

*The  
Sigma Tau Delta  
Rectangle*

**Journal of Creative Writing  
Sigma Tau Delta  
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*New Honor Members in italics*

## Delta Award Recipients

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# 2009–2010 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

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## Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Kathleen Hynes

“Mad Dog: An Emergent Language of Equality  
in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”

## Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Kathryn Andersen

“Helicopter Seeds: Sonnet 1933”

## Herbert Hughes Short Fiction Award

Jesse Snavlin

“grave-digger”

## Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-fiction Award

Meg Kelly

“One of Three: The Only Me”

## Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Jesse Snavlin

“grave-digger”

## Judge for Writing Awards

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**MAGGIE DIETZ** currently teaches in the creative writing program at Boston University and is assistant poetry editor for the online magazine *Slate*. Her book of poems *Perennial Fall* (University of Chicago, 2006) won the 2007 Jane Kenyon Award for Outstanding Book of Poetry. For many years she directed the Favorite Poem Project, Robert Pinsky’s special undertaking during his tenure as U.S. Poet Laureate, and is coeditor of three anthologies related to the project: *Americans’ Favorite Poems* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), *Poems to Read* (Norton, 2002) and, most recently, *An Invitation to Poetry* (Norton, 2004), for which Dietz co-authored the classroom guide. Her awards include the Grolier Poetry Prize, the George Bennett Fellowship at Phillips Exeter Academy, as well as fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the NH State Council on the Arts. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Agni*, *Harvard Review*, and *Salmagundi*.

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# Poetry

*Helicopter Seeds: Sonnet 1933*

*Southern Comfort*

*Ars Poetica*

*Apple Picking at Oak Glen*

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*Elegy on Replacing You with a Vacuum*

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*What The Poet Told Me*

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*A Letter From Kenton, TN*

*Finite*

*Locomotion*

*Birdsong*

*The Pass*

*Subterfuge, "The Gift"*

*Rust*

# Helicopter Seeds: Sonnet 1933

| Kathryn Andersen

A bank of swollen clouds retains a storm.  
The light that strains through dust-clogged screen is strange;  
it casts a spell on browns and creams that form  
those cowboys riding broncs across a range  
of cotton curtains, makes the figures look  
alive until a child's finger parts  
them; then their magic slows. That massive book,  
a make-shift step below the window, starts  
to wear beneath the child's shifting feet,  
so wrinkles bloom on Shakespeare's face. Outside,  
a man and woman wait to hear the beat,  
the gallop, made by raindrops that will slide  
    across the leaves of withered crops and give  
    this farm, their common dream, a chance to live.

*Kathryn Andersen is a junior at Utah State University, where she pursues a B.S. in English education. She is an officer in the Rho Tau Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and works for the university as a rhetoric associate. After graduation, she hopes to become a junior high or high school English teacher.*

## Southern Comfort

| Derrick Austin

Easter. We walk through the carnival:

Florida women line up, stiff as Baptists, for the Swing Carousel—  
seats slick with rain.

Spinning, the women leer like angels (gargoyles in drag),  
greenhouse hats stumbling like Mardi Gras floats.  
Gravity greases their knees with grace.

The choirmaster peels up her skirt and takes  
a steaming piss behind the Port-o-Potty.

Deacon's wife sells funnel cakes—her nostril  
curled as if already head up in the shit—her perm  
was immaculate—in a fog of jasmine perfume.

Turkey legs sizzle on spits like alien hearts.

Have a blessed day, she throws down the pastry  
and offers a smile like a shot of Southern Comfort.

Near a ring of stones, I touch my boyfriend's rib  
lingeringly—I know he finds no meaning there  
but shifts and finds me.

A random wind steals our powdered sugar.

I groan: Why is sweetness so light?  
We can't put it to our lips, but it's marked us  
like ashes, smattered our clothes. We're

the lichen-spotted rocks—of themselves, of this

moment, naked of pretense and sure  
of their spot on the grass between us, the tipsy  
women, and the Tilt-A-Whirl lurching to light.

*Derrick Austin is a junior at the University of Tampa, where he majors in English and Writing. He is the editor-in-chief of Quilt, the student literary magazine, and volunteers at Tampa Review.*

# Ars Poetica

| Stevie Lee Edwards

*Though this nation has proudly thought of itself  
as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial  
we have always been and I believe continue to be,  
in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards.  
-Eric Holder*

Grazing over a plate of seasoned fries smothered  
in ketchup, a humble lunch before our fourth hours,

he tried to tell me he earned the white gouges  
covering his thin chocolate arms wrestling a lion,

protecting his family. Once I asked him *Ever killed a man?*  
Silence. I tried stepping into his broken skin,

darker than mine, little less fleshy. Wanting  
to write the machete scars covering his arms away.

Wanting to soothe the roughness from this skin,  
beaten by the Sudanese sun while crossing the desert,

lost, praying to escape the slaughter. This skin came here  
to be cursed by a football player who dared

name it—*Write it!*—Nigger. The scar-tissue  
balled itself into a fist and sent the big,

white hulk of a man flying across our gymnasium,  
nose broken and spewing blood. Absorbed in the loneliness

of trying to slough off the sadness from this skin  
with pumice of words, I heard the scars howl at me,

mourning for losses I can never begin to speak.

*Stevie Lee Edwards is a recent graduate of Albion College, where she received a B.A. in English and Economics. Her poems have been published in The November 3rd Club and The Cartier Street Review, and she also has poems forthcoming in PANK Magazine and SNR Review. She now works with AmeriCorps in Chicago and plans to go to graduate school for creative writing.*

## Apple Picking at Oak Glen

| Kristin George

The arch of my foot remembers  
the pressure of your palm  
long after you have hoisted  
me up to the highest bough.  
Sole in hand, leg upon shoulder,  
we sift through damp sunlight  
between the leaves.

I pluck only the ready,  
twist stem from spur as softly  
as I would gather dandelions,  
willing the wish to release  
without scattering seed.  
But the worm has already  
hollowed the golden delicious  
and bruised its pale skin  
like the sun as it deserts the sky.

Down below we tread ten thousand  
apples into the pulp of earth  
and save a bushel  
of red and gold, ripe and whole  
to be boiled bitten or sliced.

Our laps piled high with possibility,  
hands steeped in vinegar,  
cheeks with juice, we leave  
the orchard behind with the sun.  
An apple falls from seat to floor  
and fills again the arch of my foot,  
where blood warms  
to familiar touch.

*Kristin George is a recent graduate of Westmont College, Santa Barbara, where she received a B.A. in English. She spent this past fall traveling through Europe as an aide on Westmont's Europe Semester program, and will apply to an M.F.A. program in creative writing within the next year. Her poems have been recently published in Sage Trail, Tipton Poetry Journal, The California Quarterly, and Mirrors Magazine.*

# King of the Ghosts

| Micah Dean Hicks

Grass.

Grass thin, bristle grass quilling,  
rifing in the light's bone yellows,  
Dry rustle, hot drum-beat of the morning.

There the rabbit king comes hunching  
his burial dance, spine jumping  
up through hungry skin,  
cracked tooth sweeping the dirt.

His leg—the longer one—sweeps around,  
draws his spirit circle in the alkali dust  
of bird skulls and owl shits.

Long leg, barb of wire pulsing  
in the bone between toes, he raises high,  
scepter-leg bleeding; whispers pale

secrets into it, words that strip fur.  
He rocks in his thin skin, milky eyes quivering,  
and behind him the white sun pulls up

settles like a crown over his cracked ears  
and its light stains his domain:  
the terrified living.

