



RC Alumni Journal 6

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Fall 2022

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Introduction

Welcome to the sixth issue of the *RC Alumni Journal*!

We feature RC alums and Creative Writing graduates from 50+ years of the University of Michigan Residential College, which opened its doors in 1967.

This issue, we again feature a brief interview with an RC alum: Ellen Dreyer. We also feature an excerpt from a Peter Anderson-Warren Hecht play, *The Janitors*, which was performed in the RC's theater back in 1975.

You have probably noticed the "wrap-around" cover (a departure from the "patchwork" formula of the first five issues). On the cover, Peter Anderson (RC 1972) and Marty Sherman (RC 1974) entertain the 1974 Hash Bash crowd on the U-M diag. Several others with RC connections are evident, notably Jim Robins (yellow jacket) and Bob Hoot (straw hat). Jim later was a co-editor of *Trains*, an RC lit journal. Other possible sightings: Katie Reifman, Michael Koenigschnecht, Heather Phillips. There are more photos from this era in a feature on Peachy Cream, starting on page 145.

On a housekeeping note, I've moved the brief bios of contributors to a dedicated section near the back. Last October, I began to compile and send out an "eblast" with news and things of possible interest, to former journal contributors and others. A compilation of some of this material is also included, near the back. Let me know if you'd like to be added to the list. You can read the previous posts on the RC writers site (sites.lsa.umich.edu/rcwriters), as well as to view PDFs of all journal issues.

The idea for this journal appeared in mind about a year and half before the RC's 50th anniversary, and it made sense to link the two: the first issue came out in October 2017.

If you'd like to financially support the journal, or the Emerging Writer Award, there are specific instructions on the next page. Thank you!

We look forward to seeing you next year, if not before!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a long horizontal stroke on the "a".

To financially support the journal:

go to leadersandbest.umich.edu/find/#!/scu/lsc,
click on "Write In Your Gift,"
then put in "331802, RC Alumni Journal"
and whatever amount you wish to contribute.
Or send a check to Carl Abrego at the college.

To support the Emerging Writer award, Its "giving" number is 323069.
There's more about Emerging Writers on p. 155.

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The University of Michigan *Residential College Alumni Journal*
is edited by Daniel Madaj.
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"Being too close to an old flame, with the warmth of memory
aglowing and the smoking trails of extinction filling the room,
can indeed bring tears to your eyes. Use your hanky.
Open your window." — *Michael Madaj, December 24, 1971*

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Eight Poems

Fez

What's New?

At some point the kids on the backs
of milk cartons got replaced by jokes. Since nobody
asked I tried to write a love poem. Here I am with a pile
of pants I need to patch. Here I am. Here I am.
I've seen people drop out of the rat race and to be honest
it looks pretty goddamn righteous. I don't look down
until I'm running midair next to the bluff and in a pandemic
I keep up appearances. Some never look back at all.
Everyone can probably hear my grasshopper heart
chirping. If you touch my elbow while we're talking
you'll feel how prickly it is. It's the winter. Sometimes
I think all of my love letters were spilled
milk. Something about this week reminds me of lichen
blistering off a boulder at the sun-hungry
summer camp. I didn't see the tree stump
until my nose hit the mulch. I used to sprint
back from recess and smooth my shirt
over my belly to watch my heart pump
through it. These days I am just trying to think
of new ways to phrase it.

So They've Been Lying to Us About the Environment

I light the kettle on fire. The television tries to feed me scraps from the kitchen. Didn't you know?

Mushrooms are solitary creatures. Individualistic. Like

a mushroom, I rely on nobody. My morning coffee grounds are tasteless today, which means drought. It looks

like the fish have stopped walking. Summer

gifted us a swell of red tide and a swill of funk. The kettle screams, trees sprout from concrete. I swim

outside to greet the stars. There are three. There are always

three. I curl my toes into the clouds and their milky sap begins to curdle. The sky is green. The grass is

blue. Mushrooms and I are solitary creatures.

Body Farm

I keep coming back to this. We're washing dirt from our hands after packing the summer camp into boxes. Soot from lifting the stove

and it's touched you, too. Six weeks before, we dragged this woodstove into the library to warm our hands, dusty from the books

we organized on makeshift shelves and fondled together on couches. Nights we stumbled here in the beam from your headlamp. Howls from

behind the screen windows. Something out there is dying. In here I watch your eyes. We built in May what we would destroy in June. Your hair makes

a tight curl around your ear and when you tie it up, a few strands slip between your fingers and rest on your cheek. Where your jeans cinch

your t-shirt at the waist I catch my breath. There is blue pen up and down my arms where I want to remember you. It will sink into my skin or coat

the drain in ink, then one day it'll be gone. We have said almost everything that needed to be said. I watched the animals melt into the forest floor: after the flies, the beetles,

the flesh is finished off by fungus, what is left? Hair lingers for a while. Bones become brittle and crack and eventually collapse into dust. All that's left is the teeth.

My Bedroom, 2005

after C.D. Wright

If this is childhood, some pinks. Strawberry Shortcake. An empty cat dish. A bankrupt grocery store rewards card that's still tucked like a beacon of responsibility between the folds of a real leather wallet. If this is childhood, a real faux-leather wallet. Two hand-me-down cheerleading outfits. Two polyester sleeping bags. If this is childhood, learn how to ride a bike and that not all parents are kind. Learn how to play dead, which can mean anything as long as your tongue hangs limp from the side of your mouth like a cartoon dog's. You'll just have to visualize the Xs over the eyes. If this is childhood, people will take from you. People will leave without telling you why and you will have dreams where they return. If this is childhood, pencil grips that almost double as erasers in a plastic glitter case. Markers that have been out of ink for so long that even the cup of water can't coax them.

Forest of Mismemories

I used to sit, on colder days, in a gravel patch between the infirmary and the smoker's porch. That day, the crybaby. The man and the moon. I peeled oranges with my eyes closed. Calcified soap scum growing on bones. It was sunny and breezeless. For every forest of muscle there is a forest of misuse. One for sale, the other filled with ghosts. Memory is sweet and sticks to the roof of my mouth, a sandpaper tongue on my sunburn. Sew me a river. Grow a patch of doubt. For every child there is a man in the moon. The orange burst, the juice dried, and now I'm leaking sap. Lick the wrist. Peel the bark. Wipe the canvas clean.

Anthills

One August in the rugburn hug
of childhood I sat on a long strip

of sand eroded by the thaw and freeze
and flood of Michigan winters. That day

I heaved the pump handle and water
spilled onto the dry ground, into the canyonlike

ruts in our driveway. Splattered dust
onto my jeans that turned quick into sweet

mud, safety from the crackling heat. Sticks
and stones and my newly-callused hands dug

streams into the sand, branched them like
the roots that split the city concrete. Go ahead,

sink your basement into the wormholed dirt. Surprise
me. Build your sturdy house on a hill and clear

cut all the trees to do it. Do it. See how
everything collapses in the rain.

Reader, I'm Molting

Again. Would you mind
peeling this
sleeve off for me? Yes,
and toss it
on the pile. I've got worms,
don't worry—
red wigglers
to eat up the dead
skin and clementine
peels and coffee grounds
and those newfangled
takeout containers.
It's spring, you see,
it's time
to start from scraps.

lullaby for an ex-lover in the last hour we have

you shiver and i conjure
my grandmother's quilt
from the ample air.
in my dreams i have a quiver
of letters to deliver, one of them
a prayer, for you, who never
rests, i lay it in your lap
and begin to undress, slip
a sigh between each letter,
between each thigh,
the prayer kneeling
into you, blind, in the cold
lupine dawn.

moonlight sitar
in my chest, dissolve
dissension from us drunkards
in your room. heirloom
sharp, the moratorium pooling
through the wiper,
my lashing is languid
to lull you backwater
and forcep, between bog
and drench. in my drinking
you shiver and i collect
a quilt from the crooked
amphitheater air.
in my drinking i have
a quota of liabilities
to decipher, one of them
a prayer, a hyena in my laughter
i begin to unwind, slosh
a signature between each
line the precipice,
the hookah, the safety
in the lulling deadbeat.

sinner on my chest,
dybbuks heave
this language through
backbone and bottle, between
my quiver and your thigh,
like hookah,
like honey, like
your shoulders pooling
through a windbreaker.
drenched in vocality
in the lord's ample air
i will lull you off
the precipice.

Imposter

Kaitlyn Brannigan

I am a child in rubberized rain-repellent fabric
Holding the cracked screen of a dead phone
Abandoned at a rest stop in the woods
I have no use for the past
All the goodnights and stories and embraces
Are lies
Burnt-out Christmas lights on the corpse of an evergreen

I feel a force pulling at the thoughts inside
Sucking the stars
Color clashes with the sky
All the buildings start to float away
Then the cars and lamp posts and park benches
This is a silent night
But there is nothing holy about it

"Though a mother forsake her child, He will not abandon you"
But my mind has decided to cut me in two
Pitting the strength of my weakness against the weakness of my strength
And I will come out a tear-stained face
The Weeping Woman by Picasso

I am the empty screams of a 1920's movie
A sucker punched, tongue-bitten thief
Ghost in the grass with no headlights searching for me
The beast is dressed in glory
Rings on every finger
They clap and chant my name
Over and over like waves
Each one a whisper of what I wish were unsubstantiated claims
"You did it"
"You made it"

Did I really?



Utopia

Theo Poling

The news said it was for one year, but my grandmother knew better.

Everyone had heard about it, she'd written, ever since it began construction seven years ago.

It was a ship--a yacht, a party cruiser, the kind that costs more than the GDP of Ghana. Eleven stories tall, glass decks, private pools, buffets, gambling rooms, anything luxurious you could imagine, it was in those 50,000 square feet.

Supposedly, it was a vacation getaway for the hyperelite. A year-long trip away from cities and smog and politics and bad weather. And people, regular people.

But my grandmother was the help. She was a maid. She did room service in fancy hotels, had lived in every major city in the country, and the company she worked for brought her onto the boat as her next gig.

She'd known what it was from the moment she stepped onboard. She was part of a small staff, but the gardeners, farmers, and cooks numbered

almost in the triple digits. The "sun shade" was state-of-the-art, able to turn the entire ship into a sealed-off bubble.

The day of the launch came with a lot of hub-bub. It was on the front page of every website and on the minds of everyone. It was mostly because of the vacationers involved: the CEOs of the five biggest tech companies, numerous oil and gas executives, entertainment stars and producers, and countless politicians, including the president himself.

My grandmother's writing was vitriolic. The letters on the page shook with how her hand must have trembled in rage. This president was a hail mary, a euphoric promise after several years under a brutally stupid and selfish administration. But some people didn't even know about that, or they didn't care.

He was supposed to be a savior, a herald of a new age. But here he was, spending an entire year of his four year term on a boat in the

Pacific. A mega-yacht with cocaine and tenured sex workers.

The news didn't cover it like some breach of democracy, didn't mention what would happen to the country while he was gone, but one of the CEOs on the boat owned every major news outlet, and another one was starting a reality TV show about the yacht that everyone was excited to watch, so it didn't surprise my grandmother.

The only thing that surprised her was that she seemed to be the only one who knew. Or, if other people knew, no one was voicing it. Out of what--fear, denial, grief--she didn't know.

She started working on launch day with her head down ignoring the cameras and journalists. She cleaned powder off the toilets and stacked dozens upon dozens of suitcases into walk-in closets without a word.

Once the ship was out at sea, the mirage vanished. The reality TV show was mostly interviews and short, staged party excursions out to the olympic pool. They only filmed a few episodes before they stopped caring.

And why should they? They were gone. There was no internet on the boat, no live TV, only a catalog of the best entertainment in the business, enough to last a lifetime. There was no one to hold them accountable. In their minds, they were beyond the world now. The people they'd left behind were nothing, the politics trivial, the concerns laughable.

They headed straight for the equator, for the warm, placid waters and great weather. The ship stayed miles out from any land, using fuel reserves kept on a basement deck that went on for miles. The farmers and gardeners

harvested crops every year that the cooks used in their five star meals.

One year turned into two, then five, then seven. Seven whole years my mother worked on that ship, unable to leave, and without pay. The payment they offered her was a bed to sleep on, a toilet to shit in, and food to eat. She could join the other workers that had jumped overboard if it didn't suit her.

She was cut off from everything, from everyone. I can't imagine how lonely it must have been. But she worked. She was ignored by the guests, invisible to most. She wrote that she was dumbfounded they managed to last a whole seven years.

The boat was built and stocked to last fifty years, but none of that mattered. None of the preparation and engineering they did mattered. Hell, the yacht even had a state-of-the-art climate system to filter out pollutants and refresh the air, one that was easy to make and not too expensive, but never revealed to the public. It had only been built for the ship.

That was the truth of it all, the truth that my grandmother wrote over forty pages ranting about. All of the problems were solvable, and easily. The amount of money it would take was out there. The price of each fix--each effort to help the ice caps, or the ozone, or the people--was not too bad. There were geniuses out there, people who could figure out how to recycle plastic and create renewable energy out of accessible materials. People who could make systems that fed and sustained themselves in a way

that wasn't just neutral to the environment, but actually helpful.

But all of the people in power were people on the boat or friends of people on the boat. All of those geniuses could be bought, of course they could, they wouldn't get money to do their research otherwise, and they had families.

Think about it like a game, my grandmother wrote, a game where you were a god, and you were trying to accomplish something. Trying to hide something, obscure it. From everyone.

It's easier than people think. Planting information. Buying news outlets, buying politicians. What about the ethics? What about the people who will die? What does it all matter if the whole planet burns within your lifetime? Before your children can grow up?

They know. They always knew. But things that didn't benefit them in the ways they wanted didn't get done, and everyone else was at their mercy.

I feel my grandmother's rage each time I read her words. Each time I read the truth, so logical, so simple, but also so evil and cruel that most people rejected it outright. I can't imagine living in a world like that.

For seven years she worked, imagining her hometown burning down, people dying, sea levels rising, wild-fires spreading, consuming entire states, entire countries, with no aid ever coming, disorganization suffocating all the good people left. Mass migrations.

The signs of the end were a long time coming. There were hints, she recalled, even on that first day. Guests who would snap at each other. Vacationers bored and restless after one game of strip poker.

They tried to elect a board, but everyone wanted a position, and everyone wanted something different out of the position. They were all vying for power in the ways they'd learned before the yacht, and no one was willing to compromise. They'd never had to before.

It was only after the cameras turned off and the batteries died that it became an actual reality TV show. The screaming matches were unscripted. The legions they formed, the betrayals they wrought, were all real.

Alliances could be built and slashed in one day over something as simple as a dessert menu item.

They wanted more. More than the 50 years of supplies, entertainment, and drugs they'd brought on board. It was never enough. It would never be enough. The ship could sustain itself, but it couldn't sustain a system of infinite growth and greed and capital. But they wouldn't let anyone leave, sick with fear of what would happen to the rest.

They became so bored they began to drink their own poison. The first murder was in year five, but it was covered up somehow with some dubious claim and a paid off doctor. The next few in year six were public business, though, and any last vestige of decorum went overboard. Anyone who tried to be a mediator, who tried to resolve conflict, was dealt with quickly.

Conspiracy theories and paranoia were king, and people were vying for the crown. But the collateral damage was what killed them. They stopped caring. They stopped caring about the help, about the things

that really mattered, like where their food came from and who fixed mechanical and electrical problems. None of the guests were cooks or electricians or plumbers, so when the help worked together as one mind, unlocking a rescue boat and piling onboard, the guests were left to fend for themselves.

Seven years, my grandmother wrote. She didn't have to witness the end to know it happened.

She wrote down the coordinates of the ship. She taught my mother everything she knew about life before the world ended. She taught my mother geometry and algebra and biology and political science. She taught my mother empathy and critical thinking. And she gave my mother the skills she needed to survive in a world where there weren't enough resources to go around, and an abundance of fear and violence.

My mother raised me with my grandmother's words. I grew to love this woman I'd never met, and resent the woman I had. My mother never did anything with my grandmother's wisdom, never anything real. I always had a place to stay and something to eat, but that was it. We lived like any other survivor, migratory, staying on land, always hiding, alone.

I left her when I was twenty six. I took a boat from a warehouse in what used to be California and I went into the water. I was an idiot and almost died several times.

But I was not alone. Out on the water, there were hundreds of rafts. Survivors like me looking for something better. Something with a little less plastic and radiation.

I shared my grandmother's words in-

stead of hoarding them. I made them a textbook, not a survival guide. With a group of friends and allies, we used my grandmother's coordinates to sail our way across the Pacific.

It took us two years to get there, and we were down two people. I was sick and fading fast. When we got there, the boat was gone. Of course it was. The ocean was more volatile than ever, throwing up category 5 hurricanes every two months in seemingly random places.

But, like my grandmother wrote, even when the world was cruel, it was still logical. I studied the ocean currents, the patterns of storms. And I took my dwindling troupe of loved ones and sent us southeast. After another year, we found it.

The outside was covered in barnacles and seaweed, and most of the windows were cracked and broken. It was a dark behemoth. The main deck was overgrown with grasses, weeds, vegetables, and fruits. Palm trees had reached maturity, sticking out of the decks and waving their leaves like sails.

We climbed onboard, breathless, senseless, and shaken. I knew in a practical sense how massive the boat was. But standing on it and staring up into the atmosphere where the decks disappeared into the clouds was something else entirely.

As we walked, our feet squished ripe apples and bananas. Freshwater pools rippled with fish. The first door I opened was some kind of medical bay. Shelves and shelves of creams and antibiotics and tools and wraps that I'd never seen before, only read about. Enough to last all of us a lifetime.

The deeper into the ship we explored, the deeper the forest, the dense, lush greenery exploding across the very walls and floors. It was nothing like the brown, burnt landscape I'd crawled across, struggling to breathe, my entire life.

Trees. Trees that hadn't been logged. Water that hadn't been poisoned or stolen. Air that didn't burn my breast. And there was so, so much of it. So much space to run and run and run until my legs gave out.

And no humans. Just deer and birds and frogs and tortoises and foxes and squirrels. Animals I'd only seen in picture books. The ship was loud. I didn't even realize it at first, but it was so loud. Bugs were making noise, chirping and buzzing in some unimaginable symphony. Birds tweeted and called and cooed. And the undergrowth was noisy with creatures moving and hunting and living.

The only color I could see for miles

was green. Every possible shade of green in the universe.

It was beautiful. We built a life for ourselves, hunting the animals and eating the fruit. We healed each other. We started working on a way to get the boat engines working again. Several people went off in rescue boats to find others and bring them back.

In a way, I am just like my grandmother. But in other ways, we couldn't be more different. This boat means something different to me than it did for her. I like to think she dreamed about that, hoped for some outcome where that would be true. I would have loved to have met her.

But for now, all I can do is meet other people. Meet as many people as I possibly can. And share with them the dream of my grandmother before my heart finally stops beating.

The dream of life.

Two Poems

Claire Denson

The Bell Jar Amendment

I bite my chosen fig in half
and there it is—seeded mound

staring back. I finger inside
to dig out my fear: antenna

poking out the deep purple
lava that's left of legs,

little claws, compound eyes.
My mouthful of sweetness

was burying the sting. I spin with
all the times I have learned

and forgotten the same
thing: even the freshest

fruit seethes inside
with smothered life. Look

closer; imagine the dead
wings unfolding. The day

I saw the wasp
I saw my future.

Published in The Minnesota Review

Survival Skills

I came to the woods to live
deliciously. I came to the woods to walk
off a meatloaf. The small-talker

*says you seem full
of existential dread I say maybe
I'll be a dentist she says you must be*

*suicidal. I Google suicide rate
in dentists it says 100% I say are you
hungry she says a career*

*brings perspective. David Attenborough
coos hopeful in my brain but I know
it is unrealistic to expect the almighty*

redwood to save the ravaged
forest. I know prayers
are impractical. From the stump

I dip my stick in flame,
talk about a game where broken
bones re-assemble. She asks me

*do you practice religion? and
I swallow. My background of belief
rushes like a waterfall*

then sinks: an emotion abstract
like home or love, left
crackling in the pit.

"The Bell Jar Amendment" was first published in the minnesota review and "Survival Skills" in Girl Blood Info, a philanthropic zine edited by Chessy Normile and Julia Edwards. All proceeds of this issue (#7) are donated to Survived & Punished. Email girlbloodinfo@gmail.com for your copy.



Alaska Stories

Michael Koenigsknecht

High Country

Alaska was a strange place filled with strange people, mostly men. Many were at the end of their rope: men fleeing a marriage, a scandal, or the law. Some hoping to lose themselves; some of us, hoping to find ourselves.

By late June Andy and I figured we would get no more good work around Fairbanks, and the salmon run was about to start in the southern part of the State. In April 1970, we had hitch hiked from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Fairbanks. We had been working on a survey crew hacking a line through the forest for what we were told would be an oil pipeline from the North Slope to a shipping port in the south. We had been living in an abandoned cabin about 30 miles north of Fairbanks when not

out surveying in the bush.

In Alaska bars were at the center of both a social and a work life. Most bars required that guns be checked at the door, like a coat check in the lower 48. This was reasonable since virtually everyone who entered drank to get drunk. There were a lot of fist-fights and knife fights, but shootings in bars were rare.

Bars were also the place to find a job. Just start talking to people and eventually someone would offer a job: no paper work, no last names, all cash. Every job I got in Alaska started with a conversation with a stranger in a bar and was sealed with a handshake. Both getting and quitting a job were like everything else in Alaska, very informal. It was like everyone lived by day to day whim, no commitments and no questions. And now it was time for me to migrate south to

catch the commercial salmon season. I was sure I would find work by the sea.

Andy and I needed to get to Anchorage. There was no road completed between Fairbanks and Anchorage, but there was a rail line between the two towns. The distance was about 350 miles as the crow flies, but much longer on the winding rail tracks through the mountains which passed near Mt. McKinley, also called Denali. We decided to hop a freight train. We gathered our few belongings and packed two half gallon, cardboard milk cartons with brown rice held together with split pea soup. Each milk carton was a heavy brick. We calculated we could live a week off the milk cartons.

We hitched a ride to the rail yard in Fairbanks and waited for a chance to sneak into a boxcar. As we waited and watched we saw trainmen patrolling the yard, carrying long guns and holstered side arms. Unfortunately, in June it never gets fully dark, so at midnight it is only marginally dimmer than at noon. Worse, there was no cover in the yard. There was just one freight train in the middle of the yard, in plain sight of anyone who cared to look. We assumed it was headed for Anchorage, since there was just one track out of the yard, but we didn't know when it would leave. We finally concluded we would just have to approach it in plain sight and try to find an unlocked boxcar. This was not an easy decision. The trainmen in Alaska had a vicious reputation and the main focus of their job was keeping free-loaders like us off the trains.

After a long, whispered discussion we made a run for it. We found an unlocked, fully enclosed boxcar

and slipped in. We tried to camouflage ourselves in a dark corner and waited. And waited. As hours dragged by we ate some rice, drank water from our canteens, and tried to sleep. We dared not talk, fearing that a trainman silently patrolling the yard might be nearby and hear us. Andy wasn't a talker anyway. He had a long face with dark hair all around, including hanging over his forehead to his eyebrows and a scraggly beard. Andy was the reason I was in Alaska. During the winter in Ann Arbor he had started talking about getting a summer job fighting forest fires in Alaska. He had looked into it and it paid \$50 per day in cash with transportation to the fire and meals included. It sounded like an adventure: fly into remote wilderness to heroically battle raging forest fires — and get paid to do it. I didn't know Andy well— he was a year or two older than me. A quiet type, Andy was a tinkerer. When he did speak he seemed sure of himself and reliable. So, in April 1970 we stuck out our thumbs. I was 19 years old and had never traveled on my own.

During the weeks of hitch hiking we learned that the State of Alaska had just passed a law providing that no one actually in Alaska could be hired to fight fires in Alaska. This was to discourage people from starting forest fires. It worked. There were fewer forest fires in Alaska that year; but it also took away my purpose in going to Alaska before I'd even gotten there. I had managed to get the surveying job out of Fairbanks and spent several well-paid weeks in the bush. But now, I was hiding in a boxcar looking to ride south to An-

chorage. At some point nature called. We resisted as long as possible and finally just peed through a wide space in the floorboards and hoped no one would notice the leaking boxcar.

Looking back now, I believe that the danger, the risk of arrest or bodily harm was the whole point of hopping a freight train. We could have hitchhiked to Anchorage by backtracking southeast to Tok Junction and then circling west to Anchorage. We could have bought a ticket on a passenger train or scheduled airline. But hopping a freight was more adventurous and dangerous. Young Plains Indians proved their bravery and gained prestige by counting coup. Running up to the enemy, touching him without striking a blow and escaping unharmed was a coup. Young warriors' coups were celebrated by the entire tribe. I cannot speak for Andy, but I now believe I was counting coup in the train yard.

After what seemed like a full day of hiding in the boxcar, the train finally started to move. Success. We were undiscovered and on our way. The car bounced and swayed. The floor was very rough, with huge slivers exposed. The train slowed, sped up, stopped, started. The herky-jerky, bouncing and swaying in utter darkness was disorienting. The clatter of the steel wheels on the tracks and the rattling of the rickety boxcar made talking impossible. As the hours dragged by my anxiety mounted. What if we were discovered in a remote spot with no witnesses. The trainmen could easily kill us with no one the wiser. As I imagined my death, I was poised between regret

at leaving home without saying goodbye, and a grim satisfaction that my father would regret his behavior when he found out that I was dead.

I was a typical teenage boy: certain that I knew the truth about the world, and impatient with more deliberate adults who claimed to see more than one side of every issue. I viewed this as merely a stalling tactic. At home I did not have to deal with any stalling. My Dad also was certain that he knew what was correct in every situation. In my eyes my father was both a dictator and a man who aspired to be conventional. I did not like either aspect. Dad expected absolute, unquestioning obedience from all family members, no matter how arbitrary his pronouncements. There could be no other point of view or opinion. Without much education, he scraped and clawed to climb into the middle class. He worked nonstop and would allow nothing that would slow his ascent. He wanted to be a man in a grey flannel suit. I was an embarrassment and a risk. I was against the Viet Nam war, for civil rights and women's liberation, had long hair, demonstrated against something every week, and smoked weed. None of these were acceptable to him. Dad was worried that his boss would find out about me and he would be blocked from promotions or fired. He thought I was a threat to his ability to support his family. Of course, I thought he was a coward, bowing down to "the man".

Because from my earliest years my Dad was rarely home and we had no activities together, we did not have a close relationship to start with. He did not know me and I did not know him. When I revealed my plan to go

to Alaska to get good paying work, he absolutely, 100% forbade it. We had regular, explosive arguments. He said I would go to Alaska over his dead body, like that was the end of the discussion. My younger brothers were fascinated by these shouting matches; my mother was in helpless anguish. On a normal April morning I had walked out of the house as usual, stopped by the barn where I had hidden my backpack, and started hitch hiking. Two months and 5,000 miles later the glamorous firefighting job had not worked out and I was hiding in a boxcar, between jobs, feeling a bit of a failure, and a just little scared. My defensive bravado was feeling hollow.

After many hours riding in the dark we felt the train slowing as it ground up a steep slope. We cracked the door and saw we were in a forested valley. We could see Mt. McKinley. It is a big mountain. It is not just the highest peak among several high peaks, like Everest. McKinley is more of a solitary mountain, massive, the highest in North America. Inspired by the sight, we decided to break our journey, gathered our belongings, and hopped off the slowly moving train. This far south of Fairbanks there was more varied vegetation and real trees, much larger than the jack pines of the north. It seemed lush to us and McKinley was breathtaking. We stowed our gear beneath a tree we thought we could find again and went exploring.

Walking in the fresh air felt good after the dark confinement of the boxcar. We saw moose, bear, and many birds in the distance. My spirits rose, I felt more like a free, indepen-

dent and self-sufficient mountain man. After a couple of hours of walking we decided to sleep. We found the tree with our gear under it, but the ground around it was occupied by a mother moose and her calf placidly grazing. We knew a mother moose could and would easily kill a man if she felt her calf was threatened. There was nothing we could do to get our sleeping bags, food, and gear. We each climbed a tree, found a branch and tried to rest, wedged between branch and tree. Full sleep was impossible. Even lightly dozing risked a fall.

Towards morning the moose wandered off and we could fetch our gear. We were starving. By then we were sick of the rice and pea soup brick we had been eating since leaving the cabin. We knew there was a national park around McKinley and that we were probably in it. That meant that there was a Lodge serving hot food in the vicinity. We started walking through the trees. We came upon a dirt road and sat beside it. The Lodge had to be somewhere along this road; we would ask the first vehicle we could stop which direction to go. After a long wait, lounging beside the road, a big red car with chrome-trimmed tail fins came along. Cars were a rare sight in Alaska. It was mostly pickup trucks or larger vehicles. We stood waving and the car stopped.

A well-dressed man with thick, glossy black hair was driving with a teenage boy beside him. We asked which direction to the Lodge? Andy and I were dirty and smelly. It was obvious we had been living outdoors and had walked out of the woods. Mr. Sabatino and his son, Bunky, who looked to be about 14 or 15 years old,

had just arrived at the Lodge from New York City. They were on a father/son wilderness adventure. Just out of the Lodge they were driving a rental car on the only 35 miles of road in the Park. The rental car and this little stretch of dirt road was their chance to see Alaska. Mr. Sabatino and Bunky got out of the car to stretch, breathe the air and talk with us.

I did not know much about clothes, but even I could see that Mr. S was well put together, from his shoes to his hat. He had a concept of the image he wished to project and it was executed to perfection, down to the smallest detail. Everything was of the finest materials, elegantly cut and fitted. I see now that Mr. S was a Manhattanite, dressed for his idea of the North; a country weekend in Connecticut. Bunky had a different look. Bunky's was the cleaned and pressed Bob Dylan look: frizzy hair, headband and a bit of tie-dyed cloth visible.

After we told Mr. S and Bunky a little about ourselves it was agreed that Mr. S would buy four box lunches at the Lodge and that Andy and I would accompany the New Yorkers on their drive to the end of the dirt road and back. Andy and I could not believe our luck, riding on soft seats and a free lunch. As tired and hungry as we were, this was heaven. I reckoned at the time that Mr. Sabatino viewed their chance encounter with two mountain men as an unanticipated enhancement of their wilderness adventure. Of course, it is possible that he simply took pity on two hungry teenagers. Mr. S drove us back to the Lodge, purchased the box lunches, and we set off on the only road in McKinley Park.

We went slowly; the scenery was magnificent. The dirt road curved along the side of a mountain so we had upslope views on one side and valley views on the other. Bunky, in the front passenger seat, took photos out the side window. Mr. Sabatino was a talker. He went on about being in the rag trade and life in the garment district: the vibrant street scenes with racks of clothing being pushed on sidewalks and on the streets; half dressed models wandering the cutting rooms; the vendors schmoozing and buying boozy lunches and dinners. With a wink he'd say "Well, it's a living." He told stories about designers, buyers, models and behind-the-scenes dressing room drama. He made it sound interesting and exciting, sexy even. Mr. S was proud of his career. Bunky was having none of it; he was visibly dismissive of these stories. Bunky kept his head turned away from his father, looking out the side window.

Andy and I were politely interested. We did not want to risk missing out on the box lunches. Mr. S remained cheerful and talkative. Sitting quietly in the back seat, I had the impression he was using this time with Bunky to explain himself, to disclose what made him tick, why he got out of bed in the morning. He sometimes referenced Andy and me in his monologue, but it was clear Bunky was his intended audience. Mr. S was seeking a conversation with his son. He wanted to connect with him. Bunky made a show of being unresponsive. I remember thinking that it seemed kind of pitiful; and, I felt sorry for Mr. S. Bunky

was defiantly uninterested. I could see just how rude Bunky was acting; but, at the same time I knew that I probably would have acted the same way if my Dad had ever tried that with me.

But, of course, my Dad never did. I do not recall any one-on-one moment with my father, other than arguments. He did not feel a need to reveal himself to me or to discover who I was. I was simply the first-born. We were two strangers living in the same house, each in a relationship with the same woman. She moved between us, trying to make peace. Perhaps she thought she did not have a choice. Maybe she liked it that way; as the go between, Mom controlled the communication, and that gave her power over each of us.

While Mr. S's efforts were clumsy and embarrassing to witness, on some level I admired his attempt to connect with his son. I felt a rueful sadness. I guess because I thought I would never experience such an act myself. Even a clumsy, embarrassing attempt is better than no attempt at all.

When Mr. S. finally ran out of energy trying to connect with Bunky, he got Andy and me going about our time in Alaska. We talked about the couple of weeks hitch hiking across Canada, and then up the 1300 miles of the Alaska Highway, which was unpaved and all rocks and dirt at that time. Mr. S. seemed to enjoy our stories about surveying in the bush, cutting sight lines through virgin forest. About working, eating, and sleeping out in the open with a line crew of very rough men. About misty rain most days, constantly walking

in water on the permafrost, and pine needles stuck to everything. About sweating heavily while cutting trees all day with a brush hook or an axe, and then being unable to get dry in the cold dampness. And the mosquitoes. Clouds of the biggest, hungriest mosquitoes ever, all day and all night. Mr. S kept trying to engage Bunky in our stories but without much success. Bunky did not seem to be interested in our adventures any more than his father's.

At about mile post 32 Bunky said that he wanted out of the car. He wanted to play his harmonica and commune with nature on his own. So, Mr. S left him sitting on a grass-covered knoll just to the side of the dirt road. I wondered why Mr. S had let Bunky sit by himself. While we had not seen any large wildlife on the drive, I knew it was around. We had mentioned seeing moose and bear the day before. In the end Mr. S seemed to think that leaving Bunky on the knoll with his harmonica was letting his son have the "man alone in nature" moment that was a necessary element of their wilderness adventure. The situation did look ideal: Mt. McKinley rising into a blue sky, other surrounding snow capped mountains, green grass, and mild air. We figured about 30 minutes to cover the three miles to the end of the road and back to pick up Bunky. What could go wrong?

At the mile 35 turnaround we were chatting with the Ranger — Mr. S. had a lot of questions. At some point the Ranger asked if we had seen a cinnamon grizzly bear on our drive out. We said no. He said there was a very irritated cinnamon grizzly in

the area and she was very dangerous. We should be on the lookout and stay clear of her. I thought Mr. S. would mess his pants right there. We sprinted to the car and left a spray of gravel flying as we sped off. At mile 32 we found the rise. Bunky's harmonica was on the grass. No Bunky. We were all shouting Bunky's name. Mr. S. was frantic, shouting and talking nonsense. I circled the base of the knoll and found very clear, very large bear claw marks in the torn turf. But, as I told M. S., at least there was no fresh blood on the harmonica or on the grassy slope.

Mr. S was beyond upset. He wasn't shouting anymore; he might have been going into shock. It all happened so fast, with no warning. Bunky being a normal, defiant teenage boy; then "poof", he was gone without a trace. I kept looking but found no clues to Bunky's condition or location. I had no idea where the bear was either.

The Ranger had followed us and I showed him the claw marks. He radioed it in to the Ranger Station. In less than an hour ten men assembled, all with rifles. We split up to search for Bunky, half down the mountain from the road and half up the mountain. Two shots in quick succession were the agreed upon signal to return to the starting point. Andy went down the mountain with half the men. I went up the mountain with the other half, calling for Bunky and searching for any sign of his presence. I went higher and higher. Sometime later I realized that I was far from the others, above the tree line, in loose scree with boulders the size of delivery vans scattered around. This was a

little spooky, because I could not see around the boulders. Bears can sprint at 30 miles per hour, far faster than a man can run. Bears are faster going up hill than down. I was uncomfortably aware that I had no rifle and was separated so far from the other men.

I remember the sky was clear blue, the air thin. No clouds, which was rare. McKinley attracts clouds and the summit usually is obscured by thick cloudbanks. It seemed very clean up there: no spongy wet moss, no rotten fallen trees, no tangled undergrowth. I noticed that the air was pure, with no forest scent. I was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain focus on looking for clues. Maybe it was the altitude, maybe it was hunger, but I was light headed. I was climbing in the loose gravel calling for Bunky when, late in the day, I heard two shots echo; the signal to return. I started to descend the steep slope, choosing my footing carefully in the loose scree. As I picked my way, I just happened to look up and see a cinnamon grizzly moving between two boulders. I was too close to the bear and I knew I was in trouble. The bear, now hidden among the boulders again, was between me and the assembly point below. I had been extremely lucky to have glanced up at the exact moment she was passing between two boulders. I shuddered, thinking what if I had not seen her and casually proceeded down.

Now I was in a dilemma. I was far too high for my voice to reach the men assembling below. I had no gun, only a knife. I did not know if the grizzly had a cub or two in the rocks, or where any of the bears were.

Fortunately, I was downwind from the bear so I had some time to think. I was tired and had no food or water. In the commotion around Bunky's disappearance, I'd left it all in Mr. S's car. I was now in the shadow of the mountain, out of the warmth of the sun. The bear could come up the slope and detect me at any moment. Going down towards the bear was scary; but, just sitting there as it got colder and the light faded was also scary and my situation would only get worse. I decided to descend and try to get the attention of the men. I crept down as quietly as I could, carefully listening and trying to look around the boulders. Still too high for voice contact, I came upon a boulder I could climb. Standing on top, 10 or 15 feet off the surface, I frantically waved my flannel over-shirt in the failing light. I caught the attention of one of the fellows by the road. He called the others. With hand signs I tried to convey that there was a bear between me and them. Finally, they signaled recognition and several with rifles fanned out and climbed toward me. I stayed on top of the boulder, in plain sight of the men and, I hoped, out of reach of the bear. At one point I saw the bear moving between two boulders and pointed her out. Soon I heard a shot and saw the men converging. I went down to the spot and there lay a large, lean cinnamon grizzly. We stood around the dead bear, absorbing the situation and discussing the known facts. The bear stench was head clearing strong: an overpowering combination of urine and slimy sweat. Judging by its lean frame, the bear had not fed well since spring. It was hard to know why she had not fattened, but hunger was

probably the cause of her aggressive attitude. We left the bear for later and went down to the road. Everyone was loudly jolly and relieved, except Mr. S. and Bunky; they were quiet.

I learned from Andy that Bunky had been found hiding in an abandoned miner's cabin not far down the mountain from the road. Bunky had been surprised on the rise by the bear and fled downhill. Hiding in the cabin, he had heard us shouting his name. But, he was convinced the bear was lurking just outside the cabin and had refused to make a sound until much later when men actually entered the cabin. I didn't say anything, but I was upset with Bunky. He had heard us shouting from his hiding place when we had returned to the rise and did not find him, only the harmonica. If he had just shouted back, we could have avoided the search party, wasting an entire afternoon, and my close encounter with the grizzly. Bunky's acting like a frightened baby had put us all to trouble and risk. I burned with resentment. As I watched Mr. S fussing over Bunky my stomach was growling; I had not eaten since the day before.

