Are you just going to sit there and let these youngsters drink us out of house and home?

Relax, Midge! Before you know it they’ll be wanting organic frappés and will forget all about our “Bug Juice”!
Welcome!

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

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

This is the 50th anniversary, so it seems an auspicious time to launch this journal. We hope it will be a place for RC creative writing alums to learn about and celebrate each other, but also a place where new graduates can find friendly feedback and a place to begin publishing.

This first issue contains a selection of work by RC writing alums from throughout program history. Enjoy!
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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 Spubowski a working class couple watching the movie on TV.

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

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

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

FRED: Say no to what?
ZAG: *(menacingly)* Confrontation, man, confrontation.

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

*(Loud explosion ... they fall down)*

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

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

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

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

FRED: What?

ZIG: And go on welfare!

ZAG: And smoke dope all the time!

NANCY: And be a hippie!

ZIG, ZAG & NANCY: And live!

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

ROSE: Such a nice boy.

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

FRED: Well, I don't know.

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

*(Benny stalks Cracker with pie)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOE: Cute banana? It's a monster!

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

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

ROSE: I don't care.

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

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

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

DNA testing reunites family after 50 years

Paige Pfleger

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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 just out of curiosity clicked it,” Scott says. He’s talking about the folder where messages from people the user hasn’t friended are filtered. He opened the folder, and he saw a message from someone named Keith Murphy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lauren Stachew

They were walking back from church when they first saw the angels on the side of the road – drenched and muddied in the lake – or rather, what was left of the lake. Little, ornately painted figurines, their bellies pink like salmon, lying head-first in a mass grave. Edith stood behind her mother, watching the pained faces of the townspeople as they began to weep, trudging through the mud to gather the treasures in their arms and wiping the faces of the angels clean from the mud with the sleeves of their tunics.

Edith looked up at her mother and tugged at her skirt, but she didn’t budge. She remained silent, staring out into the lake puddle. She was clutching one hand onto the other like Edith knows she does when she’s nervous or scared. She did it the night they waited up for their brother to come home (and he never did,) and the day their cow got real sick and almost died, (but she didn’t.) All of those times, her mother had her hands 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 cloths. Their faces were simple. Two black dots for eyes, a pointed, pale nose, and a single stroke of red for a mouth. Their skirts were shaped into ripples by the four craters that were pressed into their sides with fingerprints, glossed with bright orange. The fingers folded together on their hands were implied with thin, black lines, and their arms wore rows of turquoise curves like waves, elbows flowing into pointed, triangle wings marked with white shapes like fish scales, as though these angels bore fins instead of wings.

The lake puddle used to have a name, but Edith never knew it. Back when her mother and father were as old as she 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, stomping 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?” He 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
Edith stepped back behind the door.

Edith overheard people bragging at church, naming off all the beautiful objects they laid out onto their dining tables for the angels. Their eyes were wide with pleasure—the expressions on their faces sculpted in a permanent, disturbing awe.

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

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

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

Edith and her mother stepped into total uproar upon laying foot in the church that following Sunday. Among the commotion of stressed, chaotic shouting, Edith overheard a woman say that a young couple living in the bungalows near the river had offered their angel their newborn baby girl. The loss of necklaces, scarves, and tiny cups didn’t bother anyone, but the loss of a human life, let alone a baby, was apparently enough to unleash a clarity over everyone that what they had been doing was wrong. The townspeople quietly disappeared. The mound, previously puddle, was certainly involved. Edith thought. She was left behind in the consumption, along with the bee woman, who stomped circles around the mound, punching hard at its sides. Edith accompanied her to the woods the next morning to help in the honey-gathering. She squatted, holding the bucket between her knees, far enough away so that the bees didn’t sting her. The bee woman whittled out a hole big enough for her arm with a sharpened stick, and reached inside. Edith could hear the soft, low roar of swarming as the bee woman swam her fingers through the hive. Once she gathered up a handful in her fist, she crawled on her knees over to Edith and sat her arm in the bucket, scraping off the honey with her other hand. Sometimes the bees would get stuck in the honey on her arm, their last moments spent wriggling desperately in the sticky trap. She didn’t pay attention to them. She merely scraped them off of her arm, right into the bucket. When the bee woman wasn’t looking, Edith tried to scoop them out with a stick, even though they were usually already dead. Their bodies, encapsulated in the glimmering, golden tar, looked like perfect fossils, the curvature of their wings remained untouched and immaculate. Wings, not fins, built for the air and not the sea, shining in their yellowy sweetness, but useless in their too-heavy weight and their death. Too bad, Edith thought. She looked up at the bee woman, who was staring back at her, arms elbow-deep in the bucket.

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

Lauren Stachew (RC 2017) ...
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 1996) 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 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 lit, I carried Sam out on my hip so he could see. He’d been home from the hospital for over a month by then and was still struck dumb by the great outdoors, all that sky and open space that he’d barely seen.

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

I had just bought a copy of Lauren Groff’s novel, Fates and Furies. After I put Sam down, I stretched out on the bed, in between the piles of jeans and onesies and I opened the book to the first page. A newly-married couple was walking up a beach somewhere in Maine, a man and a woman in a green bikini. It was raining there and the birds were screaming overhead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Somewhere in the bowels of my purse was a Nadine Gordimer novel, a tale about struggle and strife in apartheid. The wind, until it disappeared past the jutting wing of the building, covered with its galaxy of dark windows.

The days ground on and Sam's counts dropped toward zero. This was the most treacherous period, the weeks between the time the doctors decimated Sam's immune system with a regimen of intensive drugs and the time before his new T-cells, donated by a 20-something-year-old stranger in California, began to proliferate and function well enough to keep him safe, both from himself and the outside world. Death loomed as an invader in the form of a single, invisible microbe or fungal spore. Everyone coming into the room wore gloves and lavender paper masks. Michael and I scrubbed down the crib rails with hospital antiseptic so strong we later discovered it was carcinogenic. We were constantly dowsing ourselves in Purell. It looked like we were perpetually wringing our hands. Which, of course, we were.

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

There were moments though. Sometimes leaning over the rails of Sam's crib, I would study the expressions passing like clouds across his face. As young as he was, he could emote with a startling amount of nuance and force: skepticism, indignation, outrage, the impish appreciation of a joke. He was stalled out in those series of milestones American parents obsess about: rolling over, sitting up, learning...
how to swallow spoonfuls of puréed peas and applesauce. But he had figured out how to clasp his hands together, to raise them to his mouth when he smiled with delight. It was his own little utterance of overwhelming joy. That's when I knew I was still feeling something, that's when I could hear the booming reverberation of the stone traveling back toward me with such a terrible and ferocious force that I had to put my hands over my ears and turn away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The thoughts were so vivid that I got distracted. I wasn’t looking where I was going and I almost ran head on into a jogger and her dog coming out of nowhere over the crest of the hill. As they passed, they both bestowed upon me a warning look. My heart was thundering away. I lifted my head up and looked back over my shoulder all the rest of the way home.

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

My mother never talked about her job, except one time, when she took my friend, Jocelyn, and me ice skating at the local lake. It was my birthday and I had never seen her like this. I thought she had forgotten. Mondays, she said, she opened the local history museum for school field trips. There was a couple in #11 at the Super 8 that she habitually had to let in. They always smelled of weed and wore fluffy bathrobes. With nothing underneath! Jocelyn and I giggled. A week ago, she was called to lock up the gates of Bloomfield Park. Two teenage punks had battered down the chainlink fence, waffle ironed the grass, charred the log cabin Jocelyn and I had played House in long ago. They even had pummeled the wildflowers to an ashy pulp; the same menu as the智能化. It was swallowed invisible to her and anyway, ghosts are portal openers. She looks behind the knobby bones of my elbows. To my fingers, to my knees, and then my body out of the lake, my mother 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.

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

The stars were out and I liked to hear the birds overhead. I inhaled fresh air and felt instantly better. My stomach growled so I bit into my sandwich hard. My teeth punctured the bread. Nutella smears 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 unfortunate 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 find me. I wonder if she lived in this hell in the hours before I learned how to ghost. I slammed down the phone, took my sandwich with me and ran down to the dock at the edge of our backyard. I started out onto the frozen lake because the outdoors knew nothing about me. It couldn’t talk to me or ignore me. I was allowed to just be me. Some might say it’s dangerous to be alone amongst all that ice, but the key is to know when the risk of living is worth stepping where the ice is thinnest.
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. Tell her gently, I advise. She is still my mother, whether she wants to be or not.

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

Laura Hulthen Thomas

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

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

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

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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 in a friend’s cottage near Lewiston, shot 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 ams, 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 uninhibited, the offensive drives down the field were exasperatingly opaque. I was attempting to decipher these plays in the days before sharp-image television screens made the ball visible even to clumsy viewers like me. Brightly colored digitized highlights on the line of scrimmage and the next down would, after 1998, the year of my son’s birth, make the ball’s trudge downfield obvious. But as a kid all I had to guide me on our 24 inch black and white television were the confusing sideline hash marks and measuring chains the men in my family seemed to interpret without effort. My older brother could even leave the den entirely to fetch another pop and still absorb the down with his head in the fridge as if the play was just another snack.

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

“How many yards are left?”