*after "A Rabbit as King Of The Ghosts"*  
*Wallace Stevens*

*Micah Dean Hicks is a recent graduate from Southern Arkansas University, where he received a B.A. in English. Micah is now attending the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. He hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in creative writing. His work has appeared in The Willows Magazine and The Raging Face.*

# Elegy On Replacing You With a Vacuum

| Angela Lee

Last movie night, we dropped some popcorn  
and left it on the floor for you. But then,  
we remembered that you were so buried  
in your new, dirtier occupation  
that you wouldn't be coming.

You left us with the vacuum,  
which lately, has been growing fat  
with all it consumes. It puffs up its chest  
and prowls the house like a tyrant  
because you are gone and no one here can challenge it.

When you were here the vacuum cowered in its closet.  
You always fought it so nobly snarling and slobbering.  
From your fangs seeped the full valor  
of Don Qixote's lance. Later,  
the enemy slain, you'd survey the mess—  
Popcorn or pizza,  
saucy-side down— and you'd lap it up,  
performing your duty, never complaining.

But now that you're gone, the vacuum has instituted  
an oppressive reign. It doesn't give back.  
Not like you did. It just sucks and sucks and sucks.

*Angela Lee is an English Education major and Spanish minor at Olivet Nazarene University. She is currently working on her honors capstone project that will include researching Young Adult literature and writing a Young Adult novel. Following her graduation in 2011, she plans to pursue a career in teaching.*

# Silence

| Brianna Lichtenauer

*for Nick*

Yours is an alphabet of stones,  
letters that shape *waiting*,  
that give weight without  
giving sound.

You leave words beside my plate,  
beneath my pillow, in the open palm  
of my hand. I lift them to the light  
and find open-mouthed vowels  
with no consonants to close them.

Yours is a language written on bone,  
a language I am still aching  
to understand.

*Brianna Lichtenauer is a recent graduate of Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, where she received a B.A. in Literature with a secondary focus in creative writing, as well as minors in Philosophy and Psychology. She is now attending the M.F.A. graduate program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.*

# What the Poet Told Me

| Brianna Lichtenauer

*“Be kind to yourself.”*

-Kerouac

Do not blame the little self who sends you  
poems in bottles, who sails them  
downstream where they wash up  
on your shore. Take the shiny pebbles,  
the bits of feather and leaf,  
the broken robin’s egg placed  
so carefully in your hands.

Avoid the black X of failure,  
the bite of a scorn-filled laugh, the  
red button-eyes of contempt. There is enough  
cruelty, enough poison to turn the water black.

Speak softly, accept the odd frog still slick  
with mud, and tell your little self  
what a fine creature she has found:  
how green he is, how small.

# Bullet

| Peter Simes

I taste the carnage in my steely tomb.  
You plucked the fruit; to you I do resign.  
To be used in Cain's craft, I do presume—  
I am an instrument of dark design.

Bestowed breath by an omnipotent hand,  
a fruitless gift you readily forswear.  
Still, I obey each impulsive command.  
My judgment of you would be unfair.

Licked with the fires of innovation,  
well aware of my purpose, here to serve,  
like those before, without reservation.  
The lineage of steel I will preserve.

I have no concern for the ways of man,  
or the outcome of your frivolous fights.  
I wage war for no cause, country, or clan,  
but I—seek the target you have in your sights.

Squeeze the trigger, send me flame-forth.  
If your aim is true, latter-day archer,  
then the corporeal seal I will maim,  
and—wreak havoc before my departure.

*Peter Simes is a Teaching Fellow at the University of North Texas, where he is pursuing an M.A. in English Literature. Upon completion of his M.A., he hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in English with the goal of one day becoming a brilliant professor and writer.*

## A Letter Front Kenton, TN

| Lindy Smart

I'm still a waitress waiting  
on tables and listening  
to the old farmers complain  
about no rain. He walks through  
the swinging door looking  
like the mayor in his overalls  
and noble smile. He sits down  
at Table 19—reserved for the good  
ole boys. I ask for his order.  
He says nothing and just nods.  
I want to give him everything.

Bess is jealous. She served  
her husband papers and moved  
south like me. She writes good  
poetry and has our sense  
of humor.

Amanda eats it up. She's a cook  
by day and table dances at night  
to support her dad, kids, and brother.  
She keeps off of Table 19.

I cry to Loretta when I get sick  
on love or miss home. She's as old  
as my grandma and as tough as Lucy,  
the stubborn black Quarter horse  
I ride to town on my days off.

I watch the cotton fields bloom.  
The rilo fields are hardy and red  
but look a little soft like wheat.  
They remind me of you, my friend.

He takes me on motorcycle rides through  
them—full of sound and nothingness.  
A flat nothingness that I love terribly.  
City lights can't hold a candle to lightning  
bugs dancing in the cotton and rilo fields.

I dreamt of you last night, my friend. We were  
in a jungle gully sitting on either sides of a window.  
You rested your head on the sill and listened  
to me talk. I don't know what all that means  
but I woke up missing you.

Take the train. I'll pick you up  
at the station and you can come  
to my house and tend to the vegetable garden.  
We'll get silly drunk on Aunt Phyllis' jug wine.  
I picture you here. I hear your laugh.

Today I got spooked by the wind. The empty  
rocker creaked and rocked. The dog at my feet  
even lifted his head. It made me so lonely—  
I wanted to cry.

Then he walked onto the porch—  
his work boots make him sound tougher  
than he really is. He handed me a peeled  
orange. It's so sweet, this orange  
and this man.

Come visit. The lake is so stagnant—  
it takes the steady Mississippi to move  
you forward.

*Lindy Smart is a recent graduate from Mercyhurst College, where she received a B.A. in English. She received the President's Award for Adult Excellence and maintained a 4.0 in her major. Lindy will be returning to Mercyhurst College the fall of 2009 for the M.A. Program of Applied Intelligence, and she will be working as a graduate assistant in the Center for Teaching Excellence.*

# Finite

| Alison Swety

I sweep knit sleeves over the desk  
the way that trains of dresses twirl  
along a wooden dance floor thick  
with dust except for trails of slick,  
silk-polished roads in touching rings.

These figure-eights I painted, too,  
with rollerblades on patios—  
the boundless marks can soothe a girl,  
merry-go-rounds, like twisting curls,  
a bow tie perfect comfort there—

until I shuffled through the grass  
and sent my body down a hill  
toward stiff and pebble-scattered rows  
that hid themselves then grabbed my clothes  
and bruised both spinning wheels and arms.

*Alison Swety is a recent graduate from the University of Scranton, where she received a B.A. in English and Philosophy and a minor in Communication. Her poetry and prose have previously appeared in Esprit: The University of Scranton Review of Arts and Letters.*

# Locomotion

| Alison Swety

If still inside a train and miles to go  
you press forehead on glass to feel the shock  
of feverish, rattling sweat of the window,  
fix eyes to rowboat oars and give a knock.  
One tap will do—a firm but quiet brush  
of knuckles onto slick, obstructive pane.  
Perhaps brakemen will perk their ears and hush  
the churning, metal motion of the train.  
You'll leave a mark of where you sat before,  
and someone new will settle in your chair  
after you pass through automatic doors  
into a land unburdened by a glare.  
Screened lakes and fields will beckon from outside,  
but sometimes it's just easier to ride.

## Birdsong

| Justin Swink

The pink, antique drop leaf table you inherited takes flight, mostly in winter, when the Singer machine on top sings of new creations. Holding vigil to what is born of thread, the bust of a Grecian goddess, doubles as a lamp though she is flawed by a missing nose.