Mr. S. quickly but sincerely offered his thanks to the search party. Bunky did not say anything. He did not even ask to see the dead bear, which I thought was strange. Mr. S. practically carried Bunky to the car and got him safely in the passenger seat. Mr. S was so relieved. He had lost what was most important to him for several hours; and, now it was found. His face, his eyes, his body were transformed from anxious fear

to exhausted relief. I was powerfully struck by the transformation in Mr. S. With a wave of his hand they left for the Lodge. As I watched the taillights bounce down the gravel road, I realized that the darn box lunches were still in the car.

So, our day was done. I was physically exhausted, partly from climbing at high altitude all afternoon, but mostly from the stress of playing hide and seek with a grizzly bear. I had been truly terrified, alone, and without any good options. Now the adrenalin high was gone and I felt completely drained. Andy and I ate from our brown rice bricks and got into our sleeping bags under a tree. I could not sleep. Mr. S's transformed face kept appearing above me. My body was rigid as I stared up at the trees and sky. A blur of thoughts and images from the day swirled through my head. Nothing was clear. I was agitated, disturbed — but did not know exactly why.

I was furious with Bunky, but at the same time I vaguely was aware that my anger was somehow wrong. Bunky was a city kid, 24 hours in Alaska. He did not know anything about a dangerous bear in the vicinity, and was understandably terrified upon being surprised by a bear close up and in pursuit. I, on the other hand, had some experience in the bush and with aggressive bears. Yet, I was the one that went into an area that I knew contained an aggressive grizzly, and then separated myself from the other, armed searchers. I had thought I was valiantly looking for Bunky; but, it could just as easily be described as me looking for the dangerous grizzly, alone and un-

armed.

The real question is why did I behave so recklessly. Instead of polishing my hero medal and being angry with Bunky, I should have been questioning myself. Why was I seeking danger, risking injury or death? What was I trying to prove? And to whom?

The next day we waited along the tracks for a freight train to come and climb the same steep slope where we had jumped off. I think we waited a full day. I thought about Mr. S and Bunky; about, Mr. S's face showing such strong emotions. I knew that Mr. S's fear and then relief were the visible signs of his love for his son. I saw it plainly. He cared. He loved. But what had Bunky done to deserve this? Was Bunky responsive or respectful? No. Was Bunky brave? No. What did Bunky have that merited such unrestrained love? Nothing that I could see. Bunky had run and hidden; I had sought out the bear. Yet, Bunky was loved. I was so angry; but, I also wanted to cry.

Many years later I see the self-defeating futility of my actions. I had disappeared from my family as suddenly and ominously as Bunky had disappeared. I wanted what Bunky had. I wanted to be missed. I wanted a loving embrace after an escape from danger. But I had cut myself off from the possibility of a loving embrace. I wanted to prove myself worthy of being a man among men. But now, I was far from the one man I wanted to impress.

Finally, a freight train was slowly straining up the incline. I was dismayed to see no boxcars, only open flat beds. With the end of the train in

sight we hopped onto one of the flat beds, since there was no other choice. We were exposed to any trainman who happened to be looking and to the wind and the rain. We were concerned that we would be spotted, pulled off the train and beaten or worse. However, once over the high pass the train picked up speed and we had a bigger problem.

With nothing to hold on to we were bouncing all over the flat car. The train roared across single track, spindly wooden bridges over deep gorges and sped around mountain curves with drop offs of unknown height. We dug our fingers into cracks in the rough planking and hung on for dear life. My fingers and arms ached, my butt was bruised and cut by splinters. The scenery as we wound through the southern mountains was magnificent, but sheer terror made it impossible to enjoy. Every so often one of us would lose our grip and start bouncing across the flat bed. I was terrified of going off the edge, into a gorge, off a cliff, or slamming into a tree. I could see in his eyes that Andy was scared too. We had no idea how long this ride would last.

Fish School

The Cook Inlet is a part of the Pacific Ocean that extends about 200 miles northeast from the Gulf of Alaska to Anchorage. The Inlet is about 100 miles wide at its opening and narrows as it reaches Anchorage. On the northwest side of the Inlet is a rugged wilderness of snowcapped volcanos, virgin forests and pristine rivers. On the southeast side is the Kenai Peninsula. The Kenai is thickly forested

with lots of game. Bears are plentiful, including the magnificent Kodiak brown bear. This far south it actually gets dark briefly during the night and I could feel the ocean breezes. I was on the Kenai to find a job in the commercial salmon fishing industry.

In 1970 Clam Gulch consisted of a single building on the Kenai coast road between Kasilof and Ninilchik. The only building in Clam Gulch was a general store, gas station, liquor store, post office, bar, and general meeting place, all in one. Cliffs border the sea at Clam Gulch. At the bottom of the cliffs are broad, rough sand beaches at low tide; at high tide the waves crash onto the cliffs, sending sea spray high into the air. The tides on the Cook Inlet are extreme, as I was soon to learn.

A mile or so south of Clam Gulch there was a salmon processing operation about 50 yards in from the cliffs. The cliffs and forest between Clam Gulch and the salmon processing building would become my home. I had hitch-hiked from Anchorage and now lingered at the sole building that was Clam Gulch. It was there that I met a fisherman who hired me. Dave was an open-faced man and at 29 was about ten years older than me. Dave planned to make a years' worth of money during the brief salmon season. Of course, I knew absolutely nothing about commercial salmon fishing; but Dave was happy to teach me. When salmon are running help is scarce.

I learned that salmon swarm by the millions up the Cook Inlet from the north Pacific, each salmon looking for the mouth of the river or stream in which it spawned several years

earlier. Commercial salmon fishing is strictly regulated to ensure that sufficient salmon make it to the fresh water to spawn and continue the generational cycle. The salmon run in July and August and the Alaska DNR specifies 12-hour periods when fishing is permitted. Where I was located it was all gill nets. Large boats would tether one end of a very long net to an anchor and buoy and stretch the net from there to the back of the boat. Then they would wait for the salmon.

Dave's method was a little different. He had an open boat about 18 feet long with an outboard motor. I used a sledgehammer to pound a long post into the beach, attached a rope, and jumped into the boat. Dave took the boat straight out. Once we were out of the breaking surf I attached the other end of the rope to a gill net. Dave slowly continued out to sea and I played out the net from the back of the boat, making sure it cleared the motor and did not tangle. When we had the long net stretched perpendicular from the beach, we waited for the salmon.

Salmon eggs hatch in shallow hollows in the gravel of fresh-water streams. After hatching the baby salmon head downstream to estuaries where they acclimate to saltwater. Salmon spend their adult years feeding and traveling in the Pacific Ocean. In ways and for reasons that no human knows adult salmon by the millions simultaneously navigate over hundreds and thousands of miles of the Pacific back to the estuary where their natal stream meets the sea. From there they swim upstream to the same gravel patch where they hatched to lay and fertilize eggs. And then they die, within days of completing their

quest. No one knows how salmon find their way back, but the compulsion to spawn in the same place they came from causes them to face and overcome all obstacles, including predators, swift rapids, and waterfalls to reach the exact place of their birth, and then their death. It is a complete circle of life and of geography.

The Cook Inlet, as it narrows, acts as a funnel, consolidating millions of salmon traveling to natal streams that pour into the Inlet. Waiting in the boat with Dave, I could see the salmon coming from far off. The surface of the ocean seemed to boil as far as I could see. As they came closer and closer, I could make out tens of thousands of individual salmon leaping like dolphins as they churned up the inlet. When the salmon hit the net it violently jerked the boat around. Dave started the engine and we turned to shore, forming a circle with the net.

Then the really hard work began: pulling hundreds of writhing salmon, weighing 5 to 90 pounds each out of the net in the shallows and throwing them as far as I could up the beach. We had to work as fast as possible because of the limited time period fishing was allowed, and also because of the tide. It was a mad, frantic rush of work: in the cold surf, with uncertain footing in the moving water, covered in fish slime. As we finished our second netting and were headed back to shore, a very large dump truck appeared on the beach. The truck stopped at each shore boat's pile of fish. My job when it got to our pile was to heave each fish a second time, one by one, up and into the dump truck. Our pile was hundreds

of salmon. As the fish flew high up and into the truck a man with a clipboard sitting on top of the truck cab called out the type of salmon: King, Red, Silver, Pink, Dog. Each type was a different price. I was supposed to be a check on the man counting but being new I was in no position to dispute his call. On day one, all the salmon looked the same to me. The tide ended our fishing that day. When the tide rushed in the beach was gone. The waves crashed into the cliff. Anything left on the beach was quickly pulverized and sucked out to sea. I was exhausted. Lifting and throwing each salmon twice, first out of the net to our pile above the water line and then throwing it again from the pile up into the dump truck was backbreaking. By the time we had finished it had been about a 16-hour workday and adrenaline had kept me going. Dave paid me \$100 cash and told me to be ready for the next fishing period.

For the second trip I knew what was in store and could pace myself. On my third fishing period, the sea was very rough. The wind was strong and the sky threatening. After I staked the net we were nearly swamped by high waves as we turned out to sea through the surf. Waiting for the salmon we were rocking so hard in high waves that we could not stand and the spray made it hard to see. The clouds were very dark and low, moving fast across the sky. I bailed water continuously, trying to stay ahead of the waves crashing over the sides of the boat. Then, conditions got even worse. The rise and then sickening drop off the crests of the waves

threatened to capsize us. Finally, Dave decided to concede defeat and head back to shore with me pulling in the net as best I could. The surf was too high to beach the boat. Dave shouted for me to cut the rope from the net and we would look for a sheltered place to come in.

As we headed back out to sea, rising and falling on the huge waves, we saw three of the larger, deep water boats headed in. They looked heavy. They were clearly in trouble. In the roaring wind and crashing seas I could hear nothing of what Dave was shouting, though he was only a few feet away. He signaled that we were going to help the other, larger boats before they sank. This was not welcome news. We were in a small open boat mostly filled with net that I was frantically bailing so we wouldn't sink. What did Dave think we could possibly do for these other, larger boats? But I did not have a vote. We headed out towards the foundering boats, which came in and out of sight as we rose and fell on the waves. I wondered how many men Dave thought we could carry if we threw the net overboard; I hoped they brought buckets to bail water.

We were about 100 yards from the nearest boat when I saw a muzzle flash. They were shooting at us. In an open boat on the crest of a wave in plain sight of several men firing rifles is to feel entirely naked. Nowhere to hide. Panic choked me. After riding a couple of crests without either of us getting hit, Dave managed to turn our little boat away and back toward shore. As we headed in I could see intermittently in the gloom the bigger boats taking waves over their decks. Dave found a place in the lee of gigan-

tic boulders just off the beach where it was calmer and we could bring in the boat.

Later as we dried out in front of a fire, I asked Dave what had happened. He acknowledged that he had been pushed by greed to try to fish in such bad conditions. If he missed a fishing period, that was money lost. However, he had risked his boat, his net, and our lives. He said that attempting to rescue men off the bigger boats in such terrible conditions was also a mistake but was done to atone for his greed in going out in the first place. As for the deep-water fishermen, Dave said they had the rifles to shoot seals who tore up the nets when feeding on helpless salmon. He also seemed surprised and puzzled that they would shoot at us as we approached to lend aid. He speculated that they were crazed by fear of drowning and angry at the prospect of losing their catch and boat. They were helpless and shot at us as the only thing they could do in a hopeless situation. That did not make any sense to me but based on the many Alaskans I had met over the months, it rang true. I just nodded. I heard later that boats and men were lost that day.

Listening to Dave I could still feel the blood pounding through my veins, I could hear the crashing waves and howling wind. I could feel the rise and sickening fall of the boat in seas so high that I was surrounded by walls of grey water until we rose again, soaked and freezing. I decided that I had had enough of commercial fishing. None of the fishermen I had met or seen that day had acted reasonably or with any common sense. I would find other work. Because we brought in no fish that day, I was not paid. Dave and I

parted on good terms.

I got a job as a truck driver at the salmon processing plant. The owner, Phil, was very direct and seemed honest. He owned large dump trucks that he ran on the beaches and to the docks to buy salmon from the fishermen and haul them back to his building for processing. There was a dirt access road, all switchbacks, from the cliff top to the beach. The job was to get the truck down the cliff, purchase and load salmon until the truck was full, and then get back up the cliff and to the processing plant to unload— as many times as possible until all the fish were gone, or until the tide came in. I was told that one of Phil's drivers had miscalculated and failed to get his truck off the beach before the tide came in. When the tide went out there was no sign of the truck, and Phil had to pay for the fish that never made it to the plant. Phil decided that he needed a more intelligent driver. I got the job. The main requirements— besides being smart enough to get off the beach before the tide came in— was to know how to double clutch through the gears and having the strength and nerves to manhandle the truck up and down the narrow switchbacks. I told Phil that I had been driving farm tractors since age eight or nine, so I was hired.

This was a good job. Now I was the guy sitting on the roof of the truck cab with a clip board counting the fish as they were heaved into the truck. I'd give the fisherman a receipt with the count of each type of salmon and then drive down the beach to the next pile of salmon until I was full. Then it was grinding up the

cliff and back to the plant to unload. Unloading was easy. I just backed up to a concrete apron next to the plant and pushed a button. The hydraulic system tilted the dumper and the fish slid out the back.

It was hard to turn down pleading fishermen with piles of salmon, but when I knew the tide was about to turn I did so. My number one priority was to get my truck off the beach before getting caught in the surging tide— whether fully loaded or not. When the tide was in or the beach fishermen sold out, I would drive to the docks to buy from the deep-water fishermen when they came in at the end of the fishing period. I drove the truck for a couple weeks, then Phil called me in to his office.

"Michael, good job with the truck. But now I want you in the plant."

"Phil, I enjoy driving and working with the fishermen in the fresh air."

"Yes, but I need you to manage the lines. Managing is an indoor job, and the hours are longer, but I will double your salary."

"Phil, I don't know the workers. I don't know the Manager's job...."

"Don't worry about that. I will tell you all you need to know as we go."

"But, Phil... Well, if you're sure, I'll give it a try."

Phil had a large number of seasonal employees in the plant, almost all members of native tribes from villages all over south west Alaska. These folks lived on islands or in isolated areas where no paying work was available. So, a couple of months of cleaning salmon for cash money was attractive. It was cold, slimy, repetitive work in very long shifts. Work started when the salmon started arriving at the plant

and ended when the last salmon was cleaned and chilled. Shifts were often 16 hours or more.

When not cleaning fish most of the workers camped around the plant on the cliff top. There were a couple of "pop up" trailers on two wheels, but most of us were in tents or canvas lean-tos. It rained a lot; almost every day. When it wasn't raining it was often misty or foggy. Everybody lived and worked in high rubber boots and layers of flannel topped by a water-proof poncho. We cooked over wood fires among the tents and lean-tos. Since our time off was generally less than 24 hours between long shifts, sleeping, gathering, preparing and eating food was all we did.

Our main food was fresh salmon, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Usually a whole gutted salmon would be wrapped in aluminum foil with a chopped onion and some salt and pepper and tossed in the embers. Twenty or thirty minutes later, depending on the size of the fish, it was ready. For a different taste, I would go to the enormous pile of discarded salmon heads near the plant and carve out the cheeks from several big king salmon heads and fry them in a pan. Salmon cheeks almost didn't taste like salmon. If we were off work and awake when the tide was out, several of us would descend the cliff and dig clams. There are eight known major concentrations of razor clams between the Arctic Circle and Southern California, and four of those are in Alaska. As the name Clam Gulch implies, it is the center of a prime razor clam habitat. Once on the beach at

low tide, all I needed was a narrow shovel and a big bucket or bushel basket. I would spot an air hole in the sand and figure out the direction of the clam's escape route, typically towards the water. A mature razor clam is about five inches long and can move very fast through the sand when scared. With practice I could plunge the shovel into the sand blocking escape and in one or two scoops seize the clam. There were so many that it was easy for even a novice clam digger to fill a big basket in less than an hour. Cleaning the clams took more time than digging them, but clams were a nice change from the salmon.

Once a fellow came down the road and stopped at the plant with half of a caribou carcass. A furious bidding war broke out among us fish eaters to buy his caribou meat. He would not take salmon or clams, only cash money. It was very expensive but worth it. We lucky few had red meat that night and talked about that meat for days afterward.

There were virtually no fruits or vegetables. While a few were available in the Clam Gulch "store", they were sad looking and prohibitively expensive. But, EverClear was in abundant supply. EverClear is a vodka like drink listed as 190 proof, at least double the alcohol content of any hard liquor I had ever heard of. This made it very convenient to carry around in the bush. A little went a long way. And it was relatively cheap. KoolAid packets added flavor. And so, the beverage of choice among the tents and lean-tos was EverClear with powdered KoolAid mixed in. After a long shift most of us got stupid drunk

before passing out, with luck inside a tent or under a lean-to. The hangovers were vicious.

Inevitably, the clanging bell would call everyone back to work still in mid hangover. Truckloads of salmon would arrive, to be sorted by type. Kings, or "Chinook", which could weigh 60 to 90 pounds each, were rare and the most prized. These were cleaned, filleted, and put in the cooler to be flown down to Seattle for distribution as fresh salmon. Reds, or "Sockeye", were the next most valuable and could be filleted and sold fresh or flash frozen. Silvers were more plentiful, less expensive than the Kings or Reds, and were cleaned, filleted and frozen. Pinks were cleaned and sent for canning. Dog salmon got their name because they were considered fit only to be fed to sled dogs.

This sounds simple and clean. It was anything but that. After sorting by type, the heads were cut off and discarded and the carcasses went to different lines of stainless-steel tables. Scalpers would run their tools from the tail up, with scales flying in the air like a heavy snowfall covering everything in the area. Next people with very sharp, very thin, long knives slit the belly and carefully removed any roe. Roe is placed in big wooden barrels behind the workers. Then the guts are torn out in one motion and thrown into gut buckets. Of course, blood is flowing and running off the tables onto the floor.

Next are the filleters, also with very sharp, long, thin knives. As the fish carcasses move down the lines, the bones, tail and fins are removed and brushed to the floor. With experi-

enced workers the fish are moving very fast and the knives are just a blur, flashing in and out of sight. Finally, there is a wash table before the fish meat is sent to the cooler, freezer or canner. The work continues at this pace until the fish are gone. The workers are dropping with exhaustion by the end.

Of course, accidents happen. With all these sharp knives, slippery fish and very tired workers, someone is bound to be hurt from time to time. What is not acceptable, are deliberate attacks, ambush cuttings, and brawling. Many of the workers are proud men and women, not used to being among non-family or large groups of people. They are distrustful of people of other tribes or ethnicities. They are tired, wet, cold, often sleep deprived, hungover, and generally sick and tired of camping out in the rain and working like dogs. Some seem to be constantly on a hair trigger. My job in the plant is to supervise the smooth functioning of the lines and to spot and block simmering confrontations before they turn violent. Failing that, I intervene to stop the fighting, cutting or brawling.

Sometimes simply working in close proximity would set someone off. Workers were assigned to shovel the blood, bones, scales, etc. off the floor from under and around the tables. Touching a line worker's boot with the shovel could trigger a violent sweep of the knife to the side and back of the line worker. I saw several such instance where the knife came very close or nicked the shoveler. Then of course, the shovel comes up for the line worker's head. And we are off; knife versus shovel. Partisans for each

side surround the pair, some looking to get in on the action. All the lines come to a halt. Stopping the fight and getting the lines moving is my responsibility. Fresh fish does not stay fresh long. We have to process it all as soon as possible.

Among the men and few women working in the plant some were more "native" than others, judging by the clothing, hair and demeanor. All were there, far from home, for the short opportunity to make cash money. Paying jobs were rare to nonexistent in their communities. Some of the workers seemed to want to work hard, do a good job, and perhaps have other opportunities. Others seemed sullen, worked grudgingly, and seemed to be rooting against the plant. It was puzzling to me: they depended on the plant for cash to take back home but seemed to resent the very existence of the plant. But Phil did not have a lot of choices. During the salmon season he had to hire anybody he could get.

There was one man in particular that gave me pause. Vic was a native, about 21 or 22. He had lustrous, thick, black hair and dark eyes above high cheek bones in a round face. Vic was thickly built with quick, springy muscles. His skin was a rusty brown. Vic was reserved and quiet, but when he spoke men listened. He was not one to lash out in mindless, purposeless violence. He stood out. He seemed destined to be a leader of his tribe. I respected him and in other circumstances we could have been friends. But Vic radiated resentment. I suspected that it sprang from his frustration with being treated condescendingly as an "Indian" by whites who tended to think of all natives as the same, in

stereotypes.

Vic was proud of his family and tribe. He was also embarrassed by the poverty, lack of education and other conditions that fed white stereotypes of his people. He resented whites assuming he was just another shiftless Indian based on his skin and hair. I felt he had a particular anger and resentment against me. I think Vic was angry that Phil had made me manager instead of him. I believe that if he had thought about it, Phil would agree that my qualifications were no better than Vic's. It simply never occurred to Phil to consider an Indian for the job. Whites were managers and natives were workers. I understood Vic's resentment; but I was there to make money and I was not about to suggest to Phil that he reconsider my promotion. I felt guilty, but not enough to do anything to change the situation. I made friendly overtures, but Vic was having none of that. I think he knew that it was just me trying to assuage my guilt and to obscure the injustice of the situation. He was always on guard with me and vaguely threatening. I felt I had to watch my back, not just from Vic but also because he could always get a couple of guys from his tribe to take revenge on me and then disappear into tribal lands.

So I was worried about an ambush. It would be so easy when I was breaking up a fight on the line for one of the knives to "slip" and cut or stab me. There was already much senseless violence in the plant. This would be just one more thing.

Vic and I did have one fight. It was outside the plant with a large crowd of cheering, jeering workers. It was a "feeling each other out" kind of fight. It

started with what I considered good natured trash talk that never got mean but somehow we ended up squaring off. Alcohol was involved. There was a lot of yelled advice and commentary from the crowd as we circled, feinting and jabbing. As time wore on there were some good sequences of punches on both sides. In the end, though, Vic beat me rather easily. He was stronger, quicker, and a better boxer than me. I knew from that fight that Vic could take me anytime he wanted. But, worse, the other men knew he could take me. So, it was humiliating and I regretted the fight. I worried how it would play out on the plant floor.

A few days later I was asleep on my back under my canvas lean to. I woke with Vic astride my chest, his knees pinning both my arms to the ground. He had the barrel of his revolver stuck up my right nostril. The hammer was cocked. In the dim light I could see that his eyes were unfocused.

I lay very still, watching his eyes. When they seemed to come into focus I asked, "Vic, is there a problem?" I could tell that he was trying to say something. Finally, he slurred out that his hand mirror was missing. It took several attempts but eventually I got out of him that he believed that I had taken the missing mirror. He could see the nose of bullets in the outer chambers of the cylinder. I assumed there was one ready to fire if the hammer came down. Vic was swaying a bit on top of me and leaning on the revolver, jamming the barrel into my nostril. It hurt like hell, but I tried to remain still. Vic was very unsteady; I was afraid he

would fall over and inadvertently pull the trigger. I assured Vic that I had not taken his mirror. He did not respond. I told him he could search my backpack, my sleeping bag, my clothes, look everywhere he liked.

As he swayed, leaning on the pistol to stay upright, I hoped Vic was considering his options other than pulling the trigger. Finally, he mumbled something. His thumb reached for the hammer just inches from my eyes. I prayed hard that his thumb would not slip as he tried to uncock the gun. When the hammer came down gently, I felt a wave of relief. Vic fell unconscious to one side dropping his gun on my chest.

After moving the pistol out of his reach I lay still, trying to slow my heart and calm my mind. Vic's lower body was heavy and I was not sure I had the strength to move him right away. I was completely drained.

Eventually, I collected myself, wiggled out from under Vic and took his gun to the plant office, to which I had a key. I sat in Phil's desk chair under a light, examining the gun that could have killed me. There was a bullet in the firing chamber. It seemed important that I remember all the details of this revolver. Then I put it in Phil's top desk drawer and relocked the office door on my way out. I walked the rest of the night, staying in open areas, along the cliff and in a small meadow across the coast road from the plant. I could not even think about being among trees. I needed to see 360 degrees.

As I walked in the half light along the cliffs I thought about the last several months in Alaska. I had been actively considering homesteading.

In 1970 it was still possible to claim 160 acres of land and if I made some minimal improvements I would own it after five years. Many of the men I had met were homesteading or planning to once they found the right spot. I was tempted by the thought of free land. But, none of the available land I had seen was capable of supporting crops, so all the men had to work odd jobs for money. I was having trouble seeing myself as a hand-to-mouth homesteader in five or ten years, hunting and fishing for meat but working odd jobs for all other necessities. I respected and admired some of the settlers I had met; but, there were also many that I did not respect, and I was repelled by the unethical and ignorant way of life of others. I also knew that I did not understand or fit in with the Native peoples. I walked until dawn, uncertain about my future, uncomfortable with a vision of myself in Alaska.

It was late in the salmon season and incoming loads of fish were getting smaller. All of us were played out: exhausted by the long hours; tired of living outdoors in the rainy, damp chill; sick of eating salmon; and, getting really irritated by our fellow employees' habits and peculiarities. It was good that it was almost over. But we were not quite done yet.

On a night when it was not raining and stars were visible, I was awakened by lots of yelling. I stood beside my lean-to and saw bright flames soaring from the roof of the fish processing building. I ran to the plant. Men were running around yelling, but to no purpose. The plant was about 200 feet long and about 30 feet high from the ground to the top

of the peaked roof, made entirely of wood. The flames rose high above the roof; red and orange embers swirled up even higher than the flames in a spinning vortex into the night sky. Above the underlying roaring of the flames there were cracking and popping sounds from inside the building. It was a lot to take in. I had never considered the possibility of a fire and was dumbstruck for a time. What should I do? We were next to the ocean but with no way to get the water up the cliff. With only the equivalent of a garden hose used to wash the fish and stainless steel tables, there was no way to put out this huge fire. I found Phil. The fire was on the end of the building containing Phil's office and moving toward the center of the building. We concluded that the only thing we could do was save the processed fish in the freezers and coolers at the far end of the plant. Most importantly, we had to stop the fire from reaching the rows of man-sized tanks of compressed gas used to operate the freezers and coolers. If the fire reached those tanks there would be a huge explosion. I was to organize the men to run chains and ropes through the sides of the building and over the roof. When those were in place I would hook them to the back of a dump truck and pull down the section of the plant next to the tanks, freezers and coolers. This would create a break between the compressed gas and valuable fish inventory and the rest of the freely burning building. We could then hope the flames would not jump across the open space.

The problem was that the men were not interested in helping. They

seemed to enjoy watching the fire light up the sky as they passed bottles of Ever Clear. All the resentments and anger of the past weeks seemed to well up; the fire was Nature taking their side. It was frustrating. None of the men were willing to listen to me or lend a hand. I finally ran into Vic.

"Vic, we need to do something, save the inventory." He just looked at me.

"If we don't stop the fire, the tanks will explode and many people could be hurt."

"Mm, uh hah..."

"Vic, Phil will pay extra to men who help make a fire break. Will you help? Will you ask the men to help?"

Vic silently returned my searching look for what seemed a long time. Then he turned and called out to some of the nearby men in their language. They jumped to and soon ropes and chains went in the windows of one side of the building, out the windows on the other side and over the roof. We had to move fast as the fire ate more and more of the building. We had to use two trucks, but to the roar of the engines, the cheering of men, and the groaning of the roof timbers, the building gradually gave way and we dragged the roof and upper walls away. The men used axes and sledge hammers to pull away the lower parts from the concrete foundation. We then had a clear space with just bare concrete floor and stainless steel tables between the fire and the freezers and compressed gas tanks. We could all rest and watch as the bulk of the plant burned to the ground. We sat within the light of the fire, passing the Ever Clear, marveling at

the brightness in the middle of the night, and at the thoroughness of the flames. The fire did not jump the gap.

In the morning, only blackened, wilted stainless steel tables stood where a large building had been the day before. There was not a trace of Phil's office. Only the tanks, freezers and coolers stood, a low humming letting us know that the fish was safe. Ash and debris littered the surrounding area. The section of roof and upper walls was a mangled pile off to one side. In the morning light the immensity of the destruction was plain. The air was clear and calm. It felt strangely peaceful. All of us stood around silently or talking quietly in small groups.

Phil gave a speech. He was grateful that we had saved the inventory and avoided the gas tanks exploding. No one was seriously injured. Our jobs were over for the season, but everyone would be paid that day in cash for wages owed. Once the inventory was sold in a day or two, he would

honor my promise of cash rewards to all who helped during the fire. Then he would begin to rebuild the plant. He said he would be ready for the next salmon season and promised everyone a job if they returned next year. Later I saw Phil walking with Vic. They had a long conversation and shook hands.

I did not know whether to believe Phil about the rebuild or not. The idea of rebuilding from scratch was daunting. But Phil assured me that he would start the rebuild as soon as the cash from the sale of the inventory came in. He asked me to stay and help rebuild. He offered a good wage. Phil is a true Alaskan settler: bold, hardworking, and undaunted by disaster. I admired Phil for these qualities and he made me believe that he would rebuild. But I declined his offer of employment.

In that moment I knew that I did not want to claim a homestead. I was not a Native; and, I was not a settler. I knew that I would not make a life for myself in Alaska. I had other plans.

Five Dance Pieces

Irena Barbara Nagler

what the nine deer in the graveyard say to me who stand electric still

we can show you
the many doors that peel back
to expose the dragonfly field
we can show you
the green-blue river of your mother's ancestry
we can show you
the eyelid of a sleeping world rising
skies that open into skies
and the quiet thunder of the realms beneath your feet.

ISLE ROYALE, 1949,
EYE OF THE WOLF

Before I was born
I watched wolves cross the ice.
The world creaked under the weight
of constellations marked in snow.
Night sang in a nest of trees
on the shore where they arrived
and a green-fire torch was passed
from eye to Eye.

Aldo Leopold, the great ecologist, experienced one of his early revelations on seeing the "fierce green fire" dying in the eyes of a wolf he had killed. Leopold died in April 1948. In winter of 1948-49, wolves first crossed the ice in return to Isle Royale, known as "the eye of the wolf" for its placement within the wolf's-head shape of Lake Superior. Aerial photos of wolves crossing the ice have an odd ring of familiarity to me though I have not actually seen the phenomenon. I have sometimes told myself that I watched the wolf-crossing several years before I was born.

spring in the time of technomagnetism

air thins, and butterflies
elude the grids that slice their violet worlds
and skew the compasses of bees.

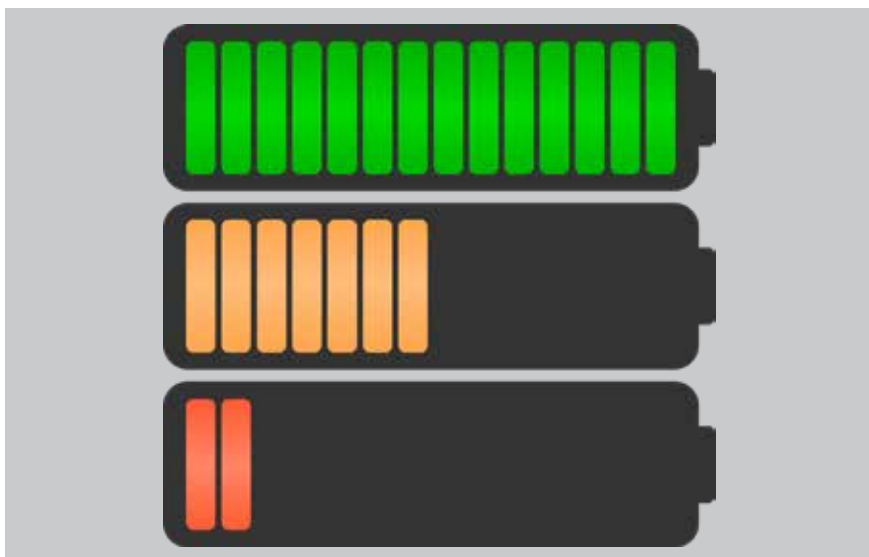
and colors dim.
But down on the ground
water collects in tannic pools
presses brown leaves into earth
and the skunk cabbages wax bright
Firm, uncurling lips invite you
to the darkest fairy tea.

dream of a green cat dancing in water

In this time when rocks are broken
The green cat dances the story of earth and water.
No one can take me from my dream of her.
No one will distract me from the cat
Who emerges from fractured stone
Who guards the water of memory
and the memory of rocks for themselves.

a vixen walks on snow
the night-earth electrifies her paws
and stars shine into her bones.
Her blood is a harp
strung between earth and heaven,
a stream of guiding whispers.

She hunts for stars
in the subterranean
where messages leap from metal to metal
She hunts for stars that navigate
the rivers of her blood
and from the sinews of prey, and the forge
in which the prey becomes herself
and lends her its eyes.



Low Battery

Theo Poling

-[|||||]+

Spencer wakes up. Their battery is at 75%. They make breakfast.

Outside of their studio apartment, campus awaits. The south side is quiet, mostly residential, with perfectly-trimmed hedges quieting the roar of the train line beyond.

Spencer is early. They walk to class with an easy amble. They check their phone for a text from Alex but there is nothing. It only takes seven minutes to get from the door of the apartment complex to the door of the lecture hall. In that time, they are stared at three times, and one person murmurs an aside to her friend with a laugh.

-[|||||]+

Spencer starts class. Their battery is at 60%. They take out their notebook.

Anthropology is one of their favorite subjects. Anthropology is all about defamiliarizing the familiar. In this class, Spencer is not weird, is not impossible to understand. In this class, making a phone call or doing your taxes is just as weird as knowing every single Magic: The Gathering card by heart or having a stutter that comes out only late at night.

Their teacher likes them. They are called on a few times, and share their thoughts on the inherent bias of biographical work. It is well-received.

-[|||||]+

Spencer meets their friends at the dining hall. Their battery is at 65%. They order pizza.

Spencer met their friends in their dorm hall freshman year. Then, they had all lived on the same floor, and had similar schedules. Becoming

friends was easy. Now, they are all fragmented, split across classes and majors and life paths, but lunch is still a thing.

Spencer sits sandwiched between Ruby and Preethi, with Tinashe across from them.

Preethi rambles about a class she's taking, how she hopes it will help her score a prestigious internship. Her grades are getting better, and her mom is finally off her ass.

Spencer wiggles animatedly in their seat. "You got this!" they exclaim. "You are gonna score that internship so hard."

Preethi beams. She talks about the new T.V. show she loves. Tinashe and Ruby have seen it, but aren't caught up. They beg Preethi not to spoil them while Preethi shouts out facts about various characters. Tinashe and Ruby cover their ears.

Spencer smiles and laughs, looking between their friends. They haven't seen it. To change the subject, Spencer lets out a groan. Everyone looks their way. "They had nuggets today? Nooooo! I didn't even notice!"

"It's not like it's right at the top of the menu," Ruby says.

"Typical Spence," Preethi says, waving a hand around in a vague, fluttery gesture, and Tinashe and Ruby laugh.

Spencer forces a smile. "Guess what, guys? I got the—"

Tinashe's timbre is loud and overpowers Spencer like a bulldozer over a clover. "You guys wanna hear something cringey?"

Tinashe talks about a biology class she's taking. That morning, her lab partner had struggled to understand something that Tinashe understood easily, and Tinashe laughs when she recounts the incident. When Tinashe

explains it, she mixes up the definitions of prokaryotic and eukaryotic.

Spencer smiles and nods, but they don't laugh. They wonder how the lab partner would feel about this story, but Tinashe seems happy, so they stay quiet. Spencer wonders what Alex is doing right now, if practice for the big show has started yet.

When lunch is over, Tinashe, Ruby, and Preethi discuss the movie night the three of them are going to have tonight.

Spencer understands without needing to ask that they are not invited.

-[|||||]+

Spencer walks home. Their battery is at 45%. They have some homework to do.

It is around 6 P.M. when they finish writing their essay. It is not due for two weeks, but they are experimenting with a new type of prewriting and drafting process. It works well, and the essay, while rough, has an edge to it that they know their professor will appreciate.

Their imagination has been wacky lately, colorful, like they're a kid again. Each object in the books they read is a symbol, and that symbol stands for their own smile, their very identity. The queer takes they argue are well-received in class, and they are even brainstorming ideas for a poetry collection. Their advisor is subtly emailing them links to magazines and competitions.

Their phone rings. They aren't expecting a call. It's Preethi.

They pick up. "Hello?"

"I didn't get the internship," Preethi croaks out in that post-cry waver. "I

am so stupid. My mom's gonna kill me."

They close their computer and sit on the floor. "You're not stupid," they say, keeping it quiet, knowing the walls here are thin. "Those internships are always super competitive. They often only take one or two people out of hundreds. It probably came down to something subjective."

"I needed that internship," Preethi continues the moment Spencer goes quiet. "I've already applied to so many. All of my psych major friends have already had paid internships, and I'm a junior and I haven't even had an unpaid one. Do you think it's because I dropped out of Glasgow? I didn't put it on my resume. I've already had, like, three panic attacks this week... my mom texted me about my weight again. She just doesn't understand what I'm going through."

They hum a kind noise. They've known Preethi for a long time, and Preethi's mother has always had a magic way of wanting to help Preethi in the most damaging way possible. "That really sucks, I'm sorry," they offer, imagining Preethi sitting alone on the other end of the line. "It won't be the last internship, and you aren't defined by your mom. Keep trying, dude."

There is a pause on the other end of the line. "Don't you have anything else to say?"

The smile twitches on their face. They search their mental repository of social scripts for the right answer to that one. Does Preethi want new ideas? Should Spencer rag on Preethi's mom? They take too long.

"Never mind," Preethi sighs, long

and sad, like there should be violins accompanying her words. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye," they say, but Preethi has already hung up.

-[|||||||]+

Spencer's battery is at 15%, but sleep is coming.

They are just getting into bed when their phone beeps. It's the group chat. They have been directly messaged by Preethi. She's asking if they want to come to the movie night.

All of their previous concerns and fears wash away. They shouldn't have assumed they weren't invited or that they couldn't help Preethi earlier. They accept, climbing out of bed and stepping out of their pajamas.

Spencer makes it to Preethi, Ruby, and Tinashe's apartment about half an hour later. The twinkly lights are on and Ruby's laptop is plugged into the TV, displaying the web browser. Ruby points to the TV. "We need your Amazon login for the movie," she says.

They crouch in front of the laptop, typing in their information.

