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Contact info, etc.

This package is sold by weight and not volume. Some settling of contents may have occurred.

Crest has been shown to be an effective decay-preventive dentrifice when used in a conscientiously applied program of oral hygiene and regular professional care.

The wind, by sea, is lashed to storm, but if it be unvexed it is of all things most amenable.
An excerpt from
The Banana From Outer Space

Peter Anderson

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

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

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

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

FRED: Say no to what?

NANCY: Fred, if you say no I’ll never speak to you again.
ZAG: (menacingly) Confrontation, man, confrontation.

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

(Loud explosion ... they fall down)

REV.: (coming out of prayer) Amen.

FLOCK: (coming out of prayer) Amen.

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

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

FRED: What?

ZIG: And go on welfare!

ZAG: And smoke dope all the time!

NANCY: And be a hippie!

ZIG, ZAG & NANCY: And live!

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

ROSE: Such a nice boy.

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

FRED: Well, I don't know.

ZILCH: (playing himself in the movie, center stage) Hi there, this is Capt. Zilch for WOOM woom news covering Rev. Bill Cracker's pre-election rally in downtown Washington, D.C. (to Benny) Excuse me, sir, but who are you voting for in tomorrow's presidential election?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Zig and Zag remove long-haired wigs)

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

FRED: Hey, that's not fair!

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

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

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

JOE: Cute banana? It's a monster!

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

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

ROSE: I don't care.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keith was 16 when he realized he had a brother out there somewhere. His father came home drunk, threw a table across the room, and shoved his finger in Nancy’s face. He asked her...
why she hadn’t told the kids about the child they abandoned.

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

**It’s a match**

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

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

The DNA profile said that user scottwinter17 was Keith’s sibling. So he did what any self-respecting 21st century person would do — he stalked every single Scott Winter on Facebook and sent them all the same message: “Scott, my name is Keith Murphy. I’m looking for Scott Winter 17 from ancestry.com. And I believe that if you are him, we are brothers.”

‘I’ve been waiting for this phone call all my life’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I know the childhood that my four children had, and they did not have what you would call a normal childhood,” Nancy said. “And I was certain that Scott would have a more normal childhood. To this day, I think he probably had the best childhood of any of them.”

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

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

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

But this holiday season, 50 years after Scott was left in a car at a bowling alley, the family reunited. When Scott last visited the family, who now live in Pennsylvania, they took the opportunity to celebrate the holidays together. It was Nancy and all of her kids: Keith, Scott, Lynnae, Charles and Jeannette. Their father, Patrick, passed away a few years ago. They celebrated Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all at once, and they celebrated the 49 birthdays they had missed out on.

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

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

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

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

Lauren Stachew

They were walking back from church when they first saw the angels on the side of the road – drenched and muddied in the lake – or rather, what was left of the lake. Little, ornately painted figurines, their bellies pink like salmon, lying head-first in a mass grave. Edith stood behind her mother, watching the pained faces of the townspeople as they began to weep, trudging through the mud to gather the treasures in their arms and wiping the faces of the angels clean from the mud with the sleeves of their tunics. Edith looked up at her mother and tugged at her skirt, but she didn't budge. She remained silent, staring out into the lake puddle. She was clutching one hand onto the other like Edith knows she does when she's nervous or scared. She did it the night they waited up for their brother to come home (and he never did,) and the day their cow got real sick and almost died, (but she didn't.) All of those times, her mother had her hands clutched together just like she does now. She held her hands tightly, and the tips of her fingers turned white.

Edith peered closer at each of the angels cradled in the dirtied clothes. Their faces were simple. Two black dots for eyes, a pointed, pale nose, and a single stroke of red for a mouth. Their skirts were shaped into ripples by the four craters that were pressed into their sides with fingerprints, glossed with bright orange. The fingers folded together on their hands were implied with thin, black lines, and their arms wore rows of turquoise curves like waves, elbows flowing into pointed, triangle wings marked with white shapes like fish scales, as though these angels bore fins instead of wings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The angels in the mud weren’t as strange as what had happened a
week later. Night fell, morning rose, and on that day everyone in town began to offer away their belongings to the angels, perched high up on the mantels of the fireplaces. Lamb stew, painted wood bead necklaces, silk scarves, and porcelain china cups. Edith overheard people bragging at church, naming off all the beautiful objects they laid out onto their dining tables for the angels. Their eyes were wide with pleasure – the expressions on their faces sculpted in a permanent, disturbing awe.

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

Her mother and father were unfortunately afflicted, too, by the gift-giving. Edith woke up each morning to see them kneeling in front of the mantle, always a different object held in their hands. Her concern didn’t settle in until the day she saw her mother holding her grandmother’s ivory jewelry box with the painted red elephants to the angel’s dotted eyes. Her grandfather had it specially made for her as a wedding gift. She remembered when her grandmother died, her mother had sworn that box was the last thing she’d ever rid of, even more than the family rosary. Edith stepped back behind the door and watched them through the gap in between the wall. They stood up after a few minutes and set the box on the table. She waited for them to leave, then approached the box. She reached out to lay a finger on the lid, when she heard her mother hiss, “Edith! That is for the angel! Don’t you touch it!” She rushed over to her and swatted hard at her hand. Edith could hear her growling irritably under her breath.

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

Edith and her mother stepped into total uproar upon laying foot in the church that following Sunday. Among the commotion of stressed, chaotic shouting, Edith overheard a woman say that a young couple living in the bungalows near the river had offered their angel their newborn baby girl. The loss of necklaces, scarves, and tiny cups didn’t bother anyone, but the loss of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity.
Poets With History/Poets Without History

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

Mary Wollstonecraft Traveling With Her Kids

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

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

Everything is more distracting than the clouds
they are never there they move on
no one can say remember that cloud
we saw in college it’s still there
let’s go see it again they walk their dogs in the park
they raise the plastic shade on the airplane window
and see a low region surrounded by thin peaks
all of it unreal white needle shaped mountains like a scroll
of Chinese painting a landscape not even imagined
which disappears when the plane flies through it
and emerges in the blue air over the monotonous sorghum fields below
and everything changes a diet coke sprays open
the distracting flight attendant glides past
but the clouds continue to gather
they fail and dissipate they come from the east
where the sea makes them foam
or they come from the west
full of ragweed and pollen too small to see
everyone breathes it all day
distracted by a song a friend sings
over and over white miraculous shifts overhead
the clouds reflected in the surface of a cocktail
completely ignored drink and cloud ignored
while a woman takes her clothes off in front of a man
who smiles shaded by the passing helicopter’s rotors
tearing up the stratus clouds and flinging now
her shirt at him
rain falling in her almost unnaturally light blue eyes
when he looks closely reflected there
in the morning the whole sky
is a lusty pink lamp turned on
a little girl stands open-mouthed in her pajamas
she is his daughter it is five o’clock in the morning
the city still sleeps the clouds fly out to sea
how many people saw them this morning
the citizens who turn their backs on the leaves and insects
who turn their faces to the light of their rooms
when the clouds are the color and shape of flaming brigantines
gone up in a dark harbor but they’re distracted
from the mares’ tails if they looked up they’d see
there’s nothing to be afraid of
a high pressure system is moving in the air is cooler now
the sky is a mild blue something
has changed

Like A Sausage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At first, I made good on my word. About a week after Sam was born, as soon as I got the hang of nursing and could manage a free hand, I picked up reading right where I had left off. I sat in the cheap, squeaky glider we’d acquired, and rocked what was probably the seated equivalent of miles, a novel in one hand, baby in the other. I was beyond sleep-deprived and yet also weirdly focused. While the glider shrieked and squealed, and Sam shifted between napping and gnawing my nipples raw, I plowed my way through Thomas Hardy and Dan Chaon. There’s a picture of me Michael took around that time. I’m sitting in that glider, a burp cloth on one shoulder and Sam on the other. My face is tilted toward the window, bright with late-May sunlight, my eyes are closed and purpled with exhaustion. You can’t see the copy of The Empathy Exams spread open on my lap but trust me, it’s there. I remember, because it’s the last breath I took before I went under.

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

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

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

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

Somewhere in the bowels of my purse was a Nadine Gordimer novel, a tale about struggle and strife in a country half a world away. I had a tale about struggle and strife in my own depression, and finally of the tedious exhaustion of new motherhood. Now, here I was in this 15-by-20 room, where monitors and alarms were constantly beeping, and there was no way out, except the unimaginable.

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

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

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

Or we desperately tried to, anyway.

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

I didn’t blame myself for what had happened to Sam. I knew his fate had been sealed the moment sperm met egg—the biological version of a Greek tragedy. In hindsight it was clear that we, the mortal fools, had all been rejoicing when we should have been weeping, when we should have been steeling ourselves for an ambush, a battle, a long period of wandering in an existential wilderness, far from comfort of any kind.

But I did think about those weeks in the rocking chair, all that obsessive reading, and its uncomfortable resemblance to flight, all that time when my mind was not on my new baby, but somewhere else, somewhere he was not. It was hard to remember, but I think I had been trying to prove something. What it was I could no longer say.

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

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

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

He was stalled out in those series of milestones American parents obsess about: rolling over, sitting up, learning
how to swallow spoonfuls of puréed peas and applesauce. But he had figured out how to clasp his hands together, to raise them to his mouth when he smiled with delight. It was his own little utterance of overwhelming joy. That’s when I knew I was still feeling something, that’s when I could hear the booming reverberation of the stone traveling back toward me with such a terrible and ferocious force that I had to put my hands over my ears and turn away.