“Just watch.” This while my dad kept up with the game from behind a newspaper or the latest Book of the Month Club selection. Despite squinting at the plays, the only times I was certain of what I was seeing was when the chains came out to pinpoint the exact yard. My favorite play was when the ball was just shy of the down, because the television camera would swoop on to the ball, locking focus for a brief moment. The
ball looked nothing like the cheap leatherette bomb my older brother would whip at me in the yard during half-time. The leather looked pliable, the stitching uniform, the laces crafted to the correct grip. Then the official would make the call, the camera would cut away, and the offensive line would once more swallow the ball from view.

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

At least, that’s the connection I drew. A few weeks back, when I WhatsApped my brothers, now living in California and Texas, to ask how they could keep track of every single game stat during the height of the season, the Frisbee victim replied, “We’re men. We’re hard wired to care about football.” He was joking, but I thought back to how the men in my family dissected every play I couldn’t see almost before it happened. They could divine the movement of the ball, while I lost track of the play at the snap almost every time. Years later, the hardwire explanation still makes a certain sense of my play blindness.

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When I’d asked my son’s therapist whether buying a gun for a depressed child amounted to a breach of parental duty, she talked about how the gun might be my son’s best course of treatment. He has a passion for the sport, and goals for competition. He immerses himself in the flow of the moment between aiming and pulling the trigger, feels the healing serotonin when he hits his mark. He feels pride, not anxiety, about his performance. These sensations and motivations are exactly what he needs to counter his depression, she advised. The therapist’s rationale was more treatment plan than argument, and matched what we’ve been counseling our son. Find a passion. Heal through a sense of purpose. Could I now argue that because this passion was armed we wouldn’t support it? Besides, I’d seen him shoot targets at a forested range at the local Boy Scout camp. The shooting pavilion is located in a peaceful meadow surrounded by tall golden grass, maples and birch. While my son loaded his borrowed rifle, I’d watched fathers show their young scouts the basics of aiming and firing. I’d seen how the intense focus of good aim relaxed my son, soothed the unhappy knot along his jaw. I’d learned that his restless comic spirit can achieve absolute stillness in the moments before pressing the trigger, and that he never flinched at the gun’s kick.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few moments later, my younger brother, the husband of the questioner, sent a photo of his .357 Magnum.

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

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

Since my mother is on this chat group, my father is not. If he were, would Dad, too, contribute a snap of a handgun to this family arsenal I didn't know existed?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Experiencing these assault rifles in the close space, barely better than an echo chamber, makes me ashamed to remember my walks in the woods with a shotgun slung at my hip. I'm part of the lineage that has brought to my son's choir concert a handgun as effortlessly as the men in the room. It's as difficult to recall the uncomplicated joy of shooting at those birds, even though I missed them all, as it is to recall the joy of watching football in the days before brain scans revealed the effect of that sport on the men who play it.

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

Just watch, I hear. And so I do.

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

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

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

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

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

When my son wraps up his session, we collect our driver’s licenses from the front desk and spend a few moments browsing the handguns and assault rifles for sale in the show room. 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 which set of laws bothers me more.

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

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

***

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

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

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Chapter 1
Show Day

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

“Get caught in a cat fight, Little Miss Bit?”

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

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

Why didn’t you bring a cot to the barn and sleep over? she could hear Grandma ask in her head.

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

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

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

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

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


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

“We’re diversifying,” he told her.

“Schultes can do swine as well as dairy. Diversification will put us in the black. Plus, market prices for pork are on the rise. So.”

“Milk, too,” she told him. “Why don’t we expand the herd?”

“Finally outgrown your britches, miss?” He’d said it with a smile.

“Dad, I’m almost seventeen.”

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

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

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

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

“They can’t be silent any longer about this unjust war,” Lance announced.

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

“President Nixon wants to end it,” said a girl.

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

“To stop the commies!” Faith shouted.

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

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

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

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

“Hey, Faith. Are you okay?”

Faith blinked. “Itchy eyes,” she said, turning away. She stretched a raggedy strip of towel over Velvet’s shoulders and rubbed vigorously. Didn’t her dad say that pigs loved a rubdown as much as a shower?

“Got any clippers?”

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

“Good luck, in general,” Ginny offered, as if she’d been waiting to say it.

Maybe these were signs. She shouldn’t be here with the pigs but in the cow barn, where she’d been every year since she was three. Where there was plenty of time for chit chat while doing chores. Shoveling manure that smelled sweet, not sickly. Winning some ribbons with her heifers, then gearing up for the State Fair in Des Moines. They were there for the first time last August, she, her dad, Grandpa, and Grandma, who was still perfectly healthy and helped her in the cow barn. The place swarmed with reserve champions, champions, and all other manner of bovine excellence. She’d come close to placing, had no wins, it was hot as a griddle and rained the entire time, yet she loved being there and wanted to return, to victory next time.

She could keep herself from following Lance’s progress. Embarrassment crept over her, adding to her distress. She checked the dirt-encrusted clock above the barn doors. Eight fifteen. Still a few minutes before she met her dad for breakfast. She started across the barn.

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

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

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

“Why? Seems like a lot of 4H-ers want out of Vietnam.” He pointed them out to her, hand on her shoulder. Faith shivered, riveted to the spot. Those yellow flecks seemed to be moving around, like ducks set free from a shooting gallery. And was his hair that same color they’d done every year since she’d learned how to walk. Her feet fell heavier now, still, there was goodness in the grass underfoot, in the climbing, in her heart tripping a beat as they topped the rise. Sun glinted off the distant Ferris Wheel and strands of spider silk shimmered in the ash trees.

They headed across the dirt yard onto a grassy hillside, enacting the same ritual they’d done every year since she’d learned how to walk. Her feet fell heavier now, still, there was goodness in the grass underfoot, in the climbing, in her heart tripping a beat as they topped the rise. Sun glinted off the distant Ferris Wheel and strands of spider silk shimmered in the ash trees.

Two 4-H food tents stood in friendly competition by a grove of trees, beyond which lay a playground, and all the rides. Faith waved to her cousin Billie and her Uncle Gerry, who sat at a picnic table under a gnarled mulberry.

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

“See you,” he said. “Good luck!”

She walked carefully back to her pen.

“Just the person I wanted to see.”

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

Well, he had. Still.

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

“Okay?” he asked.

“Okay,” she answered. They walked carefully back to the barn, right on time.
Her uncle worked on the farm almost every day, but she hadn't seen Billie as much as she would have liked since school got out in May. She wore a new blouse of thin green cotton, with appliquéd flowers around a square boat neck and a tear in the shoulder along the seam as if she'd started to take it apart then changed her mind.

Billie swished a fly away from her face as Faith slid in next to her, nose wrinkling at her cousin's strong perfume. Billie had the better end of the bargain when it came to looks: straight, dark blond hair falling past her shoulder blades, bottle green eyes, and a smooth, ski-slope nose that defied the Schulte bump shared by Faith, her dad, Grandpa and Uncle Gerry. Faith's was the worst, after crashing her dad, Grandpa and Uncle Gerry.

“Excuse me?” Faith said.

“Who knows, the way this year’s gone. Blizzards nearly all winter long and then come Easter, Big Chief shuts the faucet. Few showers here and there don’t amount to much.”

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

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

By up north he meant Minnesota. “Oh, it’s comin’,” Faith's dad said, biting into a doughnut.

Billie raised her gaze to the heavens and down again to Faith, with something like a smile; speared the two remaining doughnuts and took off across the yard. Faith got up, too, though she wouldn't have minded talking more about the rain, or lack thereof. It was automatic, following Billie. Plus, there was all that Lance and Faith's family packed off for town and grounded Faith in her room. When Billie's family packed off for town after the second time Uncle Gerry, drunk, put a farm truck in a ditch, Faith should have seen it as an end to her troubles, but she didn't. Billie was as good as a sister to her, and Faith mourned the day they left the farm seven years back.

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

Billie turned to her, exhaline.

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

“I saw him,” Billie smiled. “His hair’s getting long.”

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

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

“How do you even know that?”

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

“Please don’t talk about her,” Faith whispered.

“Okay.”

Billie stubbed her cigarette in the dirt.

“What? Did she really say that?” Billie nodded. “She said, ‘We’re meddling where she shouldn’t be.’”

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

“She didn’t salute,” Billie countered, “she waved.”

“I saw her salute.”

“Minds change.”

“Not that fast. Not about important things.”

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

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

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

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

“Like...”

“Those stories she told us.”

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

“Remember?” Billie said.

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

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

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

Billie laughed. “I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right,” Faith finally answered. It was something, at least: Billie wanting the old chair that Greta’s husband had supposedly made by hand. Maybe appreciating a chair could lead to other things. She peered more closely at the racetrack. The tractors were John Deere 5020s, from the looks of it, and only a couple of years old. “Dad would give the skin off his finger for one of those,” she heard herself say. Billie’s laugh started out low and rose to a high, sweet pitch, like taffy on a hot day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clare Higgins

nine ways of looking at her knees

knobbly hob hills where the goblins and elves go
peach-tops: piles of fuzz and pale dew two leaves if it is warm
a thin film over blue veins spider-like a map of the body
dotting her wounds
new young muscle brash all envy
old clickety-clacking when overrun pop and hiss
railroad song
older cousins to sock feet angular tween grace
soaked after rain their tears pool in her shoes
boulders against one another when I wake in her bed
   making a tunnel for promises to pass through
whispering

Desdemona

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

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

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

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

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

Commend me to my kind lord

Clare Higgins (RC 2017) . . .
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 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 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 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: Clinopathologic 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 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: Clinopathologic 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.

