, too," she told him. "Why don't we expand the herd?"

"Finally outgrown your britches, miss?" He'd said it with a smile.

"Dad, I'm almost seventeen."

She had ideas. Voicing them was natural, if it was out of her mother's earshot. Her dad might not encourage her, but he didn't give her an argument, either, about what was or wasn't her place to comment on, which was as good as acknowledging she was every bit a farmer as him. Today she'd prove it by showing everyone that Schulte Farms could raise prize-winning pigs as well as cows.

She stroked their backs, each in turn, and ruffled their brushy neck hair. She was still amazed at how sensitive they were, how much they responded to her touch. They seemed even more delighted when she squeezed the hose handle and let the first drops fall on their backs.

"Faith Schulte!" Lance McNamara breached the barn doors, striding noisily past her. Faith turned away, forgetting the hose, nearly drenching the silver-haired judge (who'd be considering her pigs in exactly an hour) walking past the other way before she could close the nozzle. Faith might have added: "What are you doing in the show barn, Town Kid, with your clipboard and ballpoint, peace-sign buttons rattling on your chest like some useless breastplate?" She aimed the hose at him, but he was already too far away, interrupting other kids amid their chores. The pigs' snouts, all of them at once, were on her like leeches. OK, maybe not that bad. More like rightful nudges. We're

roasting in here and we can't sweat. Shower us. Shower us again.

Faith obliged, as they shifted and lifted their feet from the scattering dirt. Clear beads pearled on Velvet's heels.

"We can't be silent any longer about this unjust war," Lance announced.

He was her friend, or so she'd always thought. They'd been lab partners more than once, assembled puzzles together in kindergarten.

"President Nixon wants to end it," said a girl.

"He wants to pull our troops out," Lance corrected her, "but we've already lost. Thousands of soldiers and civilians dead, all for nothing."

"To stop the commies!" Faith shouted.

Her pigs grunted, startled. She was as surprised as they were. Thankfully, the judge was nowhere to be seen.

"This is no place for politics," she explained, not shouting this time, "and you all know it."

Some of the kids laughed. They had Lance's buttons affixed to the collars of their white 4-H T-shirts. A hot bloom spread across Faith's cheeks, and she turned away, laying her hands on her pigs' backs, as much to calm herself as them.

Ginny Hincks, busiest of busy bodies, broke away from the Lance cluster and came toward her, eyebrows knit with some form of concern.

"Hey, Faith. Are you okay?"

Faith blinked. "Itchy eyes," she said, turning away. She stretched a raggedy strip of towel over Velvet's shoulders and rubbed vigorously. Didn't her dad say that pigs loved a

rubdown as much as a shower?

"Got any clippers?"

Faith looked up. The blocky girl had thin blond braids that grazed the tops of her shoulders, and one of Lance's damn buttons. Make Love, Not War, it read.

"My pigs have a lot of ear hair. It's distracting," Ginny said.

"Talk about distracting!" Faith blurted, pointing at the button.

"The judge'll take points off for that." Faith shook her head as she rummaged in her show box. Give Ginny her clippers and send her on her way. "And it isn't patriotic."

Ginny scratched her ear. "It isn't patriotic to want peace?"

Faith put her hand on the old electric clipper that Grandma used to use to cut Grandpa's hair. She had to untangle the frayed cord from a couple of brushes. "Besides," she went on, looking up at Ginny, "remember what we learned. Show day is it. You need to focus completely on your animals and doing your best out there in the ring. Completely." She finally put the clipper and cord in Ginny's waiting hands. "Good luck with that ear hair."

"Good luck, in general," Ginny offered, as if she'd been waiting to say it.

Maybe these were signs. She shouldn't be here with the pigs but in the cow barn, where she'd been every year since she was three. Where there was plenty of time for chit chat while doing chores. Shoveling manure that smelled sweet, not sickly. Winning some

ribbons with her heifers, then gearing up for the State Fair in Des Moines. They were there for the first time last August, she, her dad, Grandpa, and Grandma, who was still perfectly healthy and helped her in the cow barn. The place swarmed with reserve champions, champions, and all other manner of bovine excellence. She'd come close to placing, had no wins, it was hot as a griddle and rained the entire time, yet she loved being there and wanted to return, to victory next time.

Swine just might not work out.

Nor could she keep herself from following Lance's progress. Embarrassment crept over her, adding to her distress. She checked the dirt-encrusted clock above the barn doors. Eight fifteen. Still a few minutes before she met her dad for breakfast. She started across the barn.

"So what's this about a peace group?" she said to Lance's back. He turned, his face dimpling on either side of his mouth, the yellowish flecks in his brown eyes seeming to swirl around.

"Faith!" he said. "Just the person I wanted to see."

She grabbed his arm and pulled him and his buttons to an empty corner of the barn. "You should leave."

"Why? Seems like a lot of 4H-ers want out of Vietnam." He pointed them out to her, hand on her shoulder. Faith shivered, riveted to the spot. Those yellow flecks seemed to be moving around, like ducks set free from a shooting gallery. And was his hair that long when school let out? The chestnut waves fell almost to his shoulders.

"You're breaking everyone's concentration on the most important day of the year."

He stared at her for a moment, looking like he'd burst out laughing, and removed his hand. "I'm glad to see you," he said, somewhat apologetically. "How's your summer going?"

"Fine."

She looked away—not entirely breaking the spell, but just enough—and about faced.

"See you," he said. "Good luck!"

She walked carefully back to her pen.

"Just the person I wanted to see."

Then he'd touched her. She'd stared at him like a dummy, like the fair police, as if he'd invaded her territory.

Well, he had.

Still.

What did Lance McNamara know about pigs? Did he even know that a gilt was female, a hog male? Had he ever actually smelled pig shit before today? Town kids in the show barn were trouble, plain and simple. She topped off the grain buckets, freshened the water, and inspected the clippers that Ginny returned for foreign hairs. She left her shaggy-eared pigs (now snuffling happily in their buckets) and went outside to meet her dad, who stood outside the barn doors, right on time.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Yup," she answered.

They headed across the dirt yard onto a grassy hillside, enacting the same ritual they'd done every year since she'd learned how to walk. Her feet felt heavier now, still, there was goodness in the grass underfoot, in

the climbing, in her heart tripping a beat as they topped the rise. Sun glinted off the distant Ferris Wheel and strands of spider silk shimmered in the ash trees.

Two 4-H food tents stood in friendly competition by a grove of trees, beyond which lay a playground, and all the rides. Faith waved to her cousin Billie and her Uncle Gerry, who sat at a picnic table under a gnarled mulberry. Her uncle worked on the farm almost every day, but she hadn't seen Billie as much as she would have liked since school got out in May. She wore a new blouse of thin green cotton, with appliqued flowers around a square boat neck and a tear in the shoulder along the seam as if she'd started to take it apart then changed her mind.

Billie swished a fly away from her face as Faith slid in next to her, nose wrinkling at her cousin's strong perfume. Billie had the better end of the bargain when it came to looks: straight, dark blond hair falling past her shoulder blades, bottle green eyes, and a smooth, ski-slope nose that defied the Schulte bump shared by Faith, her dad, Grandpa and Uncle Gerry. Faith's was the worst, after crashing into a tree while sledding when she was six. Not that she thought herself ugly, just a little dented.

"You git your chores done?" Uncle Gerry said. "Ready to show?"

"Uh-huh," Faith answered.

"Good girl."

"Does it stink real bad in there?" Billie asked.

Faith shrugged. "Not awfully." Dad was at the front of the line now,

and Faith's mouth watered; she was hungry, the six AM eggs and bacon all used up. A few minutes later he headed toward them, his tray piled with powdered doughnuts, two cartons of milk, and two steaming, Styrofoam cups. He was so slim he almost seemed to fold in the middle as he slid onto the bench beside her.

"Well, now. Schultes can win ribbons for pigs as good as cows." Uncle Gerry grabbed a doughnut and turned to her dad. "Right, Fred?"

"A-course." Her dad broke a doughnut in two, then licked his fingers.

"They're sayin' rain next week," Gerry said through a mouthful.

"Maybe one of these times they'll be right."

Uncle Gerry swilled and swallowed. "Who knows, the way this year's gone. Blizzards nearly all winter long and then come Easter, Big Chief shuts the faucet. Few showers here and there don't amount to much."

Faith winced as Billie's eyes met hers. She knew Billie knew what she was thinking: that Big Chief—her father's name for God—had shut off more than the rain at Easter.

"Been raining steady for three weeks up north," Gerry added.

By up north he meant Minnesota.

"Oh, it's comin'," Faith's dad said, biting into a doughnut.

Billie raised her gaze to the heavens and down again to Faith, with something like a smile; speared the two remaining doughnuts and took off across the yard. Faith got up, too, though she wouldn't have minded talking more about the rain, or lack thereof. It was automatic, following

Billie. Plus, there was all that Lance weirdness to tell her about.

They walked through the picnic area and the rusty playground to the red barn, the last building left from the farm that the fairground was built on. A banner stretched across the top of the barn read 4-H ART SHOW. Billie slipped around the side of the barn and plunked onto a shady strip of grass overlooking the racetrack. She took a pack of Marlboros and a lighter from her fringed white purse.

"Excuse me?" Faith said.

Billie lit up and inhaled without coughing. Well, she was seventeen since February. That was old enough to smoke, Faith guessed. But still. It was just like always: Billie taking the risk while Faith stood by, waiting for them both to catch hell. There was the time Billie snuck into the neighbor's pasture and jumped on their pony, Tony, who dumped her on the ground and headed out the gate, onto the road. Faith had to run to grab him. Another time, Billie insisted they touch an electric fence at the same time, to see how it felt. Faith's mother, who believed yelling wasn't ladylike, gave them what-for after both those antics, and grounded Faith in her room. When Billie's family packed off for town after the second time Uncle Gerry, drunk, put a farm truck in a ditch, Faith should have seen it as an end to her troubles, but she didn't. Billie was as good as a sister to her, and Faith mourned the day they left the farm seven years back.

"I made a fool of myself in the barn," she said.

Billie turned to her, exhaling.

"It wasn't my fault, though. Lance McNamara was in there recruiting kids for his anti-war group. I told him off, right in front of everyone."

"I saw him." Billie smiled. "His hair's getting long."

Faith sighed, forcefully. "He shouldn't have been there. It's like a slap in the face to his own brother, Alan, and all the other boys over in Vietnam. Not to mention a huge distraction to all of us."

"Well," Billie said, drawing the word out as if it were a point in itself, then taking another drag on her cigarette, "this war is different from any we've had before. A lot of soldiers don't believe in what they're doing over there."

"How do you even know that?"

"Talking to people." Billie turned the cigarette in her fingers, and finally looked up at Faith. "You know something? Before she died, Grandma told me she regretted not going to an anti-war protest."

"Please don't talk about her," Faith whispered.

"Okay."

Billie stubbed her cigarette in the dirt.

"What? Did she really say that?"

Billie nodded. "She said, 'We're meddling where she shouldn't be.'"

Faith shook her head. "Remember last July, when Alan McNamara was on the float, with Kip Neary and Jimmy Reichenstall? She saluted them."

"She didn't salute," Billie countered, "she waved."

"I saw her salute."

"Minds change."

"Not that fast. Not about important

things.”

The thing was, Grandma should be here. She hadn’t missed a fair since Faith started showing. She wasn’t supposed to be dead, taken by cancer on Good Friday. Big Chief shut the faucet, all right.

“She would have loved to see the moon landing,” Faith said, her eyes welling up as if she was still staring into that pit watching dirt rain on the coffin lid. “When they planted the flag—”

Her voice broke. Billie laid a hand on her shoulder; the weight was a comfort.

“Don’t dwell on it,” she said. “Grandma wouldn’t want you to.” She took her hand away. “Remember all the good things.”

“Like...”

“Those stories she told us.”

Faith closed her eyes. There was Grandma, shepherding her and Billie to the high point of Faith’s front yard and turning them to face east. “There,” Grandma said, pointing across forty acres of beans, “is where the sod house was.”

“Remember?” Billie said.

Something shifted back and forth in Faith’s chest like bumper cars. Remember? Did she breathe?

“Greta and Maria. Weaving those wildflower halos by the creek. Trading with the Indians.”

Faith opened her eyes. Billie’s grin sparked her own. “You ran away with them. I couldn’t find you in the brush.” Billie laughed. “I know.”

On the racetrack below, men climbed into tractors with mowers hooked up. They’d neaten the grass just for it to get trampled later, when

all of McGill County and beyond came to hear Chet Atkins do his amazing guitar picking. She wished she could bask in the sweetness. The stories. Their Great-Great Grandma Greta and Great-Great Aunt Maria, two teenaged sisters from Pennsylvania, who “staked a claim and had to prove up,” in Grandma’s words. Back then, Faith only dimly understood what that meant. Yet she and Billie played at being the sisters again and again—Greta, strong and practical, and Maria, dreamy and sickly. She wasn’t sure those things were true, or if they’d made them up.

“We’ve got to carry it on, Bil,” Faith said. “The farm.”

Immediately she wished she hadn’t said it, not that way, pleading. Billie hunched her shoulders and pulled her long hair forward, laying it over her knees like a blanket. She drew a circle in the dirt, added petals for a flower, then erased it. “Those were stories, Faithy.”

The stab of hurt surprised Faith. Along with something, a sense of the words running off, as if into some distant brush where words waited. Billie was born on the farm, just like she was. The farm was theirs to carry to the next generation. Faith knew this, the question was, did Billie?

“I guess you don’t want Greta’s chair?” Faith said.

“Course I do.” Billie peeked at her from behind her curtain of hair. “Grandpa said I could get it later. Want to come with me? Help me figure out where to put it?”

“All right,” Faith finally answered. It was something, at least: Billie wanting the old chair that Greta’s husband had

supposedly made by hand. Maybe appreciating a chair could lead to other things. She peered more closely at the racetrack. The tractors were John Deere 5020s, from the looks of it, and only a couple of years old. “Dad would give the skin off his finger for one of those,” she murmured.

“Yeah. Maybe an arm.” Billie grinned at her sideways. “Hey, did you see the hippies down to Limestoneville? They moved into the old mill. They’re starting a commune.” She pulled her hair back from her face, looking straight at Faith.

“A commune? Like that one in Life magazine?”

“Exactly.”

Faith sighed.

“They’re free, you know? They’ve ditched all the stupid rules that make people so unhappy. Look this way. Think that way. Suck up to authority. Know what I’m saying? They don’t believe in war, or the all-mighty dollar. They don’t even believe in God . . . at least God as we know it.”

The tractors snapped into action. Faith suddenly longed to be down there, chopping grass, maybe figuring out how many rotations it would take to cut the whole damn field. “God’s a Him, not an it,” she heard herself say. Billie’s laugh started out low and rose

to a high, sweet pitch, like taffy on a hot day.

A voice, amplified through a megaphone, came rolling up from the show barns. Faith glanced at her watch. “Shit!” That was not a word she usually used, and she half expected another gale of laughter from Billie, who only said, “Good luck.”

On her feet, gazing down at her cousin, Faith wondered if she should run, or wait for some acknowledgment that hippie communes had nothing on being in the show ring.

Billie shaded her eyes, looking up at Faith who was already moving off, and called out, “Later.”

It was funny, the way she said it. So flip. Not “See you later and we’ll go get Greta’s chair.” “Later” could mean anything.

Faith turned to wave, but she was no longer there.

Ellen Dreyer (RC 1983) has published or edited over 60 books for young readers. She received the Bank Street Best Book of the Year Award for The Glow Stone (Peachtree, 2006), and two Hopwood Awards for short fiction. She currently teaches creative writing and literature in the Rutgers University early college program REaCH.

Desdemona

Clare Higgins

Kitchen smells like garlic
your back, tied up in holy knots
your lip got cut in a fight
but I told you hold back your sword
on those black nights you can't see
the moon for squinting, trying

Days bent over vinyl booths
and I went back to work for you
Daddy held up the rent money real quick
heard I was running with a black boy
and I cut my ties for you

Now you come, stand over the bed
curse me, you're brave, aren't you
soldier still knows how to fight
but wouldn't know his woman
if he crawled between her thighs
and she bit him on the cheek

So take me, spitfire and all
I won't go down white flag
and if you think I've ever loved a man
face the color of the moon
then I hope you find your prayers answered
in someone else's book – pages torn
rippled by seawater

In a dream you came, powerful and strange
as sable evening skies
took me in your arms and held on
safe enough for kissing sinless lips
and I cried out for you

Commend me to my kind lord

nine ways of looking at her knees

Clare Higgins

knobbly hob hills where the goblins and elves go

peach-tops: piles of fuzz and pale dewtwo leaves if it is warm

a thin film over blue veins spider-like a map of the body
dotting her wounds

new young muscle brash all envy

old clickety-clacking when overrun pop and hiss
railroad song

older cousins to sock feet angular tween grace

soaked after rain their tears pool in her shoes

boulders against one another when I wake in her bed

 making a tunnel for promises to pass through

whispering

Clare Higgins (RC 2017) has won Hopwood awards for her collection of poems, "An Education," and her screenplay, "Hindsight."



Dead Empty

Elena Potek

I arrive in the lobby of the Cardiovascular Center on a bright, crisp, fall morning. I see Professor Flint in a chair to my left. He waits patiently for my arrival and is joined by two other girls from my class. They both agreed to observe the procedure, as I had. I imagine they received a similar call from him this morning. We've got one, he announced over the phone, as I lay in the warmth of my bed. A drug overdose. Far too chipper for such an early morning conversation. Be here in half an hour. Now I sit down next to my Professor and my two classmates. I'm breathless, having just barely

arrived before the window of allotted time expired. The chilly breeze outside stripped me of my sleepiness, only a cold anxiety remains.

I recognize the girls beside me as Erin and Sam, two of the students who sit in the first row of our Monday/Wednesday morning class, Introduction to Medicine: Clinicopathologic Diagnosis of Human Disease. Sam sports workout clothes, as if the events we are about to observe will energize her enough to hit the gym directly afterward. Erin scrolls through something on her phone. She leans over and shows it to Sam, they snicker

together. I don't really feel like anything could be funny right now.

Professor Flint lets us know that we are waiting for one other girl to join us before we head down. He is an older man, always well-dressed in corduroys, a button-down, and of course, his signature bowtie. With their unusually bright colors and odd patterns, his bowties make me smile long after our class has let out. His class begins at 8:30 am. Most mornings we are greeted at the front of the classroom by containers of homemade cakes and cookies, and our professor's wide grin. He loves to bake for us, and even invited anyone in our class who didn't have a place to go for Thanksgiving to celebrate the holiday with his family at their home. I like to think of him as the soft, wise, grandfather I never had. The four of us ease our way into small talk. Sam launches in with the awful record of the Michigan football team, and, after some painful silences, the conversation flows into questions we have for our professor. "Did you ever get nervous before doing an autopsy when you started?" I ask. He thinks for a moment as he folds his hands together on his lap. "I haven't done many, only about 150 cases." To cut 150 dead apart, all of the stories those bodies told, seems like a lot to me. "The main coroner here has probably performed over 10,000." He looks at us and smiles easily. "But, to answer your question, no. I was never nervous." Great, I think, just me then. I smile back uncomfortably.

The bitter November sun filters in through the clear, wide windows

of the Cardiovascular Center's lobby. "So what was the most interesting case you've seen?" Erin looks up from her phone, her face caught in the trickling light pulled from the windows around her. This building is beautiful. The light from the windows catches on the gold flecked paintings in the lobby, making them glitter. A delicate stream of water runs down the wall alongside the stairs that lead to the lower levels. Professor Flint hates doing forensic cases, he says, because it sometimes requires going to court. "There was one woman I did an autopsy on who was allegedly strangled with a telephone cord by her boyfriend." I watch the water move against the sturdy white wall behind it, hugging its smoothness for support. "In court, the judge asked me how much force the murderer would have had to use to kill her." The water flows downward, disappears beneath the stairs. "The girl's boyfriend sat across from me as I answered the judge, staring straight at me without looking away." I pull my eyes away from the water. "That was pretty creepy." I shudder from his recollection. Professor Flint seems lost in his thoughts then and looks out with a distant stare at the window behind me. "I also don't like doing child abuse cases. Little kids, you know, especially girls because I have two of my own." The stream continues to fall, I hear a soft gurgle as water hits the distant bottom floor.

I realize now that that this decision may have been a huge mistake.

I'm not very good with blood or needles, medical procedures or pain. At checkups, when a nurse attempts to give me a shot, my screams can be heard by doctors attending to their own patients on the opposite end of the building. I know this for a fact, because the office I went to as a kid was my mother's. Dr. Maach, it sounds like your daughter has arrived, her nurses joked, as she was forced to stop what she was doing to come check on me. As I left the office, her apologies to the other doctors we passed always made me feel guilty for my squeamishness. But it wasn't a feeling I could control. Over the years I have become mildly better with needles, but not by much. When I came to college, I thought volunteering in the hospital could help. It is an interesting dilemma, having a doctor for a mother. I feel a certain comfort with the sterile, beeping world of a hospital. And yet, when I walk down the hallways to visit patients, I still fear what I will see behind each door. This contradiction is not so unlike how I feel towards my mother, too. The skills I taught myself in order to attune to her sadness were good practice for this work. I never knew what to expect when I peeked my head inside her room. "Sorry I'm late," the last girl from our class pants. As she rushes in, my mother's darkness fades. I become aware, yet again, of where I am sitting. Late-arriving Becca, along with the other two girls sitting beside me, are among the many students who put their hands up on the first day of class as being pre-

med. Throughout the semester, no matter how grotesque the pictures on the slideshow or disgusting the symptoms we discuss, these students never flinch. They even ask follow up questions, probe our professor for more gruesome details. In the back of the class, my eyes are jammed shut. I sit at a desk, wish I could crouch underneath it instead. Hiding from the information being taught, however, would likely diminish my chances of passing this class.

There is no hiding now. Professor Flint rises from his chair and asks us to follow him. We head down the stairs and through the hallway that connects the Cardiovascular Center to the general hospital wings. This part is familiar. Every Friday I walk through this hallway on my way to visit with patients. I sit with them and hear their stories. For at least a half hour or so, my nods and smiles allow them to forget where they are. Now, I wish someone could do the same for me, too. Along the way we pass the portraits of every graduating class from The University of Michigan Medical School. "If you look closely you'll see Dr. Kevorkian up on this wall," Professor Flint points out. I feel like I should have noticed his portrait before. But when I walk through this hallway I'm so wrapped up in my list of patients to visit, that I barely notice the world around me at all. The elevators to the general

wings of the hospital, the ones I usually take, are straight off this corridor to the right. Instead, Professor Flint turns left down a different hallway. The other three girls swiftly follow him, barely giving Dr. Kevorkian's smiling portrait a second glance. But I feel his black and white stare on my back as I trail behind the others.

This wing is much more isolated, without the bustle of nurses and visitors who pile in and out of the elevators to see their patients or loved ones. A lone elevator arrives to take us down to the hospital's basement. As the doors slowly open, Dr. Flint says, "Here we are, the bottom floor of the hospital. If we go right here, this is where all meals are made for patients, and if we go straight, we'll arrive at the mortuary." We get off the elevator as someone in a staff's uniform pushes a cart of prepared food past us and down the hall. I never before gave any thought to all that went on in the hospital outside of the rooms I visited each week, the dead and the food being prepared so close together. Professor Flint takes out his Mcard and swipes through a locked door. He shuffles us through before the door closes behind him. We are in an entirely white hallway, sterile, bright. At the end we enter through the last door and come to a small narrow room. Completely windowed on one side, the room looks down into a lower chamber.

The first person I see is a man who stands near the set of windows. He wears black suit pants, a tie and white button down shirt with a

papery thin medical smock over his clothing. He looks far too formal to be a doctor and I wonder what he is doing there when I spot a gun strapped to his belt. He is speaking to the doctor. "...was out until 2:30 because right after I finished with him I got another call. Lots of overdose cases." As he speaks, I finally look through the glass for the first time. I let out a small bit of air. Right below me is a man who looks to be about 30 and is, apparently, dead. But he doesn't look it. Had he been tucked under the sheets of a bed in the general wing above us, I would have peeked my head in and closed the door gently so as not to disturb him. He is fully clothed and other than the waxy look of his swollen fingers, he could be asleep. I realize that until now, I have never seen a dead person. The funerals of my grandparents or great uncles had all been closed casket; it is Jewish tradition not to view the bodies of the dead. This 30-year-old drug addict is my first.

He has on a grey, worn T-shirt, and I can't make out what it says. Black graffiti letters trace themselves across the front, as indecipherable as his heartbeat. His creased belt snakes through the loops of ragged, dirty jeans. A slit cuts up the bottom of the left leg all the way to his knee. I can't tell if this was his doing or the doctor's. I see from the slit he has on white Hanes crew socks pulled as high as they can go, his feet tucked inside brown slip-on shoes I imagine he bought at Walmart. The man is heavy, with thick thighs and a protruding stomach. He has large

ears and the ridges of his skull show slightly underneath his bald scalp. On each arm, a tattoo captures what he felt deserved permanence in his short life. Like the words on his shirt, I can't decipher the tattoos either. In death, meaning ebbs away, no longer translatable.

The police officer explains that the man had been taking prescription medication for chronic back pain after a car crash 10 years ago. According to his girlfriend, she was aware that he switched over to heroin last year, but had tried to stay out of his habit. It's unclear why he stopped using his medication, but the man had been admitted to the hospital five times in the past year for near-overdose mishaps. "Apparently," the officer reports halfheartedly, "he wasn't very good at knowing how to do it." The officer looks down at the man below him. I follow his gaze. I am struck by how young the man is, how different from the many elderly patients I am so used to visiting. Those age-spotted ladies and wrinkled men share fond stories with me of Ferris Wheels and the bright lights of their youth. They may be close to death, but at least they have lived. This man's memories cannot be shared with us here. Instead we tell his story of addiction for him, with distant eyes gazing through thick glass. I look at the officer now and wonder how many people, like this man, he has found dead in their bathrooms. And, I wonder what he first sees when he looks at them.

