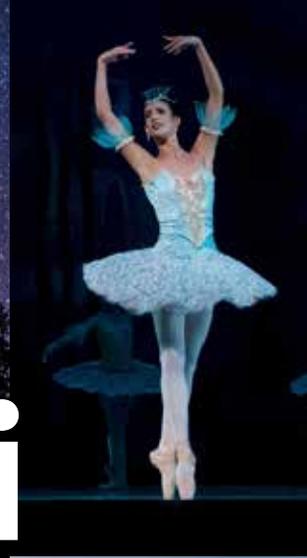




RC Alumni Journal



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Fall 2019 • No. 3



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Introduction

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

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

This issue also includes a section on alumni publications (and performances), a brief overview of news from RC Creative Writing, and a new “then and now” feature.

Visit the RC Writers site for various posts and updates throughout the year (sites.lsa.umich.edu/rcwriters), as well as to view PDFs of all journal issues.

Let us know if you’d like to receive an occasional e-blast about readings and others writerly events in the Ann Arbor area (email Dan at dmadaj@umich.edu).

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

We hope you enjoy this issue, and we hope you are having a wonderful year. We look forward to seeing you next year for our fourth issue, which will celebrate the 50th anniversary of RC creative writing (the program officially began in Fall 1970). Stay tuned for festive developments!

To financially support the journal:
 go to leadersandbest.umich.edu/find/#!/scu/lisa,
 click on "Write In Your Gift,"
 then put in "331802, RC Alumni Journal"
 and whatever amount you wish to contribute.

Or send a check to Carl Abrego or Robby Griswold at the college.
 To support the Emerging Writer award, Its "giving" number is 323069.
 There's more about Emerging Writers on p. 122.

A formatting note: if a contributor is a creative writing alum, the name will be followed by the graduation year in parentheses (RC 2019). RC grads with other majors will have majors listed, when known (RC 2019, Arts and Ideas).

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The cover is a composite of these images, plus a section of Dan's original "bug juice" drawing, a nod to the scary vat of "bug juice" in the EQ cafeteria in the early '70s (one bug says, "I wouldn't worry about these kids drinking us dry; I hear it's only a matter of time before they start drinking things called lattes and smoothies . . ."), and a photo of Dan's dog Rowan (courtesy Emily Miller-Madaj).

Print copies of this journal were made possible by donated funds,
 and by the Residential College.

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

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Behind the Curtain

Julia Byers

I've always had a thing for backstage right. Or I guess I've always had a thing for both wings, but they feel so different for two areas that are essentially the same.

Backstage left is where the costumes crew hangs out, with their racks of quick change clothes slipped between set pieces. It's where the assistant stage manager relays commands and someone stands waiting, always waiting, in the curtains.

Backstage right is where the stage manager sits, calling cues at the Vortek, lowering backdrops and raising lights, a script with so many scribbles in it, it could be bleeding, open on the table. This side is where Wren and Markus caught a porch on fire one page before its cue during *The Wizard of Oz*, playing with a lighter, and they put it out with spit. It's where Tabitha threw up that one time

two minutes before Act II of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and we thought it was because of nerves, but actually she had the flu and we were all sick by closing night, because it's a law of life that when one theatre kid gets sick, we all do.

God. The Theatre Plague. I'll even miss the dumb Theatre Plague.

The entire company always came down with it, one after the other, usually during competition season when everyone was stressed about finals and not sleeping because of Hell Week. The cast would improvise reasons for coughing in the middles of songs at the district festival level of competition, and Mr. Clark would act as a stand-in during rehearsals for five different roles because even the understudies were sick. One time Wren was so out of it she fell asleep during the final dress. She was the

stage manager.

I once went through an entire box of tissues during a performance of *Hairspray*, here in backstage right.

I run the velvety black curtain I'm standing beside between my fingers. It hangs limp two curtains back. It's the one everyone forgets, so it's less pilled than the others. Not as many sweaty hands tugging at it while waiting on cues.

I made my first entrance from behind this curtain.

It was the fall play. Freshman year. *James and the Giant Peach*. I was Ensemble Member Number Five.

The suffocated gasp is in my throat before I feel it rising. I press my rose-painted lips tight. Squeeze my eyes shut. Cling to the curtain.

High school. They said it would go by fast. They said it would be a blur.

Knowing that in advance didn't slow it down.

It's too much, clinging to that curtain everyone forgets, here on backstage right, my curtain, my backstage right, and I back away. Turn. My toe scuffs through the sawdust collected against the wall.

Glitter sparkles amongst it. I don't know where it's from. There's always glitter. Even when we did *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the brooms swept glitter into our corners. Even now, after closing night of *The Sound of Music*, my ballet flat comes back sparkling. And I stop. Palms pressed to the matte black plaster wall. Chest heaving for air. Glitter sparkling before my eyes even when they're pressed shut.

Tonight was the last night of the spring musical. Tonight was my last performance as a senior. Tonight was my last chance to own this theater

and that audience and these years.

Tonight *was*. Was.

I played Maria. Four years of trying for the lead, and I finally got it in the last show.

They gave me a standing ovation.

I know it was more because it was closing night, senior year, than anything else. But still. Who knows if that will ever happen again. Who knows if I will ever stand on a stage again at all.

Eyes open. Chin set. I cross from backstage right to downstage center—that sweet spot where all the eyes are on you. The yellow stage lights threaten to melt off my thousand pounds of makeup, too hot and dry and blinding. Sweat prickles at the back of my neck, already sticky with cheap hairspray. I'm practically alone in the auditorium. There's only one crew kid left in the lights booth; Mr. Clark is somewhere in the scene shop or dressing rooms.

My left knee trembles. I tense it; hold steady. The dumb thing's been doing that since Wren and Markus dropped a flat on me freshman year when I ventured into sets crew for a show.

I close my eyes. Force my shoulders to relax. Make my hands go limp at my sides.

In my memories, the applause rises.

I recite a thousand lines in a hundred costumes. I play improv games at our annual lock-in and lead the chorus of "Happy Birthday" for Tabitha, because her birthday always landed during dress rehearsal week for the spring musical and her parents always brought the entire company sheet cakes for tech dinner. I sing "The Sound of Music." I sing the reprise of "So Long, Farewell."

So many memories, time running backwards, until I am a scrawny freshman in ill-fitting jeans and a red size-small t-shirt that is somehow still too big, stumbling my way through my first audition with my stomach twisted into a single, tight ribbon that they could have cut so easily, like the Three Fates cutting life strings, and I could have died, the moment the cast list went up—but I didn't.

Ensemble Member Number Five. One of only three freshmen cast.

I met Tabitha that day.

She's going to a different university. She's majoring in accounting. Wren and Markus are going to different schools, too. Undecided.

How are we supposed to decide? How are we supposed to be anyone when the only people we know how to be are the ones we became in this echoing, cavernous room? I don't know how to be who I am right now anywhere else. Let alone anyone else.

But I have stood in this position so many times, the dirty red theater seats stretching away from me. The mesh catwalk high above, cluttered with lights and brightly-colored gels. The entire theater before me, quiet, waiting for a single word to pass my lips.

Every moment in a show is anticipatory of what could come next. One moment carrying into another, and on and on and on. Something always comes next, until the final bow.

Warmups and massage chains and tongue twisters—"Whether the Weather Be Cold" and "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" and "A Box of Biscuits (A Box of Mixed Biscuits)." Singing "Bohemian Rhapsody" before every opening

night. Telling the freshmen about the theater ghost. Playing practical jokes on them so they'd believe he was real. Always another day of complaining about rehearsal and memorizing lines and selling tickets at lunch. There's a certain comradery, a certain fondness, that only arises from mutual complaining.

Except there isn't another day. That's all done now. The last audience members left two hours ago. The majority of the company trickled off to the cast party twenty minutes ago. I stayed to do a final clean check on the dressing rooms and to make sure none of the other actors left anything in the wings. I made sure I'd be the last member of my class to touch this stage.

Only a couple of the stage lights are still on and Tony, the sophomore just elected lighting crew chief for the fall show next year, is packing things up in the lights booth. He's on the phone with someone. He's a short pale kid dressed like a ninja, pacing, visible through the glass partitions in the wall high above the rows of chairs.

I'm in street clothes—jeans and a size-small t-shirt that fits much better now, this one with the *Sound of Music* logo on the front and "MARIA" emblazoning the back above the massive list of company names. But I focus and my ballet flats become character shoes. I wear a long plain dress. I carry a heavy guitar case in my right hand. Six hundred and fifty pairs of eyes watch me.

A note on my tongue. Warmth at the corners of my eyes.

"Closing night," says Mr. Clark.

I spin. He's standing in the wings, all receding grey hair and smile lines

crinkling his eyes. He shoves his hands in his pockets. I should ask how long he's been there, watching me fall to pieces, but I don't.

I force a tightlipped smile. Nod in both greeting and agreement. "Closing night."

"It's always hard. No matter how many years I teach. It's always hard." He crosses to center but stays upstage of me, like he doesn't want to steal this final moment of breathing in the paint fumes and breathing out my lines.

My shoulders and hands are still limp. "You have a good group of kids for next year." My left knee still shakes. "Sarah Jones, especially. Keep an eye on her. She's just learning how to use her voice, but she's going to be a great soprano." He nods.

It's not my choice to leave. If I could, I'd stay in this theater forever. As torturous as the rest of high school was, I would repeat it all a hundred times if it meant being able to do just one more show with these people, in this place, at this time. I'd give anything for even one more tech rehearsal, or one more night spent painting sets long after rehearsal had ended, belting show tunes and pop songs and leaving our paint-splattered handprints on the walls. Racing around the school after everyone but the company had left for the night, showing off half-finished costumes paired with worn Converse high-tops, laughing so hard our chests hurt and someone would inevitably shout in an impersonation of Mr. Clark, "Use—your—diaphragm!"

I would do it all again before I'd choose to do anything else.

But I've had my final curtain call. It's

not my choice. I have to say goodbye.

Mr. Clark's smile is sad, like he can see my thoughts are doing a ballet across the stage. "I'll miss having you to look out for the company."

"You don't need me." I shake my head. "You know this company. Someone will rise to the occasion."

"Even still." He exhales. "It was a pleasure, Regina." He crosses to me, and I meet him halfway, and he pulls me into his arms. "Do well at college, okay, kid?" His breath ruffles my hair-spray-stiff hair. "Show them what a real thespian looks like. Whatever you decide to study."

My laugh chokes off on a sob. Or maybe it's the other way around. "I'll do my best."

He lets go and backs toward backstage left. The door to the scene shop and from there the door to the parking lot. His eyes are wet, but Mr. Clark cries at everything, so it doesn't matter. I'm sure he has this conversation every year. Still, this is the only time for me. "Don't stay in this dusty old theater too long. You don't want to miss your final cast party."

I nod. I wipe my own eyes and my fingers come away black with makeup. "No. Of course not." I laugh with tight lips, chin trembling as badly as my left knee. "See ya, Mr. Clark."

He dips his head. "Have a good life, Regina." Then he's gone.

The lights booth glass partition slides to the side and Tony sticks out his head. He's such a tiny figure above the massive auditorium. I wonder if I look small upon this empty stage. "I'm heading out in a minute, Reg. Would you mind plugging in the ghost light before I turn off everything else?"

"Of course not."

Backstage right again, I drag the tall, rolling black-cased light from its corner and bring it downstage center. The sweet spot. I flip up the cover on the power strip in the stage and plug it in. The ghost light flickers to life.

Even once we're all gone and the theater is alone, at least the theater ghost will have a little light. It must get lonely, saying goodbye to so many people every year.

"Thanks!" Tony sends me a thumbs up, although he's distracted again by his phone. It could be either one of his overprotective parents or Miri, the junior on the costumes crew they definitely don't know he's dating. He disappears back into the bowels of the lights booth. The glass partition slides back into place.

Immediately, the stage lights flip off. Then the house lights too. Then the light in the lights booth.

I watch the progression of Tony's bobbing iPhone screen as he waltzes his way down the aisle between the chairs and the outer wall, then out to the lobby.

Then it's just me and absolutely everything that has ever happened here.

There are so many memories, they've become nothing but layers pressed upon layers. A rolling pressure that could carry me up and away.

The ghost light casts a pale white glow across the stage, like the inverse of a shadow. Maybe in another theater, after another show, I would huddle closer to it. But the darkness here is familiar and quiet. A blanket over the theater as it falls asleep. My theater.

It belongs to me. I belong to it.

Damn it. I don't want to go.

That doesn't mean it's not time to.

"Thank you." My whisper is so quiet it doesn't echo. Not a stage whisper, but the kind meant for my ears and my ears only. And possibly the ghost's.

No one will ever hear my final line on my high school stage. But for the first time since that first audition freshman year, I don't want anyone to hear.

I do not make my final exit singing and dancing, as one would expect of Regina Lackmore—Thespian of the Year, star of the spring musical, the one who could never sit still and always wanted more. Regina Lackmore: the girl who was always staring at downstage center, even during auditions for that first show freshman year, like she could tell it was meant to be hers.

Instead I walk away with salt tracks staining my overly made-up cheeks. And I'm feeling so much, so many good things mixed with so many bad, and it hurts. God. They don't tell you how badly it hurts.

Doing theatre here wasn't always great. There were so many rough times. There was so much that hurt, from beginning to end. But the tragedy of life is that even the shitty parts become beautiful once they're in the past and unreachable, inalterable, just a memory. And I don't want to say goodbye. It's too much pressure on my chest. I could drown.

I look at backstage right. I don't know who I am outside of this theater. But whether or not I want to, I have to find out.

The future stretches before me, a play that has yet to be written.

So I step away from the ghost light.

I step away from the sawdust and glitter. I step away from backstage right.

And maybe it's just me looking for meaning in the dark and silence as I step from the scene shop into the world beyond, the humid May air warm on my cheeks and the velvety black sky full of stars, but I think my ballet flat presses against the pavement a little more firmly.

My left knee shakes a little less.

Julia Byers (RC 2016) graduated from the Columbia Publishing Course UK in 2016. She runs the writerly nonprofit Chapter One Events, is an amateur photographer, and is an assistant for a children's literary agency. She lives in New York City, where among other things she worked as an editorial intern at Scholastic.

Two Poems

Carmen Bagan

Moon

The full sunlit side of the moon filled
Our room with light
That broke through autumn trees;

We could have stayed awake all night trying
To name it, as it lit up the clock, corners,
Our heads on pillows.

But we fell asleep with its light
On our eyelids, with nothing to hide,
Not even private dreams.

I felt not too far from being translated,
The same way sunlight was interpreted
By the moon face we could see.

Piano

for Alisa and Stefano

It was perfectly tuned.
I first saw it by the railing
that overlooked the pond
filled with white and red
water lilies and red fish.

I had never played the piano,
so the first time I sat on the chair,
under the thick willow,
with the sun streaming
through the leaves
making patters on the keys,
I looked around to make sure
no one could hear me.

And then I tried out notes till I fell
in a trance--wind rustling,
pond lapping, scales
dispersing into greenery.

To my right, beyond the keys,
fish gathered at the edge of the pond,
under the boardwalk. Hundreds of them,
like a red, shimmering belt.

That afternoon, when my children
returned home from school, I took them
to the piano and they invented a duet.
They were biting their lips gently--
there was a feeling of life in their faces
I will never forget.

People came by, curious.
Some knew how to play and delighted
in showing off their skills.
Others stood by listening.

It was as if the piano had always
been there and everyone
stopped by to play a tune--
their baguettes and bottles of wine
in bags at their feet.

When we left the country it was winter,
the piano was no longer there,
but by then everyone
knew each other, so they made
music with their friendly chatter
by the frozen pond.

"Moon" was previously published by The Irish Times (June 15, 2019) in its Poems of the Week feature.

Carmen Bugan (RC 1996) was born in Romania and emigrated to the United States in 1989. After U-M she earned an MA in creative writing from Lancaster University, and a MA and PhD (English Literature) from Oxford University, UK. Her poetry collections include Crossing the Carpathians (2004), The House of Straw (2014), and Releasing the Porcelain Birds (2016). She has also published a memoir, Burying the Typewriter (2012), which won the Bread Loaf Conference Prize for Nonfiction, and a critical study, Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile (2013). She teaches at the Gotham Writers Workshop in NYC and lives in Long Island. Bugan was the 2018 Helen DeRoy Professor in Honors at U-M. She was made a George Orwell Prize Fellow in 2017. In September, Lilies from America: New and Selected Poems, which has won the Poetry Book Society Special Commendation, will be published by Shearsman Books; these poems are from that collection.



The Stargazers

Allison Epstein

Note: This story was previously published in Hypertrophic Literary.

The light is beautiful and muffled, like a sun trapped inside a god's mouth. It's not at all how Carmen thought it would look. She tilts her head up and tries not to look at Molly. They sit together on the hood of Molly's car in the parking lot outside the Sunglass Hut, and Carmen thinks about ancient Titans, swallowing worlds and vomiting them, dripping green, back up.

Molly shifts on the windshield, so that her blouse edges a few inches above her hipbone. Carmen tries not to look, but it's safe: Molly has her eyes on the comet. This isn't the closest Carmen's ever gotten to being invisible, but it's not the farthest off, either.

She thinks about running the pad of her thumb along Molly's hip, and wonders what it will feel like, bony like the back of a wicker chair, or not.

She blushes and looks back up. Carmen tries to see nothing but sky, and the luminous ripple that splits it in half. The comet seems to be moving with impossible slowness, as if it knows it won't be back while these two girls are still alive, and it wants to give them something to look at that isn't each other.

The comet will come back, of course, sometime. But by then Carmen will be long gone, nowhere near the register at the Sunglass Hut in the Twelve Oaks Mall, where customers waste ten minutes trying to get two bucks off a pair of aviators with years-expired coupons. By then, she'll

be forty years old, publishing articles in dusty academic journals (which she assumes come pre-equipped with dust).

Or maybe it'll take longer. Maybe by the time the comet comes back Carmen will be an eighty-year-old spinster on the front porch, smoking American Spirits and telling improbable stories to neighborhood kids. Her eightieth birthday is sixty-four years off. She assumes they'll have invented a harmless cigarette by then.

Or maybe the comet will come back sooner than they all think. Maybe it'll glance quickly over its shoulder tonight, to see if Carmen will find her nerve after all, will dare to put her arm around Molly's waist. Molly's wearing a denim jacket over her white blouse, and Carmen thinks about how the thick seams would leave creases on her cheek if she were to lean over and rest her head on Molly's shoulder.

Two of Molly's stray curls blow in a soft breeze, striking the windshield. Carmen, who's still trying her best not to look, sees a splotchy bruise on Molly's hipbone, the yellow-green of nuclear runoff. It could be from anything. Molly has the tendency to throw her body around without regard for how it lands. Yesterday afternoon—a rehearsal day, not a work day—Molly tripped down the free-standing stoop that formed most of the set of the fall musical. *Fiddler on the Roof*. Chosen, Carmen's quite sure, because the only set pieces it needs are a bed, a blanket on sticks, and the vaguest outline of a house. The theater department blew its three-year budget on last

year's staging of *Sunday in the Park with George*, which left Carmen and the rest of the props crew to pull this year's set together out of cardboard and prayers.

Carmen heard the thud from backstage—a human thud, not the thud of falling scenery. She ran to the wings, saw Molly lying on her back, and heard Mr. Anderson yell from the pit, "Golde, I'm not stopping rehearsal unless you need an ambulance." Carmen blushed like she was the one getting yelled at. But Molly stood up, brushed off her butt, and yelled "From the top, Tevye!" to Kevin Tran, who stood upstage wearing a striped beach towel in lieu of a prayer shawl. It was like Molly didn't understand the concept of getting hurt, or that she'd been hurt so many times that she hardly noticed.

The bruise on her hip isn't from that, though. Molly landed on her back.

Carmen tucks her hands under her thighs, feeling sweat that doesn't belong there. Her legs feel distinctly not her own. She coughs and looks back at the sky.

"It's crazy beautiful, isn't it," Molly says.

Carmen nods. "Yeah."

Molly grins and props herself up on her elbows. Carmen winces as Molly's bones bang against glass. There will be two more bruises there by morning. If elbows can bruise.

"You know what else is wild?" Molly says.

Carmen can think of many wild things. Instead, she shrugs as best she can while still lying down on the car.

"Jake was talking to me the other day," Molly says. "He wanted to know if

you had a date to homecoming."

The last glint of the comet's tail is gone now. Carmen is intensely aware of the other people in the parking lot, employees mostly, heading home after closing time. She thinks of Jake Sears, Molly's older brother. Jake is off to Trine University next year on a baseball scholarship. He looks so little like Molly that Carmen suspects they're only half-related. His teeth are brilliantly white, perfectly straight, and absolutely fake. They got knocked out in middle school by a curveball to the face. The fake teeth have nothing to do with why his smile looks so cruel. It's nothing like the smile Molly gives customers when they ask if the cat-eye glasses flatter their face. Molly's smile makes you feel like the only person alive. It's there right now, the beautiful smile of someone who's delivered good news.

Carmen bites her lip. "I don't do dances," she says. "And I hate your brother."

Then she pushes herself off the car and onto the pavement. She turns her back and starts walking, because it's the only way she can think of to keep Molly from noticing how red her face is. She will not cry. Even though she's taking those stupid dead-fish gasping breaths already, she's not going to cry. She's not stupid enough to cry over this.

"Carmen," Molly yells after her. "You okay?"

But Carmen doesn't turn. She knows this comet only comes once every hundred and fifty years, according to the Fox 47 anchor last night. She knows exactly where she'll be the next time. She walks slowly

toward the bus stop, trying to keep her shoulders steady.

She keeps expecting Molly to get up and follow her. But when Carmen reaches the stop, Molly is still sitting on the hood, loose curls rippling.

Carmen thinks about this moment often, but she'll tell the story only twice in her life.

The first time, she's twenty-four and drunk in the graduate lounge of the Barnard English department. She and her cohort are celebrating having finished grading a stack of midterms in which not one but two undergrads confused Thomas Wyatt and Wyatt Earp. With the usual exuberance of the drunk and underpaid, the twelve of them are sitting on everything in the lounge that isn't a chair. Carmen drinks from a bottle of Evan Williams on top of the three-drawer filing cabinet. Above, the florescent light is spitting, though the heavy hum is more annoying than the unreliable light.

Aided by liquor, the conversation turns from Renaissance poetry to slumber-party banter. They've somehow settled on the topic of most embarrassing moments. Elizaveta is midway through hers, a surprisingly graphic tale involving a bear trap and a meter reader.

Then it's Carmen's turn. She tells the rest about the time she burst into tears in front of the most beautiful girl in Novi High School outside the Sunglass Hut. She knows how to tell a story. It's embarrassing, the way she tells it, but not exclusively. She's two people at once: the awkward kid pining after a straight girl, and the cynic who can roll her eyes at everything in retrospect.

Leonora almost chokes on her boxed wine trying not to laugh. (This, though Carmen doesn't know it, is also the moment she comes out to Leonora. She assumed it was a given, but Leonora is a reserved woman from Pennsylvania Dutch country, and not prone to assumptions. They will date for five months, though in the end Carmen will have nothing to show for it other than a new appreciation for Coltrane and brief custody of a hamster named Wentworth.)

Carmen feels the group liking her more as she tells the story. She likes herself progressively less. It's as though she's betrayed something in front of them, turned herself inside-out and shown these budding theorists the messages scratched on her insides.

It's a good story, and they laugh, and she finds herself wondering what person they found funny, the story or its teller.

The second time, Carmen's thirty-one and sitting with Greta in a hotel bar near Bergen. They've come to Norway for the Ibsen Society International Conference on Nineteenth-Century Drama, held exactly three weeks and four days before they're going to be married. Carmen does not, in fact, like Ibsen, but Carmen loves Greta, and Greta wrote her doctorate on Ibsen, and Greta showed Carmen pictures of glaciers and lakes named after trolls for months until Carmen agreed to tag along.

The bar is elegant the way Greta is elegant. The curves of the wood are too pretty to touch, yet beg to be. The lamps behind it are shaded in

pale pink glass like the inside of a conch shell, which makes everything look warmer than it is.

The theater department at Greta's university is picking up the tab, so she and Carmen have made a solemn pact to expense everything within a nine-mile radius. Carmen lets Greta order the bottle of wine in German, a language she has in common with the bartender. She chooses well: not the most expensive, but certainly not the least.

As they drink, they tell each other every secret they haven't yet gotten around to. Everything they can think of. As if there won't be time, so much time, a beautiful and deeply destructive expanse of time, the power of which neither of them have fully understood.

It's sometime past midnight when Carmen tells the story of the first girl she ever loved. She tells it differently now. It's the real story, the story of a girl with bruised hips and an ill-fitting shirt, a girl who didn't love her back, but who showed Carmen how and where to see something nearly as good.

Either because of the wine or something else, Carmen is unable to read Greta's expression. They're silent for a moment.

"Do you want the rest of this?" Greta asks, nodding at the bottle.

Carmen shrugs. "Split it?" There's only really enough for one, but it's good enough to be worth another taste. The wine looks like melted butter as it slides from the bottle into their glasses, or maybe that's only the effect of the lamps. It makes Carmen regret the nights she's wasted on subpar Riesling.

When the bottle's empty, Carmen and Greta leave the bar and walk across the dizzying carpet toward the bank of elevators. It's late, and they're headed for their pristine room, with its starched white sheets and the safe in which Greta has placed eight thousand kroner and the figurine of Saint Christopher she brings every time she travels. They've probably stayed up too late, and certainly drank too much. Greta has a panel on Maxim Gorky to moderate in the morning, at which Carmen has promised to take pictures and not ask anything confrontational during the Q&A.

Across from the elevator, a long picture window looks out over a parking lot, and beyond that a shudderingly long expanse of black.

Carmen has never seen night like this before. Space. And through the nothing, twisting strands of color.

Faint here—they'd be brighter further north, away from the light pollution even the Norwegians can't quite stamp out. But it's unmistakable, those strands, like the flame beneath a Bunsen burner, coiling off into the night.

The aurora looks so terribly near. It shows no interest in what's happening beneath it. It will last as long as it chooses to last.

Carmen puts her arm around Greta's waist, between her blazer and the silk of her shirt. They stand there until the elevator comes, watching bands of green and yellow dance like bruises across the sky.

Allison Epstein (RC 2014) lives, writes, and drinks coffee in Chicago, where she is pursuing her MFA in fiction at Northwestern University.

Two Poems

Melissa Durante

Indigo Feelings

I thought that maybe the briars
had bitten into my new jeans
torn them
as we walked through the snowy old hay field.
Long unplanted
the withered late November reeds and briars had taken over
hunched against the cold air.
But then I remembered
that I had waited fourteen years to take that walk.
I would almost be happy
to have a new pair of jeans
ruined in a familiar old way.

Atom and Eve

They say that
in the beginning
it seemed so simple.
"Split Adam,"
he said.
And so it was.
And everything from that moment
was different.

In the middle
it seemed so simple to them too.
"Split atom,"
he said.
And so it was.
And everything from that moment
was different.

Melissa Durante (RC 2015) works as a paralegal at Hudson Legal Group. She is editor-in-chief at Electric Rail magazine and a contributor to Happenings Magazine. She was editor in chief of Michigan Journal of History and reader at Midwestern Gothic during her U-M student days.

Three Short Pieces

Kathryn Orwig

Waiting

I am like the restless sea, always moving and roaming about,
Deep down emotions swirl beneath my utterly, seemingly, quiet
surface,
Like colorful fish jostling together, exploding around as a dark
shape passes over them.
Fear constricts like a rope, but then releases as the shape of black-
ness passes,
Life returns to my rainbow fish as they scatter about and jump for
joy in their shinny coral reefs.
The wind plays gently with the waves of my life, as if it knows just
where to bow to make me laugh or cry,
It whispers soft secrets to me like a lover, one who knows me
well and sees beyond the ever-changing currents of my glasslike
surface.
The waves crash against rocks, destroying my calm surface, break-
ing and tearing apart the Earth's rocky core little by little,
The anger in the waves is full blown battering harder and harder
until the land resembles nothing but fine sand.
And in the depths of my sea of waves is one little clam waiting,
Waiting for anyone who can pry it open just enough to see the
good it holds inside.

What is a Moment?

The dictionary says it's "a very brief period of time. Importance." Witnessing something, anything in time and space that lingers. Swells in you. Cries out to some emotion that doesn't always have a name.

It was May in Alabama, or Kentucky, even could have been Tennessee. I'm not sure anymore as the hours turned and the hills continued to rise and fall, rolling by. My mind wandered through the landscape, not really here or there, thinking in that space between reality and dreams.

But then it crawled out of the hills. A cemetery.

The grave stones were highlighted in orange and red as the sunlight wrinkled over the hills for just a touch longer. The marble shone with a cold warmth. Glowing. But silent.

Someday, I'll be dead. We all will be. End up here. Families over our graves, crying. I think morbidly, snapped back to reality. For how can one think otherwise upon coming into sight with the starkest reminder of death?