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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. Late-arriving Becca, along with the other two girls sitting beside me, are among the many students who put their hands up on the first day of class as being pre-med. Throughout the semester, no matter how grotesque the pictures on the slideshow or disgusting the symptoms we discuss, these students never flinch. They even ask follow up questions, probe for this work. I never knew what to expect when I peeked my head inside her room.

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 tugged under the sheets of a bed in the general wing above us, I would have peeked my head in and closed the door gently so as not to disturb him. He is fully clothed and other than the waxy look of his swollen fingers, he could be asleep.

I realize that until now, I have never seen a dead person. The funerals of my grandparents or great uncles had all been closed casket; it is Jewish tradition not to view the bodies of the dead. This 30-year-old drug addict is my first.

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

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

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

“Well, you ready to go down?” Professor Flint looks at us. Until that moment I am so entranced by what is taking place below me that I forget I am supposed to be down there too, watching up close. The other girls look far more ready than I. We cross the windowed room together. Erin, Sam, Becca and I journey down the stairs that leads to the entrance of the autopsy room. Thankfully, an “Autopsy in Progress” sign is posted on the door. Its warning stops us, at least momentarily, from going any further. Small illustrations on the sign depict the necessary garments we must don before we enter. Professor Flint leads by example as he pulls on shoe covers, a hairnet, apron, latex gloves and glasses. Without a word, he disappears into the room behind the door, swallowed by the light within. As we pull on our hairnets, I try hopelessly to bond with the other three girls, and confess that I’m phobic-level afraid of blood.

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

Gym-clothed Sam offers an unsympathetic, “Then why are you here?” I really didn’t have an answer, at least not one I’m willing to uncover. So instead, I reply, “I thought it would be interesting to see another part of the hospital.”

Once inside, the room seems bigger and blindly white. Lights, just like the one a dentist points into a mouth, blink on in full brightness. Even the faces of those alive look ghostly. A framed poster on the middle of the wall that faces the windows lists the normal weights for a heart, spleen, lung and brain. Their weights seem surprisingly heavy. Obsessive about my own weight, I never think about anything other than the fat on my body. The sign posted before me in plain, black lettering illuminates what I ignore. Parts of my body that actually matter, weigh me down too.

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

I feel the banana I ate on my way to the hospital and close my eyes to try to hold it down. I open my eyes once the nausea passes, only to realize that in the time they were closed the situation has gotten much worse. Looking over at the body I see a newly created V-shape cut across both sides of the man’s chest, meeting at his neck. The slice is colorful and layered, with the red from blood and internal body organs below and the yellow of fat and skin above. The resident is folding these chunks of flesh back and over the side of the body to peer into the just-minutes-ago whole man. It is at this moment that I start to see black spots in my vision. I let out both uncontrollable laughter, and a gasping, “I think I need to leave the room.”

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

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

The woman exits and I am left alone again. Below me, I see her enter the procedure room. She returns to the table where the still man lies, already so well-versed in what I am too afraid to understand.

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

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

I watch the events that take place below and am startled. The woman who I mistook for an assistant is now performing the procedure herself. She holds the large shears in her hands, cuts through each rib, digs into the man’s insides, saws away at his skull. The resident only weighs about the last life this man allowed his hands to touch. 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 onto what they didn’t like. This completely bypasses our global reaction, which for reasons of tact and good will might be necessary. But it also bypasses the process of accurately describing a story. It assumes everyone observed the story carefully and that their observations yielded the same conclusions. At the same time, it pressures participants to evaluate something they may have yet to understand.

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

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

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

Amy Gustine (RC 1991) is the author of the story collection You Should Pity Us Instead (Sarabande Books), which received starred reviews in Publishers Weekly, Kirkus and Booklist. The New York Times Book Review called the collection an “affecting and wide-ranging debut” and it appeared on many “best of” lists, including the San Francisco Chronicle’s “Best of 2016: 100 Recommended Books.” Gustine’s fiction has also been published in several journals, received special mention in the Pushcart Prize anthology and been awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2016. Amy Gustine currently lives in Toledo, Ohio.
It was like looking into a mirror. She was surprised A.J. could still appear so innocent, when she saw the live-motion portrait of him on the television more than a year later. She had seen that primed glance, like the ting off the tip of a fang, that minute pupil of his mouth. Now, just like a year ago, he looked choked for breath between verses. She wanted to reach him. But then she remembered how, when it happened, she had thought he was just as innocent and exposed as she was. In a sense, she had thought, she was swallowing him. On the TV was a flare of astonishment. Had he stolen that face from her? She had to get him from inside of her out, had to tell somebody. If not, she was gonna blow.

There she was at a college party in Southside Birmingham, where one guy, a little drunk, who had nodded in a genuine way while she spoke, asked her back to his place a few blocks away. Miranda had only drunk one Dixie cup of wine. Nonetheless, she was careful climbing the stairs to his room, angled against the roof and reeking of sweat. His jaw was clenched. Miranda wondered if he would make the A.J. smirk she knew so well, when he put a finger to his lips. His room stank less than the hallway and gave just enough space to undress. He gaped at her nakedness, even the baby fat she'd never been able to shed. Then he struggled with his own clothes, tripping over his half-removed pants. She waited for him and didn't even tighten when he entered her. He was
clean-shaven, so her skin wouldn't feel rubbed raw, like after A.J. But maybe that was why, after he came, she couldn't. "Short but sweet," she said. She could tell he didn't like that. He left to pee.

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

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

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

One evening at dinner, Leah whis-pered to her the question of motherhood. Miranda decided it was time to tell Leah, at least, about A.J. But her sister announced to the whole family that in August she was leaving Alabama for New York, where she'd found a job at a publishing company. Leah gave a shrug, as if she couldn't help being so lucky, and it reminded Miranda of A.J.'s hip dismissal.

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

At night they sat drinking wine by a bonfire on the sand. The humidity made the buzz come on faster. Fried from chain-smoking cigarettes, their voices rasped. The firelight wizened their faces. Like a good English major, Miranda had brought Edna St. Vincent Millay. She edged toward the flames to recite, "Time does not bring relief; you all have lied. / Who told me flames to recite, "Time does not bring relief; you all have lied. / Who told me"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miranda was already covered by a web of cold sweat when she inserted herself, faster than anybody else had, into the polyester material. When it was their round, he came on strong at first. Miranda let herself scream, like a cartoon superheroine. But cartoon superheroines never cry, and that was what she was doing when they stopped, and she kept crying as they pulled the sleeping bag off her and as Geoff half-led, half-dragged her out a small distance. She watched a floater flash away across the sand. They closed in again. Astride Geoff, she threw her head back and came. Indifferent, the moon wheeled past.

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she had to tell somebody, if not Geoff himself.

#

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

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

She would tell how this seemed to work—the dirty-blond boy picked up a guitar. As he strummed it, his bottom lip enveloped the top, awkward but cute. “A lullaby for adults. For pale brunettes like you.” The vibration touched her. He introduced himself as A.J. “I’m in a band called Lonely 101.” When he offered his hand, she slipped further into the sack, covered her breasts. After a heavy thrum, he thrust the guitar toward the ceiling. His voice could taste it, she burrowed in over her head. “I’d like to give you a kiss,” he said. She snorted and raised her legs, putting her feet in and immediately lifting them from his lap, as if scorched. “You’re hard to read, aren’t you?” She thought answering might give her away, so she simpered instead. The couch creaked.

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

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

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

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

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

Next to her ear, his voice thundered, “It was this girl I knew, older…I heard she’s got like three kids now. She was smart, really cute. Big, but cute, you know? She was just, like, really confident in herself. Anyways, one Saturday, we were at the mall bored out of our minds. She had this tight green dress on. My friend kept staring. She got in the car with us. She kissed my friend on the cheek, then the lips. She touched his dick. But he didn’t want her to do it in front of the other guys. I didn’t care. She went down on me right there. Then she got on top of me. The other dudes looked away. I had never been…intimate with anybody.” Geoff had hardened. His taller body pressed against hers, which was in fetal position. He thumbed the waistband of her pajamas. “I couldn’t believe it. I think I said, ‘Whoa,’ or something stupid.” He flattened out with a heavy sigh and took up most of the mattress. His jaw was distended, teeth bared. The bed was rocking faster than he and Miranda had ever caused it to.

After his mouth closed, he rolled onto his side away from her. He had come without her and now, like all men, would sleep.

#

She’d tell how the morning after she had avoided the mirror while trying to pee. She had decided she wouldn’t tell Leah. That meant she wouldn’t tell anybody. She stepped onto the front porch to smoke one or maybe all of the cigarettes A.J. had recommended and handed her, before he “jetted.” She still possessed these cigarettes, rolling on the back of a drawer. Maybe it was the smiling red of the morning light that had held back the waterworks? Maybe she just wasn’t the type of person who cries after losing her virginity. She’d tell how she had heard the voices of her sister’s roommate and of Leah herself, “What kind of porn are you into, Kim? Ha ha. Our mama
always said 'slept like the dead,' instead of 'slept like a baby.' Mamas can say any old weird thing to their kids, and the little ones just have to listen. Not just anybody can blurt whatever she wants. Did y'all see Carol Ann last night?" Like anybody cared what Leah thought. "Hey, kid sister. Some party, huh? Lord. This place looks like a flop house." Leah sniffed. "Miranda, did you give some lucky beau a fish sandwich?"