Below us a resident performs the initial evaluation of the man. He

holds a clipboard, and slowly makes his way around the body. He picks up an arm, examines a leg, turns the man onto his side. The resident continues to make marks on his white sheet of paper as he searches the full terrain of this man's body. A photographer also makes his way around the table. He positions his camera, bends the man's body in odd angles to get the picture he needs. Latex gloves cover his hands, but he doesn't wear the mask, cap or medical apron the other officials have on. He sports cargo pants and a vest with mesh pockets that looks more suitable for a jungle safari than an autopsy room. A Nikon SLR digital camera is strapped around his neck as he places a small metal tag on the man's puffy right big-toe. He takes a close-up shot, as if the deadness will tell him something more later on. Now, the tag is balanced on the shiny roundness of the man's head. The photographer snaps two or three, close up and farther back, then continues across the landscape of this cold body.

"Well, you ready to go down?" Professor Flint looks at us. Until that moment I am so entranced by what is taking place below me that I forget I am supposed to be down there too, watching up close. The other girls look far more ready than I. We cross the windowed room together. Erin, Sam, Becca and I journey down the stairwell that leads to the entrance of the autopsy room. Thankfully, an "Autopsy in Progress" sign is posted on the door. Its warning stops us, at least momentarily, from going any

further. Small illustrations on the sign depict the necessary garments we must don before we enter. Professor Flint leads by example as he pulls on shoe covers, a hairnet, apron, latex gloves and glasses. Without a word, he disappears into the room behind the door, swallowed by the light within. As we pull on our hairnets, I try hopelessly to bond with the other three girls, and confess that I'm phobic-level afraid of blood.

"My mom made me go to therapy for it when I was younger."

Gym-clothed Sam offers an unsympathetic, "Then why are you here?"

I really didn't have an answer, at least not one I'm willing to uncover. So instead, I reply, "I thought it would be interesting to see another part of the hospital."

Once inside, the room seems bigger and blindingly white. Lights, just like the one a dentist points into a mouth, blink on in full brightness. Even the faces of those alive look ghostly. A framed poster on the middle of the wall that faces the windows lists the normal weights for a heart, spleen, lung and brain. Their weights seem surprisingly heavy. Obsessive about my own weight, I never think about anything other than the fat on my body. The sign posted before me in plain, black lettering illuminates what I ignore. Parts of my body that actually matter, weigh me down too. In the room, I feel too close to death. I had surprised myself by being able to handle the dead-or-maybe sleeping man who laid on his

back while I watched from above, distant and God-like. But now, he lays so close to me. If I wanted to step forward, to touch his rough cheek, I could. The realness of his skin would be all that remains of what has already left his body. As I attempt to distract myself by looking around the room, the resident and assistant completely undress the man. I am drawn to his brown scuffed shoes and dirty jeans and T-shirt in a heap on the floor beside him. While on his body, they were the final pieces that hid his deadness to me. The photographer asks the resident to reposition the man, as he needs a few final shots before the procedure begins. The resident rolls the man towards himself so the photographer can get a picture of his back. As he turns him, with what obviously took a considerable amount of strength, blood gurgles out of the man's mouth and splatters onto the floor, inches from the resident's feet. The resident quickly rearranges him onto his back and the assistant brings a mop to wipe the floor. The blood begins to disappear into a bucket, while the moment permanently pools in my mind.

I feel the banana I ate on my way to the hospital and close my eyes to try to hold it down. I open my eyes once the nausea passes, only to realize that in the time they were closed the situation has gotten much worse. Looking over at the body I see a newly created V-shape cut across both sides of the man's chest, meeting at his neck. The slice is colorful and layered, with

the red from blood and internal body organs below and the yellow of fat and skin above. The resident is folding these chunks of flesh back and over the side of the body to peer into the just-minutes-ago whole man. It is at this moment that I start to see black spots in my vision. I let out both uncontrollable laughter, and a gasping, "I think I need to leave the room."

I feel defeated and far weaker than my fellow classmates. I find each staring straight ahead, as if they actually want to see more. Their eyes shine with pure curiosity. There is no deadness in this man that they fear seeing reflected in themselves. Professor Flint opens the door and leads me back into the windowed room above. I take off my mask and hair net. Without the sharp tools, my fear recedes. Above the bright room, my breath returns.

I continue to watch through the windows, safe, in my distance. Audible gasps and dramatic phrases claw inside my throat. They are too hard to hold back. But after one of my "Gross, gross, gross," exclamations, I hear the door open and up the stairs walks the assistant I recognize as the one who retrieved the mop after the nauseating gurgling-blood incident. Her latex gloves are off, too, and she approaches me asking if she can get me some water. I feel embarrassed that yet another completely unfazed professional noticed my pansy-ness. I tell her that I am fine, and thank her for her offer. She leaves the room. I wonder where she is going. If I had mopped blood off the floor as she

had just done, I would have rushed to the bathroom to vomit. But this woman spoke to me calmly, she was in no hurry as she left. A few minutes later, she returns with a bottle of water and three miniature Hershey's chocolates. With a nod she sets them in front of me, on the ledge of the window I now stare through to gaze at the man below us. "It's really hard the first time," she says as she crosses to the stairs. "But you get used to it." The woman exits and I am left alone again. Below me, I see her enter the procedure room. She returns to the table where the still man lies, already so well-versed in what I am too afraid to understand.

Guilt creeps up my spine. I remember how I stood next to my mom in her office as she made excuses for my weakness. I feel like that same child again. This woman thinks I am here to become more comfortable with death, to uncover the mystery of how to disassemble a body. But now I know that I came this morning to find an answer to a much harder question. Like volunteering each week, I didn't come to help patients, or to confront my discomfort. I came for something else entirely.

When I looked into my mother's silent room as a child, at her sleeping body across her bed, I closed the door on her sadness, unwilling to accept its dark answer. But, if I chose to look away from her, I would have to find somewhere else to look. I still needed an answer for the question of how to live. This search led me to the hospital. I encountered patients with happy

memories. Their pasts were painted by the stories they told, of lives experienced in exhilarating color. So foreign were their stories to me, to the black and white life I had come to understand through the eyes of my mother. I'd hoped these sick people's outlooks could provide me with clues, help me finally find my own, better, answer. But, when I walked out of their rooms, their smiles faded against my back; their colorful stories faded too. My mother's silent one powerfully took its place in my mind once again. Perhaps the hospital was a gateway drug for me. Since I never found what I needed in the dying, I moved on to death. Maybe this extreme, an already dead man, could give me the answer no living patients could. Maybe the memory of him will be powerful enough to shut out all else. What this woman didn't realize is that I came here for myself. I wanted to feel the ephemeral sensation of living, to use the painful end of someone else's life to compel myself to start living my own.

I watch the events that take place below and am startled. The woman who I mistook for an assistant is now performing the procedure herself. She holds the large shears in her hands, cuts through each rib, digs into the man's insides, saws away at his skull. The resident only weighs

and checks the man's organs but it is she who singularly deconstructs him. I breathe sharply in. Just a few minutes earlier she had handed me chocolate with hands that are now encased in bloody latex gloves. I stare at the pile of the man's clothes, still piled on the floor, and realize the absurdity of what I had hoped to find in coming here. I expected a stranger to give me an answer to life that he couldn't even give himself. Her drill pushes deeper into this man's skull. No different than leaving the rooms of sick patients each week, I feel myself deflate. The hopeless question inside of me, that I try so hard to answer, still lives.

I watch her movements, methodical and direct, and am drawn to wonder. Did she touch the face of her boyfriend that morning, hold a niece over the weekend, chop vegetables for last night's dinner with the same hands now caged in this man's dead and open body? And I wonder, too, before he shot that needle into his arm, about the last life this man allowed his hands to touch.

Elena Potek (RC 2015) currently lives in Chicago and will be returning to Ann Arbor in Fall 2018 to pursue a dual masters degree of Public Health and Social Work with the goal of becoming a sex therapist and educator.



The Expert's Black Box: Using Instinct and Observation to Improve the Fiction Workshop

Amy Gustine

In his book *Blink* Malcolm Gladwell explores the fact that we are capable of making accurate snap judgments without being consciously aware of our reasons for them, particularly if we have significant expertise in an area. Gladwell calls the part of our brain assessing evidence without our conscious awareness “the black box.” Among his examples is this anecdote: When a museum bought a new sculpture, several art historians identified it as an accomplished fake

within seconds of seeing it, even though a geologist, a team of lawyers and other art experts had judged it authentic after a year-and-a-half of intensive study. The art historians identified the fake without examining it up close by simply relying on their first reaction. For one man this was noticing the word “fresh” popped in his mind. For another it was the feeling that there was a wall of glass between him and the work. For a third there was a feeling of repulsion

for the figure. These snap impressions drove the museum to perform more analysis and they were eventually able to prove the sculpture was fake.

As a writer, I began thinking about this incident and others in *Blink* as they pertain to the process of asking for and providing feedback in workshops. Though we are certainly open to corrections of fact and grammar, these edits aren't really why we bring a piece to workshop. What we are really asking for is a global reaction to the story, poem, memoir or essay. We are asking, “Does it work?” In other words, we want people to use their black boxes to make snap judgments about our submissions because, like it or not, this is precisely what editors and agents will do when we send to them. Ironically, though this is actually the motive for bringing a piece to workshop, participants rarely if ever share these global judgments, at least in their most blunt form.

Instead, typically workshops ask participants to do what agents and editors won't (or can't): avoid global judgment, but explain in detail negative and positive opinions about a story's components (plot, point of view, setting, pacing, diction, structure). Then we go further, and expect participants to suggest strategies for improvement. In light of what Gladwell reveals about the way our black boxes work, what implications for a workshop do these expectations have?

First, we have to think about whether we and the other people in our workshop group are “experts.” In fact, a common criticism of work-

shops is that they invite people who aren't experts to give advice to others. The problem with this observation is that it doesn't unpack the concept of expert and thus can mislead people. In fact, there are three different types of experts relevant to a writing workshop: readers, editors and writers.

For our purposes, let's call an expert writer a person whose work has been published in book form or has had extensive magazine publications. (Certainly, there are expert writers who don't meet this criterion, but for the most part publication is a good rough guide.) Other than the instructor, MFA workshops often feature no expert writers. That's also frequently true of summer workshops. Does this mean such workshops shouldn't allow participants to offer a judgment?

Gladwell's work suggests the answer to that is no.

As far as step one—a global reaction to the work being discussed—goes, being a useful member of a workshop doesn't rely on people being expert writers. It only relies on them being expert readers. It requires, or assumes, that your response to other people's work is a reliable reflection of the response a broader audience is likely to have. In other words, the minimum qualification for being a useful workshop member is having spent enough time reading to develop an expert-level black box full of reader reactions.

Do most workshop participants meet this criterion? Hopefully, the answer in a general sense is yes. Un-

fortunately, in a narrower sense the answer may frequently be no.

An expert in Gladwell's parlance is someone who has spent over 1,000 hours developing a skill. It's probably fair to assume most people in MFA workshops have spent a thousand hours reading quality writing. It may even be fair to assume this about any workshop. After all, people who hope to be writers are probably big readers. However, not all writing is measured against the same standards. For example, young adult novels have parameters that are different from literary adult-audience novels. Most are first person, feature a young protagonist and avoid or minimize flashbacks. They also tend to have straightforward chronological structures. Someone who has read dozens of YA novels but rarely reads adult literary fiction may bring this black box of expertise to the table, and provide misleading feedback about literary fiction for adults. The same can be said for other categories. You may read lots of literary fiction, but hardly any memoir. You may read classics but not contemporary fiction. You may avoid satire. You might read a lot of novels but few short stories. You may read essays and articles, but no fiction. These preferences in your own reading will be reflected in your "black box" and therefore drive, maybe inappropriately, your snap judgments about a work.

So, what should we do? First, consider the type of work you routinely read. It will help you identify whether other people's work is truly in your area of expertise, and thus how reliable your black box of aesthetics

is for any given piece of writing. Also, find out what those in your workshop routinely read. This will help you weigh the feedback they provide about your work.

Next, start building your black box for the neglected genres. If you don't read a lot of memoir, but one of your members is writing one, read some well-reviewed memoirs and a few reliable craft books about the genre. Ditto for YA fiction, essays, mystery, romance, thriller, science fiction, satire or any other identifiably distinct type of writing. If you participate in a community writing group, try to find one that limits the type of writing it considers to genres about which you are willing and able to develop expertise.

Another approach is to ask the writer to characterize the work for the group when they submit it. While this is rarely done in workshops, it could help sharpen reader responses. For example, a writer may identify a story as satirical. Knowing this can afford readers a chance to educate themselves about the conventions of satire and help focus their feedback. One trick is to ask the writer to name one or two writers whose work they feel is similar to theirs and in what way it is similar. Someone who is aiming to please Jodi Picoult's audience needs different feedback than someone who is writing with Adam Johnson's readers in mind. This type of deliberate audience identification will also help writers seek appropriate agents and presses down the line.

Another point Gladwell makes about the black box is more controversial in a workshop setting: He

cites studies which suggest people can actually inhibit their ability to accurately "intuit" something simply by being asked to explain why they feel the way they do about it. For example, in some studies people's preferences for things changed when they were asked to explain them. In others, people described having seen something that didn't occur when asked to explain an insight they had about a situation. Psychologists speculate this may be because people feel uncomfortable not being able to "back up" their feelings, so instead they change their feelings to fit the evidence or explanations they can articulate. That brings us to the third area of expertise: editing.

Once you've read several examples of a particular genre, your global reaction may be more reliable, but that doesn't mean you are in a position to make recommendations about how to improve a work. In other words, expert readers are not necessarily expert editors. The demands on editors are far greater. First, they have to explain the reasons for their judgments. Second, they are expected to offer suggestions on how to fix the work's weaknesses. Editors must also work within the parameters of the writer's intentions and aesthetics. They are supporting the writer, not taking over the project. (Critics exist somewhere between the reader and the editor, able to articulate what's wrong with a work but not required to come up with ways to fix it.) Even expert writers, usually the workshop leader, should be aware of the editor's special expertise, and that they may or may not have developed it.

But where does this leave a workshop? What if instead of trying to ex-

plain what we liked and didn't, and why, we simply said, "I felt bored reading it, and unmoved when I was finished." This would be tactless, for one thing, and probably prove pretty frustrating to the writer. They want more guidance. After all, stories aren't like ancient sculptures. Carbon dating and other objective scientific methods will never tell us if they are working well or not, so opinion is all we have to go on. We need people to explain these opinions. But what if you can't honestly say that you have enough experience to be an expert critic or editor? This is probably the case with most people in MFA and summer workshops.

One simple thing participants can try to both improve the workshop experience and to build their skills as editors and critics is, ironically, to spend less time evaluating and more time describing or observing work. Typical workshop discussions begin with what people liked about a story, and then move onto what they didn't like. This completely bypasses our global reaction, which for reasons of tact and good will might be necessary. But it also bypasses the process of accurately describing a story. It assumes everyone observed the story carefully and that their observations yielded the same conclusions. At the same time, it pressures participants to evaluate something they may have yet to understand.

First, workshop participants could be encouraged to articulate the story's objective features, such as its clock (how much time the present story covers), its stage sets (where events take place), its shape or structure (scenes, flashbacks, exposition), its plot, and its point of view. Next members can try to articulate their interpretation of a

story's less objective features, such as narrative distance and tone or voice. Asking participants to describe each of these elements in a disciplined way will force readers to note how a story is put together; articulate slippery, subjective impressions; and get people talking the same language about a story. For example, what may seem like stating the obvious often gives rise to surprises. Sometimes you'll discover half the workshop thought the piece satirical and the other half didn't.

This method may also lessen the chance that, by being required to justify our judgments, we subconsciously alter them. Observations about a story are just that: objective. It's nearly impossible to invent what you thought was noteworthy about a character. You either noticed his obsession with jelly beans or you didn't. How many people noticed it, and what they thought it meant, is valuable information for the writer, but it doesn't require a judgement of quality from the reader. Similarly, instead of telling the writer we thought a character was underdeveloped, we can describe what we do and don't understand about a character and let the writer decide if our understanding is sufficient and accurate.

As workshop leaders and participants, we all have a duty to continually refine our black boxes, that store of experience which helps us react usefully to work. Part of this is keeping in mind the graduating and distinct skills of readers,

writers and editors. They may overlap, but they don't always. Another part is recognizing, and educating ourselves about, the conventions of different genres. Finally, we must recognize the value the story's author brings. While she shouldn't interrupt discussion to argue with feedback or justify her choices, inviting a writer to pose questions or explain her hopes for a work beforehand can add valuable focus to readers' observations and the workshop discussion.

If we can find a way to respond viscerally to work as well as intellectually, and to describe stories before (or instead of) criticizing them, perhaps our workshops will understand better how and why a story is put together before we start tearing it apart.

Amy Gustine (RC 1991) is the author of the story collection You Should Pity Us Instead (Sarabande Books), which received starred reviews in Publishers Weekly, Kirkus and Booklist. The New York Times Book Review called the collection an "affecting and wide-ranging debut" and it appeared on many "best of" lists, including the San Francisco Chronicle's "Best of 2016: 100 Recommended Books." Gustine's fiction has also been published in several journals, received special mention in the Pushcart Prize anthology and been awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2016. Amy Gustine currently lives in Toledo, Ohio.

At Gettysburg

Laura Kasischke

The one I love stands at the edge
of a wheatfield wearing
a blue cap, holding
a plastic musket in his hands. The one I love does a goofy

dance at Devil's Den. Mans a cannon. Waves
at me from a hill. He

dips his foot into Bloody Run. The sepia
dream of his dead body
is pulled by the water
over the rocks. And I

am the shadow of a stranger taking
his picture, laid out like so much black
drapery on the pavement. Is there

some better explanation? Was there

some other mossy, meandering
path we might have taken

to this place through time and space? Why

is it that where my heart
should be, there's
a small bright horse instead? While I

was simply standing
over there by a stone, waiting, did
an old woman run her bony
hand through my hair
and leave this gray ribbon there?

The one I love leans up against a fence, and then
pretends to be shot. He

(stanza break)

opens his eyes
wide and grabs his chest, stumbles
backwards, falls
gracefully into the grass, where he lies

for a long time holding the sun in his arms. I take

another picture there. The worms
beneath him make

the burden of the earth seem light enough to bear—and still

inside me I believe I carry
the pond where the injured
swans have come to flock. I
believe I hold inside me
the lake into which the beautiful, armless
mortals wish to wade. I am

after all, their executioner and their creator, being
as I am, their mother. Were

they gods who came to Earth to die and suffer, I wonder, or

boys who died and turned to gods? O,

the one I love needs sunblock, I think, too late, and,
perhaps, a bottle of water, but now

I have no idea where we are. *Where*

*were you, God asks, when I
spread out the heavens and the earth? If you*

were not there, then

how can you expect to know where you are now? Truly,

(stanza break)

I don't know. I look around.
I say, We're lost,
to the one I love, who

looks over my shoulder and laughs. *No,*

Mom, he says
and points to dot and arrow
of ourselves on the map.

You're holding the battlefield upside down.

Laura Kasischke teaches creative writing in the Residential College and the MFA Program and is the Allan Seager Collegiate Professor of English at U-M, where she has won numerous teaching awards as well as a Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award. Laura has published eight collections of poetry and eight novels. Her novels include Suspicious River (1996), White Bird in a Blizzard (1999), and The Life Before Her Eyes (2002), which have been made into feature films. Her work has been translated widely, and she has been the recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the DiCastagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, several Pushcart Prizes, the Bobst Award for Emerging Writers, and the Beatrice Hawley Award. Laura is a graduate of the Residential College, where she studied creative writing. "At Gettysburg" was published in the New England Review, and then in Best American Poetry, 2006.



First Time

Ian Singleton

It was like looking into a mirror. She was surprised A.J. could still appear so innocent, when she saw the live-motion portrait of him on the television more than a year later. She had seen that primed glance, like the ting off the tip of a fang, that minute pupil of his mouth. Now, just like a year ago, he looked choked for breath between verses. She wanted to reach him.

But then she remembered how, when it happened, she had thought he was just as innocent and exposed as she was. In a sense, she had thought, she was swallowing him. On the TV was a flare of astonishment. Had he stolen that face from her? She had to get him from inside of her

out, had to tell somebody. If not, she was gonna blow.

There she was at a college party in Southside Birmingham, where one guy, a little drunk, who had nodded in a genuine way while she spoke, asked her back to his place a few blocks away. Miranda had only drunk one Dixie cup of wine.

Nonetheless, she was careful climbing the stairs to his room, angled against the roof and reeking of sweat. His jaw was clenched. Miranda wondered if he would make the A.J. smirk she knew so well, when he put a finger to his lips. His room stank less than the hallway and gave just enough space to undress. He gaped

at her nakedness, even the baby fat she'd never been able to shed. Then he struggled with his own clothes, tripping over his half-removed pants.

She waited for him and didn't even tighten when he entered her. He was clean-shaven, so her skin wouldn't feel rubbed raw, like after A.J. But maybe that was why, after he came, she couldn't. "Short but sweet," she said. She could tell he didn't like that. He left to pee.

The morning after, in his bachelor's kitchen, her one-night stand cooked an egg while simultaneously talking about running. Then he hurried to escort her outside. She stood at the corner, mouth poised. He gave her a peck and said, "I'm about to go on a two-miler. Else I'd give you a ride. You said your sister's around, right?"

Instead of asking Leah for a ride, she walked almost five miles to her dorm. If only you'd kept your mouth shut, she thought. On the way, she stopped a passerby her age to ask him for a cigarette. His eyes darted left, right, at her face, then down, making a little cross over her body. The gaze tickled her. As he handed over the cigarette, he said, "This a walk-a-shame? Go on, girl."

She paid attention while cooking her eggs. Other girls at Birmingham-Southern started sentences with, "Girl, when I got kids..." but Miranda kept mum.

One evening at dinner, Leah whispered to her the question of motherhood. Miranda decided it was time to tell Leah, at least, about A.J. But her sister announced to the whole family that in August she was leaving

Alabama for New York, where she'd found a job at a publishing company. Leah gave a shrug, as if she couldn't help being so lucky, and it reminded Miranda of A.J.'s hip dismissal.

To celebrate Leah's success, on Labor Day weekend they rode with some of Leah's old friends to Orange Beach. Miranda caused uproar inside the clown-car space by mocking pickup lines like, "Baby, I read you like a book," and, "Girl, I wrote this song for you." Then he asked me what my name was.

At night they sat drinking wine by a bonfire on the sand. The humidity made the buzz come on faster. Fried from chain-smoking cigarettes, their voices rasped. The firelight wizened their faces. Like a good English major, Miranda had brought Edna St. Vincent Millay. She edged toward the flames to recite, "Time does not bring relief; you all have lied. / Who told me time would ease me of my pain! / I miss him in the weeping of the rain." At that line she stopped and turned the page to find another poem. A boy stood, his fists, his whole body, throbbing. He demanded they skinny-dip.

Against the black line ribbed by moonlight, they disrobed. The elongated crash of the surf spurred everybody into a jog. She and the tall, thin, tanned preppy boy named Geoff veered from the others and sprinted further, until she dug her heels in. "I prob-ly taste like vodka," she said.

Geoff didn't break his genuine smile much to speak, but when he did, it always sounded like he was apologizing, which was the best use

of the Southern drawl he possessed, slighter than Miranda's. Before she could make her move, his fingertips drew a line down her back. Wind cooled rarely exposed spots on her bare skin. Miranda felt as if her touch would forever come short of him by a small distance. She watched a floater flash away across the sand. They closed in again. Astride Geoff, she threw her head back and came. Indifferent, the moon wheeled past.

Light from the fire glistened in the granules on their skin. The others grinned at them and passed looks. Somebody had brought sleeping bags out, and one couple had already burrowed in. Miranda shuddered but did not crawl to Geoff. Instead, she leaned back on her palms, as if to hold court. She imagined A.J. saying, *Shut up*.

She woke abruptly. The sun had risen, the others had gone indoors, and the fire had turned to ash. Miranda squinted at the blanched surroundings.

In an uncaffeinated blur, they crammed into the car and departed. Once they were on the road, everybody including Geoff fell asleep, except for Miranda and the driver, Noel. "Hey, I need you to talk to me, so I don't snooze behind the wheel," Noel said.

Miranda rested her forehead against the back of the passenger seat. "I don't think anybody got any sleep last night."

"Yeah, baby," he said in a low, confidential voice. He bared his teeth, as if bracing for impact.

Deflated, she asked, "You probably know Lonely 101, don't you?"

"Course. They won Dixie Punk 1997. They're playing Birmingham, Atlanta, even New Orleans. They got a new album coming out."

Miranda sold back all her CDs. Then she had more than enough cash to pre-order the new release by Lonely 101, A.J.'s band.

Their music played everywhere, like at the house where Geoff and his roommates lived and partied, more or less, every weekend. Adamant about not neglecting his friends for a girl, at some point on a typical night, in some shadowy nook, he would pinch her butt. That meant they could leave.

Or they spent time at Geoff's church, where he was in a Christian youth group. One night there was a "spiritual retreat," and they were supposed to stay overnight at the church. There was no butt pinching then, no kissing either, not even a peck.

Sex still stuck to them, though, only it was "gummi sex." That was a game they played, since everybody had brought sleeping bags. Two people, usually a boy and a girl, crawled inside their bags backwards, feet out the opening. Then they wrestled like gummi worms.

Miranda was already covered by a web of cold sweat when she inserted herself, faster than anybody else had, into the polyester material. When it was their round, he came on strong at first. Miranda let herself scream, like a cartoon superheroine. But cartoon superheroines never cry, and that was what she was doing when they stopped, and she kept crying as they pulled the sleeping bag off her and as

Geoff half-led, half-dragged her out of the room to another, more private place.

In that private place she began to scream. "I know it's just gummi sex, but it's a small, hot trap to me," she sobbed. And that was the moment she knew she had to tell somebody, if not Geoff himself.

If she were going to tell somebody, she would tell him about the party her sister threw a couple of years ago. She would tell him how nobody stuck around when Miranda started talking, not even other girls. She had felt like a telemarketer. She'd teased any curl out of her hair, tied it back, and put on a green pencil dress, eyeliner, and this almost-neon lipstick. But they could probably tell she was still in high school. Sitting on the couch by herself, drinking, Miranda had decided she hated them, at least the girls.

She would tell him how, by the time the living room had emptied, only the light of a few guttering candles had kept Miranda from crashing. For some reason, a croaker sack had been lying on the sofa. She put her legs in and closed her eyes. She was alone, or at least thought she was, until a dirty-blond boy flopped down next to her. She kept quiet, or else he'd leave too.