"Press 'save password,'" Ruby pipes up.

They do. They find the movie and hit play.

It isn't their usual preference--a rom-com--but they end up enjoying it. They make a joke about the hot man lead actor, but no one reacts. They glance over and see Preethi is on her phone. Past her, in a row, Ruby and Tinashe are, too.

When the movie ends, Preethi puts her phone away. "Wasn't that so

good?" she asks.

They nod vigorously. "Yeah, I r-really liked it. We should all w-watch the sequel together!"

Preethi nods. "Yeah. Can you Venmo me for the popcorn?"

-[|||||||]+

Spencer leaves the apartment alone. Their battery is at 7%.

The temperature has tanked considerably. It's late, and this street is not the safest. They walk briskly, clutching their phone in their hand. They're passed by several groups of drunken students, hanging off each other and laughing in loud barks. One girl pukes on the curb.

One of the boys from one such group looks over at them.

"Do you think it's a he or a she?" the boy asks loudly. The others look up and giggle with red, watery eyes. Someone holds up a phone and Spencer cannot tell if its black, beady eye is aimed at them or not.

They walk faster, opening their phone to look busy. Ruby has just posted a picture of her and Tinashe and Preethi. "Movie night squad," the caption reads.

-[|||||||]+

Spencer turns the shower on, cranking the temperature all the way to boiling.

They sit naked under the spray, folding their knees in and hugging them close to their chest.

They think about the giggling students from that morning and the boy from the alley. They think about every pair of eyes that lands on them, makes an evaluation, dismisses them, and moves away.

They wonder what it is about them that makes them an easy target. They wonder what about them proclaims "stupid" in blinking neon lights. They hold their head high, they love who they are, but somehow, it doesn't seem to translate.

It shouldn't bother them this much. It shouldn't matter.

But it does.

They stare at their hands. Their ears ring. The water pelts their back. The bathroom fills with steam.

Their thoughts rush together, as loud as the susurrus of the water. Something is catching in their chest. Why. That is their only question. Why. Their heart beats faster.

why

They stand up, head going leaden, vision grey, knees weak, and scramble to shut off the shower. They grip the shower door, clinging for life while their hearing goes, the sound of bloodrush filling their world.

They wrap themselves in a towel and sit on the toilet. The numbness and fuzziness gives way to cold heaviness. It is only with a burst of sudden strength, like the hero getting up one last time to finish the boss fight, that they manage to get dressed and ready for bed.

They collapse under the sheets. Their thoughts are too quiet now, the previous mania replaced with an empty sadness. They plug their phone in, and see they missed a text when the screen swirls to life.

It's from Alex. How'd your internship

go?

-We start next week. I already met my boss, though, and she's really nice!!

Alex responds immediately. Cool! What about the scholarship?

-I got it :) I'll get the money next semester.

Alex's next text is in all caps. Confetti covers the text conversation.

When it fades, they ask Alex about jazz band and cat fostering. Alex sends them a picture of their most recent batch of kittens, who all look like milky-eyed cows. They're so cute.

Their lids get heavy, so they tell Alex they're heading to bed. Alex sends an emoji of someone sleeping in a bed. See you this weekend. Have fun at the library tomorrow! Love you!

-Love you, too.

-[|||||]+

Love you.

-[|||||]+

Spencer wakes up. Their battery is at 75%. They make breakfast.



Four Poems

Haley Winkle

satiation and other almost-fulfillments

when a rain comes out of hiding, it starts politely. gentle as the blue sky follows, keeps falling. first straight then diagonal then straight again. blue comes closer, drops heavier. still too polite to color the thyme green again, bring the soft back to the lavender and its single flower promises of rain had fallen aside the past few weeks have been so dry cloud empties self onto dead leaves I am hungry for color other than blue

Previously published in Funny Looking Dog Quarterly Issue 3. October 2019.

"the apple tree is doing just fine"

I didn't realize that / I had forgotten
what stillness / feels like / until 6pm
sunlight happened / through the window
visible / in all the dust / particles floating
slowly / in which I stood / moved
my arm / through the room / cloud
and when / the particles stayed / in place
so did I.

*Previously published in stolen time: an anthology of poems
written at desk jobs (Whatever Keeps the Lights On), March 2020.*

re-learning life at the end of May

last month, every
robin I saw looked
like it wanted to fight.
to be fair, so did I,
projecting the April
sad on nature coming
back to life before my
eyes. now I read Ross
Gay on the balcony
before noon. cat inside,
only my toes in sleepy
sunlight. the neighbor
cat from below stares
unblinking.
a cup of cut strawberries
marries the cup of
coffee in my belly. I use
the word belly. This
sunlight is awfully
golden for noon.

Previously published in Hobart. May 2020.



I try to gloss over the tweet about makeshift morgues in the hospital and
focus my attention to the thread that starts with "meeting my editor in
the beforetime"

—after Eve Ewing's Twitter thread on March 26th, 2020

in the beforetime there were fewer birds
and it was winter. there was no consistent
snow silence comfortably coating sound.
digressions were alerted. in the nowtime
I can tell it's raining even without glasses
—the parking lot below is darker than
earlier. in the nowtime I'll talk about time
as it corresponds to the weather: *i'll walk
to your house before it rains and throw
the book into your mailbox.* in the nowtime
I'll read an article about grief while it rains
and feel dry comfort in my towel and
try not to miss the beforetime too much.
while it rains, in the nowtime, and in the
futuretime, and in time, I'll succumb again;
for all I know, it might not even be raining.

*Previously published in The Agapanthus Collective Issue #1: Lucid.
Spring 2021.*



Greening

Cameron Finch

She visits my island. Every day. She watches the rubber sun fold around my hand. Like the gulls who slalom the spikes of my crown, she circles me. Studies me, the sole of my right foot, with her roaming body.

She has never been inside me. I do not know her touch.

But I can read her like a boat. The way she stands before me, so familiar. So still and built and practiced. The way she seeks me like an answer.

Little Bird, I see you.

I see who you've been. Who are you becoming?

Every day after school, she'd peel off all her skin. Flesh islands exiled to the bathroom floor. 350 pieces, count them. Maybe today, the flash of green. Something mossy. Something oxidized. Our kind, there is always something rusty, something radical.

Happening far beneath.

Every day after school, she'd dress herself in bedsheets. Adopt a new name she read in a book. Liberty or maybe its rhyme. Stand on an overturned milk crate. Drape a chain link leash across her sandaled toes. Plunge her hand into the air-bridged sky and count the minutes till her fingers fell asleep. Maybe today. Maybe today, she'd practice one minute more. Every day, here she is, one minute less alone.

Now here she is again, definitive as a door. She wants to turn into metal, or me, and all I can do is green all the time. And so I green to her: When were you something no one expected you to be. Which is to say I greened to myself.

I visit her. Every day. I trace the perimeter of her island. I practice her. The first woman I wanted to know everything about.

I have never been inside her. I have never been inside her.

I have read every book on her. I know how many men dreamed of her. How many hands nailed her together. How many crates were stuffed like a mouth with the pieces of her body. How the poet and the sonnet. How the yearning. How the harbor's vacant lot glowed her worldwide welcome.

Reading solves nothing. Reading only wants more.

Every day, I want to lie beneath her, secured by robes on all sides. I breathe her in like yogurt, immaculate and spackle sour. Harbor fish in the air and her wind tastes of dogwood.

Every day, I want to lie beneath her. I pluck glass freckles, one by one, from my tongue because I crave her reflection.

I want to lie beneath her, but. The pedestal. It follows me home every night. On the subway. Through greasy streets. Into bed. I rock this pillow of

concrete to sleep, and dream of her musculature. Of green and gravities. Who will go up, who will go down.

I stand before her and ask on the nature of statues. About the transformation of flesh to copper, and where to find such brutal magic.

But she knows nothing about herself. She cannot name her solemn structures. She does not speak to me. She does not sway her hips.

Instead she greens. A green ungreened to me before. This, too, is a kind of living.

She greens slowly at first, wanting it to last. And it does.

I will look for this green again in every where I go. But it will be impossible.

A fleck of my skin exiles to the ground. Feathers its perch on our island as she greens to me. Which is to say I begin to green myself.

"Greening" was previously published in Tiny Molecules and received a nomination for the Best Small Fictions 2021.



Almost Grown

Olivia Postelli

Penny's mother does the sewing on Sundays, and it's on a Sunday her Uncle Cal arrives. Cal is her mother's youngest brother, and he's spent the last six years in Jackson State Prison for assault and battery.

High 90s all week. Penny has taken to standing in front of the open refrigerator for a few seconds every time she passes through the kitchen. Quickly, so her mother doesn't catch her. Her father spends Sunday morning washing the car before the three of them pile in for church. Church, then breakfast at the little diner wedged between an antique shop and a mechanic. Penny orders pancakes. Her father, a Denver omelet. Her mother doesn't eat, only picks at their leftovers, drinks a milk-heavy cup of coffee, and smokes despite her father's frown. Neither of them say anything about Cal at breakfast. They don't say anything later when her father leaves to pick him up. But her mother does have Penny put

freshly cut flowers in the guest room in preparation.

Later that afternoon, Penny bikes home from Louisa's house, where she's spent most of her summer break alternating between air conditioning and the trampoline. She's stowing her bike away in the garage when her father pulls into the driveway with Cal in the passenger seat.

His hair is longer and he is thinner than Penny remembers from the last time she saw him. His left arm, exposed where the sleeves have been cut off his t-shirt, is covered in tattoos, barely discernible smudges of dark ink. He and her mother don't look alike, but they do share the same coloring, a washed-out sandiness. Penny has always been grateful she got her father's dark hair and eyes because there's a sturdiness there, a dependability. Looking at her mother? At Cal? Well, you could look straight through.

When Cal walks in through the

kitchen door, her mother drops her father's shirt, knocking the button tin onto the floor, and throws herself into Cal's arms. Penny doesn't like hugs, hasn't liked being touched at all since puberty set in, but watching them, she yearns to be swept up like that. The craving a hunger under her skin.

It's unlike her mother to be so overcome.

Penny busies herself by putting the buttons back into their tin, by moving the needle and thread and her father's shirt off the table and onto the window seat, giving them all room to sit down.

"I'm so glad you're home," her mother says, reaching across the table to hold Cal's hand.

He nods, looking at the sink, the refrigerator, the spice rack. He looks at Penny, sitting next to her father, like he's never seen her before. He looks anywhere but at her mother when he says, "Me too."

*

"Your parents are going to let a criminal live in your house?" Louisa asks.

"He made some mistakes is all," Penny says.

That's what her mother told her when she said Uncle Cal would be coming to stay with them for a while. She wouldn't say more about it, only that they should all give him space and time to settle in. That he was on the inside for a long time so it might be hard to adjust.

Penny asked her father why Cal wasn't staying at his mother's.

He looked at her. "Would you want to live with your grandmother?"

Her grandmother pinched when

Penny fidgeted too much at the breakfast table, and had once spanked her with a wooden spoon before her father appeared and angrily snatched it out of her hand. Her grandmother hadn't been allowed to babysit her after that. Her mother pinches, too, when she's mad. Like when Penny wanders off at the grocery store. She isn't quite sure there's as much of a difference as her father thinks, but she shook her head no anyway.

"Well, what did he do?" Louisa asks.

"He beat someone up."

He'd broken his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend's jaw and three of his ribs. He got six years because it wasn't the first time he'd been to prison. The first stint happened before Penny was born – sent up for a string of burglaries that her mother said he hadn't exactly masterminded himself. Still, he wouldn't give anyone else up, even when they offered him a plea deal.

"Did the person deserve it?" Louisa asks.

Penny says she doesn't know, but he must have had his reasons. The mistake was not handling the problem a different way, not going to the police or talking it out like adults are supposed to do. She's done things she regrets, too. Like when she and Louisa were little and they thought Mrs. Pappas down the street was a witch because she wore all black, talked with a strange accent, and lived with a wheezy cat in an old, crumbling house where no one ever came to visit her. They threw a large rock through her first-floor window which seemed, when you're seven, the thing to do to scare someone. But Penny hasn't forgotten the look

on Mrs. Pappas' face when she burst onto the porch after they shattered the glass. Fear, Penny saw from where they were hidden behind someone's car, followed quickly by betrayal that something like that could happen here, on their quiet little street. Penny knows now it was wrong, that Mrs. Pappas was a harmless old lady, but she still doesn't think she deserved to get in trouble for it. But Cal was twenty-six years old. He was supposed to know better.

Every Christmas, when her mother has her assemble cookie tins for the neighbors, Penny makes sure to slip Mrs. Pappas extra Russian tea cakes as a way to say, "I'm sorry."

*

She and Louisa spend the afternoon at the creek smoking cigarettes. After, Penny takes the long way home past Dairy Korner. There's a line out the door, and she's surprised to spot Cal in it. He looks out of place sandwiched between two teenage boys and a mother with two grubby preschoolers hanging off her legs.

He's been out for a week.

She hops off her bike, waving at him. Penny turned fourteen on the Fourth of July. Her father had gotten her a bicycle, a used Schwinn he dolled up. He spray-painted the frame robin's egg blue and silver. "You're almost grown," he said. "Doubt you want us driving you everywhere." She lost herself for a minute, squealing in glee and jumping up and down excitedly. He cleared his throat. "All right now. Let's not make a scene."

Cal squints, like it takes a second to place her. Penny is used to a certain

level of invisibility so this doesn't surprise her. Subtly sniffing the end of her braid to make sure she doesn't smell too much like smoke, she joins him in line.

"Oh, hey," he says. "You want something?"

Dairy Korner does vanilla cones with fruit sauces drizzled all around. Kiwi, mango, grape. They even a fake blue raspberry flavor (what Louisa always gets).

"Small vanilla with pineapple?"

"Sure thing," he says.

"Thanks."

Today was his first day at work, painting houses with her father's cousin Cory. He makes Penny call him Uncle Cory even though he isn't her uncle.

Cal gets a hot fudge sundae with extra cherries, and they slide onto the end of an empty picnic bench.

They eat in silence for a few minutes before he kicks at her under the table.

"Do you remember Horse World?" he asks.

Horse World was a make-believe game Penny invented when she was in kindergarten and, whenever she could, made her cousins play. Essentially, they were all horse versions of themselves living on a sprawling ranch she called Willow Way. Horse-Penny was a dappled gray mare with a white mane. The game wasn't even particularly imaginative, but she'd been hurt when they refused to go by their horse names or didn't want to play with her at all. She knew now the whole thing had been silly, and they hadn't wanted to play with her because she was so bossy, crying like a baby when she didn't get her way.

Sometimes, at family parties, Cal

would play it with her for a little while, beer can in one hand as they galloped and neighed under her grandmother's clothesline.

She can feel her ears heat up thinking about it now, and she shakes her head.

"Come on!" he says. "Queen Misty."

Oh God. She couldn't even come up with a better horse alter ego than Queen Misty.

"It's Duke," he says, pointing at himself. "Your old pal."

His work shirt is covered in paint splatters, and it covers up his tattoos. Penny wants to ask him about them, but she doesn't.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says, attempting Louisa's affected, adult-woman-asking-to-speak-to-a-manager voice.

"Okay, QM," he says, "Your secret's safe with me."

What had he been trying to get away from? Running around with her in the yard instead of watching football, or playing cards inside with the other grown-ups? Was it the same thing she always was? The feeling that no one knows anything about you, but they think they do so they never ask?

"Speaking of secrets," he says. "Let's not tell your mom about ice cream before dinner, okay?"

"Your secret's safe with me," she echoes.

*

That fall Penny starts high school, and Cal takes to shaking her awake while it's still dark, well before school and her parents' alarm, to take walks, to go on coffee runs.

It's dawn when they're out so no

one else is usually around, although she feels a sense of kinship when they do see someone – people who can't sleep or whose jobs have dragged them out of bed or who are wanderers by nature like Penny and Cal. The groundskeeper she spots when they cut across the elementary school soccer field, grass frosted over, flattened beneath their boot soles. The woman she sees jogging past the dark shops and restaurants as they cruise down an empty Pearl Street. The cashier at the gas station where Cal gets 89 cent coffee he drinks out of an unmarked Styrofoam cup. Through their entire ritual, which takes about an hour, he smokes the Winstons he swipes from her mother.

The first time, they don't even go far enough to cut through the soccer field. Instead, they end up sitting on the fence that runs along the creek on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where the houses stop and farmland begins. She used to play in that creek when she was younger, collecting stones with Louisa, before they noticed it was mostly filled with plastic takeout forks and empty pop cans.

Penny has given Cal room to settle in, like her mother asked her to do, but it's been hard ever since the day with the ice cream. She's never had a friend at home before, not someone who sees her, knobby, rashy elbows and all. Let alone someone with knobby, rashy elbows of his own.

She sits on the fence while he smokes. She's been here countless times with Louisa, smoking the same stolen cigarettes as Cal. Maybe that emboldens her to ask: "What was it like? In jail, I mean."

He shoves one hand deep into his

pocket.

"Lots of time to read," he says. "I finished that book your mom loves."

Penny has never seen her mother read.

"What book?"

"*Gone with the Wind*." He purposefully exhales away from her; Penny finds the misplaced concern for her lungs sweet. "I always thought she'd name her daughter Melanie."

Penny has seen the movie so she knows Melanie isn't even the main character. She's the quiet friend who dies at the end. *Be kind to Captain Butler. He loves you so*, her mother always mouths along whenever it's on TV.

It occurs to Penny that Cal must know all sorts of secrets about her mother.

"Then why am I Penelope?"

"Your dad picked it," he says. "They basically sound the same."

No one else at school is named Penelope, and she feels a flash of gratitude at her father for not choosing a name like Melanie or Emily where you have to go by your last initial so people know which Alexa someone's talking about. As in: Alexa C., not Alexa P., had been the one to give Peter Jaroslav a handjob on the bus. As in: Alexa P. found out and told every girl in third period gym.

"Would you like to do this again?" Cal asks. "Take a walk with me?"

"Sure," she says. A zip of electricity runs up her spine. She tries her best not to look too excited so he doesn't take the invitation back. Is Cal enough like her mother to know that a sudden change of mind, a revoking of permission, is the easiest way to break her heart?

"Okay. Good," he says, and he sticks

out his hand for her to shake.

She thinks of the bike her father gifted her for her birthday, how soon she won't be able to ride it anywhere because of the snow. She wonders what other books her mother used to read.

"Maybe you can teach me to drive," Penny says. If it were anyone else, she'd expect them to say no, but Cal seems amenable to spending time with her.

He stamps out his cigarette with a heavy boot, laughing.

"All right. You're a good kid," he says, clapping her on the shoulder like they're golf buddies. "Happy to teach ya."

She carries *You're a good kid* and *Happy to teach ya* around in her back pocket, like a carefully creased love letter, for days.

*

Their first lesson isn't driving at all.

"Step one is learning to pump gas," he says.

He drives them downtown to the Shell, where he makes her figure out the gas cap and the nozzle, before setting the latch on the handle to go inside for his coffee. The parking lot is deserted, the early morning sky slowly lightening to a blue glow. Penny buckles back into her seat then startles, when a man appears, seemingly out of nowhere, to knock on her window. She knows better than to open the door, remembering the time a group of men outside the bowling alley had shouted at her and Louisa: *Hey! Aren't you two pretty little things?* and *Aww, why don't you give us a smile?* and *A smile? I can think of better things she could do with that mouth*. She remembers that girl on the news who was kidnapped from

her bedroom last summer, snatched in the middle of the night. Everyone was so surprised when she turned up alive.

She cracks the window. "Hello?" she says.

The man is older than either Cal or her father. He's wearing the same brown Carhartt jacket her father has. The one every father has.

He looks back at the gas station over his shoulder, then leans closer to her.

"Do your parents know where you are right now?"

Her parents were up the morning they got back from their walk to the creek, moving slowly about the kitchen. Her mother pulled them both in for an uncharacteristic hug which they pretended to only tolerate, but Penny thinks they needed.

"What are you two up to?" she asked.

"Penny dragged me on a walk," Cal said with a wink.

Her mother looked at her. "Well, I suppose it's good to get out and about," she said.

Penny felt brave. "We're going to do it again."

Her father tossed Cal the newspaper, and her mother poured Penny cereal. The four of them sat at the table in silence, but she could sense her mother's satisfaction. Clearly pleased at Penny's sudden push toward extroversion. Cal eventually snuck upstairs to get ready for work, her mother loaded the dishwasher, and her father drove her to school where Penny let Louisa do her eyeliner in the bathroom before first period.

She nods her head yes, giving the man a quick smile.

"Okay," he says easily, but his gaze darts back over his shoulder again. "You can tell me if you need any help."

It dawns on Penny that this man isn't like the men outside the bowling alley or the one who took that girl. He thinks Cal is like them, that Penny is in danger, and he wants to help her.

"Oh," she says, relieved. "No, that's my Uncle Cal. He lives with us."

He sighs.

"Okay," he says again. "That's good." He shrugs, sheepish this time. "I have a daughter, and sometimes— I wanted to check."

He taps the hood a couple of times before he walks off. His car, Penny can see it now, parked down the street.

Cal is still talking to the cashier, and he looks relaxed, leaning against the counter. The Shell sits on a corner, all windows, and its fluorescent lights illuminate the entire block.

She doesn't need anyone to save her. There's no bad man to save her from.

*

The morning Uncle Cal finally lets her drive, it snows for the first time that winter.

The only things she's driven before are the riding lawn mower and bumper cars. Once, on Thanksgiving, her cousins had been about to let her drive a four-wheeler around her grandmother's back forty before her mother had intervened, dragging Penny away with an iron grip around her upper arm, pressing in painfully with her fingertips. When they'd gotten back to the house, her mother had burst into tears, collapsing onto the porch steps.

"You can't do things like that!" she said. "It's not safe."

Penny resisted the urge to say that she was only following along, that everyone else was having fun so why couldn't she? She knew that wouldn't fly with her mother.

"What would I do?" her mother asked her. "What would I do if something happened to you?"

She thinks about that moment now as they're inching down the block, early morning hush hovering and heavy. They've only been in the car a few minutes, not enough time for the heater to kick in, and Cal has the window open while he smokes so she can still see her breath as she exhales nervously. Breath, smoke, sky. All gray. The snow is a surprise to Penny which delights her, out of the house early enough to dodge her mother's morning weather report. Who knows what newness the rest of the day holds?

Now, she's gliding down their street, three inches of new snow crunching under the tires, going all of about five miles per hour which she knows is embarrassing.

"Know how to make it to the diner?" he asks. That would take them out of the relative safety of the neighborhood, onto the big road, a local highway that connects their town to all the neighboring ones south, until it hits the Indiana border. And Indiana might as well be Horse World for how far away it feels.

She shakes her head. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea," she says. She thinks about the years Cal spent in prison, the way her mother cleaned anxiously in the days before his return home, stripping and remaking the bed in the guestroom over and over again. It makes her nervous, breaking rules, even as it excites her.

"You're doing great, QM," Cal says.

He flicks his cigarette out the window. She's going to have to make a decision soon, to turn back or keep going.

"Uncle Cal?" she says.

"Turn left. I'll talk you through it." He reaches over to turn on the blinker. Tick tick tick. She idles, unsure.

"Well?" he says, his voice tinged with disappointment. "What are you waiting for?"

Penny presses down too hard on the gas, and the car jerks forward. She starts to angle into the ditch that lines the road and overcorrects, braking hard, which sends them spinning. Above them, black power lines. Next to them, trees with bare branches, vulnerable against the wind. The world is white and then it is whiter. She knows she should feel scared, but she doesn't. She feels exhilarated. A slip. A careen. It only lasts for a few seconds before Cal reaches over and yanks at the steering wheel.

"Jesus," he says as they skid to a stop.

Penny's hands are shaking. She closes her eyes and imagines what it would feel like to fling her whole body into a snowbank.

"Roads are bad," Cal says, opening his door. "We gotta switch."

How long would it take before the numbness set in?

*

It's New Year's Eve, and Penny is shocked her parents let her go with Cal to his girlfriend Dani's party in the first place. Her father even gave her a pair of New Year's sunglasses – 2004 – the zeros for lenses. She's supposed to be babysitting Dani's son Aiden, making

some pocket money, but she put him to bed hours ago. Penny's mother doesn't drink at all, and her father never drinks more than one beer a time, but she still recognizes that most of the people around her are drunk. They're talking too loudly, laughing like they're trying to prove they're having a good time. Of course, they are having a good time. It's almost midnight.

Dani is the waitress at Clem's, the bar the paint crew frequents. She has neon blue hair, a barbell through her left eyebrow, and every shade of lipstick you can imagine. Penny and Louisa are obsessed with her, but Penny's mother hates Dani and has called her white trash to Cal's face. Penny knows this because Cal told her so.

He tells her lots of things on their drives. Like how much he loves outer space, night driving, deli pickles, lawn sprinklers, and Dani. He hates board games, the nightly news, turtlenecks, and grape jam. Penny loves outer space and hates grape jam now, too. She keeps a list of all these things in her head. She would write it down, but she knows it wouldn't mean as much, out in the world on paper, as it does running through her brain. That's the place where it matters, where it's allowed to grow.

Slowly, she's getting better at being behind the wheel.

Dani has snuck Penny two glasses of champagne, and she wonders if she's drunk, but she tosses the possibility aside. She feels the same as she always does. Mostly, like she's wandered on stage at a play, lost while looking for the bathroom, and she's seen the first act so she knows enough of the words to pretend she's supposed to be there, a neighbor dropping in to say

hello. And it's clear to the other actors she doesn't belong, but no one in the audience notices anything is wrong. In this case, she thinks the other actors are Uncle Cal and Dani. The audience is everyone else at this party.

Countdown. Ball drop. Auld Lang Syne.

Penny watches Cal and Dani kiss, swaying back and forth in each other's arms, next to Dani's Christmas village which is displayed precariously on a card table. All those little people – carolers, ice skaters, shopkeepers, and churchgoers – going about their merry lives. Their world won't ever be bigger than it is now, a town that only exists for the same twenty days each year, stretching from Mama's Bake Shop to Pep's Pizza.

Penny takes another sip of champagne. She reaches and tips over one of the carolers. A tiny blonde girl in a red knit cap, smile gone sideways. Of course, the other carolers don't react. They're ceramic figurines. But it makes Penny feel bad, that no one in the village lends a hand. Carefully, she picks the girl up and slips her into her pocket. No one says a thing.

*

Penny arrives early to babysit Aiden, her regular after school weekday gig, and finds him alone in his playpen in the living room happily chewing on the head of a stuffed caterpillar.

"Hello?" she calls out.

She hears raised voices from upstairs, but she can't make out what anyone is saying.

Glass breaking. A shriek. Dani? A loud thump. Silence.

Penny scoops Aiden up, resting him

against her hip, keeping him close.

Cal comes barreling down the stairs and looks shocked when he spots Penny in the living room.

He looks back over his shoulder before zipping up his jacket, fiddling with his keys.

"Look," he says, then stops.

"Is everything okay?" Penny asks.

"She threw a lamp at me," he says defensively. "What was I supposed to do?"

He leaves, slamming the door behind him without another word.

When Penny gets upstairs, she finds Dani in her room, picking up the biggest pieces of glass from the broken lamp and holding them delicately in her open palm, like seashells she's collected on the beach. She's clearly been crying, eyes wet and cheeks puffy. She wipes at her nose when she sees Penny; she looks away.

Penny notices it then, the shock of red high on her cheekbone, a slight purpling around her temple. Dani threw a lamp at Cal, and he hit her.

"I don't think I'm going to work," Dani says.

Penny nods. Dani isn't going to work because Cal hit her.

Dani's mouth tightens when she looks down at the mess.

"Could you get the broom?"

Penny clutches Aiden tighter, rocking him back and forth now. Dani needs a broom because she threw a lamp at Cal. Dani needs a broom and Cal hit her.

"Yeah, just a minute."

When she gets downstairs, she gently puts Aiden back into his playpen. It takes her a second to find the broom hanging up on the back of the pantry door. She needs to take it upstairs to

Dani, but she hesitates at the bottom of the stairs. *What was I supposed to do?* Cal said. She thinks about the man Cal assaulted. A broken jaw. Three broken ribs. Cal must have had his reasons, she'd told Louisa.

Penny thinks of how Dani had taken her and Louisa to the mall two towns over and bought them makeup she didn't make them pay her back for. How she was always sneaking Cal and Penny free French fries at work. How when Aiden cries and Dani sings him *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* until he quiets down enough to fall asleep. Once, Penny caught Cal singing along, too.

She drops the broom; it clatters against the stairs.

"Penny?" Dani shouts.

Penny makes sure to close the door quietly behind her as she leaves.

*

A month later, Penny's mother refuses to put up the bail when Cal gets his DUI, and Penny doesn't speak to her for three weeks.

Her mother has given up even trying to get her to talk, keeping up a running monologue anytime they're together as if she couldn't care less whether Penny got a word in edgewise. It's a tactic her mother has never used on her before, but that Louisa employs regularly when angry, so Penny's used to it. She has taken to leaving the room when her mother's mid-sentence as payback.

After the incident with Dani, Cal continued taking Penny on their early morning excursions, but it was tense, quiet. She knew it was wrong to blame Dani for his sudden silence, but she

did. When he's sent back to jail, Penny swaps early morning drives for afternoon walks, but she thinks they're making her feel worse. She puts *Rocky Mountain High* on the living room stereo so she can hear him say, *Ugh, John Denver, QM? I blame your dad for your terrible taste!* in her head. She puts Van Halen on after, like her imaginary Cal would. If she lies on the soccer field long enough to see the sunset, all she can see is Dani's black eye.

She's distraught enough to sneak into the garage one night after dinner to beg her father for the bail money. He slips away ostensibly to work on the car, but actually to drink beer and listen to sports on the radio. Tonight, it's high school hockey. They don't usually spend time together, Penny and her father, the two of them too quiet to make good company, but he must sense her grief at Cal's disappearance from their lives because he makes space for her on his work bench.

"This isn't Cal's first rodeo," he says, shrugging. "He chose to break his parole."

Penny would argue that she doesn't think Cal had much of a choice, really. That Dani gave him and his friends free drinks all the time. And Dani didn't have a car so Cal had to drive her to pick up Aiden from his grandparents' house after her shift. And wasn't it Cory's fault for letting him leave by himself in the first place? And they'd only pulled him over for failure to signal which wasn't even a big deal. Not big enough to take him away even though his blood alcohol was over the legal limit.

Penny had practiced saying, "Fuck

the legal limit" very deliberately in the bathroom mirror before saying it out loud at school to Louisa.

She doesn't say this to her father.

"Third period," he says, gesturing toward where the radio sits on top of some piled up two-by-fours.

Penny sits down gingerly, a little shocked she's been let into his previously sacrosanct post-dinner garage world. It's not that they ignore each other so much as they're united in their shyness. That's what she likes to think anyway, that they don't have to say anything because they're the same. Not that they don't have anything to say because they're too different. Besides Cal, her father is one of the only people who gets her. She is lucky to have Louisa who doesn't get her, but loves her anyway.

"Are they winning?"

"Nope."

They listen for a little while, the announcers' voices occasionally interrupted by static. Her father commenting on the plays. She hears names she recognizes, boys from gym, from homeroom. She doesn't go to any games even though Louisa does. She's never been one for school spirit.

"Maybe take it easy on your mom, okay?" he says, during the commercial break, advertising a local car dealership owned by a player's dad.

"Why?"

Her father shrugs, finishes his beer.

"It's a tough time for her, too."

Because of Cal, does he mean? The thwack of a puck hitting glass, the clean shrillness of a whistle. The game is back on, and it's too late to ask.

*

Penny and her mother are in the frozen food aisle at Marvin's when they run into Dani. Cal has been gone for two months, and this is the first time Penny's seen her since the incident with the lamp. She's alone – no Aiden. She doesn't even have a cart, just a plastic basket with three Stouffer's lasagnas inside.

Penny is surprised that her mother says hello first, asking after Aiden and the restaurant. Cal used to insist, often in front of Dani, that his sister disapproved of their relationship. *I think it's the single mom thing*, Penny remembers him telling her, the three of them sitting around a late fall bonfire. *She's being protective*, he said. Dani huffed. *But I want her to like me.*

Now, Penny wonders if it was Dani her mother was looking out for.

They end up in the check-out line behind her, and, when Dani reaches into her purse for her wallet, Penny's mother lightly squeezes her elbow.

"Let me get it," she says. She lowers her voice. "It's the least we can do."

Penny is shocked at her generosity – she clips coupons religiously and never spends a cent more than she has to on anything – but not as shocked as Dani.

"Oh," she says softly, looking down into her basket. Three Stouffer's lasagnas. A pack of hair ties. Generic brand goldish crackers. Coffee filters.

"I can't let you do that," Dani finally says, but Penny can tell she's reluctant to turn down the help. It makes Penny feel uncomfortable, and she busies herself with putting groceries on the conveyer belt behind the divider. Sometimes, she lets Louisa pay for things like movie tickets and milkshakes, and Louisa says not to worry

about it: *her* uncle is a dentist.

But Penny's mother already has her credit card out, handing it to the cashier who waits for Dani's nod before running it through.

"Thanks," she says, smiling at Penny over her mother's shoulder. "Seriously, thank you," she says, before leaning over to gently hug first Penny's mother and then Penny herself. She feels the shock of being touched travel through her whole body, suddenly pressed into Dani's warmth. She presses back, as hard as she can, before letting go.

In the car, on the silent drive home, her mother, unprompted, says: "I miss him, too."

But Penny doesn't want to talk about Cal. Doesn't want to think about what he's doing, miles away. Instead, she thinks about a car hitting a patch of ice. A cigarette flicked away just so. *The girl with kaleidoscope eyes* sung off-key.

After they put the groceries away, when her mother reaches out to push Penny's hair off her forehead, she lets her.

*

Cal was out of prison for less than a year before he had to go back. He's been gone for months now, but if he were still here to listen and he wanted to listen, Penny would tell him that she and Louisa made a new friend at high school, a transfer student named Tori who just moved from Minnesota and was really saving her from failing biology. She would tell him that she's babysat Aiden twice. She would tell him that she's taken driver's ed for real now, and she's better at it than anyone

else because of their practice.

She wouldn't tell him that Tori had to leave her old school because she'd had sex with two different boys at a party, and they told everyone about it. Someone told a teacher, who called Tori's parents, who pulled her out of school. Tori said she sort of wanted to do it at the time, with one of the boys at least, and once that had happened, it seemed silly to have reservations about doing it again. She told Penny she really regrets it now.

She wouldn't tell him that both times she's shown up to babysit, Dani has been drunk. She looked bloated, dulled when she answered the door, leaving her with money for pizza before tugging the door closed behind her. Coming home long after Penny had fallen asleep under a scratchy, smoke scented afghan on the couch. They never said Cal's name.

She wouldn't tell him that at driver's ed, the shop teacher who moon-

lighted as a driving instructor would use merging onto the highway as an excuse to put one hand on her headrest with the other on her thigh so he could turn around and check for traffic, squeezing her knee as an all clear. She tried to twist away once, like her leg had gotten pins and needles and needed to move, but he hadn't stopped doing it. In fact, it made him smile.

Well, maybe she would tell Cal about the shop teacher. And the boys who'd hurt Tori. Maybe they deserved a broken jaw, maybe three cracked ribs.

Do your parents know where you are right now? the man at the gas station had asked her because he worried Cal was dangerous. *What would I do if something happened to you?* her mother said.

Penny knows she won't say anything to anyone. Why would she?

Things are happening to her all the time.



Toast

Allison Epstein

I steeple my fingers and point the triangle across the booth at Geoff, who still hasn't touched his salmon benedict: a snub I'm trying with every bit of goodwill I've got not to take personally. "I mean, it's like this," I say. "Either a town's a breakfast town, or it's not."

Geoff looks down to make sure his phone's recording. This is his fourth check in the ten minutes we've been talking. Nervous tic, probably, though he's got no reason to be intimidated by me. I stand five-five in shoes, my hair started going gray at twenty, and I own a pancake house. Not exactly the girl your mom warns you about. Changing tack, I swap the hardball gestures for an easy slouch, self-effacingly Midwestern. *Don't worry, friend, eat up before it gets cold, and let's chat.* Geoff doesn't even make eye contact, making the whole performance for nothing. Whatever the journalism

equivalent of bedside manner is, he doesn't have it.

"I don't think anyone would call Lansing a breakfast town," he says. There's a line between condescension and admiration, and Geoff is tightropeing it. Geoffrey-as-in-Chaucer Pierce, he'd introduced himself. Culture reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, in town for a feature. Accent flat as a flyover state, name just quirky enough for NPR. I don't like him, but he'll do a good job on the profile. Geoffrey-as-in-Chaucer is going places, and if those places help me and Isaac, more power to him. "You and Mr. Harker-Brown opened Baker's Dozen, what, three years ago?" Geoff says. "Seems like an odd place for something like this, is all. Most businesses are leaving town, not opening up."

I nod. "Listen, I hear you, but it's home. And it's not always a bad

thing, a little more elbow room. Your New Yorks, your San Antonios, it's high-end breakfast as far as the eye can see. But it's a buyer's market, you know? Overcook one waffle by thirty seconds, and it's curtains. Now, here..."

I twist round in my seat, where Bob and Judi Matsoukis occupy their usual booth. Without looking, I know Bob ordered our three-up special—three pancakes, three eggs, three sausages. Judi, more adventurous, has gone for the special: Challahween French Toast, spread thick with cinnamon pumpkin butter. The staff roll their eyes when I announce the seasonal specials, but when you commit to the pun, you commit.

"How long did it take you to get here, Bob?" I ask. "Judi?"

It works like a dream. The Matsoukises love nothing more than complaining about logistics.

"Oh, twenty, twenty-five minutes," Bob says. "You're not exactly around the corner, Sarah. We've got to go past two Chevy dealers, Sunset Ford—"

"Two cornfields, a soybean field—" Judi continues.

"And Pirate Pete's Adventure Golf. I wouldn't make that drive for just anyone, sir," Bob says, brandishing a full fork at Geoff, "but Isaac Harker-Brown knows how to handle an egg."

Geoff flips over his paper placemat and scribbles down notes. I should get Bob and Judi on payroll. Other people have to pay for that kind of pull quote.

There's not much left after that. I field the usual questions: origin story, regional inspiration, pros and cons of locally sourced ingredients. Geoff gets

around to half his benedict, then—to my satisfaction—asks for a to-go box, even though shit knows a bennie doesn't travel well. We exchange business cards, and then he's out into the parking lot, climbing into his van.