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

She'd tell how that awful taste had made a desert of her larynx but worked. Miranda didn't cry or tell. They went to breakfast at a diner, and she wrote down that lyric, desert of her tongue. It was the middle of the school term, which she balanced against her abdomen. *In the morning, I'm hungry. I can't stay up anymore.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. Why do you ask?"

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

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

Although she waited for his dumb hick voice, he never responded. He left without pinching her butt. Staring out the window, she sat in what was usually his after-sex pose but without a cigarette and without having had sex. After a day of anticipating sleep, now insomnia tickled her features. Through his squished mouth, he repeated, "I don't know," as if again in mockery.

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

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

They were thumbing through the back pages of the January 4-10 issue of *Magic City Times* and saw an ad for New Women, All Women in Five Points. Geoff mentioned making an appointment. It was the middle of the school week, and clouds teemed with a threat of rain, weather that always burdened Miranda with a funereal fatigue.
her, as they soothed her down to the pitch dark where you’re going and where you been.

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

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

But instead of picking up, she pressed play on the stereo again. A little voice inside her rose with the volume. She switched on the kettle. On the tea tin was the staid face of the Queen. The music overwhelmed the stirring of the leafless oak branch against her window. Miranda stood guard. The music would probably muffle the familiar rumble and shriek from within the kettle.

Ian Singleton (RC) was born in Dearborn, Michigan, grew up in Alabama, and moved to Massachusetts, where he met his wife. Along with their beloved daughter, they share an apartment in Brooklyn. His short stories, translations, reviews, and essays have appeared in journals such as: New Madrid; Digital Americana; Midwestern Gothic; Fiddleblack; Asymptote; Ploughshares and several times in Fiction Writers Review. His first collection, Grow Me Up, is seeking a home. He was a student at Emerson College and at U-M won a Hopwood; he was later asked to be a Hopwood judge. Ian has taught Creative Writing and Literature for the PEN Prison Writing Program, the Prison University Project, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at San Francisco State University, Cogswell Polytechnical College, and the Cambridge Writers’ Workshop. He currently teaches for New York Writers Workshop and PrisonWrites! and freelances as a translator and tutor. He is working on a novel titled Odessitka. Fluent in Russian, Ian is interested in Russian literature and Russian and Ukrainian diaspora communities in Ukraine and elsewhere. He’s especially interested in the city of Odessa. “First Time” was published in the 2016 issue of New Madrid.
This is a potato. This is a piece of paper with a drop of LSD on it. Any undercover drug enforcement agents that are here tonight can relax, for although this is a literal potato, there is no literal drug on this literal piece of paper. Which I will prove to you now. (licks it; staggers) Oh man...wow. This is heavy shit, man. (looks at audience, soberly) just kidding. I have other props here too. This is a jar of Tar Ointment used for the treatment of skin diseases such as eczema and the heartbreak of psoriasis. Unlike blotter acid, it can be purchased over the counter at any pharmacy. And this is a copy of the Old Testament. These are not randomly selected objects. They all, in fact, relate to the Jewish High Holy Day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. For me, at least.

I am almost eight years old and it’s the breaking of the fast at Yom Kippur, the highest of the High Holy Days and there is a mountain of provisions on the table waiting to be consumed after the prayers. Sitting around this Mt. Zion of food are thirteen people, three of whom are featured on an old photograph on the wall that was taken in a little shtetl near Kiev. In the picture are my great-grandfather, great-grandmother, grandfather, and my great aunts and uncles. Eight penniless Jewish peasants pretending to be aristocrats, all posing somberly in their best borrowed clothes, in front of a painted backdrop of an lush garden that looks like something out of Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard. By far the most striking figure is a tall and handsome young man, who actually does look like an aristo-
Me: Grandpa, tell me about my Uncle Moishe.
Grandpa: Moishe? Well, my darling boy. This is all you need to know: there is God -- and there is your Great Uncle Moishe.
Me: You really mean that?
Grandpa: When the Cossacks came (those butchers, those dogs from hell), he saved our lives and brought us all to the glorious Promised Land: Detroit, Michigan. That would be enough for all of my eight years because starvations taking place right now (beside which my own, trivial, personal, time-limited starvation pales) but this symbolic fast which will buy atonement for all my sins like the times I stole a comic book or neglected to wash my hands after a pee, or picked my nose and vomited on the floor, or not one of the other people at the table are paying any attention to the religious ritual. Two of my older cousins, who are lifeguards at the pool, are sleeping. My mom is talking to my Great Aunt Rozzie -- she’s the old beautician with all the makeup and the super black ratted-up hair who doesn’t seem to care about God at all, because she’s applying mascara on Cousin Bertha of the legendary foot kissing lips. I have fasted all day for the first time and even though I have a very, very tiny stomach I can feel these gigantic pangs of hunger gazing at the feast that we are not allowed to touch until the last amen. I am old enough to know that this is a metaphorical starvation, that I have fasted for all my accumulated sins not just for the last year but for all of my eight years because this is my first fast, and I am doing a big penance today, and that this isn’t just my starvation but a small version of the big starvation all the Jews have suffered. I’m not thinking of all the big planetary starvations taking place right now (beside which my own, trivial, personal, time-limited starvation pales) but this symbolic fast which will buy atonement for all my sins like the times I stole a comic book or neglected to wash my hands after a pee, or picked my nose without using a Kleenex. At least, those are the sins I told myself I was atoning for. In truth, I had a much deeper, darker sin that plagued me: I did not love my father. I did not honor him, which broke the Second Commandment. Worse, I was ashamed and repelled by him. First, because of his deafness, he was hard to talk to. And though I was told that before I was born, he was a nice looking, athletic guy whose only flaw was a little rash on his elbows, by the time I came along, the little rash had spread over his entire body -- wherein comes the tar cream, which failed him. He was eventually covered with red peeling blotches that left scales all over the house, and his joints were swollen and twisted with arthritis, which curved his spine, making him look like a leprous Quasimodo -- who, by the way, was also quite deaf from ringing the bells. When we did communicate, it went something like this:

Dad: Where are you going?
Me: To Denny’s house.
Dad: Come again?
Me: I’m going to Denny’s.
Dad: What was that?
Me: Denny’s.
Dad: You need pennies? You wanna look through my change?
Me: No thanks, Dad, not right now.
Dad: What?
Me: Nothing.
Dad: Okay then, if you’re so rich. Do me a favor, son, will you?
Me: I gotta go.
Dad: Give me a little scratch.
Me: I can’t right now.
Dad: But there’s this spot that’s killing me.
Me: Sorry I gotta go.

Anyway, my epiphany is interrupted by the old guy sitting next to me, my great uncle Sammy. He is a very scrummy little man, and after fifty years, he looks remarkably unchanged from the short and scrummy boy in the family portrait. Apart from the wrinkles, baldness and hairy ears which have grown larger from age, Sammy, who was always considered useless and negligible, still of the old world, is still a peasant. While my eyes shift from the oceanic transgression he’s feeling, How is it possible? That my sin, which seems so overwhelming, should be miniscule compared to his. It made me desperate to know, exactly what was his great secret sin?

Everybody is ignoring Sammy, not because they’d be disgusted, but because they’re too busy sleeping, putting on makeup or praying for forgiveness. Great Uncle Sammy’s gagging and I am fascinated, thinking that maybe he is going to die right here, because he’s committed a sacrilege, wondering if this is God’s punishment to the wicked who preempt the prayer with a potato. I am suddenly filled with the dread that this Day of Atonement, Great Uncle Sammy is going to be struck down by a tuber from Yahweh and fall over dead on my lap. It takes a great deal of effort but I manage to pull myself away to look urgently at my father, but clearly he’s not about to be distracted. I don’t know what the Hebrew words are he’s intoning, but his eyes have shifted to the portrait. He’s staring at his Uncle Moishe, who seems to be staring back at him. In fact, my mother always claimed the reason everyone thought Moishe was a saint was because no matter where you stood in the room, Moishe’s eyes in the picture seemed to be staring right back at you. I’d often try to talk to my father about Moishe, who died before I was born, but these conversations always ended the same way.

Me: Dad? Dad: Hey, boychick!
Me: I have a question.
Dad: A confession? Do I look like a priest? Did you go Catholic?
Me: No, no. A question.

Mom. I don’t care. Get it.

Me: (over-enunciating) Please. Tell me about Uncle Moishe.
Dad: (desperately controlling the emotion) Never forget this: he was a great man. He was the greatest.
Me: Was he really your teacher?
Dad: He taught me everything I know. He was more a father to me than my own father. Uncle Moishe was Moses, Gandhi and Elvis rolled up into one.

Me: Was he really your teacher?
Dad: He taught me everything I know.
Me: I have a question.
Dad: Hey, boychick!

Mom: Come here. Come closer to me. I want to smell your breath.
Me: Why?
Mom: I think you have halitosis…Where are you going?
Me: To gargle.
Mom: Let me smell first.
Me: You want to smell my halitosis?
Mom: Why are your eyes bloodshot?
Me: I was swimming. There was chorine in the pool.
Mom: You were not swimming. Are you taking drugs? Let me see your bathing suit.
Me: Now that’s just kinky, Mom.
Mom: I don’t care. Get it.
Me: You want it so bad, you get it.
Mom: How dare you talk to your mother
Me. How else should I talk to you. This is bullshit! Mom. When your father gets home -- Me. What? We'll have a conversation? Good luck.