She would tell how this seemed to work—the dirty-blond boy picked up a guitar. As he strummed it, his bottom lip enveloped the top, awkward but cute. "A lullaby for adults. For pale brunettes like you." The vibration touched her. He introduced himself as A.J. "I'm in a band called Lonely 101." When he

offered his hand, she slipped further into the sack, covered her breasts. After a heavy thrum, he thrust the guitar toward the ceiling. His voice smelled like his gum. Just before she could taste it, she burrowed in over her head. "I'd like to give you a kiss," he said. She snorted and raised her legs, putting her feet in and immediately lifting them from his lap, as if scorched. "You're hard to read, aren't you?" She thought answering might give her away, so she simpered instead. The couch creaked.

She'd tell how, from deep inside, his breath had warmed the cloth around her, and this warmth drew her into a lurking drowsiness, while he continued to whisper sweet nothings. Maybe he stuck around because she was the only girl left. His hand poked her thigh and skated inward. She flailed. Sweat smeared the cloth within and pressed cold against her. His hands lingered in her grasp.

She'd tell how metal had clicked the way an unlatched buckle sounds, had slid like an unfastening zipper. Creeps were supposed to come drooling, poorly dressed. That's what mom had said once while tucking her in. She had forced herself not to think of her mother. He whispered, "Think I could get into you." She clutched cloth in her fists. She turned her head, and the bitter sack covered her gasp. Her body mindlessly swelled with curiosity about his hands. How had they become so callous? What they had already started, slipping the sack off of her, she allowed them

to finish, even helped herself out and into their grip. She had thought his squeeze couldn't possibly be as tight as her vagina then. She was wrong. That was one of the many surprises. When it thrust itself into consciousness—her consciousness, not his—she asked, “Can you please get your hand out of my underwear?” He didn't answer. Or he did, only not with his mouth. It was too busy twitching—was that a smile?—when he saw the blood, as if it were ink on a document and she had signed something away to him.

But she kept A.J. inside, even after the “gummi sex” incident.

After real sex one night, she began talking about anything but her first time. “Isn't it weird how lullabies are all so morbid? Sorry I quit the pill. It was messing up my cycle. I just worry so much.”

Geoff said nothing.

“I'm sorry you had to pull out. Hey, don't ash in that can. I accidentally swallowed a bunch of ashes once 'cause of that.”

In a more countrified mockery of her voice, Geoff said, “My name is Miranda Duvall from Jemison, Alabama. I accidentally swallowed ashes.”

She gave him a sideways glance and reached for the window but didn't have enough leverage with his legs across her lap. He rose to shut it, then pulled her down to embrace her.

The room soon became stifling. “What was your first time like?” she asked. Then, maybe, she would tell hers.

Next to her ear, his voice thundered,

“It was this girl I knew, older...I heard she's got like three kids now. She was smart, really cute. Big, but cute, you know? She was just, like, really confident in herself. Anyways, one Saturday, we were at the mall bored out of our minds. She had this tight green dress on. My friend kept staring. She got in the car with us. She kissed my friend on the cheek, then the lips. She touched his dick. But he didn't want her to do it in front of the other guys. I didn't care. She went down on me right there. Then she got on top of me. The other dudes looked away. I had never been...intimate with anybody.” Geoff had hardened. His taller body pressed against hers, which was in fetal position. He thumbed the waistband of her pajamas. “I couldn't believe it. I think I said, ‘Whoa,’ or something stupid.” He flattened out with a heavy sigh and took up most of the mattress. His jaw was distended, teeth bared. The bed was rocking faster than he and Miranda had ever caused it to. After his mouth closed, he rolled onto his side away from her. He had come without her and now, like all men, would sleep.

She'd tell how the morning after she had avoided the mirror while trying to pee. She had decided she wouldn't tell Leah. That meant she wouldn't tell anybody. She stepped onto the front porch to smoke one or maybe all of the cigarettes A.J. had recommended and handed her, before he “jetted.” She still possessed these cigarettes, rolling in the back of a drawer. Maybe it was the smiling red of the morning light that had held back the

waterworks? Maybe she just wasn't the type of person who cries after losing her virginity.

She'd tell how she had heard the voices of her sister's roommate and of Leah herself, “What kind of porn are you into, Kim? Ha ha. Our mama always said ‘slept like the dead,’ instead of ‘slept like a baby.’ Mamas can say any old weird thing to their kids, and the little ones just have to listen. Not just anybody can blurt whatever she wants. Did y'all see Carol Ann last night?” Like anybody cared what Leah thought. “Hey, kid sister. Some party, huh? Lord. This place looks like a flop house.” Leah sniffed. “Miranda, did you give some lucky beau a fish sandwich?”

She'd tell how she had searched for a prop. Leah reached out to hold her sister's cheek, but Miranda ducked. Without a cigarette, she raised her chin to hold back the waterworks. She snatched the nearest drink, a can of coke on the table. The can, a makeshift ashtray, tossed flecks that coated her face and uvula.

She'd tell how that awful taste had made a desert of her larynx but worked. Miranda didn't cry or tell. They went to breakfast at a diner, and she wrote down that lyric, desert of her larynx, in a composition notebook she had brought—her journal, which more than a year later Geoff would kiddingly call her diary. Greta, Leah's friend, had been next to Miranda. Next to Greta had been her boyfriend, Kevin. Greta asked who this was playing. “Lonely 101. Local legends,” Kevin answered. “You know, they're working on a new album.” In Greta's face and across Miranda, he sang,

“Our love is viable, you're the one, my setting son. It's timed to come at the same time his son is born. It's a play on words.”

“Wasn't that guy at your party last night?” Greta asked.

“Who wasn't? My parties are the shit,” Leah barked.

“No way,” howled Kevin.

She'd tell how she had asked to bum a cigarette to make Kevin shut up. He gave her the smoke without making eye contact, but Miranda could feel the darting glances of the others. Leah would never light up in such a cramped booth, or, if she did, she'd say to Miranda, “I bet you didn't know mama smoked back when.” Miranda pored over the filter for a second, lit up, then thumbed her pager, as if there was a number displayed with somewhere for her to be. The plume of exhaled smoke reminded her of an ole-timey record player.

Nights passed without Geoff, who was at lab late or working on a paper, then at an all-night Waffle House, then sleeping into the afternoon. If not studying, he drank beer with “just the boys.” Her roommate was usually missing, so Miranda kept to herself. *Life seems elsewhere*, she wrote in her journal, which she balanced against her abdomen. *In the morning, I'm hungry. I can't stay up anymore.*

The next day, reading these words as if they were somebody else's, she said out loud, as if to that somebody else, “Hello.”

After she had finished, Miranda set the unused test strip in the medicine cabinet, next to Geoff's toothbrush, and shut the mirror door.

Her reflection trembled, but Miranda ignored this.

While she walked to class, she shivered from the cold cement through the soles of her slip-ons. Posters for Lonely 101's new album littered campus. She had her copy now, but she kept it in her closet tucked under blankets, like hidden evidence. The wind tossed her hair against her face. Trees lashed themselves, bushes fell to pieces. The wind lifted girls' skirts, as if to reveal their panties. But it couldn't touch what was tucked deep down inside Miranda.

In a line of cars, drivers were holding their horns. The one in front had stopped to let two girls pass and continued to ogle them, even after they cleared his fender. The girls made faces at one another and didn't notice Miranda, which was fine with her. Traffic moved along.

When Geoff answered, she automatically said, "Hey, daddy." Afraid he would think it was a weird sex game, she repeated, "Hey... Geoff." He greeted her as usual and waited. She glanced out the window at the baby-blue sky, wound the cord around her finger, like girls are supposed to. Her voice became just as casual as his. "Um, you know how I'm late?"

He said nothing, like he had done nothing. "Huh?" She dug her nails into the seam on the phone. "Oh shit. You're pregnant?"

They were thumbing through the back pages of the January 4-10 issue of *Magic City Times* and saw an ad

for New Women, All Women in Five Points. Geoff mentioned making an appointment. It was the middle of the school week, and clouds teemed with a threat of rain, weather that always burdened Miranda with a funereal fatigue. Maybe all of this was why she couldn't tell him. She really wanted to, but she felt like it was too important for her tongue, which drawled more than his. She might become angry at him for never asking.

At Geoff's request, she had switched on her electric kettle for instant coffee. "Better than at church," he said, nursing his cup. Under the table, he cuffed her ankle with both his feet. "You're not partaking?" he asked, raising the coffee.

"I don't know. Sorry," she mumbled.

He planed his face, warping its features. Through his squished mouth, he repeated, "I don't know," as if again in mockery.

"I'd like to tell you that I would protect her, the baby. If that's what you're worried about."

"Wait. You found out it's a girl?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"It's just, usually people say he-or-she, or just he."

"I'm just saying. We shouldn't blame her."

Although she waited for his dumb hick voice, he never responded. He left without pinching her butt.

Staring out the window, she sat in what was usually his after-sex pose but without a cigarette and without having had sex. After a day of anticipating sleep, now insomnia tickled her scalp with the too many things she'd like to tell. She crossed her room to the closet and took

out the CD, slipped the sheath of cellophane off the case and opened it, inserted the disc in the player, and tucked herself in. The first song was "Lullaby," nothing but an acoustic guitar and A.J.'s voice, almost country. She wondered if the lyrics were about her, as they soothed her down to the pitch dark where you're going and where you been.

Tight, aching uncertainty anchored her in bed. A sharp wave came and cut her loose, and she plunged to the surface. She was sitting up, her cheeks finally wet with tears. She sat still until they dried. She'd tell him that only she could save that life.

Her pager chirped its tiny song. From the wall, the phone played the second act. Nobody but Geoff ever called her. He'd probably try to make her think she wasn't alone in this time of crisis. She was sure now that she could tell him and could forgive never asking about her first time.

But instead of picking up, she pressed play on the stereo again. A little voice inside her rose with the volume. She switched on the kettle. On the tea tin was the staid face of the Queen. The music overwhelmed the stirring of the leafless oak branch

against her window. Miranda stood guard. The music would probably muffle the familiar rumble and shriek from within the kettle.

Ian Singleton (RC 2004) was born in Dearborn, Michigan, grew up in Alabama, and moved to Massachusetts, where he met his wife. Along with their beloved daughter, they share an apartment in Brooklyn. His short stories, translations, reviews, and essays have appeared in journals such as: New Madrid; Digital Americana; Midwestern Gothic; Fiddleblack; Asymptote; Ploughshares and several times in Fiction Writers Review. His first collection, Grow Me Up, is seeking a home. He was a student at Emerson College and at U-M won a Hopwood. Ian has taught Creative Writing and Literature for the PEN Prison Writing Program, the Prison University Project, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at San Francisco State University, Cogswell Polytechnical College, and the Cambridge Writers' Workshop. He currently teaches for New York Writers Workshop and PrisonWrites! and freelances as a translator and tutor. He is working on a novel titled Odessitka. "First Time" was published in the 2016 issue of New Madrid.

Five Poems

Bob Clifford

Devils Gate Rawlins where your dreams died

Devils Gate where your dreams died with your broken wooden wheel dead deer with no tripe The ashes swirl below the rocks Gate to death pray for forgiveness To finish a journey herded by the seekers	To the river To the future of the chasity the pass in the mountain that saves and not kill To the future memory To the scared To the sacrificed To the morning you started West Only knowing the sunset of the West
Wolf Mountain sings a song of redemption to the repented Which way West Which way East Which way South Which way North Come up over the mountain Say they The unforgiven terrain awaits you	Brown Eye brings you to your knee's Looking for the past from the Wind River On a lonesome road with no water stars are the map for the human prey the wagon train to Death's gate On a howling windy night when the mud froze The hoarses died The people crawl inside the cavity to breath For their America

Farewell to the lonesome warrior

The Wrestler You awoke with your noble values along side the daily sunrise The will to conquer and full fill the mission	Your love Your vision Your dreams Your force
The mat was your partner The physical challenge The son The brother The Husband The father The teacher The gentleman The editor The Democrat The will to win	The message from you will be carried on the wings of the butterflies for the earth to breath when the sun shines
	The lonesome warrior has galloped away with his God.

The casket makers for wars

The casket makers for wars On a long crooked road One size fits all Who do they put in there the same person who traveled to die the pine box without finish being prep for the morning sun prep for the lunch hour prep for the dinner hour prep for the story hour	AS the casket makers pound nails Into a invisible hole The edge of the hammers are dense that Deliver the final answer of destination On a required requiem of precision
The casket makers for wars Carry a soul not a body Who is in that pine box That is carried to a hole Will the dirt feel the soul Will god find the soul Will the 80 fingers that carry the casket Be different after and holy	The makers of caskets for war have a memory the flowers are on put on the caskets with the bodies that cannot smell do those flowers go to the rest home after The casket with a soul not a body meets the Hole that is straight from hell.

As the daisies wake up for another day of sun

As the daisies wake up for another day of sun	A ghost visits every night
The lust of the seeds seek the boarder	It will not leave until sunrise
We walk down the limits of the trail	Sleep cannot hide you from the haunt
Smelling the presence of the past	a past
Where is the full moon	The daisies go to sleep so the ghost
Where is the coyote howling	can visit on the train
Who is the coyote howling too	That arrives at the chicken coop
Can you hear the orchids sing to each other	station with cut off heads
Can you hear the water travel	And throats emptying the sins of the
Will you crave what you have not done	slicers
Will you crave what you have done	The Daisies go to sleep so the fox can
Will you bury both in your selfishness	travel with the moon or no moon
	The Daisies go to sleep tucked away
	from the violent smells
The optical revisit to love and the sorrowful without pity	The Daisies will wake up with
The gray fox peaking out of his home	everyone looking at them
The black and yellow snake laying in the sun	Who will look

Running through the Assabet Valley

Running through the Assabet Valley	The shotgun
Wet leaves of trails	The power pellet
Virgin trails	The orange coat
Virgin runner	The 10 fingers
Virgin mind	
Virgin hope	Running through the Assabet Valley
	On a foggy raining day
The splash of mud	Where is the river
The whip of the branches	Where is the dam
The thud of a gully	Where is the exit
The crack of the twigs	Oh my do I wish the wishes of the prey

Bob Clifford (RC 1979) is a poet, and former associate director and coordinator of acadademic programs. He was Senior Associate Athletic Director at Oregon State University for 13 years and in 2016 became Director of Athletics at New Mexico Highlands University. Bob's second book of poems will be released in fall 2017.

Two Poems

Elizabeth Schmuhl

#67

Beetles visit
the hydrangeas
at night.

I kneel
waiting
till dawn.

Not even
a moth
has landed
on one of
my petals.

The earth here
acidic. My
petals
no longer
pink.

#37

A rose is a nice way
to remind the person you
love about impermanence.

I pick a yellow one and stuff it
into an envelope
send it to a lover who thought
they left me and yet.

Elizabeth Schmuhl (RC 2006) is a multidisciplinary artist and the author of Presto Agitato (Dancing Girl Press & Zoo Cake Press, 2015) and Premonitions (Wayne State University Press, forthcoming). She illustrates essays for The Rumpus, and co-edits the twice-weekly micro-fiction journal CheapPOP. She has taught at the RC and now works at the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Art. She divides her time between DC, NYC, and her centennial fruit farm in Michigan. These pieces have been printed elsewhere.



My Acid Trip

Dennis Foon

This is a potato. This is a piece of paper with a drop of LSD on it. Any undercover drug enforcement agents that are here tonight can relax, for although this is a literal potato, there is no literal drug on this literal piece of paper. Which I will prove to you now. (licks it; staggers) Oh man... wow. This is heavy shit, man. (looks at audience, soberly) just kidding. I have other props here too. This is a jar of Tar Ointment used for the treatment of skin diseases such as eczema and the heartbreak of psoriasis. Unlike blotter acid, it can be purchased over the counter at any pharmacy. And this is a copy of the Old Testament. These are not randomly selected objects. They all, in fact, relate to the Jewish High Holy day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. For me, at least.

I am almost eight years old and it's the breaking of the fast at Yom Kippur, the highest of the High Holy Days and there is a mountain of provisions on the table waiting to be consumed after the prayers. Sitting around this Mt. Zion of food are thirteen people, three of whom are featured on an old photograph on the wall that was taken in a little shtetl near Kiev. In the picture are my great-grandfather, great-grandmother, grandfather, and my great aunts and uncles. Eight penniless Jewish peasants pretending to be aristocrats, all posing somberly in their best borrowed clothes, in front of a painted backdrop of an lush garden that looks like something out of Chekhov's Cherry Orchard. By far the most striking figure is a tall and handsome young man, who actually

does look like an aristocrat: my late great-uncle Moishe, whose magnificent shadow loomed over our lives. This man was my father's beloved mentor. I never met Moishe, but his shadow was always there. I was forever trying to find out more about the man, the perfect role model for the enterprising 8 year old that I was at the time. Luckily, my grandfather was always happy to talk about his big brother.

Me: Grandpa, tell me about my Uncle Moishe.

Grandpa: Moishe? Well, my darling boy. This is all you need to know: there is God -- and there is your Great Uncle Moishe.

Me: You really mean that?

Grandpa: When the Cossacks came (those butchers, those dogs from hell), he saved our lives and brought us all to the glorious Promised Land: Detroit, Michigan. That would be enough for most people. To save so many. But then, here we are, a bunch of starving immigrants without a word of English, and he saves us again.

Me: Tell me the story, from the beginning.

Grandpa: In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.

Me: I mean, later. Much later: Moishe, the business.

Grandpa: Then what did you say 'at the beginning' for?

Me: I meant the beginning of the business.

Grandpa: Ah, well, in the beginning, there was just me and your Great Uncle Sammy. Moishe got me a wagon, and gave Sammy the wheelbarrow and he would send us off with a pocketful of pennies. We'd go from house to house, paying a few cents for some copper pipe, or an old stove, or a steel rod.

Me: You were junk collectors.

Grandpa: Junk, no! Scrap metal. And Moishe turned it into gold! He was an alchemist! He'd separate everything and then sell it by the ton. Copper, lead, iron! Worthless bent-up crap bought for pennies, sold for dollars! He was a genius! Einstein would have wept to have a brain like his! Because five years after coming to this country with holes in our shoes, we're all driving cars and have houses for everybody to live in. Everyone in the family, as soon as they got off the boat, they came and worked for Moishe, the cousins, the in-laws, everybody.

Me: You all loved him.

Grandpa: Loved? We worshipped the ground he walked on. My cousin, Bertha, with the big lips, every Rosh Hashanah, she'd take off Moishe's shoes and socks and kiss the dirt on his feet.

Me: He did so much. What did he want in return?

Grandpa: Nothing. Only love. All our love.

Me: Okay, so tell me, why does my dad cry whenever we say his name?

Grandpa: Because Moishe was like his father.

Me: But you're dad's father.

Grandpa: Believe me, darling boy, the day Moishe came to me and said he wanted my son to be his right hand, it was the proudest day of my life.

Me: And when he died?

Grandpa: (Grandpa just looks at Me. Eyes tear up.) A mench like that. He can never die.

Me: But Grandpa...

Grandpa: In the beginning, God made the heaven and the earth and your great uncle Moishe.

That night, my Grandpa leads the prayers that Moishe once led. These are the holiest of all holy prayers that no one sitting here can understand except for the Baruch Ata Adonai, Blessed Art Thou Oh Lord our God, and the amens, which I always try to say with a great deal of commitment, but at which I always fail miserably. Grandpa, on the other hand, is very good at this. He reads and chants and bows his head and kisses his tallis and my dad is the only other person at the banquet table who is keeping up with him. My dad looks kind of haunted, there at the head of the table, but since I am eight, I assume the haunted look is due to the eminent arrival of God.

Please note that my dad and his father are very devout and very deaf. My dad is completely deaf in one ear and half deaf in the other, and grandpa lost a chunk of his hearing from old age, so neither of them seem to be noticing that not one of the other people at the table are paying any attention to the religious ritual. Two of my older cousins, who are lifeguards at the pool, are sleeping. My mom is talking to my Great Aunt Rozzie -- she's the old beautician with all the makeup and the super black ratted-up hair who doesn't seem to care about God at all, because she's applying mascara on Cousin Bertha of the legendary foot kissing lips. I have fasted all day for the first time and even though I have a very, very tiny stomach I can feel these gigantic pangs of hunger gazing at the feast that we are not allowed to touch until the last amen. I am old enough

to know that this is a metaphorical starvation, that I have fasted for all my accumulated sins not just for the last year but for all of my eight years because this is my first fast, and I am doing a big penance today, and that this isn't just my starvation but a small version of the big starvation all the Jews have suffered. I'm not thinking of all the big planetary starvations taking place right now(beside which my own, trivial, personal, time-limited starvation pales) but this symbolic fast which will buy atonement for all my sins like the times I stole a comic book or neglected to wash my hands after a pee, or picked my nose without using a Kleenex. At least, those are the sins I told myself I was atoning for. In truth, I had a much deeper, darker sin that plagued me: I did not love my father. I did not honor him, which broke the Second Commandment. Worse, I was ashamed and repelled by him. First, because of his deafness, he was hard to talk to. And though I was told that before I was born, he was a nice looking, athletic guy whose only flaw was a little rash on his elbows, by the time I came along, the little rash had spread over his entire body -- wherein comes the tar cream, which failed him. He was eventually covered with red peeling blotches that left scales all over the house, and his joints were swollen and twisted with arthritis, which curved his spine, making him look like a leprous Quasimodo -- who, by the way, was also quite deaf from ringing the bells. When we did communicate, it went something like this:

Dad: Where are you going?

Me: To Denny's house.

Dad: Come again?

Me: I'm going to Denny's.

Dad: What was that?

Me: Denny's.

Dad: You need pennies? You wanna look through my change?

Me: No thanks, Dad, not right now.

Dad: What?

Me: Nothing.

Dad: Okay then, if you're so rich. Do me a favor, son, will you?

Me: I gotta go.

Dad: Give me a little scratch.

Me: I can't right now.

Dad: But there's this spot that's killing me.

Me: Sorry I gotta go.

...But let's go back to the breaking of the fast, the eight year-old me staring at my father who is fervently praying, dark bags under his red rimmed eyes. And this revelation hits me: my dad's back is not just bent from arthritis; it's bent from the weight of sin. It's obvious that no matter how huge my offense against him feels, it's a mere teardrop compared to the oceanic transgression he's feeling. How is it possible? That my sin, which seems so overwhelming, should be miniscule compared to his. It made me desperate to know, exactly what was his great secret sin?

Anyway, my epiphany is interrupted by the old guy sitting next to me, my great uncle Sammy. He is a very scrawny little man, and after fifty years, he looks remarkably unchanged from the short and scrawny boy in the family portrait. Apart from the wrinkles, baldness and hairy ears which have grown larger

from age, he remained unmistakably the same Sammy, who was always considered useless and negligible, still of the old world, still a peasant. While my eyes shift from the photo to the man, comparing the changes time has wrought, my great uncle Sammy does the unthinkable. Ignoring the holy rituals that are going on at the head of the table, he lifts his fork, reaches over to the bowl heaped with whole skinned and boiled potatoes, jabs his fork in, pulls out the biggest potato and jams the entire thing into his mouth. My own mouth drops open wide in utter shock at his chutzpah. But unlike my mouth, which closes again, his mouth does not because the potato is wedged in. Uncle Sammy can't get it in and can't get it out. He's opened his mouth so wide, and the potato's undercooked just enough, and so deep in his throat, he can't bite down. So he's frantically jabbing with his fork, trying to pry it out but the potato won't give.

Everybody is ignoring Sammy, not because they're disgusted, but because they're too busy sleeping, putting on makeup or praying for forgiveness. Great Uncle Sammy's gagging and I am fascinated, thinking that maybe he is going to die right here, because he's committed a sacrilege, wondering if this is God's punishment to the wicked who preempt the prayer with a potato. I am suddenly filled with the dread that this Day of Atonement, Great Uncle Sammy is going to be struck down by a tuber from Yahweh and fall over dead on my lap. It takes a great deal of effort but I manage to pull

myself away to look urgently at my father, but clearly he's not about to be distracted. I don't know what the Hebrew words are he's intoning, but his eyes have shifted to the portrait. He's staring at his Uncle Moishe, who seems to be staring back at him. In fact, my mother always claimed the reason everyone thought Moishe was a saint was because no matter where you stood in the room, Moishe's eyes in the picture seemed to be staring right back at you. I'd often try to talk to my father about Moishe, who died before I was born, but these conversations always ended the same way.

Me: Dad?

Dad: Hey, boychick!

Me: I have a question.

Dad: A confession? Do I look like a priest? Did you go Catholic?

Me: No, no. A question.

Dad: Ah, questions! You're in the right place! I am the answer man. Fire away!

Me: Tell me --

Dad: Whoa! That ear's as dead as a doorknob, Son. Talk into my good one.

Me: Uncle Moishe.

Dad: Wait! Gotta turn up the hearing aid. Try again. First question, batter up!

Me: Uncle Moishe.

(Dad hyperventilates. His eyes water up.)

Me: (over-enunciating) Please. Tell me about Uncle Moishe.

Dad: (desperately controlling the emotion) Never forget this: he was a great man. He was the greatest.

Me: Was he really your teacher?

Dad: He taught me everything I

know. He was more a father to me than my own father. Uncle Moishe was Moses, Gandhi and Elvis rolled up into one.

Me: What happened when he died?

(Dad looks at Me, grief stricken)

Dad: Come again?

Me: What happened?

Dad sadly shakes his head. Dad: He left us too soon. Moishe...

(Dad starts to cry)

I used to think -- especially when you consider Uncle Sammy with the potato sticking out of his mouth or my Dad scratching himself all day long -- I used to think the strength in my family had died with Uncle Moishe. I imagined that my great uncle was puking in his grave at how lost they all were without him. I fantasized how much different my own life would have been if he'd been my mentor, my teacher, this man who'd saved dozens, hundreds of people from death and poverty. Under his tutelage, I would have been so much more, so much better than I was.

So how was it that my father could have been under his wing of greatness and become such a crippled, pitiful man? These negative feelings took over my life the way a baobab tree might overwhelm an island. And as a result of these insinuating and endlessly multiplying doubts, I became distant from my father, ashamed of him, and over the years I developed into what is commonly known as a problem child. My parents became concerned that I was going off the deep end, and to

be quite honest, I gave them every reason to be. A development that seriously threatened my mother's dream of me becoming a brain surgeon, or at the very least, an orthodontist.

Mom: Come here. Come closer to me. I want to smell your breath.

Me: Why?

Mom: I think you have halitosis...

Where are you going?