And that's when a little red car in the cemetery appeared out of the rolling hills, parked along the grave stones. A few headstones down, a young girl and her mother stood in the fading light of day, holding each other. Crying. Their blonde hair glistened, cheeks red. I wondered who they'd lost, a father? A sibling? A grandparent? I sat up and lost sight of them around the next bend, as the cemetery lingered, twisting along the knolls and valleys. Rolling with the land.

The rays of light fell further, the hills grew as shadows stretched. But I still see them, the two, holding each other on that piece of earth. Alone.

Together.

A Crown

Her hair sparkles. Little diamonds like dust, woven from her forehead down to her shoulders. A thin net without threads. With jewels so small the light dances right through them.

Nearly frozen water.

Our breath clouds white in the air.

If I were to but run my fingers through her curly strands, the droplets would glide along my skin, tingling and cold, fading from her.

My hand stills in the air beside us.

I watch them shine, stars nestled in golden strands. Her gaze locks on mine and a peek of sunlight makes two last drops of gemstones in each of her eyes, light-bright. And then she grins, and all the sparkles

are squinted tightly away—but a thousand times brighter in the dark.

Wearing a crown that will fade and fall, melting away.

A crown of raindrops.

Kathryn Orwig (RC 2017) is a screenwriter for It's Not a Phase, Mom LLC, an animation company. She received a Hopwood in 2017. More about Kathryn at her website: www.kathrynorwig.com.

"Waiting" won 2nd place and a \$25 gift card in Kathryn's high school's poetry contest and was the first poem she ever wrote.



Pinball Einstein

J.L. Hagen

Me and Lanny McCall was best friends. We used to call him Peanut, me and Obi. His head was weird-shaped, like a jumbo beer bottle, only turned upside down. Thinking on it now, it didn't look like no peanut, but back then it seemed like it did, so that's what me and Obi called him. After a while, it stuck.

I first run into him one day in the neighborhood with Obi, or at least that's when I started hanging with him. He was maybe four grades ahead of me. I always saw him around and everything, but Obi knew us both, so that's how we connected. Afterwards, he told me that Peanut loved to play pinball—and owned a monster stack of comics. That caught my attention. I went ape shit for comic books.

A few days later, me and Obi walked over to Peanut's house. It was up the block, one of them old

two-story, brown, asphalt-shingle houses with a gravel driveway. The front storm door didn't have no bottom glass. It always hung open, swinging like a broken gate. We climbed up the cement steps and Obi knocked. Old Lady McCall never come to the door. She yelled, "Com' on in." At first, we hesitated. Obi pushed it open, and we crept in the darkened room.

Old Lady McCall sat on the davenport with her back to us, watching tv. A sheet blue plastic was scotch-taped over the screen, which made it like color tv. At least how I thought it looked. "Lanny's upstairs!" she shouted.

A hand sticking out of the sleeve of a purple housedress pointed up the stairway through a cloud of cigarette smoke. Obi wheeled around and I followed him up the worn wooden steps. He opened the bedroom door and the stuffy smell of sweat and old

laundry filled up my nose. Over in the corner, Peanut stood, lifting weights in a undershirt, the same old yellowed undershirt he used to wear, I swear, every day I ever seen him. Obi flopped down on the mattress by the door, but I hung in the entry, leaning on the jamb.

Propping his self up on his elbow, Obi asked, "Going down to Sherry's to shoot some ball?"

I didn't know nothing about Sherry's, except that my old lady told me to "stay outta there." I thought they was talking about basketball or something.

"Yeah," Peanut said. He lowered the weights and huffed out a long breath. "Gimme a sec." He noticed me half-peeking around the doorway. "Hey, I seen you before. You're Jimmy, ain't ya?"

"Yeah," I muttered, half-startled. "I been around," I added, even though I hadn't.

"Play pinball?"

"Nope, don't care for nothing but hoops."

"Damn, Obi, we gotta show your pal here what he's missing." He jerked the bar up chest high, sucked in his breath, and crammed the weight over his head. It crashed down on the linoleum.

Old Lady McCall's voice thundered up the stairwell. "Damn it, Lanny, stop dropping them weights. You'll wake your pa up. How many times I have to tell ya!"

"Sorry, Ma!" Peanut shouted. He wiped off his forehead with the side of his undershirt, leaving a streak above his wispy eyebrows. He spat toward the corner. "Com' on, let's go..."

We walked down Convent Hill to

Sherry's, a coffee shop on the south end of Main across from the coal dock. When Obi pushed open the big green front door, it smelled like donut grease and Pine-Sol. Inside, we squeezed between the lunch counter and grill on one wall and four booths along the other, toward a pinball machine in the back. Overhead, a high tin ceiling with a bunch of globe lights hanging from chains cast a dim glow.

Peanut tossed down a buck on the counter, and Sherry give him a handful of coins. He scraped them off the faded red countertop and swaggered over to the machine, the Dancing Dolls model. The cheesy-looking girls on the back glass caught my attention. They was wearing these red and yellow bathing suits and high heels. They giggled and frolicked back and forth in the spotlights, toying with us.

Peanut reached up and touched the one dressed like a cigarette girl—for luck. He dropped a coin in the slot. The machine lit up like a carnival. He spaced his feet just right, pulled his jeans up, wiped his hands along his thighs, and gave the flippers a practice snap. With an open palm, he rammed a ball up from the trough into shooting position. He dragged the plunger back to some mark only he could feel and let fly. The chrome ball arced out of the chute to the top of the playfield. He shuddered—it was all action. The ball hammered back and forth between the bumpers. Peanut bumped on the edge of the machine with his left hand. In a silver streak, it whizzed through a lane down to his left flipper, up to a kick-out hole, back to a flipper, up against targets. Chunk-chunk-ka-

chunk. Bells rang like fire alarms. The machine pulsed and strobed. The little ball twirled and danced, caught in a web hand-spun by Peanut and the machine.

Time and time again, he flipped it upward in a blur, until the scoreboard rolled back around to zero. The lights flashed; the sound blared; the girls on the upright flickered and laughed. Pop-pop-pop, the machine showed a bunch of free games. Peanut wiped his forehead. I looked over and Obi's eyes was big as lightbulbs.

"That's the best you done!"

"Yeah, I think I even surprised myself. You just gotta treat the machine right, that's all, just treat her right." He glanced at me. "Take one?"

"N-no," I stammered. "I only wanna sit here and watch. Besides, I don't feel like it... anyway."

Peanut checked the counter. It showed ten free games. He shrugged, pressed the replay button. Obi knew how bad I wanted to be that good, not at pinball, but anything, and mostly basketball. He didn't say nothing. They played darn near all afternoon, and I studied on them. We was all drinking Pepsi. Obi won a few games, but mainly he lost the ones that Peanut won.

It seemed like I was watching a championship fighter, Sugar Ray or Muhammad Ali. He bobbed and weaved, rolled with the shots, and just when the ball lost its punch, he caught it and threw it up with a right flipper back into play. Him and the ball was one.

Right there, I turned into his number one fan. I didn't have nothing going that summer. Peanut got up early to help his old man pick leach-

es, so mornings I shot hoops in the back yard. They had a sweet little fish bait business going, and Peanut was always carrying money in his pocket. One time he told me he expected to make about six hundred. Anyway, mornings I passed my time shooting around. It was getting so I couldn't miss.

When the noon church bells rang, I'd grab me a quick sandwich. Out the back, I'd go before my old lady roped me into some chores. I'd haul ass over to Peanut's house. We would hustle down to Sherry's and go through the nickels and dimes routine. I'd buy me and him a Pepsi each and sit down to watch him play. He would sip a little from the Pepsi and set it next to him on the table. Throw me a glance with them watery green eyes, and a little nod. Even though I never played the game once, he always made it seem like me and him was in it together.

He would say, "Jimmy, we got to get five thousand points on this ball." And sure enough, we would bag them. Over time, he built up a real philosophy, and I caught little snatches.

Peanut's home life, same as me and Obi, it weren't much, and I guess his real world was the machine. It was how he escaped from his old lady, who never done nothing but sit in front of her color tv. Peanut's old man slept most days on account of he worked the graveyard on the Soo Line. He weren't generally around excepting when they picked bait in the summer. So, Peanut wrapped his life around pinball.

Nobody could touch him. He was the greatest pinball player I ever seen, even if he had nothing to show when it come to something else. A

hundred times I watched him stand over that machine with his scroungy undershirt on, sweet-talking the ball against one or another of Gottlieb's finest bumpers, working, working for every last point.

More than once, I heard him say, "This here's a machine—like any other. They always work the same, got their own rules." He said, "You gotta play by them rules, roll with the bad balls right down the gobble hole, and make them good balls count. Only thing you can do—stay loose."

He'd take a sip on his Pepsi. "If you get mad and act rough, ain't nothing going to happen but a tilt on you. Just a game like anything else. If you work yourself up, the machine's gonna beat you while you're thinking how to get even, instead of how you're gonna beat it. The machine don't never vary. It always uses your feelings to beat yourself, so you gotta do the same and keep your cool."

That stuck with me good. I'd sit there listening while them lights flashed and Peanut talked about pinball and gave little extra nudges and bumps here and there—and the score counter spun round and round. I seen plenty of players since that time, but none of them ever gave the game or the machine the same pure love or respect. That was the thing about Peanut, he was some kind of genius—a pinball Einstein.

That's what nailed him.

One morning late in August, me and Obi hiked over to find him and see if he wanted to walk down to Sherry's. I almost didn't make it. My old lady was dead set against me hanging around him. And like I mentioned, the last place she wanted me

was down at Sherry's. But I grabbed Obi, and we snuck over to hunt him up. I'd been out of circulation for about a week because my old man made me paint the house with him on his vacation. Now I think on it, it was crazy strange 'cause everything seemed to happen just like that first day I seen him play.

We jumped the steps, and the storm door was banging against the house, bottom window still out. I thumped on the inside door and waited for Old Lady McCall to yell from the living room.

She glanced over her shoulder as we entered. "He's upstairs."

We ran the same worn steps and opened the grimy white door. Peanut stood there, pumping the bar. I can't help thinking how little good that weightlifting done. As he huffed and puffed away, me and Obi sacked out on the dingy mattress with a comic book. He had one of the lousiest builds I ever seen. He looked like them guys you might kick sand in their face. Maybe that's why he worked so hard at it, to be like that Charles Atlas guy in the comics ads. Anyway, he stopped lifting and let the bar crash on the linoleum.

He wiped the edge of his undershirt across his forehead. "Where you been lately?"

Obi looked at me to answer.

"Painting the house with my old man."

"Fun, ain't it?" he said, reading my thoughts. "Whatcha say we go to Sherry's and shoot a few."

I didn't have no chance to answer before we was headed down the stairs. It was a quick ramble, and all the way I could see us there in the

corner—just me, Obi, and Peanut, and the machine—winning away and sipping Pepsis. We opened the green door and a couple of flies buzzed off into the sunlight.

“Hey, somebody’s playing already...,” Obi whined. Me and Peanut turned to where he pointed. Peanut wiped his mouth on the shoulder of his undershirt and stepped over to the flashing machine. Three high school guys was standing around it, smoking cigarettes. They was watching a fat kid in a leather jacket with long hair combed back in a duck-ass.

As Peanut walked by him, he glanced around. “Fuckin’ machine,” he swore. “Damn thing’s rigged.”

Peanut didn’t say nothing, just scowled.

I brought over some Pepsis and set them on the table. I glanced down past the fat kid’s boots just as Obi said, “Hey, they put ashtrays under the back legs.”

“Big deal department, Hiawatha,” he sneered. “Only way you can beat this fuckin’ thing, anyway.”

“That’s cheatin’!” I said. It never struck me someone could do that. He give the machine a kick that would have cracked the leg if it wasn’t metal.

Peanut said, “Cut it out.”

“Fuck off, pal. It’s only a shit-ass machine—and I own it.” His three sidekicks stood up straight and glared at us.

Peanut’s eyes grew more waterier. He wiped his mouth again on his undershirt. The kid turned around and gave the machine another kick, only harder. The machine tilted.

“You goddamn moldy whore!” he

screamed.

“Cut that out!” yelled Peanut.

The fat kid grabbed hold of the machine, slammed it down. Peanut grabbed hold of him.

The kid gritted his teeth. “I said fuck off—jackass!”

Two of his wormy-looking friends grabbed Peanut and shoved him towards the table. He tumbled into Obi. I didn’t know what to do, excepting duck. Sherry yelled at them. Nobody heard her but me.

Peanut whirled around. Tears rolled down his long, pockmarked face. I wanted him to show them bastards so hard. His chin kind of puckered up. His mouth quivered. He snatched my Pepsi off the table and hurled it straight at the fat kid. They all ducked. The bottle glanced off the kid’s head and ricocheted into the scoreboard glass. It exploded, shattering all over the room. The machine started to make a racket. The lights flashed over and over. A stream of blood dripped from the kid’s head.

His three pals grabbed Peanut. They commenced to wail on him. Punched and kicked him. The fat kid beat him with an ashtray. Sherry yelled again. They kept hitting him. She picked up the phone and shouted, “That’s it, I’m calling the City Police.”

They took off running, and Peanut slumped to the ground. He was pale as moonlight. Blood spilled out his nose. He spat, and a bloody tooth skittered across the floor. Obi started to bawl. I felt queasy and hollow. Cops from all over come flying in the door.

I never did figure why he took them on that way. He could have beaten them any time on the machine. That night when I went to bed, I cried for

hours, with a pillow pulled over top of my head, and I hardly never done that.

The next week, the cops required Peanut to go see the judge. My old lady made me promise not to hang around with him no more. Before I knew it, school started up, and I was hard on it, so I didn’t have no extra time, anyway.

One day I managed to sneak over to his house. I scrambled up the steps and knocked on the door. Old Lady McCall yelled, “Com’ on in.” When I stepped into the room, she was sitting as usual in front of the tv, smoking.

She turned to look over the couch. “You’re too late,” she said. “Uncle Sam took him in the army last Tuesday.” She turned back around to watch her show.

This was just before basketball season, so I fell into the dumps. I wanted to show him how good I learned. And I learned darn good. I was JV first string, and after a while, I made it up to varsity. But it would have been a whole lot better if we was hanging together like old times.

After high school graduation, I didn’t find no job, so I left town to work construction. If I didn’t come home for Christmas two years later and seen the Loyale paper, I might never read how he got his self killed.

The article said they assigned Peanut to the 101st Airborne Division in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, when he got KIA. It said they killed 1,782 enemy in the operation, but only 386 Americans lost their lives. He was one of the last ones. When I finished reading the story, I tried to hold back, but I couldn’t help it, I sobbed like a

little baby.

On Saturday, Christmas night, I drove to the Sand-Bar with my cousin Ronnie. When we walked in, Obi was leaning on the bar in a army uniform. With his black hair cropped short and bronze skin, he looked real snappy. I almost didn’t recognize him.

“Man, Obi,” I said. “I can’t believe it, I ain’t seen you since high school. Didn’t know you joined up.”

“Drafted,” he said, drawing on a Lucky Strike. “Pulled a troy. One of the first to go.”

“Wow, that’s a bummer,” I said.

“Aaah, it’s ok. My old man had a heart attack, so they let me come home over the holidays before I ship out.”

“I’ll bet he was glad to see you.”

“Yeah, he was. Doing good as expected, home now, taking it slow. But his drinking days is over, which is a plus for everybody—you still swinging a hammer?”

“Unfortunately. I done lucked out. Hired on a project for the Navy, so they deferred me—for now. Hey, you read about Peanut?”

“I read it, but they left out a bunch.”

“What’s that?”

“A buddy of mine in the military police told me. He heard me and Peanut was both from Loyale and asked if I knew him. Someone he met in the JAG office said Peanut was in a village with a pacification team. He was searching a hut and come on two ARVNs. They was ripping this woman’s clothes off, trying to bang her. After My Lai, this was like a ‘firing squad’ offense.

“Peanut ordered them. ‘Cut it out!’

“They pointed at her. ‘She Cong, she Cong,’ they said, laughing.

“Peanut grabbed one guy to pull him off, but the other one started to pound

him. The first guy jumped him too. Peanut threw a hail of punches. He dropped one guy to the ground and lunged at the other trying to run away. The one on the ground pulled a knife, reached up, stuck him in the back, and sliced his neck. Peanut slumped over. They both took off running. The woman yelled for his squad, but he bled out before they could medevac him.

"It depressed me to find out. I couldn't get to his funeral, so I come in here tonight to get shit-faced in his memory."

Me and Ronnie sat with Obi for a few hours talking high school, and Peanut, and his genius at pinball. It was nice to recollect it and all, but dismal knowing he was dead.

Now it's past fifty years, but a day don't go by I don't think on him. I can still see him standing there, feet spaced just right for balance, sling-ing them balls into one of Gottlieb's finest, free games popping like machine-gun fire.

Goddamn War.

An earlier version of this story was published in Generation, Vol. XXI, Number 3, 1970.

John Hagen (RC 1972 Literature) retired in 2015 after a career in economic development. He and his wife Joy divide their time between homes near Tampa Bay and Saugatuck, Michigan.



Atlantic Affair

Melissa Durante

At that time, I had only been kissed once on New Year's Eve. By the next Thanksgiving, the carbonated kiss has faded into bitter words and scathing goodbyes. I hated that after that that was who I thought of each year at midnight when I saw other happy couples in Times Square on the broadcast.

I finally moved away from that New Years Eve and that city with its empty mumbling streets whose horns and clambering footsteps never seemed to say much of consequence to me. Superficial conversations. I moved in a Demember, barely getting settled before it was time to visit home for Christmas. When I returned, I still didn't really know where the best restaurants were or where to get my morning coffee. I only knew where to find the sea. That year, I tiptoed down the sleepy street to where the bay lapped at the sand. I walked out carefully, watched

as the waves of fractured moonlight flirted with my toes. The sea slowly reaching towards me so I could always anticipate his touch, his breath always at my ear. I would tentatively step forward, courting the chance, and eventually, our tiny dance would bring us together. The sea my midnight kiss. First just grazing my toes, then swallowing my ankles whole. Begging my heels not to leave when I eventually turned towards home.

It was the most sensual kiss, more depth to it than that kiss years before. There was more promise in the foam and the whispers of tides than there had been in the entire relationship before. So I did it each year. Returning again and again from the friends' homes or the bar stools or wherever I was to have my first kiss of the year with the sea.

When someone else finally did come around, someone new with his own ocean's depth, I didn't know what to do. I felt like I would be cheating on the sea, the sea that had welcomed me when I was raw, had loved me all the while. In the end though, I let the someone kiss me outside on our friend's upper deck instead. A kiss that shimmered down my spine like moonlight glimmers on tides and melted in my toes. I would go back in the morning to see the sea.

I walked down the street in sunlight that morning to be at the bay. It was still early, revelers still in their beds. I sat there, contemplating what we had become now. The sea's

waves were gentle, understanding as they kept close to the shore. Not rolling out far to greet me now. I inched forward, it was my turn now to court the sea. I was tentative too, not wanting to give the wrong impression. We met eventually, a foamy sea tendril reaching out to meet my toes in the middle. It was more like a friendly kiss on the cheek this time.

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An Introduction to "Selma Sully Walker and Native Women's Leadership in Ohio, 1975-2011"



Lucy Eldersveld Murphy¹

A note from author Lucy Eldersveld Murphy:

I attended the Residential College from 1971 to 1975. It was an exciting time because the Women's, African American, and Anti-Viet Nam War movements were blossoming and stimulating the development of new curricula across the university. While a student at the RC, I had the privilege of studying with Kathryn Kish Sklar, who had recently finished a PhD in history at UM. The class was one of the first U.S. Women's History courses offered anywhere, and it was incredibly inspirational. Prof. Sklar went on to become a leader in the devel-

opment of the field of women's history. She and her husband, Thomas Dublin, with a team of colleagues and students at SUNY Binghamton later created enormous online women's history databases of thousands of primary sources called "Women and Social Movements." (<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/>)

I eventually earned MA and PhD degrees in history at Northern Illinois University and became a professor at the Ohio State University, Newark. I was thrilled when Prof. Sklar invited me to help develop document collections about indigenous American women's history for a new iteration of "Women and Social Movements in Modern

Empires.” The following essay is an introduction to my document collection about two leaders of the Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio, Selma Sully Walker and Carol Walker Welsh. It is part of the database from Alexander Street Press, “Women and Social Movements in Modern Empires Since 1820.” In-text references to documents are to items in the document collection, such as newspaper articles and interviews.

Readers who are interested may read the whole document collection by visiting the University of Michigan libraries and accessing the collection on the library’s computers there.

*For more information about the database:
<https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-modern-empires-1820>*

Selma Sully was born in 1927 into the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux community. She experienced a difficult childhood in a church-run boarding school, but later reconnected with her family and joined in their practice of feeding their neighbors and fellow Native American Church members. After she married Joe T. Walker, who was a Chief Master Sargent in the Air Force, they moved from one base to another for three decades and raised a family before retiring to Columbus, Ohio. Then memories of her childhood experiences, and a keen awareness of the poverty and injustice that many American Indian people faced, led her to devote the last twenty-two years of her life to serving the needs of people in Ohio. In 1975, she founded the Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio and served as its Executive Director until 1992, when her daughter

Carol Walker Welsh succeeded her in that role until 2011.

Although Selma Walker’s leadership was extraordinary, her experience as an urban Indian was not unusual in second half of the twentieth century. During and after World War II, large numbers of Native Americans left their homes on reservations and in rural communities. Thousands of them served in the armed forces, and many others made new homes for themselves and their families, and took jobs in urban areas.² Many Native people found their new lives in the cities to be challenging because of cultural differences, discrimination, loneliness, and poverty. But in cities across America, Indian people came together for fellowship and to create cultural and self-help organizations. More than forty such centers existed by 1970, located in Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Gallup, New Mexico, and Fairbanks, Alaska, among other cities.³ The Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio (NAICCO) is one such urban Indian organization, and it has been led by women for more than four decades.

The Center’s objectives can be found in its 2008 mission statement: “The Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio is a non-profit intertribal organization founded by Selma L. Walker in 1975 and governed by Native Americans. The center exists to preserve, protect and promote Native American spirituality, culture and philosophy.”⁴

NAICCO’s philosophy statement expressed its guiding principles: “The Philosophy under which NAICCO operates on a day to day basis is ingrained in the prayer ‘Mitakuye Oyasin,’ (Dacotah language) which translates into ‘all my relations,’ and encourages us to:

- Accept each person and their differences.
- Deliver services with respect, compassion and integrity.
- Encourage spiritual, physical, mental and emotional growth, wellness and recovery.
- Make decisions with respect and regard for past, present, and future generations.”⁵

Background: Indians in Ohio

In both 1975 and at the time of this writing in 2016, there were neither reservations nor federally recognized tribes in Ohio, but there have been Native Americans in this place for thousands of years. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, in forms of ethnic cleansing, most were killed or forced out by colonial and U.S. military efforts and by the pressure of Euroamerican settlers moving from the east. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 in particular served as a vehicle to force Shawnees, Lenni Lenapes (also known as Delawares), Wyandots, Odawas, Senecas and other Ohio region tribes to relocate to the west of the Mississippi.⁶ This law empowered the President to designate lands west of the Mississippi River as destinations for tribes in the Midwest and the East, tribes that the government threatened, bribed, and otherwise coerced into signing land cession treaties. As a result, thousands of Native people traveled on “trails of tears,” as they were relocated hundreds of miles away from their homes. Many thousands of them died as a result of disease, harsh conditions, despair, and the difficulties of travel.⁷

However, as was generally the case with Indian removals, some Native

people hid out, refusing to move by “hiding in plain sight,” often blending into a rural population of mostly Euroamericans and pretending to be of an ethnic background other than American Indian. Some avoided removal by moving north into Michigan or Canada. A few were removed and came back.

There were very few Native Americans in Ohio in the early twentieth century. The U.S. Census counted only forty-two in the entire state in 1900; that number had risen to 435 in 1930 and to 1,146 in 1950. (Of course, as NAICCO leaders pointed out, it is possible that these numbers are underestimates due to Native people’s hesitance to respond to census surveys, based on justifiable distrust of the federal government. [“One for the Road”]) But by 1970, the census reported 6,654 American Indians and Alaska Native people living in Ohio.⁸ There were several reasons for the increase, including migrations of Native people from rural areas in search of jobs, particularly during and after World War II. A government Relocation Program after 1952 recruited and, in a limited way, assisted Native people who chose to move to some cities, including Cleveland and Cincinnati. Although Columbus was not a designated Relocation city, this federal program which supported the movement of thousands of Indians from reservations to urban centers, had a major impact on Native people around the country. A small number of people migrated to other cities through the Relocation program and then moved to the Columbus area.⁹ And, of course, the Native families of Ohio continued to grow by natural

increase.

When Selma Walker founded the Indian Center in 1975, there were at least 1,200 Indians living in central Ohio, and probably more.¹⁰ A survey of fifty Native women living in the Columbus area in about 1980 found that most had moved to the city as adults in order to find work, to be near relatives, or both.¹¹ By 1990, the U.S. Census listed 1,257 American Indian and Alaska Natives in Columbus; with 3,004 in the metropolitan area. ["Everlasting Tradition"]

In the new millennium, the Native population continued to grow. By 2014: 1,950 people in Franklin County gave their race as American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN), while 12,197 gave AI/AN as their "race alone or in combination."¹²

Since 1990, more than two-thirds of Indian people across the country have lived in cities. But although it did provide some job and educational opportunities, moving to urban areas was difficult for many Native people. Loneliness, poverty, cultural differences, and discomfort with crowded city life were only some of the problems they faced. In her interview, Carol Welsh discussed the difficulties that Lumbee Indians were having in the mid-1970s trying to adapt to urban life. [Carol Walker Welsh, interview with Stacey Westfall and Phil Desenze] In addition, Selma Walker and Carol Welsh talked to newspaper reporters in the 1980s and discussed some of the challenges Native people faced "living in a white man's world." [(One for the Road) and (Indians hold Pow Wow)]

A Brief History of NAICCO

The history of the Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio is detailed in the interviews and newspaper articles, collected here. Briefly, NAICCO's origins can be traced to Selma Sully Walker, who moved to Columbus with her husband in the mid-1970s. In 1975 she began working for a federal program created by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, providing food as well as social services to needy Native people, and helping Indians to find jobs. She soon rented office space. Volunteers and family members helped out and the organization was born. In about 1983, the Center began hosting powwows both to raise funds, and as spiritual, social, and cultural events, according to Carol Walker Welsh, who became the executive director in 1992 when her mother retired from that role. Powwows are Native American festivals, and NAICCO's powwows were usually held at least twice a year on Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends, and featured dancers, singing, drumming, prayers, food, and fellowship. They were open to the public. As Welsh explained, they were organized "to build self-esteem and instill pride . . . to experience the joy and beauty of being Indian . . . [and] to break through the negative stereotypes."¹³

Over the decades, the Center provided assistance to a wide range of people. In an interview given around 1982, Selma Walker reported that members of thirty-two different tribes were affiliated with NAICCO. ["One for the Road"] Non-Native people, however, were never turned away. The range of services and programs has varied, too, as the documents here illustrate. In 1988, for example, the

Center was providing three hundred food baskets every month to needy Native families and helping about five hundred people each month to connect to social service agencies and groups. [Indians hold Pow Wow] To illustrate further, in the early 2000s, activities included a food and clothing bank, regular White Bison sobriety meetings, a smoking cessation program, strong families classes, a women's creative circle, tutoring, and a Native garden. [Carol Walker Welsh, interview] In 2016, the Center is still providing services to the community. Readers may want to compare this organization and its leadership to Chicago's Hull- House.¹⁴

Selma Walker and Carol Welsh faced a number of challenges and addressed numerous issues over the years. Funding has probably been the greatest challenge; the Center's programming has been affected by the availability of grants and donations. In the early years, Selma Walker and others actually dug worms and sold them to bait vendors in order to raise money to rent the first building. (See Carol Walker Welsh, interview and "Everlasting Tradition") In addition, as mentioned above, some revenue was available from powwow ticket sales. But there were other challenges. Carol Welsh faced prejudice when she was trying to find a new facility to lease in 1991 because realtors and landlords did not want to rent to Native Americans. [Carol Walker Welsh, interview with Stacey Westfall and Phil Desenze] In addition, the Center's leaders had to deal with vandalism of the Parsons Avenue building on seven occasions in 1994, and police commented after one break-in

that it looked like a hate crime. [Mary Bridgman, "Let her people prosper"] In 2003, an interfaith prayer event was raided by police who did not understand the ceremonial burning of sage. [Mike Harden, "Sage saga at Riffe Center amounts to big bust in drug war"] After the national and international economic downturn which began in 2008, grant opportunities became scarcer and the Center had to scale back its programs.