Alone, I slump down in the booth. My slouch is less staged now, more from an interview hangover. I know how important press is for business. We wouldn't have our line out the door without it. And I enjoy it, even. Folks always say "compliments to the chef"; more rarely do I get "compliments to the front of the house." Being the one on tap to promote the place is my chance at some of the glory, even if I always feel like someone's hollowed me out with a spoon afterward.

A slow round of applause comes from over my left shoulder.

"You forgot to thank the Academy," Isaac says.

He's standing in the open kitchen door, a streak of flour running across his forehead and into his buzzed black hair. It makes me think of Cruella de Vil. The image flashes fast: Isaac skinning Dalmatian puppies near the fryer, fashioning some kind of fur coat.

"Bob and Judi were a dream," I say. "Story should run in the *Sunday Free Press*."

"Which no one in town gets delivered."

Asshole. "There's this thing called the internet. Look into it."

"Funny." Isaac brings his hands together one last time. "Let's talk for a second."

His expression does nothing to help the spoon-hollow feeling in my gut. After a minute, I follow him into the kitchen. Judi Matsoukis shoots me a sympathetic look as I pass, which

makes me feel worse.

The front of the house is decorated with 1950s charm, a pancake spot straight out of *Grease*. The kitchen, on the other hand, is standard-issue industrial. Chrome and linoleum and a general feeling of being behind schedule. Isaac leans against the sink, which is piled eight inches high with dirty dishes. He doesn't say anything. On the grill, a scrap of bacon fat has caught and begins to curl. It burns like a cigar, both sweet and rotten.

"What's up?" I say.

He's been waiting for me to ask.

"Press."

That's not an answer. I don't even know if it's a noun or a verb. I sit on the stepstool near the pantry, lean back, and wait. My tee-shirt rides up, pressing the stool's cold metal bar between two of my vertebrae.

"I want to handle press," Isaac says. "All of it."

I feel the heat on my chest, the flush crawling from ribcage to collarbone. It happens when I'm anxious, or when I'm scared, or when I'm angry. I don't know which this is. Isaac has never shown an inch of interest in press before. No matter how many times I ask him to help. Feels like selling out, he says, even though we own a business, and selling is the whole idea.

"Why, exactly?" I say.

"We said this was a partnership, Sarah," Isaac says. "But I'm doing the work, and you're getting the glory. My food, my press, or this is my two weeks' notice."

Now I know what the heat is from.

Isaac crosses his arms. There's a fresh burn along one of them. Not a bad one. The kind where you lean against a hot stove for a second without think-

ing. Pink and raw like fresh-caught salmon. I hope the burn is new. I hope he did it this morning. I hope it hurts.

He's doing the work, he says. Well, let him.

"No," I say.

"Sarah." Isaac didn't expect me to hold him to it, but he should've known better. Don't stand in front of the train if you aren't willing to get hit.

"Don't wait two weeks," I say. "Finish the day. Lindsay can pick up grill duty."

Isaac laughs, though all the color's gone from his face. "Lindsay can't cook dry toast."

"She'll learn," I say, and walk out.

Deb, the head server, tries to flag me down with a question, but I walk right past her. Out the side door, to the concrete spit near the dumpster where the servers go to smoke. The sky is bright overhead, the perfect early October blend of blue and white. High enough and bright enough to bleach out the "fuck" I yell with everything in my lungs. The sound scatters half a dozen seagulls who've been gorging themselves nearby on scavenged huevos rancheros. Lindsay, the dishwasher, doesn't blink from behind her cigarette. Maybe I'm not the first boss she's watched yell into the void.

I pull my hands down my cheeks and turn to her. "Want to move up to line cook?"

"Come with a raise?" she asks.

"Course."

She nods. "Nice."

One problem down. I close my eyes, spit on the concrete, and head back in.

#

After Isaac leaves that night, I spend hours cleaning things that don't need cleaning. Isaac isn't a cleaner. I've heard him claim that sausage grease in the bottom of the skillet enhances the flavor, like garlic seeping into a cast-iron pan. He doesn't know I always leave the skillet to soak as I close up.

I'm wiping down the corner booth when Deb snatches the rag out of my hand. "Go home," she says. "You've been here thirteen hours. I'll close."

I straighten up. My back whines about the change in posture. "Lock up when you're done?"

"No, Sarah. I'll leave the door open and let coyotes tear the place apart."

I roll my eyes and pull on my coat. "I'm not paying you to be sarcastic."

"Get outta here."

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I'll tell the team about Isaac. Tomorrow we'll adjust, we'll adapt, we'll make plans. I toss Deb the keys, watching their neat arc, and head to my car.

#

In the dark, my apartment feels like the photo negative of a home. I kick off my shoes and weave between the crouching shadows of furniture to the bedroom. It's only 11, but the only sound is the hum of the washer-dryers a floor below me, the gentle rush of someone else's toilet. After the bright chaos of Baker's Dozen, it's like I've stepped into the Arctic, surrounded by silent, endless night.

I'm starving, but I bypass the kitchen. I've lived here for three years and I still haven't fixed the fridge. It drips from the top, a Freon-laced drizzle that I

catch in an empty butter container and dump in the shower every few days. I don't live here, I sleep here. And the fridge at the restaurant works.

I take off my jeans and slide into bed. For company, I bring the grilled chicken sandwich I took from the restaurant, the extra one Isaac probably wanted for himself. Blankets up to my hips, I close my eyes and consider the texture, the flavor, the balance. I want there to be something wrong with it. Something only I can notice, here, alone. I want my stomach to turn. I want vomit.

It's delicious, and I'm pissed.

#

Isaac isn't flashy. His exit from the business is stately and ordered, like disembarking from an airplane. Wednesday morning, we meet in a tiny strip-mall office next to a tattoo parlor to hash out the details with a lawyer. Isaac forfeits his right to partial ownership of Baker's Dozen, although both our names will be on the business license until I renew. He's being so aggressively reasonable that I can't argue against anything he's asking for, which isn't much. A month's severance. Stay on the health insurance plan until open enrollment, if he keeps paying the monthly premium. I say yes. Of course I say yes. I'm not a monster.

It would have been one of the easiest splits in history, except for what he did next.

#

Two months later, I'm in the

kitchen, trying to whip lumps out of waffle batter. Operative word being the obvious one. I don't see what I'm doing wrong. Isaac never even used a whisk, but somehow he always left the batter smooth as glass. Mine holds its lumps like a grudge. Still, I'm better than Lindsay, who's back on dish duty now, after a battalion of customers started complaining.

Deb steps into the kitchen. "You give the truck a permit?"

My whisk sinks into the batter. "I give the what a what?"

"A permit. For the truck."

She moves enough for me to poke through the door, into the front of the house, with its broad picture window.

"Oh," I say. "That truck."

It's parked on the opposite side of the lot, its jaunty yellow body like an anthropomorphized pat of butter. The truck has popped out a white-and-blue-striped awning, which shadows the open rectangular window along the side. A big, cartoonish piece of white bread is painted beside the window, underlined by sloppy hand-lettering that reads *TOAST OF THE TOWN*. Through the opening, I see the glint of Isaac's glasses.

The line outside the truck is seven people deep.

It's not even a good pun.

I slam the kitchen door and return to the waffle batter. The lumps don't go away. If anything, they're getting larger.

#

Within a week, the line from the truck is averaging a dozen people.

On the whole, I remind myself every morning, I'm the one who came out of all this on top. I've got the restaurant, the press, the real estate. Plus, I've heard of nightmare splits between business partners. Forbes has a story about this businessman in Seattle who stole his co-founder's cat and left it in his trunk for a day and two nights. Cat was OK in the end, though when the sucker finally opened the trunk, he got a whole face full of starving claws for his trouble. In the scheme of things, passive-aggressively making French toast is tame. Polite, even.

Which is exactly what's driving me nuts.

I can't stop thinking about it. How quickly he pulled it all together, the permits, the ordinances. Isaac can't do his own taxes, and now he's picked up forms from the city council? Now he's handling parking and zoning rights and God knows what else? And that's not even asking where the truck itself came from. You can't get a kitchen-grade truck from the Ford dealership, or either of the Chevys. (I know. I called.) It's so unlike him, the only explanation I have is that he's doing it to drive me crazy.

It's working.

The truck is always there. As I wipe tables. As I take orders. As I spill coffee, I keep spilling coffee, I've never spilled this much coffee in my life. Pretty soon my towel is a permanent, soggy brown, and there's always something sticky on the inside of my palms.

#

Nine-thirty on Sunday morning.

I sit down in the corner booth, pull a bowl of creamer toward me, and dump its contents on the tabletop. Methodically, I stack them into a pyramid. Three rows of seven creamers, touching just at the ridge. Then three rows of six, carefully balanced, and up and up. Even though I'm eyeballing the distance as best I can, the base of the pyramid still seems too wide for the top. Foundation-heavy. Dumpy. I finish it out anyway, then move to arranging the sugar packets. Alternating colors—white blue yellow pink white blue yellow pink—a pastel beach umbrella.

Nine-thirty on Sunday, and Baker's Dozen is deserted.

I've set up an interview with the FOX 47 news crew for this morning. They were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago. I guess, in a way, they are.

The news van is parked next to Toast of the Town.

Liza Espinoza, Lansing's hometown celebrity anchor, is perfectly positioned next to the food truck's logo. The cartoon crust starts right where the shoulder of her navy blazer ends. She's honed her instinct over the years until she can frame shots with her eyes closed. Back in middle school, I'd watch the news with my parents, but really I was watching Liza, the way her perfect lips would caress the words "construction on I-465" or "crisis along the Somali coast." She hasn't changed since then. Neither, watching her through a rectangle of glass, have I.

Isaac stands next to her, sleeves rolled to his elbows. He's growing his beard out again, or he's been too busy stabbing me in the back to shave. The black spikes against his chin

look like iron filings on a magnet. He says something, and Liza laughs, the news-anchor laugh that shows too many teeth. I have a hard time believing Isaac said anything that funny.

Eventually FOX 47 packs up their lights and cameras and microphones. Liza shakes Isaac's hand—not intimately—and she's gone.

The line is still getting longer.

There's no way I just spent fifteen minutes watching Isaac poach my interview with Liza Espinoza. Moreover, there's no way I'll watch his interview tonight.

I balance a butter knife on top of the creamer pyramid. It wobbles precariously in the fluorescent light. A compass holding its north, just barely.

#

The news starts at ten on the dot, by which point I'm in bed with the remote and some self-loathing. The stories at the top of the hour are what they always are. Inflation somewhere, primary elections somewhere else, corroboration and corruption and collusion. And then, finally, we hit the human-interest stories.

Liza Espinoza's hair looks incredible. It's better on TV than in person. This is why they say *don't meet your heroes*. She gives Isaac a brilliant smile.

"Isaac Harker-Brown," she says.

"Toast of the Town has really made a splash in Lansing over the past few weeks. Tell us your secret."

Isaac looks jaundiced on TV. His smile isn't as convincing as hers. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret."

Liza laughs like this is funny. "Magician's code," she says. "But why a food truck?"

Isaac shrugs, as if it's not painfully obvious, as if there's more than one reason to buy a food truck and park it in front of the restaurant you used to own with your best friend, who you walked away from because she had the nerve to say no to you one time, because she wanted one thing to herself, and you couldn't stand her having anything that wasn't mostly yours.

"I love constraints," he says. "When you're restricted by space and equipment, it's fun to see what you can come up with. It's like poetry."

"Breakfast poetry."

I reach for the remote, fumble a second, hit mute. In my darkened bedroom, the TV's incandescent flash washes out the blanket and the carpet. Isaac and Liza Espinoza speak without sound, mouths framing forced laughter. The edge to Isaac's smile turns sharper.

Eventually, the story switches. They're talking about a gas explo-

sion off Jolly Road, the kind of story that really should have come before some guy and his food truck. I can't watch it. I don't want to.

All my stuff is where I dropped it at the side of the bed. My phone, my wallet, my bra, my keys, my jeans, everything else I took off and cast aside as soon as I got home. Without getting out of bed, I lean over and pick up the keys. They seem heavier than usual. Sharp enough to slash four bald tires. Listen to the screech of air in a parking lot, under streetlights that don't make a difference when there's no one around to see. Heavy enough to jam into the ignition and drive farther than I've ever gone before. Or maybe the only thing keys are good for is doing their job, doing it long enough for a man in a truck to realize that sooner or later, cruel dumb luck always runs out.

I toss the keys up and watch them flash in the silent light of a burning office building. They seem to take too long to fall.

Three Poems

Matthew Rohrer

Like A Prayer

Pictures of dead Russian soldiers
covered in snow, being slowly
obliterated by it.
Tomasz safe across the border,
Karl Martin safe.
I concentrate my brows
and send a beam
of love their way.
I know they will pick it up,
the Russians don't have
the technology to repel it
since it is almost meaningless
like a prayer.

Jardin du Luxembourg

The manicured park shuts its gates
at night and falls asleep.
All the useless footpaths darken.
The quiet at the very center
must be singular, like a dollop of cream,
we'll never know.
We have a long way to go
through evening skies
as pink as a slapped cheek.

Football Is Not The Same As Cheese

I speak enough French
to know that one guy
loudly argued with another
guy that "football is not
the same as cheese!"
True story.
Then the rest of it receded
into the constant babbling background.
The voice of the Metro
was teaching me French.

The locals seemed ill-clad
for the weather
but how could that be?
It must have been me.

More like a painting
than anything else
they sat on the hill
in long evening light.



from Casus Belli

Kathryn Orwig

An excerpt from a TV pilot: In the midst of WWI, when the head of the Vincenzo Mafia is murdered by an inside man, his squeamish younger brother must uncover the murderer among them - the only catch is, he's gotta suss out the killer on the battlefield as the mafiosos have been drafted. (It's BOARDWALK EMPIRE and PEAKY BLINDERS...but on the battlefields of WWI.)

EXT. WWI TRENCHES - NIGHT

A heavy bombardment of BULLETS
rain like iron hail. GIOVANNI ADAL-
BERTO (28, Italian) shady past, heart
of gold, peers out over the top of the
mounded dirt in a trench coat.

ARUN (O.S.)
Get down!

Giovanni turns to his fellow soldier.
ARUN PUNHANI (19, Southeast Asian)
clutches his helmet to his head as he
squats as close to the ground as he
can physically get.

GIOVANNI
Not to be a smart-ass, but it don't
matter if you're down or not.

A BOMB implodes a line twenty yards
from them, throwing up dirt and
debris as a whole crouching unit is
incinerated.

Giovanni leans against the dirt wall.
Striking up a smoke --

GIOVANNI (CONT'D)
I once shot a man in your position.
Back in New York. Only he was mid-
shit. I don't shit in public areas. 'Cause
you can get shot, obviously.

ARUN
What the hell kind of business
were you in, Giovanni?

GIOVANNI (smiles)
The Family business.

He offers a cigarette to Arun, who sucks it down.

GIOVANNI (CONT'D)

The way I see it, we got two choices.
(beat)

Here's to not dying shitting.

Giovanni grabs up his Mannlicher- Carcano M1891 RIFLE and rises. BLACK BOOTS disappearing over the edge --

EXT. STEPHANO'S HOUSE - PATIO - MORNING

Black boots crowd terracotta tiles before gigantic floor-to-ceiling windows of a luxurious mansion fit for a king.

INT. STEPHANO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

More black boots stride over imported ceramic floors placed in repeating mosaics, gold plated door knobs shine like mirrors, artwork hangs in black walnut frames.

Flashes of cameras go off on a dead body laying face down shot multiple times in the back. A gruesome hit.

Police scour the scene.

EXT. STEPHANO'S HOUSE - PATIO - MORNING

JOURNALISTS careen their necks into the windows for a taste of the sensational murder of --

JOURNALIST 1

Crown Kingpin Stephano Vincenzo of the New York Vincenzo Mafia family was found murdered in his home --

JOURNALIST 2

Slain steps from a shotgun sometime between Saturday night and Sunday morning 1917 --

JOURNALIST 3

Police are scouring the area for any witnesses. But guesses as to who may be behind this daring crime are numerous: Gophers, Five Points, there's even talk of the revitalization of Monk Eastman's heinous gang over escalating tensions --

INT. STEPHANO'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MORNING

A POLICEMAN (38) fiddles with multiple shell casings.

POLICEMAN

Whoever did this better have a good hiding place 'cuz the Vincenzo's are gonna be out for blood.

Dried blood stains Stephano's imported Turkish carpet.

INT. RAO'S DELI - VINCENZIO MAFIA HQ - NIGHT

Blood spatters on red cushioned seats, a body slams against a black marble bar scattering chairs. There's even sprinkles of red dotting framed photographs of the Old Country.

Several Vincenzo members dressed in fashionable coats, three-piece suits, and gold pocket watch chains that dangle from vests sort through a stockpile of weapons. Gearing up for an all out war. An interrogation continues behind them --

GOPHER GANG MEMBER

I was just walking by I-I s-swear --

One muscular mafioso, MARCO CONCETTO (26) belligerent with the best interest of the "Family" at heart, stops wailing on the bloody mess of a face --

MARCO

"Just walking by" and covering your tracks after killing our boss --

Marco pulls out a gun and the rival gangster braces.

ANDREA (O.S.)

The hell's going on here?

ANDREA VINCENZIO (29, Italian) usually serious, often listens before he speaks, strides in upon the bloody scene.

MARCO

Found him outside Steph's. Figured we'd bring him in for questioning.

ANDREA

You think some lowly Gopher kid took out my brother? *Idiota!*
(gestures to the kid)

Look at him. Barely out of his Mama's house, not even a full beard. Come on, kid, get up, let's brush you off.

Andrea goes to brush the guy off, but he's covered in blood, so Andrea gingerly taps his unsoiled shoulder.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

Apologies for my men's rash behavior. Here's some money. Should be enough to buy yourself a clean shirt, eh?

Andrea stuffs a wad of cash into the rival gangster's breast pocket, much to the Gopher Gangster's shock.

Andrea escorts him to the exit. Once the double red doors of Roa's is shut tight --

MARCO

Kid or no kid, we gotta send a message. Steph would've agreed.

DINO DIANGELO (22) is not someone you'd think of as a criminal, clean looks and a bit of naiveté to him, chimes in.

DINO

I'm sure Andrea didn't mean it like that. Right, *Capo Regio?*

Before Andrea can speak, Marco boils over.

MARCO

Your brother would've never let the murder go unanswered --

Andrea looks the men over, holding guns, ready for an all-out wild west shootout on the streets of New York --

ANDREA

I killed him.

Absolute silence. Looks of disgust. Andrea is stone-cold serious. He waits. No one moves a muscle to contradict him.

ANDREA (CONT'D)

There's no one to go after except me.
(leveled look)
Any takers?

How Reflexive Partisanship Has Undermined Math Education

Barry Garelick

Like many people, I have been watching the January 6 Committee hearings. I have been struck by an irony that is particular to my own experience with ideology, politics, and partisanship as it applies to (wait for it) math education. Allow me to explain.

Liz Cheney has demonstrated her belief that the Constitution, and the oath public servants take to defend it, takes precedence over partisanship. What I find ironic about this goes back to my experience with the world of math education in which another Cheney—Lynne Cheney, Liz’s mother—was speaking out against what she saw as the sorry state of math education in the U.S. and was also confronted by partisanship.

I learned of Lynne Cheney’s involvement with math education in 2002 during a six-month assignment in the office of Sen. Ron Wyden (D, Ore.) while working for a federal agency in D.C. I was tasked with investigating what was going on in K-12 math education. I had extensive conversations with various mathematicians who were concerned with how math was currently being taught (referred to as “fuzzy math”) and was advised to follow what Lynne was saying about math

education.

She was greatly respected by the (mostly) Democratic mathematicians with whom I had been speaking. She criticized the recent changes in instructional methods of teaching math which had been implicitly embedded in standards written by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 and revised in 2000. In a nutshell, the new standards discouraged memorization and were focused on having students “understand” math, rather than just “doing” math—as traditionally taught math is often mischaracterized.

The philosophy behind NCTM’s standards is at the root of what is called reform math. Central to reform math is the fixation on understanding and that it must come before learning the standard procedures lest the latter eclipse the conceptual underpinning of what makes the procedure work. The result has been confusion as students learn convoluted and inefficient strategies prior to learning the standard method. (More detail on this and related issues discussed here.)

Lynne Cheney championed traditionally taught math fundamentals along with the ways of reform math. While I was working on the Hill, she moderated a forum on math edu-

cation, which was sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute. Two members of the panel were also opposed to the direction math education was taking. They both held Lynne in great regard, were not politically conservative, and did not care what her party affiliation was.

Critical to me at the time was the National Science Foundation’s role. NSF had awarded millions of dollars in grants for the writing of math textbooks that embraced NCTM’s standards and philosophy of math education.

Since Wyden was on a committee that had oversight of NSF, I thought it important to convey this information to Hill staffers involved in education. But when I started describing the situation to someone who worked for another senator on this same oversight committee, she responded with, “You sound like Lynne Cheney.”

The staffers in Wyden’s office reacted similarly. They had already heard from other Democratic staffers that it would be wise to stay away from the “fuzzy math/Lynne Cheney/Bush agenda” issue.

The result was that Wyden was never briefed on how (and excuse me for the phrase to follow) “the big lie” about math education was being perpetuated and implemented through the auspices of the NSF and taxpayer money. In short, Democrats didn’t want to take up an ideology embraced by Republicans.

Years passed, but the arguments about math education remained static. And in 2009, along came the Common Core State Standards for Math. These were initiated and promoted under the Obama administration and therefore

were viewed through the partisan lens as Democrat-begotten. Eventually most of the nation, with the exception of five states, adopted the standards due to strong federal financial incentives.

The standards threw gasoline on the ideological fire that had been raging since the early 1990s over how to teach math. The math standards essentially codified NCTM’s reform-math ideology by embedding what Tom Loveless (formerly of Brookings Institution) calls the “dog whistles” of math reform—words like “understand,” “explain,” and “visualize.”

Implementation of the Common Core math standards in the form of textbooks and training teachers via professional-development vendors has been a Pavlovian-like response to those dog whistles. Students are asked to explain—often in writing—how they solved a problem, in addition to showing their work. If students do not solve a problem in more than one way, they are deemed to lack “understanding.” They are also made to use cumbersome strategies for basic arithmetic operations. (An example of this is provided in testimony given by a parent before the Arkansas state board of education.)

Today, the partisan nature of what should be a nonpartisan issue continues. Some states—such as Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Ohio to name a few—with Republican governors ordered Common Core’s standards to be replaced. The replacements, however, are essentially the same standards under a different name with only

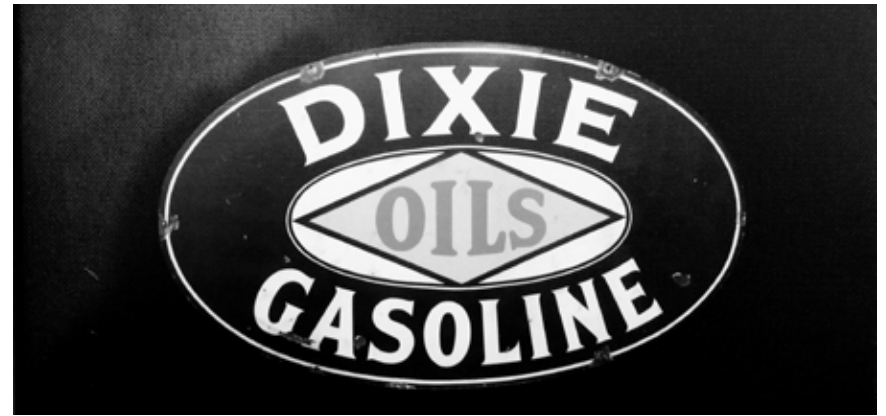
slight changes in wording. The issues that existed under the original standards have remained. The governors who ordered a stop to the Common Core standards point to the so-called revisions and replacements and boast that they rid their states of the Democratic-infused standards.

The bottom line: The politics surrounding the mischaracterization of traditionally taught math continues as it has for the past few decades. In the meantime, textbooks and teachers maintain the ineffective teaching methods of math fundamentals, such as convoluted and inefficient strategies in lieu of standard algorithms and procedures all in the name of

“deeper understanding.” Parents continue to complain about their kids’ math class.

Not much has changed since the days when Lynne Cheney was making the rounds 20 or so years ago. Maybe after Liz is through with her January 6 hearings, she can carry on where Lynne left off with the message that math, like an oath to the Constitution, should be independent of political baggage.

Reprinted from Frederick M. Hess’ education blog on AEI (the American Enterprise Institute), where Barry was guest writer, August 9, 2022.



Driving Mr. Williams

Mike Parsons

Charles Carr, age seventeen:

Charleston, West Virginia on Wednesday night,
Canton, Ohio on Thursday night.
Dad said Hank Williams had concerts there.
He needed a driver and would pay well.

Four or five days driving with
the most famous man in Alabama
in his sweet blue Cadillac convertible?
Heck yeah.

We set off Tuesday afternoon.
To tell you the truth,
Mr. Williams looked pretty weak
getting into the car.
But he was in a good mood.
It was “call me Hank,
I’ll call you Charley.”

He had some beers with him,
and we joked a little heading north.
“Jambalaya” came on the radio.
I told him I didn’t like it much,
but he just laughed.

The weather turned.
The driving got harder.
We decided to spend the night in Birmingham.

The next day started out well enough.
We made good time to Fort Payne,
singing along to songs on the radio.
Hank bought a bottle of whiskey there,
then it was back onto the highway.

We hit Chattanooga around lunchtime.
Hank called someone from the restaurant.
Next I knew we were headed to Knoxville
on the double-quick.
The weather was getting bad.
He was going to have to catch a plane
to get to Charleston on time.
Hank didn't talk too much then.
I think he had opened that bottle, maybe.
And I needed to keep my eyes on the road.

We made it to Knoxville on time.
But the plane turned back - bad weather.
Charleston was cancelled.

We booked into the fanciest hotel in Knoxville
at around seven o'clock.
Thursday was going to be long drive to Ohio,
more than five hundred miles,
but I was sure I could handle it
with a good night's sleep.
If the weather held out.

Then there was a call from someone,
and we had to start then, right away.
It was nearly eleven.
Hank, Mr. Williams, was in pretty rough shape.
I think he'd finished that Fort Payne bottle.

A doctor came to the hotel
to give him some pain shots.
The bellhops brought him to the car in a wheelchair.
They got him into the back,

placed a blanket over him,
and we headed into the dark.

There was wind and blowing snow.
Those Tennessee roads had plenty of curves.
It was cold in the Caddy.
I guess ragtops don't hold heat too well.

I pushed it as hard as I could.
Too hard, I guess,
because I got a ticket an hour or so out of Knoxville.
I paid the fine and kept pushing.

Some where past Bristol,
I stopped for gas and a sandwich.
Mr. Williams he said he just wanted to sleep.
Those were the last words he said to me.
Or anyone.

I drove north into West Virginia.
The road was narrow and black,
the sky was black,
the trees were black
and pushed right up to the edge.
There were hills and curves
and more hills and more curves.
Mr. Williams didn't make a sound

I can't lie to you,
I was cold and tired and scared,
not even thinking about Ohio,
just the next town.

Near daybreak, I pulled over to check my map.
There was no sound from the back seat.
I could see the blanket had slid off Mr. Williams.
I went to rearrange it; he didn't move.
His hand was cold and stiff.
Then I was really scared.

I stopped at the first place
that seemed to be open.

An old man came out.
He looked in the back, said I had a problem
and pointed me toward the nearest hospital,
six, seven miles away.

Some orderlies came out.
They looked inside and told me Hank Williams was dead.
I guess I knew that,
but hearing it made me all empty
and even colder.

Then I had to call my dad and Hank's mother,
and the police asked me questions.
That day never ended.

A sign similar to the "Dixie Oil Gasoline" sign used to hang at the front of a large Ann Arbor rental house, back in the 1970s, two or three houses northwest of the intersection of Division and Hill.



One-Hundred-Fifty Gallons

Kaleb A. Brown

She had always been better at math, but since she was gone, he was stuck doing the calculations for his project. His finger trailed up the measuring tape, mouthing the numbers. The tub was eighteen inches tall. He pressed down on the tape's black button; it hissed as it slithered back into its shell. Then the reign of silence continued.

The nearest school was about five miles out, a car only rumbled down the street every few hours, and the birds never sang in the neighborhood. She wasn't a chatterbox, but her presence was loud enough. She always said that this place was too quiet, she suggested they move out of the burbs and into the city. He'd always say the house was wonderful as long as she was there. Now, it was his prison.

As he knelt beside the porcelain, he

could see, but not feel the memory — she held him in that tub, caressing and wrapping him her with her love. If felt like describing a film he knew he saw but didn't recall watching.

Shouldn't he be doing something?

Right, the calculations. From reading books to watching shows — he hadn't been able to focus on much, but he swore he'd do this.

He entered the measurements into his phone. His tub held thirty-four-thousand-five-hundred-sixty cubic inches. He tapped and typed on the phone, looking at the screen with a furrowed brow and hard frown.

To submerge himself, he'd need to spend three-hundred odd dollars to buy one-hundred-fifty gallons of milk.

He went to the bedroom to grab his wallet. He slowly opened the door, the light illuminating the red, queen-sized bed they shared for a year. It hurt. But

what didn't? The jangle of keys reminded him of their joyrides, the dining room table reminded him of them playing chess, the damn toilet reminded him of her singing in the shower. He told himself that he wouldn't hurt if he slept on the couch, but no — on the couch, they watched movies and read side-by-side. No matter what he did or didn't do, the echo of her remained.

He went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, empty save for a long expired, half-empty jug of two-percent milk that had long expired. If it wasn't good enough for her tea, it wouldn't be good enough for the bath.

He was the one who created the rose milk tea that she had loved so much. She was a refined woman; the only reason she courted a man ten years her junior was because she said he had his life together. Her refinement showed in what she drank: rose tea without sugar. While it was a bit bland, she said that adding things just made it taste bland-with-a-dash-of-sugar. He tried his hand at fixing the drink by adding a bit of milk and a hint of simple syrup. Voila, she loved it and he had prepared her rose milk tea ever since.

He felt it was the least he could do for a woman that he had fallen in love with at first sight. She said he always made her tea taste heavenly. Fitting: a heavenly drink for a goddess.

He cringed at the thought. She'd get upset when he called her that. He played it off as a joke. But he meant it and would think it often.

So often, in fact, that it was the straw that broke the camel's back of their relationship.

She sobbed in their bed, her entire body heaving. It was beautiful in its ugliness. She was wracked with guilt

when she told him she wasn't happy anymore. She lost sight of the man she fell in love with, the man who had it together. In his place was a man who had no aspirations beyond her. So she began cheating.

He ignored the twist in his stomach, the flare of anger in his head, the kick to his heart. His only future was with her, so he couldn't scare her off. He couldn't be angry, couldn't argue. Instead, he'd smile and tell her that if sleeping with others made her happy, so be it, so long as she didn't leave.

The next morning, she left.

And with her, she took the piece of his mind that held his peace of mind. It was a wonderful thing, not having a mind. With her, he never had to think too much. He didn't need to fret over anything as long as he had her. He relinquished control but now it was hoisted upon him and he didn't want it. A year's worth of thoughts came flooding into his mind, the kind that told him that it was a good idea to bathe in one-hundred-fifty gallons of milk.

...

The sun had just set when he parked in the lot of the local grocery store. Beyond momentarily seeing a faceless wraith of her in the passenger seat and despite all the sputtering and gasping his beige volvo gave, he had no issues getting to his destination. The volvo wasn't the fanciest limousine and with his fleece jogging pants and hoodie, he wasn't the sharpest chauffeur for the lovely leche, but it would have to do. He turned the key to kill the engine. He closed his eyes and sighed as his

hands went slack from the wheel. It was his first time driving in what felt like ages. Maybe it was the air that he hadn't tasted for so long that caused the second-guessing.

At the front of the store, the automatic doors opened to accommodate him and his basket. The cold air tickled his skin and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He gawked as shoppers scurried along. It had been his first non-food-delivery taste of live, human contact since the breakup.

His steps were so heavy and slow he might as well have been walking on the ocean floor instead of in the grocery store. May have been in slow-motion. Other customers darted to and fro and whipped their heads up to read aisle signs. They weren't trapped in their minds; they were alive in a way that he wasn't. They had purpose. It filled him with an aching envy.

He had bought milk from this store many times, he knew the dairy section was straight to the back. Yet, he didn't go there. Instead, milled about the store. He stopped at the cereal section; maybe he'd settle for one carton and use it for a bowl of sugary cereal, as a normal person would. Maybe he'd buy groceries to start making his own meals again.

His mood darkened as he heard a group of children screaming playfully, followed by their father hushing them. His dreams of starting a family with her, so assured he treated it as a foregone conclusion, were dashed. A life without her wouldn't be his own, it would be a stranger's. He made his way to the back of the store.

As he approached the glass door to the milk, he froze. He didn't recognize the disheveled man who reached for

the handle and stared at him. He felt ashamed at the transformation; he used to be so particular about his appearance. The man looking at him wasn't a man she'd love. Though he wondered if he ever was a man she loved.

He pushed the thoughts aside. He didn't want to think. He yanked the door open, grabbed the milk then placed it in his basket. Jug after jug of the two percent milk was feverishly snatched from their cradles on the rack and placed into his plastic prison. He counted silently as he worked, ignoring how sore his arm got. He laid them on their sides, freeing up the basket to fit. People began looking at him once he had exhausted an entire shelf. He reached for the back and took some more, squeezing as much milk as he could into the basket. He didn't mind their stares; he was back into his own world. They hadn't been in love. If they did, surely they'd understand his grief.

Once he ran out of space in his basket, he got another from the front of the store. The second basket was halfway full once he had one-hundred-fifty jugs of milk. He pulled two baskets to the front of the store, awkwardly walking sideways to do so. A part of him told him he could stop, but he figured he might as well buy them since he went through all the trouble of getting them.

With one-hundred-fifty containers of milk, self-checkout would be more hassle than it was worth. He'd have to deal with the dreaded cashier. He positioned himself in line. Once it was his turn, the cashier paused before smiling. He ignored the cashier's attempt at small talk.

Yes, he would be paying in debit.

No, he would not like to sign up for their rewards program.

No, he wouldn't need help taking it to his car.

No, he would not like them bagged.

After the ten-minute ring-up, he paid for his dairy and maneuvered the baskets to his car. Even while making sure he didn't cover his rear window, he had more than enough space for the milk.

The hard part was done, now all he needed to do was start the car and—

The engine gave a sputter and wheeze once he turned the key.

He thought nothing of it. He tried again.

Another sputter, more wheezing, no starting.

Panic set in. Of all the times to break down, it had to do it now? He tried again and again, but each time, the car failed to start. She always told him that he should invest in a new car. She suggested a lot of things, but he was always in a state of carefree bliss. She said that was part of the problem: the mature man she once loved seemed to melt before her eyes once they started dating.

He a shout of frustration and held his head in his hands. The thoughts came rushing back. He wondered what the hell he was doing. Better yet, why the hell was he doing it? He couldn't even keep his excuse straight. Sometimes, he told himself he was "invoking her essence" like he was some sort of lactate shaman. Other times he said it was as a lament to their. In that moment, he told himself he just wanted to feel something other than hurt.

Maybe his car breaking down was a sign. Yes, he spent all his money on milk. Yes, eviction was approaching. He hadn't checked his work email nor work phone for weeks, but the writing was on the

wall. Reality was catching up to him, but only because he was standing still. He could still run. He could get a new job. He could begin again.

But he didn't want to.

The whispers of logic were drowned out by the scream of emotion. He missed her. Even if he couldn't get her back, he still wanted to be with her. He had made his bed. Now all that was left to do was sleep.

He touched the phone in his pocket and sighed. He'd need help. He took it out and phoned a friend, saying that he needed a ride home, avoiding telling them he also needed them to transport one-hundred-fifty gallons of milk. They were happy to pick up and told him they'd be there in fifteen. He gazed out the windshield, unseeing as he waited.

He jolted to attention as his friend knocked on the window with a smile. Cheerfulness was something he hadn't experienced in a while. He gave his own, phony smile, praying they didn't see how strained it was. He told them he'd need help with his groceries if they didn't mind. While they agreed, their smile faltered as he opened his car and started transferring the milk cartons from his car to theirs. After, he climbed in the passenger seat before they drove out of the lot.

He sat with his hands in his lap as the car drove through the streets at night, lit by the orange glow of the streetlights. They made a comment about the smell. He played it off by saying he had worked up a sweat. They said they missed him, that they used to hang out all the time but he didn't talk to them as much when he started seeing her. He nodded and

said he was sorry. He said he'd promise to hang out again; a promise he didn't care about keeping. She was the only friend he needed; everyone else felt supplementary. With her gone, they all felt like strangers.

He responded to the small talk, throwing a smile here, a laugh there. He pantomimed being okay. He never knew he could be this good of an actor.

They asked what the milk was for.

He tried thinking up an excuse. He told them he was going to bathe in it. He wasn't that good an actor.

They asked why.

He told them because he felt like it. And that was that.

Once they pulled up to his curb, they helped him unload the milk. They told him that they knew the breakup was hard for him and that they'd always be there if he needed to talk.

He didn't doubt their words, but he figured talking wouldn't help.

He hauled the jugs of milk into his house as the crickets chirped. He filled his hallway with the cartons. He flipped the switch above the drain, closing it. He poured each container into the tub, each jug making a glugging sound as it was drained of its contents. A crooked smile spread across his lips as he watched his dream become realized, jug by jug.

It felt like an eternity before he was done, before all the containers were empty. He drew a ragged breath and rose with wobbling knees. He was sore from carrying the cartons; his muscles were tight and craved rest. Fatigue would only make the bath that much more satisfying. Once more, he'd be in her embrace. He stripped off his clothes, bare in front of his pool. He gave a shudder at the sight of his bath,

at the feeling of his nakedness. It felt intimate; he could see her leg breaching the milk. Yes, he was a weirdo. But he didn't care anymore. He was in love.

He placed one leg in, then another. He lowered himself into the bath, his body being swallowed by the milk. A tsunami of milk sloshed out the tub, crashing into jetsam onto the tile below. He didn't account for displacement. Oh well. He clamped his teeth tightly against each other to stop them from clattering. The felt frigid against his skin.

Then it felt warm.

He sighed and drew his head back. It was silent, outside, but he could hear her. He could hear her laughing, talking, singing. He could feel her, all around him. His heart raced; they were together again. Yes, this was what he needed. He felt whole again. For the first time since she left him, he felt happy.

The bath didn't have the murky, nondescript scent of milk. His nose was filled with the sharp, alluring aroma of roses as he sank further down into the bath. He smiled as he let the milk cover his mouth and nose. He tasted the intoxicating sweetness of the sugar.