Me: To gargle.

Mom: Let me smell first.

Me: You want to smell my halitosis?

Mom: Why are your eyes bloodshot?

Me: I was swimming. There was chorine in the pool.

Mom: You were not swimming. Are you taking drugs? Let me see your bathing suit.

Me: Now that's just kinky, Mom.

Mom: I don't care. Get it.

Me: You want it so bad, you get it.

Mom: How dare you talk to your mother that way!

Me: How else should I talk to you.

This is bullshit!

Mom: When your father gets home --

Me: What? We'll have a conversation? Good luck.

Mom: Where are you going?

Me: To the library. Research project. You're going out with dad tonight, right? So I guess you won't be here when I get home.

Mom: You hate me. You hate your mother.

Me: Will you please just leave me alone!

Mom: Do you want to kill me? Here's a knife. Stab me in the heart.

Me: Don't worry, I'll just eat some leftovers. Feel free to smell my

bathing suit as much as you want.

You can understand why, after a conversation like that, I might want to go straight to the librarian.

Dealer: What exactly are you looking for?

Me: Something on paper.

Dealer: how much do you need?

Me: Just one dose.

Dealer: You tripping alone?

Me: No, with a friend.

Dealer: Kind of hard to split one drop on paper between two people.

Me: He's got his own.

Dealer: Interesting. Two parallel trips. ...So you've tripped a lot?

Me: Oh yeah. A lot. Lots. And lots.

(The Dealer picks up the piece of paper)

Dealer: Good. Cause this is powerful medicine, man. With this shit, you do not trip alone.

Me: I don't. I'm not. Not me.

Dealer: Well, then. Bon Voyage, Star Boy.

Me: Over and out.

Admittedly, there was a little hubris going on here, because I had been telling people and myself that I was an old hand at this kind of adventure. After all, I had been smoking large quantities of pot, which in retrospect was probably catnip. The fact was my only previous experience had consisted of ingesting some peyote and vomiting all night, which I guess, technically, you could call a trip. It's true I had dropped some mescaline but I realize now must have been a mild amphetamine, because we stayed up till dawn, watched the sunrise and were so wired we

watched the sunset too. Having done these field tests, I felt it was time to raise the ante and see what Timothy Leary was talking about. Unfortunately for me, unlike the previous dealers I had bought catnip from, this guy turned out to be the real thing. Oh, right. There's one thing I didn't mention about that old family photograph of my great-grandparents and their family. You see, six months after the picture was taken, over half of them were dead. Everybody standing to the left of my great-grandfather was killed by Cossacks. Grandpa, Moishe, Sammy and Rozzie were the only survivors, led to safety by Moishe. I never met my great-grandpa, but if I had, I would have definitely made a point of never standing on his left. I'm saying this because I don't want to imply it was my father alone who turned me into a surly, drug abusing adolescent. I was raised with the paranoia of extinction, if not by the Cossacks or Nazis, maybe the people next door -- maybe even...you. And then, of course there were the lies, if not outright, then certainly through obfuscation: What was my dad's great burden? Nobody would say exactly what it was. My mom was a neurotic mess -- why? I knew that somehow my Great Uncle Moishe was the key to solving the puzzle, but getting the truth about him was, as it happens, no easier than getting the truth about God. Nobody would talk, everybody was perfectly willing to lie -- the very fabric of their existence was based on deceit and denial. It was no wonder a dealer could sell me

catnip or horse manure and I'd smoke it all night and convince myself I was stoned on Acapulco Gold. I was raised on this quaking bog of bullshit.

Remember Great Aunt Rozzie with the very black black hair? She is also in the picture, she was one of the lucky ones standing on the right, next to Great Uncle Sammy. Rozzie was the one putting makeup on Cousin Bertha. I actually liked talking to Great Aunt Rozzie. Of course, when it came to family history...

Rozzie: Darling, you're so big now, you're all grown up, you're a big handsome boy. When are you going to let me cut your hair so we can see that beautiful face.

Me. Soon. Auntie Rozzie, I'm working on a project.

Rozzie. For school, good.

Me. A family project

Rozzie. Whose family?

Me. Our family. I'm trying to find things out about our history. Can I ask you something?

Rozzie. Of course. Anything, darling.

Me. When you were a child, just before you came to this country...

Rozzie. I don't remember.

Me. But Uncle Moishe saved you from the Cossacks --

Rozzie: My brother Moishe, may he rest in peace, what a jewel, what a mench, if only God was a man like him.

Me. So when the Cossacks came --

Rozzie: (flatly) I never saw a Cossack in my life.

Me. But Auntie, your customers, at the salon -- most of them escaped

from pogroms or the holocaust, I thought that maybe they went to you because you're like them.

Rozzie: Of course I like them, they're my customers.

Me. No, I mean like, as in similar.

Rozzie: They want similar, I give them similar. They want Lucy, I give them red. They want blond, I make them so Marilyn Monroe would eat her kishkas out.

Me: I heard that when Uncle Moishe pulled you from under the bed -- Rozzie. Your Uncle Moishe was a saint. That's who you should be talking to.

Me. But I can't. He's dead.

Rozzie. Such are the tragedies of life.

The thing the family always whispered about was Auntie Rozzie's hair. You see, back in Russia, led by their eldest brother Moishe, Sammy and my grandfather ran into the woods when the Cossacks came to the house. But Rozzie, being only eight and too small to run, was hidden under a bed. From that vantage point, she was able to watch the soldiers hang their parents from the rafters and witness their last dying breaths. After the Cossacks left, Moishe and her brothers came back to the house, found their dead parents and there, under the bed, was Aunt Rozzie, still hiding, unharmed. The only thing different about her was that her black straight hair turned white and frizzy. She'd been dyeing and straightening it ever since.

An hour after I licked the little dot off the paper, I was sitting in my room, alone in the house, reading a

Spiderman comic in sober frustration, assuming I'd been totally ripped off by the dealer. Then I noticed Peter Parker was melting in my hands. The carpet was rippling, the walls undulating. I felt this overwhelming urge to scratch myself. My arms -- the skin was all red and inflamed and huge white blisters were breaking out all over. And inside the blisters, little black things were swimming. I looked closer. The black things were centipedes, millipedes, all kinds of venomous pedes. One tilted its razor sharp barb and sliced the blister open. Liquid poured out and so did millions of pedes, all of them swarming on my skin.

The only thing I could think to do was run. But how do you escape from your own skin? I bolted from my room, leaped down the stairs three at a time and tumbled to a stop in the dining room, heart pounding. The walls were throbbing. I peeked at my hands and stifled a scream. I was trapped in my worst nightmare. I was wearing my father's skin.

Did I hear a sound, a voice? Or was it a flash of light coming from that old family portrait? I scanned the dead faces, frozen in time, peasants posing as aristocrats -- and then I stopped cold: My Great Uncle Moishe's regal nostrils were flaring. He was breathing. His eyes were, of course, staring at me -- but with compassion and love. Uncle Moishe, I said, I've lost my way. I thought I knew what I was doing with my life, but I don't. I'm seventeen and I just want to die. Please, Uncle, help me, help me.

Voice: What's wrong with you?
 I gasped. Froze.
 Me: (whispers) ...Uncle Moishe?
 Mom: No, it's your mother. Are you talking to that picture?
 - Slowly I turned, avoiding her eyes. But I couldn't help peeking. Her body was throbbing, ballooning, swelling larger and larger. My mother was as big as the room. I swallowed desperately, trying to find words.
 Me: ...I was thinking.
 Mom: Thinking out loud? About what?
 Me: ...Uncle Moishe.
 Mom: Why him?
 Me: Because things would be so much better...if he were here.
 Mom: You're out of your mind.
 Me: Why? He was a great man, a hero, he saved the whole family.
 Mom: He was an asshole.
 Me: But he created the business --
 Mom: Moishe never made that business. It was nothing. Just a bunch of junk peddlers until your father came along.
 Me: But everybody was making money with Uncle Moishe.
 Mom: None of them drove Cadillacs until your father came along. Everyday he'd walk in with ten new brilliant ideas to improve the profits. He replaced those pathetic wagons and wheelbarrows with trucks.
 Me: But Uncle Moishe...
 Mom: Sammy loved driving a truck and your Grandfather was happy to sit and play casino all day, but Moishe was eating his kishkes out. He had nothing to do. Once your father came along, there was no more nickle and diming, no more two-bit peddlers, it

was all big deals -- Moishe was out of his league. Your father was bringing in truckloads of junk cars from Toledo, Chicago, New York. Moishe was a fifth wheel now, but he still strutted around like he was cock of the walk and paid your father shit. But that wasn't enough, he had to punish your father more.

Me: Dad loved him. He loved dad!
 Mom: (snapping) Oh yeah? Then why did he blow his brains out!

-- Suddenly I saw an eruption of blood spewing out of Moishe's picture. I must have screamed as I fell into the chair because my mom loomed over me, whispering:

Mom: You've got to swear to God you'll never tell a soul.

Me: Who am I gonna tell?

Mom: Swear it!

Me: I swear to God I'll never tell. Never, never, never! Tell me what happened, please, Mom, tell me what happened!

-- I watched spellbound as a tear formed in the corner of her eye socket, then slid slow down her cheek like a tiny slug, leaving a shimmering trail.

Mom: ...On Friday after closing, Moishe borrowed the night watchman's gun.

-- She stared at me: What's different about you? Why are you making me talk like this?

Me: I don't know. Who cares -- keep talking.

Mom: Our phone rang. The police wouldn't say what it was, just called your father to the office. He walked into that room, and saw Moishe lying there, half his head splattered on the

walls.

Me: Oh my god.

Mom: For the next two months he lay in bed, crying. I begged him, explained things to him, screamed at him. Nothing. For sixty-one days your father just laid there. Finally between the psychiatrists and the rabbis they got him back on his feet.

Me. But he was never the same.

Mom. He was never the same. The little itchy spots he always had on his elbows spread over his whole body. Red blotches, white scales.

Me. He's always scratching. He scratches till it bleeds.

Mom. Every night I'd put the tar cream on him, then wrap him in plastic and tape him up. And in the morning I'd cut him out of it. But that wasn't the worst.

Me. What could be worse?

Mom. He walked away from the business. Gave it back to his relatives. The psoriasis ate away at his joints, the arthritis twisted his fingers, bent his spine, hardened his arteries. And the family swallowed up all the profits. It was like in the Bible. The Book of Job. That is your father.

-- Then she looked at me.

Mom: What's wrong with your eyes?

Me: If my eyes are throbbing it's because you just blew my mind.

Mom: You didn't eat dinner.

Me: I'm fasting.

Mom: You wanna get sick? You have to eat something. We brought you back a baked potato. Here, bite it. Before it gets cold. Put it in your mouth. Eat the potato.

-- She's trying to push the potato between my teeth.

I ran. Out the door, down the

sidewalks, across the streets, running from her, from them, from it all. But it was no good, there were too many others trying to escape ghosts, all lost, lonely, sick, dying, afraid. My footsteps joined their footsteps until finally, I couldn't run anymore. I was caught in the truth of existence: life is a nightmare you can't wake from.

There was nothing else left to do but surrender. I looked up at the sky. At first I saw one star blink on and off, then another, and another and then I was caught. I could see the distances between each of these suns, could see the galaxies, could feel infinity. I felt a calming intelligence wash over me. And knew that if there was a god, this was it. And our world was part of it, I was part it. I had just been busy, too worried, too preoccupied with myself to notice. I looked at my hands. I understood now that they were an illusion just like I was an illusion, that the ground and the trees and the footsteps, this entire physical existence was just a stopping point, a place for a bunch of molecules to take shape for a while before becoming something else. And that was okay. In fact, it was extraordinary. The fear lifted off me because I was filled right up with the stars and the space between them. I could be happy because I was much, much more and much much less than I ever imagined. It was a beautiful place to be. I was completely blissed out and there was one person I had to share this with.

Me: Dad, I have incredible news.

Dad: News? Talk in my good ear, son, and speak up.

Me: It's all an illusion.
 Dad: It's what?
 Me: An illusion! We can be free of all this, dad!
 Dad: Who's free?
 Me: I had a religious experience, Dad. I felt the universe inside me.
 Dad: When? How?
 Me: I was...meditating. I felt it.
 Dad: You saw God.
 Me: I felt it. The cosmos. And I realized...the world...all this pain and suffering...all these things we call reality...they aren't real.
 (Dad just looks at Me.)
 Me:...Did you understand what I said? Should I say it again?
 Dad: Say what?
 Me: Dad -- you, me, our lives, our memories -- none of it's real. All these years, me feeling guilty about you, you feeling guilty about Uncle Moishe, we're just clinging to memories and feelings because we believe our existence depends on them, but it doesn't. If you let go of yourself -- the pain goes too.
 Dad: I don't think so.
 Me: Don't you see? You don't have to blame yourself for Moishe.
 Dad: What about Moishe?
 Me: For twenty years, you've let your guilt destroy you, even though he killed himself. It had nothing to do with you.
 Dad: What?
 Me: You can let go of Moishe.
 Dad: You'll have to speak up, this fucking hearing aid's on the blink!
 Me: You didn't kill Moishe, he killed himself!
 Dad: I can't hear what you're saying!
 Me: Dad. Dad!
 (Dad breathes, starts to calm down.)

Me: Did you really not hear a word I said?
 Dad: No, No, I got it. You've gone Buddhist. Don't tell your mother.
 Me: I'm not Buddhist, I just had a revelation.
 Dad: That none of this is real.
 (Scratches himself) This isn't real.
 Me: That's right. What do you think?
 Dad: It's a crock of shit.
 Me: Yes! That's it exactly! Reality is a sham! It's bullshit!
 Dad: No. I mean you're full of shit.
 Me: I am?
 Dad: I don't know what God you were talking to, but if this is all an illusion, he's one sick bastard.
 Me: It's just...if you could feel what I felt...I don't think you'd suffer the way you do.
 Dad: That's what this is all about? You don't want me to suffer?
 Me: That's right.
 Dad: Well, fuck the god shit, son. There is something you can do.
 Me: Anything.
 Dad: There's this spot, right here, I can't reach. It's driving me wild.
 Me: ...You want me to scratch it?
 Dad: If you wouldn't mind.
 Me: Okay.
 (Me scratches Dad. Dad moans with pleasure.)
 Dad: This is what Uncle Moishe was missing, son. A good scratch. If you can't get that, it makes it awful hard to live.
 -- I must have scratched him all night long, watching the scales flake off his back and snow on my feet. It gave him such pleasure, I felt like I was making up for seventeen years of reviling him. Around dawn, hours

after I had rubbed this tar cream on his skin and he'd gone up to bed, the effect of the acid wore off. And sitting there at the empty table, I found his scales caked under my fingernails. Without the chemical in my system, no matter how hard I tried to think of them as an illusion, I could not. And my hands stank of tar, the remains of dead dinosaurs. Later that day, my dad caught me sniffing my fingers, and I think the look of revulsion on my face and the sorrow on his made it clear that a repeat performance of the scratchy love-in would not be coming soon.

My Great Uncle Sammy was always kind of invisible, which might explain why he went for that potato, and why no one ever looked up. I often think back to that moment and tell myself there was nothing I could do. I was only eight, and even less important than he was. Still, I could have stood up, screamed, pounded him on the back, or even tried to pull the potato out. I said 'uh!' to my Great Aunt Rozzie, who hissed 'sh!' and never turned. Everyone else was too busy talking or sleeping or praying to God for forgiveness to notice the man suffocating in front of them. They didn't even look up when he hit the table. It was only when the fork flew out of his hand, and shattered a wine glass that the property damage snapped everyone to attention. I couldn't speak, I just pointed at him. He was blue. And despite my cousins 'the lifeguards' best efforts to resuscitate him, by the time the

ambulance came, Great Uncle Sammy was dead.

His passing was hardly noticed. After all, he wasn't Moishe. Death by potato being far less dramatic than the tragic hero's death by bullet.

Most of my life I felt torn between my two great-uncles, fearing I was an invisible Sammy, dreaming of attaining Moishe's stature. But lately I've come to an unsettling realization: I'm more like the rest of my family sitting around that table, overwhelmed by the gigantic atonement required of me, paralyzed, blind to the vicissitudes of the world, incapable of response, surrounded by things that make me feel more than I am. In case I'm wrong, I make sure there are no guns in my house and I always, always eat my potatoes mashed. But somehow I don't think that's going to be enough.

Dennis Foon (RC 1973) has received many awards for his screenplays, which include Life Above All (Oscar shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Film) and On The Farm, 2016 Leo winner for best screenplay. An internationally produced playwright, his plays have received the British Theatre Award and two Chalmers awards, including New Kid, Liars and Mirror Game. His novels include The Longlight Legacy trilogy and Skud (BC Book Prize). His latest feature film, Indian Horse, is slated for a 2017 release.



Love & Other Disorders

Clare Higgins

Monday, June 7.

This is my first entry in my “feelings journal”, as you so aptly put it, Dr. Michael Train. I would just like to say, for starters, that our appointment was just fine, but you came across as a bit condescending when you said You may call me Dr. Michael, or even Michael, if you wish. Like I was a jumpy teenager just bursting to know what your first name was. I honestly think you only did that because Dr. Train would sound too stupid-childish for an adult psychiatrist. I’ll have you know I’m probably older than your wife, and you have sex with her, so that’s a respectful act depending on how you look at it so you should treat me as an equal.

Anyway, I’m sorry I haven’t written

yet since our Friday appointment. There hasn’t been anything particularly thrilling to write about since then. I’ve just been sitting in the apartment, counting my insects. I know you said it shows signs of the urge to control others, putting them in jars like that, but they’re really quite happy in there. I went for a walk once, as well, like you said I should. It was all right. I wore a sunhat.

But getting to the reason I’m writing today. Something incredible happened this afternoon. I’m going to remember this moment in my life’s history until I die.

I’ve found him. Well, maybe him isn’t the best word, it seems so little and insignificant. *Him* sounds like a six-

legged beetle that crawls around your backyard and lives for maybe three weeks at best. I’ve found The One. I’m very sure about it this time. This isn’t anything like the windshield smashing the incident, I swear, and honestly, that was all a misunderstanding. *Jacob* was only a him, but this man.

His name is David. I met him in the elevator going upstairs a few minutes ago. We said hello and I thought to myself He is the most handsome man I have ever seen. I liked his ~~sexy~~ khaki postal uniform and I told him so. I told him My name’s Angela very calm and sophisticated and he said I’m David. Then it was quiet for a bit but I quickly interjected and I found out that he was delivering his ~~package~~ a package to my across the hall neighbor who lives three floors below me so I said I could drop it off if he wanted and he said No thank you, they’ve got to sign for it anyway but you’re very kind, what’s your name again? And I told him. Then the elevator stopped and he got out and said Well, I’ll see you around, Angela.

It was exactly how it was supposed to happen. My mother told me that was just how she met my father, not on an elevator exactly, but on top of the Empire State Building, which is very similar. Both tall buildings. She says he asked her if she had a light and she said No, she didn’t smoke but as soon as they locked eyes, something special happened. He took her by the hand and forgot all about the evil pull tobacco has on the human soul. And that’s how I happened.

Now, I’ve never gotten to meet my father, as he died soon before my birth trying to deliver a government

message to Guatemala from the Netherlands, but my mother has told me every story of their romance together, and today, I met my very own Bernard Horace Crenshaw. From the way David smiled at me on the elevator today, I knew he was no Jacob. Given the incredibly similar circumstances of our meeting, we probably have the same soul make-up, which makes us 100% compatible. It’s my father’s essence, sent to me in the form of the perfect man who I’m going to marry and have ~~nine perfect children with~~. I’m just a lot luckier than other girls to have found him this quickly. That’s all for now.

Angela

Wednesday, June 9.

Status report: Good. I decided to start adding that for each of the entries, to help you with things, so you don’t have to read into my words and etchings, I can just tell you. You’ll probably think that’s condescending of me, Michael, but it really isn’t. I’m just being helpful like you always are. Just trying to help!

Now, as you know, it’s been two days since my first meeting with David. The first time we met, he told me See you around, Angela, but I knew the fates had already been good enough to send him to me in that elevator, and I was on my own at this point. So naturally, I ~~followed him~~ learned from a friend that he lives at 401 N. Kingsborough Street just on the Upper East Side where each house has a nice little garden in front of it. I swear, it’s just like Tom Hanks’ childhood neighborhood in that one film, where all the leaves turn golden and orange in the fall. Just beautiful!

I stopped by again today and decided to ring the doorbell. My heart was beating right out of my chest and I told myself Angela, he could answer at any minute, just be calm. But he didn't answer, and I figured he must be at work, so I wrote him a nice note with my phone number and left it in the mailbox. Any day now, he'll call and I'll tell him all about the father I never knew and I'll suggest we meet for dinner at this nice Italian place by his neighborhood. I'm very accommodating.

Angela

Friday, June 11.

Status report: Fine. Today, I had another appointment with you, Dr. Michael, but you already knew that. You said I should share more of my inner thoughts with you in this journal. So I would like you to know that when you said You know I can still read all of the words you cross out, don't you I was thinking ~~Well fuck you then, Train~~ that that was a nice, informative thing to say. So thank you, Dr. Michael.

Anyway, no progress yet with David. I read an article on Thought Catalog today about how these days, we are all stuck in this crazy dating game where whoever cares less, wins. So it's hard to tell the difference between someone who is trying to appear nonchalant and someone who doesn't care at all! Poor David. He's probably nervous about talking to me. I understand how he feels since ~~my sexual confidence can be disarming for some~~. I just hope he can get over himself and pick up the phone already.

My bugs are doing well. Some of them, at least, I think the ladybugs

were in the sun for too long and I spotted some this morning on their backs ~~all dried up and grisly~~ not moving. I should pay more attention and move the different jars when the sun changes, or maybe draw the shades. Oh well. Got any craft ideas for dead ladybug skins, doc? Ha ha. Just kidding.

Angela

Monday, June 14.

Status Report: Not good. I took matters into my own hands today. Michael, I'm going to be stern but casual here and call you Michael, I know that you said if it was meant to be with David, then things would work themselves out, but I think you just read those little inspiring phrase books in your spare time and then regurgitate those phrases to people like us in your little appointments. I'm sorry for being stern but causal like this, but it's important you know why I did what I did.

I sat around all weekend waiting for David to call. But my thoughts started working their ways around themselves and it dawned on me all of a sudden and I got this sinking feeling in my stomach. What if the mailman took the note out of the box? What if an animal got into the box and ate it? ANYTHING could have happened to that note, Dr. Train, and you know it. And I couldn't just sit there after that.

~~I watched~~ I went to the house today and ~~sat in my usual spot~~ was about to knock when I saw her, with that swishy, polished ponytail and those stupid yoga pants when she pulled up into the driveway in a gray Subaru. At first I thought maybe she could be a rude salesperson who drives to houses instead of walking but she got groceries

out of the car (she used plastic bags which is the absolute worst option for the environment, by the way, she could have at least chosen paper) and turned her own key in the door.

This was what had stopped him. With that awful woman around the house how could he get away to call? It wasn't his fault: he was a prisoner in his own home. No concrete plans yet, because I am doing what you said, with the calming breaths and the waiting 24 hours instead of lashing out. But stay tuned.

Angela

Tuesday, June 15.

Status Report: Eye of the Tiger. Isn't that creative? I thought it would be cute and fitting for the occasion.

I stayed up most of last night and I've come to the conclusion that I need to intimidate the opposition. I have decided to send her messages of hatred to show her my dominance ~~like dogs do when they pee on telephone poles~~. Today, I sent a note, and just for dramatic effect, I popped a few ladybug carcasses in there. Nothing dangerous about them, just for show. Plus, now I've gotten rid of them. They were making my apartment look dismal.

Angela

Thursday, June 17.

Status Report: Inspired. I watched You've Got Mail this afternoon, where Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks think that they shouldn't be together, but that's because they don't even know that the universe already decided for them that they're perfect for each other. I personally identified with the story. David and I come from such different

worlds: he's from the postal realm, I'm in entomology, but the universe has been sending us messages for years without us even knowing it. Do you ever wonder whether all those wrong numbers, or random emails ~~or those flirty messages from Singles in your Area~~, were really from your soul mate? All those could have been him, trying to reach me without even knowing it.

Today, I made a sacrifice, as far as my bug collection goes. I decided to send something different to the house, the beautiful Meloe Americanus I found last month. I'll miss the way her exoskeleton shone and I'll always remember the day I found her under a log on the woodsy trail behind the house. It's a loss, but it'll be well worth it when that god awful mind controlling woman opens the envelope and ~~gets hemolymph all over herself and the blisters start forming~~ and freaks out. Then she'll read my note and leave him as fast as she can move. Or maybe she'll be just fine. The Meloe's only dangerous if provoked.

Angela

Sunday, June 20.

Status Report: Right as rain. I apologize again for not writing since Thursday, but you really can't blame me after your outburst, Train. You really should have been pleased at my progress this past week, if anything. I did the deep breaths and added the status reports and everything. Thank you for not noticing, by the way. I suppose I got angry ~~about your judgmental tirade~~, so I struck back.

Anyway, I've recovered from that, with the sometimes helpful breathing, but mostly I'm better because I saw

mother today. I always feel better after I've seen her. She gives the best advice in the world, and she still spoils me because I'm her #1 daughter, she says.

She told me all the old stories she loves to tell about her and dad. She misses him all the time. I was itching to tell her about David, but I waited until she had finished every detail of the meeting story, including the whole hearing him phone in to a radio talk show bit, to the writing him a letter to meet her on Valentine's day, and about almost not mailing it, but then being urged by her coworker and pal, Jean, to just live a little. Then the final meeting part and I just melt every single time I hear that one.

When I told her all about David and the ups and the downs we've been through, she said she was happy for me. She said, though, if he was having trouble reaching out, then I shouldn't succumb. Otherwise I'd end up in a one-sided marriage. So I should wait for him to come to me in his own time.

My mother knows what she's talking about, so I'm going to leave David be for a bit. I miss him very much. Like we talked about in the last session, he is probably reluctant to communicate with me because his heart is guarded and he's very shy. ~~I would like to add to those reasons that his wife is a crazy heathen who has stolen him away from me~~ There is also the wife problem. Some people just settle down too early, before they can meet their true soul mate. But it isn't too late for us. I know it isn't, and it's just up to our love to conquer the circumstances. And it will, like in Romeo and Juliet.

Angela

Tuesday, June 22.