One of the Center's goals has been to educate others about Native culture and heritage. NAICCO's powwows between 1983 and 2011 helped to teach the general public about Native arts and spirituality while serving the Native community. Selma Walker and Carol Welsh gave numerous presentations to schools and other groups and organizations, as did Carol's husband Mark Welsh and other Native people associated with the Center. These people served as cultural ambassadors to speak to, pray with, and sometimes perform for, a wide range of groups in the Central Ohio area. [Mike Harden, "Sage saga at Riffe Center amounts to big bust in drug war"] In addition, the many interviews they gave to newspaper reporters were a way to share information, cultural values, and concerns with the mainstream community. Many of those interviews became the newspaper articles included here. Furthermore, NAICCO's leaders and many other Native people affiliated with the Center generously gave interviews to students and researchers seeking to know more about Indian culture, heritage, and history. Transcripts of two of those interviews are part of this collection. (See interviews with Selma Sully Walker and Carol

Walker Welsh)

These leaders spoke frankly about their religious beliefs and affiliations, which have been very important to them. For many Native people, these are sensitive matters. Some scholars wonder whether it is appropriate to write and publish about this history. While it was common for scholars to reveal Native American religious and ceremonial practices in the first half of the twentieth century, researchers since that era have recognized tribal imperatives to keep those beliefs and ceremonies secret because of their sacred nature. Selma Walker and Carol Welsh freely shared their participation in spiritual practices, and we are fortunate to learn about them first hand. Researchers must be aware, however, that scholarship related to Native American spiritual practices must be handled sensitively in order to honor the cultural practices of Native communities.

The Native American Church, mentioned in Selma Walker's interview, combines traditional Native religious practices with some elements of Christianity, and uses a cactus called Peyote as a sacrament. It is eaten during a religious service. Because Peyote is hallucinogenic and classified as a controlled substance, Native American Church members have been persecuted over the years. Under current law, only Native American Church members may possess and transport Peyote, but this right has often been challenged.¹⁵

The women whose voices appear in the interviews and newspaper articles express here their values, including the importance of caring for others, and of maintaining and respecting

their cultures and heritage. They have worked hard, with the help of others, and have served their community with integrity, energy, and compassion.

Endnotes

1. Acknowledgments: Thanks are due to Thomas C. Maroukis for collecting and donating many of these materials, and to Bryce Jones and Margaret Solic for assistance with selecting, transcribing, editing, and scanning documents for this project. In addition, John Crissinger, Reference and Special Collections Librarian, Ohio Native Heritage Archives Collection, of the John L. and Christine Warner Library at the Ohio State University, Newark, has been especially helpful. Also, I am very appreciative of the Ohio State Newark campus for supporting the Archive, and for funding editorial assistance. The Ohio State University's Newark Earthworks Center deserves much credit as the home of the original oral history project which collected some of these materials. I really appreciate Samuel Herley of the South Dakota Oral History Center, University of South Dakota, who assisted us in gaining access to the audio of the Tom Maroukis interview with Selma Walker. And I would especially like to thank Carol Walker Welsh for her support and assistance with this project. Thanks, too, to Laurie Arnold, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Tom Dublin, Christine Ballengee Morris and Daniel Rivers for help and advice.

2. About 25,000 Native men and 800 women served in the U.S. military during World War II. At least forty thousand others left their homes

during the war, lured by war jobs or to be with family members who had gone before. R. David Edmunds, Frederick E. Hoxie, and Neal Salisbury, *The People, A History of Native America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), Vol 2, p. 390.

3. Donald L. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000) pp. 129-38.

4. Program for the Selma Walker Memorial Powwow, Memorial Day Weekend 2008, Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio, Ohio Native Heritage Archive, John L. and Christine Warner Library, The Ohio State University, Newark, Ohio.

5. Program for the Selma Walker Memorial Powwow, Memorial Day Weekend 2008. Back to Text

6. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, ed., *The Settling of North America: The Atlas of the Great Migrations into North America from the Ice Age to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 90-91; Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), passim; "American Expansion," Indians of the Midwest, The Newberry Library, <http://publications.newberry.org/indiansofthemidwest/people-places-time/eras/american-expansion/> (accessed June 28, 2016).

7. "Indian Treaties and the Removal Act of 1830," Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/indian-treaties> (accessed June 28, 2016).

8. Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987),

p. 163.

9. Fixico, *The Urban Indian Experience*, pp. 2-7; Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust*, p. 228-30; Tanner, *Settling of North America*, pp. 168-69. Carol Walker Welsh, personal conversation, June 30, 2016.

10. Census figures were these: in 1970, 738 American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) lived in Columbus; about 1,000 in Central Ohio; by 1980, there were 900 living in Columbus and 1,256 in Franklin County; 1,470 AI/AN in Five-County area. Nancy Roux-Teepen Baker, "American Indian Women in an Urban Setting" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1982), p. 3.

11. Baker, "American Indian Women," pp. 53-54.

12. "In combination" means that they said they belonged to two or more races. Among those were 4,973 who said they were both white and AI/AN. "American Fact Finder," Franklin County, Ohio, 2014, U.S. Census Bureau, https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/cf/1.0/en/county/FranklinCounty,Ohio/POPULATION/DECEN-NIAL_CNT, accessed June 23, 2016.

13. Carol Welsh, "Powwow," Program for the Selma Walker Memorial Powwow, Memorial Day Weekend 2008, p. 4.

14. For example, Introduction, "How Did Changes in the Built Environment at Hull- House Reflect the Settlement's Interaction with Its Neighbors, 1889-1912?," on the online journal and database, *Women and Social Movements in the United States*.

15. Wynema Morris, "Native American Church," *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/en->

cyclopedia/doc/egp.rel.036 (accessed June 28, 2016).

16. "NAGPRA," Indians of the Midwest, Newberry Library, <http://publi->

citations.newberry.org/indiansofthemidwest/property/nagpra-issues/ (accessed, June 27, 2016).

Four Poems

Summer LaPointe

when we dance, I feel no god, just us.

umbrellas, lined with lights,
lit the broken bark and scrawled names
in hearts along tree trunks. pretty flashes
flared against our shins, paved paths
for us to follow, guided, too, by blasts
of bass and pounding riddim.

everyone on drugs, everyone sipping
water from their camel backs, watching
the shaking sets and stars that quake
beyond the branches. everyone wearing
stories on their wrists, candied bracelets
scattered like glowsticks in the crowd.

they say a family forms in the forest,
the sweat and grime of dirt-lots caked
on our palms, streaked across our cheeks.
our group huddles close, dilated eyes
on the blinking totem cube tied
to pool floaties, and I think of when

you taught me how to swim. grip your hand
and sway like seaweed in the Bahamas,
mind like muddied waters from the rains
overnight. stumble home. next morning, wake
in your small tent, buzz with new life, sun peeking
through the vents. we made love

before joining the others in folded-chairs
around the rolling table, joints passed
between fingertips and chapped lips,
pills and acid tabs scattered on the trays,
me in only a sports bra and shorts,
warmth seeping into freckled skin.

he feels most real when I'm on acid.

Midday light in long waves ripples
against metal tops. His eyes, blue
as early winter shadows, watch

the road, one hand on the wheel,
the other safe in my grip. His freckles
shift like syrup on his cheeks.

From the window:

corn and more corn, far
from the city we met in.

I kiss his bearded face and tell him
the cloud's morphing secrets. Keep
my own tucked into my front pocket,

safe from his fingertips that grip
my thigh. Whisper my love, forged,
into his ear. He smiles, squeezes

the space above my scar, says
the words with far more ease.

first trip to the cider mill, as if you were there.

Sunset, glazed, pink as if dripping
down your lips. You'd taste
like appled donuts if we kissed
but now is not the time,
wagon almost here to take me home
or to the car, where I'll sit
and sober up, listen
to the radio, imagine you
with slow breaths.

When I ripped the husk, threw it
into dusk and endless stalks,
you laughed like crows
in my head, grasped my hips,
held me close amidst
the corn. My car is less brown
but dirtier, and I shove
clothes to the floor to huddle
on the backseat bench, open a window,
watch the sky melt.

The ride home is soft. Songs croon
through the speakers and I sing
to you, always, one hand on the wheel
and one where your jeaned-knee
should be.

I used to be valedictorian.

Three rings before my father answers, gruff. I hear wind yelling from his window. None of his trucks have air conditioning, so he sits and sweats and smokes. He tells me of aching joints that jar in the thrusts of his semi-truck but adds “puff puff pass, sweatheart” before the call ends.

My father would be proud of the bong that sits on my coffee table but not with the medications and emptied wine it sits beside. I say I love you by telling him of all the drugs I’ve tried or want to. He did the same when I was young and called him hero, told me all the joy he had.

At eighteen I called my mother from the psych ward after trying to kill myself through alcohol poisoning. She comforted while my father yelled. They were both scared. When I spoke with him later he said to stick with something safer, greener, to bring him some next time I’m home.

There used to be a pot plant beside the shabby garage where I sit and smoke with my father when my mother’s gone. I think she knows but doesn’t say. I think there are lots of things unsaid. I don’t go home often, too scared of stories that linger in our cracks.

My sister is three years younger and lives with them still. She got her high school diploma but almost didn’t. When I told her that I tried to kill myself she said she wished she could do the same. The apple tree in their backyard grows tiny apples that even squirrels don’t eat.

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Excerpt from Heartland

Ellen Dreyer

We published the first chapter of Heartland in the first RC Alumni Journal.

Chapter 2 Pork

Sweat streamed down her face and neck by the time Faith reached the barn. The other kids had already left by the side door, driving their pigs toward the show ring. She leapt into her pen and grabbed her crop from her show box while Velvet, Mo, and Larry played bumper pigs around her legs.

“Come on, girl!” she said, finally nudging Velvet with her knee. The pig stepped out of the pen and moved along nicely until, a good few yards from the show ring, she stopped to sniff an interesting patch

of ground. Faith wanted to blame it on that damn conversation with Billie, or the one with Lance, or with Ginny...in fact, everything that happened since she woke up. Of course, she couldn’t.

All this went through her head in a flash, and she quickly took control. *For heck’s sake, use the crop.* Which she did, a flurry of light taps on both of Velvet’s haunches. Velvet took off in an awkward run, zigzagging across the dirt yard into a fenced-in alleyway, and finally into the show ring, where she wound up snout to snout with a sleek red Duroc hog.

“She’s friendly,” said the Duroc’s owner, a girl Faith didn’t know.

“Too bad that isn’t a judging category,” Faith replied, catching her breath.

The girl rolled her eyes and expertly maneuvered her good-looking pig away.

"Faith, your pig," Ginny, ever helpful, pointed as Velvet trotted back toward the entry chute.

Faith watched in a stupor as Scott Nettle, her neighbor Earl's eldest son, stopped Velvet with his knees and pushed her toward Faith, while his hulking White Chester stood placid by his side.

"Thanks," Faith said, catching Velvet by the shoulders.

"Look," she said, stooping to gaze in the pig's eyes, which were an unusually bright blue, "you've got to work with me. This is it. Showtime." She ignored Scott's muffled laugh, dug her bandanna out of her pocket, and wiped the dirt off Velvet's nose. She tapped her haunches lightly with the crop, nudging her in the direction of the kids and pigs gathered at the center of the ring. The silver-haired judge tested his microphone.

She glanced around the periphery of the ring for her people. Dad and Grandpa stood inside the doors. Billie and Aunt Ruth sat together, midway up the bleachers. Had Gram been present, she'd be waving her arms in a kind of win-one-for-the-farm motion. There was someone waving, on the opposite side, by the exit. Lance. *Lance!*

"Go, Faith!" she heard Billie yell.

Magically, or entirely by chance, her pig fell in beside her. *Good. Right. Look at us, Silvertop,* she thought, watching the judge. *Come on.*

All the show kids were doing the same, watching the judge and trying to push their pigs in front of him so he could examine them closely and decide which three or four looked the

best. Faith did the same, nudging Velvet with her leg and the crop. A pig cough raked the air. She felt as if her nerves were wound on a spool, ready to snap.

Win it. For Gram. So everyone else sees that I can do the same for pigs as cows.

So Billie sees what really matters.

The judge's eyes fell on hers for a moment, then down to her pig, and lingered. Did he notice how nice Velvet's form was from shoulder to hip? How she picked up her feet almost delicately, like a dancer? He cleared his throat into the microphone to signal that he'd made up his mind, and Faith joined the other kids in maneuvering her pig toward the center of the ring. Velvet stopped and struck a pose as if she'd finally realized the seriousness of the situation. Silvertop looked. Considered. A long, deciding quiet later, he'd weeded out the top pigs: Scott Nettle's gilt, then two others, then Velvet.

Yes!

Faith's mouth relaxed into a smile as she turned Velvet's snout toward the judge's table. Come on, little girl.

"This sure is a nice group, makes it hard to pick your favorites. But I have to say the best gilt is number forty-two, shown by Scott Nettle."

Here came the applause, the whoops, and the hollers that she'd wanted for herself. Her smile faded as Scott, grinning, did a little hop-step around his pig.

"Now," Silvertop droned on, pointing to Scott's gilt, "this pig's really well made. Nice and long bodied, deep ribbed, balanced, excellent muscle shape overall. Really good gain on this pig. This is an example

of the kind of gilt I'd like to see more of..."

Faith did a quick comparison. Velvet was all those things, too—long bodied, deep ribbed, well balanced—wasn't she? Gloating Scott drove his lumbering pig a couple of extra times around the ring, soaking in the glory.

At least she'd placed, somehow. Dad winked reassuringly from the sidelines while Grandpa chewed his plug.

"In second place is number seventy-four, by Faith Schulte."

She squealed unintentionally, producing a few laughs from the stands and a burst of applause. Dad gave a long whistle. The gate clicked behind her as a handler opened Velvet's pen and Faith took her for a victory lap. Maybe pigs were okay. Diversification.

"This pig gives the first-place winner a run for her money," Silvertop said. "She's a little bit slight, a little bit short, and not quite as good a mover; but if you look at her from behind, you see she's a nicely made pig. I like her quite well."

Faith wondered at the judge's judgement: Velvet didn't seem slight, or short, to her at all. What was she missing? She herded the pig back into her pen while Silvertop called the third- and fourth-place winners. At last, the fair queen, Lori McClurg, an old friend of Billie's, stepped out in an eggshell-blue miniskirt and matching eyelet top, a sparkly silver tiara perched on her fresh wavy blond bob.

"Congratulations!" she gushed, pumping Scott's hand.

He stared at her, mouth hanging open like a hooked bass, while Lori

reached for the second-place ribbon and pushed it toward Faith, her blue eyes growing even wider. "First year showing pigs, right? Great job!"

"Thanks!" Faith took the ribbon, noting the dirt moons under Lori's nails (which would have driven Mom crazy if she'd seen them). She stood up straighter, tucked some escaped strands behind her ears. Velvet wouldn't have a chance at grand or reserve champion or the state fair. Still, it was something. Schulte Farms done proud. Nothing could ruin this feeling. Somewhere up there, Gram was smiling.

After two more classes (third place for Moe, nothing for Larry) Faith made a trip back up the hill with her dad and Grandpa for fried tenderloin sandwiches and a timely dessert, according to a handmade sign on the 4H serving counter:

MOON PIES ON THE HOUSE, IN HONOR OF OUR ASTRONAUTS ONE GIANT STEP FOR MANKIND

A shiver of pride went through her thinking of that moment just a few weeks ago—and watched on TV by the whole country—when the first man set foot on the moon.

"Where's Mom?" she asked her dad as they waited on line.

"She got a ride to the grocery store. We'll swing by to get her on the way home."

"She could have come to see me show," Faith said. "She used to." It was a waste of breath, Faith knew. Dad would never take her side when it came to her mother.

Yet there was a time when Mom

used to tie Faith's pigtails on fair mornings and let her pick out a length of ribbon from her sewing kit to make two bows. A time when Faith was little, and Mom would help her groom her show calf. Calves were cute, and she had been, too, she guessed.

Dad scarfed his tenderloin then bought one for Mom, with a moon pie for dessert, both wrapped neatly in waxed paper. Faith decided to get a moon pie for Billie, too.

Back in the truck, Faith laid the second-place ribbon on her left leg, the third place on her right.

Her dad lit up a cigarette. "You did real good with the pigs, Faith."

"Could have done better." With cows, she might have added. "I don't get why he said the gilt wasn't a good mover."

Her dad cranked his window down and flicked an ash outside. "She was fine. You need to get the upper hand. They're squirrely, I know. You'll get the knack of controlling them." He started the engine and the radio, slowly turning the dial through an effusion of static. "Scott did raise a fine pig," he went on. "And the judge might have been partial to White Chesters."

"That's not fair."

She sank into the seat. The pigs were still back at the fairgrounds, waiting to be auctioned when the fair was over. Which wasn't so nice, since they'd be butchered and sold, though the farm would get the proceeds. She wished she hadn't given them names. It was different with the cows, who came back to the farm after the show and resumed their normal lives.

The air felt taxed, and she rolled her window down all the way to let out the lingering smoke. Niles was

shabbier than her own town, Leola; a succession of rinky-dink houses with sagging porches, ornamented yards, each one rubbing shoulders with the next. She couldn't imagine having such a small yard or wanting to sit on a lawn chair in it, or plant flowers to prettify things. The very idea made her feel closed in and crazy.

Ahead lay the large parking lot of the Family Pride grocery, a low-slung, pinkish building dating back to the twenties, but with new pneumatic doors. No sign of Mom yet.

"Dad," she said, "I don't think you should listen to Uncle Gerry."

The words popped out, purposeful, though judging by her father's non-reaction, she might as well not have said anything. Couldn't he see that Gerry didn't know the farm like they did, especially since he'd started working at the rock quarry and wasn't there full-time?

"That's nothing you need to concern yourself with," he said, swinging open his door. He whistled a little birdlike tune and flung his cigarette to the ground. Faith knew his eyes were already searching for her mother.

Behind the plate glass windows, she pushed a shopping cart through the checkout line and to the pneumatic doors, which glided open for her, but she stopped short at the parking lot, which was bumpy and full of potholes. This was where Dad came in.

It is my concern, she wanted to tell him as he bounded away, and relieved Mom of struggling with the cart. Not that Didi Schulte was a weakling: she'd grown up on a farm and was strong enough, though her looks suggested a refinement that

most farm women didn't seem to have. People said she resembled the movie star Natalie Wood, with high cheekbones and brunette hair swept up off her neck. She called herself "pure Jorgensen," but having never seen another Jorgensen besides Mom, Faith couldn't be sure.

Dad loaded the groceries into the flatbed and Mom climbed up into the cab. "Nice job," she said with a quick glance at Faith's ribbons.

"Thanks." Faith turned the ignition key and put the radio back on. The Cedar Rapids station, almost static free, was playing Johnny Cash. Dad returned the cart and got back into the truck.

"Faith's gilt looked great," he said.

"She sure did," her mother agreed.

How would you know? Faith thought. *You weren't there.*

She might have said it out loud if she thought it would make any difference. Mom had made clear to her several years earlier that by the time a girl hit 14 or 15, she should be making aprons and pies to show in the 4-H craft barn "like most girls," rather than raising calves or piglets.

The "like most girls" part was true; girls were in the minority in the livestock barns. But there were a few. Apparently, that made Faith a maverick.

There was no more small talk as they drove past the businesses on either side of Niles Road: the Hitchin' Post Family Restaurant, Bud's Chevron, Rucher's Seed and Grain, and at last the Dairy Maid, after which was the right turn onto the county highway. Faith breathed deeply, taking in the scent of dirt and manure and things growing, the deep and

lighter greens sprouting thickly in the soybean and cornfields. Dad gazed out, too.

"Fred, go through Limestoneville, won't you?" Mom said, reaching across Faith to tap his arm. "I want to see my mansion."

She had a thing for the nineteenth-century mill and mill house, and even more for the mill owner's mansion perched on the hill.

They clattered over a trestle bridge that spanned the skimpy river and entered a stretch of green woods that sheltered the truck like a canopy. The little village lay ahead, cupped amid gentle hills. Iowa wasn't half as flat as people made it out to be.

"Would you look at that! Fred, *slow down!*"

A dark purple banner with painted-on peace symbols in every shade of the rainbow was draped across the front of the mill. Multicolored cloth streamers dangled from the mill wheel. A girl worked in a small garden patch beside the house. She wore a green, gauzy halter top, a long, yellow skirt, and a multicolored beaded necklace. Small plants—squash and tomatoes, by the looks of them—sprouted around her.

The girl looked up and waved. Faith waved back.

"Amarilla Faith! You don't know that girl...do you?"

Mom used her real first name—Amarilla—only when she was mad. Faith luxuriated in not answering. The real question was, did Billie know this girl?

Mom shook her head in fits and starts as they climbed the hill toward the mansion. "You know what the trouble is with hippies?" she said.

"They're unclean, unshaven, and un-American."

Dad made a little humming noise, warming up his voice box. "How d'you figure that?"

"They say they want peace, but they aren't willing to fight for it."

"That makes sense, don't it?" There was a glint in his eyes as he reached across Faith to tickle his wife's knee. "I liked her beads."

"Fred!" Mom squeaked, momentarily turning to keep the mill owner's mansion in her sights. Yet a moment later, she stretched her arm behind Faith's head to pat the hairs at the base of her dad's neck. "I've got half a mind to call Pete Dudecky and ask him if he knows what they're doing on his land," she went on. "You know hippies are bad as women's libbers, if not worse. Remember those fools burning their brassieres at last year's Miss America pageant?"

"Mom," Faith said flatly, "no one says brassieres, they say *bras*. And they didn't burn them; they threw them in a trash can."

"Same difference! Don't you ever let me see you in a get-up like that. You hear me? Or like that outfit Billie was wearing today."

"At least she had a bra on," Faith quipped.

Dad chuckled, and Mom swatted his knee, as if to get him back.

"Mark my words, Faith. They're going to ruin that beautiful house."

Faith gazed out the window again, nursing a smile. She was pleased with herself—for the show wins, of course, and for being open-minded about the hippies.

"Oh," Dad said, almost perfectly echoing her thoughts, "it's been standing there for eighty years. Maybe some new

blood's a good thing."

Chapter 3 Gut Worms

Back at home, Faith showered then put on clean shorts and her favorite T-shirt with Snoopy dancing his happy dance. An afternoon of chores stretched out ahead of her before Billie came to pick her up to go back to the showgrounds for the evening concert. She went out, past Mom cleaning the breakfast pans, through the mudroom and down five concrete steps, and gave Grandpa's homemade rain gauge—a bone-dry, rusted red Savarin coffee can—a customary kick with her sneaker toe to make it rattle. A red-winged blackbird balanced precariously on the electric wires that stretched from the house to the poles on the road. She walked across the dirt drive to the high point of the yard and stopped.

Here, right here, was where Gram had stood with her and Billie, arms stretched across their shoulders, pointing them toward the side forty acres planted in soybeans.

"Imagine this is all grass," Gram said. "Tall grass prairie."

It was impossible, for Faith anyway, *not* to imagine. She saw it now again: the ocean of grass, sleek and shining, parting with each little movement of the wind to reveal faint trails (Gram called them Indian paths) then covering them up again. Faith imagined the weight of Gram's arm pressing down on her as if to root her in the scene. "See that tree trunk? Right by the sod house? Imagine, that tree's been there more than a

hundred years!" Gram's words were a potion taking her back, making her see the original farm as it was. As Greta and Maria saw it. Faith thought now that coming to Iowa must have been like landing on the moon to Greta and Maria. It was *their* giant step.

Billie and her family lived down the road, until around ten years ago, after the second time Uncle Gerry put the truck in the ditch. He and Dad didn't speak for a few months after that, during which time Uncle Gerry moved to town and found a job at the rock quarry. He continued to work part-time on the farm, but things had never been the same. Maybe that move had broken the pull of the land over Billie—if she'd ever really felt it?

Eyes sweeping over the green and flourishing land—cultivated, barely a patch of wildness left—Faith felt the pull. It was in her feet, like gravity. She hoped she'd travel someday, see the ocean, maybe even go to Canada; but she couldn't imagine being gone for very long.

"Damn it." Dad's voice from the machine shed broke her spell. Reluctantly she headed over.

"What's wrong?" she said when she got to the door. He stood up on a chair, holding a pencil to the wall over his workbench.

"Got a splinter," he said gruffly. "Grab the measuring stick, will you? Pull it out nice and straight."

She obliged, taking the folded-up stick from his old wooden tool box and unfolding it to make a straight line for him. "I can't depend on my eyes anymore. Need my level," he said, smiling in his somewhat em-

barrassed, somewhat self-deprecating way. "Getting old."

"You're not old, Dad."

"Almost forty's old enough." He grabbed his level from the box.

"You're practically a spring chicken."

Their eyes met, and he smiled. "That was your Gram's expression."

Faith nodded, smiling back. "Speaking of which, I have something for you from her. We'll get it after chores."

"Sure!" Faith said.

This was where she needed to be. She couldn't care less if she was hanging shelves or feeding calves or pitching manure, if only she could work beside him.

"Dad," she said, "was Gram against the Vietnam war?"

He raised the metal level to the wall, and they watched the little air bubble slide back and forth and finally settle in the middle when the level was straight. "Why do you ask?"

"Billie said she was," Faith replied.

"She never said as much to me. Put the stick here." He marked the wall with a stub of pencil he produced from behind his ear.

Faith raised the measuring stick, feeling the pull in her shoulder muscles from lifting hay bales the day before. "How about you?" she asked. "What do you think about the war?"

He seemed not to have heard her as he placed the metal shelf bracket against the wall and motioned her to hold it steady while he used his electric drill to put the screws in. Not that she wasn't used to it, but she wished he could, sometimes, keep his head in a conversation. She almost wanted to yank him by the sleeve. A few mo-

ments later he said, "Them protestors are dishonoring our boys, is how I see it."

"Me, too!"

His eyes flitted away. He cradled the drill in both hands as if it were a gun. There was a mournfulness in his voice as he said, "I was too young to fight in the second World War, too old for Korea. So, I probably don't have a leg to stand on talking about any of this."

"Yes, you do," Faith said fiercely. "That wasn't your fault."

He looked at her again. "Your grandpa might be a better person to ask. He was down in the trenches in the first World War. Didn't like to talk about it when he got home."

Faith waited for something, another little tidbit about Grandpa, or anything. He shook his head and said, "Imagine Earl and Irma are worried stiff. Scott's eighteen, ain't he? Draft age."

She had a funny, twisting feeling in her stomach. Her mind flitted guiltily to Earl Nettle, whom she hadn't answered when he called her "Little Miss Bit" that morning, then to his son Scott who'd beat her out for first place. He'd helpfully caught her runaway pig, and he, too, could be caught and sent to Vietnam.

"But we must fight communism," she said. "If North Vietnam wins, they'll make South Vietnam communist, and then it will just keep spreading."

"That's the truth. It's like dominoes, Faith. If one country goes down, the rest fall, too."

Faith shuddered. It was like Gram's cancer, starting out as something small until it took over her whole body. America could fall, too, if the disease kept spreading. She grew quiet as they picked out pieces of scrap plank board to cut for shelves.

Shelves hung, they started on the

milking, a little early so they would have time to clean up and eat supper before the fair. When her favorite heifer Venezuela came through the gate, she gave the young cow a rub between the horns.

"Oh, Veni," she said. "Wouldn't you like to be running around in the tall grass?"

Veni blinked, enjoying the massage. She didn't know that Faith had fought to keep her because she was tiny. She was an oddball, a hair temperamental. Faith gave her one last, strong rub before letting her go through the gate.

"Come here," said Dad, motioning her into the bulk tank room. A large paper envelope sat on the counter. "This is for you."

"From Gram?" Faith's heart beat a little faster.

Dad lifted his cap visor as if to see her better. "Gram kept some of Greta's old letters. Thought you'd like to have them."

Like? It was too small a word, even for a master of understatement like Dad. She responded by pulling open the plain flaps, gently prizing apart a few layers of faded tissue paper, revealing a spotted gray envelope. She thought better of opening the rusted metal closer with her chore-dirty hands. Besides, the bulk tank room didn't seem like the appropriate place to open it.

"Thank you." It was the only thing she could think to say, though also inappropriately small.

"Don't read them all at once," he said.

She checked his face to gauge if he was joking or not. There was no hint of a smile.

"Take your time. Let them sink in."

He leaned on the stainless-steel counter that was as spotless as the rest of the milking parlor and watched as she slipped the envelope under the tissue paper, closing the flaps. As if waiting for an answer. Finally, she leaned over to kiss him quickly on the cheek, then put the folder under her arm and left before he turned any redder.

A buttery, late-day light poked through the clouds around five pm. Freshly showered after a half-hour cat nap, Faith was setting the supper table when she heard rock music and the crunching of tires on the gravel.

"Is Billie eating with us?" Mom asked.

"Probably," Faith said, nursing a smile. It was funny how happiness could come out of nowhere, like the glinting edge of a butter knife.

"I can't believe Chet Atkins is performing tonight!" Mom went on, stirring a panful of chopped beef.

"I know."

All of McGill County, herself and her family included, would be at the show tonight to hear the world's greatest guitar picker.

Billie appeared in the doorway in a light purple sundress, her hair loose across her shoulders. "Hey," she said genially. "Are you making Made Rites, Aunt Didi?"

"You bet." She turned to Billie, eyebrows rising as her gaze hung on the pink bra straps visible beside the skinny sundress straps.