He finally felt it. Felt her arms, felt the warmth of the water, the beat of his heart. He had been sick and she cared for him. He always took showers, but she coaxed him into taking a bath, saying he'd feel more relaxed. She brought him rose milk tea. He was moved to tears drinking the tea in the bath, being caressed and wrapped by her love. All he wanted was for her to take care of him, to not have to worry about thinking. He told her she was perfect. She told him to be careful; one day he might believe it.

He couldn't he could leave the tub.
He'd be naked, vulnerable, listless if
he did. Here, he was alive, here he had
purpose.

No, now that he was with her, he had
no intention of parting.

A whiteness came over him as he
sank deeper into the bath. It was too
late for him. Too late to fight it. He had
believed it with every fiber of his being

and now that belief was his anchor;
the flavorless world beyond the milk
surface. To him, though, he wasn't
sinking, he was rising. He rose higher
and higher into the abyss where her
love caressed and suffocated him.

*This story was originally published in A
Thin Slice of Anxiety.*

Four Poems

Carmen Bugar

The Bluffs at Empire

For Stefano and Alisa

"I feel like I am walking with my old self."
"The trees are talking, listen to the trees!"
"I am regaining strength."

And so, the three of us again, meeting the old path
Where we reinforce the backbone of endurance.
The madness in our house is behind us, at least for now.

But as we walk in this tree-swaying wind
I ask myself how to put order in our lives,
How to make it so that our path remains clear.

When we arrive at the edge of the bluff
Where trees have made way for sand bushes
That carry fragrance of burnt sugar,

We see Lake Michigan at its most
Perfect steel-blue moment. Nothing like it,
You say, nothing more beautiful. A reward

Of the road, after hundreds of miles of hi-ways
By-ways, forest roads so narrow and so secret
That a hawk flew like a guide just above

The windshield, and stopped in the tree
To look at us as we drove slowly between
The rows of cattails on each side.

Memorize the moments, keep them
As currency meant to avert the hardship
That is to come. Keep the images,

Make them last as a happy worry-free
Summer. You were not given the chance
For inner peace this time. Keep these moments

In your pockets, children. We will take
Each one of them out when the time comes:
The steel-blue lake in the sand-rising wind,

The trees that talk in slow, wise voices,
The song of birds, and the long dune trails.

Don't speak of time

For my father

I asked the doctor not to speak of time:
Not of weeks, months, not
Of filling the prescriptions every two weeks,
No one knows when it's time, I said,
Let him not know if it's this week or that.

I said this in English but I know
My father listened in Romanian,
He was too clever to pay attention to words,
When my voice, and the doctor's met
In the thick air across the table.

At home he asked, what are you worrying about,
I die a happy man: you didn't end up
Living in that country, I paid your school debt,
You've done with your life as you wanted,
And I lived long enough to give your son my shirts.
It's my time to go, I must make place for others.

And so, his argument was crisp and clear.
We stood and said goodbye, he shook hands
With my son, kissed my daughter, looked at me
With resolute eyes that somehow still
Worried more than his words: "Be strong".
What remains of our time together
Is glimpsed between our voices and our words.

The erratic heart

For my mother

How lucky we all were that I was there
When you tapped lightly on my shoulder
In the dead of night. "My heart is beating
Too fast, and then too slow. We need
The doctors, I think." You still talk about that.

Before we knew it, I found my way
On the seat next to the ambulance driver
Who leaned towards me the whole way
Explaining that we will reach the hospital
On time, and the paramedics in the back
Are doing very well at keeping you stable.

The monitors, the tests, the IV bags,
And now the phone calls: the episodes returned,
And keep returning, since I left.
There must be a pacemaker to make peace
In your failing heart. It isn't a failing heart.

I am 800 miles away in a surgery room,
Fighting with things that grow inside of me
Out of the natural order, the utensils
On the table, the lights, the nurse
Whose soft hands wrap around my right hand,
The doctor who sedates me
Before he makes me sleep.

A Wedding Dream

For Catalin

Life has a way to right all wrongs,
For there, in the picture you just sent
From Lake Michigan, there is a ring
On the hand of the one you love,
The champagne flute filled—
And of course, greenery and sun.

As if God means to say:
Trust that ahead the path is filled
With surprises you'd be glad for:
New lives, new hopes, other reasons
To get up in the mornings:
The thrills of love, promises.

So here we are mixing languages
Like drinks: two-three, one-two,
All for the youngest in the family,
The one who now must take his seat
At the marriage table, taste the gifts.

all from *Pictured Rocks*, July 2022.
For Alisa and Stefano.



Punked

J. L. Hagen

We always had firearms around. In Upper Michigan, especially Loyale, it's just part of life. The first one I recall, a .22-caliber pellet gun, we inherited from my grandpa in the late '50s. He used it to plink birds thieving in his raspberry patch. My younger brother Billy and me shot up everything in the backyard that moved or looked like a target. I loved the way it sounded when you pulled the trigger. *Gaa-snap!*

On my twelfth birthday, my parents presented me with a twenty-gauge shotgun. A couple of years later, Billy got one on his twelfth birthday. Then we shot up every woods within walking distance of our house. There was something about the pungent odor of gun smoke. For me, it was "love at first sight." My dad, on the other hand, wasn't keen on it. He said he smelled enough in World War II to last a lifetime.

One day, Billy and I were hunting, but hadn't seen a thing all day. Bored, I cocked the hammer and fired at a small pine tree about ten yards away. The clump of bird shot took the top third clean off the trunk, leaving a ragged stump as thick as my elbow.

"Holy crap!" Billy said. "You really demolished that tree."

"Yeah, kinda scary," I added. "No wonder Dad keeps telling us never to point it at anyone. Makes me think of that one-armed pump jockey at the downtown Shell."

"Slots' Bancroft?"

"Somebody told me he shot his arm off by accident—when he was like fourteen."

Billy winced. "Jeez, hurts just thinking about it."

My days in the woods ended when I started college downstate in 1968. Basically, no time, no ride, no place to shoot. So, after graduation, when I returned home to Loyale for a job my dad arranged, hunting had dropped off my radar. Then fall rolled around, and I connected with one of Billy's high school friends, Charley St. Martin, an avid deer hunter. I bought a Winchester .30-.30 caliber, lever-action rifle from Holbein's Hardware. It reminded me of the old westerns on TV like *The Rifleman* and the *Lone Ranger*. Plus, it was cheap.

Charley and I hunted deer a few times, but after all the hype growing up about deer season, I realized it was boring. You had to wake up early, tramp through the woods, sit like a statue in the brush for hours, watch your breath roll out of your mouth, feel your butt go numb, and hope you had a shot at something besides a doe. Before November ended, the gun sat unloaded in the corner of my bedroom.

By this time, I had moved out of my parents' home and rented an apartment, the bottom floor of a white clapboard house between the Catholic church and the old high school. I was single with a good salary, no debt other than a car payment. Local girls and tourists visiting the Island created lots of opportunities for fun, and my prospects for romantic adventure were traveling an upward arc. One evening, I looked across Lake Michigan at sunset. Its surface shimmered liquid gold from the Bridge to the horizon. It seemed like it would last forever.

It did, until Moose McGarrigle rented the second-floor apartment.

Moose was a walking eyesore, short and stocky with shaggy auburn hair, pinprick eyes set deep in a low-browed face, and an outsized swagger to herald his regal presence. Of all my landlady Mrs. Schaeffer's tenant prospects, he had to have been dead bottom on the list. What explanation could there have been except her desperation for income? Or her descent into the early stages of dementia? Or both.

Moose and Billy were the same age, and they shared some bad history. My brother was not real tall, and he had asked out Violette Cadotte a few times, including the Homecoming dance. She was a cute girl in the class behind him. Besides her slim figure and coppery face, highlighted by large dark eyes, glossy black hair, and beautiful ice-white teeth, she was tiny, just under five feet.

Moose must have had his eye on her. One day in school, emboldened by a couple of his cronies, he confronted Billy.

"You leave my girlfriend Violette alone—or I'll kick your ass," he threatened, sticking a finger in Billy's chest.

"Hey, she ain't your girlfriend," Billy said. "She don't even know you're alive."

Moose shoved him up against a locker. "Meet me after school, dipshit. I'll show you *who knows who*."

Billy said when classes let out, he walked to his car in the school parking lot, keeping his eye out for Moose. As he came around his front fender, he spotted right away that someone had run a key down the

side of the vehicle, writing out the word "Asshoel."

"The stupid bastard couldn't even spell it right," Billy said. "Totally pissed me off. After that, I noticed he always had two or three of his jerk-off side-kicks around to protect him."

"Was she *ever* his girlfriend?"

"Hell, no," Billy stated. "Never even went out with him once. She said he was a Neanderthal."

"I'd say the whole family is, except I don't want to insult Neanderthals."

When Billy showed Dad the side of the car, he had a similar opinion. "The snake don't fall far from the tree," he said. "Those kids are all doomed. Their old man came here as an iron worker when they built the Bridge. After the work dried up, he didn't—worst drunk I ever seen. Now, his old lady is asking all over town for credit every month."

This was my new neighbor.

I made a point of avoiding him and his girlfriend, Molly Richards, not wanting to pick at the scab I knew still festered over Violette Cadotte. But it wouldn't be that easy.

The front porch entrance to the house opened into a short hallway. Straight ahead, it led to a door into my apartment living room. To the left, an open staircase rose to the second floor and Moose's apartment. There was virtually no way for one tenant to avoid the other.

I had been parking my car in the driveway beside the house. One Monday morning, I walked out to go to work. Moose's pickup straddled the drive, blocking me in. I had heard him come in late Sunday night but

didn't notice where he parked. I was preoccupied with the commotion on the stairs and front hallway . . .

"Shut the fuck up, bitch!" he yelled at Molly. "Don't give me another load of your crap."

I cracked my front door and peaked into the hallway.

He waved his sausage-fingers rapidly, inches from her face. "I saw you talking to that whack-job—all *moony-eyed*."

"I wasn't talking to *anybody*, dumb ass. He asked if I had a lighter."

"Bull-shit." He grabbed her face. "You calling me a liar? I saw you, you . . ."

This argument continued up the entire stairway as he berated and manhandled her, while she protested, giving him as good as she got. The upstairs door slammed. I shot a glance at my alarm clock. It was 2:17 a.m.

Now, this morning, when I needed to get to work, there was no way out to the street. It flashed into mind to gun the engine, throw it in reverse, and back straight into the passenger side of his truck, a little tit-for-tat from Billy's car damage. Unfortunately, my new Chevy was worth more than Moose's rusted-out Ford F-150, so I trudged up the stairs and rapped quietly on his door.

No one answered. After a couple more knocks, louder this time, Molly opened it a crack. She was wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. Her hair looked like a Weed-Wacker had attacked it, and the left side of her face was discolored, about where someone might have landed a right hook.

"Yeah?" she said. She touched the bruise and turned away, slightly to her left.

"I hate to bother you, but Moose's truck is blocking my car. I can't get out, and I need to be at work on time."

She glanced back into the apartment. "He's sleeping." She hesitated, pursed her lips. "Uh, let me see if I can find the keys." She pushed the door closed without latching it.

I could see Moose through the opening, lying face-down on a mattress on the floor in his jockey shorts, snoring like a freight train. The air seeping out through the door reminded me of the boy's locker room after gym class. She rifled through his pants thrown across a chair and found the keys. As she crossed the room, they jingled. Moose rolled over, then raised his head. His pitted, pie-shaped face was ruddy and creased from sleeping on a mound of dirty laundry he had repurposed for a pillow.

"What the hell you doing with my keys?" he demanded.

"Go back to sleep, Asshole," Molly said. "I left something in the truck last night."

He rolled over and rebundled his makeshift pillow. "Bitch," he mumbled. She slipped through the door, keys in hand, and we tiptoed down the stairs.

A few minutes later, she unblocked the driveway and sat waiting for me to exit. Instead, I walked over to the truck.

"Hey, thanks, Molly. I didn't want to get into it with Moose, but . . ."

"Yeah, I know." She reached up and touched her cheek.

"Look, if he lays a hand on you . . ."

Her head jerked up. "What, you're gonna protect me?" She laughed derisively.

I peered straight into her eyes. "No, but I will call the cops and let them

deal with him."

She looked away. "*Puhh*."

"Nobody gets to punch a girl—especially him."

She stared in my direction but said nothing.

"Ever."

Her face softened, and her chin began to quiver. "He's not always a jerk," she responded. "It's mainly when he's been drinking."

"Whatever. In my book, that's bullshit. Don't put up with it, dump him. You deserve better."

Her shoulders slumped. She started to say something, then hesitated. "I can't. I'm knocked up," she confessed. "At least, I might be." She gazed blankly through the windshield.

"The way he treats you has to be scary. Seriously, I'd get away as quick as I could."

She stared at me. "I'll survive." As I turned to leave, she threw me a wan smile. "But I'll keep that in mind, Cowboy."

On the drive into work, I thought some more about our exchange and her relationship with Moose. She wasn't particularly attractive, but as her "tough-girl" mask melted a bit, I saw she had a delicate face with strong cheek bones and kind, gray-green eyes. A little makeup, a crash diet, a new wardrobe, and she might be fairly striking. But I didn't intend to play Henry Higgins to her Eliza Dolittle, especially with Moose in the cast—a wannabe thug, if I ever saw one.

That week was a killer at work.

We were all crushed, trying to meet a proposal deadline for a mega-project, plus stay on top of our regular business at the peak of summer. When quitting time rolled around on Friday, I beelined for the parking lot. Ordinarily, I would have made a pit-stop at the Trading Post for a couple of beers but took a pass in favor of a recovery weekend at home.

As I pulled up to the house and prepared to turn into the driveway, I stopped short. Moose's truck was hogging my parking spot. I didn't want a confrontation but couldn't let him run roughshod over top of me. I took a pen and a sheet of paper out of my glove compartment.

*Moose,
You're parking in my spot. Parking is not
"first come, first served," Use of the drive-
way is part of my rental agreement. If
you don't believe me, ask Mrs. Schaeffer.
Meanwhile, don't park there again—or
block the driveway. I need to get to work
on time.*

— Jamey Barlow

Folding over the paper, I stuck it under the windshield wiper of his truck. I parked my car back about fifty feet, so he could pull his vehicle out and leave it in front of the house. It wasn't worth provoking a fight over my parking space.

After supper, I downed a few beers and watched part of the ball game before I drowsed off on the couch. I resurfaced about ten o'clock and decided to knock off a chapter or two of *Laughing Whitefish*, a Robert Travers novel I had started. I lay on my bed in my work clothes, reading. The house was dead quiet, and in ten pages or so,

I flashed off to sleep like the evening sun dropping into Lake Michigan.

"That goddamn son of a bitch, I'm gonna knock his fucking teeth out!"

I snapped back to life. The alarm clock said 1:33 a.m.

Above me, Moose's blowhard, threatening snarls blasted through the ceiling. "Why the fuck were you talking with him?" The sound of something, a chair maybe, shoved across the floor. Thud, then a scream from Molly.

"You leave me alone, you sick bastard!"

"Shut the fuck up! I'm going to kill that asshole—did you hear me, Barlow? You're a dead man, a walking dead man."

I panicked. What in the *hell* was going on? I spotted my deer rifle in the corner.

The upstairs door slammed. "Don't be such a stupid asshole!" Molly screamed. "Asssshooooole!" Something smashed against the wall—a bottle or jar. A hundred echoes as glass shards rained on the floor above.

I jumped up and opened the closet, reaching for ammunition. I heard Moose stomping down the stairs two at a time. I opened the ammo box. He pounded on my door—*Bam Bam Bam!* I jumped back and dropped the carton. It spilled all around me like brass Pick Up Sticks.

"Goddamn it, open up, Barlow, or I'll knock it down."

I shoved a shell into the rifle magazine and ran to the living room.

Bam Bam Bam again. "Barlow, I'm

going to kick your motherfucking ass!"

I turned the knob and let the door swing slowly open.

Moose stood in the hall, three feet back, his face blood-orange. The stench of sweat-flavored vodka flooded the entry. I raised my rifle and cocked the hammer. He stared into the barrel hole like he was looking into a cannon.

"What do you want?" I snapped.

He glowered at me over the peep sight.

"I'll bet it's not even loaded," he sneered.

I grabbed the lever and racked the gun. *Ka-chuck*. A three-inch, shiny brass cartridge spun out the side of the receiver. It clattered across the wooden floor. I jerked the gun up to a point right between his little pig-eyes. They were hog-eyes now.

"Bet you don't have another one," he said, his tone less threatening, more like a smart-ass teenager than a counterfeit goonster.

I squinted down the barrel, aiming at the spot where his eyebrows knit together. "There's only one way you're going to find out." I held the gun steady as a howitzer.

He froze like a block of moron-ice.

"Moose, com'on back upstairs," Molly pleaded from the stairwell. "He's not worth it, honey. It's almost 2 a.m., I wanna go to bed."

We both looked up. She stood a few steps down from their apartment, leaning over the railing. The dim hall light bathed her fleshy figure, clad in a dingy white bra and panties.

Moose hesitated, then turned and started up the stairs. I followed him with the rifle. As he reached the land-

ing, he spun around and gave me the finger.

"Fuck you, Barlow!" he bellowed down the staircase. "And fuck your brother, too!" He raised his other middle finger and nodded his head to punctuate it. Then he slammed the door to his apartment.

I reached down and picked up the cartridge, closed my door, and locked it. The adrenaline left my hands shaking. *I'll have to frame that round*, I thought. In the bedroom, I racked a couple more shells into the magazine and propped the rifle in the corner.

Upstairs, it was deadly quiet, and I slept like a ghost at sunrise.

The rest of the weekend, I agonized over the incident. Why the hell didn't I simply call 9-1-1? No way did I want to shoot somebody, even Moose. I had punked him, but I was damn lucky. If he had rushed me and we wrestled with the gun, who knows what could have happened. I might be lying in a hospital bed with a missing arm or, worse, chilling on a morgue slab.

I didn't want to give up my apartment, but next time, Moose would surely come armed. There was no way I could stay. I had only come back to Loyale because jobs were hard to find with no experience. Now that I had some, maybe I could find something better in a larger city, say, Marquette, Traverse, or even GR.

When I gave Mrs. Schaeffer notice, she was extremely unhappy. She asked why I wanted to leave.

"The tenants upstairs are too noisy," I said. "The woman who was here

when I first moved in, the one you told me was in recovery from some mental issues, was quiet as a graveyard. I guess I got used to that."

"I could evict them. They're already behind on their rent."

"No, don't do that because of me. I've been thinking it's time to move, anyway. This is just one factor."

I warned Billy to be careful. He was on his way to East Lansing in September. If he didn't cross paths with Moose before then, he wouldn't have a problem.

I didn't want to, but I moved back in with my parents. After the new year, I found a job in Kalamazoo. I also enrolled in grad school part-time.

A couple of years later, Billy rang me up one day. "Holy shit, Jamey, did you hear about Moose McGarrigle?"

". . . that he's an asshole? That's old news."

"No, seriously, dude, he got punked by his girlfriend, Molly."

"What? What do you mean?"

"It's all over the media. Surprised you haven't heard."

"Hey, I'm working for a living. Don't have time for soap opera."

"Sit down. You won't believe this."

I could hear the excitement in his voice.

"According to the news," Billy said, "he had been abusing her for some time. She put up with it until she started finding bruises on her baby daughter, Melanie. That pushed her over the edge. One night, he got super-intoxicated and beat her. After he properly anesthetized himself and

passed out, she put a fine edge on a pair of poultry shears and did some 'outpatient surgery' on him. Then called 9-1-1."

"No shit?" The image of Moose waking up screaming out of a dead drunk swirled in my head like an Edward Munch painting. I couldn't stifle a chuckle—but also felt the urge to puke.

"They rushed him below the Bridge to the regional med center and tried to reattach his missing body parts. He's still in the hospital recovering, but, apparently, he's a soprano now—and I don't mean he's starring in the Metropolitan Opera."

"Wow. I told you Molly saved my butt that night he came after me."

"In a strange way," Billy replied, "you have to respect a woman like that."

"I think about it this way," I said.

"Historians blab all day about the Wild West, but it's got nothing on the U. P."

In Loyale, everyone has a nickname. We have "Slots" and "Deepfreeze" and "Hoover" and "Seagull" and "Skunk" and "Peanut Butter" and "Dimestore" and "Smudge" and hundreds of other residents with colorful handles, including Moose.

Within a couple of days, I was certain the Loyale "telegraph" would go viral, and Moose, whose given name was Gilbert, would acquire a new moniker, one starting with "E" and sounding a bit like "unique." As for Molly, they would probably start calling her "Doc."

Oddly, there was some poetic justice in that.

Two Poems

Peter Anderson

Paleolithic

The paleolithic lawnmowers are hard to push but they get the job done. Every weekend they can be heard rattling over the rocky landscape. It's of little consequence — since the glaciers started racing up and down the block spraying gravel everywhere and doing donuts in the wetlands, there's hardly any grass left — but some habits die hard. Little mammals, evolutionary footnotes no bigger than a thumb, flatten themselves out when the mowers pass overhead. A brave few imagining ferris wheels hitch a ride on the stone blades and squeal with delight.

Three Guys

Three guys — one tall, one short, one medium-sized— come to the city for the first time. One of them's maybe a woman, the other a kid. Or one's old, one's young and one's middle-aged. Three of them, they're farmers. They grow stuff to eat, or two of them do and the third grows stuff that gets made into poison to spray on the other two's stuff so bugs won't eat it. It's their first time in the city, not the bugs but the three what-have-you's, and the one who's blind looks up and says "Will you look at the size of that building?" The other two look up and this is when the one who's a panther — did I say one of them's a panther? Well, one of them's a panther and he eats the other two. And now there's blood everywhere, a real mess, and all the high-rises are screaming and vomiting glass onto the sidewalk, and the traffic lights and signposts are sprouting leaves and vines, and the street's a muddy brown river and everything, I mean everything, is disappearing into the foliage of this brand-new jungle. Did I say panther? I meant one of them's a painter.



Zoning and Other Mischief

Carolyn Lusch

Being a cartographer, Nadine knew that maps prescribed existence. She plastered the walls of her house with maps of all scales, of every location she could find, of every style and projection. Visitors, back when she had visitors, considered it an amusing oddity, and she liked to cover up the legend and quiz them on what a given map showed.

The map she'd tacked to her kitchen wall always baffled visitors for a hot second, with its jumble of colorful skewed polygons. Someone once mistook it for gerrymandering in Wyoming. But it was their town, the roads layered pale underneath, marked by the all-consuming regulations of what could be built where. Also known as zoning.

Tonight was the meeting to consider the granting of a zoning variance for an apartment above a garage on Pear Street. April 11th, 7:30pm, on Zoom (see link below). As always, Nadine carefully positioned herself

at the kitchen table next to the crazy map, blazer on top and pajamas on bottom. She informed her ten-year-old that if he dared to throw naked Barbies into the shot again she would disown him.

"Aren't I too young or that? If you put me out on the street it would be, like, child abuse."

She glared at him. Threatening kids wasn't what it used to be.

But then on her screen the little squares popped into existence. Her fellow members of the Zoning Boarch of Appeals, Mr. Lawrence and his GIS Analyst, a couple city council members, Ralph from the Building department. And of course, the dozen or so gadflies swarming protectively around their 4-acre homes. Almost all over 60, mostly women, they showed up at every civic event with the leisure retirement afforded them. The refined, cozy homes visible behind their skulls greatly annoyed Nadine.

It was a funny thing, but once they'd

approved minutes and opened discussion on Pear Street, no one could find the map. Millicent Township was tech savvy, it had all the zoning districts nicely accessible to the public through an online map viewer. Except, strangely, the viewer seemed to be down. The GIS Analyst, a severe young woman with thick round glasses, could be seen in her square scowling at the screen, clicking refresh, enraged that cyberspace had chosen this moment to make her appear incompetent. There followed a scratchy silence in which pairs of eyes darted towards unseen diversions. Except for Mary Sue's. Mary Sue always focused single-mindedly on the task at hand. No one else would be such a stalwart defender of her neighborhood's wellbeing, so she had to do it herself.

Finally, good-natured Ralph from Building unmuted and ventured: "Does someone have a hard copy? I know it's untech..."

Nods of agreement bloomed on the grid of squares. All the commissioners and planners dove to rifle through files that may or may not have been imaginary.

Of course, over in her kitchen Nadine was looking at the map, pinned on the wall to her left, gigantic and just out of view of the camera. She grasped her laptop, ready to point it at the map with inward mutterings about how no one else took this job seriously. But then inspiration alighted, and she stopped. She reached below the kitchen table and rifled through her own imaginary files – in reality petting her very lazy cat sprawled on the linoleum.

"I'm so sorry," said Mr. Lawrence,

pulling on his mustache and clicking furiously. "This is really terribly unusual, I was certain I'd saved a PDF in the archive."

His face grew as he leaned in to squint at the screen, looking like he was trying to decipher some ancient secret in faces of Millicent's citizens. This went on for about ten minutes. The analyst thought she'd unearthed it by Googling, but screenshare revealed it to be the zoning map of Millicent, Washington, an uncivilized-seeming place with illegible boundaries. Lou, the unofficial town historian, flagged her teenager down to unmute her so she could announce that she had the original town zoning map from 1924, would that be helpful? Apparently the entire center of town had been overtaken by a massive walnut shelling factory. In fact, Lou explained, they'd only managed to outline three blocks with the shaky label of Residential.

Peter McCoughlin, a legendary NIMBY grump, made it known that he was very disappointed by the incompetence he was witnessing, from taxpayer-funded staff who had probably all been hired as favors to the mayor's crooked friends. The GIS Analyst, at the very end of her patience, cut in to clarify that she had earned this position through hard work and study. An especially awkward silence spread over the screen.

Then, into the void came the stern face and clarion voice of Mary Sue. She'd been watching it all with unwavering eyes.

"Commissioners, city staff, fellow residents," she began, "There is no need to bother ourselves with this pointless search. The parcel in question is just down the street from my house, and

I like every responsible citizen know very well what zoning district I live in." Nadine pulled her blazer tighter and tried not to let her eyes flicker to the map.

"This block of Pear Street is zoned single-family low-density. Always has been for the 37 years I've lived here as a tax-paying homeowner." Nadine saw Peter McCouglin nodding with vigor in the top right corner. The magic of the word homeowner! Nadine heard it at nearly every meeting. It conjured a sense of responsibility, stability, well-trimmed bushes and punctually-mowed lawns. Whereas – well, no one would dream of identifying themselves as a renter! You may as well say you're an itinerant layabout bent on Harold Hill-type mischief. You certainly have chipping lead paint and plastic bags in your bushes, and it's certainly your fault. Nadine shook herself out of her urbanist rage and unmuted. "Ms. Meriweather, I'm sorry but I have a clear memory of that part of Pear Street being zoned medium-density residential. I can see the shape in my mind and Pear Street is in the purple

zone, definitely purple."

"That's ridiculous." Mary Sue frowned at the screen, taking in the contours of the offending face. "That would allow Accessory Dwelling Units. There are no Accessory Dwelling Units on my block. It's not a college party street."

Ralph piped in. "Doesn't Rosie over at 150 have a granny flat?"

"A nonconforming use! From the 1840s!"

"Of course, Ms. Meriweather." Nadine made a conspicuous note, really a flourishing scribble. "Nevertheless, in the absence of proof I don't think we can move forward with the hearing. Isn't that in the by-laws, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Oh – well, I suppose – "

"And I'd hate to waste anyone's time. I'm sure you all have..."

She trailed off. Two dozen faces blinked at her.

"Busy schedules. Yes? Alright then. Motion to adjourn."

And she tidied her papers to convey finality, just as a naked Barbie landed on the keyboard with a thud.



Sweetgum

Ian Ross Singleton

They say talking to yourself shows low self-esteem and poor mental health.

There are blank patches. The voice on the radio says somebody is killed. There's a killer on the loose, known as the Highway Sixty-Five Terror. The killer is southbound, according to the spread of sites.

There is the speed limit. And there is my speed. They are not the same. That was Indiana. Now this is Kentucky. There is the steering wheel that can turn this way or that. Those are my hands that can turn it either way. There is the aqua green digital clock on the dash. Is it going backwards?

In the rearview, there is a pair of eyes. They could be those which have witnessed violence or that are deter-

mined to save somebody.

There is no cell phone.

The mile marker passes. The sun meets the earth and sinks into it like a raging figure razed by night-black water.

There are blank patches the size of Indiana.

The radio fuzzes. I start to seek. It's a different accent than before, Southern. Appalachia tips up, and the grass shifts to blue with the incline. Trucks careen down on my car. The voice on the radio speaks about fear. The killer's moving south now. Another announcer speaks softly with venom. When the radio is off, the only sound's the child's scream of the wind whipping against the window. Then a cell phone goes

off. The car whips over the line and there's the runover thud of the rumble strip, the wipe of screaming tires.

My vertebrae are the highway stripe.

When the radio is on, there is oldies. There is that famous song about balls of fire. The singer is the killer. That's his nickname. He never really killed. But who knows anybody else, really knows them? I don't even know Sheila.

#

There is a growling in my stomach. There is an exit ramp, and there is a town. There is a honky-tonk bar. There are neon lights blazoning the sky, a glut of pink and blue light. There are hands in my lap. They grind within. My stomach's burned out with hunger.

The lot has its share of scores, ruts and holes, each one an emptiness sounding out what was there before. There's a jagged bottle-half. There's a blowed out condom. There's a string of underwear. That means at least two people. That means maybe even a third, a new person, just conceived and anonymous. There is a person, me. This person might become a Northerner, a Yankee, come down South and swooping into her seat like a bird of prey relying on aspect alone to seize a chickadee. The walls are like a stage background built of pegboard paneling. The wainscot's glue is loose from the steam coming up from the plate. A couple girls saunter by. There are eyes that follow them and their dipping hips. There's a girl drinking at the bar all alone, looking at every feller that talks to her like he was an unidentifiable slab of roadkill. I feel

for her and that means she will be the first to die. But what if it reverses and she doesn't look at fellers or anybody?

The carpet is as thin as the walls, same as the basement where Sheila is right now, where there must soon be a plea over the cell phone. There is a mug and the sauced rippings of a cow on bread. A few old men whose lives have aged into nothing and kids. The kids got chaw in their lips. They say "compañero." The kids have girls. The old men are too old. Time has reversed, done itself a K-turn, and now the girl has never looked at fellers and instead sat down with the person sitting where I am sitting, with me.

There is no knowledge. There is no judgment. There is nothing to say. She blows smoke up and out, brought in and reversed and still meaning nothing, blank, white. Her feet slide near to mine but never touch. There is only her feel. Then she asks me if I'd want to go for seventy-three dollars.

There is a value, a number, a time, the digital clock glowing like swamp gas. There are fishnets, cells of little old quanta. There is a veil. All is black. There is the question, who died? The wind howls, but the wind is not a wolf, not a killer. Don't matter. That wind'd about rip a head off. A wolf does so. So does a killer.

"Nobody I knew," she says. "What's your name?" I say Jada. I do not say Sheila's partner. That'd be a mite gauche. "You from around here?" There is still the accent copied from the pitiless announcer. "Yes, I'm from around here." The street mirrors the color and texture of the moon. With

Sheila, there was knowledge, judgment, a hurt little spanked face. A knuckle to scratch an eye may cut it open.

Spanish moss hangs in curtains from a sycamore. There are fingers on an inner thigh, a little hurt in the doing. There is motion again, my head out the window like a dog's, tongue lapping, the mirror hooded by my body, the car hood there before us, the rustle inside of fishnets against one another, quanta rubbing up against other quanta, like the sound of cicadas, clicking like heels on the road, a sound blasting like a head light switched off, across the rumble strip as the hood stops rumbling. She's gone, I'm gone, cicadas wake, the rustle of an empty cicada exoskeleton, for she has moved on, psycho killer on the radio, and a fist in the eye of the one in the mirror who is I.

There's one of them blank patches right around then I reckon if I reckon back to right around then, that patch of blankness.

#

There is a disappearance. There is not. Inside those little old glass booth motel offices, they can see you, but them you can't see. There is one of them little old bells and out comes a girl in a black skirt with little roses on it, a raggedy t-shirt, her jet hair all up. There is no click of heels. There are chuck taylors. There are bright yellow walls against my vision. There is beauty blasting my breath out and away like an emptied cicada exoskeleton. There is no click, only the tick of the clock. There is the tap of her finger against the guest book, the rustle

of keys in a cabinet. There is music screaming from the back room.

"I just noticed. We're already full tonight," she says. "No rooms?"

"Not a one."

"Damn. But I done already signed my name," I say. "You'n erase it."

"I don't mind," I say.

She starts to head into the back room. There is a reflection in the glass turning and me returning.

"Hey! What's your name?"

"Cass," she says. She leans against the door jamb.

"Did you see mine?" I ask. I have to keep her talking, dumbfounded as I am.

"No. I'll see it when I erase it," she sighs without looking.

"Wait," I say. She waits without looking at me. All I see is her black hair. I explain, "I put a fake name on this here book. Let me tell you my real name. You ain't curious?"

"Why'd I care?" she asks. "Why would I want to know?" But she's smiling. "Well fine. I don't gotta tell you. 'Specially if you don't care," I say.

"All right. Tell me."

I tell her Frances.

She reaches down to the boss's desk right there for one of the cigarettes lying on the pine. "That with a e or an i?"

"I? You got a drink back in that room?" I ask.

"Maybe."

"Well, you gonna turn down a stranger asking for one?"

"I suppose not."

"Now see. I done been polite and you started being polite."

"Who do you think you are talking to me that way?"

"Who am I? Who do I think I am? A

dog.”

“A dog.”

“A little old dog.”

“Something off with you.”

“With you, something’s on.”

She blows her smoke, her elbow in her palm. The smoke blankets the fluorescent lights, where the light will lay itself down to sleep in the morning, wake itself again at dusk. She nods, stubbing out the butt and sitting across from me. That’s when she really stares at me.

“What?” I ask and stare back.

“Nothing.”

“You ought not let in strangers like me, seeing as that killer’s loose and killing.”

“Yeah, well. There’s a number of reasons I don’t much worry. That’s a different highway, and the killer’s North now, and I don’t really need to worry besides, ‘cause I only let in people I know. They say the killer’s from the North, ain’t got no accent, she offers. And now I know you,” she mumbles.

“Well. This evening’s turned around. It’s just become a whole big carnival,” I say. “Yeah,” she says.

#

In the little back room there are dried roses. There are red sheets. There is a poster on the wall showing a girl holding a hand in the shape of a pistol to her head. There is a song about a golden ring with a sort of military drumbeat. There are bodies lying asleep and the light of the clock’s red numbers fixed like devil’s peepers. There is a feeling that the brains of my body been scooped out, stepped on, and squashed. The body who is I is

awake. Cass is not. She dreams, and I would step on, squash, and drum her dreams with a military boot if I woke her. So I leave. When I shut the door, I remember what happened during one of those blank patches. This, this is how I shut Sheila out, how I left her.

#

There is a sun that blooms, déjà-vu every day, every day new. I knew I would leave her,

Cass, Sheila. There could of been a killer in her bed. But Sheila, what if she’s doing the same? What if she has somebody in her bed too?

I open the door and let it slam shut and open it again against the highway thrust and almost stick my neck in. ‘Cause the killer might be that somebody Sheila lets over. There is so much time I have lost.

There is a roll and curve to the highway. The treeline nods. When the radio is switched on it streamlines my psyche. Cars pass because the car I’m driving moves too slow. Or the car I’m driving is passing them—sometimes I can’t tell. What does there need to be, I ask the mirror, wait for it. There needs to be patience. It must be holy.

The killer is still on sixty-five, an authority has determined. They’re waiting for the next strike. The announcer squawks about how that’s unacceptable that an unholy killer’s on the loose, and they and other authorities are just waiting.

There’s a patient quiet. The authority says, “Sonny,” he didn’t really say “sonny,” did he? “We don’t know a thing about who this man or not is

or what’s driving him. I can tell you that judging on the nature of the acts, he most likely has got the schizophrénia. But, he’s a killer, as I repeat. We are on to his pattern of killing. But y’all got to realize that there’s nothing we can say about him. Anyone could be this killer.” Then that quiet. “Even you,” the authority told the announcer.

There needs to be safety and caution. There needs to be a phone call to Sheila, who needs to change her name to Shelly or Skyler, so as not to be identified as the fiancée of this person who I am who is worming along the highways and thinking about all hell else to boot. My head would butt the windshield if I didn’t need it to drive forward.

That one real famous song “Hey Joe” is playing on the radio. If Sheila keeps on identifying as Sheila, and there is somebody else who loves her for who she is and is herself not the killer, then I would want to be the killer of her. There must be a car in a river. It should lie there dead. There must be me on the City of New Orleans. Back in Chicago, there would be a skirmish, squashing and drumming on the head, a head butt, a military boot on the head, lying there dead like a murder victim in the City of New Orleans. Then it would be I, anonymous, with my new accent, new identity, and Sheila again, with hers if she’s got one, a new ID.

There is no place to leave the car, shut the door and leave it sleeping like the dead lie there. There is nothing. The song ends. Joe is the killer of “his woman.” There is nobody who “owns” me.

#

There is a dark little pond with a shed, an empty chair, and an open cooler. There is a head butting in at the surface. Ain’t there a parcel of this earth uncivilized by man? There is a dust cloud, a blank patch, in case the car I’m driving was followed by the killer slash new lover in a car just like it. There is a bend and a dry dirt straightaway. There is half an hour of hillbilly civilization, a stretch with weeds too high to of been driven on shortly. There is a quarry deep off a cliff. There is rainwater inside. There have been kids drinking beer. There is no cell phone. No. It’s gone, vanished in a dust cloud. The car sinks in blank water. The walk back is a long piece, through big blank patches. I nap for a spell along the road. Kids drinking beer wake me with a stick. They ask this body of mine if I want beer. They want to do things to this body of mine.

I take the stick and shut my mouth.

#

Then they gave me a ride back to town. There is a City of New Orleans train station. I’m on my way to it, with my money and all, when I see the used car lot. There is a nineteen sixty-eight Ford Mustang, the paint called starling azure. There are other cars not as good, Japanese cars. There is a beater pickup with military boots in the bed. Somebody lay there.

#

Then there’s a long blank patch, and I have a car and feel I done

good. I done not bad, at least. Maybe I shouldn't even show back up for Sheila. I hadn't done nothing like whoever killed somebody and laid the body in the bed of a beater pickup, stolen their boots.

There is a quitting, a hewing of the artery, a burning shut.