Status report: Elated. It happened today. David has finally broken through and come to me, even with his hang-ups.

I was going downstairs to try and catch the matinee of West Side Story that's happening at the local theatre just by the park, and there he was. In all his magnificent anger, he strode up to me. ~~He is so beautiful when he's tense.~~

He yelled at me about Was I the woman who had been sending bugs to his wife and Was I insane and Stop harassing my family and Go see a shrink (I chose not to mention you), then he asked Did I have anything to say and I only shook my head since I was all too aware of the game he was playing. Then he stormed out.

Afterwards I went back to my apartment and poured myself a celebratory glass of Pinot. He came straight to me just like mother said he would. I did wonder how he found me out and then I thought he must have craftily noticed my return address.

Regardless, all plans are back in motion. I have it all figured out. I'll do it Thursday night—you don't need to know anything more than that. I might not come to my appointment after that, so I suppose I don't know exactly why I'm writing now, but I guess it's more of a habit than anything else.

Anyway, once she's out of the way, everything will be fine. Smooth sailing from here. Then David and I are going to spend a weekend away together. I sent him our tickets to Fiji in the mail with no return address this time. I don't need her messing around in our

affairs again.

Since I don't know if I'll ever see you again, Michael, Dr. Michael, whatever you want to be called, I guess I should thank you. ~~Even though you were~~ ~~Despite your Well, of course just just~~ Thanks for all you've done. I'll miss our meetings, in a way. I hope you succeed in your fixing of all the crazies out there.

Angela

Friday, June 25.

Dear Dr. Michael,

I'm sorry I didn't come to the appointment today but I did leave a message with your secretary and I am happy to say I will be coming back in the future!

The most amazing thing happened to me last night. I was picking up some late dinner on the way to David's house and to be honest with you my hands were shaking badly by that point so I needed some food in me if I was going to go through with it.

Anyway, I stopped at Panera Bread to get the soup and salad deal that really is the perfect size portion for a cheap price. So I sat down and opened my bag just to check ~~that the black widow was still there in its jar~~ that I had everything and it was and I did so I thought I was fine but when I looked around someone had seen me.

He was tall, almost as tall as David, and he had brown hair just like Tom Hanks' but he was like a young Tom Hanks and he wore a tie-dye shirt with cargo shorts. He was very handsome but I didn't notice it at the time.

He came over to me and I was about to run but he put a finger on his lips as in Shhh and sat down across from

me and he said What've you got there? And I coughed on my soup and he continued with I like a woman who knows her Chicken and Lentil.

At first I was offended and tried to leave but he asked me about my interests and I told him reluctantly about my insects. As it turns out he tried to join the Peace Corps after high school but the feds caught him with drugs and then he was resigned to spend years behind bars. He's a renegade. He said his name was Hans, and also said Your eyes are incredibly beautiful and suddenly when we met eyes again there it was.

So I have realized, Dr. Michael, that David was too aloof and couldn't communicate. Hans and I share the same morals for the most part and can talk for hours. He gave me his phone number ~~814-996-3702 whoops~~ and since then I have left him five voicemails. His voicemail says This is Hans and here's the beep! I also found him on Facebook. He hasn't had an account for long so there aren't many pictures of his face but I still found it—his profile picture is a character from Dragonball: Evolution. Anyway, David really was just a him and would never meet me on top of the Empire State building. Sometimes you think you've got it all figured out and there you go! Your life turns around completely. I rescheduled our appointment for Tuesday. I'll see you then!

Angela

Clare Higgins (RC 2017) double majored in creative writing (RC) and screen arts and culture (LSA). She has Hopwood awards in both fields (poetry, 2015; screenplay, 2016).

Acid

Peter Anderson

I drop some blotter on the Vegas strip.
Next thing I know a giant slot machine
Is telling me "Jackpot! You've won a trip!
You'll soon be seeing things you've never seen."
The sidewalk's undulating like a wave —
It swells above my head then swallows me
In so much light, the universe is paved
In pink neon as far as I can see.
And then I'm at a blackjack table. Weird.
The cards too big, each one a different size,
The dealer sizes me, I see his beard
Emitting psychic sparks, his x-ray eyes
Are piercing me, I stand to go, the door
Is upside down, the ceiling is the floor.

It's crazy, but then maybe it's just me —
What if I never come down from this high
And who I am is who I'll never be
Again? Forever gone. I start to cry.
What's going on? I try to talk, the drugs —
Now everyone's an undercover cop.
The patterns, trails, dissolving into bugs —
I close my eyes, that makes it worse, no stopping
it, what's happening, I cannot think —
A blinking billboard winks at me and nods:
"Nudes on ice! One hundred in one rink!"
I look up and see clouds turn into gods
Who weep to see what's happened to our nation.
Their tears fall down, and then a revelation —

The gods are turning soldiers into stone;
They topple down like statues in a square —
Smashed, abandoned, left there on their own,
Each one looks up, a blank and granite stare,
At transport helicopters overhead
Who're plucking lucky souls from off rooftops.
The rest left down below all left for dead.
And then I bump a family who stops
To stare at me as if I am the one
Who's sleepwalking through hell without a clue.
What if I am? When all is said and done
Who knows what's for show and what is true?
And just like that it's gone, my fragile dream
Evaporates like dust, a cloud of steam.

The sun comes up and what the night revealed
Retreats in shadows on an empty street.
The oneness that I felt is gone, congealed.
There's no more haloes, I'm a bag of meat,
And everything once more seems hard and fixed;
The towers trumpeting our vanity,
Mean-spirited and hateful politics,
The City, War, Man's inhumanity,
A land that eats its young then spits them out
And goes about its business every day
As if it's normal. Why? I want to shout
But no words come; I'm coming down and, hey,
It's coming — breaking news — around the bend,
The day when everything comes to an end.

Excerpted from the sonnet drama "Peace & Love 1971." More information about Peter Anderson (RC 1972) on p. 4.



Delilah

Allison Epstein

He feels his father's indifference like a cramp in his stomach.

He's no longer a child, not anymore—there's no reason to think about any of this. Sometimes he wonders if "childhood" was a thing other people had, like lake houses or great-aunts who wrote you checks in birthday cards that came three weeks too late.

Here, in this third-story studio apartment, snowflakes lazily beating the frost-slick window, the last thing he should be thinking of is his father.

But still. A call. Chrissakes, he's not ambitious, a text, even. These days, radio silence is always intentional. Even Starbucks wished him a happy birthday.

A paperback copy of *Infinite Jest* winks at him from its sideways home on the windowsill. Its laminate-slick cover glints with reflected streetlight, with the snow drifting onto the side-

walk along Racine. He sets a sweating bottle of out-of-season Oberon atop the book. It leaves a ring, will ripple the pages if he ever decides to open them.

The orange streetlight drenches the budding snowdrifts.

A text.

He has never been good at not thinking.

Leaning over the kitchen sink, he rests his elbows on porcelain. Cigarette ash rains pumice dust on the drain. Mark likes to tell him smoking is a vulgar habit.

Vulgarity luxuriates in his veins.

The phone in his pocket has rung twice since seven thirty. Once, *Grace, happy birthday get out here we're all at the bar come out Delilah's don't be a prick come*. The second time, Mark, telling him to come see Dad before the hospital closed for the night.

He lets the winking firefly cigarette

dangle between his fingertips, considering. The roads are too icy to drive. Delilah's is on the corner of Diversey and Lincoln. Fifteen minutes, if he makes the train.

He sweeps on his coat and closes the door, leaving the cigarette flickering in the sink.

#

Delilah's.

From the other side of the bar, he feels her interest trickle hot down his throat. Smooth sparking amber filtered through liquid eyeliner. Whisky inhaled from a distance. He tosses it around his throat, catches the savor, edges it back.

Dark jeans and a black silk top. Ice-pick heels. She brought no coat. Out of politeness, he pulls her into the bathroom, presses her back against the stall door, sinks his lips into her hungry kiss.

Why wait for the train? Not in weather like this.

She is married—he sees her ring.

She is twice his age—he saw her driver's license when he slipped open her wallet, helped himself to two twenties while she ordered him a drink.

She is rich—he sees her ring and her wallet.

She kisses him like a wolf howling at the wind. He is either the rabbit or the gun.

He feels her brand sizzle across his back, fingernails biting flesh. He lets her do what she will, and stands on the corner leaning his cigarette into her lighter when it's over.

Delilah.

#

The phone in his pocket vibrates as he shaves in front of the bathroom mirror at five forty-five the next morning. The razor slips, hot pain and hotter anger. He swears under his breath. Delilah—not her name, but what else can he call her?—rolls over in bed, turns her face to the wall, ignores him. He worries the phone into his hand.

Mark.

He does not answer, even though his brother never calls. And if he does, not twice in two days.

When the second buzz comes bearing voicemail, he's looking at his face in the mirror, dabbing at the blood with the back of his hand. From the bed, not-Delilah snores, slaps at the alarm he forgot to turn off.

Through the window, the sidewalk disappears under the snow.

#

He feels his father's death like the loss of cancer. He stands taller now, but he has grown used to the texture of mutated cells.

He stands on the opposite side of the church from Mark, who cries like it belongs in the Special Skills section of his résumé.

When they lower the casket into the frozen earth, he lights a cigarette.

Vulgarity thrives in graveyards.

With low expectations, one can never disappoint.

Allison Epstein (RC 2014) lives, writes, and drinks coffee in Chicago, where she is pursuing her MFA in fiction at Northwestern University. "Delilah" was previously published in the September 2016 edition of Sweater Weather Magazine.



Love Letter to Woody Plants

Anna Prushinskaya

To the woman in the parking lot of the park, who has found me crushing leaves, smelling them, and looking at the willows: I am giddy because I have identified a poison sumac. It grows on the trail by the water. They happen in Southeastern Michigan, and here are some ways to tell: Shrub or small tree; leaflets compound, sessile, with scarlet midribs; drupes white, persisting in winter.

I have been learning the names of woody plants this fall thanks to a special course at the college in town, a historic course, and sometimes I am overwhelmed with the trees. The distinctions between oaks, the tips of their leaves sometimes bristled, their buds sometimes tomentose, their acorns brimmed with fringe, where they are and aren't on a hill. And the maples. "Something like Acer," the

graduate instructor says of them, meaning something common, mundane, easy to define. Silver, red, sugar, and box elder, they do their own thing. Thankfully, the Hawthorns one cannot distinguish, by the species at least. They have a thorny, suckering habit. They are part of one another. It is true that they have thorns and haws.

The shrubs that creep and climb beneath, I had not noticed. The vines with their special lifestyle, a specialist explains. They adapt; survive in high winds; have structures. Sometimes, they smother, they get a bad rep. A man comes to talk about soil, its micro-biome with elements that outnumber stars. He throws acorns at the students to get their attention. A student asks how we could count the stars; the man explains.

I drive to somewhere by Highland Township, and towards Detroit, and to the border with Ohio, to find the right plants. There are places in Ann Arbor I had not considered, the glacial features. The forest changes. A place that felt common, felt familiar, is not the same place. I've only visited the class for weeks, which is to say, I know not much at all. Still, that is all it takes to make the forest strange and lovely, a place to touch and explore.

Often the forest is a backdrop. Now, as I walk and scan the paths for bark patterns, and then the understory, the leaves on everything, the

way they move with wind, I become the backdrop to the forest. By the end, my senses are exhausted, and I listen. It is the time of year when I can hear the acorns drop, a time of year I hadn't noticed until now. I am not particularly spiritual, but I quiet. I think: Once I was an addict. Maybe I still am.

In the Mary Karr memoir *Lit*, she conveys a familiar situation. When in traffic, inching bit by bit, we don't think of ourselves as it. Traffic is the other humans. Prickles, spines, thorns, I touch plants with all of them. (Some things are structural.) What else can we learn from the woods, at a time when we need to learn from something more than ever, perhaps, I think, too sincerely. I crush leaves, I rub at bud scales.

The saying that encapsulates advice for winter identification, after the leaves have dropped: "Trust the bud." My instinct is to walk away from the forest, the way it's changed me in weeks. My instinct is not to trust it. I am hoping instead to find a place where I can. The woods in town, perhaps.

Anna Prushinskaya (RC 2008)'s "Love Letter to Woody Plants" was first published by Great Lakes Review as part of the Narrative Map Project. It's part of Prushinskaya's collection of essays A Woman is a Woman Until She is a Mother, out in Fall 2017 from MG Press.



Genesis

Jon Michael Darga

Together they were black — not an absence of light but an absorption of it, drawing it into their bodies until there was nothing left. Together they consumed. They were the moment between waking and sleeping, the wick of a candle after blowing out the flame, the blank reflection of a phone screen seconds before it lights up — *sorry, there's been an accident* — and in the moments after. A smoldering everything, then a smothering nothing.

I.

He sees her first; or, if she saw him first, she doesn't let on. She's sitting at the bar, pale hands cradled around a pale beer. Her nails, he notices, aren't manicured; at least, not in any noticeable way, though they glimmer in the dim light of the pub every time she tilts the glass to her lips. Perhaps that means

they're manicured. He holds his own hands in front of his eyes, twisting them back and forth, trying to catch a glint in their dull opacity like a caveman might try to spark a fire.

When he looks up, she's standing there, small bubbles rising up to the top of her drink, frosted condensation misting the glass over, except for the shadows created by the warmth of her palms. "Hello," she says, in a voice lower and richer than he was expecting.

"Hello," he says, creaky with surprise. He coughs, self-consciously, and takes a sip of his cider. "Sorry."

"Not at all." She smiles. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Or be forward, or anything. I've just..." She sets her glass on the back of the chair in front of him, her hand cupped loosely around it. It balances. "It's been a long fucking day and you seem like maybe you've had a

bit of a day, too, and I thought..." The smile again, but this time it's thinner, more self-conscious. "Oh, God, I suppose I just thought that two strangers in a pub might like to bitch at one another about their lives." The glass slips a bit from its perch, and she catches it with a tiny "oop" noise. "But I might have just had a bit too much, also."

He's staring at her. He doesn't mean to; partially it's because he's tired and partly because it's in his nature to study everyone. Very little make-up, vulpine face, curly blonde hair. She's wearing a loose purple blouse and tight jeans that make him wish that he'd seen her walk his way, just a bit. "Sit," he says, and winces because it sounds like a command, and he sounds like an ass. "Sorry, you're right, it's been a long day."

But she just grins, and pulls out her chair, and traces the grains in the wood with her finger. "Jenny."

"Malcolm."

"Very nice to meet you, Malcolm. So, what do you do and in which ways has it fucked you over lately?"

Who are you? "Uh. I'm police, actually. Investigator. I'm sure you can gather from that why it's been a rough... life."

"A copper," she says, putting on a very good show of being delighted. "Homicide?" When he nods, she adds, "It just didn't seem like petty theft would lie so heavily on you, is all."

"What about you?"

"Barrister." A slight pause, an upturn of her mouth. "Though I've always said that they should call female barristers 'baristas,' for the fun of it."

"That'd be good," he agrees, chuckling lamely. "What sorts of cases?"

"Defense."

"We'd be on opposite sides of the

court room, then."

"I suppose so."

As soon as the word are out of her mouth, his mind is moving the requisite ten steps ahead: an awkward silence will fall with the unpleasant speed of a cold autumn rain, after which he will cough, say he needs to use the toilet, and vanish. Jenny is, it turns out, a shooting star: pretty when admired from afar; flaming hunk of space rock when seen from close-up.

But before he can start to scoot his chair out, she says, "What's your biggest regret, Malcolm?"

He laughs, because he doesn't know how else to react. "What?"

"I'm visiting. From out of town. Professional conference." Lips like her nails: unremarkable, yet when she smiles... there's that way it makes her shine in the dark. "The only way anyone would ever know what you tell me is as 'this man I met once in a pub.' Don't tell me that's not an attractive confessional."

"Why did you come over here?" he asks. This isn't a normal conversation. There's nothing normal about this; there's nothing about this that should be happening or that has ever happened to him before. She's the kind of dream where you feel like something is missing the next morning, like your subconscious had tried desperately to patch a hole in the ripping fabric of your life overnight.

"What do you want me to say?" she asks, her eyes squinting.

There's an invitation in her voice that he doesn't take. "I'm sorry. I should probably be going." He nods her way, an acknowledgement. "Long day, after all."

"I don't really have regrets," she says. "Or at least I try not to. I've made

mistakes, but doesn't everybody? You live, you learn." Lips sip from her drink, but Malcolm doesn't see the volume in the cup go down. "I regret not taking more chances, I suppose. Going places. Meeting people." Eyes on him. "I'd regret if I drove you away right now."

A jolt as her foot touches his shin, lingers for a second, then two, then three, then leaves. *This world is not yours to fix.* Who'd said that to him the first time? Boss or lover or mother or friend? Did it matter why he was such a trope — the cop with the weight of the world on his shoulders? Wouldn't it help him, then, maybe, if he let this happen? If he didn't try to fix this woman sitting in front of him, but went home with her, because the crazy ones are always the best lays, and he could slip out from her hotel room early the next morning, and never see her again?

When was the last time someone had talked to him like this? What would happen if he said yes for himself, not for somebody else?

He downs his drink in one and leans in.

"What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

II.

"You're very good," she says, and even as he wonders how exactly she means it he knows he doesn't want to ask.

"I had a good time," he responds, and she smiles up at him from where her hair is spilled out across his chest, light against dark. Her finger traces shapes in the black hair of his chest, entwining her strands with his, until she shifts her head and they pull loose: together and then, simply, not.

He wonders if her shapes have any

meaning. He wonders if what they did had any meaning. *Probably not*, he acknowledges, even as he remembers that as they left the bar it was *definitely not*, even as he worries that as he leaves the next morning it will be *probably* yes. But there's no real fear of being let down; they have both known, from the beginning, that she is leaving town soon, and that there is safety within this built-in ending.

"I see it," she says suddenly, softly.

"What?" He looks down — it can't be that visible; and anyways, it's not all *there* yet, not enough for a second go, anyways.

"Your darkness," she says. It's so simple that maybe she's talking about the dark of his clothes, or the way he takes his coffee, but she's not. This isn't what he wants to talk about after sex; he wants her mouth around his cock again, or maybe to learn her taste all over again, or maybe just to climb on top of her and slip inside, staring at the pillowcase just past her head because to make eye contact while doing this, something so intimate, with a stranger, is somehow too much for him.

He scoots up and rolls away, so that his back is facing her. He can hear her shift on the covers behind him, a smooth silky rasp of skin against fabric. Fingers begin tracing the same patterns on his back, between his shoulder blades, some circular and light, tickling; some angular and harsh; some neither; some both. If he needs to, he can swing his legs out from beneath the covers, exposing his body to her but protecting something far more valuable.

"I'm sorry if that was too sudden," she says, softer still, almost so that he has to lean backwards to hear her.

He doesn't; he would rather not hear than get sucked in deeper, like CS Lewis wrote, *further up and further in*. He hasn't read since childhood, really, but he remembers enough to know to avoid wardrobes, avoid white witches, avoid anthropomorphic things that stand in for God.

"Malcolm?" she asks.

"I don't know what you mean," he says.

"You carry things," she says, and her thumbs press into the flesh around his shoulder blades, muscular; yet her fingers hurt him. "Here. I want you to know that I see it; that I felt it. That somebody knows. What you hold onto inside."

He reminds himself that this is why the sex was good; because she's a loony, because she is likely one of those women who dance naked around the forest in the light of the full moon and believes that by doing this she is restoring some form of balance to our tortured earth.

It is also, he thinks, not at all difficult to look at a homicide detective approaching middle age and see world weariness. It's like the veneer on a car — or maybe, more accurately, the mud and dirt that have come from years of use.

But then, there is also something new in Jenny's words, in the way that they cover him like a blanket. Again — and he remembers that he has felt this way about her before — there is something rich to the way she speaks to him, in this case a full and textured acceptance. Not pity, which has always tasted to him like thin and oily coffee; or a sort of nervous fear, bitter and gritty grounds. This is luxurious, coating, and it feels like he is on a diet and this is something that he is not supposed to eat: good, sinful, guilty.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks, almost to himself before he realizes he hopes that she can hear him, and before he finishes talking he realizes, again, what is familiar in her. It's instinct, born from the same adrenaline-spiked urge that makes him lean harder into the interrogation of a bereaved widow, or to leave the room and let the stoically grieving brother to sit in silence. It is a recognition of the same.

"You have it, too," he says.

It is not his job to fix her. He cannot take this burden on. She is a random from the bar; a one-night stand.

He feels warm breath against his neck, condensed like the thick foggy steam from a shower. She is saying something, and the warmth feels good, so good that the rest of his body breaks out into a small, shuddering shiver, and he feels goose-pimples rise like grim soldiers at attention on his arms and neck and back, and he feels her fingers tracing over these new hills of discovery, conquering, and he leans his head back until it lands on hers with a small thunk, like what it must sound like when the worn hull of a ship first makes contact with a foreign shore.

She breathes again, and her breath sounds like, "Yes."

III.

When he walks into the room it feels like a dream. Maybe it is. Maybe he's still sleeping; maybe when he dreamt of the two of them lying on a forest floor bleeding out to the sound of birds trilling and a faraway stream it wasn't a dream at all, and this is just... in-between.

She is sitting at a dinner table covered in plain white cloth, two dark red

candles sputtering as wax drips down them tar-like. The black dress she wears looks so smooth and silken it's almost like lingerie; the way that it hangs off of her is like a loose curtain drawn against a full moon, though why it's like that he doesn't know. If this is a dream, after all, he doesn't need to.

A song lingers in the air, from everywhere and nowhere; it's a slow and haunting version of "Stand By Me": "When the night has come/And the land is dark/And the moon is the only light we'll see/No I won't be afraid/No I won't be afraid..."

The words sound like a growl, like a threat.

There is nothing about this that he enjoys, and yet, because she is here, there is no other place that he can be. She has trapped him here as thoroughly as Dante in his levels of hell: the only escape is deeper, deeper.

"I made steak," she says.

"You don't cook."

"I know my way around meat." She smiles, elfin and mysterious, so completely comfortable in who she is that he almost forgets what she is.

He pulls out his chair and sits, and she pulls out hers across from him. With a fork and knife in each hand, he cuts slices off of the filet in front of him, and it carves tender and rare, spilling out steam and blood. "How did we get here?" he asks.

"Love," she answers, as if it were that simple. "Love and acceptance."

A cut of steak goes into his mouth; it's rich and seasoned and flavorful. Delicious. "I don't accept you."

"I understand what you need to do for yourself," she says. "I do. What you need to tell yourself. But Malcolm, really, if

you didn't accept me you wouldn't be here."

"Where else is there for me to go?" A sip from his wine: he's not sure where it's from, or what year, but it's perfectly paired, the taste of berries so full it's almost earthy. Of course it would be. She always knows what fits together.

Do they fit together anymore? Did they ever? Something pulses behind the bridge of his nose, like a migraine. Something horribly, terribly broken; a shard of lost memory obscured by dust, still sharp enough to cut to bone. What was it: the man he had been or the man he would never know?

"Anywhere."

"I can't go anywhere," he says. He wishes he could spit the words out; hurl them across the table at her like a weapon. "You're wrong. I don't accept you. What you are; what you've done. I never can; you know that." He looks up from his meal, at the piercing eyes that are already staring at him from across the table. There is still a jolt, like he has been injected with a drug, urging him to go, go, go; to run; but when he tries to run away it's like he's only running against the treadmill, going nowhere. "I can't go anywhere because you're here. I don't accept you. I do love you."

"You don't accept me because you don't accept yourself. You never have." She looks back down at her steak, to cut it. "You're trans-emotional."

He laughs at this; he has to. "What?"

"Society expects you, based on your outer appearance, to be one thing, but inside you feel differently. You're a cop who feels the burden to do right, and so you are expected to be a good man, but you are not, and so the weight of that bears down on you. You feel a discon-

nect between the you that everybody sees and the true you that you feel inside. Trans-emotional."

He is still laughing, on the verge of what could be described as hysterical laughter, as he drinks more wine. "You just made that up, didn't you?"

A tight smile peeks around the edges of her fork. "I might have done."

"It's not a thing, Jenny. 'Trans-emotional' is not a thing."

The smile fades. "Perhaps it should be."

They eat in silence until he says, "I can't figure it out."

An eyebrow raises across the table, but she doesn't say anything. They will sit in silence or move the conversation elsewhere or he will tell her. She will not press him for information; that would be too close to begging.

"How is this real?" he asks, finally. "How did I get here?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

"Do you ever think it's not real?"

"How do you mean?"

"That this is some sort of purgatory."

Jenny's knife slides against her plate with a high and pitiful ceramic squeak. "Stop. Stop comparing being with me to various levels of hell, Malcolm. Nothing's preventing you from going."

"I can't—"

"You can't what? Live without me? Then kill yourself, if that's what will make you happy." When he stares at her blankly, she laughs sharply, and empties her glass of wine.

Without looking, she refills her glass, then holds her hand up to the flame of the candle in between them. Her fingers get closer and closer, until Malcolm is sure her fingers must be burning, until it looks almost like they are lit from something

within, glowing. "You don't have the courage to be happy, Malcolm. That's the secret, you know, that nobody ever tells you. It takes courage to be happy."

Another sip of her wine as she plays with the flame. The red sits on her lower lip like blood, but Malcolm knows that this is in his mind; that he is running amok with *blood on her hands* associations; that red wine does not and cannot reasonably stand in for anything remotely like blood. "Because what comes after happiness? Either the great quest is over, or you realize that it takes work to maintain. Each one is terrifying. If it's the first, well, then, you're done. It doesn't get better. Yes, you're happy, *great*, but that is *it*. You've seen it all. Treading water; you've seen all that you can see. And if it's the latter... well. Treading water takes effort, doesn't it? You get tired, eventually. You want to stop. But if you stop you'll drown." Pause. "So it's easier, really, to imagine happiness as this faraway, unattainable paradise island. At least that way it will always be ideal. It's absolute cowardice, of course, but to each their own."

Like scenes from a reel of film that have been separated and then, shoddily, put back together, his tongue is suddenly in her mouth with no recollection of the in-between; next he is standing back and staring at her face, her face, the only face he wants to see; then he is on his knees, on grass, outside, a clear sky and cold stars above him. He looks back. Jenny's silhouette is framed black against the light of the house, blurred around the edges from distance or mist, but she stands unmoving.

"What am I doing?"