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

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

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

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

That old restless writer’s habit of trying to inhabit other people’s lives is back with a renewed, unsettling force. On the walk from work this week, under a gloomy overcast sky, I was passed by a teenage girl driving a decrepit minivan. Something about her face caused me to conjure up her life, the slick feel of the worn steering wheel under her palms, the particulars of the home she was driving toward. I was trying to bestow upon her a problem, her blessing or her curse, the one mysterious and secret pivot on which her life might turn and suddenly become unrecognizable. The thoughts were so vivid that I got distracted. I wasn’t looking where I was going and I almost ran head on into a jogger and her dog coming out of nowhere over the crest of the hill. As they passed, they both bestowed upon me a warning look.

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

Alyson Foster (RC 2004) has had two books published by Bloomberg: The Place of the Holy, a collection of stories (May 2016), and God Is An Astronaut, a novel (2014). This essay first appeared in Guernica.
never had the time to spend with me. Most days I spent alone in the house, doing homework after school, making dinner for myself, watching Adult TV and later, practicing what I saw on myself upstairs until Mom came home. I had never met my dad. Mom never said much about him either. All I knew was that he lived in Florida now with a woman named Kathleen.

My mother never talked about her job, except one time, when she took my friend, Jocelyn, and me ice skating at the local lake. It was my birthday and I had never seen her like this. I thought she had forgotten. Mondays, she said, she opened the local history museum for school field trips. There was a couple in #11 at the Super 8 motel. She said she had played House in long ago. They even had pummeled the grass, charred the log cabin Jocelyn and I had played House in long ago. They even had pummeled the wildflowers to an ashy pulp; the same neon to the ground. It is swallowed up by the blizzard and disappears completely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I imagine her future now, her future without me. I know that she will continue to childlock the door. She
will sometimes drive by my school. I’ll spy on her snuggling under my covers, curling them up to her chin. She will continue to go through the motions like I’m alive. Because it is easier to love someone you never meant to birth when they’re gone. You see, it won’t be me she’ll be missing. No, I don’t think so. She’ll fall in love with my memory. I can see the way that the neighbors will stare at her. She will gain a new identity - the mother of the dead child. She will be ignored by most, because no one knows how to talk to a wounded animal. Some will go so far as to say, “I’m so sorry for you.” But I’m not sorry for you, Mom.

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

The cemetery lock is sheathed in frost and looks like the glazed donuts they sell at Hinkley’s bakery. The ice has filled in the keyhole with impenetrable crystals. The lockkeeper has been outdone tonight. The elements prevent her from finding her way inside the graveyard. I’m hovering behind her now, still wondering why she is here. Her hands let go of the keys. They clang to her thigh and silence. Her hands, bare, slide over the padlock. It is slippery in her sooty hands and her thumbs rub over its face. I had a stuffed bunny once with a pink satin bow. I rubbed the bow until it was streaked with dirt and more brown than pink. But there was something in the motion, a soothing circling comfort that the satin would always be there. Even when the color ran out. This is how I hold her hands now. They are cold, statuesque, teal-marbled with veins. I can’t remember the last time she held me in her arms.

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

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

The night, my witness, has undoubtedly whispered my death through the wind, through the trees. She wanders down the cemetery path until the blizzard makes it impossible for even a ghost to see through.

The timing of the gift would make a big difference. My son would turn eighteen in early January. If we gave him the gun on this milestone day, the registration would be in his name. If the rifle appeared under the Christmas tree, ownership would rest with us, at least on the official paperwork. Each choice, we felt, would bestow its own message about parental oversight. On the gut level, where so much of parenting lives, retaining ownership felt like a duty of care to our child, a backstop to any lapse in safety or judgment. But at eighteen our son would be able to purchase a rifle on his own. Wasn’t the impulse to have our name on the paperwork another overprotective cling-wrap our
son had outgrown? Besides, transferring the registration at a future time might prove complicated, not worth the Christmas Day delight and the days off from school to shoot at the brand new mall-sized shooting range that had just opened down the street from our home.

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

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

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

My son held no objections, either, to singing the high bass line of a Bach cantata to a Glock in the front row. His defense of the open carry might merely have been teenage bravado. But recently we’ve come to see his view as more about investigating the emotional impulse behind carrying the weapon than defending the weapon itself. The occasional target shooting my son enjoyed with his Boy Scout troop had lately, he told us, become more essential than a sometime hobby. This past autumn, a lingering bought of the summertime blues had become unshakeable. As he struggled to keep his footing, our son discovered that achieving good aim transcended skill and discipline. Focusing on the bull’s-eye had come to mean attaining peace. He quoted from articles on flow and the healing power of meditation. He wrote his college application essay on the joys of taming his reflexes in the cross-hairs. He urged us to buy him a rifle so he could shoot more often, join competitions, make everyday grasps at this fleeting peace. “I know you’re anti-gun. But you’re not anti-sport,” he argued, as if this dichotomy didn’t share the connective tissue of a weapon.

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

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

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As the only daughter embedded with three brothers, football was both my first fascination and bewilderment with a sport devoted to men. When my parents relocated from a liberal New Hampshire college city to a sulphur-aired Wisconsin paper mill town, rooting for the Green Bay Packers over the Patriots became a way to slough off the Eastern pizzazz and resilience of the passing game for the slow, methodical Midwestern power drive. Pro games ran on our television all weekend long, a continuous stream my brothers and father shared as devoutly as a religious ritual. To the uninitiated, the offensive drives down the field were exasperatingly opaque. I was attempting to decipher these plays in the days before sharp-image television screens made the ball visible even to clumsy viewers like me. Brightly colored digitized highlights on the line of scrimmage and the next down would, after 1998, the year of my son’s birth, make the ball’s trudge downfield obvious. But as a kid all I had to guide me on our 24 inch black and white television were the confusing sideline hash marks and measuring chains the men in my family seemed to interpret without effort. My older brother could even leave the den entirely to fetch another pop and still absorb the down with his head in the fridge as if the play was just another snack.

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

“How many yards are left?”

“Just watch.” This while my dad kept up with the game from behind a newspaper or the latest Book of the Month Club selection. Despite squinting at the plays, the only times I was certain of what I was seeing was when the chains came out to pinpoint the exact yard. My favorite play was when the ball was just shy of the down, because the television camera would swoop on to the ball, locking focus for a brief moment. The
When I’d asked my son’s therapist whether buying a gun for a depressed child amounted to a breach of parental duty, she talked about how the gun might be my son’s best course of treatment. He has a passion for the sport, and goals for competition. He immerses himself in the flow of the moment between aiming and pulling the trigger, feels the healing serotonin when he hits his mark. He feels pride, not anxiety, about his performance. These sensations and motivations are exactly what he needs to counter his depression, she advised. The therapist’s rationale was more treatment plan than argument, and matched what we’ve been counseling our son. Find a passion. Heal through a sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed? Besides, I’d seen him shoot targets at a forested range at the local Boy Scout camp. The shooting pavilion is located in a peaceful meadow surrounded by tall golden grass, maples and birch. While my son loaded his borrowed rifle, I’d watched fathers show their young scouts the basics of aiming and firing. I’d seen how the intense focus of good aim relaxed my son, soothed the unhappy knot along his jaw. I’d learned that his restless comic spirit can achieve absolute stillness in the moments before pressing the trigger, and that he never flinched at the gun’s kick.

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

My son, I’d learned, is an excellent shot.

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During my son’s slipping away days, he quite literally blinks out. The light in his blue eyes, his rod iron posture, his speech, all dim and slacken when he hits his mark. He feels pride, not anxiety, about his performance. These sensations and motivations are exactly what he needs to counter his depression, she advised. The therapist’s rationale was more treatment plan than argument, and matched what we’ve been counseling our son. Find a passion. Heal through a sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed? Besides, I’d seen him shoot targets at a forested range at the local Boy Scout camp. The shooting pavilion is located in a peaceful meadow surrounded by tall golden grass, maples and birch. While my son loaded his borrowed rifle, I’d watched fathers show their young scouts the basics of aiming and firing. I’d seen how the intense focus of good aim relaxed my son, soothed the unhappy knot along his jaw. I’d learned that his restless comic spirit can achieve absolute stillness in the moments before pressing the trigger, and that he never flinched at the gun’s kick.

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

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

My parents gave birth to their children during the Vietnam War. They put guns in the same immoral category as the war. Arming in personal self-defense they viewed as a nullification, not a protection, of civil order. So when, during a midlife crisis when I was eleven, my dad signed on to the Ann Arbor auxiliary police force and brought a handgun home in a white shoebox, my mother insisted he return it. By then my parents were ensnared in a tumultuous marital meltdown that I later learned sometimes turned violent. Looking back, my mother’s demand was not out of conviction, but out of fear for her, and
On the day Dad turned in the weapon, I drove to the police station in downtown Ann Arbor with him. The shoebox holding the gun rested between us. I'd never seen a real live gun, so I was desperate to peek under the lid, but was afraid I'd be yelled at. Because my parents divorced soon after, I never did ask my dad what impulse, or desire, drove him to want the gun. As far as I know, he has owned nunchuks and a pair of Japanese Sai, but never, again, a gun. The closest our family would ever come to embracing a violent pastime, I thought, was watching football.

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

A few moments later, my younger brother, the husband of the er brother, the husband of the sister-in-law happened to put out a question on our family WhatsApp chat group. I'm thinking of buying a handgun for self-protection. Any recs? She's asking the wrong question, I thought, put down the phone. My screen flashed; my eldest brother had sent a snapshot of his handgun, a shiny Sig P226.

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

Just watch, I hear. And so I do.