A thatch of wrapping paper rises from the would-be umbrella holder, emblazoned with parrots perched upon limbs never touched by rain. Plastic, purple drawers hide the pencils, paper and paint less appealing to display.

Your books, stacked and scattered, wait attentively to lend their knowledge to any project. Others double as tables, stools, or act as magnets for age to cling to.

In your room, hibernating, creation anxiously awaits the day you swoop in to take up the song of inspiration that will make our home vibrate with great decibels of love as you anticipate the growing of our nest.

*Justin Swink is a senior at the University of Texas at Arlington, where he majors in English. Justin will receive his B.A. in May of 2010 and will then pursue his M.A. In 2009, Justin took second and third place for short fiction and poetry, respectively, in the University of Texas at Arlington's annual creative writing contest.*

# The Pass

| Justin Swink

Tearing the night's darkness in two, El Paso  
Rises and dips along the horizon. The wind,  
Cool, now charged with the electric show.

Sour smells rise from the river, sent  
From between borders, a no man's land that  
Keeps its secrets and where death does chant.

Smog lays heavy, clear as thick wax,  
Melting every light, one into another,  
Glimpses of life only through the cracks.

Berated with enough sound to smother,  
I'm driving seventy wishing I had  
The city in my rearview mirror.

Stealing confidence from a Camel and match,  
Wrestled from the armrest at my side,  
Waiting for the moment I would crash,

Sending sparks upon the ground, bright  
And numerous, echoing the stars  
Lost above the oppressive city's sky.

Rounding a new curve, herds of cars  
Set my nerves on end. I grow impatient  
For the desert to reassert its hard, harsh,

Reality. To break this untrue existence  
Of a city imposing itself upon a land.  
Reaching, stretching, begging like a penitent

Dropped off to his fate there in the desert sand.  
 Then a new light appears upon my car's dash,  
 It is thirsty and threatens to stop around the next bend.

I will not yield to it 'til I'm through this mess.  
 I push on, nudging the needle of speed  
 Higher, for I begin to see the dress of darkness past

The city lights. The traffic wanes and the neon lights cease.  
 Miles past the city my body trembles still.  
 A mile off the highway, a fuel station glimmers, where police

Cars sit vacant upon Coors cans next door at the bar/grill.  
 Outside my car, the air rife with fumes, and a bum  
 Who keeps one hand hidden, and speaks little

English, wishes for me to give the sum  
 Of what I can't spare. I fuel with my back  
 To the pump. Hearing voices, all in different tongues,

Some pleading against me, others to get back  
 On the highway, scolding that I strayed.  
 Back in the calming dark, I try to understand my lack

Of courage in that glowing pass, from one state  
 To another. I feel ashamed, boyish, not a man,  
 That a city beneath smog and light can create

In me such fear that I'd rather dare stand  
 Alone in the desert darkness of night.  
 But then I remember my trip is not at an end.

I must drive back through that city in time,  
 The pass that splits the darkness like a knife.

# Subterfuge, “The Gift”

| Michael Valinsky

What he knew was in his hands,  
the grease between his nails.  
He never considered placing faith  
in old books smelling of maturing words  
and how they were still the words of dead  
and dying men. On October fishing trips he was silent,  
his eyes lying across the late night ocean,  
the direction of a dark gradient mess of a horizon,  
out into what his eyes could not see.  
As if, drowning underneath, submerged under all that salt,  
were all his dreams lost in the shroud,  
of being the voice too loud for pages,  
of being the voice that silenced all men.  
This was dad’s sordid art,  
a long, solitary movement.  
He never graduated high school,  
never placed where his feet should stand.  
And when those nights stole his color,  
he’d take to the *Study of Hands*.  
I would watch from the side,  
pretending to move in unison,  
never asking him why the moon is  
the size of a dime in the sky.  
His never telling me  
why not to shave against the grain.  
With his feet buried in the sand,

never cheating and speaking one dumb thing,  
he seemed to be the smartest man alive,  
with the way he placed silence in my hands.

*Michael Valinsky is a senior at the University of West Florida, where he majors in English. Post graduation he plans to pursue his love of creative writing, expanding his work through the experiences he shares with others to engage the complexities of the human spirit.*

# Rust

| Renee Beauregard

Red clay rust melts  
over the toilet-side radiator.

Little boy, toes curling into feet  
never did aim, standing like a man

Doing man things, pissing  
like the man who didn't show him how.

A polite spray of urine  
against the January-slick radiator

Already beaded with winter morning wet.  
Little boy shuffles from his puddle

And the radiator, now scabbed,  
remembers the cold of January

Before the permanent shelter  
of its burnt shearling coat.

*Renee Beauregard lives, writes, plays Balderdash, and drinks a ridiculous amount of coffee in New Braintree, Massachusetts. She is a senior at Franklin Pierce University, where she majors in English. She has begun the terrifying process of applying to creative writing M.F.A programs.*

# Creative Non-Fiction

*One of Three: The Only Me*

*On Shingling*

*Swimming in the Agam*

*Our Ancestors*

*Korean Mother: The Dialogue*

*Ex Libris*

*The Professional and the Polar Twin: A Five-Act Drama*  
*(With Author's Notes)*

*An Open Letter to Target Guests Who, On the Occasion  
that an Item Doesn't Ring Up at the Register, Exclaim,  
"It Must be Free!!" Followed by Obnoxious Laughter and  
That Look Like You are Quite Proud of Yourselves for  
Delivering Such an Original Joke (You Know Who You Are)*

*Running In Water*

*Steam*

# One of Three: The Only Me

| Megan Kelly

i

To hear waves crash. To taste a salty breeze. To feel sand beneath one's eight-year-old toes. The burning hot gritty goodness used to build sandcastles and turn mere mortals into mermaids and mermen. Granules of lizard sunbathed, ocean tumbled, lover skipped rocks ended up in my sandwich and danced like a doe in light fog when the warm wind whisked our sheet from my hands.

ii

My mother has no breasts. As an early twenty-something I know about some aspects of womanhood. I have stared into my child's eyes, yet I am not a mother. I have given my child the life she deserves, yet I have never felt life die within me. I have not had five miscarriages like her. I have loved men, yet I am still craving the right love, and I am not a wife nor a divorcee. I have argued with a man and smacked his face with a closed fist, yet I have not experienced abuse and subsequently escaped the abuser. I am still learning womanhood, like Grandma Blanche too at ninety-seven. To watch Mama redefine herself as a woman without breasts felt like watching time-lapse photography of the brightest October. October 8, 1952. To watch Papa allow Mama to undergo a singular, independent metamorphosis felt like waiting for fireworks to pop when they've already been shot from the cannon. July 21, 1946.

iii

Essentials included books, blankets, caffeine-free diet sodas, and lotions with sun-protection factors four and fifty-four. In summer sun, my skin burns, freckles and changes to a light cinnamon. In summer sun, Papa turns pink, then red, then purple. He glows and in a slow southern drawl complains about the way his socks stick to his burned feet. In summer sun, Mama turns dark orange brown, like a toasted marshmallow. She gets tan lines doing the Jersey strut

to the mailbox. Olive oil runs through her veins.  
iv

Our garage door code was 3552, and I lived in that house for sixteen years. For some reason I rarely used the front door.

“Patty says Feng Shui says paint the door pink,” Mama tells Papa.

He asks, “Why we oughta?” but drives to Sherwin Williams anyway.

Papa could tell you the molecular formula for paint. Or pink. Or sand. Sometimes during a chicken dinner while a tiny TV played the evening news too quietly for anyone to hear, Mama and Papa would debate about the nature of experimentation and the future of microbiological advancement.