But he knows exactly what he is doing. Something snaps inside him, not

breaking but slotting back into place. This — *all of it* — is to make himself feel better. He has known exactly what he has done, all along, just as she has. The blood is on both of their hands, both of them willing participants. He's tired of the ruse, so tired of feeling guilty for something that has also felt right.

Why can't you be happy? Because admitting to happiness also means admitting to something that he hates within himself. Perhaps it's not the worst to allow yourself to be cut against the broken edges. Perhaps the Greeks had something right: they believed, after all, in bleeding the bad humors out and in blood sacrifices to the gods. Two for one, something left behind while something comes home.

He looks back up at the bright pinpricks in the sky and then back at the house, back at Jenny, still exactly as she stood. The darkness between the stars.

A wave of euphoria crashes over him so suddenly it feels like drowning, everything aflame and gasping.

Something in him is awake.

II.

She's taken control; she's on top of him, fingers digging into his shoulders and leaving behind the indents of her own stigmata. This is different than the first time, like a shroud has been lifted to reveal a living face behind it, to reveal something that is more truth than façade. This is right, in a way that it was not when he was atop her.

It feels as if everything that came before was prelude.

"What," she asks, when they are done, "is the worst thing that you could accept?"

"How do you mean?" he asks, though

he does understand and likes even less where this is going.

"You asked me earlier what was the worse thing I've done. Where do you draw your battle lines, Detective Malcolm?" There are no flirtatious fingers tracing along his chest now, no playful lilt to her tone. They have descended further, to where he does not yet know. "If your friend were to steal a chocolate bar from the store. Would you end the friendship? If your mother were to push her sister down the stairs and kill her, by accident...?"

"Why do you want to talk about this?"

They're staring at each other, sparks in her eyes as he hopes there are no sparks in his. "Another man would have his clothes on and been out the door by now had he been asked that question. You're uncomfortable talking about it. Look—" she places her hands on his shoulders, rubs her fingers into unwilling muscle — "you're tense. Fight or flight. But you're a parched man in the wilderness who hears the trickle of water." He sees her playfulness again as if a blindfold has been removed from his eyes, as suddenly and as clearly as a pilot light lit on his stove. "I am your oasis."

"The water source," he says slowly, "could be tainted." He doesn't know why he says it. It doesn't even make that much sense, if you think about it too much. But she smiles and makes a sort of humming noise, as if she understands.

"For me, it's intent," she says. "Any act is forgivable, depending on the intent." Her voice lowers and lowers in volume, until her consonants sound like the sputtering of a flame.

"That makes sense. But accidental

murder is still murder. The result is the same."

"Is it? For the dead, yes. But it takes two."

He means to tread carefully, pick his way through thorny underbrush. "Yes, legally speaking. It's prison either way." "There's the physical prison and then there's the emotional prison."

"Are you a failed poet then?" The question comes out of him unbidden and unexpected, using the same instinct as he would pulling his body away from a physical blow. He almost covers his mouth as if to prevent more words from coming out. "I'm sorry, that was—"

"That was your defense mechanism coming out, yes."

When he looks over she's already on her back, and the bedsheets have fallen down to expose a pale breast, and she's laughing so hard that tears are running down her sheets and darkening the pillowcase like raindrops and her chest is heaving. "Oh, God, that was brilliant. That was — God, I was sounding pretentious, wasn't I?"

"It wasn't pretentious." He can't help but smile. "It was a little pretentious."

She makes a strangled "ugh" noise and swats the bed beside her. The palm of her hand leaves an indent that the covers slowly rise to conceal, until nothing is there. "You know what I meant."

"I know what you meant," he agrees.

"We're all serving our own sentences." She giggles, but a giggle sounds wrong, and she clasps her hands over her mouth, and he can't tell if she's mocking him for doing the same thing a moment earlier. "That pretension was on purpose."

"I'm sure it was."

She turns over, again, and looks at him. Her smile is gone. She is no longer hiding anything. "You know."

He nods, in grandiose solemnity. "I do."

I.

He needs another drink, he needs to be more drunk than this, he does not go home with random girls from the bar sober, though where this moral compunction comes from he does not know, because he does not judge this behavior in others.

She takes his hand as if in a dream, and runs her thumb along his palm, and the sparks there jolt him awake but he does not want to be awake, because with waking comes awareness and complications and judgments.

"Come on," she says. And he stands up and her eyebrows furrow and she says, "You never said what your biggest regret was."

He lies, "Breaking up with my girlfriend at university because I was scared of where we were going."

She shrugs and says, "If that's what you want to go with."

And he thinks, *I am scared of where this is going.*

And he thinks, *My biggest regret will be you.*

And he thinks, *Don't wake up.*

Jon Michael Darga (RC 2014) is an editor at The Crown Publishing Group, an imprint of Penguin Random House; and a reader for the literary journal Midwestern Gothic, where he co-created their Voices of the Middle West lit fests. He attended the Columbia Publishing Course and moved to New York City shortly after graduation, where he still lives.

"Find what you love and let it kill you." — Charles Bukowski

Two Poems

Logan Corey

Likewise

these are my people
who mistreat cashmere sweaters
stolen Salvation Army
who fish boxes Tiffany blue
upturn garbage can New York City
who memorize Bryant Park
newness, plaster discarded circulation leaflets
in grimy spirals against a mouthy palate
who travel by discount commuter train
borrowed boxcar redeye voyage
who never buy
tickets to sold out shows,
who search the bottom of the barrel
and reevaluate the notion of food
who buy the biggest, cheapest bottles
of foulest champagne, and toast wordless speeches
to friends they cannot afford to keep
who have never touched their foot soles against another country's soil-stem
and spend their days manual-clutch training
optic nerve lenses in worship
of counterfeit grail that manic-gleam reflects
the uninhabitable absence of Here.

It was four weeks until authorities discovered
the sluggish, grunt-like nature to Jane's vocal techniques
and movements were symptoms of a larger problem, specifically, the crafty gorilla using Jane's hollowed out skin as a
human disguise of sorts
experts suspect this key factor also contributed to Jane's
sudden drastic increase in body size over the past
four weeks
it's been decided the gorilla will be allowed to publish his
findings for the past four weeks as long as he agrees to stop
submitting articles written under the Goodall name

* * *

The Church of Scientology has issued an
official day of mourning to commemorate
the deceased,
who was unpleasantly crushed earlier today,
when the L.A. billboard featuring Mr. Cruise's likeness
leapt free of its hinges and pitched straight downward,
deftling splitting Mr. Cruise's skull wide open along his hair-
line's subtle point, which, incidentally, revealed nothing but
cybersparks and smoking gears as substitute
for insides

Logan Corey (RC 2013) is director of admissions at the RC. She was editor of the Residential College Review in 2013. These poems are reprinted from the 2013 issue. "Likewise" also appeared in her honors collection, The Leather Lotus, and in the 2013 Literary Statement issue of the Michigan Daily.



Pearls Before Swine

Liz Parker

It had been three years since the Incident, but Lily still wasn't allowed out past 9 p.m. She fought this tooth and nail, of course, but Andromeda was firm: no swimming past that hour. This meant a lot of hanging around—and a lot of pouting—but Andromeda would not change her mind.

Lily had never led a sheltered life, but she was becoming more and more cloistered since the Incident. Andromeda kept tabs on her at all times, and she was only allowed out for school and after-school activities. It wasn't like she had any friends, anyways—the girls at school thought she was the school weirdo, despite her athletic prowess—but there had always been the hope of friendship, and now that hope was dashed.

Lily had a unique home life situation, but people didn't need to know

that. That was her and Andromeda's business, and no one else's. From the hours of 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., when she was at her high school, she was a normal human. As normal as a mermaid can be, anyways, while passing for a human. She came home to the Bay at 5 p.m. daily, after swim practice had let out for the evening, did her homework while sunning herself on the rocks, then put the completed homework in the backpack that she left in the bushes, nearby, and came back to Andromeda for the night.

In her heyday, Andromeda had been a stunner, but stress was starting to show. Mermaids don't get lines on their faces like humans do, but Andromeda used to have light blonde, almost translucent hair; at present, that hair was half grey. She could have used kelp to dye it back to its original

color, a technique that some of the older mermaids favored, but looks weren't exactly a priority for her nowadays. The Incident had changed her priorities.

Lily wasn't entirely sure why Andromeda even let her attend high school. Andromeda's grandmother, Astrid, had been fooled by a human; her grandfather, Phillip, had seemed like a fantastic guy at first. He wooed Astrid, who in turn married him and later bore his children, including Andromeda's mother, Ruthven; but later, when Astrid aged, a younger woman caught Phillip's attention, and he dumped Astrid. Shamed, Astrid sought out an enchantress, and was able to get her mermaid body back; she then returned back to the sea, bringing her babies—who were, by that point, teenagers—home with her.

In the past few years, though, Andromeda had tired of home-schooling Lily, and had asked her if she would be willing to undergo the Triton Clause, which would give her “sea legs” and allow her to get by in the human world. The Triton Clause would permit her to attend school, get her high school diploma, and eventually come back and lead the Bay as their queen. Lily's aunt, Celeste, was currently running things as the temporary queen, but her reign had been going on for far too long; after the Incident, Andromeda was too shaken up to lead, and the agreement was made that Celeste would take her place, at least until Lily finished high school and was of age (though, technically, a mermaid could be made a queen at Lily's present age of 16).

Lily was on the accelerated route—in and out of school in three years—which probably didn't help her social status; it made her a nerd and some-

thing of a bookworm. She thought that joining the swim team would maybe help with a social life, but it had yielded nothing. She was, of course, one of the fastest swimmers on the team, but that ended up working against her; the girls pegged her as a show-off, and none of them had even attempted to get to know her outside of swim practice.

Lily, an introvert by nature, was dreading having to take over the throne from Celeste; the Bay's mermaid flock was currently scattered, and it made it hard to govern. It's not like they even had a future—all of the mermen and even the merboys were gone, now—but Celeste insisted on moving forward like no time had passed at all.

Today was a new day though, and anything could happen.

2:30 p.m.: swim team practice

Lily stumbled a bit while walking into the locker room; some days she still felt unsure using her legs, even though it had been two years now. Lara Kennedy, team captain and resident mean girl, snickered at Lily as Lily righted herself. Lara hated Lily, because Lily was the fastest swimmer on the team; Lara wanted some of those first place medals for herself.

During practice, they separated into three groups, based on ability—Lily was always in group #1—and they practiced holding their breath. The other girls constantly complained about Coach Gold's “Gold Fish Club,” as he called it, but Lily didn't; she could breathe underwater as a human, still, though the other swimmers didn't know that.

To make it into the Gold Fish Club, you had to swim one length of the pool

while not breathing. Get to the other side, take a quick breath. Then repeat. You were allowed one breath per lap, if needed. Do that for twenty laps, and you secured yourself a spot in the Club. Only five swimmers were in it, currently, including Lily and also Lara, although Lara had the slowest time of the five.

For Lily, the challenge was actually remembering to take that one breath per lap. The first time they had done the challenge, she hadn't breathed at all, and the girls thought she was just being a show-off, per "usual." After this happened a few times, though, they started to wonder how she did it; rather than be the focus of their gossip, she started taking the one breath that was allowed, even though technically she didn't need it.

5:30 p.m., the Bay

Lily normally rode her bicycle home from school every day, but today the weather had been ghastly and raining; she came home half an hour late. Andromeda, of course, was furious.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "I was worried sick."

Lily rolled her eyes. "I had to bike home in the rain."

Andromeda glowered at her. "Well maybe if you didn't insist on doing extracurriculars after school, you could have avoided the weather and arrived home earlier."

Andromeda didn't like Lily being on the swim team, but she also didn't want to attract suspicion by having Lily engage in no extracurriculars at all. Lily begged and begged her for permission—this was Before, when she thought she might actually make some friends at school, and have people her

own age to talk to—and Andromeda eventually acquiesced.

Lily shrugged. "I know you like to control everything, Mother, but even you can't control the weather."

She flapped her fins and swam over to where her mother was lounging. "Where's Aunt Celeste? Wasn't she holding court today?"

Andromeda sighed. "You know your aunt. After court she likes to linger. It's the only day she wears all her baubles, too, so she likes the girls to admire her jewelry before she stows it away again."

Celeste was Andromeda's younger sister, and her complete opposite: Andromeda had been a bit of a tomboy growing up, whereas Celeste loved to dress up. Celeste was especially proud of her pearl collection, which had been scavenged from various corners of the world: Japan, Australia, Israel.

The pearl obsession was what had caused the royal family's troubles, though; because of this, Lily was surprised that Andromeda still permitted Celeste to showcase them, much less wear them to court meetings.

Three years ago

Lily was thirteen years old when the Incident occurred. At that point, her family still included her father, Damon, and the baby of the family, Jack, of whom she adored. Jack, at two years old, was still just a toddler; Damon and Andromeda had found themselves with a surprise pregnancy on their hands, but Jack had made their little family of four complete, and everyone was in love with him, the only baby merboy in the Bay at the time.

This was Before – when Andromeda was Queen, and Damon was King, and

the residents of the Bay were happy. There hadn't been a pearl culling in years and years, and the mer-people had almost forgotten about it. The humans, however, had not forgotten.

Many moons ago, mermaids and mermen were selfish creatures; they took what they wanted, when they wanted. Legend states that the very first pearl was taken from a human—though originally, of course, grown in the sea—and ripped off her neck by a mermaid who was posing as a human at the time. The human/mermaid couldn't deny herself the beautiful object, and ripped the pearl necklace off the woman's throat; all of the pearls littered the ground, except the largest of the bunch, which the mermaid grabbed, and made a mad dash for the exit. The mermaid, who ironically was named Sapphire, brought the pearl home to the Bay, and our people were able to extract its essence and make more pearls from it.

Since then, pearls from the Bay have been considered precious, and humans dredged the Bay every year during the summer, looking for pearls to wear and sell.

Celeste had been a human for an extended period of time at one point, and passed along a rumor that the Bay was empty of pearls. All of them must have been found, she said, winking slyly at whichever male companion was with her at the time. Word got around, and eventually the fishermen, as well as those wanting to make a quick profit, stopped coming to the Bay. This year, however, would prove to be different.

Damon had just returned from a food-gathering expedition. Women

were encouraged to attend these, too, but Andromeda was busy with Jack, and Lily was still too young to go; the minimum age was 16. If Damon had just spent one more day away from the Bay, maybe things would have been different – maybe he would have survived.

Celeste and others had spotted the fishing boats earlier in the day, and the Bay inhabitants knew to stay away. Mermaids who were caught by fisherman rarely survived—even if they knew how to invoke the Triton Clause—and if they did, they were viewed as oddities, perhaps curiosities at best. At worst, they were placed in the county zoo with the other sea "animals."

Later in the day, the boats were stationed directly over the Bay, and the mermaids and mermen had been cautious all day long, as to not get in the way of the humans. However, the natives were starting to get restless.

"This is getting a bit ridiculous, Andromeda," said Damon. "Yes, the boats have been parked here all day, but we can't let ourselves be trapped in our home like this."

Andromeda narrowed her eyes at him. "It's not safe to go out. You know that."

Ever the stubborn merman, Damon, too, glowered at Andromeda. "I know that I need to be careful. But I won't allow their actions to control mine."

The royal family's abode was in a master suite in a sunken yacht, which had been at the bottom of the ocean for ages and ages. Damon swam to the top of their quarters, and gave Andromeda a steely look. "I won't allow our family to be stuck here until when-

ever those humans decide to leave.”

Damon had never been a fan of humans, and thus was definitely not a fan of the Triton Clause. He especially didn't approve of Celeste using it, but then again, Celeste had quite a few enemies; she was never afraid to speak her mind, which often caused drama.

Damon disappeared out of the room. “Damon!” cried Andromeda. “Come back!”

She grabbed Jack and swam after Damon, leaving Lily alone in the room. “Mom?” she said, tentatively. Lily quickly debated if she should swim after them or stay there, safe, in the room, but family loyalty won out; she swam as fast as she could towards the sound of her mother's voice.

What she found, a few minutes later, made her speechless, and to this day is still hard for her to think about.

Andromeda, sobbing over baby Jack's lifeless mer-body. Damon, a few feet away, completely still. And the rest of the mermen and mer-children—but only the males—floating beside them. All were dead.

“What happened?” cried Lily. She noticed a few pearls bobbing besides the bodies, in the water, which normally would have been a pretty sight; instead, it added confusion to the chaotic scene.

Andromeda threw herself onto a nearby rock, inconsolable.

“The fisherman,” she sobbed. “They wanted the pearls, and your father got in the way. Jack swam over to him and they murdered him too.”

“But how did the other mermen die?” Lily cried. “And the merboys?”

“It looks like they were playing near the boats as well,” Andromeda said.

Lily stared at the grisly scene before her.

It was a massacre. Forty-nine mer-men—the entirety of their mermen population—and fifteen merboys had been slaughtered. Lily couldn't bear to look, and turned away, wanting to vomit.

Half of her family – gone.

Present day

Celeste, always her bubbly self, suddenly appeared out of nowhere. “Andromeda, darling!” she trilled. “Lily. How are we?”

Lily shrugged. “Fine. I had a lot of homework today, and Mom is giving me grief about getting home late, but otherwise good. How are you?”

“Marvelous, just marvelous,” Celeste beamed. “Court was very productive today. We decided on some new necklace options for the merladies, and also what we want to serve at the Bay dinner that's coming up soon.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes. For all of the hardships that came with being queen, Celeste seemed to revel in the frivolous obligations of the role; obligations which Andromeda had never cared about.

Lily perked up. “When is the Bay dinner?”

“I've told you about a billion times,” huffed Celeste. “It's a week from today. And I'd better see both of you there! Especially you, Andromeda,” she rebuked her. “You know your loyal subjects are missing you these days ever since you've become a hermit.”

Andromeda loudly sighed. “Sister, I've never been a hermit. I'm content with staying home, is all, and not frolicking every night, like you prefer

for yourself.”

Lily stifled a laugh. “She's kind of telling the truth, Mom. When was the last time you went out and had some fun on the Bay?”

Celeste nodded in agreement. “Seriously, Andie, my niece is right. When was the last time we had cocktails over at Bayside? Pierre makes a mean martini, you know.”

Pierre, like all of the mermen who currently resided in the Bay, was a transplant – he had migrated there from a nearby mer-colony.

Andromeda glared at Celeste. She hated being called Andie, which Celeste knew perfectly well; yet, Celeste continued to use the insufferable nickname.

“I don't drink anymore,” Andromeda said, frostily.

“Remember all the fun times we had when we were in our early 20s?” Celeste teased.

There was no drinking age in the Bay, though it was frowned upon to drink before the age of seventeen. Lily was looking forward to the day when she could try a mixed drink; some of the concoctions that Pierre made sounded marvelous.

“Fine,” Andromeda acquiesced. “One drink. I can do tomorrow if Lily comes too.”

“So glad I was able to fit into your schedule,” laughed Celeste. “See you tomorrow, Andie.”

Celeste fluttered away, and Andromeda sighed, turning to Lily. “I always have been a pushover when it comes to Celeste,” she said. “It's been like that ever since we were young.”

Lily's grandmother—Andromeda and Celeste's mother, Ruthven—died

when they were very young, and since then, Andromeda had always looked out for Celeste. It made Lily sad to think that she never got to meet Ruthven, but it was what it was; Andromeda and Celeste never really got to know their mother either, as Andromeda was only four years old when she passed. Andromeda told Lily that she has occasional memories of Ruthven, but for the most part, she doesn't remember anything from that early part of childhood – and Celeste was only one year old at the time, so she had no memories of their mother at all.

One day later

Andromeda and Lily swam up to Bayside, the Bay's best restaurant and bar, according to Celeste; whom, of course, was biased, since she and Pierre always flirted madly with each other.

“Yoo-hoo!” Celeste cried, beckoning them to the bar area. “I'm over here.”

Andromeda and Lily approached the bar, and Celeste grabbed the Mai Tai that she had been drinking and swam down from her bar stool. “I was just catching up with Pierre while I waited for you two.” She winked at Pierre, and followed Andromeda and Lily to their table.

A waitress asked Andromeda if she would like anything, and she ordered a rum and soda; Lily ordered a raspberry smoothie for herself.

“So, sister ... what's new?” Celeste asked Andromeda, twirling the colorful mini umbrella in her drink. “It's been ages. And Lily, how are you fitting in that human school of yours?”

Celeste had in fact gone to high school too, but soon became bored of it; she dropped out when she had only

completed two of her four years, and came back to the Bay to hang out with her friends.

Lily laughed. "You can just call it 'school,' Aunt Celeste. And it's fine."

Andromeda gave her a sharp look. "You just told me the other day that it's not fine, Lily. Didn't you say you haven't made any friends there?"

Lily squirmed in her seat. "I'm still hoping to make some friends. The other girls are just a bit difficult, is all."

Celeste smiled at Lily. "They're probably jealous of you, Lily. Didn't you say you're the fastest one on the swim team? Of course, they have no idea whom they're up against!"

"Yeah, I'm pretty fast. I don't think that helps much with making friends though," Lily said. "The other girls would rather come in 1st place than see me take home all the medals at the meets."

Celeste pooh-poohed this idea. "Nonsense. I would think they would aspire to be you, rather than dislike you!"

Celeste had always been wildly optimistic, thought Lily wryly.

Andromeda, who rarely drank anymore, was halfway into her drink, and was feeling a little inebriated.

"Oh please, Celeste. You've never had issues making friends. My little sister, always the belle of the ball," she remarked.

Celeste's smile faltered slightly. "Well, not always, Andie. As I recall, I approached Damon first with an offer to dance, at the Bay Dinner, but he chose you over me."

This was news to Lily. "Really? What happened?"

Andromeda glared at Celeste. "That's ancient history, Celeste, and I prefer

that we don't discuss it in front of Lily."

Lily's curiosity was piqued. "I'd like to hear the story," she said.

Celeste patted Lily on the back. "No, your mother is right," she remarked coquettishly. "She did win Damon fair and square, after all. No use dredging up the past."

"Fair and square?" Andromeda said, narrowing her eyes. "Even after we became a couple, you still declared your love for him. He politely turned you down, of course, and then immediately told me about it."

Celeste swiveled to look at Andromeda, mouth agape. "He did?"

"Of course he did!" Andromeda exclaimed. "He was my husband – did you really think he'd keep something like that from me?"

Celeste blushed. "I'm sorry, Andie. What can I say—I was young and foolish. You remember what it was like to be young, right?" she said, trying to excuse her behavior.

Celeste was a few Mai Tai's in, and it was starting to show—her face was red, and she was sweating a bit. "It's not like it matters now, anyways—the fishermen killed them all. It wasn't supposed to happen that way though."

Andromeda blanched. "What?"

Celeste swayed a bit in her chair. "The fisherman. They were only supposed to kill Damon, not the other mermen and merboys."

Andromeda gasped. "What are you talking about?"

In an instant, Celeste seemed to realize she had said too much, and she put her hand to her mouth. "Oh God. Nothing, Andromeda. I don't know what I'm talking about, I'm drunk."

Lily had a strange feeling in the pit of

her stomach.

Andromeda turned to Celeste and gave her a piercing look. "Did you somehow orchestrate my husband and my son's deaths? Please tell me I'm wrong on this."

Celeste half-smiled for a second.

"He was the only merman I've ever loved, Andromeda. And he chose you. Do you know how that feels? You weren't even trying to find a merman; you had no illusions of marriage! If I couldn't have him, I didn't want you to have him, either. The fact that it was pearl season, and that the fishermen wanted the pearls anyways, was just a happy coincidence."

Andromeda stood there for a minute, trying to formulate words. "So you had the love of my life killed, as well as my baby boy? What kind of a monster are you?"

Celeste was starting to realize that perhaps she should have kept her mouth shut. She started slowly swimming away towards the entrance of the restaurant.

Andromeda, however, had anticipated this, and grabbed Celeste by her long, blonde hair. "You—little—mer-whore," she swore. "How dare you!"

Celeste chose this moment to turn on the waterworks. "I'm so sorry, Andie," she cried, "I didn't mean to do it. I've regretted it ever since. And the rest of the mermen and merboys weren't supposed to be killed—that was truly an accident!"

"I don't believe anything that you say anymore," yelled Andromeda, and she grabbed Celeste and threw her outside.

Lily, shell-shocked, swam outside as well, only to see Andromeda pinning

Celeste against a large rock.

"You've always been selfish, but I reasoned it was because Mother had died young and you were the baby of the family," Andromeda said to Celeste. Andromeda sounded almost calm now, and Lily was scared by this; she had never seen her act like this before.

"I never would have thought that you would do something like this ... so ... so despicable," Andromeda whispered.

Celeste opened her mouth to speak. Andromeda shoved Celeste, who reeled backwards and hit her head on a large rock. Suddenly, Celeste was still.

"Celeste?" Andromeda whispered, putting her hands to her face.

Lily quickly swam over to Andromeda and Celeste's lifeless body.

"Mom?" Lily said.

"Celeste! Wake up!" Andromeda cried. But it was too late.

Two weeks later

"Please repeat after me," said the magistrate. Lily struggled to keep the heavy tiara on her head, and she looked at her steadily.

"I, Lily McIntyre, do solemnly swear to uphold all laws as Queen of the Bay, and to serve my people until my dying breath," she said. Lily repeated the vow after him, and the people of the Bay cheered.

It has been two long weeks since Celeste's death. Andromeda was currently being tried for her murder, although her lawyer had been able to get the charge of 1st degree murder dropped to mer-slaughter; it was an accident, after all.

Lily, as the only witness, will have to testify in front of the court in a few months, but she first had to attend

to the more pressing business of the Bay being without a queen. Lily had to drop out of school early, citing family problems—not entirely untrue—and promised the Bay school district that she would eventually get her GED. Although Lily was heartbroken at the loss of her aunt and also of her mother's freedom, all in one fell swoop, she knew that the Bay needed a leader, and she was determined to be that leader for them.

The day before, she had visited Andromeda in jail, which was in a smaller shipwreck close by to the yacht that Andromeda and Lily had formerly inhabited. As queen, Lily was expected to live in the royal family yacht, a different shipwreck where Celeste had formerly lived.

"So the coronation is tomorrow?" Andromeda had asked Lily.

"Yes," Lily said.

"You will be a great queen," Andromeda said, clasping Lily's hands in hers. "I know you will."

"But what about you? How are you doing?" Lily asked.

Andromeda shrugged. "I'll be fine," she said, obviously lying.