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

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

Kids thought they were Rambo, he mouths.

And I remember a moment from my shooting days when Ron and I shot skeet at that friend’s cottage near Lewiston. Our friend had not yet arrived home when we hiked to a clearing with a few other guys we knew. I was the only woman, and expected to be the only one to fail to hit a target. My aim hadn’t improved since my Frisbee days. Despite my practice sighting ahead of the disc and shooting into the arc’s apex, I could never hold my arms still enough for an accurate aim. After missing a few, and watching the guys hit a few, I hefted my shotgun while my husband loaded the trap. The sky was bottle blue, laced with wispy clouds. At the crack of the launch, I tensed and followed with my barrel not the skeet, barely visible against the white clouds, but the curve of the target’s whistle. I squeezed the trigger. The disc exploded. Shards rained from the sky like shattered bone china.

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

When my son wraps up his session, we collect our driver’s licenses from the front desk and spend a few moments browsing the handguns and assault rifles for sale in the showroom. Thanks to my brothers and stepdad, I recognize some of the models. A pink weapon catches my eye. I wonder if my sister-in-law ever bought a handgun. If so, they would be a family of two handguns and three young children.

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

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

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

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

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

Previously published in Midwestern Gothic, Issue 23, Fall 2016.

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

I recognize the girls beside me as Erin and Sam, two of the students who sit in the first row of our Monday/Wednesday morning class, Introduction to Medicine: Clinicopathologic Diagnosis of Human Disease. Sam sports workout clothes, as if the events we are about to observe will energize her enough to hit the gym directly afterward. Erin scrolls through something on her phone. She leans over and shows it to Sam, they snicker together. I don't really feel like anything could be funny right now.

Professor Flint lets us know that we are waiting for one other girl to join us before we head down. He is an older man, always well-dressed in corduroys, a button-down, and of course, his signature bowtie. With their unusually bright colors and odd patterns, his bowties make me smile long after our class has let out.

His class begins at 8:30 am. Most mornings we are greeted at the front of the classroom by containers of homemade cakes and cookies, and our professor’s wide grin. He loves to bake for us, and even invited anyone in our class who didn’t have a place to go for Thanksgiving to celebrate the holiday with his family at their home. I like to think of him as the soft, wise, grandfather I never had. The four of us ease our way into small talk. Sam launches in with the awful record of the Michigan football team, and, after some painful silences, the conversation flows into questions we have for our professor. “Did you ever get nervous before doing an autopsy when you started?” I ask. He thinks for a moment as he folds his hands together on his lap. “I haven't done many, only about 150 cases.” To cut 150 dead apart, all of the stories those bodies told, seems like a lot to me. “The main coroner here has probably performed over 10,000.” He looks at us and smiles easily. “But, to answer your question, no. I was never nervous.” Great, I think, just me then. I smile back uncomfortably.

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

I realize now that that this decision may have been a huge mistake. I'm not very good with blood or needles, medical procedures or pain. At checkups, when a nurse attempts to give me a shot, my screams can be heard by doctors attending to their own patients on the opposite end of the building. I know this for a fact, because the office I went to as a kid was my mother’s. Dr. Maach, it sounds like your daughter has arrived, her nurses joked, as she was forced to stop what she was doing.
to come check on me. As I left the office, her apologies to the other doctors we passed always made me feel guilty for my squeamishness. But it wasn’t a feeling I could control. Over the years I have become mildly better with needles, but not by much. When I came to college, I thought volunteering in the hospital could help. It is an interesting dilemma, having a doctor for a mother. I feel a certain comfort with the sterile, beeping world of a hospital. And yet, when I walk down the hallways to visit patients, I still fear what I will see behind each door. This contradiction is not so unlike how I feel towards my mother, too. The skills I taught myself in order to attune to her sadness were good practice for this work. I never knew what to expect when I peeked my head inside her room.

“Sorry I’m late,” the last girl from our class pants. As she rushes in, my mother’s darkness fades. I become aware, yet again, of where I am sitting. Late-arriving Becca, along with the other two girls sitting beside me, are among the many students who put their hands up on the first day of class as being prepared. Throughout the semester, no matter how grotesque the pictures on the slideshow or disgusting the symptoms we discuss, these students never flinch. They even ask follow up questions, probe our professor for more gruesome details. In the back of the class, my eyes are jammed shut. I sit at a desk, wish I could crouch underneath it instead. Hiding from the information being taught, however, would likely diminish my chances of passing this class.

There is no hiding now. Professor Flint rises from his chair and asks us to follow him. We head down the stairs and through the hallway that connects the Cardiovascular Center to the general hospital wings. This part is familiar. Every Friday I walk through this hallway on my way to visit with patients. I sit with them and hear their stories. For at least a half hour or so, my nods and smiles allow them to forget where they are. Now, I wish someone could do the same for me, too. Along the way we pass the portraits of every graduating class from The University of Michigan Medical School. “If you look closely you’ll see Dr. Kevorkian up on this wall,” Professor Flint points out. I feel like I should have noticed his portrait before. But when I walk through this hallway I’m so wrapped up in my list of patients to visit, that I barely notice the world around me at all. The elevators to the general wings of the hospital, the ones I usually take, are straight off this corridor to the right. Instead, Professor Flint turns left down a different hallway. The other three girls swiftly follow him, barely giving Dr. Kevorkian’s smiling portrait a second glance. But I feel his black and white stare on my back as I trail behind the others.

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

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

He has on a grey, worn T-shirt, and I can’t make out what it says. Black graffiti letters trace themselves across the front, as indecipherable as his heartbeat. His creased belled sleeves snake through the loops of ragged, dirty jeans. A slit cuts up the bottom of the left leg all the way to his knee. I can’t tell if this was his doing or the doctor’s. I see from the slit he has on white Hanes crew socks pulled as high as they can go, his feet tucked inside brown slip-on shoes I imagine he bought at Walmart. The man is heavy, with thick thighs and a protruding stomach. He has large ears and the ridges of his skull show slightly underneath his bald scalp. On each arm, a tattoo captures what he felt deserved permanence in his short life. Like the words on his shirt, I can’t decipher the tattoos either. In death, meaning ebbs away, no longer translatable.

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

Below us a resident performs the initial evaluation of the man. He holds a clipboard, and slowly makes his way around the body. He picks up an arm, examines a leg, turns the man onto his side. The resident continues to make marks on his white sheet of paper as he searches the full terrain of this man’s body. A photographer also makes his way around the table. He positions his camera, bends the man’s body in and over the side of the body to peer into the just-minutes-ago whole man. It is at this moment that I start to see black spots in my vision. I let out both uncontrollable laughter, and a gasping, “I think I need to leave the room.”

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

I continue to watch through the windows, safe, in my distance. Audible gasps and dramatic phrases claw inside my throat. They are too hard to hold back. But after one of my “Gross, gross, gross,” exclamations, I hear the door open and up the stairs walks the assistant I recognize as the one who retrieved the mop after the nauseating gurgling-blood incident. Her latex gloves are off, too, and she approaches me asking if she can get me some water. I feel embarrassed that yet another completely unfazed professional noticed my pansy-ness. I tell her that I am fine, and thank her for her offer. She leaves the room. I wonder where she is going. If I had mopped blood off the floor as she had just done, I would have rushed to the bathroom to vomit. But this woman spoke to me calmly, she was in no hurry as she left. A few minutes later, she returns with a bottle of water and three miniature Hershey’s chocolates. With a nod she sets them in front of me, on the ledge of the window I now stare through to gaze at the man below us. “It’s really hard the first time,” she says as she crosses to the stairs. “But you get used to it.” The woman exits and I am left alone again. Below me, I see her enter the procedure room. She returns to the table where the still man lies, already so well-versed in what I am too afraid to understand.

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

When I looked into my mother’s silent room as a child, at her sleeping body across her bed, I closed the door on her sadness, unwilling to accept its dark answer. But, if I chose to look away from her, I would have to find somewhere else to look. I still needed an answer for the question of how to live. This search led me to the hospital. I encountered patients with happy memories. Their pasts were painted by the stories they told, of lives experienced in exhilarating color. So foreign were their stories to me, to the black and white life I had come to understand through the eyes of my mother. I’d hoped these sick people’s outlooks could provide me with clues, help me finally find my own, better, answer. But, when I walked out of their rooms, their smiles faded against my back; their colorful stories faded too. My mother’s silent one powerfully took its place in my mind once again. Perhaps the hospital was a gateway drug for me. Since I never found what I needed in the dying, I moved on to death. Maybe this extreme, an already dead man, could give me the answer no living patients could. Maybe the memory of him will be powerful enough to shut out all else. What this woman didn’t realize is that I came here for myself. I wanted to feel the ephemeral sensation of living, to use the painful end of someone else’s life to compel myself to start living my own.

I watch the events that take place below and am startled. The woman who I mistook for an assistant is now performing the procedure herself. She holds the large shears in her hands, cuts through each rib, digs into the man’s insides, saws away at his skull. The resident only weighs his skull. The resident only weighs the man’s organs but it is she who singularly deconstructs him. I breathe sharply in. Just a few minutes earlier she had handed me chocolate with hands that are now encased in bloody latex gloves. I stare at the pile of the man’s clothes, still piled on the floor, and realize the absurdity of what I had hoped to find in coming here. I expected a stranger to give me an answer to life that he couldn’t even give himself. Her drill pushes deeper into this man’s skull. No different than leaving the rooms of sick patients each week, I feel myself deflate. The hopeless question inside of me, that I try so hard to answer, still lives.