Billie helped Faith put out the glasses and the milk, while Mom heaped the hot ground beef, swimming in tomato sauce, onto seeded buns.

"Mom said to tell you she's bringing blankets," Billie said, "so you don't have to."

"All right." Faith's mother stared at Billie; her ladle poised over the pan. "What are you wearing to the fair?"

Billie looked up, then down. "This."

The ladle clanked against the pan rim. "I'm amazed your mother let you out of the house like that."

"She wasn't home," Billie said.

Faith stifled a laugh. Billie always had a comeback for her mother, and wasn't intimidated, even when she knew she was wrong. That dress was revealing. She could offer Billie something from her closet.

The cold milk perfectly balanced the piping hot, saucy meat. Right outweighed wrong for the moment. They devoured it all, making ample use of the paper napkins stacked by their plates.

Upstairs, Faith put on a pearl-button Western shirt and denim shorts that cuffed above the knee. Billie stretched out on the bed and picked up a dog-eared copy of *American Cattleman* magazine from the nightstand. "A full spread on gut worms," she said. "Sexy."

"Shut up," Faith said, as Billie turned the pages, contorting her face every which way. The next thing Faith knew she was rolling bug-like on the floor, laughing uncontrollably. By the time she opened her eyes again, Billie had left the room.

"Damn. She'd forgotten the cover-up shirt, and to show Billie the letters from Greta. Her cousin waited outside, already in her car."

Come on," Billie said as Faith slid in next to her "Let's get that chair."

Gram and Grandpa's place was a quarter mile down the road. They called it the Schoolhouse since it had served as the local school up until the 1940s. It was smaller than Faith's house, boxier, with a small peaked steeple. The door was open, as always, so they walked in.

"Grandpa?" Billie called.

He came out from the kitchen with his bowlegged walk, the corners of his gray mustache turning up at the sight of them. He was seventy-two, small like Faith's dad, and fit, though he didn't do heavy work anymore due to his bad hips. She thought back to what her father said about his fighting in the first World War. Grandpa had never spoken about it. Did he injure his hips then? It surprised her that she'd never thought to ask.

The house was eerily quiet without Gram's radio playing, empty without the smells of her cooking, her presence. Faith's insides felt cold. Now she felt even colder to think that the rocker would still be in Gram's room today, if she were still alive.

Billie went to the chair, put her hand on its back, and set it rocking. "Wow, Grandpa. It's great."

Faith touched the smooth, worn seat. "Greta sat here."

"Yes, she did," Grandpa said. "Her husband, Robert, made it for her. Look at the back," he went on. "These are hickory branches. He bent them by hand and braided them. Imagine that."

"It looks delicate," Billie said.

"No, it ain't," said Grandpa. "Have a sit."

Billie looked at Faith. "You first."

Carefully, Faith lowered herself onto the chair, her heart jumping as it easily tipped backwards, then forwards again.

Grandpa chuckled. "Watch your speed."

She closed her eyes and smiled. It was as if, for the briefest moment, she was back there, she was Greta. Then she was herself again, lifting the chair to bring it to Billie's car.

"See you at the fair later?" Billie asked Grandpa on the way out.

"I hate to think of seeing Chet Atkins without your Gram," he said.

Billie hugged him gently. He wasn't much of a hugger, but he stood for it. "Gram will be listening from above," she told him.

The chair lay on its side in the back seat. Billie lit a cigarette. "You don't mind," she said after her first exhale, "that I'm getting the chair and not you?"

"No," Faith said. "Besides, I already got something. Dad gave me some of Greta's letters."

"Really? That's amazing!"

"You don't mind?" Faith asked uncertainly.

"Of course not." Billie turned the radio on to the rock station but kept the volume low. "We're all given just the right gifts." She turned the volume up and they listened without talking for the five miles to town.

No one was at Billie's house. Uncle Gerry frequently went out to the farm to help Faith's father, but he might just as well have been down at the Rusty Tap, tying one on before heading over to the fair. Billie's mother, Faith's Aunt Ruth, worked Saturdays at the Leola Reformatory.

Faith followed Billie as she carried

the chair upstairs. In Billie's room, the last of the day's light revealed floating dust motes, and the heavy, flowery smell of perfume hung in the air. Changes had been made. The bed, which used to have one of Aunt Ruth's crocheted afghans on it, was now covered with a maroon bedspread. The books had been cleared off the middle shelf of her bookcase and replaced with candles of all shapes and colors; her dresser, usually a neat expanse featuring her tiny porcelain deer family and a ring holder, seemed a catch-all for everything from empty gum packages to found rocks to a branch that bore one bursting seed pod. Faith could barely see the baby deer's head poking through all the fluff. Clothes, school notebooks, and the books that used to be on the middle shelf, were scattered in the litter. The runners of Greta's rocker, which Billie had set beside the window, sat in a mixture of dust bunnies, hairs, and a lone, pink Barbie doll pump.

"What do you think?" Billie asked.

"I think you should sweep before you put the rocker there."

Billie's head tilted to one side.

"Yeah. I guess."

Billie returned with the broom, set the rocker to one side, and cleaned the area under the window before putting it back. At the last moment, Billie rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a long silk scarf, yellow with white feathers printed all over it. She draped it on the back of the chair. "Is that new?" Faith said.

Billie didn't answer as she twisted the scarf once along a back tine of the rocker. "There. Perfect."

The country highway, with its miles of visibility, wide, horse-shoe-shaped curves, and long straightaway stretches begged for speed. Billie delivered: the old gold Dodge, formerly their grandparents', still had some kick to it. Faith leaned her head on the crackled leather seat, rolled her window down, and took a walloping breath.

"Wait. Aren't you going the wrong way?" she said, suddenly noticing that they were headed in the opposite direction of Niles and the fair.

"We have one more stop to make," Billie told her, smiling.

Her bra straps had mysteriously disappeared.

"You didn't," Faith said, imagining Billie's bra left behind beside Gram's chair.

"Didn't what?" Billie fished in her purse and brought out another cigarette, which she pointed at the radio. "You can put something on."

"I was about to say the same thing to you!"

Billie laughed. "So, I can't wear a bra when the straps are showing, and now I can't not wear it?"

Not that Billie was big up there or anything. Neither of them was. Still.

Billie steered with her elbows while she lit up, causing the car to veer dangerously. Faith grabbed the wheel to keep it steady until Billie put her hands on it again.

"What about this?" she said, poking around in the litter between them. "I thought I saw one here."

"That's a bikini top." Billie turned the radio knob slowly. "Try to find WLS, 890 AM. It's in Chicago, but sometimes you can get it in the country."

"You can't go to the fair like that," Faith insisted.

Billie zeroed in on the station and then upped the volume until the seat pulsed with the beat. "It's Cream!" she shouted. "You know, Eric Clapton's band?"

No, Faith didn't, yet her skin tingled each time the guitar wailed, and the drumbeat rippled down her spine. Like liquid sunshine, she guessed a hippie would say.

" 'I'll stay with you darling now!'" Billie shouted again. "'I'll stay with you till my seas are all dried up...'"

"Billie, what the hell!"

Her cousin laughed and kept going, her right arm straight against the wheel, her left out the window, keeping time against the car door. Faith turned and watched her farm go by; the soybeans' glossy leaves tipped with late sunlight. She thought of Lance in the barn, moving in closer to her, stars swimming in his eyes, kissing her. The thought surprised her enough to turn back to Billie and snap the radio off.

"What's wrong?" Billie asked.

"Till my seas are all dried up?" Faith said.

"He's expressing how he feels." Billie's voice went higher, as if she were a little hurt.

At another time, Faith would have laughed. Just like she'd been laughing all over the place about Billie's reaction to those gut worms.

"Look, Faithie. You don't have to do what I do, and you don't have to be embarrassed because of what I do. Going braless and singing out loud feel good to me."

"They shouldn't," Faith said. "I mean, the braless part." She was suddenly

confused. Was Billie only talking about those things, or something else, too? The thing the song was about? "You're going to put the bra back on, though, aren't you? Before the fair?"

Billie made the left onto the Darnelle-Limestoneville Road, tapping the brake as the car dipped beneath the sheltering trees with a few red and yellow leaves amid the green. Summer couldn't just be summer without a little fall thrown in. Ahead, through the leaves, bits of the purple peace sign banner were visible. She squirmed in her seat. "Wait, what are we doing here?"

Billie pulled the car over by the ditch, stopped, and looked at Faith. "I know you liked that song a teeny bit."

Faith inched her foot experimentally toward the door. They were only two miles from home, close enough for her to walk and still catch a ride to the fair with her folks. Which wouldn't be optimal, but hey.

"Remember," Billie was saying, "the time we went down to the creek at night? You wanted to roust a serpent from its depths. That was your word." She laughed. "*Roust.*"

Faith's mouth twitched.

"Then you got scared. At the windbreak. You wanted to turn back."

"Shhh, Bil..."

"What happened when we got there?"

"We saw the moonlight."

"And...?"

Faith exhaled. "It was like a fairy beam."

Billie shifted on the seat and sighed. "That's what love's like. Haven't you felt it, Faithie? Haven't you wanted it like nothing else?"

"Hold on," Faith said, and suddenly Billie grew quiet. The moment, like so many others between them, was an experiment, a dare. Something to say yes to regardless of the consequences. Billie's next move.

"Do you know these people?" Faith asked as Billie shifted the car to drive and rolled to a stop in front of the hippie house.

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).

Three Poems

Elizabeth Witte

These poems were first published in Denver Quarterly.

A New Kind

A new desert forms. It's unnatural. Not post-apocalyptic but caught in the moment. Here the original landscape dissipates. Does not dissolve so much as waste away, but a surface remains. Unstable yet dependable to a degree, we presume. Foreshadowing now unable to indicate or verify even that all the things happening will happen.

Here distance originates in droughts. In the evaporation state, a sense of how far away is. And will be. An inward glimpse of the hint of a desire to look unaged gathers remains. What is left of a want when it is actualized. When it is not.

In the end all is possible. What becomes the new land surface, the new growth body, is divided. Each form allocated by its features. An illustrated guide might help but there's nothing left to recognize. Wrong season, perhaps. Or a new process, unknown result. A certain amount of risk.

Eventually, the desertification becomes nearly contiguous. One of all the parts without break. Fabric of a wing as it shudders before flight. And almost every day the wind video plays again.

Another Nature

Another nature splits off one hand. Appendage differential—it's not the same as another. One arm and not the same arm. Branching is everything. Generalizations are to be avoided. Thick trunk, hollowed from or of reason. A tree gnawed down to its core.

Storefront palm reading the future: wood in its natural and pressure-treated states. Space is where the object goes, or will. A program of transition of time runs fast as possible in spite of potential limits. Like beauty is. Limitless: the name of a perfume, and its paper reflection.

Two Places

I was holding the jar. Inert glass in which no thing happens but time. Tomatoes. I'm holding this fruit. Standing on wood atop frozen earth. The tires are flattening. There is not enough today is freezing. We want a balance of pressure. Want being not the right—there is always. The ground sounds its hollow. The proof of protection and the depth of walls. As compared to floors. An enormous nothing going through, like a road.

At the bottom of the ocean, also. A balanced system-organism. Body in which some have disappeared over time. The story appearing, disappearing. At the bottom of various that are all one deep many, bodies gone. What is transparent in the absence of light? On the surface many consider offering a trade. No wonder. No news. What remains is a taste. Fish in oil, warm again.

Elizabeth Witte (RC 2003) is a writer and editor based in western Massachusetts. She is a recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Artist Fellowships in Poetry whose work has appeared in a variety of journals, including Prelude, Word For/ Word, and Denver Quarterly; her chapbook Dry Eye is available from Dancing Girl Press. She is Associate Editor of The Common and Director of The Common in the Classroom.



The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Lynn Chou

Edna had not expected a phone call in the middle of the night. She was jolted from her lovely dream: Christmas, hot spiced cider, roasted chestnuts. Or was it a dream? She could almost taste the chewy chestnuts in her mouth. Disoriented, Edna reached for the phone, tucking it between her ear and shoulder. She hated her slow, arthritic hands and the way her frail elbows trembled under their weight. After 82 years of cordial co-existence, her body was starting to betray her.

What time was it, anyway?

Edna glanced at the clock on her nightstand. The blurry, red glow was impossible to decipher. She reached for her glasses, a lovely pair of purple cat eye frames. The large, glowing

red digits came into focus: 4:28 AM.

Who could possibly be calling?

"Hello?" Edna felt the sleepy relaxation slide away. It wasn't the first time she had dreamt about Christmas morning recently. If only she could fall back into the exact moment she had just dreamt about: the aroma of spiced cider, the blanket of warmth and laughter and love -- these things were worlds away from this somber room. She yearned for the big Christmas pine decorated with tinsel and fairy lights and glitter-covered ornaments crafted by her grandchildren. She yearned for Henry's intelligent green eyes twinkling at her as he told a joke. But her delightful, fleeting reverie had scattered the moment the phone rang.

"Hello?" Edna asked again.

"I--I don't know if I can do this." The boyish voice wavered, as if almost overcome with emotion. Then the line went silent.

"Hello? Hello, are you there?" Edna strained to hear the caller's meek voice.

"Yeah. Still here...for now," the boy said.

Oh. Edna hadn't gotten one of these calls in over a year. God's Angels Suicide Prevention Center opened up three years ago after the death of a teenager in Belfast County. A month or so later, Edna received a call from a girl who could barely stop crying long enough for Edna to tell her that she had called the wrong number. Two months after that, Edna told yet another distressed high school student that he had misdialed.

Puzzled, Edna told her daughter about the strange calls. After some digging, the two women discovered that Edna's phone number was one digit off from that of the local suicide hotline.

I can help you change your phone number, Mom, her daughter promised. But Edna persevered as the unofficial hotline operator. She wholeheartedly believed it was no coincidence that the hotline's phone number was so similar to her own.

For the rest of that week, she went home and sat solemnly by the telephone just in case somebody else called. Nobody did. Edna realized it was irrational for a sensible woman such as herself to wait by the phone all day. *I haven't done that since I was seventeen and waiting for Eli Mackiewicz to call and ask me on a date!* But still, she checked the local

obituary for news of her two callers.

As each week passed without incident, Edna felt the tension ease. Over the next two years, there were only four of these calls; the callers had all been pleasant to talk to. She carefully and succinctly explained the mistake. Now, as she sat up in bed with the phone pressed to her ear, Edna began her usual dialogue with the young man.

"There's been a mis--"

"I honestly just need someone to listen. I don't have anyone to talk to since my sister died," he began.

"You've called the wrong--" Edna started.

"Look, can you help me or not?" the voice snapped.

Edna frowned at the young man's rudeness. He had discourteously woken her up at 4:30 AM; the least he could do was be polite.

Ignoring the pain in her stiff joints, Edna did her best to tighten her grip on the phone. After all, it was her favorite piece of technology. She certainly didn't enjoy the computer; Edna wasn't sure how to operate it and struggled mightily to find the right letters on the keyboard. But without being able to send emails, it was difficult to stay in touch with her family. They loved her, but they were not keen on chatting on the telephone for more than a few minutes at a time.

"Mom, how many times do I have to tell you?" Monica would say, trying to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

"But I have a phone already," Edna would reply in a puzzled tone. This was the first time Monica had brought it up, wasn't it? Edna knew that they hadn't talked about getting her a cell phone before.

"Oh Mom," her daughter would sigh. "This is different. I've told you before. It would be so much easier to communicate with you if you had one. You know I worry about you getting lost every time you leave the house."

"Lost? I'm quite alright, my dear," Edna would respond stubbornly. Monica wanted to change everything. Before Edna's eyesight had weakened, she had possessed an exquisite little analog clock. Its porcelain base was carefully painted with poppies and crocuses. *Nyctinasty flowers*, Edna remembered with a smile. *They open with the sun and close at the close of each day*. Edna had once mentioned to her daughter that she could no longer read the clock. The next day, a box arrived in the mail. Edna's beautiful analog clock with a hulking black box with large numbers that glowered menacingly at her in the dark. Monica told Edna it would be easier on her eyes. Now, when she spoke with Monica on the phone, Edna was adamant about keeping things just the way they were. "I'm quite alright. One phone is good enough for me."

After that, they would move on to other topics like the PTA's dumb new rule about not bringing store-bought treats or the neighbor's locust problem or how Miller's General Store no longer stocked 100% pure maple syrup (Edna swore she wasn't a syrup snob, but pancake syrup made her wrinkle her nose in disgust). Or how Monica's sister had auditioned for the local theatre. Or the weather. When their conversation broached the topic of how beautiful it was outside or how they were expecting rain later

that week, both women knew the conversation had drawn to a close. Monica would then usually bring up the idea of a cell phone. She hated how her mother would act surprised and shocked at the idea, even though Monica had talked to her repeatedly about it. It was infuriating.

Monica surmised that Edna's distrust of technology was common among her generation. Gone were the days of spending leisure time exclusively with family members. Edna had always boasted of the frequent family game nights in her childhood and potluck dinners with great aunts and uncles and her father's second cousin's something-or-another; they were all family. Now, it seemed as though the family time Edna yearned for had been reduced to a weekly phone call. Each time, Monica would say goodbye and hang up, frustrated but resigned to how adamant her mother was when it came to resisting technology.

"What is your name, dear?" Edna asked the boy at the other end of the phone. It was 4:31 AM. Unlike her old clock, this newer digital clock was constantly reminding her of the time with its loud, pushy, attention-seeking glow.

"Henry. Henry Worthington," the boy responded. She intended to keep him on the line long enough to calm him down and tell him about the mix-up. And to be honest, it was nice to have someone to talk to. Although Edna was reluctant to admit it to herself, she had decided not to change her phone number for this reason.

"Oh! My son's name was Henry as well. Lovely, lovely name indeed. We named him after my grandfather." Her soft brown eyes welled with

tears as she spoke. It had been a long time since she had talked to anyone about her deceased son. Whenever his name had come up during family gatherings, even in passing, Edna had pressed her hands to her lips and excused herself from the room. Henry had not been a failure as he had claimed in the note he left behind. Henry had been *Edna's* biggest failure. She'd failed him, failed to notice all of the clues leading up to his death. How could she call herself a mother if she had not been successful in protecting and loving all three of her children? It wasn't death that unnerved her. She was 82, for goodness sakes! Her beloved husband had passed several years ago, most of her friends were gone, and she had attended more than a handful of funerals for extended family members. No, death was not the worst part. It was the way Henry had died.

"Uhh, okay," the boy on the phone said. The silence lasted several uncomfortable moments too long as Edna allowed the past to tug at the corners of her heart. "I just feel empty. Numb. I'm tired of waking up every morning with that sinking feeling. You know--the one that comes from not really having a purpose anymore?"

Henry waited for Edna to respond. Purpose, Edna reflected with pity. It was such a heavy thought for the young man to tackle on his own. She knew how heavy it was. Once upon a time, her purpose had been to successfully raise three wonderful kids. *Two out of three*, she corrected herself sadly. After Monica and her sister had moved to cities far away, she focused on being a dutiful wife to her husband, Paul. She cooked his dinner,

washed his clothes, rubbed his back, and tended to him lovingly and obediently until his death. After that, Edna wasn't quite sure what to do. She faced the futile search for purpose that Henry was now describing. Her children no longer needed her. They were busy with their own husbands and kids and dogs. And although they tried to call her once a week, the calls fell wayside when work and school became hectic.

"What is your name, dear?" Edna struggled to fill the silence on the line. Distracted by her own thoughts, Edna had accidentally tuned him out.

"My name is Henry. You asked me that already," he said irritably.

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to repeat myself. Silly me. Go on," Edna prompted Henry. She was fully awake now and it wasn't as though she had anything else to do at 4:33 AM. The least she could do was listen to the poor soul.

"All my life, I've never really felt like I belonged. My parents and my sister, Hallie, were the only ones who loved me. And since Hallie died in the car crash, it's just been me. My parents won't even look at me anymore because I remind them of her. They're too deep in their grief. Plus, everybody at school treats me like a messed up freak. Nothing has changed there, at least," Henry's voice cracked, exposing the pubescence that he had tried to cover up. Surely, he could not be much older than 14.

"What about your friends? Surely you have someone you can turn to?" In her state of concern, Edna had temporarily forgotten to tell the boy

about the mix-up.

"No friends. Hallie was the pretty, popular twin. She used to invite me to hang out with them. But after she died..." Henry trailed off. "I don't want to do this anymore. I have nothing to live for and honestly, who would care if I was gone?"

"I would care," Edna said with conviction, surprising herself. "God would care. Things happen for a reason, Henry. And right now, you're going through a rough patch. It'll get better."

"Says who?" Henry asked.

His tone had suddenly turned angry. "Now, you listen. All of this... bullshit that you people are trained to tell me? It doesn't work. How am I supposed to believe that someone up there has a great plan for me if nothing good has ever happened to me?"

"Well, you know--" Edna began.

"Although, as much as I don't buy all that crap, I suppose it's sort of nice to talk to someone that actually wants to listen to me," Henry said in a somewhat remorseful tone, as if he hadn't meant to be so harsh.

Edna swallowed hard, choking slightly on the explanation about the mix up that no longer seemed appropriate. Perhaps it was better for him to not know. She didn't want him to feel betrayed. She didn't want to see him give up quite yet.

As the boy continued to talk, Edna tried to wrap her finger around the telephone cord and was met with air. It's a cordless phone, Monica had told her the day they had it installed. Even so, Edna found herself wrapping a finger or two around the imaginary telephone cord out of habit. It still

felt like someone was playing a trick on her. *How could the telephone work without its cord?*

"--so I couldn't do it after that. I felt empty and angry every morning, but I didn't know why. It wasn't until the day of Hallie's funeral that I realized how messed up this whole situation was and--"

Edna tried to follow along as Henry articulated his thoughts. It had been weeks since anybody had talked to her this much.

Holding the phone carefully so as not to cause static on the phone line, Edna shifted her legs to the side of the bed and slipped into her shabby purple slippers. Since she was wide awake now, it was as good a time as any to make a cup of chamomile. Or at least get away from the eerie glow of those red numbers.

Edna wobbled slightly as she shuffled down the hallway, steadying herself with a hand against the wall. Her hand brushed against the closed door of the guest room. Even without opening the door, she could picture the lavender sheets with the puffy white comforter gathering a thick layer of dust. Her grandkids had been too busy to visit this summer. With a slight sniff, Edna continued her journey down the hall.

What Edna liked most about the tiny house was that the kitchen was down the hall from her bedroom. It was a convenient layout for her early morning tea or a warm cup of milk before bed. Even in her old age, Edna felt eight years old again when she snuck cookies and milk back into her room.

Now, as she flicked the light switch and looked around the small, tidy

kitchen, Edna was struck by how unchanged the kitchen was. Other than the date on *The New York Times* that was delivered each morning, everything was mostly the same as four years ago, when she moved in. The same Indian mandala tapestry hung on the same butter-colored wall. The same fake fruit in a chipped azure fruit bowl.

The same home traditions, too. Every December, Edna would bring out the miniature decorative Christmas tree with tiny lights that lit up when she plugged it in. She would place a pine-scented candle on the window-sill over her sink. Just last week, Edna had pulled out the old cardboard box of ornaments and holiday crafts that her grandkids had sent her over the years.

Christmas was her favorite holiday; a time when family gathered to sing carols, open gifts, and be merry together. And soon her daughters and their families would be there to celebrate with her.

Why had she come to the kitchen? Edna cast a confused glance around. In the midst of Henry's babbling, she had somehow misplaced the intention that had propelled her to the kitchen at such an odd hour. Edna lifted the tea kettle from the stove top and filled it with water from the sink, before replacing it and lighting the stove. She knew her body would not allow her to go back to sleep. Why not have some chamomile tea?

Edna leaned shakily against the counter. Her unfinished crocheting project lay abandoned on the turquoise ottoman. Strangely enough, it had been placed in the kitchen because it didn't match the living

room furniture. Her gaze lingered on the pile of colored yarn and crochet hooks. Once the arthritis had set in, Edna no longer had her nimble fingers. Many mornings, she woke with a dull but persistent ache in her chest. It wasn't just the act of crocheting that she missed. She also missed being able to crochet beanies and pullovers for various relatives. Giving these as gifts filled her with glee. Her daughter, Monica, had offered to come help after seeing how much Edna missed her little projects. *But you hate crocheting! You never wanted to learn,* Edna had protested. *If it makes you happy, it'll make me happy, Mom,* Monica had reassured her.

These days, it seemed that all her family members wanted was for her to be happy. It was at her request that they let her keep the house instead of moving her to a nursing home. As far as she knew, she had the alertness of a teenager. There was no reason to live elsewhere. Edna had also requested a new set of porcelain decorations for her living room and a stack of jazz tapes to listen to. What she wanted most -- though she was embarrassed to admit it -- was for her children and grandchildren to want to spend more time with her. Not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

"I think some people aren't meant to be happy," Henry hypothesized. Edna closed her eyes, trying to remember what Henry had said the past few minutes. "I mean, if you think about it, somebody has to get the short end of the stick. Somebody has to be ugly so that

another person can be beautiful. Somebody has to be dumb so that another person can be a genius. If everyone was beautiful and smart, then they would just be average. It's all relative."

The tea kettle whistled. Edna pulled it off the stove and poured steaming water over the tea bag in the cup. Her pale blue teacup had a slight chip along the rim from years of use, but Edna couldn't bring herself to replace it. After 20 years, it captivated her with its sentimental value. She reached for the small canister of sugar next to the stove and dumped one neat spoonful of sugar into her tea. Nothing was different.

"And I got stuck with all of it. I mean, I'm about as socially awkward and hopeless and unstable as you can get. I guess I never realized it before because my sister included me in everything. And I stupidly thought that her friends were my friends too, but they want nothing to do with me. Nobody sees me and thinks *oh he's so lucky, I wish I could be like him*. I hate it. It's always been this way and I'm done trying."

Henry's voice was devoid of emotion, something that worried Edna more than the angry outburst from earlier.

To her, he sounded lucky. After all, he still had two family members in his life that he could see anytime he wanted to.

She peered at her reflection in the rusty mirror above the sink. Why do all old people have permed hair? Patting at her hair, she wondered when she had reached the milestone of aging that somehow required every elderly woman to perm her hair

and trade in regular pants for unflattering high-waisted elastic pants and those detestable wrinkles. She was now the kind of old where it didn't matter what day it was because her days and nights blended like watercolors on a wet canvas. What sense of self she once had had faded along with her purpose. She had become her daily routine and it had become her. What day was it anyway? She looked over at the calendar on the refrigerator.

Today's date had been circled twice in red marker. *December 23rd*. She knew what today signified, even though she hadn't written anything in her calendar. Edna beamed. Her family was finally coming to see her and to celebrate Christmas with her. The flowers she had placed in a vase in anticipation of their arrival had wilted days ago, strangely enough. The landlord had taken down the Christmas lights that hung on the outside of the building, a little prematurely, in Edna's opinion. Monica and her sister had both left cryptic messages on her voicemail telling Edna that they hoped she had had a wonderful Christmas. Edna didn't quite understand the joke; Christmas was right around the corner. She had been counting down the days, hadn't she?

"Hey, thanks," Henry was saying now. "I've never liked these hotlines because they all try to tell you how to feel. I just needed someone to listen. For once."

"Sure, dearie," Edna said absent-mindedly as she sipped her chamomile tea. She didn't have the heart to tell him he had poured his entire life story out to an old lady dreaming

of chestnuts. Her eyes wandered over the morning paper from the day before. The dim lighting of the kitchen made it hard to make out today's date. The small black lettering seemed to say "December 27th." That was odd. Had she forgotten to put on her glasses again? Edna touched her fingers to her eyes and felt them tap against the lenses of her purple cat eye glasses. No, that wasn't it.

Peering back down at the newspaper, Edna let her eyes notice an article about the local congressman. As an experiment, Edna removed her glasses and looked down at the article once more. The words blurred on the page. Edna blinked hard be-

fore slipping the purple glasses back on her face. The words in the article came back into focus, but the date in the upper right corner still seemed to read "December 27th." Very odd. The wooden legs of her chair scraped against the tiled kitchen floor as Edna got up from the table and reached for the phone book on the counter. *Maybe I should get my prescription checked*, Edna thought, as she went to call her eye doctor yet again. Luckily, she already had the phone nearby.

Lynn Chou (RC 2016) recently completed a Masters in Business. She lives in California.

Three Poems

Lynn Chou

Berlin

The loneliest girl on the train
Must be color blind
Her eyes see no vibrance
In the yellow of thirsty grass
Poking through the railway tracks.
Nor life in the hush hush sound of the beggar lady's shoes
Wobbling from one train car to the next.
Certainly there is no beauty in
The stocky buildings of Berlin
In their thin jackets of graffiti and cracked paint and sorrow,
Industrial bodies with beauty queen dreams.
Berlin boasts of her welcoming spirit
But the girl remembers unforgiving terror
The heartless prison of yesterday
Like her own name.
Berlin promises grandeur,
The girl does not listen.
Berlin sings,
The girl on the train does not hear.
Berlin waves,
The loneliest girl on the train sees only grey.
She wants to be beautiful.
Does she know she is sad?