Mom. Where are you going?
Me. To the library. Research project. You're going out with dad tonight, right? So I guess you won't be here when I get home.
Mom. You hate me. You hate your mother.
Me. Will you please just leave me alone!
Mom. Do you want to kill me? Here's a knife. Stab me in the heart.
Me. Don't worry, I'll just eat some leftovers. Feel free to smell my bathing suit as much as you want.

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

Dealer: What exactly are you looking for?
Me: Something on paper.
Dealer: how much do you need?
Me: Just one dose.
Dealer: You tripping alone?
Me: No, with a friend.
Dealer: Kind of hard to split one drop on paper between two people.
Me: He's got his own.
Dealer: Interesting. Two parallel trips. ...So you've tripped a lot?
Me: Oh yeah. A lot. Lots. And lots.
(The Dealer picks up the piece of paper)
Dealer: Good. Cause this is powerful medicine, man. With this shit, you do not trip alone.
Me: I don't. I'm not. Not me.

Dealer: Well, then. Bon Voyage, Star Boy.
Me: Over and out.
Admittedly, there was a little hubris going on here, because I had been telling people and myself that I was an old hand at this kind of adventure. After all, I had been smoking large quantities of pot, which in retrospect was probably catnip. The fact was my only previous experience had consisted of ingesting some peyote and vomiting all night, which I guess, technically, you could call a trip. It's true I had dropped some mescaline but I realize now must have been a mild amphetamine, because we stayed up till dawn, watched the sunrise and were so wired we watched the sunset too. Having done these field tests, I felt it was time to raise the ante and see what Timothy Leary was talking about. Unfortunately for me, unlike the previous dealers I had bought catnip from, this guy turned out to be the real thing.

Oh, right. There's one thing I didn't mention about that old family photograph of my great-grandparents and their family. You see, six months after the picture was taken, over half of them were dead. Everybody standing to the left of my great-grandfather was killed by Cossacks. Grandpa, Moishe, Sammy and Rozzie were the only survivors, led to safety by Moishe. I never met my great-grandpa, but if I had, I would have definitely made a point of never standing on his left.

I'm saying this because I don't want to imply it was my father alone who turned me into a surly, drug abusing adolescent. I was raised with the paranoia of extinction, if not by the Cossacks or Nazis, maybe the people next door -- maybe even...you. And then, of course there were the lies, if not outright, then certainly through obfuscation: What was my dad's great burden? Nobody would say exactly what it was. My mom was a neurotic mess -- why? I knew that somehow my Great Uncle Moishe was the key to solving the puzzle, but getting the truth about him, as it happens, no easier than getting the truth about God. Nobody would talk, everybody was perfectly willing to lie -- the very fabric of their existence was based on deceit and denial. It was no wonder a dealer could sell me catnip or horse manure and I'd smoke it all night and convince myself I was stoned on Acapulco Gold. I was raised on this quaking bog of bullshit.

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

Rozzie: Darling, you're so big now, you're all grown up, you're a big handsome boy. When are you going to let me cut your hair so we can see that beautiful face.
Me. Soon. Auntie Rozzie, I'm working on a project.
Rozzie. For school, good.
Me. A family project.
Rozzie. Whose family?
Me. Our family. I'm trying to find things out about our history. Can I ask you something?
Rozzie. Of course. Anything, darling.
Me. When you were a child, just before you came to this country...
Rozzie. I don't remember.
Me. But Uncle Moishe saved you from the Cossacks --
Rozzie: My brother Moishe, may he rest in peace, what a jewel, what a man, if only God was a man like him.
Me. So when the Cossacks came --
Rozzie: (flatly) I never saw a Cossack in my life.
Me. But Auntie, your customers, at the saloon -- most of them escaped from pogroms or the holocaust, I thought that maybe they went to you because you're like them.
Rozzie: Of course I like them, they're my customers.
Me. No, I mean like, as in similar.
Rozzie: They want similar, I give them similar. They want Lucy, I give them red. They want blond, I make them so Marilyn Monroe would eat her kishkas out.
Me: I heard that when Uncle Moishe pulled you from under the bed -- Rozzie. Your Uncle Moishe was a saint. That's who you should be talking to.
Me. But I can't. He's dead.
Rozzie. Such are the tragedies of life.

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

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

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

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

Voice: What's wrong with you?
I gasped. Frozen.
Me: (whispers) …Uncle Moishe?
Mom: No, it's your mother. Are you
talking to that picture?
- Slowly I turned, avoiding her eyes.
But I couldn't help peeking. Her body
was throbbing, ballooning, swelling
larger and larger. My mother was as
big as the room. I swallowed desper-
ately, trying to find words.
- …I was thinking.
Mom: Thinking out loud? About what?
Me: …Uncle Moishe.
Mom: Why him?
Me: Because things would be so much
better…if he were here.
Mom: You're out of your mind.
Me: Why? He was a great man, a hero,
he saved the whole family.
Mom: He was an asshole.
Me: But he created the business --
Mom: Moishe never made that busi-
ness. It was nothing. Just a bunch of
junk peddlers until your father came
along.
Me: But everybody was making money
with Uncle Moishe.
Mom: None of them drove Cadillacs
until your father came along. Everyday
he'd walk in with ten new brilliant
ideas to improve the profits. He
replaced those pathetic wagons and
wheelbarrows with trucks.
Me: But Uncle Moishe…
Mom: Sammy loved driving a truck
and your Grandfather was happy to
sit and play casino all day, but Moishe
was eating his kishkes out. He had
nothing to do. Once your father came
along, there was no more nickle and
diming, no more two-bit peddlers, it
was all big deals -- Moishe was out of
his league. Your father was bringing
in truckloads of junk cars from Toledo,
Chicago, New York. Moishe was a
fifth wheel now, but he still strutted
around like he was cock of the walk
and paid your father shit. But that
wasn't enough, he had to punish your
father more.
Me: Dad loved him. He loved dad!
Mom: (snapping) Oh yeah? Then why
did he blow his brains out!
- Suddenly I saw an eru-
tion of blood spewing out of Moishe's
picture. I must have screamed as I
fell into the chair because my mom
loomed over me, whispering:
Mom: You've got to swear to God
you'll never tell a soul.
Me: Who am I gonna tell?
Mom: Swear it!
Me: I swear to God I’ll never tell.
Never, never, never! Tell me what
happened, please, Mom, tell me what
happened!
- I watched spellbound as
a tear formed in the corner of her eye
socket, then slid slow down her cheek
like a tiny slug, leaving a shimmering
trail.
Mom: …On Friday after closing,
Moishe borrowed the night watch-
man's gun.
- She stared at me: What's different
about you? Why are you making me
talk like this?
Me: I don't know. Who cares -- keep
talking.
Mom: Our phone rang. The police
wouldn't say what it was, just called
your father to the office. He walked
into that room, and saw Moishe lying
there, half his head splattered on the
walls.
Me: Oh my god.
Mom: For the next two months he
lay in bed, crying. I begged him,
explained things to him, screamed at
him. Nothing. For sixty-one days your
father just laid there. Finally between
the psychiatrists and the rabbis they
got him back on his feet.
Me: But he was never the same.
Mom. He was never the same. The
little itchy spots he always had on his
ears spread over his whole body.
Red blotches, white scales.
Me: He's always scratching. He scratch-
es till it bleeds.
Mom. Every night I'd put the tar cream
on him, then wrap him in plastic and
tape him up. And in the morning I'd
cut him out of it. But that wasn't the
worst.
Me: What could be worse?
Mom. He walked away from the
business. Gave it back to his relatives.
The psoriasis ate away at his joints, the
arthritis twisted his fingers, bent his
spine, hardened his arteries. And the
family swallowed up all the profits.
It was like in the Bible. The Book of Job.
That is your father.
- Then she looked at me.
Mom: What’s wrong with your eyes?
Me: If my eyes are throbbing it’s because you just blew my mind.
Mom: You didn’t eat dinner.
Me: I’m fasting.
Mom: You wanna get sick? You have to eat something. We brought you back a baked potato. Here, bite it. Before it gets cold. Put it in your mouth. Eat the potato.
-- She’s trying to push the potato between my teeth.
I ran. Out the door, down the sidewalks, across the streets, running from her, from them, from it all. But it was no good, there were too many others trying to escape ghosts, all lost, lonely, sick, dying, afraid. My footsteps joined their footsteps until finally, I couldn’t run anymore. I was caught in the truth of existence: life is a nightmare you can’t wake from.

There was nothing else left to do but surrender. I looked up at the sky. At first I saw one star blink on and off, then another, and another and then I was caught. I could see the distances between each of these suns, could see the galaxies, could feel infinity. I felt a calming intelligence wash over me. And that was okay. In fact, it was better than I ever imagined. It was a beautiful place to be. I was completely blissed out and there was one person I had to share this with.