Mama asks too many questions. Not about science, or math, or the weather, or the song playing on the radio. She asks questions that almost no one can answer. Our living room is too hot. A few years back, in deep winter, a silent snow fell. Crystallized individuality, or so the scientists say. I think Papa likes to reminisce about living in Buffalo, where he met Mama, where I came into the world. Neighbors stand with crossed arms, attempting to make polite conversation over the din of Papa’s snowblower. Later, our family of three feasts on still warm chocolate chip cookies. Thank you gifts.

“But Michael . . . you’ll just tear it up anyway. Why not let Max puppy do it for you?”

Mama refers to our cocker. Buoyant and joyous, with tail wagging, and Papa sighing, Max puppy shreds newspapers for the fire that Papa will light for us. Mama makes Max puppy pancakes for dinner. She lets him lick the plates. We serve obnoxious guests beef stroganoff on those same plates because it’s funny.

Someone in our intimate family has contracted a bug, so naturally

we've all come down with a moderate case of the sniffles. Logs crackle and pop in the wood-burning stove, and on top, in a cast-iron pot, mint leaves dance in a rolling boil. Max puppy burns his wet, black nose trying to sniff the crafted metal. From my seat at the piano bench, I pad slowly to the kitchen and create the most monstrous sundae ever.

“Close those doors, Mennie. Mennie? Menna? Close the doors, ok? Don't forget, don't let the heat out! Come quick or else your ice cream will melt!” She lets out a girlish giggle. Papa rolls his eyes and opens his mouth. He wants a bite. Papa's bites equal three normal sized bites. When he asks for a bite, the bite-giver needs to be prepared to relinquish almost half of their ham and cheese, cheesesteak, pizza or any assortment of delicious treats. Papa will slurp down half of your soda. He will take a bite so big that his jaw lets out a satisfied “pop!” Needless to say, I know his eating habits well enough, so when he asks for a bite of my butter pecan I overload the spoon and slowly pad back through the living room to close the doors.

A movie begins. “Michael . . . Michael . . . Michael!” Mama pokes Papa in the arm over and over and over again, whining his name like a little sister who wants her eldest brother to drive her to the mall so that she can meet a boy.

“Quit it!” Only he pronounces it, “Queet it!”

The Miramax lion has already let out a throaty roar, the opening credits have rolled, and in our ice-cream induced revelry all three of us have managed to miss the title of the film, and her questions begin.

“Wow! How deep is that water? Who's that guy? Is he the good guy? No, no way, look at his hair, I'll bet my house he's the bad guy.

Do you think he dyes his hair? *Does he dye his hair?*”

No one replies. Five minutes later.

“Mennie! I love that paint! Don’t you just love love love that paint? I bet it’s Martha Stewart paint. Her paint is so pretty, but she’s such a dud. No one really makes Easter egg dye from cabbage, do they? What a waste of time! Remember when you wanted to do that, Mennie? Remember? Michael! What’d that guy say?”

“Why, he probably just said to . . .” His “wh” words sure are full of “wh.”

First, Papa blows out an audible puff of air and finishes with something that sounds like a Christian comedian imitating a Jewish comedian imitating fear. An “eeeah” sort of sound. He can’t finish his sentence because Mama and I start imitating him. I know what he would have said because I inherited his sarcastic wit. Something like, “He said to quiet down because your handsome husband can’t tell his wife what the movie’s about.”

Mama falls asleep next to Papa. I fall asleep next to Mama. Max puppy falls asleep next to me. We share one couch, sweat in our sleep and dream of questions. I wake up in my room to find, “I love you” scribbled on a note from Papa.

v

“You wanna ring like that?” He proposed in an airport after eleven days. One date to be exact. Eleven days of talking to one another.

“Um. Yes.” Mama replied. Neither one knew if the other thought it was an engagement, but they were married by a prison chaplain two months later, on New Year’s Eve, in front of two witnesses in

Gram's immaculate living room.

vi

Mama and I talk alike. Apart from the lifestyle habits that have bestowed a musky luster to my song and speech, Mama and I sound almost identical. With her, I share my worries, dreams and life experiences, yet I *have* withheld two important feelings. As an adolescent, the fear I felt concerning my pregnancy, and as a child, the awkwardness I felt when sand filled the crotch of my bathing suit. 3552 was my creation. Our garage door code. Three-five-five: the number of a hotel room, and two: simultaneously the second letter of the alphabet and the first letter for the locale of our temporary abode. The beach.

vii

I am seven-years-old with matted, sandy hair and tan lines that look as though they've been painted on. Every night before bed Mama dries my hair because my arms get tired. I lie on her bedroom floor and read *Highlights* magazine. Our dog's feet smell like that old blue rug and sometimes Papa comes upstairs slurping crushed Saltines in milk. It looks like barf, and he raves about it. Still, I've never tried this soggy cocktail.

We're staying in a house with a spiral staircase, the kind that shakes and rattles as I bound up the steps to look for my word search book. Nelson Nelson owns this place, only people call him Bud because Nelson Nelson gets confusing. While Mama sews stitch after endless stitch on yet another project that will remain an unfinished mess of strategically placed blues and reds, Papa practices swinging an invisible golf club, and I fall asleep upside down in my favorite underwear. I only know because they took a snapshot. Later, I'll try to take a picture of the television and after not so patiently waiting one hour to reap the fruits of my photographic experiment, I realize that you can't capture everything like a memory.

I'm not sure when I make a conscious decision to stop taking pictures, but I made it. I want to know fluid memories because laughter and conversation and good food and angst and pain and love and knowledge and looking and smelling and tasting and touching and doing and being are not static. I am a photographer of static things, but not my life. I will snap a photo of a rotting outhouse, an ancient gnarled tree or yellow flower, a sunset, a trashcan, or one lone shoe, dangling. In late afternoon a low and glowing sun cast its last light under the boardwalk, illuminating half criss, half cross, and so, in this beauty, I snapped a photo.

viii

I have found solace in a dark sky. I have found solace in a dark sleep and I have found solace in a dark room. A milky paper becomes clear, uncovering my geometric moment, and in its black and white and grey I see a cavern, inviting. Thanks to a sinking star I stare at this half light photo, at this moment that I captured and tamed, and I cannot help but notice that this image looks like an image of my own half-light. Because when you live in half-light you live in half-dark, and warm darkness is my favorite kind.

ix

I am embarrassed today, but I wasn't embarrassed yesterday while my roller-skates rattled on the splintered boardwalk wood, shaking my bones. I wasn't embarrassed when I misspelled "radio" during our second grade spelling bee.

Bravely and proudly, I stood, alone, face forward and calmly, confidently stated, "Radio. R-A-I-D-O. Radio."

I am embarrassed now, but I wasn't embarrassed this morning when I didn't have sand in the crotch of my bathing suit. This morning I felt free. It's always quiet on the beach because we are only three.

Mama reads while Papa takes long strides near the shore. He will never go in, and he will never get his feet wet. Papa won't let food touch his lips when he eats either, eating slowly, contorting his lips. I will duck behind Mama's chair, hoping she won't notice.

"Mennie? Mennahooooonie? You are so silly. Don't you totally wish that books were written on the clouds? Or in sunglasses or something? We could lie here, looking at the clouds, reading books. So cool."

Yes, I do wish that, Mama.