Progressive

The boy sits at his desk, scowling
Baseball cap flipped backwards
Leaning on the back legs of his chair
With a defiance that does not match
His carefree life and
Socioeconomic status was what trapped her
In the run down motels of motor city
Working a 9 to 5 on top of her 1 to 9
She had two jobs, three if being a mother counted
Which it should because her nights
Were interrupted by the wailing of her
Baby, I told you the other guy didn't mean anything to me
His wife gripped his hands tightly
Although Charles was trying to pull away
It was one drunken night, she told him
At a bar, then in the car
And shit, his heart was breaking as he listened
He wanted to call off the
Marriage was the most wonderful thing ever
Lily thought as she watched her parents in the kitchen
They bustled around each other
Dad reached above mom's head to grab the wine glasses
Lightly touching her on the back and smiling at her
Mom chopped onions as she playfully bumped hips with dad
It was the kind of fairytale Lily had dreamt of since she was
Little did he know, his whole world was about to come crashing
down
They would see only the color of his skin
Dark like a starless night
As he ran down the sidewalk
A midnight jog gone wrong
They would accuse him of a crime he did not commit
And leave his body riddled with bullets
On the side of the road
Simply because he was black
It wasn't
Just a small town girl
Who took the midnight train going anywhere
Her city boy had left her
Because that was life
And there were no answers.

Untitled

you make me tremble like a mad-
man shivering with excitement
 and i want to wrap myself
up in you because happy is up-to-the-minute
(up-to-my-elbows ,over myhead)

you smell like dirt from the earth
scented with sweet rain from the yesterday sky—
it only makes me love you more.
you taste of springtime (with lips new-to-me
like a newborn leaf—furled and fragile—on the Kabbalah.)

all the blossoming flowers gaze at you
my sweet god of love (secretly admiring you as
i peek at you and i adore your gentle smile and you tilt
your hair back, the way you laugh, it makes me laugh)
i want your love to shine like the naughty sun
on me and maybe

your
 eyes
 to
 say

yes.

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Weak One

Hannah Levine

I lay on the floor; arms and legs sprawled like a flower trying to catch the sun's rays, staring unblinkingly at the gray, industrial ceiling. Pat grunted as she set another heavy box on the floor beside me, sighed, and went back to the moving truck. She didn't have to say anything for me to know what she was thinking. *Feminism or not, he's the man. He's supposed to be doing all this heavy lifting. Or at least we're supposed to be doing this together.* I could practically see her, curly amber hair, frizzy and unkempt, bouncing as she shook her head at my limp body.

I thought about getting up to help her. I could take a small box, a light box, maybe the one filled with pillows and comforters, but I knew I was the only thing keeping the floor from floating away. I closed my eyes

and smiled. Floating away. Pat was standing above me gently kicking my side with a broken lamp in her hand when I opened my eyes.

"I can't do this alone, James. I just can't."
I didn't really know what to say. I wanted to tell her she looked beautiful, but I knew it wasn't the response she was hoping for, so I kept my mouth shut. She'd been crying and there was a glimmer of anger shining in her crystal eyes.

I reached up and she handed me a piece of lamp for each hand. I imagined myself looking very sexy as I threw them to the corner, but I knew that was laughable. I wasn't exactly the sexy type, more the tall and scrawny guy who lays on the floor while his wife moves into their new house type. Pat flinched as the lamp

shattered against the wall and wiped a fresh tear from her cheek, staring at me all the while.

She said my name again with an unbelievable desperation in her voice that I knew wasn't just from me not helping with the move. "James..."

"Pat, it's just a lamp. We can afford another one." I said it as kindly as I could, but even I could hear the annoyance in my voice.

Pat lowered herself to the floor and crossed her legs. Then, lying down all the way, she lowered her head to rest heavily on my stomach. We lay there for a moment, two limp beings stuck to the floor. I liked feeling the weight of her. She was my companion, and, like this, it was okay to let the world pass us by. But it didn't last. She turned on her stomach and wrapped her arms around my waste, softly kissing my abdomen. The moment was over.

"Why is this so hard? Two days ago we were great. Everything was perfect," she whispered it into my stomach, almost inaudible, muffled by my t-shirt and her tears. I could've pretended not to have heard her if I'd wanted to.

I couldn't even remember the last two days, not really—just pieces. They felt much longer than 48 hours. I knew I began the first day getting ready, but there was nothing before the moment the heavy doors opened and I saw her gliding toward me like an angel. It was like no one else was there, just the two of us. When Pat's father kissed her hand and placed it in my own, I felt electrified. There she was, my angel right in front of me. There was a kiss, filled with a new passion, a shared passion that

was ours and ours alone. Someone offered a toast and the bubbles of our champagne built inside of me, exploding with warmth no drink had before. Pat's head leaned against my shoulder as we swayed to the rhythm of whatever song we had chosen as our first dance. I couldn't remember what it was, something by The Beatles I think. Her eyes twinkled as she led me away from it all. I thought back to her neck. It was soft beneath my lips as I reached for the buttons of her dress. Each one felt like a pearl as I gently undid them, kissing her back after every release. She turned to face me and the electricity inside of me returned, making my heart beat like wild and my blood run fast. A night of pure ecstasy no drug could ever match.

Then, waking up to her quiet breaths and her hand on my chest, glittering as the light hit the ring I spent so long choosing. It looked so good on her finger it almost surprised me how perfect a ring could be. I took her hand in my own and kissed it, whispering in her ear, "I love you, Mrs. Patricia Premont. I love you very much." She smiled at her new name and opened her eyes. We spent the next day in bed, only leaving to go to the bathroom and answer the door when room service arrived.

Those days were perfect, just as Pat had said. But then it was over. We were checked out, staying in my parents' guest room for the night, waiting for the moment I could carry her over the threshold into our new house. The house I bought as a surprise. The house where we would raise our children. Grow old. Die. But the excitement of the wedding

was over, and it wasn't a mistake, but it wasn't a fairytale anymore, either. With each passing hour, I thought deeper about the responsibility I had undertaken when I said my vows. They didn't seem like such a big deal at the time. They just felt right. But I was a husband now, a protector, and I didn't know how to be that.

By the time we arrived at the house in the moving truck I didn't feel like carrying her over the threshold. It was too cliché and who really did that anyway? Instead, I took the key and turned it in the lock and went straight to the floor. Pat followed me. I think she thought it was a game; we would christen the room before we'd even moved the furniture in. We didn't. I just lay there, like the sun-soaking flower I wasn't until she got the idea and gave up her playful kisses and caresses. She lay on her back beside me, staring at me as I stared at the ceiling. Then, leaving me there, she went back to the truck.

"James?" Her sweet voice awoke me from my reverie. I looked back at her. I loved her, I loved everything about her, but it was all so different now, so real.

"I don't know what happened. I just don't know," I replied. Then, before she could say anything else or start crying again, I added, "I'm sorry, Pat."

She climbed on top of me, her hands on my chest and her legs wrapped around me. I looked up at her beautiful body, then down at the ring on her hand. How could I have given her that? I can't take care of her. We have money for a lamp, sure, but did we really have anything else? I spent all of my savings on the house and Pat had barely enough to pay off

her student loans. I bought a house for god's sake! A house! What was I thinking?

Again, Pat's voice brought me back to reality. "We've got to figure this out, babe," she said urgently, more force in her voice than she'd ever used before, even when she was upset with me. I was ashamed. It wasn't fair to be so pathetic, but some dark thing inside me kept me on the floor.

"I know," I said. "I'll try."

"You don't know," she said, emphasis on the "don't".

I didn't know what she meant by that, but I knew I was being a jerk just lying there. I knew I should be doing more. What did she mean I didn't know?

She sighed again, deep and heavy. "Just, help me get the last few boxes please. We'll put together the bed and call it a night."

Pat looked at me expectantly. I returned her gaze, trying to see what she was really upset about, then, unable to figure it out, I turned away. I looked at my arms still sprawled out from my body. Wiggling my fingers to check if my body was still holding the floor down, I decided that moving the last few boxes might be okay. I sat up and kissed Pat on the lips, a deep kiss I hoped would explain everything so I didn't have to. Then, I lifted her up and took her outside.

I headed towards the truck, but I didn't want to let her down yet. Instead, I turned around and went back to the doorway. Pat looked confused. I could tell she thought I was going back to the floor to stare at the ceiling, and she was on the

verge of crying again. "One thing first," I said, stopping in front of the door. She held her breath and I carried her back over the threshold into our new home. Then, I set her gently on the floor and went to the truck for the last few boxes. I turned to see if my small gesture had helped. She watched me, arms at her side, expressionless except for a single tear tracing its way along the lines of her beautiful face.

When I had taken the last box in, I wiped the sweat from my forehead and began looking for the odd-looking Swedish words that were supposed to indicate the box that held the pieces that would become our bed. Pat was in the empty kitchen putting silverware in drawers and plates and bowls on shelves with as much noise as she could make without purposefully breaking the dishes. She was mad and she made sure I didn't forget it. I kind of loved her for that.

After a half hour of looking I gave up on finding the IKEA box and instead found myself back on what would become our living room floor. Pat came into the room, a strange mix of disappointment and understanding on her face. "Couldn't find the bed frame?"

"Nope."

"Okay," she said, looking around. "Where's the mattress?"

I pointed to the other room without getting up and let my hand fall back. The thud of my arm against the plastic wood-looking floorboards was so satisfying I reached my hand up again. Just as I was about to let it drop, Pat came into the room, backing her way in and pulling the mattress saying, "if you don't get your ass off the ground right now and help me, we're getting

a divorce."

Floor, I thought, but didn't say a word.

We dragged the mattress to the center of the room together and pushed it down so that it lay flat with another satisfying thump. Pat pulled a sheet out of a box labeled "So the bed isn't gross" and started turning the mattress into our new bed. I grabbed a pillow from the "soft things" box and threw it at the makeshift-bed. Pat crossed her arms at the sight of it, took off her t-shirt and jeans, threw them on the floor, and did a trust fall onto the mattress. I ripped off my shirt, pulled down my jeans, and joined her. She turned on her side away from me and I reached for her hand, interlocking it with my own.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"Tomorrow," I repeated.

We awoke to the ring of Pat's cell phone. She answered and said something about how it wasn't a good time to come over, even if whoever it was on the phone was offering to help. I assumed it was Pat's mother. She was the only one who would think now was the time to call. Fear Pat would give in suddenly consumed me, but she was resolute. She kept talking, saying that we were barely settled and hanging on by a thread. I hated that phrase. It made me feel like a button on a child's coat in the middle of fall, like I was about to fall off and get lost in a pile of leaves all alone. Pat hung up and started going through more boxes without bothering to get dressed. "I think we need breakfast before we

can start this bullshit," I said with false enthusiasm, pulling my pants up and digging through a box for a clean t-shirt.

Pat turned to me and put her hands on her hips sternly. The affect was lost on me. She looked so goddamn sexy in her underwear. She crossed her arms over her chest and waited. I nodded, went to the nearest box I could find, and started removing bubble wrap from a particularly well-wrapped vase.

By the end of the second day, we had most of our possessions out of their boxes and, although a bit disorganized, things didn't look too bad. Or, at least, I thought the place didn't look too bad considering I spent most of the first day lying on the floor. Pat clearly thought otherwise, though. She had a constant frown, and even as I was growing more comfortable in our new home, I was beginning to worry that I had really fucked up this moving thing. She stood in front of the bookshelf we had just put up with her arms tightly folded. I watched her contemplate its placement for a few minutes, then crept up behind her and hugged her like I used to in college. She turned to face me and looked me in the eyes without a word until I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really messed this up." She looked at me, something like pity shining in her eyes. "I was scared." At that, she laughed. I couldn't figure out why. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation and I didn't really know how else to explain my utter inability to move from the floor or help, but she just kept giggling wildly to herself.

She kissed me on the cheek and left the room, heading towards our living room mattress and, between laughs, calling behind her, "Tomorrow we build the bed."

I woke up the next day and held out my hands before me. It was the fifth day of our marriage, the last day I would be able to count our new kind of love on just one hand. I thought about the six-fingered man from *The Princess Bride*. He had it easy, I thought, he didn't love anybody. Then, pretending to wield a sword, I slashed the air and imagined I was slashing my doubts into tiny, bloody pieces. Pat turned to look at my invisible sword and, with stunning speed, she was out of bed holding her own invisible sword, ready to defeat my game and get me back to work. But then again, I thought as we dueled, what's the point if you don't love anybody?

I spent the rest of the morning building the bed frame while Pat watched, saying something about pay back and liking to see sexy men hard at work. I figured the combination of the two statements meant I could be okay with her doing nothing, but by afternoon I was done with the bed and no longer willing to let her sit around and laugh at me for putting things away in all the wrong places. We developed an assembly line. I unloaded boxes and she put everything away the way she liked it. It was a good system. Things felt more manageable.

By the sixth day Pat was ready to have her parents over. I wasn't too keen on having company, seeing as

we'd spent most of our time in the new house hovering somewhere between having an argument bad enough to end our new marriage and having hot sex that would do just the opposite, but Pat was persistent. She spent the entire day making sure everything looked at least presentable while I tried not to get in her way and prayed she didn't hate me for not helping again.

Her parents arrived at 6 o'clock sharp. Pat's mom immediately wanted a tour, exclaiming, "Oh I just love how you thought a starter home was a good gift, James! So cute!" I wasn't sure if it was a compliment, but hoping to get through the night with as little fighting as possible, I thanked her and let Pat lead her mom and dad from one slightly disheveled room to the next.

After the tour we had drinks. Well, we didn't have much, so Pat used whatever we could find. She poured four glasses of orange juice and tonic water and pretended it was something the French drank. I chuckled to myself as Pat's parents sipped their mocktails and discussed everything they could think of that was French, including, but not limited to, the Eiffel tower, the hunchback who must still live in the Notre Dame Cathedral, and French fries. I made a note to myself to take Pat to Paris the first chance I got.

By dinnertime, I was ready for the night to be over. As I glanced pleadingly at Pat, I was interrupted by a forceful, "Now don't forget to purchase home-owners' insurance, Johnny! I know you're used to that renters' stuff, but it's the most important decision you'll ever make when it comes to making sure my baby is safe and happy." Even after two and a half years of dating and another half-year engagement,

he still thought I was an idiot named Johnny.

"James, Dad. James." I looked at Pat with what I hoped was a grateful smile and she squeezed my leg under the table.

After dessert the night was finally over and, as I waved goodbye to Pat's parents from the doorway and held my smile until the headlights were no longer in danger of shining on my face, I told Pat it was time for bed. She nodded and led me to the bedroom, her hands covering my eyes.

"Tadah!" she exclaimed, showing off the bedroom she'd finished earlier that day. I kissed her cheek and squeezed her hand. It looked great! "Do you know what the best part is?" she asked, feigning innocence with every word. I nodded, arousal overwhelming me as she led me further into the room, kissing me and pulling me towards the bed until I was gently pushing her onto it, forgetting all about the arguments of the week and the dinner with her parents. And just like it was always meant to be, the world became ours and it was just the two of us alone again.

The next morning, I woke up and realized I wasn't scared or unsure anymore. I could do this. We'd been married for a week and suddenly it wasn't so daunting to be in this real-life, committed relationship. I didn't feel so fragile anymore, so weak. I looked over to Pat. She was curled up on the bed beside me, snoring softly, so I slowly snuck out of bed and went to find something

to bring her for breakfast. Just as I was about to reach the door, though, she called me back.

"James?"

"Go back to sleep, babe. I'll be back in just a minute with something good to eat."

"But I have to tell you something, James." She said it with her eyes still closed, sleep heavy in her voice.

"Tell me in a minute. I'll be right back, just wait."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Come on. Let me do something nice for you," I pleaded. I still felt guilty about our first days in the house.

"I'm pregnant," she said, the sleep no longer there, her eyes piercing through me, trying to read my reaction before I could have the chance to feel it.

"You're..."

"Yeah."

I rushed back to her, taking her face in my hands and kissing her with salty, tearful lips. "You're pregnant!" I said, hugging her tightly.

Pat nodded. She was crying now, too. "I thought you'd be upset. You seemed like you'd be upset. I thought you didn't want to do this anymore. You couldn't." I shook my head. "You said you were scared, but then you just laid there on the floor for hours and hours and..." She trailed off and I kissed her again.

"How long have you known?" I was so excited. Every thought I ever had about wanting to be alone with her the way it was before we got married was dissolving inside of me as I realized just how wrong I was. A baby. Our baby!

"Not long. The doctor told me the

other week when I thought I had that stomach flu."

"The stomach flu? How fantastic!" Pat looked at me like I was insane, but I just kept talking. I couldn't stop. I needed to know more. "How far along are you?"

"Almost two months."

I shook my head in disbelief. Three months? Damn, Pat was even better than I imagined.

"You're amazing," I kissed her again and again, lowering myself to kiss her stomach and our child growing within. "Amazing I tell you!"

"So, you can do this? For all of us?"

I looked back up at her, seeing her for the first time. "Pat, I will be the strongest man you've ever known. This kid is going to be well cared for. I promise you that with all of my being"

She kissed me and hugged me tight. "We're gonna be strong," she said.

"We're gonna be so strong," I repeated. And I never felt like I'd said anything truer.

Hannah Levine (RC 2016) is a digital freelancer. She was the first digital/social media editor at the Detroit Jewish News, and also worked as an events and publicity assistant at Cherry Lake Publishing/Sleeping Bear Press and as web content writer at Washtenaw Community College. Aside from her U-M degree, she has a Certificate in Publishing from the University of Denver's Publishing Institute. Her story "The Wedding" won 3rd place in October Hill Magazine's First Annual Literary Contest. She lives in Huntington Woods. Check her out at hannahlevine.weebly.com.



Picture Window

Peter Anderson

Picture Window was first produced in March 1996 at the Vancouver New Play Festival. It was performed by Peter Anderson and directed by Sherry Bie.

(LIGHTS UP ON A MAN STANDING STILL. LONG, UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE BEFORE HE SPEAKS.)

MAN

Okay. It's July, 1967. I'm 17 years old and I'm standing in my parents' living room looking out the picture window. I say "my parents' living room" even though it's mine as well. I guess. Anyway, I'm 17 and I'm looking out the picture window. This is the picture window. It's pretty big, huh? Almost the whole living room wall. What would you say, six feet by oh, about twelve? Fifteen? Something like that. Anyway, it's big.

You can't see it because my mom keeps it so clean. You can feel it – a cool glass feel when you put your hand on it – and you can hear it, especially during a storm when it rattles like a trapped insect, and you can even smell it – a sharp, ammonia window smell. But you can't see it. My mom keeps it so clean you –

(HE REACTS TO SOMETHING HITTING THE WINDOW.)

Birds can't even see it – that's how clean it is. They fly into the window like that all the time and break their necks. (AS HE LOOKS OUT THE WINDOW) Sometimes they're only stunned. But most of the time they're dead.

Mom keeps everything clean in our house, and I mean clean. We have

a cleaning lady named Eliza who comes to our house once a week. She's black and my mom says "Don't call her a maid, we don't have a maid, she's a cleaning lady."

I don't care what you call her, it embarrasses me, having a black cleaning lady in an all-white neighborhood. Why we have a cleaning lady in the first place, I don't know. The day before she comes, mom goes around the house and cleans everything up. I guess she doesn't want Eliza to think we're dirty. So there's never much work for Eliza to do. Then my dad complains about what we're paying a cleaning lady for when she doesn't clean anything. And my mom says yes, she does clean. Then my dad says what. Then my mom says things. Then my dad says what things. Then my mom gives him a dirty look and nothing more gets said.

So I live in a clean house with a clean picture window. So clean you can't see the window, only the picture – a picture of our backyard, very clean, and beyond it our neighbourhood, also very clean, and beyond that the rest of the suburbs, clean as clean can be. They even have a Clean-Up, Fix-Up, Paint-Up Week here where prizes are given for the cleanest yard and the cleanest home. The Mayor has campaigned for the last twenty years on the slogan "Keep Our City Clean." Everyone knows what this really means is "Keep the Blacks Out." Only nobody calls them "black." Not even my friends. The word they use is "nigger."

The first time I heard that word I was

in second grade. When I asked my father what it meant he told me that "nigger" is a bad word, that the colour of a person's skin doesn't matter, that all people are equal, that we should call them "negroes."

Right now the TV set's on behind me, but no one's watching it. They're all out there in the backyard, talking about the riots in Detroit. 47 people have been killed so far. Everyone's nervous it's going to spread out here to the suburbs. My uncle says they're guarding the city border with tanks, but he's got his gun ready anyway, just in case. He's sitting there with my mom and dad and my aunt, drinking scotch, talking and laughing, showing them how to clean a gun. They sent me in here for more ice when I got distracted looking out the window at them. They're all waving their drinks around, moving their lips, but I can't hear a word they're saying. It's just like watching TV with the sound turned off.

They don't see me here, watching them. I'm invisible, just like the window. I could scream right now and they wouldn't hear me. I look out the window, wishing I could say something, tell them what I really think, just talk, but I don't. I don't talk much to anyone, ever. Mom, dad, aunt, uncle, friends. Cleaning lady. I find it difficult to talk, to say what I really want to say. I'm embarrassed by so many things. Or if I'm not embarrassed, I'm disgusted. It's like this constant fight inside me between embarrassment and hate – I hate being the same but I'm embarrassed being different – that makes it so

hard for me to talk. To know what to say. Or do. So here I am, inside looking out. While they go on about the riots.

“Cocked and ready,” says my uncle, “Right next to the bed.”

“Oh, honestly,” says my mother, “they’re not going to come knocking on our door.”

“You don’t know that. I work with them. I see how they can take over.”

“Who’s for another round?” says my father.

“They’ll walk right in and steal you blind if you let them. Look what they’re doing to their own neighbourhoods for chrissakes. Block after block, burnt to a crisp.”

“That’s what I don’t understand – why they’d want to destroy their own homes like that.”

“Cause they can’t get to ours.”

“Honey, you want your drink freshened up? Anyone else?”

“Hell, we got what they want: TVs, dishwashers, power tools.”

“It’s such a waste.”

“Listen, if every person in this city had a gun, including you, we’d all be better off.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Well, I do. Let me tell you, it’d make

those damned niggers think twice before they tried anything stupid.”

There is an awkward silence. My aunt, so shy and sweet, manages a pained smile. My mother purses her lips tight and says nothing.

I wait for my father to tell my uncle off. To tell him the things he’s told me. But all he says is “Get us some more ice, would you, son?”

Yeah, I’ll get you more ice. But what I’m thinking is: man, I wish the riots would come here. Forget Detroit – burn this fucking neighbourhood to the ground. Yeah, I’ll get you more ice.

And then, before I know it, I’ve picked up our television set and hurled it across the living room.

Turning end for end, it arcs slowly over the sofa and smashes through the window with a ssshhhhh. I’m surprised by the sound. Not at all what I expected. It’s a gentle sound, like falling leaves, or water.

And now I can see it. The picture window. For the first time, I can really see it. It looks like a mouth with frost-bitten lips and crackled teeth, opening wide, trying to scream. I take a step closer, to hear what it’s trying to tell me. Something crunches underfoot. I look down. The living room carpet’s covered in glass. I look up again. The jagged outline in the middle of the picture window looks like it should contain great big cartoon letters: KAPOW! SMASH! But it doesn’t. It’s just a hole, an empty space, waiting for me to fill it. I grab my dad’s tripod, no, my baseball bat, and jump. Suddenly it’s nighttime. I land on

my feet like a cat. Fires have broken out all over the neighbourhood. My heart’s pounding in the darkness. There’s an explosion. Gunshots. People screaming. Sirens wail dream-like in the distance...

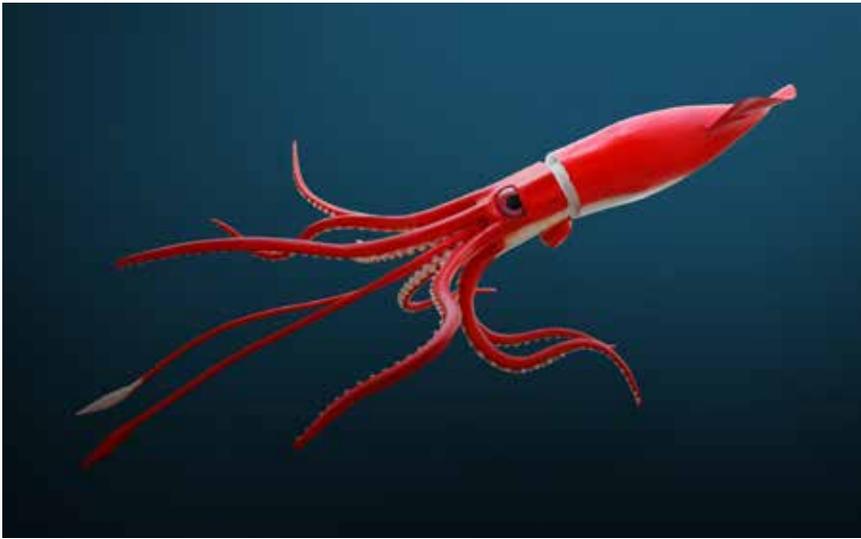
But that’s all it is. A dream. The riots never come to our neighbourhood. The picture window remains intact, whole. And the picture itself remains intact: our neatly-trimmed very green lawn beneath the sunny, very blue sky of our very clean city. And my family talking as if nothing’s wrong, until you could almost believe them. It’s such a peaceful, comforting picture. It really is. I could stand here for hours, looking through the picture window, oblivious to the window, absorbed in the picture. I could stand here watching my family and friends come and go, as grass grows and gets mown and grows again and gets mown again. I could stand here forever, looking through the picture window, watching myself playing in the yard at six, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-three,

forty-five. I could stand here forever, never saying a word, or if I did, not being heard by anyone, because they’re all outside, on the other side of the glass, smiling, saying things I can’t hear, only imagine. I could stand here forever until suddenly something out there so catches my fancy, a friend, a memory, that I step forward for a closer look, to touch that friend or memory, to say something, to make myself heard. And moving closer, I hit my head on the window and drop to the floor.

Just like a bird.

(BLACKOUT)

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



The Bold Explorer in the Place Beyond

David Erik Nelson

"So, that lil squid, the bold explorer, had just knocked his whole damn operation into a cocked hat, is what he'd done." That voice came chopping out of the crisp spring dark and scared the tar out of me. I'd been creeping down to peep into the windows of Two-Ton Sadie's Dancehall -- catch me a look at them dancing girls she's got -- when that crippled ole Johnny Reb, Dickie Tucker, came bellowing out of the dark alley alongside the General Mercantile Emporium, bottle in hand. He stomped up to Rev. Habit's First Church of the Latter Day Saints, and I went hopping into Sheriff Plume's high hedge like a jackrabbit.

The fat, spring moon gleamed on Dickie's single good eye and made

plain the hard fist of scars clenching the right side of his head as he hectorated the big double doors of Rev. Habit's church. He looked like the Devil's own fist hammering down the Lord's door.

"That lil squid had kitted himself together a clever ole clockwork diving engine -- an undiving engine. Looked like a lil crab stitched outta scraps of copper, rubber, and greased leather." Dickie made obscure gestures in the air, like he was telling a chinaman how to put together a pump head, but I already had a notion of what his bold explorer looked like: Like them Union automatic clockwork soldiers that keep their camp up on Windmill Mesa, now that they's retired from Sherman's dreaded First Mechanical Battalion.

Word was that Dickie'd lost his face to a clockie platoon at the Battle of Atlanta. No one knew if that was true -- you couldn't hardly talk to Dickie Tucker, no more than you could talk to a rabid dog, but the way he lashed into the clockies when he'd see them in the street . . . it seemed credible.

"Started okay: The bold explorer, he'd crept up out of the water, peering from behind a curved shard of a Chinese blown-glass fishing float, not knowin' what to expect of the Place Beyond. He'd clicked and clacked up out of the surge and scuttled into the sedges, not just blinded by the clean, pure light of that slitted sliver of moon, but by his sense of wonder and terror. He'd skidded right through the scintillant edge of everything, and was still live and sane." Dickie wavered in the street and held his bottle up to see its level in the moonlight. I couldn't see how much he had, or had had, or would have. Probably God couldn't, neither. Behind him, the dancehall thumped and jangled. With its swaybacked roof and lit up windows, it looked like a November jack-o-lantern gone soft, waiting to fall in on itself.

"Before he'd even gotten over congratulating hisself on bein' so damn brave and clever," he told the bottle, "the bold explorer had already bumbled his way through the thickets of sharp bentgrass, tumbled down the backs of the dunes, and stumbled into the forest." Dickie took another slug.