The Queen was allowed to pardon her subjects, but when it came to family, an impartial second advisor had to also agree with the Queen's pardoning. The whole Bay knew what had transpired between Andromeda and Celeste; however, although most agreed that after her confession, Celeste deserved to die, Andromeda still needed to serve time for the events that had transpired.

"I'll visit you every day," said Lily, tearing up.

Andromeda hardened. "No, don't,"

she said. "You will be Queen, and it does not behoove a queen to visit a murderer in jail every day."

"You're hardly a murderer, Mom," said Lily. "It was an accident."

Andromeda looked at Lily, unwavering.

"That may be. But you're queen now, Lily. You can take care of yourself. All I ask of you is that you remember who you are, and that at one point in time, we were a family," she said, crying. "I wish your aunt hadn't poisoned that for you, and I'm sorry that we can't be a family anymore."

Lily tried to hug her mother through the bars, but Andromeda pushed her away. "Go, now," she said, wiping her face. "Please don't come back."

"Of course I'm coming to visit," Lily said. "Mom?" she pleaded.

Andromeda turned her back on Lily, and sat down on the floor in her cell.

"Mom," Lily said, in a choked voice.

Andromeda did not turn around.

When Lily eventually falls asleep the next night, after the coronation, she does so with a heavy heart. She dreams of the Bay and its people; and she sees Damon and Jack, who wave at her, from the recesses of the dark sea.

Liz Parker (RC 2009) is an editor for Snack Food & Wholesale Bakery magazine, a business-to-business publication covering the snack and bakery industry. In her spare time, she runs two blogs: Yes/No Detroit, and Books I Think You Should Read. She also writes "Best of Detroit" articles for CBS Detroit. While in the RC, Liz was the recipient of a Hopwood Award (Cowden Fellowship) for fiction. Liz currently resides in Clawson, MI.



E.J. and the Trojan Horse

Daniel Madaj

Summer

Wasn't it a Russian writer who said that smart things are done uniquely, but dumb things are done in generic dumbness? He might have gone on to say that there's never a good time to do something dumb, but that some times are worse than others.

Well, anyway, Emil Joseph Jackson picked a bad time: Dotty was home to England midsummer to visit family and friends. "E.J." waited and waited for some "special hash" she had promised. Overcome with an odd righteousness, ignoring their surprisingly good spring together, he sent a snippy, hurtful text. Dotty replied: We're done.

E.J. sent apologies, flowers. He should have bought a plane ticket and flown over. Not that it would have done any good: even Dotty didn't yet fully understand that when she closes a door, it never reopens.

Instead E.J. moped, and hoped that things would warm when she returned to town in a few weeks. But no.

No doubt E.J. was the new face illustrating the dictionary definition of stupid, but he had to wonder: Bushy or clean-shaven? Tortured, guilty, in denial? It was some time later before he started to see that if something was too fragile to withstand one blow it could hardly be durable. By then he had moved on to other, hopefully less stupid things.

His focus on the stupidity obscured the central point: why did he get so angry and feel such injustice? This would complicate every romance and most every friendship for many years.... It was like he kept something radioactive locked away in a suitcase locked away in a closet, but the radiation eventually leaked out. He needed to open that suitcase, deal with what was inside, or he would be carrying it around with

him everywhere, while it ate away at everything.

Autumn

Of course E.J. heard the party around him, Sunday night, the first weekend of fall term. E.J. spent most of that evening face down in bed, in "his and Dotty's" room in the three-bedroom he shared with fellow writing majors Lou Mothersbaugh and Gus Jamison. E.J. heard the music, the babble of the visitors, smelled the cigarette and grass smoke.

And from time to time he heard his bedroom door opening....

The next morning, he waited until everyone had left the apartment, then hobbled down the hallway to the bathroom, bleary, heart-broken, troubled, but finally too bored to stay inert.

E.J. looked in the mirror. As usual, he didn't like his beard; it looked like a matt of iron filings hugging a magnet. Or his hair, a bristly bush. But then, he didn't like himself clean-shaven or with his hair short or slicked back. His nose seemed too large; all his features seemed crowded into the middle of his face. Some times it looked just the opposite: tiny little features spread out against a vast wasteland....

How long had he been hibernating? Stepping out onto the sidewalk, it was no longer summer. Mid-September: moderate, not humid. The big maple out front still had a head of green, if "greying" at the temples, but several shrubs were flame red and a few trees up the road had already yellowed or browned.

Autumn! He met Dotty last autumn, in the Inn, in the Experimental College basement. The Inn had a more formal name, but it now escaped him. Inn-Digenous? Inn-Digestion? Dotty Botsford was a first-year student from England (her parents had met at the university), seated with her two roommates, Deb and Casey.

E.J. had been in the small game room to the side, frustrated as usual with his poor showing at the Inn's ancient pinball game, a version of Rap-pacchini's Daughter where the player takes on the role of young Giovanni and infiltrates the poison garden (one ball active), adjusting to the various poisons just enough to convince Beatrice to escape with him (two balls active), engineering an escape (three balls), then nursing himself back to health and her to a new chemistry of health. And then presumably living together, happily ever after. After countless quarters spent, E.J. has never been able to restore Giovanni, which seemed a bitter but fitting metaphor for his romantic failures.

With one last quarter in his pocket, he decided to use it on a song from the jukebox. He picked a new solo song from one of the Barberless Quartet, and one of Dotty's roommates piped up that the Barbers were also Dotty's favorite, why not sit and join us?

Thinking about Dotty and the Inn on the walk to the XC, he headed downstairs. He was going to ask for a job. He'd never worked in a restaurant, but who else ordered more hippie fries? He had assumed he'd be head librarian at the dorm's library, thought he had the inside track, but then at the

end of April it went to Marv Gleason, his freshman year roommate, of all people! What was the library's name? Something like Bootlicker. Butt-kicker?

It turned moot, as the library "down-sized" over the summer, and was now hardly larger than a broom closet. It seemed to operate like a kind of vending machine....

Usually, the Inn closed every summer but would surely be open by now. It wasn't. In fact, the sign was gone. He stood before the door, rather stupidly, until someone called out to him from a dorm doorway. Didn't you hear? It's been shut down....

The XC administrative offices were on the first floor, set off on the south side near the southern-most entrance. The office seemed unchanged: a surprisingly large room with several desks, windows along the back wall, and then an office to either side, one for the administrative manager, the other the director. You just knew that when the building was next renovated this space would be slashed to the size of a dumpster. It was the middle of a Monday afternoon in the second week of the semester, and the place was quiet, two of the three desks vacant, and the XC director's office dark and locked up.

Ruth Warshington was the young woman at the one occupied desk. E.J. couldn't remember why he and Ruth disliked each other, but he assumed the break-up with Dotty only made it worse.

"I was an idiot," E.J. offered. "I've apologized, tried to make amends, but nothing seems to work."

Sally smiled with some satisfaction at this, as if a lifetime of misery would only start his penance. He told her that in his

grief he had missed the first week and a half of school. "I can try to catch up with my classes, but I wondered if there might be other options available."

Ruth stared at him impassively. "You could drop out and leave town," she quipped, then waited, as if for a drumroll. "Well, there is this Aristophanes project," she said. "I think they'll still looking for a token male so the project doesn't look too skewed towards women." She checked things on her computer, then texted a brief message. "Yes...." She sent him down to room 112.

E.J. stood before the door. It looked like any other dorm room, except for a taped handwritten note, "Aristo." He was about to knock when the door flew open, almost smacking his nose. He stepped back. Sylvie St. John, sobbing, stepped out. Tall, too thin, with long, shiny black hair, she looked woe-some in that way that was too painfully familiar. Before he could think, he put his arms around her. She collapsed into him, sobbing harder. He held her head gently with one hand and he steered her tears onto the front of his left shoulder. Goodness, did he kiss her on the top of the head?

"Thanks, E.J.," she mumbled, stepped back, and gave him a piercing look of appreciation.

An older woman appeared at the door, wearing a slight smile. "You must be E.J.," she said. "I see you already know Sylvie."

Justine Nesbitt wasn't a creative writing major when she started at the Experimental College. She was in the XC's second class; the creative writing program hadn't started yet.

Justine was a star journalist in high school, as much as such a thing is possible, and she came to college to get a degree in journalism. During the summer before her freshman year, the university sent her and all other incoming students a note describing the XC and inviting applications. Justine was intrigued; she applied, was accepted.

Justine remained committed to journalism, working at the university's student paper; she was editor-in-chief in her senior year. But along the way she discovered drama, first in the XC, then in the larger university. Drama led to a class on television arts. Meanwhile, when a junior, Hayley van der Berg was hired to teach creative fiction....

Justine won a Ficklehart Award for a tv screenplay, which led to a summer internship in LA, her junior year, working for a small tv writers conglomerate. They liked her; they offered her a job after graduation.

Perhaps it was her earlier focus on journalism, but Justine found herself able to be creative within the narrow confines of television writing: be creative, but none of the main characters can change and the plot should wrap up within the episode, which currently meant within about 35 minutes of on-screen time. Oh, and keep it simple.

Justine prospered.

She might argue that she prospered too well: for one thing, dating was difficult. Men seemed intimidated by her success. One who wasn't was Costa Papagalos, whom she bumped into at a local LA production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. They shared a drink after, and had a brief relationship. It might have been more than brief if he wasn't already married; he was always vague

about these details, but Justine could see the outline clearly enough. Most external details about Costa were slightly vague, but it seemed mostly because of a boundless restlessness, a yearning for new things.

Costa lived well and probably beyond his means, so it was not a surprise to find him adept at grantsmanship, if not outright tax-dodging. He encouraged Justine to establish her own foundation (which she didn't do) or at least to "find ways to get others to pay for things you would like to see happen." He said that if you're going to end up paying taxes, why not use those payments to subsidize things you want to see prosper? Which she eventually did with the Aristophanes Project.

She was coming back to the area regularly to visit her aging mother, and dropped in periodically to see Hayley and other teachers at the XC. The university had been pounding her with generic requests for money, but she found the requests hollow, even if the caller was usually an earnest young man breathlessly telling her about the exciting opportunities made possible by alums just like her. She assumed male alums were called by equally charming young women.

This led her to muse: what if there was something specific and desirable at the XC? Would I give to that? Of course she would. So she mused about what that would be, which in quick order led her to imagine the Aristophanes Project. But she found it impossible to set the wheels in motion at the university; it became clear that it would be immensely better if the Project already existed, or had external funds to bring it into existence. So with Costa's help, she

crafted proposals, and eventually one was funded.

His caveat? That she agree to meet him in Athens at Christmas during the project, assuming she was not in a serious relationship. Or even if she was.

Justine ushered E.J. into the modest office and gestured to a scruffy, padded chair that he seemed to remember from the old library. She sat behind the desk and tidied up a few folders there. She smiled, and E.J. realized that she was younger than he thought. He squinted. 30, maybe? She was dressed well, minimal make-up. He recognized a quality that he had in short supply: self-confidence. He reached up and patted at his hair, wondering how disorganized and self-conscious he looked.

Justine was smiling because she saw in E.J. several possible solutions. For one, he was male, which the Project needed, and for two, he would be the fourth of four Project students. For three, he might have a further calming and sustaining effect on Sylvie, who a moment before was considering leaving the Project and perhaps even dropping out of school. Sylvie's boyfriend, Rex, had apparently dumped her; apparently this violated Sylvie's unviolatable 50 year plan, leaving her plan-less.

Justine described the Aristophanes Project, but spoke more about the Trojan Horse. Back in L.A. when she saw the Aristophanes play, she remembered the annual theatric competitions that Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others participated in. She saw a matrice that could train writers to work within narrow parameters, which she saw as necessary for success as a writer in the real world. Plus, one or more of the stu-

dents would win the competitions, and awards are always a good way to spruce up a resume and get attention.

The Trojan Horse? Students would study Greek plays, maybe even learn Greek, then work towards writing two ten-minute plays to perform, one humorous, one dramatic, for a brief modern competition similar to the old Greek ones. But the real purpose would be teach practical discipline about writing for a specific audience. Almost amusedly, Justine thought to indulge her personal belief that drama, and writing specifically, are fundamental tools for every writer....

She opened a chocolate. The bar had an unusual name, Ygias. She then carefully folded the wrapper into smaller and smaller squares. At first, E.J. thought she might be folding it into an origamic horse. She opened a drawer and offered him samples: "all successful bribes from the lon candy company."

They talked about the Trojan Horse, and about how unexpected outcomes can arise from seemingly clear beginnings.

"That's what I mean about the Trojan Horse," Sylvie said. "Unexpected outcomes, at least for the recipient."

"That's what caught my eye about Sylvie," she said. "Did you know she won a Ficklehart Award this summer for a spring story about the concept?"

No, he didn't. In fact, he knew almost nothing about Sylvie, except what he had learned in the last few moments: that she was suffering from his sad illness, and that she hadn't clobbered him when he hugged her.

Justine happened to be a guest reader for the summer Fickleharts, and when she read Sylvie's story, she knew she had

her first Project student.

"The story is about someone distributing counterfeit coins that mimicked ancient ones; there was no financial fraud involved; the purpose was to inspire curiosity and wonder."

Justine asked E.J. about his writing and then asked about administrative background. He had worked a bit at the library, and in high school had done office work. Heck, she might use him to run things locally so she didn't have to make so many trips!

Justine knew little of Sylvie's 50 Year Plan. The Plan began when she was 12, so you might say it was now in its 43rd year, but it didn't hit its stride until 11th grade, when she was 16, when she and Rex started dating. She knew then that he was The One, even though he was a year younger and just in 10th grade. They'd both go to the same college, she'd major in anthropology, he'd be an engineer, they'd marry when he had his degree, they'd live on the west coast, eventually have two children, a boy and a girl

But the plan was not specific about the summer after Rex graduated high school, and he had a chance to attend college early, that spring. Wouldn't it be cool if she also took spring classes and they lived together? It sounded good. She took two classes, including a writing class, because it was available and because she had heard good things about van der Berg. Living together was great. She wrote that story....

But during the spring Rex bumped into the Immersive Language Program, and before Sylvie knew otherwise Rex was moving into the Italian dorm, referred to himself as Giovanni, and

was "immersing" with an Italian tutor/girlfriend.... Rex was gone. The Plan was dead!

E.J. wanted to look for Sylvie. But first he forced himself to look for work.... Sure, the thing with Justine might pan out, but with the Inn gone and the library gone....

He went to university counseling to ask about fellowships. Yeah, maybe there was one for stupidity. (He promised himself he would fund such a fellowship, later, if one didn't already exist.) Since the semester was underway, the wait was not long. He was called into a small office where a thin, nervous man with orange hair and an inordinate amount of figurines lining his desktop and bookshelves gestured for him to sit. The counselor perked up when he heard about the Greek things. If you'd take Ancient Greek, a stipend! Courtesy of the Greek Antiquities Council. E.J. was good at language.... And hey, if by chance you took ancient as well as modern, well, more money. Courtesy of the Greek Tourist Agency. He could take the two language classes, his tutorial, and the two Aristophanes classes, 15 credits. Perfect. And the stipends would more than he could hope to make working 8 hours a week....

It was late when he finally reached Sylvie's door. (He had read the number off a sheet on Justine's desk). He knocked. Waited, waited.

The door opened. Sylvie smiled. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay...." E.J. began.

She kissed him. She pulled him gently into her room, and shut the door.

E.J. wanted to say that he stayed in

that room for the rest of the academic year, but that was only mostly true.

Hayley Van der Berg kept details of her own story discreet, but most students knew she ran the XC's fiction writing program. Trim, compact, earnest, intense, she had a reputation as fair and even-tempered, if stoic to the point of inscrutability. It would surprise no one that she was herself a writer; she wrote manuals and instruction pieces for industry which brought in a steady second income. But she also wrote detective fiction, under the pseudonym Piso Cuidado.

Cuidado's stories are popular in Argentina and Central America, where middle-aged detective Niño en la Canis-ta solved seemingly unsolvable mysteries with the aid of the psychedelic drug asahuenga. Cuidado followed the standard detective formula for the first books in the series, but increasingly the drug is causing a spiritual and existential crisis. Of course, the publisher worries about where this is going, but so far sales have been strong, so worries have been pushed to the future. There are talks about movie adaptations.

Hayley wanted to explore a theory that people are drawn to writing as a way to better detail one's sexual fantasies. This seemed true of her male students; when they're not exploring the miserable pointlessness of human life (as if the first one to truly see it that way), they're writing about their own sexual parts (as if the first one to ever have them).

Both themes were big for E.J., at least at the start. But then he abruptly turned to space opera, which Hayley hated: she didn't like sf and E.J.'s tepid

effort wasn't changing her mind. Then E.J. decided to "be positive," which first took the form of awkward love letters to Dotty and then to Sylvie, embarrassingly transparent wishes that the universe smile more broadly on these relationships.

Consequently, E.J. was not one of Hayley's students recommended to Justine for the Aristophanes Project. She recommended two; one, Darla Marbury, was selected.

They never discussed it, but E.J. and Sylvie cohabitated in a pleasant limbo: Sylvie was waiting for Rex to come to his senses, and E.J. waited for Dotty. At least at first.

E.J. loved to watch Sylvie when he thought she didn't notice, although the truth is that she noticed almost everything. That was actually one of her problems. Tall, too thin, with long black hair, she was very pretty, perhaps moreso because she didn't wear make-up and didn't draw attention to herself. If you didn't know her, you would likely find her guarded or worried or thinking about events somewhere else. Even if you did know her, these would be normal states.

E.J. periodically hacked at his big head of red-brown hair and his big red-brown beard, always being sculpted or shorn into a mustache or Manchu or something as E.J. struggled to find an identity he liked. Mountain man? Not so much. Clean-faced youngster? Not so much.

Early in October, Sylvie got very sick with flu. Dispite a nimbus of toxicity and

exhaustion, she willed herself to class and kept up with schoolwork. And she resisted every effort of E.J.'s to help. "Let me get you some ramen!" he would complain. "Let me wipe your forehead!" But no. The most she would concede: if E.J. replenished the ibuprofen, and left the bottle out on the top corner of the dresser, she might nod in his direction when she took out a pill.

Last year, E.J. and Dotty had ushered several large concerts; it was a good way to hear music for free. E.J. had forgotten that he had signed up for this year, until a notice appeared in his e-mail in late September for October's Imposters concert.

And it wasn't until he met with the other ushers at the concert that he remembered that Dotty also signed up.

It was probably best that he didn't see Dotty until the crowd of ushers gathered before their amped-up supervisor: as he looked around the group, there she was. He nodded, smiled; she nodded and smiled back. They were assigned posts at opposite ends of the arena; E.J. didn't see her again until after the concert was over.

The opening band was Blabble.... E.J. had never heard of them, so he got an unique experience: the lead singer at seemed to mutter incoherently, but then suddenly the lyrics were clear, sharp, and seemingly intended for him alone! E.J. looked around: many seemed to be having the same experience! Remarkable.

No surprise: the Imposters wore disguises. Just as the band was about to begin, E.J. saw a young woman sitting near him turn to her boyfriend. Her voice had a nervous quaver that veteran

hallucinogist E.J. recognized as pre-flight warm-up. "How many imposters do you think there are, like here in the audience?" she asked. Without turning his head her boyfriend conversationally replied, "Well, let's see, there's you, and me...." Then the music blasted forth.

E.J. was only passingly familiar with the Imposters, but found the concert pleasant enough. He would not have thought to conjecture whether the lead singer sounded different, acted younger, or stayed away from quieter and more reflective songs. You see, there was a rumor that the singer was struggling with addiction recovery and wanting to write more thoughtful, less raucous material. Perhaps he was sequestered on a South Pacific island to recover, and meanwhile was replaced with someone more rock-oriented. We know the rumor to be true, but that's a story for another day.

During the last of three encores, a young man looking all the world like Milton Sharp ran up on stage, dancing, singing, and playing a spastic air guitar until guards muscled him off stage. Could it be Milton? The last E.J. knew, Meltin' (as everyone called him) had joined a religious commune out west....

After the house lights came on, and folks left, the ushers gathered for a brief thank-you and then also dispersed. Dotty was also headed to the XC, and it seemed natural to walk with her. The walk was about half a mile, and E.J. was pleased to see how easily they fell back into their ordinary rhythm.

As they walked past the piles of dirt across from the XC (where yet another business school building was going up), E.J. saw something aglint on the

side of a near mound and picked it up. Improbably, it was in fact Dotty's earring from last year, lost somewhere on the walk from the arena to the XC. It must have been lost in the grass, and now.... Stunned, he offered it to her. She looked at it, laughed, and walked ahead, leaving him alone with the earring in his hand.

Sylvie was still up, in bed, reading. She asked about the concert, heard the whole story. She couldn't help but smile to herself: if Dotty had responded differently, would E.J. even be here to tell her about it? But she was sympathetic; she also placed inordinant significance on moments of augury, or at least she used to.

She took him in her arms. Generous, she soothed him. But: she never said.... But she never said.

Late last Winter semester, a small group of fervent believers led by Josh ("just Josh," charismatic, heavily-bearded) stopped in town on their way to homesteading in South Dakota. Milton went to hear Josh, and the next anyone knew, Milton was gone to South Dakota.

The homesteading experience went largely as you'd expect: no one knew much about subsistence farming, and it was a lot of hard work, not to mention the fact Josh didn't help much. And then this privilege extended to Josh's women, and then his "bodyguards."

But Milton liked the spirituality. At least it was fresh and new, at first. Eventually it seemed to have more to do with Josh and less with anything else.

And although he didn't think of it this way, he liked being away from drugs. As it turns out, he didn't need

them; he was crazy enough on his own. If anything, drugs dumbed him down. This wouldn't all come together until some time later, after he and Chrysanthé became a couple. In some ways, she became his anchor. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

After homesteading began to fall apart, Milton called his parents and got a ride back to school. You'd think they'd be furious with him, but mostly they were glad to have him back and delighted to see he had lost his appetite for recreational drugs.

But Milton was even later than E.J. getting back into the Fall semester. In fact, his air guitar playing at the Imposters concert fell on his first day back in town. He wasn't on drugs when he did it, but that doesn't mean he wasn't very, very high.

E.J. spotted Milton in the XC lobby the next morning. He wanted to ask about the commune, but was afraid he would hear something spiritual that might infect him, ruin him before he had yet developed his yet-to-be-developed special self. Milton might have said that the extreme spirituality was much like his old drug experiences, except less transient, perhaps a step closer to the trick of reality.

Class-wise, while it was too late for Milton to enroll for the Fall semester, he planned to finish up Incompletes from the Winter, since he had left with a few weeks of school work not finished. E.J. suggested he consider an independent study in Winter to reflect on his commune experience, something he could begin to work on now. He told him about the Aristophanes Project,

and wondered if he might be good for it next year. And of course he told him about Sylvie, hardly mentioning Dotty.

Finding a place to live for Milton was complicated. He crashed with friends that first night; he had heard that there was "always room" at the Omega Omega Omega fraternity. Neither of them knew about Omega's parachute-less plane jump each spring, which was one of the reasons there were always vacancies.

E.J. was tempted to let Milton use his apartment, since he spent most of his in Sylvie's dorm room. He brought this up with Sylvie. They've been spending about 70 percent of their time at his apartment. Couldn't Milton....

Immediately he saw his error. It was like what he had lucked into learning: don't touch her, let her touch you. She had to initiate. She might have offered.... but didn't like having it suggested! No, no, forget about it! We'll find something else for Milton!

Thanksgiving Break was short, only two days longer than a normal weekend. E.J. dutifully went home for his family's Thursday mid-day meal, and drank whiskey and watched football with his uncle and his brothers. E.J. was alarmingly distracted; first, he brooded that everyone would be asking him about Dotty (they didn't), and then, he brooded that he couldn't imagine bringing Sylvie home to meet the family. Was it because they weren't actually boyfriend/girlfriend, despite the practical appearances? It seemed clear that a day would come, perhaps sooner than he thought, that Sylvie would be walking out of his life. Could it do anything else but break his silly heart?

No sooner did everyone return from the break but Justine announced a perk for Project students: she herself was going to Athens for a few days around New Year's; the Project would pay for any Project student who wanted to come along. She'd pay airfare (roundtrip New York to Athens), and two nights in an Athens hotel. It turned out to be a Grade H hotel, but it had hot water, after a fashion, and was, after all, free.

Three of the five of them took the trip to Athens: E.J., Justine, and Chrysanthé.

Sylvie had declined so early and so completely that E.J. couldn't help but wonder if she had made other plans, specifically with Rex. He had done his best detective probing but was unsuccessful in learning if she saw Rex over the Thanksgiving break, considering they both came from the same town.

Darla declined and then dropped out of the Program.

The three of them rendezvoused at JFK in New York for the flight to Athens. E.J. had hitched a ride via the Ride Board with Fred Stockbridge, a pleasant if hyper native New Yorker. They left around dusk, drove all night. Fred looked haggard, but declined E.J.'s offer to help drive. E.J. figured Fred must be a hard partier, but eventually Fred turned to E.J., sighed, and said, "There's this girl, Jill."

He was smitten, of course, but was having an impossible time getting close enough to her, at parties, to find out what she thought of him. You see, she could handle her drugs like no one Fred knew, and certainly more than Fred.

He tries to hang in, limit his consumption, wait for the circle of folks

smoking or drinking to thin....but by the time he has an opportunity, he's so bamboozled he can hardly put three words together. The best he can do is stagger to his feet and somehow find his way home.

What should he do? Is this a sign that they shouldn't be together? Should he be more clever?

Yes, probably more clever, E.J. thought to himself, not that he knew much about being smart in relationships. He couldn't offer Fred any advice other than words of consolation.

Fred dropped E.J. off at a commuter station just north of the city, and E.J. took a train to Grand Central and then a bus out to JFK.

When Chrystanthe arrived, E.J. barely recognized her, and realized how little attention he had paid to her even though she was in his modern Greek class. She was smaller than he remembered. Was she even 5 feet tall? Trim, dark haired, she blazed with an excitement that even E.J. couldn't not notice.

When Justine had announced the Athens opportunity, Chrysanthé parlayed it into an extended trip to family on Xathos: she would take one exam on-line, and then return after the semester break. Chrysanthé was the first recruit to Justine's program: she was a creative-writing major from Chicago, her parents' Greek immigrants. Chrysanthé was fluent in modern Greek and more literally interested than most in the specifics of the Aristophanes Project.