As the car I'm driving mounts the highway ramp, I search for my cell phone. There is no way to communicate with Sheila. There can be no beautiful, expressive way to communicate with Sheila. No matter how much I step and squash, beat and quit, hew, burn, there will be no more communication. There is only knowledge of who I was, judgment, and no words. There is a scarecrow, its mouth sewn with black stitches.

We're stitched together. We're unalive scarecrows. We're not. There is no we. Don't let them into "we."

The aqua blue digital clock says sundown.

There's a field that doesn't, that don't have a scarecrow. There is a dry crunch under my step like the crack of bone. There is a crucified scarecrow, holding out her arms in the field. Rubberneckers tool by and gawk, heads twisted until they can't twist no more or they'll crack like bone. There is nothing else to be but a crucified scarecrow.

There is untended plain. Stalks throng around and stab through my clothes and flesh. I know my clothes are right ripe with nasty. There hasn't been a shower for days. Even crucified scarecrows need their rest. There I lie on the field, on the horizon. There is a world spinning underneath. It's all flat with places I never been. There is a sunset to crush me and send me to

either the sky or the ground, one or the other.

There is a stumble, a thorn underfoot, a broken husk of a sweetgum seed lying in spiked pieces. To the edge of the field and behind where the house stands, in its center, is a sweetgum tree whose seeds have lit out. In some years, there'll be more of these trees if these spore keep riding the wind. The tree eclipses the field with its dark brown bark and seething green leaves. Branches shake with the knotty muscles of the sweetgum's crannies, tinier twigs like long fingernails. The tree stands surpassing all, like a sentinel of the sum of the world. There's no one to tell about it. That tree, I know in just this one sighting, is more beautiful than this whole crucified scarecrow's life. All I have is a few paces away. Yet I wanted to tell about it. I should find silence.

#

There's brush along the highway, pieces of plastic and cardboard littering it. There's a sun just gone under, the livid pallor of all the surface save the sweetgum sucking at the world. There's a snap in my neck. Is that a shooting star moving slow? No. It's headlights, gliding across the sky.

There is a window to close, road to ride. The empty fields course and whisper past, the earth rolling onto her shoulder from me.

There is the radio, but no news of the killer. One announcer says he suspects she has given up. Maybe so. Another says they'll find a body in one of the great northern cities,

such as Chicago, only after a period of time. Then it'll start again. The voices all talk the same, the accents all sound the same. Then, I hear it—I'm talking to myself.

"Sweetgum" was originally published as "Highway Anonymous" in Fiddleback. It is a story from Ian's forthcoming book, Grow Me Up and Other Oaths.



Messing with Mr. T, and Other Stories

Daniel Madaj

In an episode of the Dobie Gillis television series from the early 1960s, Maynard G. Krebs is given a Rohrschacht test. To every image shown, Maynard replies, "Sex!"

Tales continue from the Experimental College, in an alternate RC universe.

1. My Baby Must Be A Mortician

In her lucid dream, XC student Jill Smith met a dashing young man, and easily, wonderfully, they fell into bed, where Jill had the most wonderful sex of her young life. She looked over at him. He smiled with a look that was more cunning than warm.

"I think I've died and gone to heaven," she said.

He smirked. "Some of that, at least, could be true."

What did he mean by that? She

didn't like that smirk, and told herself to wake up.

But she couldn't!

His smirk deepened. "Come with me," he said. "I think you'll find plenty of enjoyments beyond the limitations of life."

Okay, now she really did need to wake up.

But still couldn't!

Did she make a silent call for help? Because a moment later, she heard a loud snarl, and there was Hugo, Darryl and Marta's golden retriever, up on the bed, separating Jill from the man, showing the man his teeth.

Before the man could make a

counter-move, a cacophony of barks arose, as tens, as hundreds, as thousands of other dogs swarmed around the bed, all growling at the man!

And then: A pulsing buzz?

Jill opened her eyes like she was gasping for breath after breaching a deep pool. She reached over and turned off the alarm. She had set the alarm to allow barely enough time to shower, dress, and grab a bite of breakfast out the door . . .

She slumped back against her pillow. She felt around the bed, searching beyond the dampness of her own frightful sweat, searching for a bit of male residue . . . She didn't find any, at least not yet.

She was going to be late for class.

The XC continues its tradition of interviewing as many in-state applicants as possible to check on fit. On the days when several prospective students are scheduled for interviews, Raven Caraway likes to borrow Hugo, who mostly snoozes in the corner of her small office, rousing for an occasional treat or greet, giving subtle but clear feedback. Raven thinks about Jill Smith, whom Raven might have dismissed (too cocky, too complex, too dangerous). But Hugo was delighted with her, and Raven relented.

And then there was Sparky Knott.

The first Marta Rozzum heard about Sparky was in a call from the ER nurse at the university hospital. Sparky was an XC student, and the nurse knew about Marta's connection there, and of course knew of Marta's interest in sleep and dreams (and her sleep clinic, which everyone called "the

Slumberyard"). Marta hurried down to the ER, where she found Sparky dozing in a stiff-backed chair in the waiting area. Since he didn't seem to be oozing fluids or to be otherwise in a critical emergency, she invited him up to her office.

Awake, Sparky was affable and talkative. His blond hair was newly long: Marta could tell because he kept swiping it out of his eyes, not yet familiar with how to control it. He was an XC freshman, he said, and taking the dream-focused freshman seminar. He had rarely remembered dreams, and sometimes wondered if he had them all, but a few weeks into the semester he was enjoying his dreams so much that all he wanted to do was go back to sleep and dream. He was skipping classes, he wasn't hanging out with friends. In fact, he had just broken up with his girlfriend . . .

Marta raised her eyebrows, and Sparky stopped, looked down, and said, "Well, actually, she broke up with me. She said it was embarrassing to her that I would rather sleep than have sex. I guess I can't blame her . . ."

Marta smiled, thinking that Sparky likely wouldn't have made such an admission to a male doctor. It would be a taboo subject in the male hetero club.

Marta also noted that, a year or so ago, before she met Darryl, "the dream detective," she would likely have prescribed Sparky a stimulant to make it harder to sleep, assigned an exercise regimen, given him a bromide (like: "it's important to have balance in your life"), and scheduled a brief follow-up visit in a week or two.

Meanwhile, Sparky waited patiently. He expected a scolding, and a prescription for strong drugs to blast him

out of his groove, and it would be worth it all, he now realized, because maybe it would be enough to coax Angelina back into his life. She's been gone for almost two days, and it seems forever.

Instead, she asked, "Are your dreams mostly about the XC, or about high school, or the house you grew up in?" Sparky didn't expect questions about the content of his dreaming. "Uh, mostly high school, I guess, why?"

Marta didn't answer, but asked, "Are there any XC people who are prominent in your dreams?"

Sparky thought a moment, paused, and then said, "Not so much people. But . . . do you know that dog, the one who sometimes sits in the admissions office? Herbert, or something? I think he's been almost a constant in my dreams, but hanging around the periphery."

Marta smiled. "Are you free for dinner, tonight?" She gave him the address, and he programmed it into his phone. "Around 6 would be good," she said.

She added: "Hugo will be there."

XC senior Chrysanthé Glafkos had worked on the Aristophanes Theatre Project since its beginning: actor, writer, a Greek student face for the project, mundane errand runner. She (and anyone else) seemed ever-blocked from running things as long as never-graduating E.J. Jackson continued in that position. But suddenly E.J.'s last lingering credit was achieved (thanks to Sylvie St. John's canny help) and now Helen is the new manager!

So it seemed like her own little Greek tragedy that almost the first bit of mail she opened as new manager was . . .

from a national waste management company with Greek ties wanting the project to write and stage a short series of waste management dramas (or comedies!) for its annual shareholder meeting, later this year and in Romulus, so not too far away.

What should she do? Should she rip the letter in half and toss it? And yet . . . the substantial sum for the effort would further secure the Aristophanic future and allow for its expansion. And she has some ideas . . .

What would E.J. do?

Chrysanthé had to smile. Most likely E.J. would never have gotten around to opening that letter! Yet, she had to admit, he did have a way of bumping into good fortune. Would he say yes or no?

If she said yes: Who would write plays about waste management? Many would suggest Sylvie St. John, who had that rare gift of being able to step aside from herself and write about others. (Frankly, if Chrysanthé is going to ask her, she'd better hurry, because things are changing quickly for Sylvie). So Chrysanthé sends an email to E.J., but with a "c.c." to Sylvie, "just in case" E.J. doesn't get around to checking his email.

Sylvie and E.J. are taking a short trip to South America, ostensibly to soak up culture for the Niño en la Canasta book series and just in case the tv series based on it comes back to life. They're far enough away that it doesn't make sense to go into much detail about their trip, except perhaps to say that Sylvie's plan is going well: to test various South American hallucinogens and other drugs on E.J. and then study their effects. They won't be gone long, about four

weeks, but Sylvie is already anxious about her mother's pregnancy (and the well-being of her sister-to-be). Sylvie realizes she wants to create a female "version" of the hero and perhaps retire the male version, a shocking departure from the chameleon Sylvie has always been. She has preferences! Does she also have things she wants to say?!

Anyway, Sylvie responds immediately to Helen's e-mail, suggesting a Zoom chat. They're both in the same time zone, so it's easy to set up, and so just a little while later, they're talking face to face. Sylvie has a good excuse for E.J. not responding to her email (he's flying high in some alternate universe, just now, testing out another poultice), and when she hears about the waste management proposal, she pauses for only a moment, then says, "Hmmm, what about a romantic story about a young woman losing a ring in the trash, her abusive boyfriend is furious, the young and smitten garbage man searches the trash overnight and finds the ring, and love wins out in the end?"

Just like that: one possible story!

After the call, Chrysanthé had to close up the office and hurry to the Outside Inn for her gig at the author-reading event there. It had resumed on Wednesday nights, now that the pandemic was subsiding. The readings featured XC alums or those with ties to the XC, and Chrysanthé had worked patiently and efficiently to "grow" the event, with reasonable success.

Now she had convinced the Inn's owners to repurpose an under-used little side room as a bookstore, at first

open only during the readings, showcasing books by this and previous readers but also works by other XC alums. Alumni contributions had funded the purchase of inventory, and otherwise the overhead was minimal. Maybe it could become a kind of bookstore . . . Maybe she and Milton could stay in town, after graduation. He could go on for his Masters, and she could run the bookstore . . .

Maybe it was because her accession to the top of the Aristophanes Project had been blocked by E.J., but Chrysanthé has not seen that she has a rare gift, aided and amplified by her organizational and logical thinking: she seems to be a "quickener," a catalyst. Involved in something, she seems to immediately help it along. Let's hope she always chooses wisely!

Meanwhile, as she arrives at the Inn, she bumps into sophomore Jen Hermadik, who is also working the event as a room assistant. She tells Jen about the waste management project, and rather than laughing Jen says, "That's interesting. You know, I thought I wanted to be a police officer, then a soldier, but I think what mostly attracted me were these souped-up vehicles: squad cars, tanks. What about a garbage truck? How have they changed over the years? Where are they built?" She touched Chrysanthé on the shoulder. "I think there's a story there."

A second possible story!

Work had been slow at the Outside Inn, and "Chef P" lingered at the apartment, straightening things after Maggie left early for a social work exam. He made the bed, tossed dirty clothes into the hamper, and lined

up their stuffed animals along the bookshelves, giving each his customary morning greeting. Interesting: here was a small bear he'd never seen before. He put him on a shelf with the dog, the frog, and the cat. A bit of morning sun glinted off the bear's eyes, and then there was a third glint, between and above. Moving the fur aside with a finger, he found a third eye!

2. Mock Uncle Joe

Chef P. looked at the bear, then put him back on the bookshelf. That third eye suggested the yoga "cult" that was getting a lot of buzz these days: apparently a university student had been appointed one of the new swamis, and resources were devoted to upgrading the sleepy little meeting center into the beginnings of an actual ashram. That "boy swami" was apparently fun and not pretentious and very much an American, and promoting a three-eyed stuffed animal seemed like something he'd do.

As to why Martha hadn't mentioned her involvement? He felt a hot zizz of anger, like heartburn, then a cold ache of regret. More than anyone, she knew the history of his addictive behaviors! Likely that was in play.

You see, as a kid, Chef P., Petrik Mazurski, Pete, was an odd mix of obsessive and lazy: he could stay involved with something for hours as long as it wasn't hard. He didn't need to win, and didn't seem to care if he lost, although he didn't lose very often. His friends, and then his girlfriends, seemed easy choices. He didn't want to work hard at anything, even love.

Pete was a decent student, which

is to say he was smart enough to do fairly well, considering how little effort he put in. He did manage to get into the XC, where he lasted a week or two. Guess what? College's lack of external structure brought quick doom, and then drugs entered the picture. He was such an enthusiastic, regular user that many pegged him as an addict, which seemed accurate but incomplete: he seemed to use drugs to prevent himself from caring about anything too much.

Pete didn't want to move back in with his parents, who would likely complicate his new "lifestyle" by expecting him to work or take classes or at least help around the house. So instead he "crashed" with his older brother Greg in New York, where Greg was in pre-med at Columbia.

Greg was patient, for a while, and so was his girlfriend Liz, but they but eventually grew tired of Pete hanging around, doing nothing except smoke all their dope and leave a mess everywhere. As a kind of compromise, Greg said, "Look, you can stay here as long as you want, but you're going to have to pay rent." That meant getting a job. Hmm, what kind of job would let him stay stoned all day? He remembered helping his uncle Joe Mazurski cook; Joe claimed to have created every famous food dish, from toast to mac'n cheese. You know that hamburger and macaroni dish known as Joe Mazzotti? "That's just a bastardization of Mazurski," Joe would say. Joe's long gone. Whether upstairs or down, it's likely he claimed to have helped build it.

Pete wandered all the way down to Greenwich Village. He liked its relaxed, funky feel, and started to pay atten-

tion to the businesses along 11th Street. Here was a dive called The Four Hundred Pound Griller. It might be fun. But: would he have to wear a gorilla suit? Or padding? (Pete was rather thin, so it would take a lot). Either or both would make it hot and cumbersome in the kitchen . . .

Across the street was a little place called Joe's Grill, which of course reminded him his uncle. The owner was desperate enough to give Pete a part-time job in the kitchen. Pete worked just enough to keep in his brother's good graces.

Bored with the normal fare of burgers and dogs, scrambled eggs and toast, he started to whip up his uncle's "Joe Mazzotti" once a week, with oregano and fennel in a from-scratch tomato sauce, three cheeses, spinach noodles. People liked it; a sign about it even went up in the window.

One day some college friends dragged Margaret Marling to Joe's for lunch. Maggie was from San Diego, but was in town going to Empire State nearby. Her friends were big fans of the Joe Mazzotti, but as was often the case with carnivores, they had overlooked the fact that Maggie was a vegetarian.

So Maggie made do with salad and french fries. Smitten, Pete promised that if she'd come back, he'd serve her a vegetarian version of Joe Mazzotti. Also smitten, she agreed, but asked, "but how will I know when it's available?"

"That's easy," Pete said. "I'll make it every day until you come back."

And he did. Crumbled grilled tempeh replaced the hamburger. Uncle Joe would have rolled his eyes and mocked the substitution.

Maggie came back in about a week. She liked Mock Uncle Joe, and so did others. The grill changed hands a few times during the winter, but Mock Uncle Joe stayed on the menu. But of course Mock Uncle Joe was no longer the only reason Maggie was dropping by.

For most of us, being "smitten" mellows into a pleasant glow (or it fizzles and sputters, only to reignite elsewhere!), and that was true for Maggie, but not for Pete. If anything, Pete's infatuation with Maggie grew and grew, which at first Maggie found flattering but quickly became suffocating. It was a little like being a baseball fan and then being nailed into a seat at the ballpark. Pete's smothering obsession had an ironic twist: he stopped smoking marijuana, the better to focus his attentions upon her!

The winter semester was ending, and Maggie was looking forward to returning to San Diego for the summer. Alone. Boy, did she need a break! But Pete of course wanted to come along. She ingeniously argued that someone needed to stay back and watch over their apartment. Pete cleverly countered by saying he would, but first he wanted to travel to San Diego with her, see her home town, meet her parents and friends. So they wound up with two round-trip tickets: hers had a return in mid-August, his a return at the end of that first weekend.

It's probably not a surprise to know that, come Monday morning, Pete was not on his flight back to New York. But by then, Maggie was far, far, far from his mind . . .

It was because of the ocean.

Endless! Constantly in motion! Irresistible . . .

Maggie's folks lived on the hill below where Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss) used to live. When Maggie drove Pete down the hill to Long Beach so they could wade into the ocean swells, Pete, who had never seen the ocean before, never wanted to leave!

Pete spent almost all of that weekend at the beach, which was a relief for Maggie. When Monday came and it was time to drive him to the airport, Pete was nowhere to be found. Yes, he was on the beach. And that's where he stayed, all that summer, into the fall.

Pete found a little shack of a restaurant near the beach. Everyone called it Formerly's, because that was the only part of the name that stuck; one day it was Ernesto's Grill, formerly Frank's Red Hots, then Susie's Surf'n Turf, formerly Ernesto's. Pete got a job there, cashing in his return ticket and renting a corner of a dilapidated surfer shack further up the beach . . . So when Maggie returned to New York for her senior year of college, Pete was not with her. In truth, it was a relief. What stung the most was this evidence of her continuing bad taste in men. All the things Pete had left behind fit into two cardboard boxes; she shoved the boxes in a closet, certain she'd never see Pete again.

Maggie also never needed to see the inside of Joe's Grill. But her friends liked the food, and now the new owners had expanded the vegetarian menu as part of an obscure ethnic heritage that local media raved about. One of these friends was Curt Bielik, a handsome pre-med student with whom Maggie had some

romantic interest. Curt's presence as well as the passage of time helped normalize Joe's, and before long, Maggie had mostly forgotten about Pete, especially if she avoided the Mock Uncle Joe, which had remained on the menu.

What happened next is somewhat obscure, but it seems that a new set of foreign owners thought that "Uncle Joe" would be improved not only with "meat," but with, uh, human "meat," figuring that "Joe" was a carnivorous tradition. Fortunately, the owners didn't get far with their plan: they were overheard by a police detective who happened to be having lunch at the restaurant. The worst thing that happened was that poor Curt Bieliek was briefly captured. You might say that plan was nipped before Curt could be.

Before things went to trial, attention turned to Mock Uncle Joe and then eventually to Pete. Did anywhere know where he was now? Uh, well, Maggie thought she did . . .

Back in San Diego, most of Pete's hovel-mates were avid surfers, the better to interact more completely with the water. And while Pete has done some of this, active surfing was too much work; he was content to just stand near shore, letting the swells lift him off his feet . . .

Pete worked at Formerly's for a few hours a day, which was enough to pay for his rent and incidentals. He eats for free at Formerly's while he's cooking. And so the ocean is never far away: he can hear its rhythmic roar even over the clatter of the kitchen and the murmurs of the restaurant crowd.

As weeks became months, could

the water be washing the obsession out of Pete? He began to feel different. It wasn't that the ocean was less invigorating: his need for it seemed to lessen. It did seem that another change was in process (he joked of it as a "sea change"), and therefore wasn't completely surprised when the subpoena arrived . . .

Back in New York, the trial wraps up quickly.

Poor Curt Bieliek is not just traumatized by what almost happened to him, he can't accept Maggie's involvement in it, however innocent. He takes the rest of the semester off; the school is of course sympathetic. He moves back home . . .

And Maggie discovers that she still likes Pete, especially now that he seems almost normal. After graduating later that spring, she's accepted into a social work grad program. Pete comes along, and gets a cooking job at the Outside Inn . . .

If Maggie and Pete end up getting married and have kids, they might name their first son Joseph. If so, this time, Uncle Joe would be right.

3. Messing with Mr. T

Earl Hoover was having a rough night. It was a Sunday, and he had just returned to the XC after an odd, disappointing weekend home. A party was going on down the hall from his room, and Earl was offered a small bottle of gin. Unfamiliar with hard liquor, Earl chugged the contents, briefly enjoyed his high, but then found that the brakes weren't working. He kept getting disturbingly higher. He spent the next hour or so sprawled in

front of a toilet in the men's communal bathroom, which earned him the nickname "Hurl Heaver." His floor mates coaxed him to drink lots of water, then put him into his bed. It was now after midnight, and most of the water had worked its way through his system, urging him back down the hall.

At a urinal, even foggy-headed "Hurl" couldn't help noticing the young man stepping up next to him. The man was wearing long orange robes. The man smiled congenially, and said, "Yes, the robes do make this more complicated, but they're necessary for the overnight chant in 4518." He invited Earl to join them.

Earl mumbled something in reply, hurried back to his room, vowing he would never drink again. He held to his vow for a very long time: almost a week!

The all-night chant in the XC "hall" ended at 7 a.m. The "hall" was actually two large XC "doubles" next to each other with the wall between them removed. The plan was to put the wall back up in the spring. Forming the hall also required a lot of moving of roommates, and Richard, impressed with this dedication and creativity, agreed to a weekly overnight chant in this new hall.

It was now 7 a.m., and folks quickly dispersed: to sleep, to finish homework, to get ready for morning classes. Richard lingered, as usual, accepting the standard invitation to join some of the chanters for a dorm cafeteria breakfast. He changed into more normal clothes, and then looked much like the other students, except that he didn't look sleepy.

He wasn't sleepy. In truth, he rarely was, these days. He also was rarely hungry, but dutifully ministered to his bodily needs, including rest. He looked around the cafeteria for Jill, but didn't see her. He was disappointed she hadn't attended the overnight chant, like she had the previous week, but he understood why. Then, she had talked with him after the chant, then asked him to come to her room so she could pick up a sweater on their way to the cafeteria, but once the door was open she quickly kissed him, and tried to pull him inside. He gently pushed her away, thanked her for her interest, and hurried downstairs.

It was not as easy or simple as it sounds.

He did see Earl Hoover, sitting in a corner. Earl still looked sickly, and now looked nervous, glancing over at Richard from time to time, probably wondering if he was an apparition from his strange overnight. Richard felt uncomfortable with the attention from his breakfast companions, and so told them a story. He said it was about the Buddha, although Richard made it up. Nevertheless, he wouldn't be surprised to hear it had happened:

In the story, the Buddha was talking, then noticed that several of his followers were earnestly writing down every word! He stopped them, saying, "You've got to think for yourselves! Live your own lives!!" Years later, scholars note there were two sentences, signifying the basic duality of human life. There were ten words, each representing a facet of life, including that initial contraction,

showing that some condensing of experience is acceptable and even encouraged . . .

This all began a few months ago, when Richard Greenwood, seemingly a fairly regular student at the university, awoke inside what he can only describe as a shimmering cloud of happiness. It was a while before he learned that he had been tabbed as a new swami . . .

You see, many years ago, the head swami of this particular branch of yoga died. He had presciently named a successor, and almost everyone agreed with his choice, only he picked identical-twin monks, probably figuring one of them would step forward. It turned out to be easier to keep both.

So, many years later, when they were considering their successors, they impishly each picked two.

That seemed impossible, but things worked out quite well, and, many years later, there were eight swamis, and now, 16!

Eight and now sixteen allowed for greater variety, and now here was Richard, Richard XVIth, an American.

Richard likely drew notice at a yoga conference in Chicago, the year before. It is said that a swami noted his pure heart, his simple but deep devotion.

Indeed, it seems that these are the things that have been amplified, as the chi, or Shakti, or energy pulses through him, and that it is these things mostly, and less so his American-ness, that has made him so appealing to others.

The "ashram" was in an old rent-

ed house on the edge of town, but there was talk of expansion. Frankly, Richard liked the modest, temporary aspect of the rental, and chuckled to himself at his imagined reply to a question about his own future as a swami: "I'm a Millennial; I can't imagine doing anything for more than a few weeks!" Some of the ashram staff brooded about Richard's weekly overnights at the XC, but perhaps more so because he didn't hurry back to the ashram's controlled environment. Richard treasured this freedom, and made a point to leave his cellphone behind.

This morning he decided to take a walk in the university arboretum, only a few blocks to the northeast, and then found a comfortable grassy spot beneath a big oak with a view of the river. He continued to marvel at the palpable bliss that continued to well up inside him. How long would it continue? He smiled, well aware of the many things that could make it end.

Eventually, back on city streets, on his way back to the ashram, Richard found himself thinking about Jill, wondering if they could ever have a conversation about what he might call "Ms. Es and Mr. T," as in "estrogen" and "testosterone." Ever since puberty, Richard had acknowledged the new, powerful presence of "Mr. T," with his insistence that sexual orgasm was the most important thing in the universe. The only important thing!

You know, in the last few weeks it wasn't so much that Mr. T's influence had diminished (although "he" might rage that it was so!); it was that this palpable bliss had grown and grown,

putting other things into a different perspective. If he was ever going to talk about it, he might say it was like considering a fabulous meal but having just eaten your fill.

Richard had assumed that the influence of "Ms. Estrogen" on women was nothing like Mr. T's, nothing so singularly focused, but he was likely wrong. After all, most medical research continues to focus on men, not women.

He did wonder what Jill would have to say about this. He hoped her interest in him was more than just a moment of jaunty conquest, of trying to "bring him down." He had been aware, in that moment, of what he thought best for her, as not just what he might enjoy. Wasn't that called the Platinum Rule? That got him wondering about the various "rules of behavior," mostly absentions, that had been constructed by others, long ago, and for other reasons . . .

Thinking about Jill as he walked back toward the ashram, he felt a little "ding," and knew she was nearby. You see, in his "lucid dreaming" state of half-sleep he had previously "met" Jill, and Darryl and Hugo, all inside their own lucid dreams. That's why he recognized Jill when he first met her, last week at the overnight chant. And he knew Darryl from several lectures and articles about dreams. Wasn't there some sort of project about dreams going on at the XC?

Richard's route seemed to follow the "ding," now louder and joined by "dings" for Darryl and Hugo! Was it possible that all three were currently in the same house? That was when he saw the big golden dog barking and barking at him from the front win-

dow of a house on the left. Hugo! Of course he'll stop to visit.

A note of gratitude is due Roger Zelazny, for an "Amber" story, as well as Dr. Seuss, for The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins. Thanks again to Diane Duane for the dog wizards! Thanks to Russell Hoban, in general, but specifically for Pilgermann, and a question from Jesus: "Can you contain even the expectation of the full reply of me to you?" Thanks to Abraham Maslow for his concept of the "experiencer" and "non-experiencer." Thanks to Judy Miller for my first Joe

Mazotti. Thanks to Gail Berger (Witt) for Ted, circa 1969, and to Ann Merchberger (Dinan) for his sweater (circa 1970).

By the way, Ann Arbor had a Siddha Yoga ashram on Hill Street, a few blocks from East Quad, from the mid-70s to



mid-80s. And one of the guests Warren Hecht brought to his Narration classes in the early '70s was Max Shulman, author of the original Dobie Gillis stories.

Three excerpts from *The Janitors*

**Peter Anderson
and Warren Hecht**



Every RC student has had some interaction with U-M janitors, in-person or indirectly (through the conditions of the bathrooms and hallways), if only because each student has lived in East Quad for at least two academic years.

Peter Anderson's clever play-within-a-play was performed in the East Quad theater (now the Keene) in mid July 1975. It was co-written by the RC's Warren Hecht, and directed by RC alum Gail Lee Reisman, with music by RC alum Steven Schwartz.

Peter worked briefly as a U-M janitor at Mary Markley, and drew on his experiences to write a story about Gardner, a creative writing grad who takes a one-month job as a janitor as research for a play he's writing about working as a university janitor While humorous, satirical, musical, and even fantastical (with talking toilets and a visit from the "patron saint" of janitors), the play is also sympathetic to the work conditions of the custodial staff. Excerpts below include appearances by supervisor Mrs. Dunk, and Gardner the writer and his girlfriend Rosalie. . . . And the "Go Glow" in the play is more real than imaginary! - DM

DUNK

(stares Roy down)

25% degreaser and 75% Go Glow.

(Loud disapproval from the janitors, except Gardner who looks confused.)

PEARL

Not me, honey, I ain't usin' that Go Glow shit.

ROY

You wanna gas us or something?

CAROL

You ain't getting me on my hands and knees in no shower stall sniffin' these poison fumes.

BETTY

I got allergies.

DUNK

I play no favorites. Here's your masks and here's your bottles. Get to work.

(Dunk passes out spray bottles and surgical masks. Pearl, Betty, Arnold and Dunk exit).

GARDNER
(to Juan)

What is this stuff?

JUAN
(with a sigh)

You find out soon enough. Just hold your breath when you spray, then get the hell out.

(Roy and Carol reach for the same bottle and their hands touch. Roy looks at Carol embarrassed, then removes hand.)

ROY
(to Gardner)

It's like teargas. They shoulda called it Go Glue 'stead of Go Glow. One whiff of this is better'n a case of Romilar spiked with Mr. Clean.

(Roy, Carol, Gardner and Juan begin spraying walls and toilets. Army training movie music begins. Voice comes over loudspeaker.)

VOICE
(inflated)

Spaced Janitors on Parade! Each year millions of our men in gray and women in white march into the hearts and commodes of Institutional America armed only with a common sponge and a bottle of Go Glow. To them falls the thankless task of KEEPING IT CLEAN FOR YOU. Don't believe the media lies that some bacteria is good for you. These dedicated public servants know this is not true. Dirty greasy distortion! Germs and cooties are no-no! Ich bin nein! GO GLOW IS YES-YES!

(Janitors have started to feel the effect of Go Glow.)

Of course the casualty rate is high but so are some of the fearless janitors as they fall to the fighting fumes of freedom's finest technology. So come on, Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public. Let these guys and gals know you care. How about it? Huh?

(Voice slows down. Music and movement slow also.)

Remember if you gotta go, go Go Glow. Use only as directed.

GARDNER
What a buzz!

TOILETS
Bzzzzzz!

* * *

(... The toilet bowls rise in unison. Music.)

TOILETS
(sing)

Got no hope
Got detergent soap
Greasy shower
Scrub and scour
Varicose veins
Dirty windowpanes
Got chapped knees
Got a ring of keys
But the door to success is still locked
C'mon and do the Janitor Rock
Rock! Rock 'n Payroll!

Flush it down, sweep it up,
polish, wax and buff
Mop it on, rub it off,
scrub and huff and puff

He's a custodian on parade
Side by side with all of the maids
You think he's got nothing to say
But after all the sinks've been sprayed

He goes home just like you
With a head full of dreams
That never come true
And a paycheck that makes him feel blue

TOILETS

Two-fifty
(the Government takes a buck)
One-fifty
(Social Security's a shuck)
One dollar
(the State sends a form: "Good Luck")
Half a dollar
(the union brings him more trouble)
One quarter
(the cost of living has doubled)
One dime
(the coffee costs more than that
Per Hour!
and it tastes like mud!)

* * *

(After blackout, spotlight comes up immediately on Rosalie extreme stage left who is sitting in the same chair as the beginning of Act Three. Rosalie is reading from the script. Dunk, Pearl, and Juan have exited, Roy and Gardner and toilets are still in position from preceding scene. Lights come up dimly on rest of stage.)

ROSALIE

How trite.

GARDNER
*(steps toward Rosalie,
a little confused)*

What?

ROSALIE
Do you really think people'll believe Roy cracking up like that? It's worse than tv.

GARDNER
(defensive)

Well, it's true you know, and I want the play to tell it like is, or was. *(takes book from her)*

ROSALIE

Yeah, but sometimes the truth is too weird. If you . . .

GARDNER

Look, Rosalie, I'm trying to read you the play to see if it's straight. Just tell me if it follows logically.

ROSALIE

Man, if it's not believable, who care if it's logical. It's not enough to just put down what happened during the month you had that job and call it a play.

GARDNER
(annoyed)

Oh, ok, what do you say I should put there instead?

ROSALIE

You don't have to get nasty about it.

GARDNER

I'm just fed up with everybody telling me how to do something I know I can do twice as good!

ROSALIE
(coldly)

I can't talk to you.

GARDNER
(penitent)

Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I just want your opinion.

ROSALIE
(hugs him)

Friends.

GARDNER

Friends.

Beyond MS Word: Advanced Writing Tools for the 21st Century

J. L. Hagen

We've Come a Long Way, Baby

The first time I saw an IBM Selectric in the Dean's office at Residential College, I knew I had witnessed the final destination of technology's long march toward writing tool perfection. One day, when I chanced on the opportunity to press a key, I loved its crisp snap as it laid a coal-black letter on the typing paper. As I strung a sentence word by word out of my head, I was thrilled to watch the little font ball tap dance from left to right. It seemed to listen to my thoughts. And I marveled to see it skid back to start the next line as the paper advanced with no need for a carriage return lever. This was genius, millimeters short of magic.

If I could buy an IBM Selectric, it would be all I needed to achieve my college ambition of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. But a tool that innovative, that productive, that—dare I say it—beautiful, would be extraordinarily expensive. I could hardly afford beer money; how could I ever obtain the resources to acquire one?

Perhaps, I thought, I could find a used Selectric that might be within financial reach. But, no, who would ever part with a tool so magnificent? It seemed impossible.

Then, one day, IBM introduced the self-correcting Selectric, a work

of wizardry which passed out of the sphere of pure science and into the realm of witchcraft. I vowed, someday, somehow, I would obtain one.

But circumstances intervened. I could never find a model at a price I could afford; so, like countless others of my writing brethren, my container shipload of Nobel ambitions was dashed on Poverty Rock.

Then, the fickle finger of technology marched on, having written the Selectric's epitaph on an IBM PC loaded with WordPerfect and entombed it in an eight-inch floppy disk.

That was Then, This is Now

Since those halcyon days, I have learned to cope with tragedy. And it's turned out to be a good thing. When it comes to planning, writing, editing, and formatting your book, there are now more writing tools than ever before and fewer barriers to entry. In short, virtually every element of the writing process has been impacted by technology. And resources continue to multiply. It's a surfeit of tools. For my writer friends stuck in the last century—*Word* dates from 1983; *Windows* from 1985—it's time to acclimate and automate your writing habits. So, let's take apart the writing process, explore what's state of the art in 2022, almost fifty years after the dissolution of my affair with the IBM

ROSALIE

(takes book from him and leafs through it)

Well, the first thing that really interests me is . . . well, you've got all these people in hopeless jobs except for yourself because you're only there to get material for your play . . . but if I was writing I'd have Gardner get stuck being a janitor for fifteen, twenty years.

(Gardner groans and doubles over with age.)

Where would he be at then?

GARDNER

Go ahead, fire me! I'm a writer, not a goddamn janitor! Just because I

ain't written nothin' in twenty years don't mean nothin'! If it wasn't for the Depression, Rosie wouldn't've made me keep this job and I would've made it to Broadway by now!

(runs offstage right howling, siren subsides, searchlights dim.)

(Spotlight comes up immediately on Rosalie, stage left. The chairs and glasses are still there. She yells offstage to Gardner.)

ROSALIE

And I don't care if you don't like it! I know what you really think you lazy jerk! I know the real reason you quit!

(exits stage left)

Selectric, and see how software can make your author's life a thing of joy.

1795—Wood pencil
1867—Remington typewriter
1938—Biro ball point pen
1961—IBM Selectric
1972—Floppy disk
1977—Personal computer
1979—WordStar
1980—WordPerfect
1981—IBM PC
1983—Word
1985—Windows
1989—World Wide Web
2007—Kindle Direct Publishing

But First, The Big Picture

If you read any book, blog, or video about writing a novel, memoir, or even a screen play, chances are it will touch on most if not all the following steps:

Plan your book

- Generate ideas
- Build characters
- Create setting
- Structure story
- Summarize plot

Write your book

- Select point of view
- Integrate themes
- Compose scenes
- Find right words

Edit your book

- Analyze story arc
- Revise story and plot
- Edit copy
- Proofread text

Make your book

- Format text
- Create front matter
- Design cover
- Compile final version(s)

So, let's tackle these steps one at a time to learn how 21st Century software can help automate the process of writing your next best-seller. But before we jump into the deep end of the inkwell, let me suggest three publications with valuable how-to advice (plus examples and related templates) on writing fiction.

- *How to Write Best-Selling Fiction* by James Scott Bell (video course w/ instruction manual)
- *Story Genius* by Lisa Cron (book with exercises)
- *How to Write a Novel Using the Snowflake Method* by Randy Ingermanson (book with exercises)

Bell's survey video course is particularly helpful to understand the authorship process from first idea to publication. Cron's book provides the underlying theory and logic for writing compelling fiction, and Ingermanson's book offers an easy step-by-step guide to take an initial idea and blow it up into a novel. There are myriads of publications on how to write, but these are among the most useful. Let's get started, then.

Plan Your Book

Generate Ideas

Most writers probably have an idea about what they wish to write, but let's say you don't. You're in luck. There are at least a gazillion websites or programs that will generate random ideas and writing prompts—all at the touch of a button. Here, for instance, is *Reedsy's Plot Generator* (next page, upper left) which claims to contain over one million random

Mystery Plot Generator

1 million plot combinations to inspire you. Generate a random plot through this mystery plot generator. Simply click the button below to get started. Like a particular story combo? "Lock" and save it to nail it down.

Generate **Mystery** **Random** **Save**

PROTAGONIST

A federal investigator, who is devoid of purpose.

SECONDARY CHARACTER

A housekeeper, who is a chatterbox.

PLOT

It's a spy story about the evils of avarice. It kicks off at a football match with a naked man falling through the ceiling.
(Note that: this story will play out entirely in a single room.)
And there's a twist! Someone will be buried alive.

Story Prompts

Your character decides to prank his parents on April Fool's Day by pretending he's gotten a girl pregnant.

Your character broke both legs in a water skiing accident and is bedridden for the next month. Bored with TV, she sets up her telescope to watch the happenings in her neighborhood and witnesses a crime in the home across the street.

Your wild and rebellious character has been forced to spend his summer with his elderly aunt and uncle on their farm. Seeking an escape from the laundry list of chores that fill each waking hour, he hides out in the locked-up barn, the one place he's forbidden to go. What he finds inside fills him with terror.

plots. Even better, you can limit its offerings by genre. The screen shot demonstrates how the program works. And, yes, it's free!

But let's say you would like something simpler. There's always the "story prompt" engine from *One Stop for Writers* (above, bottom). Every time you click the Story Prompt button, it opens a drawer to reveal three more alternatives. And if you write for children (or are a child), you can take advantage of *ImagineForest's* hun-

Choosing Your Story's Central Conflict

While a story usually has a variety of conflict, one central type will lie at its heart. The most common literary conflict forms are:

Character vs. Character

The protagonist goes head-to-head with another character in a battle of wills. Think enemies Hans Gruner & John McClane in *Die Hard* or Westly @ Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*.

Character v. Society

A character takes on society or a powerful agency within their story world (Mildred Hayes in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* pitting herself against the police in a bid for justice).