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

Elena Potek (RC 2015) lives in Chicago and works as a management consultant in the healthcare space. She hopes to return to graduate school in the near future to fulfill her dream of becoming a sex therapist and educator.
In his book *Blink* Malcolm Gladwell explores the fact that we are capable of making accurate snap judgments without being consciously aware of our reasons for them, particularly if we have significant expertise in an area. Gladwell calls the part of our brain assessing evidence without our conscious awareness “the black box.” Among his examples is this anecdote:

When a museum bought a new sculpture, several art historians identified it as an accomplished fake within seconds of seeing it, even though a geologist, a team of lawyers and other art experts had judged it authentic after a year-and-a-half of intensive study. The art historians identified the fake without examining it up close by simply relying on their first reaction. For one man this was noticing the word “fresh” popped in his mind. For another it was the feeling that there was a wall of glass between him and the work. For a third there was a feeling of repulsion for the figure. These snap impressions drove the museum to perform more analysis and they were eventually able to prove the sculpture was fake.

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

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

First, we have to think about whether we and the other people in our workshop group are “experts.” In fact, a common criticism of workshops is that they invite people who aren’t experts to give advice to others. The problem with this observation is that it doesn’t unpack the concept of expert and thus can mislead people. In fact, there are three different types of experts relevant to a writing workshop: readers, editors and writers.

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

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

Do most workshop participants meet this criterion? Hopefully, the answer in a general sense is yes. Unfortunately, in a narrower sense the answer may frequently be no.

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

So, what should we do? First, consider the type of work you routinely read. It will help you identify whether other people’s work is truly in your area of expertise, and thus how reliable your black box of aesthetics is for any given piece of writing. Also, find out what those in your workshop routinely read. This will help you weigh the feedback they provide about your work.

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, workshop participants could be encouraged to articulate the story’s objective features, such as its clock (how much time the present story covers), its stage sets (where events take place), its shape or structure (scenes, flashbacks, exposition), its plot, and its point of view. Next members can try to articulate their interpretation of a story’s less objective features, such as narrative distance and tone or voice. Asking participants to describe each of these elements in a disciplined way will force readers to note how a story is put together; articulate slippery, subjective impressions; and get people talking the same language about a story. For example, what may seem like stating the obvious often gives rise to surprises. Sometimes you’ll discover half the workshop thought the piece satirical and the other half didn’t.
This method may also lessen the chance that, by being required to justify our judgments, we subconsciously alter them. Observations about a story are just that: objective. It’s nearly impossible to invent what you thought was noteworthy about a character. You either noticed his obsession with jelly beans or you didn’t. How many people noticed it, and what they thought it meant, is valuable information for the writer, but it doesn’t require a judgement of quality from the reader. Similarly, instead of telling the writer we thought a character was underdeveloped, we can describe what we do and don’t understand about a character and let the writer decide if our understanding is sufficient and accurate.

As workshop leaders and participants, we all have a duty to continually refine our black boxes, that store of experience which helps us react usefully to work. Part of this is keeping in mind the graduating and distinct skills of readers, writers and editors. They may overlap, but they don’t always. Another part is recognizing, and educating ourselves about, the conventions of different genres. Finally, we must recognize the value the story’s author brings. While she shouldn’t interrupt discussion to argue with feedback or justify her choices, inviting a writer to pose questions or explain her hopes for a work beforehand can add valuable focus to readers’ observations and the workshop discussion.

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

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E.J. and the Trojan Horse

Daniel Madaj

Summer

Wasn’t it a Russian writer who said that smart things are done uniquely, but dumb things are done in generic dumbness? He might have gone on to say that there’s never a good time to do something dumb, but that some times are worse than others.

Well, anyway, Emil Joseph Jackson picked a bad time: Dotty was home to England midsummer to visit family and friends. “E.J.” waited and waited for some “special hash” she had promised. Overcome with an odd righteousness, ignoring their surprisingly good spring together, he sent a snippy, hurtful text. Dotty replied: We’re done.

Overcome with an odd righteousness, he would be carrying it around with him everywhere, while it ate away at his heart. Some times it looked just the opposite: tiny little features spread out like he kept something radioactive locked away in a suitcase locked away in a closet, but the radiation eventually leaked out. He needed to open that suitcase, deal with what was inside, or he would be carrying it around with him everywhere, while it ate away at everything.

Autumn

Of course E.J. heard the party around him, Sunday night, the first weekend of fall term. E.J. spent most of that evening face down in bed, in “his and Dotty’s” room in the three-bedroom he shared with fellow writing majors Lou Mothersbaugh and Gus Jamison. E.J. heard the music, the babble of the visitors, smelled the cigarette and grass smoke.

And from time to time he heard his bedroom door opening. The next morning, he waited until everyone had left the apartment, then hobbled down the hallway to the bathroom, bleary, heart-broken, troubled, but finally too bored to stay inert.

E.J. looked in the mirror. As usual, he didn’t like his beard; it looked like a matt of iron filings hugging a magnet. Or his hair, a bristly bush. But then, he didn’t like himself clean-shaven or with his hair short or slicked back. His nose seemed too large; all his features seemed crowded into the middle of his face. Some times it looked just the opposite: tiny little features spread out against a vast wasteland.

How long had he been hibernating? Stepping out onto the sidewalk, it was no longer summer. Mid-September: temperature moderate, not humid. The big maple out front still had a head of green, if “greying” at the temples, but several shrubs were flame red and a few trees up the road had already yellowed or browned.

Autumn! He met Dotty last autumn, in the Inn, in the Experimental College basement. The Inn had a more formal name, but it now escaped him. Inn-Digenous? Inn-Digestion? Dotty Botsford was a first-year student from England (her parents had met at the university), seated with her two roommates, Deb Treacle and Casey Rogers. E.J. had been in the small game room to the side, frustrated as usual with his poor showing at the Inn’s ancient pinball game, a version of Rap-pachini’s Daughter where the player takes on the role of young Giovanni and infiltrates the poison garden (one ball active), adjusting to the various poisons just enough to convince Beatrice to escape with him (two balls active), then engineering an escape (three balls), then nursing himself back to health and her to a new chemistry of health. And then presumably living together, happily ever after. After countless quarters spent, E.J. has never been able to restore Giovanni, which seemed a bitter but fitting metaphor for his romantic failures.

Worse, markings on the wall made it clear that others had great success. Some even surpassed the high score of the alum who was lovingly paying for the game’s perpetual upkeep, although this required some deft tinkering: the alum’s only condition was that a governor on the machine prevent anyone from topping his high score. As you might expect, in reality the governor had to be turned back on every night at closing time.

E.J., defeated again, had one last quarter in his pocket. He decided to use it on a song from the jukebox. He picked a new solo song from one of the Barberless Quartet, and one of Dotty’s roommates piped up that the Barbers were also Dotty’s favorite, why not sit and join us?

Thinking about Dotty and the Inn on the walk to the XC, he headed downstairs. He was going to ask for a
E.J. stood before the door. It looked like any other dorm room, except for a taped handwritten note, “Aristo. He was about to knock when the door flew open, almost smashing his nose. He stepped back. Sylvie St. John sobbing, stepped out. Tall, too thin, with long, shiny black hair, she looked worsome in that way that was too painfully familiar. Before he could think, he put his arms around her. She collapsed into him, sobbing harder. He held her head gently with one hand and he steered her tears onto the front of his left shoulder. Goodness, did he kiss her on the top of the head?

“Thanks, E.J.,” she mumbled, stepped back, and gave him a piercing look of appreciation.

An older woman, who turned out to be alumna Justine Nesbitt, appeared at the door, wearing a slight smile. “You must be E.J.,” she said. “I see you already know Sylvie.”

Justine wasn’t a creative writing major when she started at the Experimental College. She was in the XC’s second class; the creative writing program hadn’t started yet.

Justine was a star journalist in high school, as much as such a thing is possible, and she came to college to get a degree in journalism. During the summer before her freshman year, the university sent her and all other incoming students a note describing the XC and inviting applications. Justine was intrigued; she applied, was accepted.

Justine remained committed to journalism, working all four years at the university’s student paper, becoming assistant editor in her junior year and editor-in-chief in her senior year. But along the way she discovered drama, first in the XC, then in the larger university. Drama led to a class on television arts. Meanwhile, in her junior year, Hayley van der Berg was hired to teach creative fiction....

Justine won a Ficklehart Award for a tv screenplay, which led to a summer internship out in Los Angeles, her junior year, working for a small but successful tv writers conglomerate. They liked her; they offered her a job, which she took after graduation.

Perhaps it was her earlier focus on journalism, but Justine found herself able to be creative within the narrow confines of television writing, with its narrow window: be creative, but none of the main characters can change and the plot should wrap up within the episode, which currently meant within about 35 minutes of on-screen time. Oh, and keep it simple.

So Justine prospered.

She might argue that she prospered too well, because she found dating difficult. Most of the men she was attracted to were eventually intimidated by her success. One who wasn’t was Costa Papagalos, whom she bumped into at a local LA production of Aristophanes’ Lysistrata. They shared a drink after, and had a brief relationship. It might have been more than brief if he wasn’t already married; he was always vague about these details, but Justine could see the outline clearly enough. Everything about Costa was slightly vague, but it seemed mostly a result of a boundless restlessness, a yearning for new things.

Costa lived well and probably beyond his means, so it was not a surprise to find him adept at grantmanship, if not outright tax-dodging. He encouraged Justine to establish her own foundation (which she didn’t do) or at least to “find ways to get others to pay for things she would like to see happen.” He said that if you’re going to end up paying taxes, why not use those payments to subsidize things you want to see prosper? Which she eventually did with the Aristophanes Project.