I will have to devise a new plan. I pranced toward the ocean, and Mama snapped a photo. Dad waved, like a shy musician, most probably because he is one of these, like I am one of these.

x

I cannot find my hands. When I look down to watch my hands tell my soul, I can never quite place whose knuckles, nails, sinews, veins, movements, and freckles, are my own. Is anything truly one's own? We are a conglomerate of our ancestors and the monkeys and fish before them, dirt before them, cells before them, cosmic dust before them. When I touch the long keys, warm and smooth in the dark orange witching hour, I untie knots which ground me to this pseudo reality. My mind races, and I trip and fall, running up a flight of twisted, rocky stairs too fast while staring downward. Panicked thoughts until peace and dark and dark and dark because dark orange is still too bright. I simply close my eyes.

Listeners are of rare breed. I want to listen. I play the piano to calm myself, but I cannot watch because I need to be detached. I want to imagine another self, snuggled in bed, experiencing a moment. Right now, my heart is aching because I want to play. I have always written, and I have always played, as I have always loved

and breathed and existed. I have not always written songs. I have always written words. And October is inspiring and so are winter love affairs. Songs aren't coming, and I am aching for them. But for so long, writing wasn't coming either. Then, songs poured out of me, every moment, distracted and unfocused because orchestras played in my mind. Those, I could not write, but I still felt inspired. But why? Musical writer's block has broken into the room of story, jumbling the stuffed animals, hiding a chocolate cup with a diseased syringe stuffed deep inside, waiting to prick a cheek and infect both body and future. Writer's block of one kind broke writer's block of another. So now, I am left asking if the reverse is also possible. Can I use words to write a song? Write out so many words that no words linger, replaced by sounds and waves? Or, can both of these things share a bed with three blankets?

Also, I feel like I am falling in love.

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# On Shingling

| Grant Bird

Running five rows of architectural tabs across a shallow four-twelve shed dormer isn't complicated, at least not in the book, but with a broody-looking thunderhead developing to the southeast and a fresh wind bearing the scent of rain, we were hustling to bring it to the peak.

Our day had started at five that morning with the drive north to the worksite. My dad and I had been on the roof at six and had hit our stride a little after seven. We were finding the pace. An hour to build up steam, a ten hour day to let it out.

We had begun our morning peeling the previous generation's shingles off a fifteen by twenty-foot dormer. Brown, crumbly, and faintly reminiscent of burnt toast, we tore and clawed at the old asphalt three tabs with roofing shovels. In my estimation, tear-off was the least enjoyable of roofing arts. It was dirty. It was exhausting. It involved bats, rotten boards, and sweat, lots of sweat. But it was a necessary first step, and thankfully it was somewhat redeemed in that it called for a keen eye and a good bit of experience. Of course, to the uninitiated ground-lubber, expertise looks superfluous when it comes to hacking off old shingles. But then again, from the ground everything looks easy.

The roofing shovel was the standard removal tool. At the end of a four-foot ash handle, the roofing shovel sported a ten inch flat steel blade with a toothed beak. Vaguely invoking the image of a famished beast, the teeth of the shovel, if jabbed about indiscriminately would leave nothing but a pile of shingle crumbs and multiply the total labor required to finish the job. Handled more deftly, however, (as of course we handled it) the shovel could peel and roll wide chunks of shingles and strip the roof down in no time.

And so, as the sun peeked furtively through the clouds, peel we did. And pry. And grunt. After an hour and clearing the bulk of the shingles, we changed our weapons for the final step in tear-off.

It was time of a final check as we honed in with hammers and flat bars, sweeping to clear the newly uncovered roof decking of any remaining nails and shingle grit that would wreak havoc as we began to lay the new roof.

Getting a roof clear to the decking was a significant first phase of the project. With the sun starting to heat up, and the morning mist burning out of the air, we stopped for an early water break. Jugs, perched amidst shingled bundles and cases of roofing nails, were liberated for a moment and, after the slightest of breaks, returned as we turned back to the project at hand.

To the south, the clouds were building. The wind was kicking up, fresh, ominous. Not good. But with an open piece of roof in front of us dodging the inevitable was foolish. We accepted the challenge. We would do battle. The clouds were still a deep blue, but now with blackness and gray melding in the center. They were to our back moving north, and the roof, to our front, was open, welcoming. A deluge now and . . .

We did not speak of it, of course; you never do. The challenge of the elements is silent. The inescapable requires no words. The possibilities—soggy insulation, interior disasters, drenched homeowners emerging virulent from the bowels of the dwelling—they were not considered. In our minds, they were impossible. We stood in front of them, those dark possibilities. Four tanned grimy arms, four sure feet, four keen eyes driving forward blocked their realization.

My dad and I found the groove we were looking for. As the sun faded high above us, we lay out aluminum drip edge locking it in place with 1-1/2 inch nails out of the Hitachi roofing nailer. As I bumped shot nails every foot or so along the drip edge, I was not thinking about the nailer, or the clouds, or the drip edge, just about where the next nail went and how fast I could get it there.

*Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.* Straighten up. Eye ball it. Good. *Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.* Good. Next piece. Mark. Cut. Overlap six inches. Flush to the far eave. Good. *Wap, wap, wap, wap, wap.* Good.

This might not be Karma, but you can see it from here. The nail gun is running smooth, the compressor down below is purring like a grateful beast, and we have a clean roof and plenty of shingles.

Next was the Ice and Water—tar paper on hormones. Thick and leathery, one side of the Ice and Water is covered with protective, creamy white plastic sheeting. Once peeled back the plastic reveals a sticky tar that reminds of the Tar Baby—touch it and you’ll have yourself immortalized by Uncle Remus himself. On the other hand, let it touch the roof before you’re ready and you’d have better luck pulling your fingernails out with rusty pliers than prying it up again. It’s a sort of double-edged sword, really, this Ice and Water stuff. We could make poetic paradoxes, and I could say that sometimes in jest I call it Fire and Ice. But then I don’t know what Frost would think about that, and it is beside the point. So anyway, Ice and Water is brilliant at making the roof impermeable, but it’s also brilliant at wreaking a roofer’s day if he crosses it. Ice and Water has a few other hazards attached, like the fact that the creamy white plastic is also about as slick as black ice in January. Put that on a roof and a wrong step at the wrong time can impart the sensation of a magic carpet with the magic removed. And at twenty feet off the ground, riding a greased eel, you need all the magic you can get.

Today, however, no problems. Position the Ice and Water along the eaves, staple one corner with have a dozen staples out of the slap hammer stapler. Pull back the lower edge. Peel off the plastic backing. Let it drop. Pat down firmly. Straighten your back. No wrinkles. Good. From the looks of it we are ready for the first row of shingles. Starter strip first.

The action becomes real—shingles. Hitachi in the right hand, four asphalt shingles in the left, I position myself on the eaves’ edge and begin the starter strip. The Hitachi, poised, expectant, feline. The first shingle goes on with the tab edge up. A flick of the wrist drops the shingle into place, thumb and forefinger, two quick nudges, ready. Ready. Nail it.

*Wap, wap, wap, wap.* The nailer pounces. The next shingle,

directly on top but with the tabs down to the eaves' in the normal manner. Nail it. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Four nails barked out of the Hitachi fasten it. Slide to the right. Another shingle. My dad, positioned higher up on the roof, feeds me shingles dropping each one into location with the deftness of a basketball player shooting free throws. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Slide to the right. 'nother. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Six more and we've reached the east edge of the roof. The last shingle trimmed flush, we eyeball the row. Slick. There is a little wobble in the third shingle, up 'bout a half inch, but we'll chalk a line in at the fourth row to clean it up. That'll do nicely. Let's go.

We go. The real stuff. Clouds are irrelevant. The moist breeze from the southeast, the faint ache in our calves and lower back—all are irrelevant. I stoop to position myself to lay the first row and start receiving shingles.

Slap it down. There. Perfect. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Next. Good. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Next. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*.