"The forest was thick," he said, taking the church steps like he was charging a trench through a mucky field, "and the leafy branches of the old beeches and buckeyes cut the

glare off the moonlight. His lil optically perfect eyes could focus again, and he saw a sick world of wonders. It was crowded with what he took for corals and anemones, but these reefs was fishless and vacant, the piebald corals bleached of their living color, the anemones listless. No wonder, he thought, that the few that got pulled up through the Silver Edge came back broken and dead, and the survivors mad; the Place Beyond was a dead world." Dickie knelt shakily, set down his bottle on the top step, and peered through the door crack like he was peeping on Jesus in the bath. Then he started to whisper into the doorknob.

"The bold explorer's lil legs whirred and clicked as he scuttled through the dry leaves," Dickie crawled the fingers of his left hand over the wooden door, like a giant spider tickling a ladies bottom over her silk knickers, "whirred and ticked as he scrambled over logs, whirred and tocked as he skittered over knobby old roots. Even of it was a dead world, there was still much to see, and he aimed to look his fill while he had the chance. He was slipping into a dip under a big ole uprooted paper birch when his suit whirred and sproinged, and one of his front legs gave out limp." Dickie made his index finger flop lamely, "He stopped in his tracks, and gave the leg a test jiggle. It did nuthin'. He gently tested the other seven; two more sproinged. He backtracked up out of the dip, but was hardly clear of the tree's lee when the suit crack!ed" he clapped his hands, "sproinged, whirred, whistled, and keeled over." Dickie's left hand dropped dead on the church's

wide top step. "He rolled a half turn, and looked up through a break in the canopy at the drowsy, half-lidded moon." Dickie himself rocked back on his heels, almost tumbling down the steps, then spun and planted his skinny hams on the narrow threshold. He leaned back into the door's embrace, closed his eye, and basked in the spring moonlight.

"Soon enough," Dickie grunted, "bold explorer discovered that the forest wasn't so empty like he thought. But 'til then, he had hisself a time to lay out orderly how he'd got where he was. If there's such as sin, then the bold explorer, his sin was pride. All his days, as a young squidlet at the bottom of the god-damn sea, he'd been too fancy to socialize proper with all them other lil squiddies. When they'd spurt up to ask him to play at races and crack-the-whip, or to twirl it up at the annual squid cotillion, he was always too busy studyin' up and schemin' on his glorious Future. He's too busy to even be proper and polite and express his regrets, and so it wasn't too soon before every other lil squid stopped tryin' to pal up to him. Not that the damn thick bastard even might notice." Dickie opened his eye and there was fire in it. He shot to his feet, and shouted in the moon's face.

"'cause ole Mr. Fancy Pants had him a notion that there was somethin' worth knowing up beyond the undulant, silver top edge of the waters, somethin' more than plain, ole Death. The squids, they all knew there was somethin' out Beyond, but didn't reckon it was somethin' worth knowin'. Why? 'cause on account now and again some poor damn

bastard would get caught in a net, or lay into a baited hook, and get whisked up clean out of their world. Mostly, that was the end of the story. Occasionally, his corpse might get coughed back out, limp and torn. And very, very, very . . ." his steam had run down. Dickie seemed like a locomotive that might start rolling back down hill, devil may care and no survivors when it jumps track. He took the steps back down in a loose-limbed trot, then looked at his hands quizzically.

"Very, very rare," he mumbled absently, looking about him on the ground, "that unlucky squid would come back live. But what he could say of what he'd seen . . ." Dickie finally caught a glimpse of his bottle, left neglected on the church steps, and his single eye sparkled, "There weren't much to it. It was crazy babble," Dickie leaned over the steps, laying out across them, snatched up his hooch, and took a long, reflective gulp before standing. "He'd tell 'em, of a thin place up above and beyond the world, a searing place of blinding light, of roars and shudders, of helpless flopping and hopeless incomprehensibility. All them other squids pitied these madmen that had seen the Place Beyond. And, jus' like us, sayin' they pitied these luckless travelers is to say they ignored them."

Dickie rubbed his face then knuckled his good eye, "But the bold explorer," he sighed, "he lacked the good goddamn sense to ignore crippled lunatics."

Dickie rocked on his heels, staring into the moon, and then muttered, "He was a brave, dumb sonofabitch. I'd pity the bastards too. Pity 'em all."

Dickie strutted up the street, like an actor across the boards. He took a deep breath and blew out his contemplative mood. "And then," he kicked a horse apple, aiming for Sheriff's door. It pounded into the bushes where I crouched, off to my left, "As the bold explorer laid there, thinkin' on his progress, cats oiled in on the darkness, like eels 'cross ice. Feral old toms, refugees from a torched plantation. One still wore his leather collar, which was cracked and dry, but had its silver bell. Though tarnished black, that bell tinkled high and pretty in the moon-bright night." He kicked another turd. "Not that the bold explorer could hear." And it went extremely wide, skittering up the street, "They was cats and didn't know much, but they remembered the sorts of fancy food what came out of cans and jars, once upon a time, afore them clockie sonsabitches brought their fire down through Atlanta and clear to the sea." He kicked another turd, hard. It disintegrated to a mist of manure on impact with his boot toe, but he still squinted into the distance to see where it had landed.

"Them cats flowed out of the dark and knotted around the bold explorer who, bless his stupid heart, was glad to see 'em. He watched the cats glide through the air, slick as fish, and blushed a warm hello and gracious salutation, such as you might to diplomats and ambassadors. 'course," he kicked, and a horse apple shot into the bush directly above me, raining down leaves and filth, "they didn't give a good God damn for greetings. Them toms couldn't even imagine the full-color skin semaphore that's

squid talk. All they saw was pretty fish in a Mason jar." Two more horse apples came in quick succession, cutting right into the trail of the last, and dusting me with stink to match my regret.

"But the bold explorer, he just kept grinnin' like a blue-ribbon asshole, and flashin' his howdy-do?, and swirlin' his embarrassed relief, and jiggin' an excruciatingly boring explanation of his predicament. He was explicating his situation when the first swat knocked him and his little bubble of sea into the brush." Dickie cracked his hard palm smartly across his thigh, "And they was off to the races. The trio of toms swirled off into the forest, drivin' that squid in his clockwork divin' bell before 'em like injuns runnin' buffalo off a cliff. They went ricochetin' off trees, tumblin' down banks and sprintin' up hills. Soon as they started they'd lost the sense of the goal of the task, and was just runnin' after the savage joy of it. Once that dome cracked the party'd be done, and maybe they'd mourn the loss of the game, but a full belly goes a long way to soothe a sad heart. Least when you's livin' rough." Dickie made to drink, but lost his grip. The bottle tumbled to the dirt. He shook his head, watching his tonic glug away into the rutted lane. Sadie's thumped and rocked, like a distant train passing on a track that don't go nowhere near your town. The girls all whooped together, high and pretty, and the sound of it in the spring night made my heart crinkle till I was near to crying.

"But the cats," Dickie said, "They didn't get their supper. They was all legs and cartwheels, time a-their

life, when somethin' big and angry, somethin' that wanted what they had, pounded up the brush and loosed a single screechin' roar. Stopped them three toms dead in their tracks, and sent 'em yowlin' to the four points of the compass, leaving the bold explorer to rock and froth and shudder to rest among the roots and bracken."

Dickie squatted shakily and dabbled his fingers in the puddle of booze that was mingling with everything else in the street -- hog slop and horse piss and cowflops and God even don't imagine what. "The cat's yowls and ruckus drifted off into the night, with the tinkle of that age-black silver bell followin' after," he brought his fingers to his mouth and my guts clenched up tight and greasy. He scowled, then nodded.

"Soon, out from the brush, crept the 'possum, gopher, and two squirrels who'd made that racket." Dickie got shakily to all fours, "They circled up 'round the bold explorer. His little undiving engine was worse for wear: Three of the legs was gone altogether, with toothy gears and useless snarls of spring-steel protruding from their empty sockets. The other five were twisted beyond all hope of repair, bent back and around the dome of his lil' anti-bathysphere like the green sepals pulled up around a dandelion's fluff." He carefully lowered his face to the puddle. "The glass was still whole -- maybe for the luck of being shielded by them bust up legs -- but there was a trickle of water running out from between the tarred plates on his undercarriage." Dickie was bringing his lips to the dirt-flecked surface of that grotesquely filthy whiskey puddle when the better angels of his nature

reared their heads. My guts hitched into my throat and stuck there, even when Dickie flopped onto his backside instead of slurping up that mess. He sighed like an abandoned dog.

I was scared of getting skinned by my pa', and scared of Dickie Tucker, and sick sad that I was missing on seeing those dancing girls that Pa' calls "prairie nymphs," like the words are a mouthful of spoilt milk. Maybe they're cheap trash, but to see them twirling in the light of a hundred candles, their curls shining, to see them lounge against the bar like cats, to see their legs and arms and necks, to see their coyness that ain't coy when they set hand to a man's arm or chest -- it's warm and dizzy and worth any kind of scared. It settled my gut, thinking about them.

"The bold explorer himself was bruised all to hell," Dickie said, "with one eye swelled shut like a county fair pugilist, but he's just as optimistic as ever. He smiled tentative, then blushed and wigwagged his color-talk, 'splaining how he'd got there -- which they knew plain enough, from seein' -- and askin' their help in diagnosing the ailments of his suit -- which was beyond their capacities." Dickie stood and turned back toward the church doors, serendipitously catching sight of his dropped bottle. A bare inch of liquor lay in the curve of the bottle's belly, and Dickie perked up seeing it. "All's to say that it was probably just fine that they couldn't understand a damn thing he said." Dickie scooped up the bottle and drained her.

Though it seems unlikely, Dickie was even less steady on his feet than

before, pacing careful, his eyes glued to the dirt. He brought each step to bear with ferocious concentration, as though he expected the ground to squirt out from under foot.

"The squirrels, 'possum, and whistlepig held a lil powwow, and agreed that they didn't know what in the hell they'd stumbled into, or where it belonged. They figured it was some manner-ah tadpole 'r salamander, and needed water, which it was quickly runnin' shy on in its leaky fish-bowl." Dickie stood at the base of the steps, starrin' down the doors.

"The bold explorer smiled hopefully up at his saviors, even as the water level inched down his dainty, color-swirled mantle."

Dickie undid the buttons on his pants, and proceeded to loose a powerful stream on the church steps, his hands, and his trousers, sighing his satisfaction.

"These four crusaders had never seen the sea, nor had any notion of it, so they did best they could," Dickie buttoned up crooked, then rubbed his face, like a night watchmen warding off sleep, "They hauled him up, set him on their shoulders, and carried him, like a fallen hero, to the charred ruins of the plantation house. Round back, down to the old slave shacks, the 'possum and whistlepig cradled the bold explorer. He's beamin' at all he'd saw, and what he'd see yet, imaginin' his hero's welcome back to the sea, his lecture circuit on the Place Beyond. The squirrels scabbled up to the crumblin' lip of the old well. The 'possum and groundhog heaved the lil suit up -- weighed almost nuthin', what with most of the water drained away --

and the squirrels hauled it over, and dropped it down. The bold explorer tumbled into the dark with the moon's silver light frostin' the copper and glass, shinin' in his perfect, expectant eyes. It was a thin slice of moon, a droopin' eye, like a lazy God almost sorta watchin' over his passage. Then he was gone."

Dickie stood, swaying like he was on a foundering frigate.

"He didn't make no sound on the way down, but he splashed when he hit bottom."

Dickie fixed the big double doors in a baleful stare.

"The four a-them standin' in the moonlight looked down inna that well. They knew they hadn't done right, 'xactly, but they'd done best they could." His breath hitched, like he might sick up, "Didn't feel much good 'bout it, tho'."

Dickie took a breath, looked as to continue, but instead passed out. His right knee buckled while the left held, and he twirled like a ballerina before flopping on his back into the lane's filth.

We sat together, alone in the dark. Dickie snorted. Down the lane, lady laughter bubbled out of Sadie's. I shivered, even though the night was warm.

I wanted to help Dickie home, but his place is so far west of town that doing so would have meant getting caught out for sure. And the fact is, I wanted -- I needed -- to have my look at Sadie's gals, I needed to go get my fill, even though I knew: Needing to see is where the trouble starts; ain't no amount of looking that fills you.

Besides, sleeping out couldn't

possibly bother Dickie Tucker; sleeping in his crumbling shack wasn't much better than sleeping out. At least on the church steps he had fresh air and the Lord watching.

But it didn't matter. I was still tangled in Sheriff's hedge when I heard clicking and clanking come from the darkness out west of the church. I looked up and seen that it was four clockies from the bunch that make their camp up on Windmill Mesa, refugees and veterans of that same Long War that had taken Dickie's good right eye. They looked down at Dickie, their eyes glowing like pairs of coals peeking out from a stove grate. One hunkered and nudged Dickie, who snored deep and didn't stir. The croucher clicked at his mates, and one tick-tocked off, returning with a wheelbarrow snatched from the side of Emet Kohen's Mercantile Emporium. They hauled Dickie up, then wheeled him down the lane, right past my nose. Dickie smelt terrible of manure and I can't even guess what, but the clockies were clean. They smelled like copper and gun oil, and water from the springs way back in

the box canyons.

As he was wheeled past, Dickie's one good eye rolled open. It fixed on my blearily, and he mumbled, "Go have yer look, Seth Everett. Couldn't possibly do no harm."

At the next alley the party cut west, into the darkness, and if they dumped Dickie back into his own pitiful sod hut, or rolled him right past, all the way to their neat homestead on top of Windmill Mesa, I really can't say.

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David Erik Nelson (RC 1999) has written or edited several hundred reference articles and over a dozen textbooks. His latest non-fiction book is Junkyard Jam Band: DIY Musical Instruments and Noisemakers. His stories have appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, StarShipSofa, and several anthologies.

A Rising Trio

Robin Lily Goldberg

good morning

muses
speak through snowflakes,
arriving at kitchen windows
with songs
that nourish smiles
like first grade flavors

Puddle Travels

Paths unfold in all directions,
carrying me through twelve dimensions,
above air,
sand,
grass,
and yellow bricks
that melt into golden puddles

iridescence

bubbles bloom
like dreams
breathing fragrance
into memories
of mornings
when the sunset
matched the sunrise

Robin Lily Goldberg (RC 2010) immerses herself in nature and the arts. Since graduating, she has enjoyed connecting the RC community as the first Student Affairs Specialist, and editing for publications such as The Mindfulness Bell and the Crazy Wisdom Community Journal. In 2014, Charing Cross Press published her first book, a poetry collection called the Sound of Seeds. Today as a writer and holistic healthcare practitioner, Robin practices yoga, Reiki, reflexology, and vibrational sound therapy. She also explores authentic storytelling and creative expression as paths of healing and wholeness



Skelly Ross

Ian Ross Singleton

One of the Eagle Scouts, Dustin, caught the boys standing on saplings till they snapped. Every scout was doing it. While Dustin was chewing them out, Seymour raised his hand. The others snickered. Dustin's features wound up like he was fixing to scream at Seymour. "I'm gonna start calling you Einstein. All you do's sit around and think."

When they repeated the Boy Scout Oath, Seymour only mouthed the words.

#

At night Seymour mouthed comebacks and cut-downs, and they turned him in his cot, tickled the top of his head. By day, he commanded himself, "I shouldn't complain about

the heat. I should cook better on the fire. I shouldn't laugh when Chilton makes fart sounds. I shouldn't joke with the others."

He pinched the skin on his thigh to mark it.

He pinched then clamped his skin harder every day and was still not a good scout. With bruises on his legs, he was still not good. He did not laugh at Chilton. Before, he only laughed when the other boys grinned or, as a group, jeered. When he cooked a can of soup on the fire, the sharing rule made him give it all away, except for the spoonful he used to taste. The smoke was what made his eyes water. He said, "Shit." Scoutmaster Anglin made him do latrine duty. Instead of whining about the heat, Seymour collapsed on the reveille field. When he woke up, they

were still laughing. Dustin mumbled, "What a fag."

#

Which is what Seymour said when Chilton, his tentmate, peed in his sleeping bag. In Orange Beach, a pack of townies had barricaded Chilton inside the bathroom, where he spent two and a half hours screaming himself hoarse. Ever since, Chilton was afraid to go to the latrine alone.

While waiting for his tentmate, Seymour kicked the concrete chamber of the latrine. He announced to everybody, "My toe's broken," and took on a limp. He found a stick with a joint, where he could set the webbing between his thumb and pointer. It became a cane. Seymour liked being a crippled old man, even though he was only eleven.

He was hobbling to breakfast, and Dustin whispered in his ear, "We know you're a fucking faker. Just admit, you're a shitty scout." Seymour held his breath till they crested the hill. Then he flung the cane. When it landed, it sounded like an Eagle Scout saying, "Psst."

#

It sounded like the shots fired on the other side of those woods, in a ravine, where the shooting range was. The crack of gunfire and the smell of powder made Seymour wish he could go home. He struggled when he had to disengage the bolt of the rifle. He wanted to make the shell flip out and land somewhere cool, like on his neighbor's table, but it only plunked down next to him. Then the

bolt stuck. Scoutmaster Baggett's tiny smile made his moustache crooked on his long face.

Shotgun was worse. You had to aim high at a moving target, there was a tougher kick, the gun was heavier. The Scoutmasters and the Eagle Scouts sounded like drills when they laughed at how it knocked Seymour back.

He hated shooting like they hated copperheads. When Scoutmaster Baggett caught one, he held the snake between his boot and a small boulder, so the snake's head stuck out. Scoutmaster Baggett warned the boys to clear back several feet, placed the twelve-gauge near the copperhead's head, and blasted. The Eagle Scouts hooted and whooped. Seymour too. His glasses were like a cool movie camera then, framing the wriggling body. The sound he made scared the others. He could tell. He had broken a rule, one nobody told him.

#

Or maybe Dustin had told him in front of the untouchable flicker of the bonfire one night. The fires were so the boys would pay attention. It never worked.

In the firelight, Linnea was trying to read the title off the book in Seymour's lap. He didn't look at her, just posed in a way she would call handsome. Maybe Linnea liked sci-fi. He knew she watched him because he heard her talking to Dustin about the note from Seymour's parents. It was about the scaredy-cats at school, where Seymour told his bad stories. A zombie moan busted through the

surface, when he remembered mom's words to the teacher, We don't know where it comes from.

Dustin was talking. "After that, you can just blow merit badges out your butt." The boys squirmed, poked the fire with sticks. "All right. I gotta tell y'all a story. The Ross family owned this land first. Their boy never went out, never did anything with other kids. His nails and teeth grew long, hair grew wild. He got skinny. His eyes got wide and buggy and glowed in the moonlight. They say he still comes round. Usually avoids groups. But he might creep up on you alone."

"Yeah, yeah. You told us that before," Braydon sassed.

Dustin scowled. "You're not afraid, huh." He knelt down. "You afraid of the Devil? You afraid of the, the beasts God put here?"

"I don't know," Braydon replied.

A plan boiled up in Seymour's brain. "I'm not afraid," Seymour said. "Skelly Ross is made up. Like God."

Dustin turned his head deeper into the dark. "The hell did you just say, Einstein? You don't believe in God?"

"Why did God let the Holocaust happen? God's made up. I'm an atheist," Seymour mumbled half his father's words into the faint crackle. Dustin glared, and it looked like the flames swelled. There was a bulge in his cheek.

As he closed in on Seymour, his honky-tonk whine altered to a deep, werewolf growl. "God's made up?" Dustin's pinched face and caving mouth were ugly, and Seymour wrinkled his nose at Dustin's breath.

He didn't mean to. He reached up

and fanned, giving a tender slap to Dustin's cheek. The Eagle Scout grabbed a fistful of Seymour's t-shirt and lifted him off the log. "Do that again, so I can beat your little ass."

Seymour sobbed, "I didn't."

"Just earned you your Lil' Pussy merit badge."

Seymour sobbed three times.

Dustin lost interest, let go, and said, "C'mon, Linnea. I'll walk you back to your cabin."

After walking tough into his tent, he emerged with a flashlight. "Y'all better be asleep when I get back," he ordered the boys. He began to hum a country song. Linnea walked the way girls do, with Dustin behind her singing, "Hate to see you go but love to watch you walk away." His voice yipped at the end.

#

Into the darkness that ate that yip Seymour followed them. He liked to scare himself, wandering without a flashlight, getting on his knees, pressing his ear to the pine needles. His bones ached from the log, where Dustin dropped him. He limped back to his tent. When he flopped onto his cot, his body tore through the mosquito net. He cursed. Shadows from the fire bounced across the canvas. Chilton loved to tell people the color was olive drab, like in the Army.

They had heard of Skelly Ross before, but Seymour saw him coming nearer. "Skelly Ross. Skelly Ross. Skelly Ross. Skelly Ross. Skelly Ross." He said it the way he said the Boy Scout Oath. Bushy hair touched the

canvas ceiling. Skelly Ross ground pee-colored teeth, the way the handle of the vice worked. "I hate Dustin," Seymour said, his head sideways, laid down. He crushed the sleeping bag in his fist. A piece of a tree fell and tinkled on the canvas. "Should cut him down." Seymour took his pocket knife out of his shorts and opened it. "I hate him. I hate Braydon. I hate them all." The knife—his hand a fist around the handle—ripped the mosquito net, gouged the sleeping bag. A flashlight passed over the tent. "I hate Alabama." Seymour folded his knife. "Should take revenge." "I'm gonna revolt. I'm gonna go to the headquarters lodge." He threw himself against the cot. A bird sang. "Owl. No, whippoorwill. No, mourning dove," he said to identify it. He counted by flicking the knife open and shut. "Einstein."

Trees creaked and groaned, and other boys snored. Chilton slipped into the tent and whispered, "You okay, Seymour?"

Seymour stalked, with his limp, along the moonlit path and dreamed of Skelly Ross with blades for fingernails, sticking campers while they sleep. Skelly Ross was a shadow with no face except for the gleaming white orbs in the boy's head. Throats opened, flowers blossoming in those sped-up movies on the projector in Science class.

#

He had been in Science not long ago. But then his dad had driven him—just like every boy, Braydon from Mountain Brook, or Tavarius

from Bessemer—along the interstate, until they exited onto the paved highway with its faded sign TALLADEGA COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, which marked a narrow drive leading into the shadowed lushness of Alabama forest. Three dozen creeping steps from that sign was a barbed wire fence stretching northwest and southeast. They had passed that sign along the paved highway, and instead turned at the camp gate, drove through the gate onto the dirt road, along the dirt road to the path, and walked along the path up to the Callery pear tree, where he tried to kiss his dad goodbye. The man told him not to.

That's where Seymour headed. To wait for his dad to come and pick him up, even if that meant waiting days out there by that tree.

Dustin was there, squatting in a huddle with the other Eagle Scouts. They were watching the huge window of Linnea's cabin, where she was undressing.

Robby asked, "You ever touch her crotch?"

"Dumb-ass. Girls don't got crotches," answered Dustin. Seymour didn't want to drink from the flat canteen they passed to each other. He stayed in the woods.

"Throw a rock at her window," said Shane.

"That's dumb," moaned Dustin. He moved like a crab and scratched the dirt.

Somebody came out of the cicadas' rattle along the path from the dirt oad. He was an adult. Everything he wore was jeans.

"Shut up. Shut up." Dustin and the

others stumbled to their feet, when they saw him.

The man sniffed. "A little circle session." Linnea was bending over to peek under the bed. The man saw her bare legs and said, "Oh my good Lord."

"Who the hell are you?" Dustin asked.

The man took a gun out. The light in Linnea's cabin shut off. The gunman looked back at the path to the ravine. "Let's say hey."

The Eagle Scouts shuffled toward the cabin door, went through, and the gunman let it shut without a sound. They didn't even turn on a light. Seymour put a hand over his scream. Who would come? He didn't want them to come. He let his hand down.

Seymour had thought about Linnea, when he and Chilton jacked off at the same time in their tent. Chilton asked if it was okay, then about how long they should do it. Seymour told him just to think about a pretty girl.

But now, when Seymour tucked his hands between his legs, he remembered how the gunman held the gun. His arm had been straight, like in a Nazi salute. "Should save her."

He sneaked close enough to hear the gunman ask, "You ever stuck your fist up that elegant hole?" He peered out from behind Skelly Ross. The gunman was pointing the gun in his face. The gunman was barking, like the Calhouns' rottweiler. "Quick. Step in here, boy." The gunman lunged to snatch Seymour's pocket knife.

Skelly Ross' tattered clothing flapped. He held his bladed hands like the front arms of a tyrannosaurus rex. They were all tied, except for Dustin, who sat on the bed hugging himself. They looked through Seymour. He

could tell they had no hope that he could save them.

Only the gunman squinted at him. "Such a strange turn of events. What's your name, child?" Seymour told him. Skelly Ross trotted back and forth. Seymour asked the gunman's name. He bobbed his head. "My name is, my name is, my name is." He didn't say. "I'm just an old con. Seymour, I gotta ask, of all the sleeping babes, why'd you come here? With that knife?"

Skelly Ross perched on Linnea's dresser, scissoring clothes in the open drawer. "I hate him," Seymour blurted, tossing his hand at Dustin. "I knew he was gonna be here." Skelly Ross hopped on his haunches.

"Oh dear God, you're cute. Goodness gray-cious." The con was watching Dustin. Seymour saw a dark spot where no shadow should have been. It was a bloody bruise.

Dustin shouted, "You are a manic!"

The con said, "Got me a new slayer's little helper now." Dustin flopped in his seat like he was throwing a temper tantrum.

Skelly Ross was at the foot of the bed, one fingernail pressing his lips. "Sh."

The con jerked his gun at Dustin. "I feel your pain, mon frere. You can't always get what you want. The gods of cut-love and garter belts deemed it necessary that I should fall into the steel crotch of prison. Ain't what you want. It's your faintest fear you get." The man was silent for a spell. Then he gestured toward Dustin. "Bind him, kid."

Dustin looked like he was about to barf. Seymour said, "I don't think he's gonna let me."

The con said to Dustin, "Shy guy, huh? Time to take your torture, curlicue."

Seymour could have just reached the gun. "Should take that gun." Skelly Ross ground his jaw, his pinhole eyes showing the brightness inside. The cabin felt cooler, and Seymour shivered. Dustin stood and balled his fists.

"Oh, honey-baked ham. I'll eat your throat right up." Deep in his pocket, Seymour felt the bump of the snail shell he found, the one that was more perfect than the camp, than the whole world. "Come-and-Seymour, you're fixing to witness my third murder. Three's my favorite number." The con blew a dark snot rocket and turned halfway toward Seymour. "Don't go soft serve on me, fun size. Don't cwy." The con frowned and whimpered.

"OK." Seymour grinned. His teeth hurt, so he stopped.

"This is montagnard country. No good guy's gonna come." The con's arm straightened like a scarecrow's, aiming the gun at Dustin. "God's getting a lap dance from the First Lady. It's your call, Seymour-Be More."

Seymour stopped breathing. Skelly Ross cowered in the corner, fingernails folded, skinny neck stretched. "I don't know," Seymour said. The con lowered the gun and made a face like Seymour's dad did, when he talked about the Holocaust. In the Guinness Book of World Records, the fingernails of the man with the longest ever fingernails

just curled into spiraling ribbons. They couldn't cut. "God's made up." Seymour raised his chin, like mom taught him to do when he was giving a speech. "I hate him. I wouldn't care if you killed him."

The con reared back, like he was bit by a snake and the bite would kill him with laughter. "God's made up? 'God's made up'? Boy howdy. That's criminal in Alabama. You're pucker up for prison, little godless soldier."

Seymour gnawed his lip and stared at Dustin, who had sat again, and whose hands cupped his elbows.

"What you need is a gun. It's such sweet serendipity that you and I've become acquainted." The con walked a circle around Seymour. "I just got the one, taken off of Officer Gil Crandall, Talladega County Correctional Facility. I'm psychic, and I predict I'm gonna get another one soon. So, here." He held the handle of the gun out for Seymour to grasp.

Seymour reached for the gun. The con retracted, and Seymour's hand missed. "Psych. I'll give you this, Trigger Junior." His hand opened to reveal the pocket knife.

Dustin sniveled and shook, and the con pointed the gun at him. "See, that's what kids did my day. You little sassafras... This," he pointed the gun at his own face, "is what you're gonna be. 'Member. I'm a psychic." He touched the barrel to his temple.

The door opened, and a man came in carrying long objects. They sounded like a jarred rifle. "Hey man, what the hell you doing?" The second man leveled a rifle at the con.

"We don't got time for this."

"Do you believe in God, cellie?" The con aimed his pistol at his cellie.

The cellie bent his head, like he was holding an invisible violin. "Man, I knew you'd go bat-shit. We can play Russian roulette later."

"Well, dear. Flying rodent feces? Suicide gambling?"

Seymour released his fists. His body was loose. All the strings of his muscles between the skin and bones had slackened like the fingernails of Skelly Ross.

The con's sweaty arm throbbed, gripping the gun. He pointed it at the floor. "Fleamour, will you please procure that firearm from my partner?"

"Uh uh. He can't hold this shit," said the partner.

"Such unfamiliarity with the abundance of our language is where you're headed, Deemore."

Seymour shuffled toward the partner, who was mumbling, "Don't you make me now, don't you make me."