Me: Dad, I have incredible news.
Dad: News? Talk in my good ear, son, and speak up.
Me: It’s all an illusion.
Dad: What’s it?
Me: An illusion! We can be free of all this, dad!
Dad: Who’s free?
Me: I had a religious experience, Dad. I felt the universe inside me.
Dad: When? How?
Me: I was…meditating. I felt it.
Dad: You saw God.
Me: I felt it. The cosmos. And I realized…the world…all this pain and suffering…all these things we call reality…they aren’t real. (Dad just looks at Me.)
Me: …Did you understand what I said? Should I say it again?
Dad: Say what?
Me: Dad -- you, me, our lives, our memories -- none of it’s real. All these years, me feeling guilty about you, you feeling guilty about Uncle Moishe, we’re just clinging to memories and feelings because we believe our existence depends on them, but it doesn’t. If you let go of yourself -- the pain goes too.
Dad: I don’t think so.
Me: Don’t you see? You don’t have to blame yourself for Moishe.
Dad: What about Moishe?
Me: For twenty years, you’ve let your guilt destroy you, even though he killed himself. It had nothing to do with you.
Dad: What?
Me: You can let go of Moishe.
Dad: You’ll have to speak up, this fucking hearing aid’s on the blink!
Me: You didn’t kill Moishe, he killed himself!
Dad: I can’t hear what you’re saying!
Me: Dad: Dad!
(Dad breathes, starts to calm down.)
Me: Did you really not hear a word I said?
Dad: No, No, I got it. You’ve gone Buddhist. Don’t tell your mother.
Me: I’m not Buddhist, I just had a revelation.
Dad: That none of this is real.
Scratches himself! This isn’t real.
Me: That’s right. What do you think?
Dad: It’s a crock of shit.
Me: Yes! That’s it exactly! Reality is a sham! It’s bullshit!
Dad: No. I mean you’re full of shit.
Me: I am?
Dad: I don’t know what God you were talking to, but if this is all an illusion, he’s one sick bastard.
Me: It’s just…if you could feel what I felt…I don’t think you’d suffer the way you do.
Dad: That’s what this is all about? You don’t want me to suffer?
Me: That’s right.
Dad: Well, fuck the god shit, son. There is something you can do.
Me: Anything.
Dad: There’s this spot, right here, I can’t reach. It’s driving me wild.
Me: …You want me to scratch it?
Dad: If you wouldn’t mind.
Me: Okay.
(Me scratches Dad. Dad moans with pleasure.)
Dad: This is what Uncle Moishe was missing, son. A good scratch. If you can’t get that, it makes it awful hard to live.

-- I must have scratched him all night long, watching the scales flake off his back and snow on my feet. It gave him such pleasure, I felt like I was making up for seventeen years of reviling him. Around dawn, hours after I had rubbed this tar cream on his skin and he’d gone up to bed, the effect of the acid wore off. And sitting there at the empty table, I found his scales caked under my fingernails. Without the chemical in my system, no matter how hard I tried to think of them as an illusion, I could not. And my hands stank of tar, the remains of dead dinosaurs. Later that day, my dad caught me sniffing my fingers, and I think the look of revulsion on my face and the sorrow on his made it clear that a repeat performance of the scratchy love-in would not be coming soon.

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

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

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

Dennis Foon (RC 1972) is a playwright, producer, screenwriter and novelist. He was artistic director of the Green Thumb Theatre for twelve years, before turning to films and television in 1986. He has written screenplays for many types of drama. In the mid-1990s his personal project Little Criminals became a success in Canada. His novels include The Longlight Legacy trilogy and Skud.
Love & Other Disorders

Clare Higgins

Monday, June 7.
This is my first entry in my “feelings journal”, as you so aptly put it, Dr. Michael Train. I would just like to say, for starters, that our appointment was just fine, but you came across as a bit condescending when you said You may call me Dr. Michael, or even Michael, if you wish. Like I was a jumpy teenager just bursting to know what your first name was. I honestly think you only did that because Dr. Train would sound too stupid-childish for an adult psychiatrist. I’ll have you know I’m probably older than your wife, and you have sex with her, so that’s a respectful act depending on how you look at it so you should treat me as an equal.

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

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

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

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

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

Now, I’ve never gotten to meet my father, as he died soon before my birth trying to deliver a government message to Guatemala from the Netherlands, but my mother has told me every story of their romance together, and today, I met my very own Bernard Horace Crenshaw. From the way David smiled at me on the elevator today, I knew he was no Jacob. Given the incredibly similar circumstances of our meeting, we probably have the same soul make-up, which makes us 100% compatible. It’s my father’s essence, sent to me in the form of the perfect man who I’m going to marry and have nine perfect children with. I’m just a lot luckier than other girls to have found him this quickly. That’s all for now. Angela

Wednesday, June 9.
Status report: Good. I decided to start adding that for each of the entries, to help you with things, so you don’t have to read into my words and etchings, I can just tell you. You’ll probably think that’s condescending of me, Michael, but it really isn’t. I’m just being helpful like you always are. Just trying to help!

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

I stopped by again today and decided to ring the doorbell. My heart was beating right out of my chest and I told myself Angela, he could answer at any
he feels since my sexual confidence about talking to me. I understand how Poor David. He's probably nervous who is trying to appear nonchalant tell the difference between someone whoever cares less, wins. So it's hard to stuck in this crazy dating game where today about how these days, we are all I read an article on Thought Catalog Anyway, no progress yet with David. 

Thursday, June 15.

Status Report: Inspired. I watched You've Got Mail this afternoon, where Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks think that they shouldn't be together, but that's because they don't even know that the universe already decided for them that they're perfect for each other. I've come to the conclusion that I need to intimidate the opposition. I have decided to send her messages of hatred to show her my dominance like dogs do when they pee on telephone poles. Today, I sent a note, and just for dramatic effect, I popped a few ladybug carcasses in there. Nothing dangerous about them, just for show. Plus, now I've gotten rid of them. They were making my apartment look dismal.

Angela

Sunday, June 20.

Status Report: Right as rain. I apologize again for not writing since Thursday, but you really can't blame me after your outburst, Train. You really should have been pleased at my progress this past week, if anything. I did the deep breaths and added the sometimes helpful breathing, and the blisters start forming and freaks out. Then she'll read my note and leave him as fast as she can move. Or maybe she'll be just fine. The Meloe's only dangerous if provoked.

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

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

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

Angela

Tuesday, June 22.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since I don’t know if I’ll ever see you again, Michael, Dr. Michael, whatever you want to be called, I guess I should thank you. Even though you were.

Despite your Well, of course just just

Thanks for all you’ve done. I’ll miss our meetings, in a way. I hope you succeed in your fixing of all the crazies out there.

Angela

Friday, June 25.

Dear Dr. Michael,

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

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

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

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

He came over to me and I was about to run but he put a finger on his lips as in Shh and sat down across from me and he said What’ve you got there? And I coughed on my soup and he continued with I like a woman who

knows her Chicken and Lentil.

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

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

Angela

Clare Higgins (RC 2017) double majored in creative writing (RC) and screen arts and culture (LSA). She has Hopwood awards in both fields (poetry, 2015; screenplay, 2016).
He feels his father’s indifference like a cramp in his stomach. He’s no longer a child, not anymore—there’s no reason to think about any of this. Sometimes he wonders if “childhood” was a thing other people had, like lake houses or great-aunts who wrote you checks in birthday cards that came three weeks too late.

Here, in this third-story studio apartment, snowflakes lazily beating the frost-slick window, the last thing he should be thinking of is his father. But still. A call. Chrissakes, he’s not ambitious, a text, even. These days, radio silence is always intentional. Even Starbucks wished him a happy birthday.

A paperback copy of *Infinite Jest* winks at him from its sideways home on the windowsill. Its laminate-slick cover glints with reflected streetlight, with the snow drifting onto the sidewalk along Racine. He sets a sweating bottle of out-of-season Oberon atop the book. It leaves a ring, will ripple the pages if he ever decides to open them. The orange streetlight drenches the budding snowdrifts.

A text.

He has never been good at not thinking. Leaning over the kitchen sink, he rests his elbows on porcelain. Cigarette ash rains pumice dust on the drain. Mark likes to tell him smoking is a vulgar habit.

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

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

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

#

Delilah’s.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

Mark.

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

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

Through the window, the sidewalk disappears under the snow.

#

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

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

When they lower the casket into the frozen earth, he lights a cigarette. Vulgarity thrives in graveyards.

With low expectations, one can never disappoint.

Allison Epstein (RC 2014) lives in Chicago, and is a writer, editor, marketer, and words person. “Delilah” was previously published in the September 2016 edition of Sweater Weather Magazine.

Allison Epstein (RC 2014)
To the woman in the parking lot of the park, who has found me crushing leaves, smelling them, and looking at the willows: I am giddy because I have identified a poison sumac. It grows on the trail by the water. They happen in Southeastern Michigan, and here are some ways to tell: Shrub or small tree; leaflets compound, sessile, with scarlet midribs; drupes white, persisting in winter.

I have been learning the names of woody plants this fall thanks to a special course at the college in town, a historic course, and sometimes I am overwhelmed with the trees. The distinctions between oaks, the tips of their leaves sometimes bristled, their buds sometimes tomentose, their acorns brimmed with fringe, where they are and aren’t on a hill. And the maples. “Something like Acer,” the graduate instructor says of them, meaning something common, mundane, easy to define. Silver, red, sugar, and box elder, they do their own thing. Thankfully, the Hawthorns one cannot distinguish, by the species at least. They have a thorny, suckering habit. They are part of one another. It is true that they have thorns and haws.

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

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

Often the forest is a backdrop. Now, as I walk and scan the paths for bark patterns, and then the understory, the leaves on everything, the way they move with wind, I become the backdrop to the forest. By the end, my senses are exhausted, and I listen. It is the time of year when I can hear the acorns drop, a time of year I hadn’t noticed until now. I am not particularly spiritual, but I quiet. I think: Once I was an addict. Maybe I still am.