Bent over double the soles of my feet dig into the Ice and Water as I make my way across the roof. The granules peel off leaving my footprints on the black. All smells of tar and asphalt. A few granules dribble gently off the roof.

Rhythm. A roof is about rhythm. Hit it, and you're on. Miss it, and you might as well stop; hang it up for the day; go home. We find it. Arms, legs, feet, machine—a unit. A singular fact.

Your left hand finds the shingle somewhere up and out of your field of vision. Right hand levels the gun and draws up tight against the lower shingle. The gun is the guide holding the new shingle in position. Left hand draws the new shingle down and to the right, it hits the tip of the gun and then is drawn up to the shingle already nailed on the left.

Set. Nail. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Next. Pull down, set. *Wap, wap, wap, wap*. Next.

Somewhere to the south the clouds are boiling. Grays deepening to bold blues and angry blacks. And here I am, perched between

heaven and earth, the breeze blowing across the sweat of my forehead, reminding me, if I were listening, of the clouds and rain.

I am not listening. Not to the wind. I am listening instead to the sharp staccato of the Hitachi, the moaning of the compressor, the snapping of each shingle hitting its spot and fastened for another fifty years.

I am lost in the moment. Again.

I have been here before. I've been on roofs. I've spent time putting down shingles. And I am here again, and-again-I am caught.

Caught in the cadences of my own percussionary song. I am shrouded, gently etherized, in the moment, in the hum of my arms, of my feet, of my mind, of my eye as it watches each shingling dropping, stopping fixed in the pattern of a moment.

*Wap, wap, wap, wap.*

*Wap, wap, wap, wap.*

*Wap, wap, wap, wap.*

Shingle after shingle. An unbroken, fluid procession. Time stretches, slowing to grasp each nail, each tab, each perfectly set shingle. Mind sharpens. Closer and closer. The hum quickens.

There is a smile forming somewhere. In my ears? Another. Set Ready.

*Wap, wap, wap, wap.*

And the spell is broken as the first gusty mist breaks on my neck.

I pause and straighten. The tar paper is all down; we are two rows from the top. We will make it now. It can rain.

As the rain comes down in waves, I am bent double again, the last few shingles flowing through my hands, as the nails go in, and the roof goes on.

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## Swimming in the Agam

| Marcy Colalillo

*It's August. I am seven-years-old and I am drowning, inhaling river water deeply and looking at the filtered light bubbling upwards. Thrown off the dock and held under by unseen hands, I am finally sinking down toward the murky bottom. I'm not sure I want to follow those bubbles making their desultory way back to the surface. It's quiet and safe down here.*

It's August again, forty-seven years later, and I am taking a swimming test, slowly paddling around a lake that looks and tastes like river water, and I *know* I won't drown. In fact, I share this with the lifeguard.

She replies, “*Ken, ken, I know.*” She smiles and says something unintelligible to me in Hebrew. I pick out the word “agam” which means “lake” and I continue to swim. I am determined to continue to swim. I am determined *not* to drown.

My cell phone vibrates in my shorts pocket—an Indiana exchange. Not a good sign. My uncle Micha, my dad's brother, has recently moved from Florida to be nearer to his son and daughter-in-law. His health is failing; age, diabetes, and heart disease have forced him into a dependence against which he has fought as long as possible. Even though they are no longer neighbors in sunny Florida condos, Uncle Micha continues to be my dad's emergency contact. I haven't heard from my father in over two weeks, which is another bad sign. Dad enjoys the hospitality of detox and psych units much more frequently the older he gets. I am reminded of that old tongue-in-cheek reference to denial not being a river in Egypt bandied about in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. Denial is truly a deep body of water in my family. Nearly eighty, my overtly atheist dad mocks God and continues his high-risk behavior with apparent impunity.

I learn that Dad is in intensive care bleeding from points unknown. He has received six units of blood already, and the hospital wants to know whether to resuscitate him if he should

arrest. He has made arrangements for that. DNR—Do Not Resuscitate, and Dad has already sent his brother, his cousin, and me the paperwork that lets us know that he has prepaid for his own cremation if he should die.

“I’m a convert and an atheist,” Elena informs me.

I suspect this is part of my orientation as a nurse here. I wonder if I am supposed to respond either with a question or with some sordid admission of my own. I say nothing while sneaking sidelong glances at her. Elena has thinning hair that perhaps had been blond at one time. Born in Poland of a Polish mother and Serbian father, she looks like any Eastern European, Jewish or otherwise. Tall and almost ungainly, Elena’s face in repose reminds me uncomfortably of my mother’s. Kindly watery grey eyes with navy rims peer nearsightedly out from behind wire-rimmed spectacles. Elena sizes me up and reserves comment.

I am beginning a four-week stint working in a busy infirmary at a religious Jewish summer camp. I do not have time to question how I got here. It is a relief to know that Elena is an atheist since the first personal information that I am to share is about my alcoholic, drug-addicted father who is trying to bleed to death in an ICU in southern Florida. Does she think it odd that I make no move to rush off to sit by his bedside? Something visceral tells me that he will survive, as usual. Elena’s expression does not change.

She merely peers at me calmly from behind her spectacles and says, “Just let me know what you need.”

What I need is not something I consider much. Thirty years of being a nurse has taken its toll on contemplation about “what I need,” in spite of many attempted moves to other career paths. Like most of us old timers in the medical field, family illness and death follow me like an endless funeral procession sporting black streamers and a second line, complete with trumpets, saxophones, and mournful jazz riffs. The mourners that bring up the rear of this ragged bunch consist of ailing relatives who keep a lurching sense of time with their broken crutches and battered wheelchairs.

I spend my first two twelve-hour shifts on the new job culling medical records, marking allergies and Epi-pens with a glistening vermilion sharpie, entering my thirty-first year of nursing on automatic pilot.

*“Christ killer! Get off this bus! You Jews have no right to ride with good Christian children!”* A drop of spittle decorates the chin of the black and white swathed nun who demands my immediate exit from the bus. I root around for my dented Mighty Mouse lunch box, pull my navy blue parka tighter around my stubby eight-year-old frame, and sadly realize that I have left my beloved library book *Amelia Bedelia* on the seat of the big yellow bus as I watch it pull away. I stand there blinking in the late afternoon glare watching the stream of nuns as they silently flow back into the school.

I shiver. It will be another hour before the late bus comes. Waiting inside the parochial school is definitely not possible for little Jewish girls. I idly wonder who this ‘Christ’ person is. Does he live inside the school? Probably not. Maybe he is a substitute teacher. I finger a mended tear in the hood of my parka.

Grandma Sarah had muttered, “Tse! Tse!” and spat when I had given it to her to fix two weeks ago. It was unnecessary to mention that it was the result of another nun-bus episode. I content myself with imagining Mighty Mouse coming to my rescue and giving me a lift home.

I am in my room at camp quietly rereading an old Chaim Potok novel when I hear what sounds like the ecstatic crowing of a large barnyard bird. It is Channah, the Georgian nurse (by way of Israel and the Bronx), noisily making her way through the waiting room into the infirmary office. The sound belies her size; Channah is actually tiny with a head of tight black curls and laughing dark eyes. She sweeps into the infirmary, hugging and kissing the taciturn Elena, trumpeting endearments while retaining her in a chokehold. Channah explains her seventeen-year relationship with “Moya Elenushka!” to us, her audience of unfamiliar staff, while her “Elenushka” looks a bit nonplussed.