She was coming back to the area regularly to visit her aging mother, and dropped in periodically to see Hayley and other favorite teachers at the XC. The university had been pouting her
with generic requests for money, but she found the requests hollow, even if the caller was usually an earnest young man breathlessly telling her about the exciting opportunities made possible by alums just like her. She assumed that the male alums were called by equally eager young women.

This led her to muse: what if there was something specific and desirable at the XC? Would I give to that? Of course she would. So she mused about what that would be, which in quick order led her to imagine the Aristophanes Project. But she found it impossible to set the wheels in motion at the university; it became clear that it would be immensely better if the Project already existed, or had external funds to bring it into existence. So with Costa’s help, she crafted proposals, and eventually one was funded.

His caveat? That she agree to meet him in Athens at Christmas during the project, assuming she was not in a serious relationship. Or even if she was.

Justine ushered E.J. into the modest office and gestured to a scruffy, padded chair that he seemed to remember from the old library. She sat behind the desk and tidied up a few folders there. She smiled, and E.J. realized that she was younger than he thought. He squinted. 30, maybe? She was dressed in E.J. the possible solution to a consciousness he looked.

He promised himself he would fund the plan already exist. Since the semester was well underway, the wait was not long. But the plan was not specific about the summer after Rex graduated high school, and he had the opportunity to attend college early, that spring. Wouldn’t it be cool if she also took spring classes and they lived together? It sounded good. She took two classes, including a writing class, because it was available and because she had heard good things about Van der Berg. Living together was great. She wrote that story....

But during the spring Rex bumped into the Immersive Language Program, and before Sylvie knew otherwise Rex was moving into the Italian dorm, referred to himself as Giovanni, and was shacking up with an Italian tutor/girlfriend.... Rex was gone. The plan was dead!

E.J. wanted to look for Sylvie. But first he forced himself to look for work.... Sure, the thing with Justine might pan out, but with the Inn gone and the library gone....

He went to university counseling to ask about fellowships. Yeah, maybe there was one for stupidity. He promised himself he would fund such a fellowship, later, if one didn’t already exist. Since the semester was well underway, the wait was not long.

Justine knew little of Sylvie’s 50 Year Plan. The Plan began when she was 12, so you might say it was now a 43 Year Plan, but it didn’t hit its stride until 11th grade, when she was 16, when and Rex started dating. She knew then that he was The One, even though he was a year younger and just in 10th grade. They’d both go to the same college, she’d major in anthropology, he’d be an engineer, they’d marry when he had his degree, they’d live on the west coast, eventually have two children, a boy and a girl....

They talked a bit more about the Trojan Horse, and about how there are many unexpected outcomes from seemingly clear beginnings.

“That’s what caught my eye about Sylvie,” she said. “Did you know she won a Ficklehart Award this summer for a spring story about the concept?”

No, he didn’t. In fact, he knew almost nothing about Sylvie, except what he had learned in the last few moments: that she was suffering with the same illness he had, and that she hadn’t clobbered him when he hugged her.

Justine happened to be a guest reader for the summer Fickleharts, and when she read Sylvie’s story and saw she was in the XC, she knew she had her first Project student.

“The story is about someone distributing counterfeit coins that mimicked ancient ones; there was no financial fraud involved; the purpose was to inspire curiosity and wonder.”

Justine asked E.J. about his writing and then asked about administrative background. He had worked a bit at the library, and in high school had done office work. Heck, she might use him to run things locally so she didn’t have to make so many trips!

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He was called into a small office where a thin, nervous man with orange hair and an inordinate amount of figurines lining his desktop and bookshelves gestured for him to sit. The counselor perked up when she heard about the Greek things. If you’d take Ancient Greek, a stipend! Courtesy of the Greek Antiquities Council. E.J. was good at language.... And hey, if by chance you took ancient as well as modern, well, more money. Courtesy of the Greek Tourist Agency. He could take the two language classes, his tutorial, and the two Aristophanes classes, 15 credits. Perfect. And the stipends would more than he could hope to make working 8 to 10 hours a week....

It was late when he finally reached Sylvie’s door. (He had read the number off a sheet on Justine’s desk). He knocked. Waited, waited.

The door opened. Sylvie smiled. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay....” EJ began.

She kissed him. She pulled him gently into her room, and shut the door.

E.J. wanted to say that he stayed in that room for the rest of the academic year, but that was only mostly true.

Hayley Van der Berg kept details of her own story discreet, but most students knew she ran the XC’s fiction writing program. She was trim, compact, earnest, intense, with a reputation as fair and even-tempered, if stoic to the point of being inscrutable. It would surprise no one that she was herself a writer; she wrote manuals and instruction pieces for industry which brought in a steady second income. But she also wrote detective fiction, under the pseudonym Piso Cuidado.

Cuidado’s stories are particularly popular in Argentina and Central America, where middle-aged detective Niño en la Canista solved seemingly unsolvable mysteries with the aid of the psychedelic drug asahuenga. Cuidado followed the standard detective formula for the first books in the series, but increasingly the drug is causing a spiritual and existential crisis. Of course, the publisher worries about where this is going, but so far sales have been strong, so worries have been pushed to the future. There are talks about movie adaptations.

Hayley wanted to explore a theory that people are drawn to writing as a way to better detail one’s own sexual fantasies. She would certainly say this is true of most of her male students; when they’re not exploring the angst and miserable pointlessness of human life (as if the first one to truly see it that way), they’re writing about their own sexual parts (as if I’m the first one to ever have them).

Both themes were big for E.J., at least at the start. But then he abruptly turned to space opera, which Hayley hated: she didn’t like sf and E.J. wasn’t crazy about it either. He turned to space opera, which Hayley much more than he could hope to make working 8 to 10 hours a week....

They never discussed it, but E.J. and Sylvie cohabitated in a pleasant limbo: Sylvie was waiting for Rex to come to his senses, and E.J. waited for Dotty. At least at first.

E.J. loved to study Sylvie when he thought she didn’t notice, although the truth is that she noticed almost everything. That was actually one of her problems. Tall, too thin, with long black hair, she was very pretty, perhaps moreso because she didn’t wear make-up and didn’t draw attention to herself. If you didn’t know her, you would likely find her guarded or worried or thinking about events somewhere else. Even if you did know her, these would be normal states.

E.J. periodically hacked at his big head of red-brown hair and his big red-brown beard, always being sculpted or shorn into a mustache or Manchu or something as E.J. struggled to find an identity he liked. Mountain man? Not so much. Clean-faced youngster? Not so much.

Early in October, Sylvie got very sick with flu. Dispute a nimbus of toxicity and exhaustion, she willed herself to class and willed herself to keep up with schoolwork. And she resisted every effort of E.J’s to help. “Let me get you some ramen!” he would complain. “Let me wipe your forehead!” But no. The most she would concede: if E.J. replenished the ibuprofen, and left the bottle out on the top corner of the dresser, she might nod in his direction when she took out a pill.

Last year, E.J. and Dotty had ushered several large concerts; it was a good way to hear music for free. E.J. had forgotten that he had signed up for this year, until a notice appeared in his e-mail in late September for October’s Imposters concert.

And it wasn’t until he met with the other ushers at the concert that he remembered that Dotty had also signed up.

It was probably best that he didn’t see Dotty until the crowd of ushers gathered before their amped-up supervisor: as he looked around the group, there she was. He nodded, smiled; she nodded and smiled back. They were assigned posts at opposite ends of the arena; E.J. didn’t see her again until after the concert was over.

The opening band was Blabble.... E.J. had never heard of them, so he got to uniquely experience the gist of the band’s new fame: the lead singer at first seemed to be muttering incoherently, but then suddenly something snapped into place, and the lyrics were crystal clear. More, it seemed that the words were intended for him and him alone. When E.J. looked around the arena, most of the audience seemed to be having the same experience! Remarkable.

No surprise: the Imposters wore disguises. Just as the band was about to begin, E.J. heard a young woman sitting near him turn to her boyfriend and speak. Her voice had a nervous quaver that veteran hallucinost E.J. recognized as pre-flight warm-up.

“How many imposters do you think there are, like here in the audience?” she asked. Without turning his head...
her boyfriend conversationally replied, “Well, let’s see, there’s you, and me....” Then the music blasted forth.

E.J. was only passingly familiar with the Imposters, and found the concert pleasant enough. He would not have thought to conjecture whether the lead singer sounded different, acted younger, or stayed away from quieter and more reflective songs. You see, there was a rumor that the singer, a founding member and principle songwriter, was struggling with addiction recovery and wanting to write more thoughtful, less raucous material. Perhaps he was sequestered on a South Pacific island to recover, and meanwhile replaced someone more rock-oriented. We know the rumor to be true, but that’s a story for another day.

During the last of three encores, a young man looking all the world like Milton Sharp ran up on stage, dancing, singing, and playing a spastic air guitar until guards muscled him off stage. Could it be Milton? The last E.J. knew, Meltin’ (as everyone called him) had joined a religious commune out west. 

After the house lights came on, and folks left, the ushers gathered for a brief thank-you and then also dispersed. Dotty was also headed to the XC, and it seemed natural to walk with her. She was still up, in bed, in her pajamas, reading. She asked about the concert, heard the whole story. She couldn’t help but smile to herself: if Dotty had responded differently, would E.J. even be here to tell her about it? But she was sympathetic; she also placed inordinate significance on moments of augury, or at least she used to.

She took him in her arms. Generous, she soothed him. But: she never said.... But she never said.