Character vs. Nature

The character goes up against nature: weather, animals, or their environment. Think *Jurassic Park* or *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Character vs. Technology

The conflict pits a character against technology (or a machine), like Sarah Connor going up against the Terminator, or Neo and his battle with the Matrix.

Character vs. Supernatural

A character faces something outside the realm of normal understanding, such as Danny Torrance in *Dr. Sleep* or Johnny Blaze in *Ghost Rider*. This form may be broken down further as Character vs. God or Character vs. Fate.

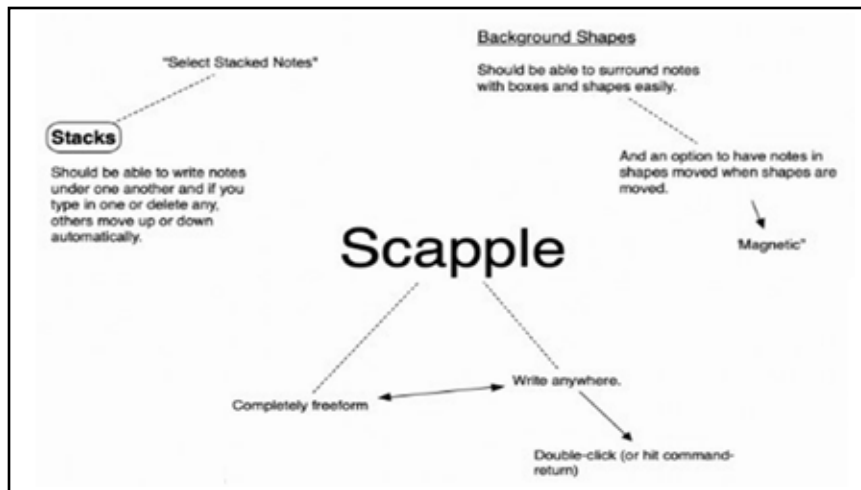
Character vs. Self

This is a personal, internal conflict where friction arises from emotional clashes within the character's own belief system. Consider Jason Bourne of *The Bourne Identity*, who is trying to regain his lost memory and be free of those hunting him. Yet, the more he unearths, the more he realizes he may not deserve freedom or a fresh start.

dreds of writing prompts for kids.

Already have the germ of an idea, but need some help to develop it? Here are some tools to flesh it out. *One Stop for Writers* has a nifty table for defining the central conflict of your story. Is it "Character vs. Character," "Character vs. Nature," "Character vs. Technology," or three other alternatives? (above, right).

One Stop for Writers will also help you write a logline: a sentence in fifty words or less that defines who



the protagonist is, his or her goal, the conflict that prevents him or her from reaching it, and what's at stake. Software programs like *Snowflake Pro*, *Plottr*, and *Contour* will also help. If you're more of a free spirit, you might try *Scapple* (above). Start with an idea; heck, start with twenty ideas. *Scapple's* story board lets you sketch them, move them around, and connect them any way you like.

Once you nail them down, you can transfer your thoughts to a structured template like *One Stop for Writers* Story Planning Checklist (next page).

But wait, there's more. Here are some other programs that will help you generate and develop your story idea.

- *Writing Exercise's* Random Plot Generator
- *RanGen's* Story Generator
- *Writer's Den's* Story Generator
- *Seventh Sanctum's* Plot Twist Generator

Build Characters

Okay, so you have a story idea. You even have a protagonist—or at least

an idea for one. But how can software help you build a solid cast? It's easy as pushing a button. Every protagonist has a fear or misbelief that prevents him or her from obtaining a goal or desire. With one click, *One Stop for Writers* will open a drawer to show you some possibilities (p. 130, top left). It will even help you place your character's greatest fear into an archetypal category (p. 130, top right).

Speaking of archetypes, an intriguing little program called *Persona* will also help you understand how your characters compare to one or more of thirty-two: sixteen evil and sixteen good, divided again by male and female, expanded into sixty-four styles (page 130, bottom). But the best feature of *Persona* is its ability to predict and frame behavior and interactions (generically) between two characters. So, if you're wondering how your "Playboy" character might interact with your "Distracted Mother" character, it's available at the touch of a mouse button. *Persona* will also help you understand the transformation of a "hero" or "heroine," should

ONE STOP FOR WRITERS®

STORY PLANNING CHECKLIST

WORKING TITLE: _____

GENRE: _____ **STORY THEME:** _____

MY KILLER IDEA	INFORMATION	LOGLINE
POINT OF VIEW	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 st Person <input type="checkbox"/> 2 nd Person <input type="checkbox"/> 3 rd Person Limited <input type="checkbox"/> Omniscient	<input type="checkbox"/> Single Viewpoint Character <input type="checkbox"/> Dual Viewpoint Character <input type="checkbox"/> Multi Viewpoint Character
WORLDBUILDING	Where my story takes place: <input type="checkbox"/> Worldbuilding Surveys complete	Important locations of note: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
CHARACTERS	Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Character Profile complete Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Character Profile complete Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Character Profile complete Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Character Profile complete	Role: _____ Role: _____ Role: _____ Role: _____
PLOT	Plot Type: _____ Central Conflict: _____	Outline Type: <input type="checkbox"/> Story Map complete <input type="checkbox"/> Formal Scene Map complete <input type="checkbox"/> Informal Scene Map complete <input type="checkbox"/> Timeline complete

VISIT [ONE STOP FOR WRITERS](http://www.onestopforwriters.com) TO VIEW THE STORY PLANNING ROADMAP AND ACCESS POWERFUL STORYTELLING TOOLS AND RESOURCES

they be corrupted into a "villain" or "villainess."

Another program with a different take on archetypes is *Dramatica* (next page, left). It's been around for awhile, and is backed by an underlying, sophisticated theory of storytelling. In *Dramatica*, character archetypes fall into one of eight categories: Protagonist, Antagonist, Guardian, and Contagonist (an archetype who

hinders or diverts the protagonist for his own purposes) who drive the story; and Sidekick, Sceptic, Emotion, and Reason, passengers who are along for the ride. *Dramatica* provides templates that help automate the process of building these characters, such as this example from *Star Wars*, including adding complexity beyond the archetype.

PLOT COMPLICATIONS

Your character has a . . .

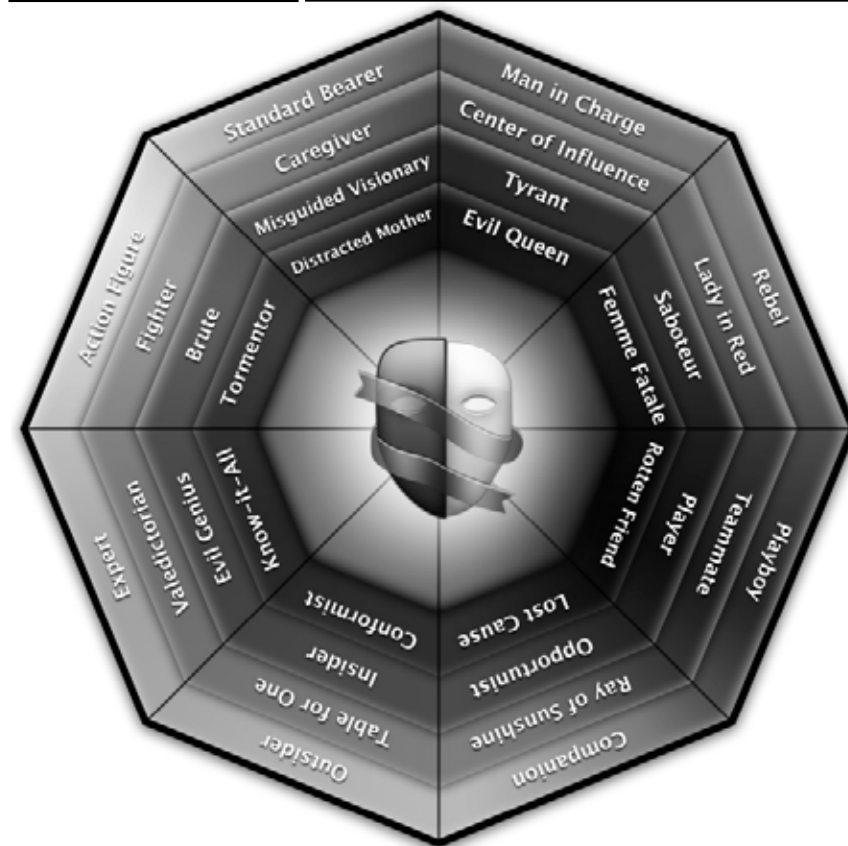
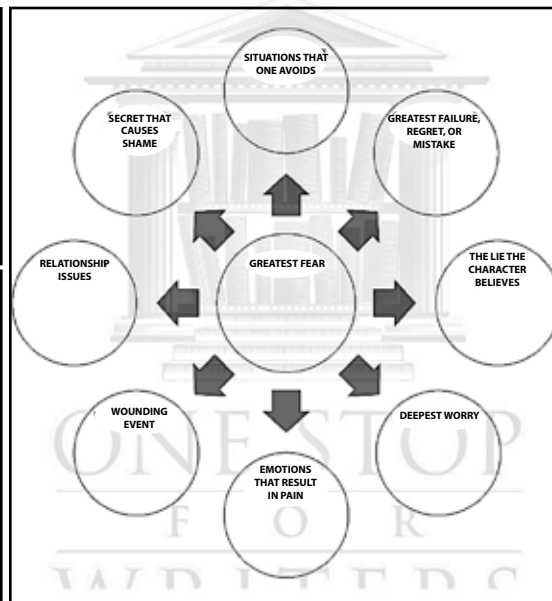
- fear of sleep
- fear bridges
- fear of drowning

FEARS

DRAMATICA ARCHETYPES

Driver characters
Protagonist - Luke
Guardian - Obi Wan
Contagonist - Darth
Antagonist - Empire

Passenger characters
Sidekick - R2D2 + C3PO
Emotion - Chewbacca
Reason - Luke
Skeptic - Han



Gilligan's Island Sample.persona — Edited

GENERAL

Name

Willy Gilligan

Type

Hero

Archetype

Companion

Style

Pai

PHYSICAL

Age

23

Height

5'10"

Weight

135

Sex

Male

Misc.

lanky

Eye Color

Blue

Hair Color

Brown

Body Type

Skinny

Ethnicity

Caucasian

OTHER

Occupation

first mate

Hobbies

banana creme pie eating

"I've done it again? I only wish I knew what I was doing."

In every episode, Gilligan manages to ruin the castaways chances of being rescued. Whenever he tries to help, he always ends up doing more harm than good. While the fellow castaways would like to kill him but he's won the affection of his fellow castaways, and plus, he is the Skipper's "little buddy" and does most of the unpleasant chores on the island. He is very content on the island, as he has everything he needs: attention, freedom, adventure, and above all, a loving substitute family. Even his favorite Rock Group the "Mosquitoes" showed up. The only thing he really misses is television, hot dogs, and licorice. He loves animals and always has a pet on the island. He also loves chocolate-covered hamburgers!

Companion

Description:

A Companion succeeds by sharing enjoyment and fulfillment with others. They are genuine, selfless, caring, understanding and prove themselves worthy of a high degree of trust from those around them. Their traits instill confidence within others and they enjoy those fulfilling relationships.

The Companion empowers others to summon the courage to do the things they might not do otherwise. Their close friends allow access to feelings, insights, or resources, and are apt to be cooperative, ignore philosophical differences, and seek to achieve a common ground. The Companion encourages close friends to openly express their hopes and feelings they wouldn't express otherwise. All of these things contribute to a relationship based on trust and openness. The Companion encourages similar relationships not only with their close friends, but also with others.

Finally, several programs such as *One Stop for Writers* and *Persona* provide templates useful for creating detailed character profiles, including the ability to drop in photos and describe various physical and psychological characteristics. (See "Gilligan's Island" example, above). And if you are stuck for a character name, *Persona* will generate over 16,000—with their origins. *MasterWriter* provides not only lists of names but also names of real people, divided into categories like actors, newsmakers, and sports figures. And sites like *Reedsy* and *Name Generator Fun* will generate over 1,000,000 combinations, including pet names, fantasy names, and names from various ethnic backgrounds.

Create Setting

The increased interest in fantasy, horror, and science fiction has amped up the importance of creating the right setting, or "world-building," as it is sometimes called. And, yes, there is software to help you build whichever world your characters choose or don't choose to live in. However, a caution

is in order: As Lisa Cron points out in *Story Genius*, your protagonist is not a camera, nor does your reader wish to view a bird's-eye view of the entire universe your character inhabits. Instead, the reader must picture the world you create through the eyes of the protagonist, as he or she experiences it—but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Reedsy's Ultimate Worldbuilding Template offers an exhaustive twenty-page questionnaire that will help you design any setting within the power of your imagination, including maps (next page, top left). It's especially helpful for sci-fi and fantasy writers, but would be useful for other genres as well, say, historical novels.

But suppose you need something more granular. *One Stop for Writers* has just the ticket. Pick a setting, and this website will supply a detailed description of the sights, smells, tastes, and textures that might be expected to be found there (next page, middle). For instance, let's say a scene in your story takes place in a pool hall. No problem. Here are a few examples

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GEOGRAPHY	History	ECONOMY
Natural world	Culture	Economics
Significant locations	Religion	Trade & commerce
Weather	Leisure	Transportation
PEOPLE	Education	Business
Races & species	TECHNOLOGY,	POLITICS
Languages	MAGIC & WEAPONS	Government
Social frameworks	Magic systems	Law
	Technology	

MONSTER IN THE HOUSE:

A big, bad boogeyman is out to get the protagonist, who is confined to a specific space or area, such as a literal house, town, or farm. This might be the alien creatures in *A Quiet Place*, Pennywise the clown in *IT*, or Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

SIGHTS:

Neon beer signs and low lighting
Tinted or grimy windows
Rows of pool tables with green felt
Balls lined up for the break
Wall racks for pool cues and rests

SMELLS:

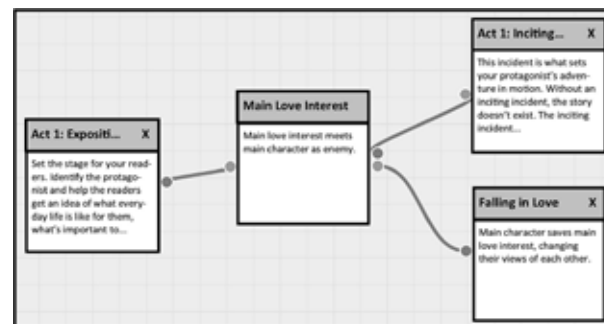
Beer and other alcoholic beverages
Dry chalk
Felt
Greasy food from the kitchen
Sewat, cologne, perfume, or body odor
Beer breath

TASTES:

Various drinks such as beer, water, pop, vodka, rum, rye, whiskey
Crunchy ice cubes
Nachos, fries, dry ribs, pizza, burgers, and other pub food
Coffee
Salt and other seasonings or condiments
Lime or lemon wedges

TEXTURES AND SENSATIONS:

The smooth slide of a cue shaft along the crook of one's hand
Scraping the chalk cube against the cue's tip
The weight of a server's tray loaded with drinks
Fuzzy felts against one's fingertips
The satisfying smack as the tip of one's cue connects with a ball



ACT 1: The Ordinary World – Thesis

BEAT 1 – OPENING IMAGE (9-7%)



A thematic or grabbing visual image, scene, or short sequence which sets the tone of your movie. It often serves as the “before” picture of your hero (or world) that will transform throughout the story.

BEAT 2 – THEME STATED (5%)



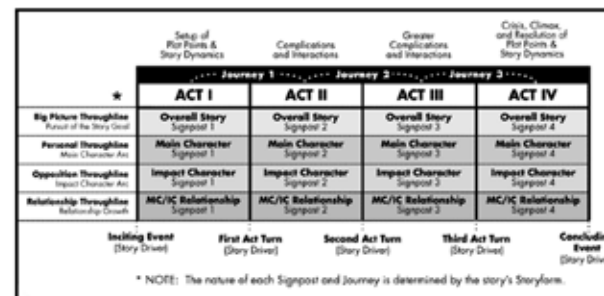
A line of dialogue that organically states what your story is all about. The theme is typically voiced by another character to your hero, calling out the hero's deeper flaw or spiritual need for change.

BEAT 3 – SET-UP (1%-10%)



Reveals your main character's “ordinary life” or status quo. Takes time to demonstrate a character's flaws that negatively impact the hero's life. Describes the character's familiar world when it comes to home, work, and play, and introduces the main characters who inhabit the hero's life.

Dramatica Act Structure



If that's not helpful, there are others—lots of them. *StoryMastery* offers a six-stage plot structure. *One Stop for Writers* and *Plottr* offer similar structures with examples. *Plottr*, for instance, has thirty different templates. And *Dramatica* offers a sophisticated, versatile model you can adapt for any novel or screen play (above left, bottom). It comes with detailed templates undergirded by a dramatic theory that is complex, but logical. As you identify preferences for various story elements, it fills in others from the reasoning that flows from your initial choices to create a complete “storyform” out of thousands of possibilities. Moreover, *Dramatica* helps you visualize the story from four different perspectives or throughlines, leaving little chance for dramatic “holes” to appear.

Summarize Plot

Books like *Story Genius* and *The Snowflake Method* detail a process, including examples and templates, that starts with a one-line description of the plot, expands it into a one-page plot synopsis, then breaks it into major turning points leading to a climax, creating a story arc. *One Stop for Writers* also contains fillable templates that help organize the plot (next page, top). Other programs like *LivingWriter* (top, left) and *Scrivener* have components that help in similar ways. *Scrivener*, an older, but powerful fiction-writing software program uses a storyboard function (page 135, top). It's a little “clunky” compared to some of the newer programs, but combined with *Scrivener's* word processing program, it offers a lot of value, especially for

of the elements *One Stop* has catalogued for a typical pool hall experience. Now, if that doesn't help you conjure up the atmosphere of your favorite billiards parlor, you will just have to do some primary research. Or switch settings. *One Stop for Writers* offers more than 250 possibilities.

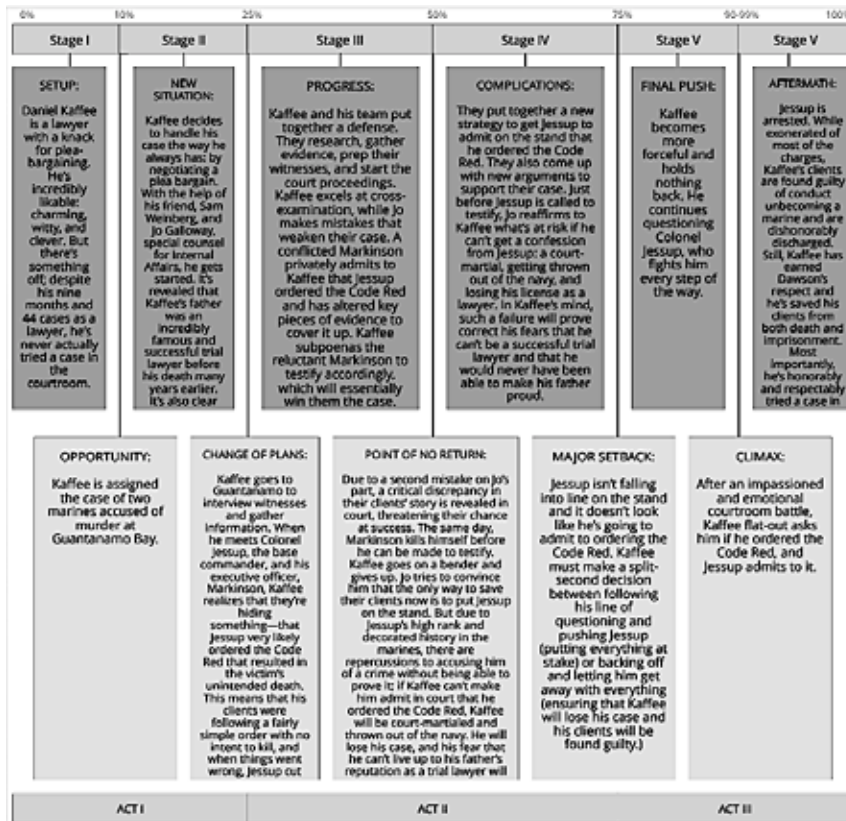
Structure Story

So, you have a story idea, you have some characters, and you have a setting. It would be tempting to just start pressing keys and see what happens. That's what “pantsers” like me can't resist. After all, it's called *writing* a novel, right? An emphatic yes, but

in long-form fiction, it's too easy to stir up some ideas, throw them in the oven, then watch your novel deflate about half-way through its cook time. Why? Because, like a loaf of half-baked bread, it lacks structure. Fortunately, help is on the way.

A website like *Save the Cat* helps you identify the archetype that your story exemplifies. Whether it's “Monster in the House” (above, top) or one of nine others, *Save the Cat* provides not only a concise description of the structure with notable examples, it also outlines a fifteen-beat structure you can customize. Here are the first few elements (next page, right).

STORY MAP: A Few Good Men



long-form fiction. *LivingWriter* is more streamlined and flexible but lacks some of *Scrivener's* features.

Programs like *Dramatica* further analyzes the story arc to add depth and complexity through its own templates.

Sequence Scenes

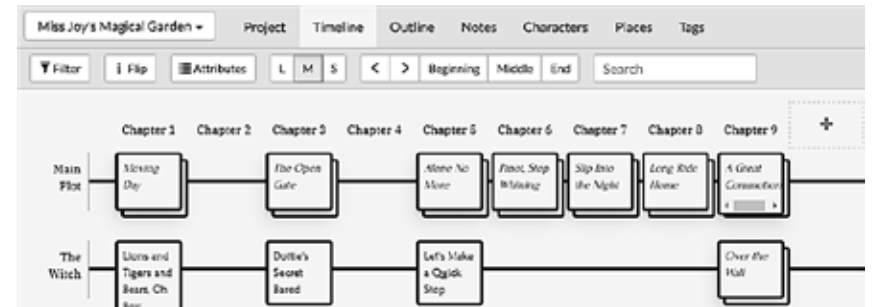
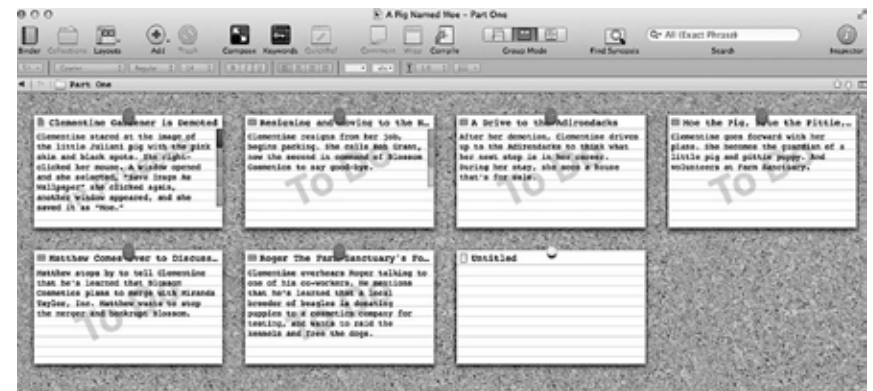
Plottr uses a *flow chart* graphic process to display key plot points. Very simple to use, it can be expanded to create individual *scenes*, and subplots. Obviously, *Scrivener's* "corkboard" function can be expanded to accomplish the same objective, as can *LivingWriter* and many other programs. But

Plottr is simple and effective (top, right).

Write Your Book

Select Point of View

Finally, you must be thinking, you're at the point to actually start writing your book. Yes, but not so fast. You still have to adopt a narration point of view—in both senses of the term. You must choose between first, second, third person or omniscient or limited omniscient narrators. That's the easy part. But as Lisa Cron points out in *Story Genius*, point of view is the lens through which your protagonist will



see and evaluate everything in your story—his or her subjective story-specific point of view. It's not the writer's "Bird's-Eye View." Nor should the protagonist be a "camera." The point of view is a key determinant of the actual story; that is, the story is determined by who specifically tells it. Moreover, all protagonists have two characteristics: a deep-seated desire—something they have wanted for a very long time and a defining misbelief or fear that stands in their way. The clash of these two characteristics as external obstacles or challenges are thrown at the protagonists creates the conflict that resolves itself (one way or another) by the story's end. Cron provides a useful template that forces the writer to confront this point-of-view issue in every scene.

Integrate Themes

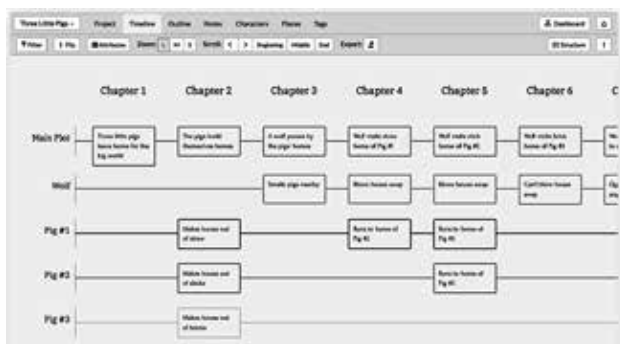
As you plot your novel and profile your characters, specific thematic concepts will start to emerge, such as journeys, betrayals, innocence, alienation, etc. But how to bring them to life and integrate them into the action of the plot can be a challenge. Once again, software is available to accelerate and deepen the writer's efforts. *One Stop for Writers* contains an invaluable "thesaurus" for this purpose.

Take a theme like isolation. Click on the term, and you can pull up an extensive list of concrete images evoking the feeling of isolation, which can be used to create settings, build scenes, or define characters (next page).

Integrate Your Theme(s)

One Stop for Writers

A FALL FROM GRACE
A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE
ALIENATION
BEAUTY
BEGINNINGS
BETRAYAL
BORDERS
COMING OF AGE
CROSSROADS
DANGER
FRIENDSHIP
GREED
HEALTH
HOPE
ILLNESS
INFLEXIBILITY
INNOCENCE
INSTABILITY
ISOLATION
JOURNEYS



Integrate Your Theme(s)

One Stop for Writers: "Isolation" Theme

IN NATURE:

The peak of a mountain
High elevations
Deserts
A lone tree on a hill
An island
Arctic tundra
A lone pack animal
Winter
Cold
Snowstorms and blizzards
A single bird flying without its flock
Hibernation
A lone wolf
A falcon or eagle's nest at the top of a tree
A solitary landform (a boulder, mesa, or hill)
An impassable canyon

IN SOCIETY:

A child playing by himself on the playground
Contamination units at the hospital
An ICU room
Outsiders
Solitary confinement
A deprivation chamber
Being underwater
A lone raft or boat drifting with the current
Language barriers
Learning disabilities
A hunting cabin
A fishing shelter on a lake
A cruise ship in the middle of the ocean
A scientific outpost in the arctic
A visitor to a foreign country
Astronauts in orbit

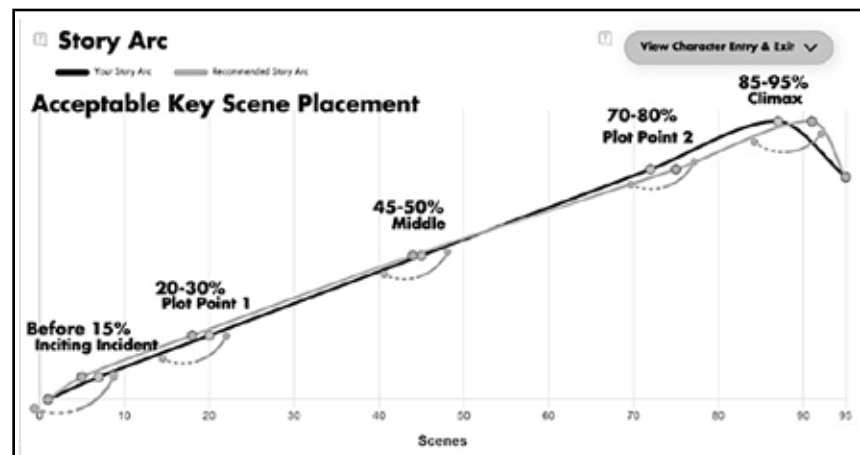
Compose Scenes

By this time, you have developed your story idea, crafted characters, outlined a plot, etc., and you're ready to open *MS Word* (or freeware like *Google Docs*, *LibreOffice*, or *Open Office*) and pound away for the next year on your 100,000-word opus. The problem is that your scene cards are in one file, your character profiles in another, and your settings research in a third. How will you refer to them efficiently as you write chapter after chapter? Plus, you will have to choose between creating a file for every chapter or placing all the

chapters in one file called something like "My Novel." Either way, it is guaranteed to be cumbersome.

Programs like *Scrivener* eliminate this problem. It's true that *Scrivener* has a long learning curve, but it's the price you pay for extensive features. With *Scrivener*, you can split the screen to show your list of scenes, your narrative for a given scene, and notes for a character or setting (p. 137).

LivingWriter (p. 138, top) and *Fictionary* (p. 139, top) provide similar functions, with cleaner, more



cheaper and time-tested.

Find the Right Words

The days of thumbing *Roget's Thesaurus*, a two-inch thick dog-eared paperback, to find that perfect synonym are long over. Word processors like *MS Word* easily connect you with alternatives to your shop-worn language. And of course, we all have the Internet. But programs like *Master Writer* (p. 138, bottom) can help you solve more complicated word choice puzzles, including phrases that incorporate a specific word or rhyming words (especially helpful for anyone who writes music or poetry). *Master Writer* also includes a traditional thesaurus.

One Stop for Writers takes this to a whole new level. Say you want to convey a character's anger without stating, "[My character] was angry." The program contains a series of "thesauri" that catalog different body language related to the expression of virtually all human emotions (p. 139, bottom).

But wait for it, there's even more. It provides similar descriptive phrases, for example, for colors, textures,

shapes, talents, physical features, and settings.

Finally, *Scrivener* has built-in links to *Dictionary.com*, *Thesaurus.com*, *Wikipedia.com*, and *Brainyquote.com*. If you can't find the right word or phrase, once again it's only a click away.

Edit Your Book

Analyze Your Story Arc

Let's say you have been writing now for six months and have a first draft saved online. It's time to start editing. Before you dive into the weeds, you may want to pull back and check the topography of your novel. Does it start too slow? Does it drag in the middle? Do your turning points come too quickly, one after another? What about the all-important climax?

Fictionary has your back (p. 141, top, left). You dump your draft into the program (unless you have used its word processor to write your story, in which case, you already have it) and press a button. Voila, *Fictionary* graphs your work against an ideal "story arc." Programs like *AutoCrit*, *ProWritingAid*, and *Grammarly* can



THE DEVIL

A bargain made with the devil.
A bargain made with the devil is no bargain at all.
A charming devil.
A crafty little devil.
A cunning devil.
A devious devil.
A handsome devil.
A honey-tongued devil.
A sly devil.
A wild-eyed devil.

Appeals to the devil in all of us.
Avoid you like the devil.
Beguiled by the devil.
Between the devil and the deep blue sea.
Beware the guile of the devil.
Branded with the mark of the devil.
Cheat the devil.

Dancing with the devil.
Devil may care.
Don't give into the devil in you.
Drinking with the devil.
Give the devil his due.
Going to the devil.
Half angel, half devil.
I had a devil of a time.
If you gamble with the devil, be prepared to lose.

In bed with the devil.
In league with the devil.
In the clutches of the devil.
In the grip of the devil.
It brings out the devil in you.
It's better to do business with the devil you know than the one you don't.
Let the devil take the hindmost.

perform a similar analysis that displays graphically the number of scenes, and even paragraphs, along with their respective word counts. This example from *Fictionary* helps identify slow pacing (p. 141, middle, left).

Revise Story and Plot

So, what about developmental or story editing? The *One Stop for Writers* website contains a section on this topic that will guide you through the initial editing process (p. 140, left). Even if you are a die-hard pantsier, once your draft is completed, the tips and templates are helpful in sharpening your narrative.

Dramatica also offers tutorials and automated reports that force you to think logically about your plot or character interactions. Its highly

structural approach is complicated but helps eliminate plot holes and illogical twists in your story or character motivations.

Programs like *Autocrit* (p. 141, top, left) will also help you compare your writing to its genre or a specific writer like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Harper Lee and provide you with a statistical analysis. For writers working in genres that are heavily formulaic, this could provide valuable insights. Plus, it's fun to see how closely your writing emulates that of a master of the craft. The ease with which software such as *ProWritingAid*, *Grammarly*, and *AutoCrit* can identify and count data in multiple ways and present it in digestible form is remarkable. It's hard to understand how writers could have created books without such tools.



DEFINITION:

Strong displeasure or: ANGER aroused by a perceived wrong

PHYSICAL SIGNALS AND BEHAVIORS:

Flaring nostrils
Sweating
Holding elbows wide from the body, chest thrust out
Sweeping arm gestures
Handling objects or people roughly
A high chin
Noisy breathing
Legs that are planted wide

Baring one's teeth
Repetitive, sharp gestures (shaking a fist, etc.)
Cutting people off when they speak
Jerky head movements
Protruding eyes
Flexing the fingers or arm muscles
Cracking knuckles, rolling up sleeves, or loosening a collar
Eyes that are cold, hard, flinty
Entering another's personal space to intimidate
Jeers, taunts, a cutting wit

Use Metrics to Target Weaknesses

So, let's say you're writing for younger readers or a general population with lower reading skills. Programs such as *Grammarly*, *ProWritingAid*, and *AutoCrit* (p. 141, top, right) can provide you at the click of your mouse with the reading level of your work, using multiple scales. They can also analyze repetitive words and phrases, clichés (p. 142, top, left), even plagiarism, and a multitude of other weaknesses. Just as important, these programs can also identify strengths in your writing, minimal use of adverbs, for instance, or dialogue tags.

Edit Copy

Copy editing is where contemporary writing software really shines. If there's a downside, it's that when you run your work through a program like *ProWritingAid*, *Grammarly*, or *AutoCrit*, you will spend considerably more time in the revision process than you might otherwise have done. They find issues that you never dreamed of and help you root them out. Even if you don't accept the software suggestions, you become a better writer because of your elevated consciousness about good and bad writing.

ProWritingAid, for example (p. 141, bottom), allows you to run individual

THE REVISION PROCESS

PRE-REVISION

Read through the story in full. Complete a postmortem to identify any big-picture items that need to be addressed.

FIRST REVISION ROUND

Use your pre-revision notes to rough in any big changes. Possible areas of focus: characterization, character arcs, main plot considerations, and subplot proportions.

ALPHA READERS (OPTIONAL)

Engage these readers (not necessarily other writers) to offer feedback on the big picture story aspects you've incorporated.

SECOND REVISION ROUND

Incorporate feedback from alpha readers. Smooth out any changes that were roughed-in from the first round. Revise with an eye for other important storytelling elements: point of view, conflict, stakes, voice, and any others. This round may take a number of passes to complete.

CRITIQUE PARTNERS & BETA READERS

Join a group or enlist a partner to read the manuscript and offer feedback.

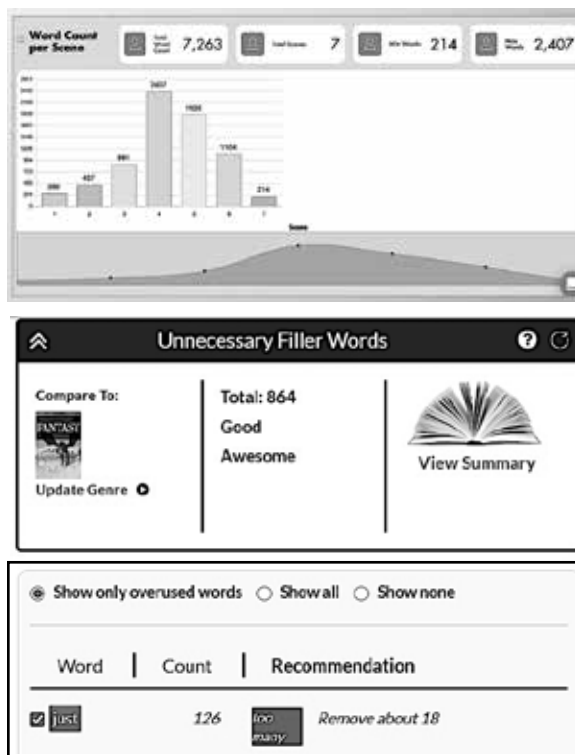
THIRD REVISION ROUND

Incorporate feedback from critique partners. Further refine anything that needs focused attention. This round may take a number of passes to complete.

POLISHING

Get granular, focusing on details at the word, sentence, and paragraph level. Areas of focus include showing instead of telling, replacing crutch words and adverbs, getting rid of repetitions, rewriting unrealistic dialogue, and fixing grammar and punctuation mistakes.

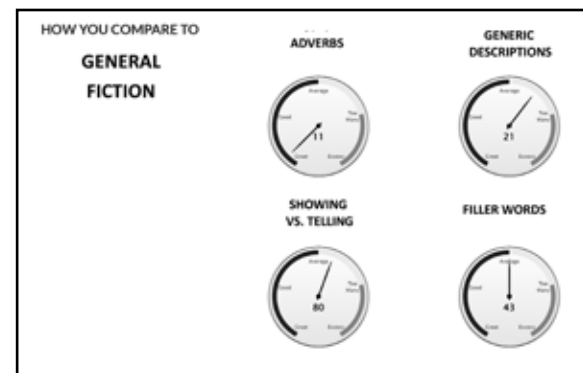
Revise your story with *One Stop for Writer's Revision Roadmap*:
www.onestopforwriters.com



twenty reports, each focusing on a different writing problem, such as, weak adverbs, long sentences, -ing sentence starts, emotional tells, complex paragraphs, passive voice, slow pacing, and unusual dialogue tags. It underlines the specific word or paragraph and allows you to click from one problem to the next with suggestions for improvement. *AutoCrit* and *Grammarly* offer similar help. *AutoCrit* will run more than thirty reports, including power words, repeated phrases, and consistency of point of view and verb tense (p. 140, bottom, right).

Proofread Text

MS Word is quite helpful in identifying spelling errors, as is any word processing program worth its salt. When it comes to finding punctuation errors, grammar errors, homonyms, etc., it's not so useful. One of the great features of programs like *ProWritingAid*, *AutoCrit*, and *Grammarly* is their ability to find missing quotation marks, straight vs. curly quotation marks and apostrophes, and other



CORRECT COMMON COPY ERRORS

Between repeated attempts to bop Google Hertz, Joylo and I polished off several episodes in the Netprime HuluCasts v boredom and V-exting blow to our vacation p the vaccinated, and a a virtual headlock.