Channah continues effusively about how her husband owns a cab company in New York, how he always has \$300 in his pocket, how her daughter is in her second year at Harvard (although why she would want to go so far from New York is a mystery), and her beloved and brilliant twelve-year-old son (a yeshiva *bucher*, of course) is here for camp. She ends with a flourish, kisses Elena again fiercely and rushes off to unpack her trunk, while a cacophony of Hebrew peppered with Georgian epithets accompanies her slapping flip flops down the hall.

My cell phone buzzes away in my pocket. This time it is my cousin wanting me to intervene with the doctor at her mother's nursing home who allegedly "is an idiot" and refuses to give my aunt medicine for the green stuff draining from the corners of her eyes. I tell her I am working and cannot address it now. My cousin oozes injury. Somehow I have insulted her. I assure her that I'll call the nursing home after my shift. The funeral procession hums a dirge in the back of my mind as I turn to the endless filing of medical records. We have no patients yet. Camp starts officially for the campers tomorrow. Four-hundred-fifty campers is a daunting thought, but my money is on the quiet Elena. I return to Chaim Potok believing that we are being guided by an experienced captain who will maneuver us through the shallows of stubbed toes, the rapids of camp viruses, and the flotsam and jetsam of homesickness and childish feuds without difficulty.

*It is near Christmas. I am perched high above my third grade classroom painting snowflakes and evergreens on the frosty surfaces of the tall windows with broad strokes and primary colors. I am reminded to put a star on the top of the tree, and I carefully paint a six-pointed yellow beauty that floats proudly on the uppermost branch of the bright green tree. Miss Sheehan turns, horrified. To my shame, she points out to the entire class that I have painted a Jewish star on a Christmas tree. I hear the razor sharp voice ask whether I know the difference between a Jewish star and a Christian one. My throat is dry, and I cannot squeak out an answer. By now the class is*

laughing itself sick. Alice Pellitier, my playground nemesis, loftily announces that a real Christmas star has five points, not six. A half hour later, I am hiding tearfully in the cloakroom.

I solemnly whisper to myself, “Five points, not six!” and pinch myself to ensure that I will never, ever forget.

Dad is recovering as I knew he would. He assures me that the bleed had nothing to do with his drinking. I am silent. We have been down this road before. He tells me that his belly is distended, and the doctor has mentioned something about his liver. He assures me again that it has nothing to do with his drinking. Of course. It never does. I sigh inwardly. Dad is jubilant. He has beaten death again. I hang up and report to Elena that a trip south will be unnecessary. She smiles and says nothing.

I make my daily pilgrimage to the camp library. I have finished all the Potok books, and I note that there are several Isaac Singer novels lodged among the ‘S’s on the shelves below. As the unusually rainy weather wears on, I find myself delving deeper and deeper into the dark fiction of my *landzmen*, my countrymen—the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. Singer is my guide to late nineteenth-century life in the Pale of Settlement, that impoverished border area between Poland and the Ukraine in which so many Jews starved or were killed by the Black Hundreds long before the concentration camps of World War II. Barnard Malamud takes me on a tour of 1940s New York tenements and the frozen winding streets of Kiev five decades earlier. Through the pages of Singer and Malamud, I find myself asking the familiar questions of whether God exists, and if so, why did He allow the *pogroms* and the ghettos? Why do the Gentiles hate us, and why are we still accused of making *matzo*hs out of the blood of Christian children? And why, if Malamud is correct, is it always a Jew’s lot to suffer?

It is the first Shabbat, or Sabbath, of camp. Channa, in her heavy Israeli-Georgian accent, announces to us newbies repeatedly that “Elena makes a beautiful *Shabbos!*” I have not heard the Ashkenazi

pronunciation of the word for Sabbath since my mother was alive, and I ponder briefly the idea of an atheist making any kind of 'Shabbos.' I am working long hours, as are we all, really. In Judaism, nurses get special dispensation to work when even God rests. There is, however, a slight aura of anticipation.

As twilight approaches, a pristine white tablecloth and crystal candlesticks are placed carefully on the picnic table that permanently resides on the screened-in porch. A braided *challah* and silver Kiddush cup appear almost magically. I spot Elena approaching the infirmary on foot pulling a red child's wagon laden with dinner. I have showered and am wearing my cleanest thrift shop skirt and tee shirt. Elena's adult daughter appears with a bunch of lurid pink freesia and presents them to her mother with a deep curtsy and a grin. Elena receives them with a shy nearsighted smile and places them in a vase fashioned from a pediatric measuring spoon. It is the only odd bit of *Shabbos* paraphernalia here, but it seems somehow to fit.

The last notes of the service ushering in Shabbat, or *Shabbos*, trail off amid the murmur of campers and staff heading to dinner. And then it is dusk. The steady chirp-chirrup of crickets mingles with the hum of mosquitoes and the flutter of moths around the single light bulb suspended from the porch ceiling. We, an assorted company of women, stand on the infirmary porch and intone the traditional prayers in the Hebrew we have all known nearly from birth. The candles are lit; the wine is sipped. The *challah* is torn, dipped in salt and passed, signifying the bittersweet lives of Jews everywhere. I hear my mother and grandmother in our voices.

*It is the end of the summer, and I am swimming again in the agam. My six-pointed gold star is fastened securely around my neck. I have read Singer, Malamud, and Potok, celebrated Shabbos, and worked the usual too-many-hours one always does as a nurse. My gaggle of sick relatives has survived, surprisingly to them, without my help. I continue to swim, and I know, unequivocally, that I will never drown.*

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# Our Ancestors

| Lee Conell

My parents never took me to the Independence Day celebrations in New York City. They said they wouldn't go because of the crowds. Really, they just preferred expressing their patriotism by shouting at the political pundits on television. But Bubbie was different. When I visited her with my mother one summer, she told me no granddaughter of hers would pass the fourth without festivities. We were going to see the fireworks.

At age ten, I had an idea the event would involve a large patch of grass and a dozen or so clean-cut suburban families sitting atop their red and white checkered picnic blankets, staring with hushed respect at a night sky filled with light. When Bubbie was driving my mother and me to the fireworks site, I kept waiting to pull into one of the vast fields that so neatly filled the spaces in between my grandmother's condo, the gas station, and the Dairy Queen.

Instead we pulled into a strip mall.

"There's supposed to be a fantastic set of fireworks you can see right from the parking lot!" Bubbie beamed.

She drove past closed store after closed store, the reflection of her white Dodge Neon gleaming in dark windows. Though a few plastic shopping bags rose like ghosts with the breeze, the lot she parked in was empty of people—until a pudgy man walked out of one of the few open stores and shuffled over to us.

"Excuse me," he said, managing to both talk and grin, "but did you happen to see a sign on your way into this parking lot? No? Well folks, I'm afraid you need to buy a sandwich from my restaurant to park here."

"A sandwich?" Bubbie said, so immediately stony-faced that I knew she'd seen the sign and ignored it.

"An Italian beef sandwich. It's our specialty."

She was much taller than this man, and made a point to examine the part in his thinning hair.

"Even better, there's a twenty-five percent discount," the man

continued, smiling harder. “On the sandwich.”

“We have to buy a sandwich to park here?”

“With a twenty-five percent discount!”

“Do you know what country this is?”

“Ma’am—”

“This is America.”

“Ma’am—”

“This is a free country.”

“I understand, ma’am, but this is my parking lot.”

Bubbie crossed her arms.

“It’s a good sandwich,” the man said. “I promise you. It’s a really, really good sandwich.”

“What about the tea?”

He squinted.

“For what reason,” Bubbie continued, “did our forefathers dump tea into the Atlantic? So that some stranger could tell us where to park on the Fourth of July? On Independence Day? Did the founders fight England so that an Italian beef sandwich could stand in the way of my loving our country however I choose? Would our ancestors be happy about that?”