Late last Winter semester, a small group of fervent believers led by Josh (“just Josh” charismatic, heavily-bearded) stopped in town on their way to homesteading in South Dakota. Milton went to hear one of Josh’s talks, and the next anyone knew, Milton was gone to South Dakota.

The homesteading experience went largely as you’d expect: no one knew much about subsistence farming, and it was a lot of hard work, not to mention the fact Josh didn’t help much. And then this privilege extended to Josh’s women, and then his “bodyguards.”

But Milton liked the spirituality. At least it was fresh and new, at first. Eventually it seemed to have more to do with Josh and less to do with anything else.

And although he didn’t think of it this way, he liked being away from drugs. As it turns out, he didn’t need them; he was crazy enough on his own. If anything the drugs dumbed him down. This wouldn’t all come together until some time later, after he and Chrysanthe became a couple. In some ways, she became his anchor, not to get too far ahead of ourselves.

After homesteading ground to a halt, Milton called his parents and got a ride back to school. You’d think they’d be furious with him, but mostly they were glad to have him back and delighted to see he had lost his appetite for recreational drugs.

But Milton was even later than E.J. getting back into the semester. In fact, his air guitar playing at the Imposters concert fell on his first day back in town. He wasn’t on drugs when he did it, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t very, very high.

E.J. was tempted to let Milton use his apartment, since he spent most of his in Sylvie’s room. He brought this up with Sylvie. They’ve been spending about 70 percent of their time at his apartment, and only about 30 percent in her Quad room. Couldn’t Milton....

Immediately he saw his error. It was like what he had lucked into learning: don’t touch her, let her touch you. She had to initiate. She might have offered her room.... but didn’t like having it suggested! No, no, forget about it! We’ll find something else for Milton!

Thanksgiving Break was short, only two days longer than a normal weekend. E.J. dutifully went home for his family’s Thursday mid-day meal, and drank whiskey and watched football with his uncle and his brothers. E.J. was alarmingly distracted; first, he brooded that everyone would be asking him about Dotty (they didn’t), and then, he brooded that he couldn’t

...
E.J. figured Fred must be a hard partier, but eventually Fred turned to E.J., sighed, and said, “There’s this girl, Jill.” He was smitten, of course, but was having an impossible time getting close enough to her, at parties, to find out what she thought of him. You see, she could handle her drugs like no one Fred knew, and certainly more than Fred.

He tried to hang in, limit his consumption, wait for the circle of folks smoking or drinking to thin....but by the time he has an opportunity, he’s so bamboozled he can hardly put three words together. The best he can do is stagger to his feet and somehow find his way home.

What should he do? Is this a sign that they shouldn’t be together? Should he be more clever?

Yes, probably more clever, E.J. thought to himself, not that he apparently knew very much about being smart in relationships. He couldn’t offer Fred any advice other than words of support and consolation. Fred dropped E.J. off at a commuter station just north of the city, and E.J. took a train to Grand Central and then a bus out to LaGuardia.

Chrysanthe was second. E.J. barely recognized her, and realized how little attention he had paid to her even though she was in his modern Greek class. She was smaller than he remembered. Was she much more than 5 feet tall? Trim, dark haired, but blazing with an excitement that even E.J. couldn’t notice.

When Justine had announced this opportunity for a short trip to Athens at the end of fall semester, Chrysanthe parlayed it into an extended trip to family on Xathos: she would take one exam on-line, and then return after the semester break. Chrysanthe was the first recruit to Justine’s program: she was a creative-writing major from Chicago, her parents’ Greek immigrants. Chrysanthe was fluent in modern Greek and interested in working within the confines of the Aristophanes Project.

Justine arrived as boarding had begun. She had a small carry-on satchel and said she had checked no bags. She deflected all questions, but it was clear that this holiday Greek trip was something she did regularly. Apparently she had written it into the grant that funded the Project.

On the plane, Justine had the window, Chrysanthe was in the middle, and E.J. had the aisle, in deference to his size. Chrysanthe was so excited that E.J. found her a welcome distraction from his traditional brooding. They all dozed during the 9 hour flight to Athens; E.J. read a bit from a book, studied up on Aristophanes (which he had neglected to do beforehand), and played blackjack and solitaire on the in-flight console.

Olympic Air was a Greek airline. Chrysanthe asked for a snack in perfect Greek, the stewardess responded, and then E.J. also asked for something, also in Greek, which pleased the stewardess. Chrysanthe punched him playfully in the shoulder. Was the universe pushing them together? E.J. just shook his head, loyal, probably to Sylvie.

No sooner had the plane landed and they retrieved their luggage, but Justine was saying goodbye! She put E.J. and Chrysanthe on a cab to the Byron Hotel, said she was staying elsewhere. She paused to wish Chrysanthe a pleasant trip to her relatives’ farm, and said she’d see E.J. back at the airport for the return flight in four days.

The Byron, although just half a mile or so from Syntagma Square and within hailing distance of the Acropolis, seemed run down. E.J’s room was on the third floor, Chrysanthe’s on the second. Distracted, E.J. hardly said anything to Chrysanthe as he unlocked his door, put his suitcase down, opened the balcony window, stepped outside.

Here he was, halfway around the world, and all he could do was brood about Sylvie (what was she up to? What would come of them?), Dotty (was he being disloyal to have already stopped mooning for her?), and fend off this new little tickle he seemed to be feeling for Chrysanthe! It seemed too complex for such a simpleton. He tried to sleep but jetlag and his worries distracted him. He must have dozed because all at once there was a knock at the door. It took him a while to register. Who could be knocking? Was something wrong with the reservation? Had he been discovered to be an imposter?

It was Chrysanthe.

“I tried calling you on your cell, but you must not have switched it back on after the flight.” That was true.

“It’s getting dark, and the Acropolis will be lit up!” she exclaimed. “Let’s go take a look!”

The Byron was in deep shadow. As they stepped outside, the lights of the Acropolis to their left was accentuated by that darkness. They made their way up. They were disappointed not to get
as close as they’d have liked, but it was still fun to have a view over the city and to be in the midst of history.

After, they walked down into the city. Chrysanthe led, taking them to a little ouzery for a few shots of ouzo and then to a little restaurant for excellent souvlakia and retsina. E.J. didn’t especially care for the retsina, but he didn’t let on. Then came the odious banana liqueur that the owner insisted on when he heard Chrysanthe’s blazing, new-native Greek, and E.J.’s faltering, academic, but accurate version.

They wandered, wandered, talked, sang, and made their way back to the Byron. They said goodnight, and E.J. trudged upstairs feeling guilty and disloyal to not either offer for Chrusanthe to come up or for him stay down. But she seemed to understand.

In the morning, they went to the ruins of the arena where the Aristo plays were performed. It was another beautiful summery day, blue skyed, a few fleecy clouds, amazing vistas. They talked and talked about writing, about Aristo, about themselves. Then her cousin appeared in a car, there were quick introductions and then an even quicker kiss from Chrysanthe, and she was gone.

In many ways he would have liked to have gone into the car with her, to visit her relatives, to quit school and settle with her here....

Sadly, he made his way down the hill and back to the Byron, which was familiar and yet alien, without her.

He grew quickly bored with his thoughts and feelings. It was almost minute....

He felt a bit guilty but he left them at the souvlakia restaurant where he and Chrysanthe had had lunch, felt relieved. He continued toward the Square, and chanced upon a hotel with the word “star” associated. He stepped inside, saw there was a Starbucks, stopped for a dark roast. He had heard that so-called American coffee was rare, and could be as expensive as a cheap hotel.... And even though it was, he decided to have a cup.

Sitting, looking out the window, who should he see but Justine....

Happy with a man about her age, flirting, headed out on the evening. He had finished his coffee; so he followed a bit, pretending to be a spy. He wasn’t a very good one. He tried to catch some of their conversation, but was unsuccessful, then lost them completely.

So it was that the next day, as they took their seats on the plane, E.J. shared some of his adventures.

Justine was delighted! What had he learned? How were things with Chrysanthe? How were things with Sylvie? He blurted out: first on his visit to friend at Antioch, then anon, he quickly realized he was (1) over Dotty, (2) that Sylvie was not as much in love with him as he was with her, and (3) Chrysanth Chrysanth Chrysanth!

He talked about the power of the Greek ruins and seeing where the plays were performed.

Justine talked more about the history of the project, but expertly deflected any talk about the man she was with in Athens.

Winter

As Winter Semester began, everything looked the same: he and Sylvie, still cruising along. Same routines: she liked to sit propped up in the bed, laptop open, notebook beside her, headphones on, working diligently. He would sit at the desk, stare out the window, stare fondly at her, stare at his homework....

But almost everything was different.

Because she hadn’t made a further commitment to him, because she treated him exactly as she had before, that was nevertheless a change for E.J., because he was certainly ready for further commitment! He tried not to be greedy. He tried to appreciate what they had together. But still....

E.J.’s administrative work for Justine kept growing, and Justine’s direct involvement began to lessen. E.J. didn’t see it, but she was preparing him (as well as testing him) for running the whole show, next year.

He had been determined to drop modern Greek, because with the increased work and his excellent procrastination practices he had too much to do. But Chrysanth was in the modern Greek class....

He was supposed to be finishing his two mini-plays for the end-of-term festival. After writing, the students would need to figure out how to stage their plays (with minimal props and zero money to spend), as well as to conscript a friend or two to help in the cast. But E.J. was still stuck putting on an unfinished Greek parody he had started in high school, with no thought yet to the dramatic play.