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

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

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

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 smelled the cigarette and grass smoke. The music, the babble of the visitors, other roommates piped up that the Barberless Quartet, one of Dotty’s favorites, was playing. A few people who else ordered more hippie fries? He turned back on every night at closing, still topping his high score. As you might expect, in reality the governor had to be 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.

Thinking about Dotty and the Inn 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 who was lovingly paying for the poison garden (one ball active), adjusting to the various poisons just enough to convince Beatrice to escape 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. 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 Rappacchini’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 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.

Instead E.J. moped, and hoped that things would warm when she returned to town in a few weeks. But no.

E.J. sent apologies, flowers. He should have bought a plane ticket and flown over. Not that it would have done any good: even Dotty didn’t yet fully understand that when she closes a door, it never reopens.

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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 pipped up that the Barbers were also Dotty’s favorite, why not sit and join us?

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.

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had assumed he'd be head librarian at the dorm's library, thought he had the inside track, but then at the end of April it went to Marv Gleason, his freshman year roommate, of all people! What was the library's name? Something like Bootlicker. Buttlicker?

It turned moot, as the library was closed over the summer, or, officially, "downsized." It was now the size of a broom closet. It seemed to operate like a kind of vending machine.... He wondered where Marv was working? Hopefully in a job dull and poor-paying!

The Inn closed over the summer but would surely be open by now. But it wasn't. In fact, the sign was gone. He stood before the store, rather stupidly, until someone called out to him from a dorm doorway. Didn't you hear? It's been shut down....

The XC administrative offices were on the first floor, set off on the south side near the southern-most entrance. The office seemed unchanged: a surprisingly large room with several desks, windows along the back wall, and then an office to either side, one for the administrative manager, the other the director. You just knew that when the building was next renovated this space would be slashed to the size of a dumpster. It was the middle of a Monday afternoon, and the XC director's office was vacant, and the XC director's office in the second week of the semester, and was the middle of a Monday afternoon.

E.J. stood before the door. It looked like any other dorm room, except for a taped handwritten note, "Aristo. He was about to knock when the door flew open, almost smacking his nose. He stepped back. Sylvie St. John sobbing, stepped out. Tall, too thin, with long, shiny black hair, she looked woesome 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 grantsmanship, if not outright tax-dodging. He encouraged Justine to establish her own foundation (which she didn't do) or at least to "find ways to get others to pay for things 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 pounding her with generic requests for money, but she found the requests hollow, even if the caller was usually an earnest young man breathlessly telling her about the exciting opportunities made possible by alums just like her. She assumed 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 well, but minimal make-up. He recognized a quality that he had in very short supply: self-confidence. He reached up and patted his hair, wondering how disorganized and self-conscious he looked.

Justine was smiling because she saw in E.J. the possible solution to several things. For one, he was male, which the Project needed, and for two, he would be the fourth of four Project students. For three, he might have a further calming and sustaining effect on Sylvie, who a moment before was considering leaving the Project and perhaps even dropping out of school. Sylvie's boyfriend, Rex, had apparently dumped her; apparently this violated an unviolatable 50 year plan that Sylvie had constructed years before.

Justine described the Aristophanes Project, but spoke more about her interpretation of the Trojan Horse. She said that back in L.A. when she saw the Aristophanes play, she remembered the annual theatriac competitions that Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others participated in. She saw a matrice that could train writers to work within narrow parameters, which she saw as necessary for success as a writer in the real world. Plus, one or more of the students would win the competitions, and awards are always a good way to spruce up a resume and get attention.

The Trojan Horse? Students would study Greek plays, maybe even learn Greek, then work towards writing two ten-minute plays to perform, one humorous, one dramatic, for a brief modern competition similar to the old Greek ones. But the real purpose would be to teach practical discipline about writing for a specific audience. Almost amusingly, Justine thought to indulge her personal belief that drama, and writing specifically, are fundamental tools for every writer. She opened a chocolate. The bar had an unusual name, Ygias. She then carefully folded the wrapper into a series of small squares. At first, E.J. thought she might be folding it into an origamic horse. She offered him one; opening a drawer and taking out samples: Derby Caramel, Break Sokofritas, Hazelnut Galatcha.

“These are all bribes from the Ion candy company,” she said. “Very successful bribes, too,” she added, chuckling. 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!

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 she and Rex started dating. She knew then that he was The One, even though he was a year younger and just in 10th grade. They’d both go to the same college, she’d major in anthropology, he’d be an engineer, they’d marry when he had his degree, they’d live on the west coast, eventually have two children, a boy and a girl.

But the plan was not specific about the summer after Rex graduated high school, and he had 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. 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 mod-
ern, 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 num-
ber 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 gen-
tlely 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
would certainly say this is true of most of her male students; when
they're not exploring the angst and mis-
erable 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
changing her mind. Then E.J. decided to
"be positive," which first took the form of
awkward love letters to Dotty and then
to Sylvie, embarrassingly transparent
allegories, which were primarily naive
wishes that the universe smile more
broadly on these relationships.

Consequently, E.J. was not one of
Hayley's students recommended to Jus-
tine for the Aristophanes Project. She
recommended two; one, Darla Marbury,
was selected.

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

E.J. loved to 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
more so 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 nor-
mal 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. replen-
ished 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 forgot-
ten 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 super-
visor: 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 thee 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 hav-
ing the same experience! Remarkable.
No surprise: the Imposters wore disguis-
es. 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 vet-
eran hallucinogenist 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 young-
er, or stayed away from quieter and
more reflective songs. You see, there
was a rumor that the singer, a found-
ing 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. The walk was about half a mile, and E.J. was pleased to see how easily they fell back into their ordinary conversational rhythm. Before he knew it, they were across the street from the XC.

As they walked past the piles of dirt across from the XC where yet another business school building was going up, E.J. saw something aglint on the side of a near mound and picked it up. Improbably, it was in fact Dotty’s earring from last year, lost somewhere on the homestead. 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. spotted Milton in the XC lobby the next morning. He wanted to ask about the commune experience, but was afraid he would hear something spiritual that might infect him, ruin him before he had yet developed his yet-to-be-developed special self. Milton might have said that the extreme spirituality was very much like his old drug experiences, except less transient, perhaps a step closer to the trick of reality.

Class-wise, while it was too late for Milton to enroll for the Fall semester, he planned to finish up all the Incompletes from the Winter, since he had left with a few weeks of school work not finished. E.J. suggested he consider an independent study in winter to reflect on his commune experience, something he could begin to work on now. He told him about the Aristophanes Project, and wondered if he might be good for it next year. And of course he told him about Sylvie, hardly mentioning Dotty.

Finding a place to live for Milton was complicated. He crashed with friends that first night; he had heard that there was “always room” at the Omega Omega fraternity. Neither of them knew about Omega’s parachute-less plane jump each spring, which was one of the reasons there were always vacancies.

E.J. was tempted to let Milton use his apartment, since he spent most of his in Sylvie’s 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 imagine bringing Sylvie home to meet the family. Was it because they weren’t actually boyfriend/girlfriend, despite the practical appearances? It seemed clear that a day would come, perhaps sooner than he thought, that Sylvie would be walking out of his life. Could it do anything else but break his silly heart?

No sooner did everyone return from the break but Justine announced a perk for Project students: she herself was going to Athens for a few days around New Year’s and that the Project would pay for any Project student who wanted to come along. She’d pay airfare (roundtrip New York to Athens), and two nights in an Athens hotel. It turned out to be a Grade H hotel, but it had hot water, after a fashion, and was, after all, free.

Three of the five of them took the trip to Athens: E.J., Justine, and Chrysanthe.
Sylvie had declined so early and so completely that E.J. couldn’t help but wonder if she had made other plans, specifically with Rex. He had done his best detective probing but was unsuccessful in learning if she saw Rex over the Thanksgiving break, considering they both came from the same town.

Darla declined and then dropped out of the Program.

The three of them rendezvoused at JFK in New York for the flight to Athens. E.J. was there first. He had hitched a ride via the Ride Board with Fred Stockbridge, a pleasant if hyper native New Yorker. They left around dusk, drove all night. Fred looked haggard, but declined E.J.’s offer to help drive.

E.J. figured Fred must be a hard partier, but eventually Fred turned to E.J., sighed, and said, “There’s this girl, Jill.”

He was smitten, of course, but was having an impossible time getting close enough to her, at parties, to find out what she thought of him. You see, she could handle her drugs like no one else. She could work her way up 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 not 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 souvlaki and retsina. E.J. didn’t especially care for the retsina, but he didn’t let on. Then came the odious banana liquor 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 Chrysanthe 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 Aristophanes plays were performed. It was another beautiful summery day, blue skied, a few fleecy clouds, amazing vistas. They

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E.J. laughed. Yes, he now knew that Athens is a true European city: things are in districts, and the Byron is in what appears to be the washing machine district. Or maybe the crumbling Grade H hotel district. Come, I'll show you a cool place to eat.

And so they walked up the street toward Syntagma.

E.J. liked them, but was uncomfortable with the differences between them. How could this relationship last? Stu seemed to have stretched as far as he could stretch, while Danielle seemed to grow more bored with each 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.

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) Chrysanthe Chrysanthe Chrysanthe! 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 Chrysanthe was in the modern Greek class....

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

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

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

By February he wanted to say....