Justine arrived as boarding began. She had a small carry-on satchel and had checked no bags. She deflected all questions, but it was clear that this holiday Greek trip was not her first. As

some of us remember, she wrote it into the grant that funded the Project.

On the plane, Justine had the window, Chrysanthé the middle, and E.J. the aisle. Chrysanthé's excitement was a welcome distraction from E.J.'s traditional brooding. They all dozed during the 9 hour flight to Athens; E.J. read a bit from a book, studied up on Aristophanes (which he had neglected to do beforehand), and played blackjack and solitaire on the in-flight console.

Olympic Air was a Greek airline. Chrysanthé asked for a snack in perfect Greek, the stewardess responded, and then E.J. also asked for something, also in Greek, which pleased the stewardess. Chrysanthé punched him playfully in the shoulder.

Was the universe pushing them together? E.J. just shook his head, loyal, probably to Sylvie.

The plane landed, they retrieved luggage, and Justine was suddenly saying goodbye! She put E.J. and Chrysanthé on a cab to the Byron Hotel, said she was staying elsewhere. She paused to wish Chrysanthé a pleasant trip to her relatives' farm, and said she'd see E.J. back at the airport for the return flight in four days.

The Byron, although just half a mile or so from Syntagma Square and within hailing distance of the Acropolis, seemed to exist in a different, more run-down city. E.J.'s room was on the third floor, Chrysanthé's on the second. Distracted, E.J. hardly said anything to Chrysanthé as he unlocked his door, put his suitcase down, opened the balcony window, stepped outside.

Here he was, halfway around the world, and all he could do was brood

about Sylvie (what was she up to? What would come of them?), Dotty (was he being disloyal to have already stopped mooning for her?), and fend off this new little tickle he seemed to be feeling for Chrysanthé! It seemed too complex for such a simpleton.

He tried to sleep but jetlag and his worries distracted him. He must have dozed because next he knew there was a knock at the door. It took a while to register. Who could be knocking? Was something wrong with the reservation? Had he been discovered to be an imposter?

It was Chrysanthé.

"I tried calling you on your cell, but you must not have switched it back on after the flight." That was true.

"It's getting dark, and the Acropolis will be lit up!" she exclaimed. "Let's take a look!"

The Byron was in deep shadow. As they stepped outside, the lights of the Acropolis stood in contrast to that darkness. They made their way up. They were disappointed not to actually walk inside, but it was still fun to have a view over the city and to be in the midst of history.

After, tChrysanthé led them them to an ouzery for a few shots of ouzo and then to a little restaurant for excellent souvlakia and retsina. E.J. didn't especially care for the retsina, but he drank it dutifully. Then came the odious banana liqueur that the owner insisted on when he heard Chrysanthé's blazing, new-native Greek, and E.J.'s faltering, academic, but accurate version.

They wandered, talked, sang, and made their way back to the Byron. They said goodnight, and E.J. trudged

upstairs feeling guilty and disloyal to not either offer for Chrysanthé to come up or for him stay down..

In the morning, they went to the ruins of the arena where the original Aristo plays were performed. It was another beautiful summery day, blue skies, a few fleecy clouds, amazing vistas. They talked about writing, about Aristo, about themselves. Then her cousin appeared in a car, there were quick introductions and then an even quicker kiss from Chrysanthé, and she was gone. In many ways he would have liked to have gone into the car with her, to visit her relatives, to quit school and settle with her here....

Sadly, he made his way down the hill and back to the Byron, which was familiar and yet alien without her.

He grew quickly bored with his regular agitations. It was almost time for dinner. He wandered down to the second floor. Chrysanthé's door was open; he couldn't help himself, he had to check to see if she hadn't somehow returned, perhaps overwhelmed with her new love for him? But no. Inside, a young couple were bickering. They stopped when we appeared, so he said, "Sorry. A friend of mine was staying here last night." The couple seemed embarrassed, so he said, "Hi. I'm E.J. Where you headed?"

Turns out they were Stewart and Danielle, from Ann Arbor. He could tell right away that Stu was dazzled, almost overfilled with experiences, while Danielle seemed already bored and agitated. Stewart sheepishly explained about the shower – they had ordered one, but he had taken too long, the hot water had run out, and there was none for her!

(The hotel was so old, there wouldn't be more hot water until morning). And they only had a block of feta and a bag of raisins to eat! They hadn't seen anything like a grocery or restaurant.

E.J. laughed. Yes, he now knew that Athens is a true European city: things are in districts, and the Byron is in what appears to be the washing machine district. Or maybe the crumbling Grade H hotel district. Come, I'll show you a cool place to eat.

And so they walked up the street toward Syntagma.

E.J. liked them, but was uncomfortable with the differences between them. How could this relationship last? Stu didn't seem capable of stretching further, while Danielle seemed to grow more bored with each minute....

He felt guilty but he left them at the souvlakia restaurant where he and Chrysanthé had had lunch. He continued toward the Square, and chanced upon a hotel with the word "star" associated. He stepped inside, saw there was a Starbucks, stopped for a dark roast. He had heard that so-called American coffee was rare, and could be as expensive as a cheap hotel.... And even though it was, he decided to have a cup.

Sitting, looking out the window, who should he see but Justine....

Happy with a man about her age, flirting, headed out on the evening. He had finished his coffee; so he followed a bit, pretending to be a spy. He wasn't a very good one. He tried to catch some of their conversation, but was unsuccessful, then lost them completely.

The next day, as they took their

seats on the plane, E.J. shared some of his adventures. Justine was delighted! What had he learned? How were things with Chrysanthé? How were things with Sylvie?

He blurted out: first on his visit to friend at Antioch, then anon, he quickly realized he was (1) over Dotty, (2) that Sylvie was not as much in love with him as he was with her, and (3) Chrysanthé Chrysanthé! He talked about the power of the Greek ruins and seeing where the plays were performed.

Justine talked more about the history of the project, but expertly deflected any talk about the man she was with in Athens.

Winter

As Winter Semester began, everything looked the same: he and Sylvie, still cruising along. Same routines: she liked to sit propped up in the bed, laptop open, notebook beside her, headphones on, working diligently. He would sit at the desk, stare out the window, stare fondly at her, stare at his homework....

But almost everything was different.

Because she hadn't made a further commitment to him, because she treated him exactly as she had before, that was nevertheless a change for E.J., because he was certainly ready for further commitment! He tried not to be greedy. He tried to appreciate what they had together. But still....

E.J.'s administrative work for Justine kept growing, and Justine's direct involvement began to lessen. E.J. didn't see it, but she was preparing him (as well as testing him) for running the whole show, next year.

He had been determined to drop modern Greek, because with the increased work and his excellent procrastination practices he had too much to do. But Chrysanthé was in the modern Greek class....

He was supposed to be finishing his two mini-plays for the end-of-term festival. After writing, the students would need to figure out how to stage their plays (with minimal props and zero money to spend), as well as to conscript a friend or two to help in the cast. But E.J. was still stuck puttering on adapting an unfinished Greek parody he had started in high school, with no thought yet to the dramatic play.

Near the end of January, one of his apartment-mates had discovered a loophole in their lease (they weren't old enough to have legally signed), so the guys were moving out and into a cheaper sublet. Did E.J. – or E.J. and Sylvie, or Milton – want to join? Of course, he would save a lot of money if he just lived here with Sylvie, since he spent most of his time here, anyway. And it would be nice to live with her in an actual house: it would make them seem more like a couple, yes? But E.J. simply signed up for a room in the new place and never brought it up with Sylvie.

In January, when he'd stare at her, she'd sometimes pause, smile, look over at him. Yes? He'd say, oh, I'm just appreciating how beautiful you are. She'd smile, regally.

By February he wanted to say....

E.J. bumped into Kaiser Roberts outside the Grad Library, one day in February, and Kaiser invited him to a

party at his apartment that weekend. Compared to E.J., at least, Kaiser seemed at the zenith of social status, so getting an invitation made E.J. feel like he existed in the real world, at least through the weekend. But no sooner did E.J. arrive at the party than Kaiser was bustling out the door, with his customary entourage of cute women. Friendly, effusive, Kaiser welcomed him. "Make yourself at home!" he enthused. Nevertheless, it did not seem that Kaiser would be returning any time soon.

E.J. slowly made his way through the crowded kitchen, took a red plastic cup already poured with punch, and jostled his way into the living room. No one was even vaguely familiar, which seemed improbable, unless he had entered a portal into a parallel universe, something that often seemed likely. He was pleased that he didn't feel particularly awkward and self-conscious. A young man with a silly half-beard that made him look like a chipmunk offered him a hit from a pipe; E.J. praised the music, which he recognized as a Babble song. Mr. Rodent was very impressed he had heard of Babble, and E.J. talked about ushering the concert in the fall.

E.J. kept a view of the apartment door to see who was coming and going. He mused that maybe Sylvie would drop in, although that was unlikely, since she didn't drink, smoke, or like crowds. He mused at how these seemed immutable facts; he had completely accepted the fact that she made all her own rules, even if those rules excluded him or any possible future together. He realized with a happy jolt that he wasn't hoping to see Dotty. And that jolt was followed by a happier one, thinking that perhaps Chrysanthé would come by ... The sun-

ny thrill of it alarmed him. He decided he had had too much to smoke and drink, and headed for the door.

As he opened it, there was Andy Boggs, about to knock! Andy had graduated the previous year, staged a very popular musical comedy in town over the summer, then went to France for a semester, funded by Ficklehart money he'd earned last Winter term. This was the first he'd seen of Andy, who had been preoccupied with work and other things since returning to town in January. And Andy wasn't much for social media, or even email. E.J. was tempted to stay a while and talk, but he could tell Andy wanted to work the crowd, and he himself still felt spooked, so he asked to get together soon and talk, then scooted home.

Despite Andy's reluctance, he allowed E.J. to come over to his apartment to visit, late one afternoon that February. E.J. was caught up in the glamour of Andy's recent past (awards, successful summer play, off writing in Europe) and imagined a frugal but elegant studio apartment, full of exotic houseplants with large windows and bookcases lining the walls. The place was frugal, but also quite spartan: Andy explained, seeing E.J. look of disappointment, that the place was quite temporary.

E.J. was also surprised to see how tired Andy was, just returned from work and still wet from a shower. He looked wirey but gaunt, exhausted.

Andy's plan had been to return to town, get a decent-paying job but work no more than 20 hours a week, so he had time and energy to write but also to develop his ideas for local theater

productions. Frankly, he thought that money would already be coming in from the various stories he'd sent in to journals, but no, not yet, and not to mention the rejections and requests for elaborate rewrites. Andy had a job working construction, which freed up his nights and weekends but left him so exhausted it was a struggle to do more than eat and sleep. That's why he hasn't been much in the social scene, although he's been back in town since January.

Andy invited E.J. into his small living room, pointed him to the one chair. Andy himself sat on his futon bed. He brought E.J. a beer, although he brought a glass of water for himself. Andy politely declined any hits off the joint E.J. brought....

As E.J. got stoned, his memories of the rest of his visit blurred. But he recalls Andy lamenting local changes making his plans difficult: the closing of the Inn (where Andy thought to stage some activities, perhaps at no rental cost), the new university regulations making it hard to schedule performance or rehearsal space and then requiring complex justification lest there be steep charges.

"That's why this place is temporary," Andy said. "If this doesn't work out, I'll have to do something different. Maybe I'll get a master's degree, or get a PhD and work as a cryptologist for the FBI in Washington...."

But he lit up when E.J. described the Aristophanes Project. E.J. felt bad that he didn't more about Justine's plans and, now that he thought about it, her obvious well-thought-out strategy for keeping costs down. E.J. promised to introduce Andy to her....

Sylvie's brother and parents visited, in March. The brother is a junior in high school, taller and lankier than Sylvie. So far, his passion is basketball, so if he came to the university he'd likely be far away from the XC. E.J. is impressed that he's actually friendly, but then again, everyone in Sylvie's family seems sweet and wholesome. E.J. can't help swooning as he imagines himself, some day, as part of this family. Of course, it does not seem likely, alas.

Easter fell in mid-March, this year, and E.J. went home for the entire weekend. Again, most of the anticipated eruptions and strong emotional weather didn't materialize. It was enough to make him wonder about how much of a catalyst he has historically been with such things. Of course, it helped that he willingly went to church and accepted wearing a suit (instead of blue jeans and a t-shirt!), and it also helped that he was relatively clean-shaven and his hair the shortest it's been in years.

It was warm enough that his Uncle John had a barbecue that Saturday in his back yard, bringing the food into the kitchen when it was done. E.J. hung out with him by the garage while his uncle grilled. The uncle asked after Dotty, remembering that she had been over last April for Easter. Wow, what a thunderous mess that had been!

So he told his uncle that they had broken up (but not that she had dumped him), and when he asked if he was seeing someone else, what could he say? So he said the truth, "Yes, sort of." It sounded so much less than it really was.

Late in March, Sylvie was polish-

ing up her submissions for the Winter Ficklehearts. E.J. still intended to write a few major works (or at least polish up a few minor works already submitted to his writing classes), but so far his main achievement was in picking a pseudonym, a requirement for submission.

He really liked "Wyatt Trayish," but Sylvie noted that in research showed that few winners had two-syllable last names. E.J. stewed for a while, hating to give it up, but then came up with "Ralph Saccavomiti." Wonderful, Sylvie said. Now that that's all set, maybe he should do some writing . . . Instead, he daydreamed about winning the modest Aristophanes prize money (\$100 for best tragedy, \$100 for best comedy), then sweeping the Ficklehearts! He'd be rich! He'd be famous!

In early April, weeks before the staging of the First Aristophanes Tournament, Justine announced that Sylvie would be leaving the XC at the end of the term and taking a job with Justine in Hollywood, at her current firm! And E.J. later learned that she and Andy Boggs were now in a relationship, and Andy was moving to LA to be near her! (He remembered reading somewhere that two writers could survive and remain creative on two part-time jobs, where a single person could not.)

Sylvie looked sheepish and apologetic. "I only got the offer a few days ago; I just decided to accept it; I wasn't sure how to tell you..." "She was sweet, friendly, loving.

But she didn't ask him to come west with her.

But Andy?

E.J. hadn't yet gotten around to con-

necting Andy to Justine, but apparently that had happened in another way.

There was less a week until the festival, and E.J. only had one of his two plays ready. The one that was ready was not very good, he decided: a musical parody of Oedipus that he had begun in high school, daydreaming in church one Sunday. In his daydream, he was excited about having members of his school's choir sing narrative parts in parody of the classic formula. The play seemed to revolve around a small pun: a polluting corporation was a potato chip manufacturer that resonated with the Greek play's name, Laius. Well, E.J. never finished the play, then or now, and in any event could only strip out a five-minute segment to be performed. And, you know, in the final analysis, there just isn't that much funny about Oedipus, after all.

He had no idea about the second one, and now with Justine's news and the certainty of Sylvie's departure, it seemed impossible for him to muster any enthusiasm for the project. Moping, he bitterly admitted that he must have hoped that he and Sylvie would continue together all of next year, so that even if there might not be any long-term future (unless Sylvie finally came to her senses), at least there would be a short-term one. Now it was microscopic.

Likely as a way to punish himself, E.J. then had a dream where he met Aristophanes, and had an opportunity to ask about some of the story ideas from some of the lost plays. (Only about 11 of 50 plays Aristophanes' plays survive).

Or was it a dream? After all, E.J.

recalled later that Aristophanes was talking in an unfamiliar version of ancient Greek, using unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar colloquial expressions. Especially in his sworn oaths, of which there were many.

He appeared in an old white robe, something he seemed to have slipped on recently, as if grabbing something to throw on when responding to the doorbell. Perhaps it was true that Aristophanes had been back to Earth many times since the old days, animating various personae that likely included creative ones. In fact, did E.J. recall a remark that suggested that Aristophanes would be returning and soon?

In any event, Aristophanes was annoyed to be bothered by E.J., seemed to have only the vaguest memory of this Earthly life ("That was thousands of years ago, you oaf!"), and no interest in helping E.J. out.

Much later, it occurred to E.J. that he might have studied Aristophanes' plays, especially the most popular ones, and see what themes might have a contemporary resonance . . . That's what Sylvie did, and that's likely why she won first place in both competitions, drama and comedy. The audience voted with a show of hands.

Darla had dropped out. Crysanthé placed second in both categories. She would later note that she had taken the assignment too seriously; that as a Greek herself she wanted to explore contemporary Greek problems like refugees, bank fraud, and cheap feta cheese (that tasted just as good as the authentic but expensive kind). But that wasn't what the competition was about.

The festival was held in the XC

Theater. The stage was set up minimally with the façade of a simple Greek temple on the right and a little three-stepped platform to the left (apparently a nod to where a small Greek chorus would traditionally stand). The festival was a rough approximation of the "City Dionysia" festivals from ancient times, usually held in the Theater of Dionysus on the side south of the Acropolis.

Performances were limited to 10 minutes, which with a full docket would have run the festival nearly two hours, with a short intermission between tragedies and comedies (four students, four 10-minute tragedies, four 10-minute comedies). But because Darla had dropped out and because E.J. was tardy, there were only three comedies and two tragedies. Justine decided to forego the intermission, given the reduced number of performances, and the festival was completed within the hour.

Attendance was good, mostly because it was mandatory, at least for XC writing and drama students. Greek language students earned extra credit for attending and then writing an essay.

Much of the set-up and all of the costumes were given gratefully by the university's costume department, but funding paid some of the final touches, and then for things like the program, and a little reception in the lobby afterwards (Greek salad, spanakotirakopita squares, pita and chicken, and of course contraband retsina and ouzo discretely under the tables in the corner).

Sylvie and Chrysanthé had conscripted XC drama students for all her roles. E.J. took the stage himself, with help from Milton. It was at the after-party that E.J. introduced Milton to Chrysanthé, getting them started into motion.

As usual, too late, E.J. realized that he could have written something about the Trojan Horse for the competition.... After all, Justine had mentioned the Horse at the very beginning, when she talked about Sylvie's story about the counterfeit coin.

And now that he thought of it, E.J.'s own experience of the project was also like a Trojan Horse, in that he started with a few things in mind (a way to solve his enrollment troubles, a way to pay the bills, and then a way to be closer to Sylvie) but seems to be ending up with different things (development, giving, the value of being organized).

And now that he thought of it, E.J. saw how the Aristophanes Project itself was a kind of Trojan Horse: luring students in with the promise of something exotic and exciting, but instead training them about specific goal-oriented writing, something useful in the real world!

Summer and Beyond

That summer, E.J. worked his old library job, but also a few hours a week of Aristophanes Project duties. Justine invited him to take on as many of her functions as he cared to, and so E.J. not only wrote the first draft of the required annual report, he also devised an evaluation of the year just passed, complete with recommendations of change for the second year and beyond. Justine asked him to recommend current students for the project in the fall, and had him meet with admissions staff to see if any incoming students might fit. In the end, five students were selected: two new ones, three existing; three females, and two males.

In the fall, Justine asked him to function as coordinator as well as staff, which was an increase of hours as well as rate.

For the summer, he ended up subletting Andy's tiny apartment, and then signed up for the coming year.

There was little news from California in the summer, but in early October he learned that Justine had left her Hollywood job and headed north with Andy to open a theater company in Portland. Sylvie remained in Hollywood, deftly taking over most of Justine's accounts.

What did this mean for the future of the Aristophanes Project? One year of grant funding remained. E.J. was stunned to realize that the Project had been set up so it could almost run for free....

There were no "necessary" costs. An assistant to handle day-to-day duties could be a volunteer. The trip to Greece, while delightful, was not necessary. Even the modest awards for the festival could be eliminated, or could be subsidized by an alum. Like himself, he realized. If he was in town, he could run the program and subsidize the awards and the project could run indefinitely!

Alums of the Project might eventually want to contribute, especially if they clearly saw how their dollars were being spent. Additional grant funding was of course possible, especially if the Project could expand or adapt in ways that would interest funders.

All this activity proved serendipitous for E.J.'s involvement in the Outside Inn project, something Andy had started before leaving town. The

idea was to re-open the Inn but outside the university, where it might exist as a bar and restaurant with a basement performing space for theater, music, and comedy. It turned out that a Korean restaurant almost across the street from the XC had failed, and this became the Outside Inn when several alumni stepped up as investors. E.J. had spearheaded this initiative, starting when he contacted the alum who had underwritten support for the Rappaccini's Daughter video game in the old location. It turned out he was delighted to help the game find a new home, as well as to help with the restaurant venture. Other alums were happy to help find the Inn a new home.

Oddly enough, E.J. and Rex ("Giovanni") became friends, probably because of their shared fondness for Sylvie. Rex had emerged from his two-semester-long intensive Italian to find Sylvie gone. Obviously, E.J. knew more than most about what Sylvie's year had been like. At first, E.J. was angry, then sad, to think about Giovanni having and squandering something so precious, but perhaps it was E.J.'s own history of blockheadedness opening into compassion for blockheadedness in others that formed a basis for commonality and then friendship.

Also odd, E.J. had a brief romance with Ruth Warshington, the difficult student in the office who had set up his first meeting with Justine. It turned out that Ruth and Dolly had a sudden, intense falling out, and Ruth turned to E.J. as a source of information and then solace. It didn't last, but was quite pleasant while it did.

It's still early, but it does not appear that Justine will be traveling to Athens this December, happily busy with Andy in Portland. She may offer the trip to Sylvie, since the trip is already funded and in most ways it is easier to use it than apply for an amendment to the grant. Justine might see it as a way to keep Sylvie connected with the Aristophanes Project. After all, if Sylvie continues with her success, she may decide to be a benefactor. And wouldn't it be something if Sylvie invited E.J. to meet her there for the holiday? She just might.

That Russian writer wouldn't like that one bit. He'd probably think it stupid....

Dan Madaj was in the third RC class (Fall 1969) but didn't actually graduate until 1982. He worked for U-M for over 40 years, primarily at the natural history museum, in linguistics, and in social work, but also had four brief jobs in East Quad (dishwasher, custodian, librarian, RC office). Many of the events in this story actually or almost happened; for example, Dan briefly held the "karma pinball" high score (with Marty Sherman) on Flower Power in the Halfway Inn. For eight years (2000-08) Dan was editor (etc.) of the Old West Side News, an Ann Arbor neighborhood newsletter. He has two wonderful children and a fabulous dog.

Program News

Retirement!



RC Creative Writing instructor **Warren Hecht** retired at the end of December 2016. Warren started the RC's creative writing program in 1970 and served as its director

through 2002. He's a graduate of City College of New York, and moved to Michigan in 1969. He was editor of The Periodical Lunch and Street Fiction Press's Softcover Original Series. He continues as deacon at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Ann Arbor, and has been painting northern Michigan landscapes and rural dwellings since 2003, often from his cabin up north.



Poet and long-time creative writing lecturer **Ken Mikolowski** retired from the RC and from U-M at the end of the Winter 2015 semester. Ken

taught poetry at the RC for nearly 40 years, since 1977 (full-time since 1988), and is only the second poetry instructor since the Creative Writing Program began in Fall 1970. Ken's newest book of poems, *That That*, was published in 2015 by Wayne State University Press. In the 1960s, Mikolowski founded the Alternative Press in Detroit's Cass Corridor with his late wife, the painter Ann Mikolowski. Aside from the RC, Ken also taught at Macomb Community College and at Wayne State.

Staffing notes



After Ken Mikolowski retired in April 2016, the Program replaced his teaching and tutorial work with **Laura Kasischke** (teaching)

and **Sarah Messer** (tutorial). Laura is Allen Seager Collegiate Professor of English, and was happy to return to the RC half-time. She has published eight collections of poetry and eight novels. Three of her novels have been made into feature films. She is an RC creative-writing alumna.



Sarah Messer is the author of four books: a hybrid history/memoir, a book of translations, and two poetry books. She also teaches for the Fine

Arts Work Center in Provincetown's on-line writing program, 24 Pearl Street, and is a cheese maker at White Lotus Farms in Ann Arbor.



After Warren retired in December 2016, the Program hired poet **Christopher Matthews**, who has worked in LSA Academic Advising since 2013.

Christopher has been Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Washington and Lee, and a post-doctoral fellow at Kalamazoo College. He has a PhD in English from U-M, an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College, and a BA from Kalamazoo College.

I am the very model of a modern major . . .

In recent years, the RC's Creative Writing major was opened to LSA students, who have long been able to take RC creative writing courses. Speaking of majors, you may be interested to know that the RC drama major is now coordinated with the LSA Department of Theatre and Drama. It is not unusual for RC creative writing students to also study drama; several students have recently written plays as part of their tutorials and then had them performed by RC Players.

The RC's is the only U-M major in undergraduate creative writing, but English has both a creative writing minor and a "sub-concentration." The Sweetland Writing Center has a "non-creative" writing minor (i.e., journalism, non-fiction).

Recent faculty publications

Wayne State University Press published Laura Thomas' story collection, *States of Motion*, in 2017. Also this year, Picador published Alexander Weinstein's story collection, *Children of the New World*.

Recent RC faculty publications include Lolita Hernandez's story collection, *Making Callaloo in Detroit* (Wayne State University Press, 2014), and Laura Kasischke's novel, *Mind of Winter* (HarperRow, 2014) and collection of poems, *The Infinitesimals* (Copper Canyon Press, 2014).

Student awards

Aside from the Hopwoods, since 2014 the RC has given Emerging Writer awards (funded by a writing alum)

to graduating writers "who demonstrate excellence in creative writing but have not previously received a writing award recognizing their writing achievements." In 2014: Allison Epstein; in 2015: Angeline Dimambro and Vicky Szczepkowski; in 2016: Alexander Miller and Sydney Morgan-Green; in 2017: Ashley Bishel and Lauren Theisen.

Writer-in-residence



Desiree Cooper will be writer-in-residence in the 2017-18 academic year, and will give a public reading. A 2015 Kresge Artist Fellow, Desiree Cooper is a

fiction writer, former attorney, Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist, and Detroit community activist. Her collection of flash fiction, *Know the Mother*, was published by Wayne State University Press in March 2016. Cooper was a founding board member of Cave Canem, a national residency for emerging black poets. She is currently a Kimbilio fellow, a national residency for African American fiction writers.

More info about the Program and about alums . . .

Updated info (with clickable links) is available at the RC Writers' website: <http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/rcwriters/>. If you would like to receive periodical emails about readings and things in the greater Ann Arbor area, send Dan a note at dmadaj@umich.edu.

Next . . .

What about a second issue next Fall, maybe with 20-25 other writing alums?