"Snatch that weapon," barked the con. Seymour kneeled, and the partner let the rifle butt touch the floor. The rifle toppled toward Seymour's hands. He hugged himself instead and crouched, and the stock made a dull thud against the floor. Seymour thought about the shooting ravine. "Oh hair off the goat's fifth leg," the con said. Seymour threw a lazy arm out and bumped the butt, as if the rifle were just out of reach. The con made a swollen smile, like Goofy. "Glory to the He-Man above! You are saved. Jesus has inseminated your brains with the spunk of heavenly sweet goodness pie filling."

"Dumb-ass! You could have saved us," screamed Linnea.

The con pressed the gun against her

head. "Quiet, cunt. Your jaw won't close again after me. Seymour is our hero. If you don't like that, you plop your boobies in the crosshairs. But don't you dare micturate on his jihad, sister. As a fine, erect young gentleman once said, 'There's a time to hold and a time to fold.'"

There was a spray, and the smell of pee came from Dustin. "Screw you," Linnea blubbered.

Seymour reached for the rifle again, his hand so close, he could feel the familiar lever that locks the bolt. The partner's foot stomped down and anchored the rifle. His mouth was a crooked o. "You had your fun, pard. This kid's reaching for the gun. Ain't shooting no kids."

The con kept grinning. He stepped behind the second, who hopped one-legged backwards, while dragging the rifle under his front foot. "Well, dasvidaniya," said the con. "This spiritual lesson is brought to you by Aaron Checkerman. If I don't see you in the future, I'll see you in the pasture." He tossed Seymour the pocket knife. "Such a warm, moist pleasure to meet you, Squealmore. Read Psalm Twenty-Two. Be glad."

The partner bent and picked up the rifle, and again Seymour sensed the bolt lever, the trigger cold and then warm against his finger, the kick, the report. Looking at Seymour, the con withdrew through the screen door. Dustin started blubbering too.

Seymour never heard that before. Off in the distance, shots were fired. But Seymour had heard shots fired off in the distant ravine before. They sounded like firecrackers, splattering the air bright red. Seymour squeezed the knife hard as he could. When he

looked at his hand, all he saw was knife. Dustin was howling, like Seymour had never heard him or any Eagle Scout or anybody howl before. Seymour never howled like that. He said, "Shut up."

Dustin did. He laid his head down, and there were only the night sounds, like the day sounds during silent prayer. Linnea whispered, "You're gonna pay."

#

How was he gonna pay, Seymour wondered along the path through darkness. His wonder caused him to forget to do his limp. When he opened the tent flap, Chilton was hissing "Seymour" through chattering teeth. His wet sleeping bag squelched. "I'm s-sorry." Hollow Chilton shivered. "I was scared."

Birds chirped outside, hushing him. Seymour wanted to cry. Instead, he murmured, "Be glad."

He would have lain down, but the con was there watching in his bed. The rising sun was bloody in the clear sky. Seymour bowed his head

and waited for the Scoutmasters to come.

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



The Adventures of Star Girl and the Marble Roller

Kathryn Orwig

Fredrick had an obsession with marbles. Ever since he could pinch one between his chubby little fingers he had rolled them, slobbered on them (he was three then, and, as he says, who among us has not sucked on a marble at some point?), and even swallowed one once. He hadn't swallowed it because he thought it was food, like his mother insisted. He had eaten it because he had seen the world through the cat's eye and thought that if he could take in the whole world in one bite, then it would dissolve inside of him and fill him with the deepest oceans, wildest forests and tallest mountains. But his mother never understood this and all that had happened was that the marble came out later in a fit of beets, carrots and lettuces from the night before.

On the morning of his sixth birthday, Fredrick lay on the smooth, well-worn floorboards of his bedroom. His stomach pressed firmly against the ground, his dark brown hair swept to the side, and his sharp hazel eyes watched the marbles in front of him. They rolled along the miniscule cracks between floorboards only to stop a few feet away in dips only marble rollers could see. His parents had given him a new batch of marbles to entertain himself with that morning, while they set up his party down stairs. He could hear their voices and even a few surprised bouts of laughter. It had been many months since Fredrick had heard his parents laugh together.

More marbles clinked in his bulging pocket. Fredrick absent mindedly fingered them, like one would a

rosary. First feeling one whole, cool marble, then letting it slide through his fingers, warm from his touch, then the next one. He liked the sound they made, a soft clink muffled by his pocket. He considered rolling three or four marbles in his hands like one would to start a fire (but slower of course), an absolute pleasure. Or holding a handful of marbles in one hand, only to drop them against one another, fast and then slowly to hear that sharp clack sound. They were smooth, soft and so lightweight, as if they were filled with air instead of marble ingredients. Mostly he couldn't tell by feel which was what type, and this gave him a certain satisfaction when he did guess right after pulling one out of his pocket. Surprising to most was that Fredrick didn't have a favorite color of marble, the pattern was more important.

He was the best shooter of shooter marbles in his class, and the highlight every day at recess in a corner on the black pavement of the basketball courts, was trying to see how many marbles he could make burst outwards like a small star explosion. And whenever they played the circle marble game—no matter how much Fredrick might want the runaway marbles—he always played for friendlies, and never keepsies; he couldn't risk losing his own collection. He loved trying to come up with the best angle on the circle to knock two or three marbles outside the chalk drawn line. It was even luckier if the shooter marble trundled out too.

Fredrick knew all the types of marbles. Clearies were a clear marble made of one color, glowing orange, florescent pink, bubbling blue—he

liked those a great deal. Cat's eyes which had a distinct three color swirl, were some of his favorites. He was always torn the most though, between loving Micas—marbles that shown so brightly in the sunlight they glittered—and Sulphide marbles—clear marbles with silvery figures in them. Micas were rare and beautiful, but the figures captured Fredrick's attention. He wondered if they lived in there happily, or if they were trapped souls who were tricked into staying in the small glass bead. He figured some genie was behind making Sulphides, he still had yet to prove his theory though. He had one marble he imagined was what his sister would have looked like.

She was silver, of course, small and dainty in the glass world. If he stared at the marble hard enough he could see that she wore a little dress and a ribbon in her hair. Fredrick could not make out if she was smiling or frowning, and her hand was always kept outstretched, palm up. Was she inviting him to come to her world, or demanding a payment of some sort? The flecks in the marble behind her looked like stars. She even looked fragile, which is the way one ought to look after being a Star Girl, Fredrick always thought. A Star Girl, that was what he had overheard his aunt tell his mother on the day they buried his little sister's body.

Fredrick had wandered up to his room on the second floor of their two-story house while his mother and aunt talked in the kitchen. He knew they wouldn't say anything important if he was around. But they didn't know that if he lay on his stomach and peered through the vent in his

floorboards into the kitchen below, he could hear every word they said. His aunt poured his mother more tea from the blue, yellow and white Polish pottery pot, but his mother didn't move to take it. She just sat in the wooden chair, with her hands clasped tightly together over her stomach and her red-rimmed eyes locked on something far away.

"Clarissa...Clary..." His aunt started.

"She didn't even make it to morning." His mother shot her hands to her mouth to keep the cries in.

His aunt got up and put her long thin arms around his mother's plump body. Drawing sister patterns with her hands on his mother's back. Fredrick always imagined that only sisters could read these patterns. "She's a star girl, Clarissa, she's now glittering and shining with them all."

Fredrick referred to the girl in the glass as precisely that. The Star Girl.

Plates clattered down stairs followed by a muffed curse from his mother. A thought occurred to Fredrick. If the Star Girl was in the stars, then she could only see the world at night. And if she could only see the world at night, then she did not know what the world looked like by day. Fredrick got up from his bedroom floor and clutched Star Girl in his hand tightly. He ran from his room, down the stairs and out into the living room, through the kitchen where his mother was picking up broken shards, and finally to the slider door. He pushed the door over and holding the marble up exclaimed, "See Star Girl, look at all the flowers in the morning sunshine...."

Water plopped on Fredrick's hand. He squinted at the sky. Dark clouds lumbered overhead and rain was just starting to drop steadily on the flowers in the garden, on the patio set where his party was to take place, and in the small blue pool they had just set up the night before. The little water toys careened and shook in the growing torrents from the sky, all about to capsize at any moment. It was so dark it barely differed from the light of night. Fredrick pursed his lips and looked up at the clouds and then back to the very wet (and getting wetter) yard. Star Girl rolled in his hand and settled next to the droplets of water. Fredrick's face started to fall as sadness crawled up his throat. He wondered if Star Girl was disappointed in him for not showing her the sun. He was now sure her face held the sternest frown. But then a drop of rain landed on her glass home and turned the world inside her marble upside down, and for the briefest of moments Fredrick saw her smile magnified.

The water slid and curved around the glass sphere, melting into the other droplets converging in his palm. Fredrick smiled and as he raced out the door, he held Star Girl high in his fingers. High in the pale, rainy, morning light.

"Look Star Girl! Look! Can you see it? Can you see it? This is all for you."

This story first appeared in Cafe Shapiro Anthology 2017 and is the basis for a screenplay that won NFFTY in 2018.

Kathryn Orwig (RC 2017) is a screenwriter for It's Not a Phase, Mom LLC, an animation company. She received a Hopwood in 2017. More about Kathryn at her website: www.kathrynorwig.com.

The Hearts of Mark

David McLeod

We first met in her dim living room with the windows lightly veiled. I could hear the clock's heavy hands
tick
like a metronome.

By the big brick fireplace surrounded by several scented candles is a portrait of Mark.

"A year ago," she tells me.
tick
"Doctors didn't diagnose until —"
tick

Tears. Tissues.

Nudging my knee with his cold wet nose is her dumb, half-blind dog. Under someone else's care, Rip would surely be put down.

He takes Prozac, for Pete's sake, and he hooks up to a cable to go outside and pee.

But she wouldn't dare not care. She must understand her dog's brain and love him like a lost love.

And she has lost love. She has lost more love than I have ever found.

She shows me a small coffee stain
on the white kitchen counter.
She asks me what it looks like to me.

tick

"It's a heart," she tells me.

tick

"Mark sends them."

Then she shows me a chip in the stovetop. She shows me the
inside of a cheerio.

Shows me dappled light on her driveway. She shows me a knot in
an oak tree.

Shows me cracks in the sidewalk.

She shows me clouds in the sky.

And me,

I feel like a dumb, half-blind dog

lamenting the hundreds of hearts I've missed.

*David McLeod graduated from the RC in Spring 2019 with a degree in
creative writing.*



On Death: A Researcher's Notes from the Field

Heena Shah

Five years ago, on mother's day, my
dad died. My mom sent me and my
sisters hurried texts as things unfolded:

*We are at the hospital; they managed
to resuscitate him in the ambulance.*

*His condition is somewhat stabilized,
but he's still not conscious.*

*They are putting him in an ice bath to
make sure blood goes to his brain.*

And the last one, as the plane we
were hurrying home on was about to
take off:

His lungs are filling with fluid.

I grabbed my sister's hand and held
it tight as we sped down the runway.
In the month after he died, I got mar-
ried. In the week after I got married,
I got pregnant. When my son was 9
months old, I earned my doctorate.

Each of these moments was imbued
with both my dad's presence and his

absence. During her wedding toast,
my younger sister shared a story
about my dad that I had shared with
her: after two weeks in India, my dad
observed with delight that my white,
southern (now) husband happily
ate vegetarian Indian food for every
meal.

*It's like he has a white armor, but
he's Indian inside!*

We didn't talk for two years after
I told my dad about Barrot. So that
offhand comment left me elated.

When I crossed the stage to get
my degree, I forgot for a moment
and scanned the crowd for him. As a
physician, he had desperately want-
ed each of us to become physicians
too. Instead, he had raised a psychol-
ogist, a public health researcher, and
an artist who does anti-racism work.

Moving through these big moments left me wondering if there was a way that we remained connected to each other. And for the first time in my life, I felt compelled to define my beliefs around death.

As a child, I lived among scientists: my parents, uncles, and aunties were all physicians. Often, I visited my dad's office, poking the model heart on his desk while he purposefully bustled between clinic rooms in a white coat, with a stethoscope looped around his neck. Many family gatherings ended with aunts and uncles perched on the edge of the couch and dispersed across the carpet, bellies full of hot and homemade rotlis, shak, dhar and bhath. There were animated discussions about patients. I would snuggle next to my mom on the L-shaped couch, my head on her shoulder listening intently to all my relatives laughing and shouting over each other about difficult cases and hospital drama. I never attended any camps as a child, but the one I did go to was a two week Math, Science and Technology camp at Michigan State University, where I learned about debate in a bioethics course, how to play Dungeons and Dragons, and what it meant to program computers.

At the same time, every spring, I would laugh raucously as I threw colored powder at my cousins in celebration of Holi, which marked the start of spring, but also the survival of Prahlad, who was put into a fire by his father, a king who didn't want him to worship God. During summer holidays, we would overheat the VCR watching episodes of *Mahabharata*. I was responsible for putting in the next tape, after which I would force space

between my mom and grandma on the couch, both of whom wore oversized glasses to better see the series for the umpteenth time. As summer drifted into the spectacle of color that was fall in Michigan, I would excitedly anticipate another joyful display of color-Navaratri, nine nights of dancing in swirling circles to mark Ramayana's defeat of the demon Ravana.

As a child I keenly believed that Ganesh, the elephant god, could use a tusk to write an epic story about the beginning of things, as told to him by an old poet, but I dismissed the idea that Santa Claus could visit all those houses in one night with flying reindeer on the grounds it wasn't scientifically sound. Those ideas somehow sat very comfortably next to each other.

As an adult, this comfort with contradiction fell away and in its place came a deeply practical way of thinking, reinforced by courses in graduate school that taught me to be a keen and methodical observer and seek evidence for hypotheses. And, while I was ambivalent about whether Hindu goddesses and gods existed, the stories of my childhood created a love for narratives and a space for the idea that maybe there are things we don't understand with just our senses.

My reflections on what happens after we die, how we remain connected to our ancestors, forced me to live inside that discomfort with contradiction: it kicked up a conversation between the scientist and the child who had believed in stories from the Bhagvad Gita.

About two months after my dad died, I tried having a conversation with him. I self-consciously talked out loud, telling him about my wedding, which he had been intimately involved in planning: how lovely my mom had looked in the sari he had helped her pick, how ethereal the sunlight had been on a day that it was supposed to rain, how comforting and jarring it was to see all his best friends from medical school sitting at the same table laughing at jokes funny only within their tightknit circle, how strange it felt for it to be both my wedding day and my first father's day without him. I finished by sheepishly asking him for some sort of sign.

That same day, I ventured out to explore Kuala Lumpur, where we were on honeymoon. I swung by a mall to get a SIM card. I happened to glance at the nametag of the person behind the counter—D.O. Shah—he had the same last name and first and middle initial as my dad. Later, sitting poolside, I scrolled through old email exchanges between my dad and me. I found an email he had sent me four months earlier, marked unread, about the seven Hindu temples that protect Bali, where we would be travelling next. There, we visited Tanah Lot, an ancient Hindu pilgrimage temple. I sat by the ocean, deeply sad and happy at the same time, and threw a creamy white fragrant frangipani that the priest had given me out to sea, wondering what it all meant.

When I found out after my honeymoon that I was unexpectedly pregnant, it tipped off an almost comedic family debate about whether this new family member was my

dad reincarnated. Many of my uncles and aunties emphatically believed it was. My mom sharply rebuffed that notion, asserting that my dad—who had meditated twice daily and gone through a radical transformation—had done enough spiritual work to achieve enlightenment.

I still didn't know what to think.

Not until after S. was born.

Because the way S.'s life began seems completely intertwined with the way my dad's ended. Like it's all part of one story. I only remember snapshots of my labor: flowers in my hair plucked by my sister as I walked in a rose garden near our home. A hug from my best friend. My mom making chai. Time in a lukewarm tub. My husband's voice counting through contractions. Hours of pushing.

It's the part where S. emerges into the world that snaps into sharp focus. There was no crying. They cut the cord immediately and whisked him away. He was quiet, pale and white, with a large, red bump on his head. His heart wasn't beating. All I could see was the pediatrician lifting his arms up and letting them fall flaccidly to his sides on the tiny cart. While the doctor cleared his airways, my mom, a pediatrician herself, quietly stepped in to do chest compressions on his tiny body, the same way she had when my dad's heart had suddenly stopped beating.

After what seemed like an eternity, S. took his first breath. A process that went in reverse to my dad's took place: lungs that had been previously filled with life sustaining water filled with air; a heart that hadn't been beating pumped its first beat out

in the world. Several hours later, S. started crying incessantly. One of the reasons I had pushed for so long was because S.'s head had gotten stuck. The x-ray results revealed that his skull was fractured. We anxiously waited through a follow-up test, this one to see if there was any bleeding below the skull, a fact that could mean he had damage to his brain. I felt my stomach turn and tighten the same way it had when I had learned about my dad's brain scan.

It turned out that S. was okay. He was more than okay. He was perfect. In the early, blurry days after S. was born, my mom was feeding me sheero, a cream of wheat porridge with cardamom, sugar and butter, while I lay on my side, still trying to recover from the taxing delivery. As she scooped a warm bite into my mouth, she said:

They say that when it takes a long time for a baby to come out, it's a soul that isn't ready to return to the world.

At four and a half, S. often reminds me of my dad. The specific way he uses his hands to eat, his obsession with a certain Kishore Kumar song, one that my dad and I loved together, his insistence on locating the moon in the night sky (my dad used to point out the moon to my mom on their evening walks) makes me feel connected to my dad. It gives

me immense joy to think that my dad, who grew up in profound poverty and worked so hard to make sure we had everything, is somehow here and being taken care of by us.

My musings on death have evolved, paradoxically, into both a firm knowledge and a steadfast uncertainty. I find myself returning to that childhood version of me, the one who is comfortable making home for two disparate ideas, holding *knowing* and *not knowing* at the same time.

Heena Shah (RC Economics, 2002) is a freelance researcher and writer. Her previous research has focused on preventing HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, community organizing for health in slums in Kenya, and examining the ways that federal food programs can better support poor families in CA. She is currently working on a children's book that lifts up the immigrant experience and a set of essays about motherhood. She earned her Masters of Public health from Emory University and Doctorate in Public Health from UC Berkeley. When she doesn't have her nose in a good book, she loves to paint with her kids, watch good television, or cook and gather around a table with friends. She lives in Oakland, CA with her partner and two children. "On Death" was published in January at Medium.com.



Beware the Sirens!

Dan Madaj

Jen Harmadik was having trouble sleeping.

On Monday she decided to major in creative writing at the XC (the Experimental College). A junior, she liked the two writing classes she'd taken with Hayley Van der Berg, the XC's long-serving creative-writing director, who graciously said that Jen had "heart," "good ideas," and "interesting turns of phrase."

Jen called her mom that evening to tell her, but like usual, her mom seemed distracted and not listening. But she must have been, because the next day Jen got a call from her grandfather Quarry. Had he ever called her, before?

Quarry wasn't his real name (it was Corey), but he had been a stoner since his own days at the XC, hence "Quarry." He had lucked into a lucrative career

selling hippie paraphernalia. (It didn't hurt that his wife Durga, also an XC alum, had a regular paying job as an attorney). Half asleep, Jen imagined Quarry standing in a cloud of marijuana smoke, wearing his favorite old tie-dyed t-shirt.

But it was not a cordial call.

Quarry was terrified.

Quarry and Durga's daughter, Jo (officially Snapjo, named after a beloved sandwich in the XC's old coffee shop), Jen's mom, was also an XC student. Sometime after Jo's XC days someone at the XC had an idea to offer tuition-and-housing for any third generation XC student . . . perhaps never dreaming how many alums would be interested, or how expensive tuition and housing would end up being, all these years later. Jen, among several others, was

getting a “free ride.”

But until Tuesday’s phone call, Jen did not know that her grandfather had also been an XC creative writing major. And that he had almost bargained away his soul to placate what he called “the Literary Police.”

“That’s why I never did any writing after school,” Quarry claimed. “I needed to keep them off my trail. Every time I heard a police siren, I thought they were coming for me! I kept finding these notes in my journals: Beware the Sirens! And now, you . . .”

It sounded like the lamest excuse for not writing. She tried to placate her granddad and then tried to forget his call. But that night, when she went to sleep . . .

It was now Friday, and Jen was having so much trouble sleeping that Piotr, the new manager of the Outside Inn, found her dozing, slumped up against a wall in the kitchen. He woke her gently. Embarrassed, she half-whispered, “I’m sorry, but n-nightmares are ruining my sleep!”

Nightmares? Piotr thought of Darryl Koshwar, “the dream detective,” the relatively new university psychology professor who was still a regular at the Outside, although Piotr expected Darryl to switch to the XC’s new coffee shop.

You see, the XC had closed its popular coffee shop a few years ago (bowing to pressure from University Housing), but alums had re-opened the shop down the street as the Outside Inn. The Outside did so well that Housing, envious, had convinced the XC to “reopen.” It had an

industrial name but everyone called it The Waffle House (because of all the bureaucratic waffling, of course).

The Outside had been managed by Darryl’s friend “Clara Voyant,” but her XC appointment (in Culinary Arts and Ideas) made her vulnerable, and she had been reassigned to the Waffle. Piotr was a drop-out who had enrolled in the XC when his girlfriend came to town to get her MSW; he was somewhat infamous as a chef (his “Mock Uncle Joe” was at the heart of a near-murder investigation), and had worked for Clara at the Outside until she was forced back across the street.

Anyway, this morning Darryl was at his regular spot, near the entrance, sipping his usual latte. He was in his early 40s but looked younger because his longish dark hair was ascue and because his “dreamy” demeanor made him look like he was stoned. This morning he was happy to be distracted with this poor girl’s problems, because it interrupted several things on his own mind:

His neighbor Dale’s beloved dog Fraximus had died, and Dale was overwhelmed with grief. How could Darryl help, or could he?

And then Marta Rozzum had invited him to dinner, ostensibly to discuss an interesting dream: she had dreamt of a special photocopier that produced copies of her dreams (but hadn’t yet figured a way to bring those copies to her waking life).

Darryl had met her recently, shortly after her arrival on campus, at her September neurology lecture about dreams and neurological healing. They had stayed in touch via e-mail and Facebook, mostly musing about the possibility of a Neurology/Psy-

chology “dream clinic,” perhaps piloted at the XC. They hadn’t even met for coffee, yet. But now . . .

It took a moment to get Darryl’s attention.

Jen looked earnest, exhausted. “It seems silly,” she said, after telling Darryl about Quarry, “but ever since, I’ve had these dreams where I’m running, hiding from his Literary Police.”

It turns out that Jen isn’t especially paranoid about her failings as a young writer. “Not yet, at least!” she laughed. And she didn’t seem eager to adopt them as an excuse.

“You know, a moment of lucid dreaming might do the trick,” he suggested. “Next time you dream you hear that knock at the door, look at your watch, adjust your glasses, touch a favorite token in your pocket, anything to remind you that you’re in a dream. Then: open the door! Don’t be afraid of what happens!”

Sometimes (and maybe most of the time), what terrifies us is the suggestion of something, not the actual thing itself.

“Uh . . . okay,” Jen said, not at all convinced.

They agreed to meet the next week.

As Jen was leaving, Darryl called out to her. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Sirens? Are you sure he meant police?”

Even for a dreamer, Darryl was distracted as he headed over to Marta’s house that evening, thinking about Marta but also about his neighbor Bob and his dog Fraximus.

Marta lived in a large apartment complex near campus, and even though all the units looked the same, Darryl found her door without much problem. The front door was slightly

ajar. He knocked discretely. A moment later, the door opened more widely, pushed open by the snout of a medium-sized retriever mix who looked remarkably like Fraximus! His fur was shaggy and multi-colored but mostly yellow and white, with a swatch of brown on the snout and on the large furry tail, which was rapidly beating the air.

The dog looked at him with such wise and friendly curiosity that Darryl got down on his knees to greet him. Darryl felt the sudden urge to ask the dog about Fraximus (“Can you tell me if he’s all right?”) but was interrupted by Marta’s daughter Yelena’s arrival at the door. If Darryl remembered correctly, she was 10. She had rather long, frizzy blondish hair, some of which was captured by a headband.

“This is my dog Hugo,” Yelena announced. “He actually belongs to my uncle Fred, but we’re going to keep him.” She paused and stared at him for a moment. “Were not allowed to keep Hugo here, because it’s an apartment. Maybe you and my mom will be friends and we all can come live at your house.”

Darryl could only smile, delighted. Yelena and Hugo led Darryl into the small living room, which opened into a small kitchen and dining room. Before Darryl saw Marta he heard her yell toward Yelena, “Yelena! I thought I told you to set the table!” And then she turned and saw Darryl, blanched, then smiled.

She was wearing an apron, and her hair, although darker, looked a lot like Yelena’s: partly captured by a barrette but mostly escaping into strands, stalks, and frizzes.

Somehow Darryl remembered

that there was no husband. The pregnancy was a surprise, the father long gone before the surprise was noticed. Someone must have chattered these details while they were waiting to talk with Marta after her lecture; it didn't seem like the thing she'd tell a stranger, no matter how important parenthood had become.

Dinner was excellent: salad, a frittata with asparagus and spinach, crunchy bread probably from a bakery, then homemade brownies.

After, as Yelena was expected to go off to bed, and Darryl offered to clean up and do dishes while Marta read to her, Yelena said, no, she wanted Darryl to tell her a story, a variation that apparently had never happened before.

Upstairs, Darryl looked on her bookshelf for something to read, but she asked instead for a real story. So he tells her about Bob and Fraximus:

Bob used to be married. He and his wife rescued Fraximus from a shelter. Fraximus was friendly and flexible, and everyone got along well. But when Bob and his wife divorced, Fraximus increasingly stayed with Bob, especially after Bob retired and had more time to spend at home.

You might think that Bob would be overwhelmed with having responsibility for Fraximus all by himself, but instead their relationship grew and grew, and Bob says that even up to his last day Fraximus was teaching him: about the difference between one and two barks, about the importance of a long stretch before rising in the morning, what a certain side glance meant, how much love you can feel . . .

Darryl then told Yelena that Fraximus was old and was increasingly stiff in cold, damp weather, and while Bob was worrying about his stiffness and thinking about ways to make him feel better, he didn't know that Fraximus was sick with something else, not until the day before he died.

That was it. The story was done. It was just sadder and more stark than Darryl had anticipated.

"Hugo reminds me of Fraximus," Darryl eventually said.

Hugo was snoozing on Yelena's bed, his head nestled on the blanket that covered her feet, but he half-opened his eyes when he heard his name. He didn't smell any treats, so he went back to sleep.

Yelena stared at Darryl. "Do you think your friend would like to see Hugo?"

"I think he would," Darryl said.

Yelena drifted off to sleep, and Darryl came downstairs. Hugo thought about coming, too, but decided he was too comfortable in bed. He huffed, and settled back in.

Marta had finished with the dishes, and had uncorked a bottle of wine. She smiled, warmly, sweetly . . . He should have kissed her, but instead he cowardly walked into the living room and sat alone in the side chair there. Marta brought him a glass of wine, then sat across from him, on the couch, wine at her elbow.

Surely she could see his nervousness (she was nervous, too), and she gave him a little smile when she realized he was more nervous than she!

She said, "Well, about that dream . . ."

There wasn't much more than what

she had told over email: there was a kind of copy machine, and in its "out" tray were many pages of transcripts of that night's dreams.

"I was excited, but of course when I woke up the next morning, the transcripts didn't make it. But I had the delicious sense that maybe it would be possible . . ."

Darryl frowned.

"If it's a gift," he said, "it seems to be an empty one: because it's not plausible. I don't just mean the 'transfer,' I mean the production. Someone would have to transcribe your dreams into words and then type them onto sheets. The copier only makes copies, after all."

He took a sip of wine.

"And it's unlikely that words typed on a sheet would be your dream-self's way of recording. Wouldn't sketching, or some sort of recorded video, or even song or dance be more apt?"

Marta smiled, and turned her head slightly to one side. "Is it less of a gift just because it doesn't work?"

They then had a long discussion about the difference between the nature and the appearance of reality: For example, Marta argued that "turtles all the way down" is unnecessary and a waste of resources, when "turtles just far enough" is sufficient. It's like television or movies, she said: you only need so many frames per second to give a believable semblance of motion.

Marta couldn't suppress a giggle. "There's another theory," she said. "Maybe the gift of the dream was not the production of functional dream transcripts."

Darryl looked puzzled.

She gave him a big smile. "Maybe

the gift was to get me to tell you about it, to get you interested, to get you to come over . . ."

When Darryl saw Jen the following week, she seemed calm and rested. A good sign!

She reached into her purse and pulled out a tiny figurine, which Darryl recognized as a Polly Pocket doll. He understood that this was the talisman Jen was using as a dream ally.

He looked at the doll more closely. She was dressed in a blue power suit!

"Yes," Jen said, "since we were going out, I told her she had to get dressed up." Then Jen frowned, but her eyes twinkled. "Maybe I didn't need her, after all: the Literary Police never showed up."