Near the end of January, one of his apartment-mates had discovered a
loophole in their lease (they weren’t old enough to have legally signed), so the guys were moving out and into a cheaper sublet. Did E.J. – or E.J. and Sylvie, or Milton – want to join? Of course, he would save a lot of money if he just lived here with Sylvie, since he spent most of his time here, anyway. And it would be nice to live with her in an actual house: it would make them seem more like a couple, yes? But E.J. simply signed up for a room in the new place and never brought it up with Sylvie.

In January, when he’d stare at her, she’d sometimes pause, smile, look over at him. Yes? He’d say, oh, I’m just appreciating how beautiful you are. She’d smile, regally.

By February he wanted to say....

E.J. bumped into Kaiser Roberts outside the Grad Library, one day in February, and Kaiser invited him to a party at his apartment that weekend. Compared to E.J., at least, Kaiser seemed at the zenith of social status, and it seemed improbable, unless he had entered a portal into a parallel universe, something that often seemed likely. He was pleased that he didn’t feel particularly awkward and self-conscious. A young man with a silly half-beard that made him look like a chipmunk offered him a hit from a pipe; E.J. praised the music, which he recognized as a Babble song. Mr. Rodent was very impressed he had heard of Babble, and E.J. talked about ushering the concert in the fall.

E.J. kept a view of the apartment door to see who was coming and going. He mused that maybe Sylvie would drop in, although that was unlikely, since she didn’t drink, smoke, or like crowds. He mused at how these seemed unmutable facts; he had completely accepted the fact that she made all her own rules, even if those rules excluded him or any possible future together. He realized with a happy jolt that he wasn’t hoping to see Dotty. And that jolt was followed by a happiness, thinking that perhaps Chrysanthemum would come by.... The sunny thrill of it alarmed him. He decided he had had too much to smoke and drink, and headed for the door.

As he opened it, there was Andy Boggs, about to knock! Andy had graduated the previous year, staged a very popular musical comedy in town over the summer, then went to France for a semester, funded by Ficklehart money he’d earned last Winter term. This was the first he’d seen of Andy, who had been preoccupied with work and other things since returning to town in January. And Andy wasn’t much for social media, or even email. E.J. was tempted to stay a while and talk, but he could tell Andy wanted to work the crowd, and he himself still felt spooked, so he asked to get together soon and talk, then scooted home.

Despite Andy’s reluctance, he allowed E.J. to come over to his apartment to visit, late one afternoon that February. E.J. was caught up in the glamour of Andy’s recent past (awards, successful summer play, off writing in Europe) and imagined a frugal but elegant studio apartment, full of exotic houseplants with large windows and bookcases lining the walls. The place was frugal, but also quite spartan: Andy explained, seeing E.J. look of disappointment, that the place was quite temporary.

E.J. was also surprised to see how tired Andy was, just returned from work and still wet from a shower. He looked wirey but gaunt, exhausted.

Andy’s plan had been to return to town, get a decent-paying job but work no more than 20 hours a week, so he had time and energy to write but also to develop his ideas for local theater productions. Frankly, he thought that money would already be coming in from the various stories he’d sent in to journals, but no, not yet, and not to mention the rejections and requests for elaborate rewrites. Andy had a job working construction, which freed up his nights and weekends but left him so exhausted it was a struggle to do more than eat and sleep. That’s why he hasn’t been much in the social scene, although he’s been back in town since January.

Andy invited E.J. into his small living room, pointed him to the one chair. Andy himself sat on his futon bed. He brought E.J. a beer, although he brought a glass of water for himself. Andy politely declined any hits off the joint E.J. brought....

As E.J. got stoned, his memories of the rest of his visit blurred. But he recalls Andy lamenting local changes making his plans difficult: the closing of the Inn (where Andy thought to stage some activities, perhaps at no rental cost), the new university regulations making it hard to schedule performance or rehearsal space and then requiring complex justification lest there be steep charges.

“That’s why this place is temporary,” Andy said. “If this doesn’t work out, I’ll have to do something different. Maybe I’ll get a master’s degree, or get a PhD and work as a cryptologist for the FBI in Washington....”

But he lit up when E.J. described the Aristophanes Project. E.J. felt bad that he didn’t more about Justine’s plans and, now that he thought about it, her obvious well-thought-out strategy for keeping costs down. E.J. promised to introduce Andy to her....

Sylvie’s brother and parents visited, in March. The brother is a junior in high school, taller and lankier than Sylvie. So far, his passion is basketball, so if he came to the university he’d likely be far away from the XC. E.J. is impressed that he’s actually friendly, but then again, everyone in Sylvie’s family seems sweet and wholesome. E.J. can’t help swooning as he imagines himself, some day, as part of this family. Of course, it does not seem likely, alas.

Easter fell in mid-March, this year, and E.J. went home for the entire
weekend. Again, most of the anticipated eruptions and strong emotional weather didn’t materialize. It was enough to make him wonder about how much of a catalyst he has historically been with such things. Of course, it helped that he willingly went to church and accepted wearing a suit (instead of blue jeans and a t-shirt!), and it also helped that he was relatively clean-shaven and his hair the shortest it’s been in years.

It was warm enough that his Uncle John had a barbecue that Saturday in his back yard, bringing the food into the kitchen when it was done. E.J. hung out with him by the garage while his uncle grilled. The uncle asked after Dotty, remembering that she had been over last April for Easter. Wow, what a thunderous mess that had been!

So he told his uncle that they had broken up (but not that she had dumped him), and when he asked if he was seeing someone else, what could he say? So he said the truth, “Yes, sort of.” It sounded so much less than it really was.

Late in March, Sylvie was polishing up her submissions for the Winter Fickleharts. E.J. still intended to write a few major works (or at least polish up a few minor works already submitted to his writing classes), but so far his main achievement was in picking a pseudonym, a requirement for submission.

He really liked “Wyatt Trayish,” but Sylvie noted that in research showed that few winners had two-syllable last names. E.J. stewed for a while, hating that few winners had two-syllable last names. E.J. noted that in research showed that few winners had two-syllable last names. He really liked “Wyatt Trayish,” but so far his main achievement was in picking a pseudonym, a requirement for submission.

In early April, weeks before the staging of the First Aristophanes Tournament, Justine announced that Sylvie would be leaving the XC at the end of the term and taking a job with Justine in Hollywood, at her current firm! And E.J. later learned that she and Andy Boggs were now in a relationship, and Andy was moving to LA to be near her! (He remembered reading somewhere that two writers could survive and remain creative on two part-time jobs, where a single person could not.) Sylvie looked sheepish and apologetic.

“I only got the offer a few days ago; I just decided to accept it; I wasn’t sure how to tell you…” “She was sweet, friendly, loving.

But she didn’t ask him to come west with her.

But Andy?

E.J. hadn’t yet gotten around to connecting Andy to Justine, but apparently that had happened in another way.

There was less a week until the festival, and E.J. only had one of his two plays ready. The one that was ready was not very good, he decided: a musical parody of Oedipus that he had begun in high school, daydreaming in church one Sunday. In his daydream, he was excited about having members of his school’s choir sing narrative parts in parody of the classic formula.

The play seemed to revolve around a small pun: a polluting corporation was a potato chip manufacturer that resonated wit the Greek play’s name, Laius. Well, E.J. never finished the play, then or now, and in any event could only strip out a five-minute segment to be performed. And, you know, in the final analysis, there just isn’t that much funny about Oedipus, after all.

He had no idea about the second one, and now with Justine’s news and the certainty of Sylvie’s departure, it seemed impossible for him to muster any enthusiasm for the project. Moping, he bitterly admitted that he must have hoped that he and Sylvie would continue together all of next year, so that even if there might not be any long-term future (unless Sylvie finally came to her senses), at least there would be a short-term one. Now it was microscopic.

Likely as a way to punish himself, E.J. then had a dream where he met Aristophanes, and had an opportunity to ask about some of the story ideas from some of the lost plays. (Only about 11 of 50 plays Aristophanes’ plays survive).

Or was it a dream? After all, E.J. recalled later that Aristophanes was talking in an unfamiliar version of ancient Greek, using unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar colloquial expressions. Especially in his sworn oaths, of which there were many.

He appeared in an old white robe, something he seemed to have slipped on recently, as if grabbing something to throw on when responding to the doorbell. Perhaps it was true that Aristophanes had been back to Earth many times since the old days, animating various personae that likely included creative ones. In fact, did E.J. recall a remark that suggested that Aristophanes would be returning and soon?

In any event, Aristophanes was annoyed to be bothered by E.J., seemed to have only the vaguest memory of this Earthly life (“That was thousands of years ago, you oaf!”), and no interest in helping E.J. out.

Much later, it occurred to E.J. that he might have studied Aristophanes’ plays, especially the most popular ones, and see what themes might have a contemporary resonance . . . . That’s what Sylvie did, and that’s likely why she won first place in both competitions, drama and comedy. The audience voted with a show of hands. Darla had dropped out. Crysanthi placed second in both categories. She would later note that she had taken the assignment too seriously; that as a Greek herself she wanted to explore contemporary Greek problems like refugees, bank fraud, and cheap feta cheese (that tasted just as good as the authentic but expensive kind). But that wasn’t what the competition was about.

The festival was held in the XC Theater. The stage was set up minimal-ly with the façade of a simple Greek temple on the right and a little three-stepped platform to the left (apparent-ly a nod to where a small Greek chorus would traditionally stand). The festival was a rough approximation of the “City Dionysia” festivals from ancient times, usually held in the Theater of Dionysus on the side south of the Acropolis.