E.J. bumped into Kaiser Roberts outside the Grad Library, one day in February, and Kaiser invited him to a party at his apartment that weekend. Compared to E.J., at least, Kaiser seemed at the zenith of social status, so getting an invitation made E.J. feel like he existed in the real world, at least through the weekend. But no sooner did E.J. arrive at the party than Kaiser was bustling out the door,
with his customary entourage of cute women. Friendly, effusive, Kaiser welcomed him. “Make yourself at home!” he enthused. Nevertheless, it did not seem that Kaiser would be returning any time soon.

E.J. slowly made his way through the crowded kitchen, took a red plastic cup already poured with punch, and jostled his way into the living room. No one was even vaguely familiar, which seemed improbable, unless he had entered a portal into a parallel universe, something that often seemed likely. He was pleased that he didn’t feel particularly awkward and self-conscious. A young man with a silly half-beard that made him look like a chipmunk offered him a hit from a pipe; E.J. praised the music, which he recognized as a Babble song. Mr. Rodent was very impressed; he had heard of Babble, and E.J. talked about ushering the concert in the fall.

E.J. kept a view of the apartment door to see who was coming and going. He mused that maybe Sylvie would drop in, although that was unlikely, since she didn’t drink, smoke, or like crowds. He mused at how these seemed 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 happier one, thinking that perhaps Chrysanthe would come by . . . .

The sunny thrill of it alarmed him. He looked wirey but gaunt, exhausted. 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 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 scouted 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.

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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 pseud-
There was less a week until the
that had happened in another way.
E.J. hadn’t yet gotten around to con-
But Andy?

But she didn’t ask him to come west
and unfamiliar colloquial expressions.
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
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 manufac-
turer that resonated with the Greek play’s
name, Laius. Well, E.J. never finished
the play, then or now, and in any event
could only strip out a five-minute seg-
ment 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 contin-
ue 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 a short-
term one. Now it was microscopic.
Likely as a way to punish himself, E.J.
than had a dream where he met Aris-
tophanes, 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.

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
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 of 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 an-
noyed 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 competi-
tions, drama and comedy. The audi-
ence voted with a show of hands.
Darla had dropped out. Crysanthe
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
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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-min-
ute 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 festi-
vale 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
driving paid some of the final touches,
and then for things like the program,
and a little reception in the lobby after-
wards (Greek salad, spanakatirakopita
squares, pita and chicken, and of course
contraband retsina and ouzo discretely
under the tables in the corner).

Sylvie and Chrysanthe had conscript-
ED 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 Chrysan-
the, 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 sub-letting 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 Holly job and headed north with Andy to open a theater company in Portland. Sylvie remained in Hollywood, deftly taking over most of Justine's accounts.

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

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

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

All this activity proved serendipitous for E.J.’s involvement in the Outside Inn project, something Andy had started before leaving town. The idea was to re-open the Inn but outside the university, where it might exist as a bar and restaurant with a basement performing space for theater, music, and comedy. It turned out that a Korean restaurant almost across the street from the XC had failed, and this became the Outside Inn when several alumni stepped up as investors. E.J. had spearheaded this initiative, starting when he contacted the alum who had underwritten support for the Rappacini'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 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.
Creative Writing Alumni News

Updated info (with clickable links) is available at the RC Writers’ website:
http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/rcwriters/publications-readings-performances/

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.


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 Cas “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).

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.
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.

Allison 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.


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 possible. I learned how to advocate for myself, how to bring out the best in my students, and how to bring love and compassion into my daily work. Ariel plans to eventually go to graduate school for a PhD or an MFA in Creative Writing. She’s from East Lansing, Michigan. She graduated with a dual degree in Creative Writing and Literature, and American Culture. Some of her poetry is viewable at Bonus Cut and the Academy of American Poets.

RC professor Laura Kasischke (RC 1984)’s most recent book is The Infinitesmals, a collection of poems published by Copper Canyon Press in July 2014. For more about Laura, visit her website.

Anna Megdell (RC 2012) is pursuing an MFA in Fiction at the University of Tennessee. U of Tennessee’s literary journal, Grist, is accepting submissions of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and craft essays until September 15th for its special 10th anniversary issue. Click here for more information!

Nicholas Petrie (RC 1990) will be Writer in Residence at the RC October 12-13, 2016. He is the author of The Drifter (2016) and Burning Bright (January 2017). A husband and father, he runs a home-inspection business in Milwaukee.

Paige Pfleger (RC 2015) is associate producer for WHYY’s The Pulse and published a story about brain-eating amoeba on NPR’s Here and Now site this August 25th After graduating in 2015 (double-majoring in Communications) Paige began work as a Digital News intern at NPR headquarters in Washington, DC. There's more about Paige at her website. She tweets @PaigePfleger.

Elena Potek (RC 2015) recently concluded a “30 day/30 women” social media project: each day on Facebook she posted about a different woman in her life who has inspired her, and who embodies “a wonderful trait that lights up the world around them.” (One of the featured women was the RC’s Laura Thomas). Elena got the idea from a former theater director, Aaron Gabriel, who was posting about a different woman each day, 38 days out from the national election, to counter “other people’s low value of women.” Elena says, “I can’t begin to describe what an incredible experience it has been for me to reflect on all of the truly amazing women who have helped to shape me, and to see how positively people have reacted to the posts has shown me how deeply important it is to actively affirm those in our lives and share more positivity with the world around us.” Elena started a 30-day project on Facebook: lifting up non-profits that folks might want to donate time and money to in the the wake of the election. Since graduation, Elena has been living in Chicago and working 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.

Molly Roth (RC 2010) published a comic called “Things I Wish I Had Said In The Moment But Only Thought Of Later” in a September 2016 New Yorker. She also published a send-up about online dating in Vox. There’s more info on Molly on her website. Elizabeth Schmuhl (RC 2006) taught a First Year Seminar at the RC in Fall 2014.

Ian Singleton writes reviews and essays related to contemporary Russian Literature; his most recent is a review of Polly Gannon’s recent English translation of The Symmetry Teacher. Ian received his MFA from Emerson and now lives in San Francisco, where he’s at work on a novel. A story collection is forthcoming from Aqueous Books. More about Ian on his website.

Carrie Smith (RC 1999)’s Forgotten City, the second book in her Claire Codella series, is due out in mid-December 2016. Silent City was published in October 2015 by Crooked Lane Books. Carrie was Writer in Residence at the RC in February 2016.

Carly Steinberger (RC 2012) moved to New York, where she currently works for the non-profit BronxWorks as a case manager for a program called HomeBase. The job is funded through New York City Department of Homeless Services, and is a homelessness/eviction prevention program. Carly works with clients facing eviction for non-payment of rent; she serves as advocate, connects clients with resources to help pay off back rent and avoid eviction, and connects clients to other useful non-eviction/homelessness resources. Carly plans to apply to grad school this year, to Masters of Social Work programs as well as one or two Masters of Psychology programs. She think she would like to work as a therapist. “I think I was drawn to creative writing in college because I loved (and still love) stories, and what I consider to be the best part of my job now is listening to stories through my clients.”

Rachel Stopchinski (RC 2016) has started at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law, planning to graduate in 2019. She says that “as of now, I’m leaning towards trying to specialize in intellectual property, so working with copyright and trademark agreements. It would be wonderful to be able to work with clients in arts-related settings, but I’m still exploring how to make that kind of career path happen.” At Michigan, Rachel’s BA was also in English Language and Literature; she minored in Asian Studies, Music, and Performing Arts Management. She was in Michigan Marching Band and Basketball Band, in Kappa Kappa Phi, and served on the CAPS Student Advisory Board, in Alternative Spring Break, and in Global Course Connections: Japan. Josh Thilmany (RC 2013) is now working as a “scholar advocate” at Interfolio in Washington, DC, an educational technology company, where he works in a “stereotypically hipster, HBO mini-series-esque office.” After graduation he enrolled in the MAT program (Master of Arts in Teaching) at Boston University, considered Denver University’s MAT program, then took this job in DC.

Ashley Willis (RC 2013) produced Jah King’s video “I’m Not Insane,” which is the single off his EP, Alterego: The Silhouette.

Retirement!

RC Creative Writing instructor Warren Hecht retired at the end of December 2016. Warren started the RC’s creative writing program in 1970 and served as its director through 2002. He’s a graduate of City College of New York, and moved to Michigan in 1969. He was editor of The Periodical Lunch and Street Fiction Press’s Softcover Original Series. He continues as deacon at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Ann Arbor, and has been painting northern Michigan landscapes and rural dwellings since 2003, often from his cabin up north.

Poet and long-time creative writing lecturer Ken Mikolowski retired from the RC and from U-M at the end of the Winter 2015 semester. Ken taught poetry at the RC for nearly 40 years, since 1977 (full-time since 1988), and is only the second poetry instructor since the Creative Writing Program began in Fall 1970. Ken’s newest book of poems, That That, was published in 2015 by Wayne State University Press. In the 1960s, Mikolowski founded the Alternative Press in Detroit’s Cass Corridor with his late wife, the painter Ann Mikolowski. Aside from the RC, Ken also taught at Macomb Community College and at Wayne State.

The Year in Review

More to come here, but of course we mention new books by Laura Thomas and Andrew Weinstein. And hey, what about that new “fake news” concentration, Creative Non-Truth? (Okay, just kidding about that . . . .)
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Hey, maybe Dan's stuff could be called Shudderstock . . .