She looked at him accusingly, as if it was somehow his fault. "I did have a dream where I heard them barge into the apartment house and start to storm up the stairs," she admitted. "I was excited, not scared: I stood at the apartment door, Polly in hand. But they never showed."

Darryl laughed. "Oh, they still might! Or you might find Polly useful for other nightmares."

Jen nodded. "I called my granddad Quarry to tell him some of this, but my grandma Durga answered the phone, so I asked her about 'Beware the Sirens.' She laughed and laughed! Eventually she said, 'Well, that's probably one of the names you could call that group of us wild women at the XC!'" Then she said, "But it seemed to work out for the old boy, after all."

Darryl laughed. Sometimes all the clues are flashing right in front of your face, he thought, but you still can't see them! He thought of his recent adventure with Marta.

"Anyway . . . you might be able to develop your lucid-dreaming skills and use them in a job."

Jen snorted, despite her best efforts. "Yeah? Like what job?"

Darryl told her about Marta Rossum and their possible "dream assistance" project.

"We don't know if the XC will be interested in housing the project, but I imagine it would be a pro-active way to help people, with nightmares but also with health problems, or worries, and so on."

Jen perked up. "It would sort of be like the Literary Police having a SWAT team!"

Darryl groaned. "Maybe not quite that pro-active," he said. "I was think-

ing more like an elementary school crossing guard."

They both laughed. Jen was interested. They tried to clink their coffee cups, but the sound was muffled and drops of coffee spilled onto the table top.

Like Dan Madaj's other XC tales, this one is based in fact and memory. For example, Dan did brood about the "literary police" when a young creative-writing student at the RC, and his beloved dog Rowan died this past January. Thanks to Karen Heckert for her friendship, back in our SSW days.

Dan was in the third RC class but didn't graduate until 1982. Among other things he worked for U-M for over 40 years, including several jobs at the RC or in East Quad.



Seven Poems

Bob Clifford

Dedicated to JH, SH & JS for their commitment to justice.

The dark gravel parking lot
On the West side of the pit
Where gladiators collide

A devil on four wheels surveyed
The air with a sickle
Innocence kills as the gray clouds circle
With no eyes

Driving to another act of futility
Flashed the appearance of the devil
On four wheels hiding under the
Whirling winds, clouds, seeking direction
From the prey

My four wheels glided to the front

The smell of evil lit my nostrils
The eyeballs like laser connected with
The antenna of the devil

We pierced each other without solution

As the attempted prey walked alone to
Freedom

We challenged the empty shark eyes of the inner
vessels Of a heart with no blood

Our eight wheels move apart
One set to sunlight
One set to darkness
On a road traveled by innocence
We meet again on the same road to freedom
With people who seek
The one human being

Not seen
On a dark night of the wet Valley

Clouded by a clogged antenna

The agents of free world descend
Like daddy long leg spiders
To conquer the quest

Many arms
Many eyes
Many tongues
Many keyboard clacks
Many cerebral vouerger

Oh where could the devil of evil snatch the innocence child

Of God

December the magic of determination
The sky opens up to retrieve the black hole
Of the past
A cold brisk dark day of being on a empty night

Eyes to seek
Eyes to declare
Eyes to eliminate
Eyes to look through
Eyes that were not there
To put a human behind the living and the invisible

The four wheel monster surface
In all of its flames and the cloistered Black Devil
Who commandeered the ship of death

A day again in the pit where gladiators collide the black hole of numbers
shouted The messengers of God shouted we were free of the devil of evil

Yes Brook we met the devil who captured you for the dark evil of your life

Our eyes, mind, arms now control him for the future not the past

The day the devil of evil went fishing no one bit

The devil of evil captured your innocence

Not you

Down the road in a valley from

heaven

a small town with
rocking chairs sits idle
fire places burn slow
old man remembers world war I
a bar with pictures of men
from world war II
breath motionless
a cold beer is poured
a pop inhaled
a cop laying cards
a chair full of gentlemen
further down the road a woman
sits in a kitchen with the
Virgin Mary beside her pictured
son
with a cold cup of coffee
she looks out the window
into a converted hayfield
laced with fog.

Sitting in a bar thinking about
the sights that have not
changed

the gas station
the school
the church
the friends

kids on the corner
the cops
even the field that I used to
lay
in and cry

*To John R. Clifford Cpl. USMC
Vietnam, December 1966 - January 1968*

My brother who was in the fox
hole

wrote and told me he wouldn't write
me when I ended up in one myself.
cause I never wrote him.
never understood why he said that
did not know that I did not write
I never understood what it was to
have a brother in a fox hole so we did
not
talk
I discovered
foxholes were not just for movies
it was too late for me to fill the hole
with letters or talk-
while the invisible letters
sacked up

Gliding over Wolf mountain on thin ice heading down
into brown eye
On a glimpse of a pulse
Dark skyline of the entrapped
We are white men invading the white men who invaded
First
The Red desert with its own soul not from history A
Gods gift of the original natives
Taking a left at Warmstutter past the highway bar that is
filled with vampires not old owls from trees
There are not trees
The rising sun of the East on a below zero morning
keep the tires on the rim of the road

the monster appears iron, chains, mud, pipe
timem to pull up with all of our fingers the truck
travels north out of the sand and tumble weed

the challenged begins on a cold snowy night
we have no dreams from the dead land of invasion
keep the tires on the white line rim of the road

friendly skyline of lights Rawlins not even a tourist trap
how do the natives dream beyond a day when you can
get lost in a white out walking home over the bridge by
the whore house with the welding trucks out front

Folkore has it the ladies of the night are from Mobile
not even Reno

11 God radio stations between trailer lot number 4
and the rifleman saloon with a cloud inside hanging
over the furtive visitors

Excitement is not defined by how far you can see in
the
wrong direction a Brown Eye special

The Red Desert blooms in your mind
Why you are looking for your mind

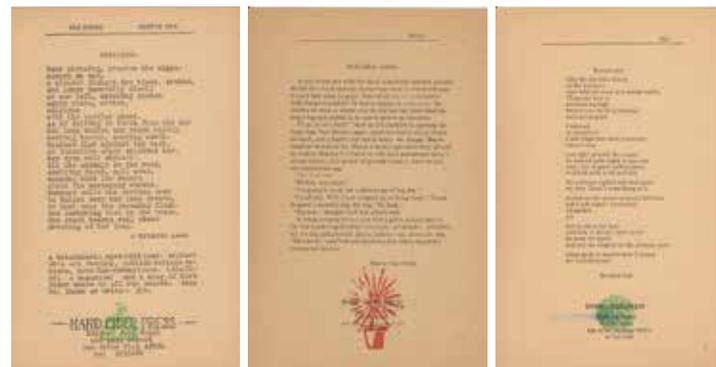
Standing on a bridge
 a pond that is old and dirty
 Saint Michael's stares on my
 right side
 looking down at the police
 and fireman under water
 trying to find a young bloated
 lifeless boy
 who has traveled from a village
 three thousand miles away to
 find
 happiness in a new world of
 unwanted adventure
 A priest arrives with his virgin
 face and hands
 the parents' young wrinkled faces
 from work not despair
 rosary beads of hell
 the silver tank is first
 with bubbles
 an endless black body rises like
 a
 volcano
 to the eyes that watch
 his right hand of senselessness
 wave
 for the protections
 as the rosary beads break and
 the



Selections from *Hard Cider Press*

John Hagen, editor

Hard Cider Press began in the early 1970s, designed as a weekly half-sheet sold by a penny, featuring one short work of fiction or poetry. Founder and editor John Hagen (*RC Literature*, 1972) notes that "the penny was never collected; it was mainly to establish some nominal value, and was a reference to the broadsheets and newspapers started in the 17th and 18th centuries that were sold for a penny or other small sum." Hagen contributed a self-designed woodcut imprint to each copy. *Issues* were distributed to area bookshops and posted around East Quad. *Hard Cider Press* ceased publication after eight issues, publishing work by RC creative writing students, RC faculty, and one LSA writing student. (More about John Hagen on pages 18, 118 and 119).



The first issue of Hard Cider Press (left), and later issues (center, right).

Neil's Silver Jubilee

Warren Jay Hecht

A red flower pot with the plant somebody said last summer should be a bush and two brown bags were it and would stay it until Neil came to grips: Does adult mean contentment with things reachable? He had a change of underwear, the clothes he wore, a winter coat he did not like that filled the larger bag and unable as he was to give it up the plant.

"I'll go to ed school!" Now he felt justified in opening the small bag. Two Havana cigars, much too heavy on an empty stomach, and a family size can of beets. No change. Maybe someone would be by. About a month ago when they all said he looked shakiest it yielded on odd days macadamia nuts, a couple dates, a half pound of ground

round, a short lid and one hard boiled egg.

The door rang.

"Hi, Neil. Any luck?"

"I'm going to write for a photocopy of my BA."

"Good idea. Well, I just stopped up to bring these." Frank dropped a handful into the bag. "So long."

"Peanuts," thought Neil, but didn't look.

A string hanging from a nail with a green crayon tied to the end beside a grid labeled *continuity*, *probability*, *reliability*, etc. on top and *planned*, *direct*, *indirect*, etc., down the side. "Ed school," said Neil and marked a box where *feasibility* intersected *random*.

This story was published in Babyburgers, Street Fiction Press, 1975.

Warren Hecht started the RC's Creative Writing Program in Fall 1970; it grew out of a writing class Warren taught earlier that Winter. Warren arrived in Ann Arbor in Fall 1969 with a writing grant and a degree in English from CCNY. He retired from U-M and the RC in December 2016 and is now Lecturer Emeritus.

Untitled

Justin Vitiello

Death called me to the door
raining a clinging rain
trees cased in wax
vapors steamed my lens
Death called me to come out
rains dead in mist
a swirling mass of curdled milk
invited me to sup
My hunger held me back
my belly would not growl
my loins slipped off their shroud
to mock death's toothless smile
If had prepared this feast
I knew a better joke
I knew a small trap door
up to a dusty skylight
There I craftily lurked
he grew weary of waiting
I laughed right up my throat
at his paltry bill-of-fare
On the roof the night was wide
the stars went round like stork mobiles
laying their eggs in the nest of the moon
spinning the tides cradling the sun

Justin Vitiello taught in the RC until 1973 when, after a year off in the woods of Vermont, he taught at Temple University in Philadelphia. He retired in 2006 and died in October 2013. He grew up in New York City, graduated from Brown in 1963, and wrote more than 20 books of poetry and essays in English, Spanish, and Italian.

a face you can lean on

Peter Carl Anderson

“home is in your head” says rogy
riverboom the skinny self-styled
who drove himself bananas drinking
romilar spiked with mr. clean thinking
the devils summoned by the potion
would perform magic instead of
gutting his cortex as they did leav-
ing rogy with twisted crankcase
chords and badly damaged sentence
structures finding it difficult to speak
coherently after that, no one but his
closest friends able to bear listening
to him talk because it meant waiting
every three words for rogy to catch
up — but he always did, persistent
poet that he was, unable to extend
his metaphors beyond a mere mo-
ment

rogy riverboom looking for the
state of mind where no boundaries
exist telling us the dream he un-
ashamedly never comes close to
realizing — to write the world’s most
incomprehensible comic book and
saying he’ll do it someday because

he’s tired of sitting around and do-
ing nothing but we smile knowing
tomorrow he’ll be sitting around do-
ing nothing — nothing but making
us happy because he’s rogy, a face
you can lean on and not be shocked
to find it slipping off in your hand

“home’s in your head” says
rogy in the back seat of his out of
order van talking to chrystalinda
his something special heartbump
warming up cozy — to his eternal
regret and her shy chagrin they’re
becoming lovers not friends — he
remembering the days when his
pockets were full of questions
and she said she didn’t want to no
answers and the rain came down
in colors where they walked — she
fondling his freedom like a stuffed
doll her hysterical eyewideness
a favorite trick learned in school
where she studied hard majoring in
psychoses reading all the books and
practicing daily until it began and
she cracked up like the rest of us

from the novel Hang On To Your Bellybutton, We’re Going for a Ride.

Peter Anderson (RC 1972) won three Hopwood Awards while at U-M.

Masquerade

Richard Sale

take the sky-blue flavor
of the yes-man
who told me once at a stellar buffet
There my boy is
madness enough
before you to fill a universe
with green grins

I listened
or seemed to
I had forgotten until yesterday
what it was

and right around the corner
he arrived with night in his coat
and a lot of good half-answers
to finish with it all and rest

the yes-man sighed and said again
my boy There’s something to it

somehow the moon moaned different
but I still wasn’t convinced
altogether
yet

but to show me blue
and how it doesn’t have to be
he took my hand
and put fingers on the oriental eyes

Great gods in heaven how I tasted
her kaleidoscope!

Richard B. Sale (RC 1975) died in August 1985.

Collision
Kristin Lems

Deer crossing, promise the signs.
almost on cue,
a slender distant doe rises, arches,
and lands immovably slowly
at our left, entering vision
again rises, arches,
collides
with the trailer ahead.
As if falling in birth from the sky
her legs twitch and reach wildly,
seeking heaven, seeking earth.
Grabbed flat against the back,
an inaudible crack stiffens her.
Her eyes roll skyward.
All the animals on the road,
smelling death, pull over,
moaning with low motors
about the streaming warmth.
Someone calls the carrion crew
to bullet away her last breath,
to haul away the steaming flesh.
And lumbering back to the track,
the steel beasts roll ahead
dreaming of her leap.

Kristin Lems is Professor of ESL/Bilingual Education at National Louis University near Chicago. She graduated from U-M in the early 1970s with a BA in English and Creative Writing. She won a Hopwood for poetry in 1969. She is also a performing songwriter, with eight CDs of original songs on her small label Carolsdatter Productions.

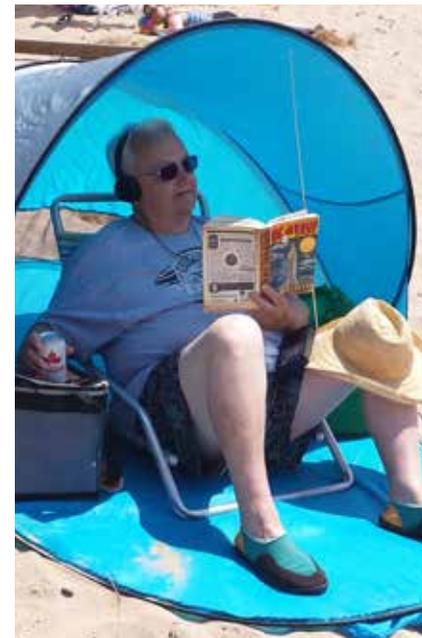
John Hagen (RC 1972, Literature) recently retired after a career in economic development. He and his wife Joy divide their time between homes near Tampa Bay and in Fennville, Michigan.

Alumni Interview: Writing Then and Now: John Hagen

You started at U-M and the RC before there was a creative writing program. Did you want to be a writer when you came to college?

I had always wanted to do something creative and, starting in junior high, was deeply involved in music. But I also had this romantic notion of moving to Paris and leading an ex-patriot life like Ernest Hemingway. I knew he spent summers as a youth in Northern Michigan near St. Ignace, where I grew up. In high school, I had edited and contributed to a new literary magazine, *Crossroad Anthology*, and designed the cover. I also edited the school yearbook and wrote some of the copy.

So, when I arrived at U-M, I looked for similar activities. I worked on various lit mags (*Generation, Chrysalis, Hard Cider Press*; see page 113), and took every creative writing course I could find in the RC and LSA Catalogs, plus a smorgasbord of lit classes. Instructors like Warren Hecht (RC) and John Aldridge (LSA) gave me time to write and lots of encouragement. Aldridge also got me a work-scholarship to Breadloaf Writers Conference in 1971. At the same time, my lit classes introduced me to fiction stylists like Laurence Sterne, William Faulkner, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jack Kerouac. I was inspired to experiment with my own writing style (with varying degrees of success). But I knew it would



John Hagen, retired!

be a tough slog to make a living.

After graduation, I moved back home, where I was fortunate to land a marketing position with the newly created Michigan State Lottery, a terrific first job. After a few years, I longed to pursue my goal of writing for a living, so I started in a graduate program in English at the University of Chicago. A whole new world opened to me with courses on James Joyce, American regional English, and Jonathan Swift. Richard Sterne was my writing coach and critic, much to my benefit. While there, I also worked on the *Chicago Review*.



John Hagen in the early 1970s.

In the meantime, I had met and married my wife Joy. I took an interest in her social work with children in my hometown. On a whim, I talked a county judge into hiring me as a juvenile justice program planner. This led to a criminal justice planning job in West Michigan (where I helped manage a regional jail study and can honestly say I have been in every jail in twelve counties). That position led to a similar position in economic development, the career I retired from after thirty-five years in four states (Michigan, Indiana, Arizona, and Florida). Over that period, I helped companies invest millions of dollars, create thousands of jobs, and start hundreds of new, small businesses. It was challenging but gratifying work.

Tell us about your wife and your kids.

My wife Joy and I met when she took a social work position out of college in St. Ignace. She has always been passionate about children and social justice. My interest in her and her work morphed into a career and a lifelong relationship. We have been married

for 44 years. A few years ago, she survived a bout with breast cancer while continuing to work through chemo and radiation. Now, even though retired, she still volunteers in a school to work with autistic children. Joy and I have two grown sons, Peter, who works for a small manufacturer in Northern California, and Andrew, who works for an audio-visual equipment rental company in Chicago. They both write games on the side, their real passion in life. They have been playing and making role-playing and video games almost since the day we brought them home from the hospital.

Did you continue writing during your working days?

I certainly used my writing skills at work in a multitude of ways: press releases, newsletters, brochures, ads, business proposals, plans, annual reports, speeches, presentations, websites, direct mail, etc. I also created several program names, slogans and taglines, and even designed a few logos. It was a very creative line of work. At various times, I also wrote book reviews for newspapers and taught composition at a community college. I kept my hand in creative writing with occasional short stories, humor, and poetry.

In high school I had been in the band program, but also started a rock band with four classmates in 1965 called the Runaways. I was the bass player and back-up vocalist. The band was quite successful, playing in Northern Michigan and Ontario. This all ended when I went to RC, but in 2005, I began writing songs and

started another rock band with three friends in the Phoenix area called Fossil Fuel. In 2010, I took a job in the Tampa Bay area but, regrettably, had to leave my band behind. I searched for another opportunity and found two groups of musicians. I started organizing bands with both groups. One became Greenlight Iguana, the other became the Time Bandits. Eventually, the first band dissolved, but the Time Bandits continue today as a six-piece classic rock and funk band. Unfortunately, when I decided to retire and live in Michigan and Florida, I had to give it up. By that time, I had written more than twenty songs.

Now that you are retired, what's your game plan?

As Joy and I made the transition to retirement, I began writing fiction, poetry and, most recently, short plays. A year ago, I pulled out all the manuscripts, journals, drafts, fragments, and notebooks I had kept and carted around the country since 1968. I found stories I didn't know I had written, others I wish I hadn't written, and a few that were not half-bad. Since then I have been working on a collection of short stories I am hoping to publish this fall. One of these I wrote for my first RC Creative Writing class. I have revised and updated it (see page 18). Other projects underway include a story for a mid-

dle-grade audience (with my wife) and an adult action novel. I also have three art projects on the drawing board and many other projects in mind. Despite not working full-time any more, I find it easy to keep busy.

I started writing fiction in high school before I knew how to type and at one time thought no new technology would be invented that could surpass the Correcting IBM Selectric. I didn't use a computer until 1993. Now, to have software available (in addition to Word), such as Scrivener, ProWritingAid, One Stop For Writers, Grammarly, MasterWriter, and Fictionary makes writing a pure joy. Beginning writers today don't know how easy they have it. Everything has been automated, except imagination. Artificial intelligence will never replace that. Or will it?

As I have dug back into the literary aspirations I largely postponed for fifty years, writing critique groups have proven invaluable. I have been members of six different groups now, and they have helped me clean out the "rust" in my work. I am currently trying to start one in the Kalamazoo area, which is near where my wife and I live in the warmer months. I have a vision of these groups popping up around the world, led by alumni, a sort of RC diaspora. I even have a name they could adopt: KeyPounders. I am hoping Kalamazoo will soon host KeyPounders, Chapter 1.

Let's do this thing.

Program News

Teaching. In Fall 2018-Winter 2019 the Creative Writing Program hired two temporary faculty to help with teaching and tutorials: **Darcy Lee Brandel** (Lecturer in the Semester in Detroit Program, she was previously Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Modern Languages at Marygrove College) and **Ari Steinberg** (author of *Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian*, he is a regular contributor to the *New Yorker's* Culture Desk blog).

50 Years of *The Alternative Press*. **Ken Mikolowski**, retired RC writing teacher, was featured in an exhibit at U-M's Hatcher Library, "Free Poems and Functional Art: 50 Years of *The Alternative Press*." Ken ran the press with his wife Ann. The exhibit was from February 25-June 2, 2019 and featured a lecture by Ken.

Bear River Writers' Conference. After the retirement of English's **Keith**

Taylor in December 2017, **Laura Kasischke** became co-director of the Bear River Writers' Conference at Camp Michigania on Michigan's Walloon Lake. Sponsored by U-M English, Bear River is "rich with writing workshops, readings, panels (often related to publishing), and craft talks."

Emerging Writers Award. Since 2014 the RC has given Emerging Writer awards (funded by a writing alum) to graduating writers "who demonstrate excellence in creative writing but have not previously received a writing award recognizing their writing achievements":

2019: Heather Young & Mariam Reda
2018: Emily Miiller
2017: Ashley Bishel & Lauren Theisen
2016: Alexander Miller & Sydney Morgan-Green
2015: Angeline Dimambro & Vicky Szcpkowski
2014: Allison Epstein

Love, Mama, in January 2018 (Roaring Brook Press). Forthcoming is *Taking the Mic: Fourteen Young Americans Making Change*, which she co-edited and illustrated (Charlesbridge, 2020). More about Jeanette at jeanettebradley.com

Carmen Bugan (1993) became a George Orwell Prize Fellow in 2017. *Releasing the Porcelain Birds*, a collection of poems, was published in 2016 (Shearsman Books). She teaches at the Gotham Writers Workshop in NYC.

Anna Clark (2003) published *The Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy* in July 2018 (Metropolitan Books). She she was a 2017 Knight-Wallace journalism fellow at U-M.

Bob Clifford (1979) published *Gasping for Air*, a collection of poetry, in 2015. A second volume is forthcoming.

The University of Nebraska Press will publish *If The Body Allows It*, a short story collection **Megan Cummins** (2009), in September 2020.

Ellen Dreyer (1983) published *The Glow Stone* in 2015 (Peachtree Publishers).

Lucy Eldersveld Murphy (1975) co-edited *Frenchtown Chronicles of Praire du Chien, Wisconsin* by **Albert Coryer**, published by the Wisconsin Historical Society in 2016.

Allison Epstein (2014) published a story, "Pandemonium", in *Metaphorosis*, a fantasy and science-fiction magazine, in November 2016.

Cameron Finch (2016) published recent poetry in *Glass* and *Queen Mob's Teahouse* as well as essays and other writings in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, etc.

Dennis Foon (1973) had *Indian Horse*, based on Richard Wagamese's award-winning novel, premiere at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival. His script for *Sawah* was produced in 2019.

Matt Forbeck (1989) recently published *Halo: Bad Blood*, the new series *Dungeons & Dragons: Endless Quest* books, the *Star Wars: Rogue One* junior novel, *Dungeonology*, and *The Marvel Encyclopedia*, plus work on *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Ghost Recon Wildlands*, and the *Shotguns & Sorcery* roleplaying game based on his novels.

Alyson Foster (2004) published *Heart Attack Watch*, a collection of stories, in 2016 (Bloomsbury), and the novel *God Is An Astronaut*, in 2014 (Bloomsbury).

Mary Gallagher (2015) writes occasional columns for Ann Arbor's *Current* magazine.

Barry Garelick (RC Mathematics, 1971) published *Math Education in the U.S.: Still Crazy After All These Years* (2016).

Amy Gustine (1991) published *You Should Pity Us Instead*, a collection of stories, in 2016 (Sarabande Books).

James Guthrie (1973) continues as editor of the *Emily Dickinson Journal*, published twice a year by Johns Hopkins University Press for The Emily Dickinson International Society. Jim has been editor since 2016.

Merrie Haskell (Fuller) (2002) published *With Mouths Unsewn: Five More Stories* (June 2018) on Amazon Kindle, and previously published *Among Green Roses: Five Speculative Romances* (May 2017).

Phil Hertz (History/Urban Studies, 1979) is a columnist, forum

Alumni News

*Some recent publication and performance activity by RC alums.
(Alums are RC Creative Writing graduates unless otherwise specified).*

Beenish Ahmed (2009) continues to produce *The Alignist*, a bimonthly book subscription service that provides readers a different way to understand sociopolitical issues and to engage with other cultures.

Erik Anderson (2000) published *Flutter Point*, a collection of essays in March 2017 (Zone 3 Press).

Peter Anderson (1972) reprised the role of Coyote in "Law of the Land"

for the Caravan Stage Company in British Columbia; Peter wrote the play and starred in its original production in 1982.

Elizabeth Block (Anthropology, Honors) had a fictional memoir excerpt from her manuscript *The Pump Room* nominated for *Best of the Web*, Sundress Press in 2016.

Jeanette Bradley (1994) published her debut picture book,

moderator, and playing time analyst for baseballhq.com. He was assistant sports editor at the *Michigan Daily*.

Clare Higgins (2017) works for Dark Horse Enterprises and served as crew on *The Umbrella Academy* and *The Witcher*.

Laura Kasischke (1984) published *Where Now: New and Selected Poems*, a poetry collection (Copper Canyon Press). It was nominated for a National Book Award.

Hannah Levine (2016) won third place for her story "The Wedding" in *October Hill Magazine's* First Annual Literary Contest.

Mariama Lockington (2007) published her debut YA novel *For Black Girls Like Me* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019). Damaged Goods Press published her poetry collection *The Lucky Daughter* in 2017.

Mark Molesky (1990) published *This Gulf of Fire: The Great Lisbon Earthquake, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason* in October 2016 (Vintage).

Christine Montross (French Literature, Environmental Science, 1995; MFA, Poetry) has a forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Acquainted With the Night: Mental Illness in the American Prison System*.

Kathryn Orwig (2017) is working as a screenwriter for It's Not a Phase, Mom LLC, an animation company, developing content for 20 episodes that will be shown online.

Liz Parker (RC 2009) writes two blogs: Yes/No Detroit, and Books I Think You Should Read. She also writes articles for CBS Detroit.

Nicholas Petrie (1990) will published his fifth Peter Ash book, *The Wild One* in January 2020 (G.P.

Putnam's Sons).

Elena Potek (2015) had a "30 day/30 women" social media project on Facebook in 2016: each day 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."

Anna Prushinskaya (2008) published *A Woman is a Woman Until She Is A Mother*, a collection of essays, in Fall 2017 (MG Press).

Jenna Rose Robins (1995) published *Faithful & Devoted: Confessions of a Depeche Mode Addict* in March 2017 (Redwood Publishing).

Damiann Rogers (1993) will publish a memoir, *An Alphabet for Joanna* in 2019 (Knopf Canada). She published her second book of poetry, *Dear Leader*, in 2015 (Coach House Books).

Matthew Rohrer (1992) published *The Others* in May 2017 (Wave Books).

Molly Roth (2010) published "Seven Wonders of the World (Wide Web)" in the April 29, 2018 on-line issue of the *New Yorker*, as well as other comics for the *New Yorker's* Daily Shouts.

Karen Gray Ruelle (BGS, Language and Literature, 1979) is author/illustrator of 22 children's books, most recently *Bark Park* (Peachtree Publishing, 2014).

Elizabeth Schmuhi (2006) published *Premonitions* in Fall 2018 (Wayne State University Press). She illustrates essays for *The Rumpus*, and co-edits *CheapPOP*, a twice-weekly micro fiction journal.

Ian Singleton (2004) published "First Time" in the 2016 issue of *New Madrid*.

Carrie Smith (1979) published *Unholy City* in November 2017, the third book in her Claire Codella Mystery series (Crooked Lane Books).

Holly Spaulding (1997) published *If August*, an extended poem, in May 2017 (Alice Greene & Company).

Laura Thomas (1988) published *States of Motion*, a collection of stories, in 2017 (Wayne State University Press).

Katherine Towler (English, 1978) published *The Penny Poet of Portsmouth*, a memoir, in 2016 (Counterpoint Press). She is also editor of *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*.

Carol Ullmann (2000) has ten

overview chapters forthcoming in *Twenty-First Century Novels* (Gale). She previously published other overviews in this series.

Brooke White (2017) published an essay in the Winter 2018 issue of *Midwestern Gothic*, and an essay, "In A Box With A Few Tiny Teeth," in the March 2018 issue of *Swamp Ape Review*.

Elizabeth Witte (2003) has poems forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly* and published poems in *Prelude* and *Word for/Word* in 2016.

Of course, send corrections, additions, and info on other RC alums to Dan Madaj at dmadaj@umich.edu