Performances were limited to 10
minutes, which with a full docket would have run the festival nearly two hours, with a short intermission between tragedies and comedies (four students, four 10-minute tragedies, four 10-minute comedies). But because Darla had dropped out and because E.J. was tardy, there were only three comedies and two tragedies. Justine decided to forego the intermission, given the reduced number of performances, and the festival was completed within the hour.

Attendance was good, mostly because it was mandatory, at least for XC writing and drama students. Greek language students earned extra credit for attending and then writing an essay.

Much of the set-up and all of the costumes were given gratefully by the university’s costume department, but funding paid some of the final touches, and then for things like the program, and a little reception in the lobby afterwards (Greek salad, spanakotirakopita squares, pita and chicken, and of course contraband retsina and ouzo discretely under the tables in the corner).

Sylvie and Chrysanthe had co-scripted XC drama students for all her roles. E.J. took the stage himself, with help from Milton. It was at the after-party that E.J. introduced Milton to Chrysanthe, getting them started into motion.

As usual, too late, E.J. realized that he could have written something about the Trojan Horse for the competition... After all, Justine had mentioned the Horse at the very beginning, when she talked about Sylvie’s story about the counterfeit coin.

And now that he thought of it, E.J.’s own experience of the project was also like a Trojan Horse, in that he started with a few things in mind (a way to solve his enrollment troubles, a way to pay the bills, and then a way to be closer to Sylvie) but seems to be ending up with different things (development, giving, the value of being organized).

And now that he thought of it, E.J. saw how the Aristophanes Project itself was a kind of Trojan Horse: luring students in with the promise of something exotic and exciting, but instead training them about specific goal-oriented writing, something useful in the real world!

**Summer and Beyond**

That summer, E.J. worked his old library job, but also a few hours a week of Aristophanes Project duties. Justine invited him to take on as many of her functions as he cared to, and so E.J. not only wrote the first draft of the required annual report, he also devised an evaluation of the year just passed, complete with recommendations of change for the second year and beyond. Justine asked him to recommend current students for the project in the fall, and had him meet with admissions staff to see if any incoming students might fit. In the end, five students were selected: two new ones, three existing; three females, and two males.

In the fall, Justine asked him to function as coordinator as well as staff, which was an increase of hours as well as rate.

For the summer, he ended up subletting Andy’s tiny apartment, and then signed up for the coming year.

There was little news from California in the summer, but in early October he learned that Justine had left her Hollywood job and headed north with Andy to open a theater company in Portland. Sylvie remained in Hollywood, deftly taking over most of Justine’s accounts.

What did this mean for the future of the Aristophanes Project? One year of grant funding remained. E.J. was stunned to realize that the Project had been set up so it could almost run for free....

There were no “necessary” costs. An assistant to handle day-to-day duties could be a volunteer. The trip to Greece, while delightful, was not necessary. Even the modest awards for the festival could be eliminated, or could be subsidized by an alum. Like himself, he realized. If he was in town, he could run the program and subsidize the awards and the project could run indefinitely!

Alums of the Project might eventually want to contribute, especially if they clearly saw how their dollars were being spent. Additional grant funding was of course possible, especially if the Project could expand or adapt in ways that would interest funders.

All this activity proved serendipitous for E.J.’s involvement in the Outside Inn project, something Andy had started before leaving town. The idea was to re-open the Inn but outside the university, where it might exist as a bar and restaurant with a basement performing space for theater, music, and comedy. It turned out that a Korean restaurant almost across the street from the XC had failed, and this became the Outside Inn when several alumni stepped up as investors. E.J. had spearheaded this initiative, starting when he contacted the alum who had written support for the Rappaccini’s Daughter video game in the old location. It turned out he was delighted to help the game find a new home, as well as to help with the restaurant venture. Other alums were happy to help find the Inn a new home.

Oddly enough, E.J. and Rex (“Giovanni”) became friends, probably because of their shared fondness for Sylvie. Rex had emerged from his two-semester-long intensive Italian to find Sylvie gone. Obviously, E.J. knew more than most about what Sylvie’s year had been like. At first, E.J. was angry, then sad, to think about Giovanni having and squandering something so precious, but perhaps it was E.J.’s own history of blockheadedness opening into compassion for blockheadedness in others that formed a basis for commonality and then friendship.

Also odd, E.J. had a brief romance with Ruth Washington, the difficult student in the office who had set up his first meeting with Justine. It turned out that Ruth and Dolly had a sudden, intense falling out, and Ruth turned to E.J. as a source of information and then solace. It didn’t last, but was quite pleasant while it did.

It’s still early, but it does not appear that Justine will be traveling to Athens this December, happily busy with Andy in Portland. She may offer the
trip to Sylvie, since the trip is already funded and in most ways it is easier to use it than apply for an amendment to the grant. Justine might see it as a way to keep Sylvie connected with the Aristophanes Project. After all, if Sylvie continues with her success, she may decide to be a benefactor. And wouldn’t it be something if Sylvie invited E.J. to meet her there for the holiday? She just might.

That Russian writer wouldn’t like that one bit. He’d probably think it stupid....

Dan Madaj was in the third RC class (Fall 1969) but didn’t actually graduate until 1982. He worked for U-M for over 40 years, primarily at the natural history museum, in linguistics, and in social work, but also had four brief jobs in East Quad (dishwasher, custodian, librarian, RC office). Many of the events in this story actually or almost happened; for example, Dan briefly held the “karma pinball” high score (with Marty Sherman) on Flower Power in the Halfway Inn. For eight years (2000-08) Dan was editor (etc.) of the Old West Side News, an Ann Arbor neighborhood newsletter. He has two wonderful children and a fabulous dog.
Peter Anderson (RC 1972) has a small, non-speaking role as Joseph Goebbels in two episodes of the second season of The Man in The High Castle, available on Netflix. Peter appears in episodes 8 and 10, “Loose Lips,” and “Fallout.” Peter has also appeared in other TV shows: Supernatural (2015) and The X-Files (1995), and in several movies (Leaving Normal, 1992; The Golden Seal, 1983).

Megan Cummins has published an article, “Plunge,” in Guernica. Megan is a two-time Hopwood winner (for undergraduate fiction, and the Robert F. Haugh Prize, both in Winter 2009). She lives in Newark, New Jersey; her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in A Public Space, The Masters Review, Hobart, One Teen Story, and Ninth Letter. She has an MFA from Rutgers-Newark and an MA from UC Davis. She is the managing editor of A Public Space and has worked as a reader in the fiction department at The New Yorker.

Anna Clark (RC 2003) delivered the James H. and Jean B. Robertson Memorial Lecture on October 19 in the RC’s Keene Theater, speaking about her forthcoming book, Water’s Perfect Memory: Flint and the Poisoning of an American City. Anna is currently a Knight-Wallace Journalism Fellow at U-M. She was interviewed in CityLab (from Atlantic Monthly) about her Flint writings. A freelance writer and Southwest Michigan native, she has lived in Detroit since 2007. She is the editor of A Detroit Anthology (2014) and the author of Michigan Literary Luminaries (2015). Her Knight-Wallace study project is titled “Common Good: How chronic underfunding of American cities imperil residents.”

Bob Clifford (RC 1979)’s latest collection of poetry, Gasping for Air, was published in 2015. His reading tour in support of the book included a stop at Nicola’s Books on September 11, 2015.

Erik Anderson (RC 2000) published an article about a recent visit to East Quad in The September 2016 issue of The American Scholar (titled “Endurance Matters More Than Talent”). Erik teaches creative writing at Franklin and Marshall College, where he directs the annual Emerging Writers Festival. He is the author of The Poetics of Trespass (Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2010), Stranger (Rescue Press, 2016) and Flutter Point (Zone 3 Press, 2017).

Beenish Ahmed (RC 2009) posted an interesting article at Vice.com about how parents in 2016 talk to their kids about terrorism. Beenish is an independent multimedia journalist and the founder of THE ALIGNIST, a new media venture that connects literary works to current events. Most recently, she worked as a World Reporter for ThinkProgress in Washington, DC.

Anna Epstein (RC 2014) has published “Pandemonium”, in Metaphorosis, a fantasy and science-fiction magazine. Allison lives in Chicago, and is a writer, editor, marketer, and words person. She currently writes both historical fiction and what could be called urban fantasy if you squint. She is the grammar nerd your high school English teacher warned you about. While in the RC, Allison was an active member and editor-in-chief of the RC Review literary magazine.

Shelley Ettinger’s first book, the novel Vera’s Will, has received a starred review from Library Journal, which calls it “powerful, superbly written” and “a breathtaking achievement.” More information on Shelley and her book are available from her website, Facebook, and Amazon.


Barry Garelick (1967–71, Mathematics) has published a book of math education essays. Previous books include Confessions of a 21st Century Math Teacher and Letters from John Dewey/Letters from Huck Finn. All books are available from Amazon.

Merrie Haskell (RC 2002)’s Handbook for Dragon Slayers won the 2014 Schneider Family Book Award for Middle Grades and the DetCon1 Middle Grade Speculative Fiction Award. It was published in May 2014 by Katherine Tegan Books.

Ariel Kaplowitz (RC 2015) has signed up for a second year with City Year, a national education-based nonprofit, in Washington DC, which is part of Americorps. “I worked as a volunteer in a first and second-grade classroom in a highly underserved school in DC, leading academic and socio-emotional small groups with some of the most at-risk students. In some ways, college prepared me for this work, but in so many other ways, nothing could have prepared me for it. My year was incredibly challenging. The real world feels so different from my academic studies of it. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and it pushed me to my physical and mental limits. But as hard as this year was, it was also the most fulfilling. I grew so much as a person, more than I thought was
Program News

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