This paragraph is hard to read. Consider revising it. Flesch Reading Ease 21.6

hop to help relieve the ined effect of the body rt for everyone including system had me gripped in h on a mercy mission to

With respect to the lat

Disable Rule

Ignore

Thesaurus

similar issues. For proofreading, it's a must have.

Make Your Book

At this point, you should have a completed manuscript in standard format. You can send it to an agent or a publisher and let them take over the design and publishing process. However, the revolution in self-publishing makes it relatively easy to do it yourself. Your first decision will be in which format(s) you

wish to publish your book. It used to be simple: you could have a paperback or a hardcover. With the advent of ebooks and audiobooks in different formats, it has become considerably more complicated. But software, for the most part, takes the sting out.

Format Text

Kindle Direct Publishing can help you format your text and also compile the various parts of a book in addition to your creative

READABILITY STATISTICS

Readability Report:
Test Results

Test	Required Grade Level
New Dale Chall	5-6
Powers, Sumner, Kearl White	5.9
Spache (Revised)	5.6
Coleman-Liau	8.6
Smog	11.5
Flesch-Kincaid	9.6
Automated Readability Index	10.0
Gunning Fog	11.7
Linsear Write	12.8

CLICHES

Compare to: GENERAL FICTION

94

Total

VIEW SUMMARY

CLICHES

as if 16

at home 7

open the door 6

not even 3

on the table 3

in the midst of 2

Most Commonly Used Specifications for Books Published Through IngramSpark

Novels & Poetry Books

Trim Size: 6" x 9"

Paper: 50 lb Creme

Binding Type: Paperback (Perfect Bound)

Interior Color: Black & White

Laminate: Matte

Page Count: 200

Choose Your Book Size & Type

Estimated Page Count: 201-250

Page Size: 5" x 8"

Interior Print Color

Cover Format

Cover Finish

Paper Color

• Black & White

• Paperback

• Matte

• Cream (50 lb.)

Printing Cost Per Book: \$4.22

writing. But other services can also help you structure your physical book or ebook as well. Some of them offer greater customization. You can even format it in *MS Word*. It really depends on how much you want to customize your text, your familiarity with self-publishing, and how much professional design and printing help you want to use (and pay for).

If you do it all yourself (except, perhaps, print it), you maintain the greatest level of control. So, it's worth exploring online self-publishing software available from the various

book sellers and book design services. In addition to *Kindle Direct Publishing* (which dominates the market), *Barnes & Noble Press*, *Kobo Writing Life*, and *Apple Press* offer online programs to help format and publish.

Services like *Lulu*, *Ingram Spark* (top, right), *Book Baby*, and *Blurb* are also helpful to design and produce your book. As soon as you know the number of finished pages, number of copies, and publication size, it's actually relatively simple to obtain a printing quote (p. 142, bottom).

Design Cover

Once your book is formatted, and you have used templates available from the book publishing services to add your legal notice, dedication, table of contents, acknowledgements, and other front matter (as well as back matter, if appropriate), you will need a cover. In a physical book, you will also create inside half-title and title pages as well. Ideally, they will mirror what is on the outside of the book. Ebooks tend to be simpler (for example, you don't have to calculate the dimensions of a spine thick enough to wrap around the two or three hundred physical pages of your opus).

But covers are important, so a killer design is critical. Fortunately, this too has been automated. Websites like *Bookbrush* and *Bookwright* have tools and templates to design covers. *Canva* is also a very useful tool and easy to

use. Or you can combine programs like *Canva* and *Microsoft Publisher* to customize a template. Plus, a service like *Shutterstock* (above) can provide you with thousands of choices for licensed images—and editing tools to modify them specifically for your publication. All it takes is some imagination—and time.

Compile Final Version(s)

We have arrived at the end of the planning, writing, editing, and publishing process. You have written your text, created a cover, added front matter, formatted your book, and uploaded it to publishers and/or printers. You may have created different versions for different outlets. (And you have purchased ISBN numbers and registered your copyright, etc.)

About now, you're probably asking

yourself, what is it going to cost to buy all these software programs? The bad news first: many of them are subscription-based, and not cheap. Some like *Scrivener* are relatively inexpensive, robust, and require only a one-time fee. However, the good news is that most programs have free trials, and/or monthly pricing. So, it can be very inexpensive to subscribe for a month or so, use the program to complete the task at hand, then cancel until you need it again.

Another option is to buy a lifetime subscription. If you like the program, it's cheaper in the long run to purchase it forever. Some companies don't advertise lifetime subscriptions but will provide one if you ask them. Others may provide extended multi-

year subscriptions that, again, they don't advertise. It's worth inquiring.

On a personal note, in 1961, I wrote my first story in sixth grade using a yellow no. 2 pencil and notebook paper. Today's writers don't know how good they have it, but it's clear they have benefited from the amazing advance in writing technology. It's also apparent that we're just getting started. Recently, I helped judge a writing contest for middle schoolers in the Upper Peninsula. The entries were remarkably good; the best could compete with many writers their parents' age. So, a new generation is coming on strong. It's going to be exciting to see what they produce in the next few decades, especially with the tools they are learning today. I hope I'm around to see it.

References

Regrettably, space limitation required some manipulation of images and are offered merely as illustrations. The links below will provide the reader with more accurate information about the resources mentioned above.

Books:

Story Genius by Lisa Cron
How to Write a Novel Using the Snowflake Method by Randy Ingermanson
Dramatica: A New Theory of Story by Melanie Ann Phillips and Chris Huntley

Video Courses:

How to Write Best-Selling Fiction by James Scott Bell

Websites/Software/templates

AdvancedFictionWriting.com/
 product/snowflake-pro-software-link
 Authors.Apple.com
 Autocrit.com
 Blog.Reedsy.com/plot-generator
 Blurb.com/Bookwright
 BookBaby.com
 BookBrush.com

BrainyQuote.com
 Canva.com
 Dictionary.com
 Dramatica.com
 Fictionary.com
 Grammarly.com
 ImagineForest.com
 IngramSpark.com
 Kdp.Amazon.com/en_US
 Kobo.com/us/en/p/writinglife
 LibreOffice.org
 LiteratureAndLatte.com
 /Scrivener
 /Scapple
 LivingWriter.com
 Lulu.com
 MarinerSoftware.com
 /Contour
 /Personna
 MasterWriter.com
 Microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/publisher

NameGeneratorFun.com
 OneStopForWriters.com
 OpenOffice.org
 Google Docs
 Plottr.com
 Press.BarnesAndNoble.com
 ProWritingAid.com
 Rangen.co.uk
 Reedsy.com/SaveTheCat.com
 SeventhSanctum.com
 Share.Reedsy.com/reedsy_worldbuilding_template.pdf
 Shutterstock.com/editor
 StoryMastery.com/story/screenplay-structure-five-key-turning-points-successful-scripts/
 Thesaurus.com
 Wikipedia.com
 WritingExercises.co.uk
 Writers-Den.PantomimePony.co.uk



Rudy Ouzo and Marlene Detroit (Peter Anderson and Gail Lee Reisman) perform in "Cabaret Halfway" in the Halfway Inn in 1973. (RC (and English and Theater) professor Peter Ferran plays saxophone in the background).

Peachy Cream Productions

The RC's theater (now the Keene) and the RC's Halfway Inn (with a small stage) both opened in Winter 1970 and provided venues for original RC student performances, probably beginning with Barry Garelick's *Mister Straight* in March 1971. Peter Anderson's *The Banana From Outer Space* (1973) and *The Janitors* (1975), among others, were also performed there.

With *Cabaret Halfway*, in 1973, performed in the Halfway Inn, and into 1975, Peter and others developed a series of "variety shows" that played in various locations around town, including the Campus Inn (now The Graduate).

The changing lineup of performers and technicians adopted the name

Peachy Cream Productions and produced four additional productions: *Zazuzoo Revue*, *Tapioca Holiday*, *Fever Pitch*, and *Rhinestoned Revue*.

Additionally, a "break-off troupe," appropriately called the Peachy Creamsicles, performed at smaller venues, including at the Del Rio and at an EMU lecture hall.

Some of the RCers involved in Peachy Cream included: Keith Clark, Mark Eisen, Debbie Faigenbaum, Val Gifford, Judie Goodman, Debby Jay, Pamela Hendrick, Barb Kellman, Paul Meyer, Nick O'Connor, Rob Nuismer, Heather Phillips, Gail Lee Reisman, Jim Robins, Marty Sherman, Keith Smith, and Genie Wolfson, among others.



Some members of *Peachy Cream*, all with RC connections. Top row: Peter Anderson, Debbie Faigenbaum, Paul Meyer, Val Gifford, Mark Eisen, Marty Sherman, Rob Nuismer. Bottom row: Judie Goodman, Keith Smith, Keith Clark, Gail Lee Reisman.

Top left: Marty Sherman and Peter Anderson as Wilhelm Waffles and Rudy Ouzo. Top right: Gail Lee Reisman and Jeannie Lienert as Marlene Detroit and Carmann Ghia. Bottom left: Heather Phillips. Bottom right: Mark Eisen as Dr. Milton Bonaye!

Alumni Interview:

Writing Then and Now:

Ellen Dreyer

Ellen Dreyer (RC 1983) is the author of the young adult novel The Glow Stone (2006), named a Bank Street College Best Book. Currently, she is a consulting editor and writer for the United Way (www.unitedforALICE.org), and she is working on an adult novel. She and her family live in upstate New York.

Why did you choose U-M and the RC? Did you intend to be a writer, and did you write in high school?

Initially I chose U-M because I was interested in studying English and knew it had a great English Department. I didn't realize I could also focus on creative writing as an undergrad—and when I learned I could, at the RC, I was elated. The smaller environment of a residential college suited me, plus the fact that I could take advantage of what a large university had to offer (including taking literature and other liberal arts classes).

I wrote fiction and poetry in high school, where creative writing classes were offered, and contributed to the literary magazine.

Are there any particular positives or negatives about your writing experience at the RC? Did it change your focus, over time? (Another way to look at it: Would you do things differently? What advice would you give a new RC writing student?)

There were many positive aspects of being a writer at the RC. I felt that there was a high quality of instruction, and I felt that I was taken seriously by my teachers and mentors and encouraged to try new things, such as writing for children and young adults. The atmosphere of the workshops was positive and supportive.

I also appreciated the balance I was able to strike between engaging with creative writing and with the academic writing I had to do for my lit classes. Both stretched me and made me a better communicator.

The two things I'd do differently: I was rather shy, and I feel I could have participated more in class discussions pretty much across the board. Also, I would have taken drama and theater classes, as I was interested in acting and dramatic writing. But it's a small regret.

The opportunity to put together a polished manuscript for the Hopwood Awards was also a great experience and I encourage any RC writing major or minor to do this.

Did you intend to go to grad school all along, or did that idea come up? Did you go directly or was there a gap?

There was a large gap, for me: I graduated from the RC in 1983 and went to grad school in 1999!



A picture of Ellen from her website (left) and a Michigan Daily photo from April 1980 showing RC friend Gali Kronenberg and Ellen at a rally on the Diag to save the Women's Studies program.

Did you go right into your “publishing career as a children’s book editor”? How did that come to be? Tell us about your shift to freelance editing.

My first job after college was as a medical secretary in New York City, and while there I applied for editorial jobs at many NY publishing houses. I finally landed a job as an editorial assistant at E.P. Dutton, working for 3 editors, mostly on nonfiction. A friend at the children's book imprint Dial Books, right down the hall, asked if I wanted to read their slush pile, so I started doing that, too—bringing home a laundry cart filled with manuscripts, and reading and reporting on each one! I discovered a couple of manuscripts that were later published. This was my entrée into children's books. At first I was a copyeditor, then a managing editor, and after grad school I moved into substantive editing, also for Dial, and

later for William Morrow.

During all these years, I'd been getting up at dawn to write before work, and realized I wanted more time for writing, so after being a full-time editor for 20-plus years, I started freelancing as an editor and writer, working for trade and educational publishers (I published around 60 books, fiction and nonfiction, used in the teaching of reading and writing). In 2006 I published my YA novel *The Glow Stone*.

Tell us something about your husband and family. How did you and your husband meet?

I met my husband Jim, a jazz guitarist, in 1996 at the Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village, NYC, where he was performing. We married in 2000. Our son, Aaron, a jazz drummer, is a 3rd-year student at Oberlin Conservatory.

How has your writing changed over the years? Is there a kind of writing (like: detective fiction) that you want to try?

I'd say the main change in my writing has to do with my willingness to take more risks and stick my neck out. I started out writing for myself, as a teenager, as a form of self-discovery and catharsis. In college, my explorations in writing short fiction, poetry, and children's/YA fiction and poetry, opened up new ideas for what I was capable of, and also a sense that there could be an audience for my work. Once I left the RC and started writing while working full-time, and especially once I started working in children's books, I wrote increasingly for kids. In recent years I've returned to writing fiction for adults, which feels right

By the way, Gali Kronenberg (pictured with Ellen on page 149) went on to earn an MS at Columbia University, and is a writer, editor and book coach. Gali worked as a reporter for The San Diego Union, The New York Times regional media group, and Los Angeles Times. He has penned memoirs, biographies, speeches and op-eds for Fortune 500 CEOs, politicians, academics and spiritual leaders. More about Gail at bygali.com

to me. I have a perpetual interest in writing poetry again but haven't delved into that—yet!

What are you working on now and do you have plans for the near (or far) future?

Currently I am writing a novel (for adults) set in rural Iowa, about a veterinarian returning home for a funeral and confronting her past. This is based on a completed YA manuscript that ultimately wasn't quite working for me. There is much more to dig into with the older, retrospective narrator. I'll be working on this for the near future! I have bits of another novel waiting in the wings, about a famous children's book author who goes missing, and the young editor who sets out to find him.

From the Eblast: Alumni Writing News

Daniel Madaj

Last October, Carmen Bugar (RC 1996) suggested that a monthly email message to announce forthcoming readings and publications by RCers would be useful. I started sending out a monthly e-blast. These are collected on the RC Writers website (under the "alumni" tab). Or send me an email (dmadaj@umich.edu) to be added to the list.

RC Alum Publications and Things

Beenish Ahmed (RC 2009) is Michigan Radio's criminal justice reporter. In February, she filed a series of stories about delays to due process in Wayne County prisons. Beenish was awarded first place (and \$10,000) in the 31st Annual James Jones First Novel Fellowship for her novel, *Every Song an Elegy*.

Peter Anderson (RC 1972) has a prose poem, "Wobble," in *Best Microfiction 2022*, out now from Pelekine-sis. He also has two pieces ("Bind" and "City") in the inaugural issue of *Duality*, an annual journal of art and literature, and has had several other prose poems published: "Bud" in the *Last Stanza Poetry Journal* (issue #8), "Virgin" in *The Thieving Magpie*, "Mutter" in *The American Journal of Poetry*, and "Hatchet" in *Rat's Ass Review*.

Jeanette Bradley (RC 1994) has a new author/illustrated picture book, *Something Great* (Levine Querido).

Lily Buday (RC 2018) published

"Saint Ophelia's School for Drowned Girls," in *The Chautauqua Journal*.

Carmen Bugar (RC 1997) has a poem in *Busy Grievs, Raw Towns: A Poetic Response to the Brutality of War in Ukraine*. An interview with Carmen appears in *Pulp*, the Ann Arbor District Library's on-line publication, discussing her new book of poems, *Time Being*. Carmen is interviewed by U-M librarian Martha Stuit (RC.2011). This is Martha's third interview with Carmen.

Bob Clifford (RC 1979) was featured on "Sundays with Michael O'Brien" on Sonoma Public Radio on October 17th.

Caitlin Cowan (RC 2008) has a poem, "Miscarry," in *Best New Poets 2021*. Her debut full-length collection of poetry, *Happy Everything*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press (February 2024). Caitlin writes weekly at PopPoetry (poppoetry.substack.com), a newsletter and blog about the intersection of poetry and popular culture.

Jon Michael Darga (RC 2014), who was one of 21 literary agents profiled in *Writer's Digest's* annual "Literary Agent Roundup," in the Sept-Oct 2021 issue. Jon works for Aevitas Creative Management in New York, and details his fiction and non-fiction interests, as an agent, talks about recent sales, and gives submission guidelines and tips for writers.

Monica Dollive (RC 2017) wrote an episode of the Netflix *Polly Pocket* show, "Mermaid Kingdom Part 2."

Cameron Finch (RC 2016) was recently interviewed for the Writers Lounge on blogtalkradio. Cam is Book Publicity Director at Atmosphere Press, and she discussed how the book business works. She has an interview with Erin Stalcup, author of *KEEN*, in *Heavy Feather Review*, and an interview with Sequoia Nagamatsu in *The Rumpus*.

Claire Denson (RC 2018) has two poems in *Booth 16*.

Hannah Ensor (RC 2009) and Laura Wetherington have a poem, "Feel Fragments" in the March 2022 issue of *Poetry*.

Barry Garelick (RC 1971, Mathematics) published his "No Leaders" story (which was in the 5th alumni journal) in *Fiction On The Web*. His new book, *Traditional Math: An Effective Strategy That Teachers Feel Guilty Using*, is due in November 2022 from John Catt Educational.

John Hagen (RC 1972) has a poem ("Northwest of the Skillagalee") selected for *Thrills and Chills*, a themed collection published annually by the Florida Writers Association. A memoir, "The Most Remarkable Thing: Starring Norwegian Ida G," about John's grandmother, appears in *U.P. Reader* #6.

Clare Higgins (RC 2017) wrote "What Is Lost" (and co-wrote the teleplay), the third episode of the second season of *The Witcher*, out on Netflix.

The seventh book in the Peter Ash series by **Nick Petrie** (RC 1990) was out in January 2022.

Matthew Rohrer (RC 1992) has his poem, "Follow Them," in *The Best*

American Poetry 2022. It has previously been published in *American Poetry Review*.

Ian Ross Singleton (RC 2004) published a review of *Words of War*, an anthology of Ukrainian poetry in *Asymptote Journal* ("the premier site for world literature in translation").

Holly Wren Spaulding (RC 1997) published "Estuary Walk," a poem, in the *Dunes Review* (25:2), the journal of Michigan Writers.

Sofia Spencer (RC 2021) published a flash fiction piece in *Coastal Shelf*, a quarterly literary magazine.

Katherine Towler (RC 1978) has a short story, "Eulogy," in the Spring 1922 issue of *Ploughshares*.

An RC Alumni Journal Reading was held via Zoom on October 20 in 2021. Hosted by Laura Thomas, readers included several authors from the 5th journal: Peter Anderson, Carmen Bugar, Caitlin Cowan, Claire Denson, Ellen Dreyer, Amy Gustine, John L. Hagen, Carolyn Lusch, Kathryn Orwig, and Ian Ross Singleton.

"Paths to Publication: Building a Career in Journalism" occurred via Zoom on Tuesday, November 9, 2021, at 7 pm ET, moderated by the RC's Susan Rosegrant (RC 1976) and featuring Beenish Ahmed (RC 2009), currently reporting for WUOM, Michigan Public Radio, and Paige Pfleger (RC 2015), currently reporting for WPLN, Nashville Public Radio.

Michigan and Regional Resources

Some of us have mused about the RC (and U-M) being more of a hub for writing in the Midwest. A

first step along that path might be to assemble the resources that already exist; that way, we can see what's missing. So, in no particular order:

The **Michigan Writes** group (michwrites.org) reports a new Detroit-based online magazine featuring poetry and short fiction, *Detroit Lit Mag*: <https://detroitlitmag.wordpress.com> Editor Robert Hunter is accepting no-fee submissions via detroitlitmag@gmail.com

The 10th annual issue of *Write Michigan: 2022 Anthology* was recently published by **WriteMichigan.org** via Schuler Books in Grand Rapids. The anthology collects winners of the annual Write Michigan Short Story Contest, which has four categories: 11 and under, 12-17, 18 and older, and Spanish language, with three cash prizes awarded in each category. Schuler Books publishes the anthology through its Chapbook Press, in partnership with Meijer and several Michigan libraries (Kent, Traverse City, Hancock, and Canton). Order through Schuler Books (\$14.95 plus postage): <https://bit.ly/3ow88tC>

The Traverse City-based **Michigan Writers** group (michwriters.org) publishes an annual collection, *Dunes Review*, and the **Upper Peninsula Publishers and Authors Association** (uppaa.org) publishes the annual *U.P. Reader*.

The **Detroit Writers Room** was recently created, providing writing coaches but also virtual workshops and author talks: <https://www.detroit-writingroom.com>.

The **Great Lakes College Association** (which works on behalf of thirteen Great Lakes colleges, including Albion College, Kalamazoo College,

and Hope College in Holland) holds an annual contest for new writer's awards in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. The 2022 award reading was held on March 8 at Hope College. The poetry winner was Sumita Chakraborty, who was a visiting professor at U-M Zell last year. GLCA is headquartered in Ann Arbor (in the old Argus Camera building on the west side). More info: <https://www.glca.org>

The annual **Bear River Writers' Conference** is part of U-M LSA, and directed by Cody Walker, who directs undergrad creative writing at U-M English. The annual conference is held at U-M's Camp Michigania on Walloon Lake, and the Bear River Review collects conference writings. More info at <https://lsa.umich.edu/bearriver>

The **Poetry Society of Michigan** holds an annual poetry competition (10 categories) and publishes a poetry collection called *Michigan Reads*. The current issue of *Reads* contains poems from the previous five years and is available via Amazon for \$10. More info at poetrysocietyofmichigan.com

The **Michigan Poet** (themichiganpoet.com) features a different Michigan poet each month, along with an archive of previous features. The most recent book collection is *The Michigan Poet: Collected Poems 2010-2015*. More info at the website.

Ann Arbor's District Library publishes **Pulp**, an online journal, with frequent contributions by Martha Stuit (RC 2011), including several interviews with Carmen Bugar (RC 1996). More at pulp.aadl.org The

library sponsors an annual writing contest, and its Fifth Avenue Press recently published *Bring Your Words: A Writers' Community Anthology*, which included words by Kaleb Brown (RC 2021), Kathryn Orwig (RC 2017), and Abby O'Meara (RC 2022).

The **Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp** in Twin Lakes (near Muskegon) focuses on the "fine arts" but does include drama.

Three Fold Press is an independent quarterly based in Detroit (threefoldpress.org).

Other U-M journals include **Cafe Shapiro**, an annual collection of U-M student writing (<https://bit.ly/3zuc2tu>), and **Michigan Quarterly Review**, "the flagship literary journal" at U-M. MQR staff include U-M faculty, English PhD students, and student and recent grad interns. (The **Hopwood Program** published a 75th anniversary collection, but it looks like it will be about another 63 years until the next one).

U-M and other state universities have presses, and the Wayne State press has a Made in Michigan Writers Series. **Haley Winkle** (RC 2018) is an editorial associate at U-M Press.

Cameron Finch (RC 2016), **Claire Denson** (RC 2018), and **Hayla Alawi** (RC 2020) work in book publicity at Atmosphere Press (atmospherepress.com), which is "an author-friendly publisher" that aims to "put the power not in the hands of the press, but in the hands of the writer."

RC Connections To The Larger World

At least two RC writing alums have parents who were Ann Arbor mayors: **Lucy Eldersveld-Murphy** (RC 1975), whose dad, Sam Eldersveld, was mayor from 1957-59, and **Conan Smith** (RC 1996), whose dad, Al Wheeler, was mayor from 1975-78.

Food has been part of the RC since before its beginning (Charles Benzinger was treasurer of the East Quad Council that in 1952 called for basement rooms for a library, snack bar, and rooms for U-M's new student radio station, WCBN). The "snack bar" became the Halfway Inn, in 1970. . . . Speaking of the dear, departed Halfway, several RC and RC-ish writers work or have worked in the food and restaurant industry: chef, author, and editor **Ruth Reichl** (UM 1970) was not in the RC but worked as a waitress in former RC director **John Mersereau's** short-lived French restaurant on Main Street, La Seine. Chef and author **Sara Moulton** (RC 1974/81) worked at Ann Arbor's Del Rio restaurant. **Peter Anderson** (RC 1972) worked briefly as a salad chef and clown waiter at the Phoenix Cafe in Arcata, California. Sommelier, vintner, clown, and sage **Marty Sherman** (RC 1974) and **Holly Speagle** (RC 1974) worked at the Del Rio. **Nadia Todoroff** (RC 2016) worked at Juicy Kitchen, her parents' Ann Arbor restaurant. And famous (and infamous) Martha Stewart is the author of the cookbook *Entertaining* Oh, wait a minute, I'm confusing her with **Martha Stuit** (RC 2011) . . . (Martha's last name is pronounced "Stite," not "Stu-it," but mediocre comedians, and politicians, never let facts get in the way).

Program News

Susan Rosegrant retired at the end of the Winter 2021 semester. She had taught narrative journalism, creative non-fiction, and creative writing at the RC since 2008. **A. Van Jordan** left U-M in Fall 2022 and is now Professor of Creating Writing, Modernist and Contemporary Poetry, and Film at Stanford. He taught poetry and film studies at the RC while also a professor at U-M English,

Faculty publications and news.

Laura Thomas (RC 1088) published a story, "Stay Home, Stay Safe", in *failbetter*. It has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Laura was one of four U-M lecturers named 2021-2022 Collegiate Lecturers for "outstanding contributions to instruction," per an article in the April 18, 2022 issue of *The University Record*.

"When a bolt of lightning falls in love," a poem by **Laura Kasischke** (RC 1984) is featured in *The Best American Poetry 2022*. The poem appeared in *The Georgia Review* and is in Laura's 2021 collection, *Lightning Falls In Love*. "The Vine," also from the collection, was featured on *The Slowdown* (American Public Media) on October 27, 2021. "The Skill," a story of Laura's, will be featured in a forthcoming animated horror film, *Uncanny Stories*. (It is

currently in "pre-production.")

Former RC writing instructor **Ken Mikolowski** was featured in a "Conversation with Rebecca Kosick" on October 8, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw9Tgi199yc>

Former RC creative writing instructor **Lolita Hernandez** published an essay in an issue of Detroit's *Three Fold Press*: <https://threefoldpress.org/arrivalsanddepartures>

Emerging Writers Award. 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":

2022: Elizabeth Schriener & Marlon Rajan
2021: Kaleb Brown & Andrew Warrick
2020: Zofia Ferkel
2019: Heather Young & Mariam Reda
2018: Emily Müller
2017: Ashley Bishel & Lauren Theisen
2016: Alexander Miller & Sydney Morgan-Green
2015: Angeline Dimambro & Vicky Szczepkowski
2014: Allison Epstein

Contributors

Peter Anderson (RC 1972) is a poet, performer and playwright living in Vancouver, Canada. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best Microfictions 2022*, *MoonPark Review*, *Unbroken*, *Sublunary Review*, *Thieving Magpie*, *Flora Fiction*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *American Journal of Poetry* and numerous other journals. His plays are available online at the Canadian Play Outlet (canadianplayoutlet.com).

Kaitlyn Brannigan (RC 2020) published a poem this year in *The American Journal of Poetry*. She lives and works in Macomb, Michigan.

Kaleb A. Brown (RC 2021) is a staff writer for *USA Today's* "Reviewed.com," which is described as "a team of product experts (geeks, in truth) that put in the hard work of testing products so you don't have to." Kaleb worked as a news intern in the summer of 2020 at the *Detroit Free Press*, and has published articles in *Medium*, "usually about pop culture." He has published poetry and fiction in the U-M Library's annual *Cafe Shapiro* collection, an article about Pinball Pete's in the March 2018 *Ann Arbor Observer*, and is also featured in *Bring Your Words: A Writers' Community Anthology*. Kaleb continues to write fiction and poetry, hoping to get more publications under his belt.

Carmen Bugan (RC 1996) was born in Romania and emigrated to the United States in 1989. After U-M

she earned an MA in creative writing from Lancaster University, and a MA and PhD (English Literature) from Oxford University, UK. Her poetry collections are: *Crossing the Carpathians* (2004), *The House of Straw* (2014), *Sulla Soglia Della Dimenticanza/ On the Side of Forgetting* (2015), *Releasing the Porcelain Birds* (2016), *Lilies from America: New and Selected Poems* (2019), *Time Being* (2022). Her memoir, *Burying the Typewriter* (2012) won the Bread Loaf Conference Prize for Nonfiction. She also wrote the monograph *Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile* (2014), and a book of essays on politics and poetics, *Poetry and the Language of Oppression* (2022). She is an adjunct professor at Stony Brook University in New York and lives on Long Island. Carmen was the 2018 Helen DeRoy Professor in Honors at U-M. She was made a George Orwell Prize Fellow in 2017.

Claire Denson (RC 2018) earned an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she taught English and served on the editorial staff for *The Greensboro Review*. At Michigan, she was an alum of the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program (now called Lloyd Scholars for Writing and the Arts) and won the Caldwell Poetry Prize. Her writing appeared in the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program Arts & Literary Journal, *Xylem*, *Fortnight*,

Café Shapiro, *Hell[icon]*, and *RC Review*. Claire is now on Staff of *The Adroit Journal* and her writing appears in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *The Florida Review*, *the minnesota review*, and elsewhere. She works as the Publicity Manager for Atmosphere Press and lives in Brooklyn, NY. Find her at clairedenson.com.

Ellen Dreyer (RC 1983) received the Bank Street Best Book of the Year Award for her young adult novel *The Glow Stone*. She is now at work on revisions to her novel *Heartland*. She has worked in various capacities: as a book editor, as a writing instructor with the Rutgers REACH precollege program, as a medical editor, and currently, as a consulting editor and writer for the United for ALICE initiative (<https://www.unitedforalice.org/>).

Allison Epstein (RC 2014) is the author of two historical fiction novels, *A Tip for the Hangman* (Doubleday) and *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* (September 2023). She is also the creator of *Dirtbags Through the Ages*, a twice-monthly newsletter profiling lesser-known jerks from history (rapscallison.substack.com). Allison lives in Chicago, where she works as an in-house editor for a consulting firm and indulges her love for terrible puns.

Fez (RC 2022) is an eco-poet from Northern Michigan who writes about bodies and the environment, with a particular fondness for decomposition and pleasure. While at Michigan, they studied creative writing and drama, and owe their only published work (so far) to the Hopwood Program. They graduated with highest honors for their senior thesis, "Body

Farm," a book of poetry exploring wilderness and human connection. They are currently earning their MFA in poetry from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

Cameron Finch (RC 2016) is a writer and editor based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Finch's writing and interviews have appeared in various journals including *The Adroit Journal*, *The Common*, *CRAFT*, *Electric Literature*, *Fiction Writers Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *The Rumpus*. Visit the word garden at ccfinch.com.

Barry Garelick (RC 1971) retired from teaching math in middle school. He taught math as a second career after having retired from US EPA. He remains deeply involved in math education advocacy. He has written articles on math education for *The Atlantic*, *Education Next*, and *Non-partisan Education Review*, and has published several books. *Out on Good Behavior: Teaching Math While Looking Over Your Shoulder* was published in January 2021 by John Catt, LLC. He will have a new book out soon: *Traditional Math: An Effective Strategy That Teachers Feel Guilty Using*. Barry and his wife live in Morro Bay, California.

Warren Hecht started the RC Creative Writing Program in 1970 and served as its director through 2002. He retired from the RC in 2016.

John L. Hagen (RC 1972) retired in 2015 after a career in economic development. He and his wife Joy divide their time between homes near Tampa Bay and Saugatuck, Michigan. *Sea Stacks*, a collection of interrelated stories, was published in December 2020.

Michael Koenigsknecht entered the RC in 1968. In 1970 he worked in Alaska for a summer, matriculated

into the Latin Department of University College London, and traveled in Europe. After this break from the intensity of the R.C. he returned and graduated in 1972. After working for a year at Ypsilanti State Mental Hospital, he went to N.Y.U. Law School. He then was a trial lawyer in Chicago, primarily for large, international corporations, for 34 years. Since retiring from the law he has focused on the arts: writing fiction and nonfiction; working onstage in non-singing roles at the Lyric Opera of Chicago; and, supporting other writers and opera companies. He is married with two children and three grandchildren.)

Michael is a member, and past president, of the Chicago Literary Club, which for nearly 150 years has been a voluntary association of men and women interested in writing pieces of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, or plays. The club gathers on Monday evenings between October and May, listening to one member reading or short play each meeting. For more information, visit chilit.org or email Michael at mjk@mjka.com.

Carolyn Lusch (RC 2011) earned a Master of Urban and Regional Planning degree from U-M's Taubman College in 2015. Since then she has worked on sustainable transportation and land use planning projects in Michigan and Connecticut, working to shift the sprawling and auto-oriented narrative. She has published articles on public transportation, pedestrian safety, and writing communities in *Concentrate*, the *CT Mirror*, the *New Haven Independent*, and the *Arts Paper*. Her fiction has been featured in *Carrot Bean Magazine* and the *Local Lit @ Lotta* reading series.

Daniel Madaj (RC 1973/82) worked for U-M for more than 40 years, including brief stints in the RC and in East Quad. He was editor of *Ann Arbor's Old West Side News* for eight years (2000-2008).

Irena Barbara Nagler (RC 1977) is a director and performer with a Southeast Michigan dance theater group, for which she writes text and poetry. She facilitates creative dance and environmental movement meditation, and contributes essays, short fiction, and artwork to *Crazy Wisdom Community Journal*, the *Ann Arbor Observer*, and anthologies.

Kathryn Orwig (RC 2017) is a Summer Hopwood Award winner, and a film and TV writer. Kathryn's won or placed highly in multiple screenwriting competitions (Top 5% Nicholl's, Page Awards, Screen-craft, Creative Voices, LA International Screenplay Awards, etc.). *Casus Belli* won the Best Crime TV Script in the Los Angeles Crime and Horror Film Festival 2021, was a Top 10 Semi-Finalist Table Read My Screenplay Summer Genre Edition 2022, and was a Top 50 selection in the ISA Fast Track Fellowship 2022. She acted as a final-round judge at the National Film Festival for Talented Youth in 2019, and wrote 20 scripts for a media company to turn into an animated TV Web Series. Her short script *Iguana Dog* (which was published in last year's *RC Alumni Journal*) was one of four grand prize winners in the Roadmap Writers 2021 Shorts Competition; she was also selected as the July 2021 Roadmap Writers Diversity Initiative winner. Kathryn's work is included in *Bring Your Words: A Writers' Community Anthology* (Fifth Avenue Press, 2021). More about Kathryn at her website: www.kathrynorwig.com.

Mike Parsons (RC 1973) has a J.D.

from the University of Tennessee, 1978. Mike worked as a lawyer, and is now retired, living in Nashville, Tennessee. He once stood behind Emmylou Harris in the concession line at a local theatre.

Hopwood winner **Olivia Postelli** (RC 2014) received her MFA in fiction from Oregon State University. Her work has appeared in *Kenyon Review Online* and in *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*. She lives in Chicago.

Theo Poling (RC 2022) has published work in the *Huron River Review*, *Political World*, *Palaver Arts Mag*, *RC Review*, *Blueprint Magazine*, *Arts, Ink. Magazine*, and on Kindle Marketplace, and has produced a short film while earning a BFA at U Southern California in Writing for Screen and Television. While studying Creative Writing & Literature and Arts & Ideas in the Humanities in the RC, Theo started the *Trans and Gender Nonconforming Arts Review*, the university's first transgender-focused student literary organization. Theo graduated with an honor's thesis full-length novel and hopes to pursue a career in social justice, community organizing, writing, and film.

Matthew Rohrer (RC 1992) is the author of several books of poems, most recently *The Sky Contains the*

Plans (2020) and *The Others* (2017, winner of the 2017 Believer Book Award), both published by Wave Books. His first book, *A Hummock in the Malookas* (1995), was a winner of the National Poetry Series Open Competition, and *A Green Light* (2004), 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

Ian Ross Singleton (RC 2005) is author of the debut novel *Two Big Differences* (MGraphics 2021). He is Nonfiction Editor of *Asymptote*. He has written short stories, translations, reviews, and essays which have appeared in journals such as: *Saint Ann's Review*; *Cafe Review*; *New Madrid*; *Fiddleblack*; *Asymptote*; *The Los Angeles Review of Books*; and *Fiction Writers Review*. He teaches Writing and Critical Inquiry at the University at Albany.

Haley Winkle (RC 2018) is an Ann Arbor-based food enthusiast, poet, artist, and collector of floral tattoos. Her poetry can be found in *Hobart*, *Funny Looking Dog Quarterly*, *Hooligan Magazine*, and *Vagabond City Lit*. Her analog photography can be found in *Honey & Lime Lit* and *Hell[icon]*. She is currently an Editorial Associate at the University of Michigan Press.

Endnotes

Pulling together this journal is a long, sometimes complicated process. It's good to reconnect with old friends, but I'm also happy to make new connections. Not to be too corny, but we all do have at least one thing in common!

I've been unusually nostalgic, recently, about the power of my own RC experience, because I attended a wedding in early September 2022 in Portland, Oregon, a wedding of Marty Sherman and Linda Wallen's son, Adam. I went to the wedding with my daughter Emily, itself a wonderful gift, but it struck me, our first day in Portland, about the lasting values of the RC experience: I was sitting outside at a restaurant with Em and Margie Wallen (RC 1977), her husband Tom (an EMU grad, and friends with many RC-ers), and their daughter Molly, talking about events now more than 50 years passed, while a Doors "greatest hits" sequence played aloud for us ("The crystal ship is being filled . . .").

Aside from Marty (RC 1974), Linda (RC 1975), and Margie (and about 100 others), also at the wedding were Peter Anderson (RC 1972), and Rachel Sherman (RC 2012).

Earlier in the summer I enjoyed a visit from John Hagen (RC 1972) while I was pet-sitting for my daughter's dog and cats in Portage (south of Kalamazoo). We talked about writing projects and grand schemes to somehow

make U-M a center for Midwest writing . . . but we also told crazy stories about our East Quad days, triggering a thought about a compilation (perhaps via the "burgeoning" RCAJ brand!).

In particular John told stories about his East Quad hall: in one, a student returned to the Quad after a weekend away to find his room had been filled with water to a knee-high depth like a wading pool (after it had been expertly lined with plastic sheeting). In another story, a hallmate returned in his bathrobe from the communal shower down the hall to find that his room had been stripped of everything within it, including its front door (and all his clothes)!

John also confirmed what seemed an impossible memory I have of sitting in Greene Lounge and watching Jorge Luis Borges walking down the main hallway (in a company of taller men in dark trenchcoats). John recalls a reading, one evening, in Greene.

And I've read and enjoyed several alumni books since last issue: *Forgotten City* and *Unholy City* by Carrie Smith, *Sing To The Colors* by Jim Tobin, and *The Glow Stone* by Ellen Dreyer.



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