I wanted to point out that actually, weren’t our ancestors wandering around somewhere in Eastern Europe during the Boston Tea Party? But I knew this was a bad time; the store owner’s left eye was beginning to twitch.

“Listen, ma’am, private property is all-American too,” he said finally. “Now either buy a sandwich or get off my parking lot.”

\*

Luckily, Bubbie had a supernatural knowledge of every Independence Day celebration occurring within a twenty-mile radius. As we pulled out of the forbidden parking lot, having lost the battle of wills with the sandwich man, she told us one-hundred percent we’d see fireworks that night. Heck, we could see two sets of fireworks if we wanted, or a whole dozen. But we would see fireworks. She would make sure of it. Heck.

The sky grew darker, the time for fireworks approached, and traffic got worse. A red light stuck us next to a car piled full of teenagers. They rolled their window down and began to scream in our direction, a slew of them laughing and horn-honking. I imagined their car hitting ours, knocking us into a ditch, and everyone too distracted by the fireworks to help.

My mom cast alarmed looks at my grandmother, who seemed to neither see nor hear the teenagers. When the light changed, the other vehicle swerved dangerously close to ours, but Bubbie looked straight ahead and gripped the wheel, told us yessirree, there'd be fireworks tonight. When the teenagers lost interest and sped ahead, my mom let out a sigh.

I thought about how I could use a sandwich.

When we at last pulled into a field, it was not like the one I'd imagined, but the kind of open space designed for crowd-drawing high school football matches. All around it were boxy bright white lights to illuminate the games. They dimmed the sky.

Cars on the nearby road emitted a constant roar to compete with a firework's boom, and a wire fence kept the waiting families from going out too far on the grass. A group of kids only a couple years older than me, middle-school kids, were gathered around the fence smoking cigarettes. I stared at them, and for a second they stared back, sizing me up the way no city kids had ever bothered to do. Then their faces went slack, their gazes turned dismissive, and they made a point not to look at me. In fact, they didn't look at much of anything but focused on their smoking. None of them seemed to have a red and white checkered blanket, and I wasn't sure where their parents might be.

I know we saw fireworks that night, but I don't remember them. I just remember the kids, sometimes looking out at the field, sometimes looking at the ground. Maybe fireworks aren't the kind of thing you're supposed to remember anyway, being more or less the same each year. Maybe that's why we like to see them, why we feel we can freely offer our oohs and ahs. The moment passes with

no burden to the memory, for the fireworks will be back. Knowing this, when the show ends we allow ourselves to feel a little glad to let our craned necks relax, to look once more in front of us, instead of above.

Unless you were Bubbie. As soon as the show ended, she offered to drive to two more fireworks displays in surrounding towns, and to take us to an Independence Day parade early the next morning. The parade would be great, she said, lots of neighborhood kids carted down the street in little red wagons, and everyone waving plastic flags in miniature. But my mother declined, suggesting probably it would be best for us to return to the condo. There, to conclude the festivities, Bubbie read out loud to us Whittier's poem about Barbara Frietchie, the old woman legend says refused orders to take down the union flag hanging from her window, even though Stonewall Jackson's rebel forces were marching right past her house. My grandmother embraced the recitation, shaking her fist to the poem's impassioned rhetoric, becoming Barbara Frietchie at the dramatic climax. "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, but spare your country's flag, she said!" Bubbie bellowed the words, pointing to her own platinum-dyed hair.

After the recitation she brought out a gigantic Sara Lee coconut cake, small striped candles wedged into the sticky frosting. She did not bake like the cookie-making grandmothers on TV; always it was store-bought cake waiting in the fridge. We had picked up the cake earlier that day at what was essentially a Sara Lee outlet store, stocked with baked goods that didn't sell, mammoth towers of frosting made for weddings that were called off and centenarian birthday parties sadly canceled. The cake cost us only a few dollars, but it was big enough to serve at least twenty people.

Setting the slightly stale and seriously mythic pastry in front of us, Bubbie began to sing: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear America."

I don't know exactly which America my grandmother was singing to—the America she grew up with during World War II? The

Technicolor America in the musicals she loved? Or was it the one we had just emerged from, all strip malls and parking lots?

At the time, I didn't worry about it. I assumed the country she meant was the one that existed exclusively between us, three generations in a small kitchen where candles burned on colossal cakes. I joined my voice in song with my mother's and my grandmother's and ignored the far-off rumble of the fireworks outside.

\*

Because of the distance between our homes, I would only see my grandmother a few more times. Soon after her death when I was in middle school, a teacher, following some "Discover Personal History" bullet point in the curriculum, assigned my class to write a profile of a grandparent's childhood. I chose Bubbie, and since I could not go to the original source, I asked my mother for stories. She told me about my grandmother's father dying when she was five, about the family's devastation during the Great Depression, and about how one Fourth of July, when my grandmother was a sixteen-year-old girl in Chicago, someone fired a gun in patriotic celebration. But the aim was off, and the bullet did not disappear harmlessly into the sky. Sequestered in her sister's home, then-lithe Bubbie had just bent down to put some fudge in the oven when the bullet zipped through the window, right where her head had been moments before she knelt down to open the oven door. Maybe the shot damaged a wall, maybe some pans clattered, maybe for a second her heart crushed itself against the rib cage in shock.

Had Bubbie felt like some cherubic Uncle Sam had swooped in and saved her? Was that strange survival what made the holiday near holy for her? If so, why not worship fudge instead?

It was too late to ask, and I certainly couldn't figure it out for myself. Bubbie now seemed to exist in my mind as another part of the spectacle of Independence Day, a bumbling comic figure whom I loved, surely, but did not and now would never quite understand. I could not even call to mind the timbre of her voice as she read

“Barbara Frietchie,” only her gestures, the way she pointed to her head at that dramatic line.

Still, part of me remained sure the sound of her voice would come back to me, in the same way the fireworks returned. I thought for sure I’d hear her when, the summer before my junior year in college, I took a cross-country bus trip from New York to California and ended up on a Greyhound the night of the Fourth of July. As the bus pulled out of the station, a web of fireworks, each from different distant towns, ascended into the black sky. The fireworks then fell in fizzling pieces, their light dripping down the bus’s tinted safety glass windows.

Watching, I tried to think of Bubbie, tried to hear her reciting her poem. But instead I just found myself wishing I was enmeshed in the crowds, waiting to hear the next explosion. At first, I thought the pull I felt toward the celebrations was patriotism. Really, though, it was a kind of longing. I wanted to know the towns the fireworks so sparsely lit. I wanted to know their sandwich sellers and sulky middle-school students and grandmothers, while I still could. But the bus moved fast, and the fireworks were so far away, I couldn’t even hear their explosions. It was as though they were already in the airless part of memory, where sound cannot travel, where the old voices you strain to recall end up resembling your own.

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# Korean Mother: The Dialogue

| Angela Dahl

“Uhm-ma! It’s too cold!” I yell as I slam the door.

“Put on clothes!” she yells back at me from the piano.

“What do you *think* I’m wearing?!”

Every winter we have this fight. She leaves the windows and doors open, even when it’s fifty degrees outside, which is cold to a native Californian. My mom has told me many times that in Korea you always need fresh air. This conversation falls back into the same pattern as I state that she is not in Korea anymore.

“You have to know that you have a Korean mom.”

I know.

There are so many other ways to describe my mom: old-fashioned, health-nut, and downright crazy—but we both blame our miscommunication on the simple fact that she was born and raised Korean and I was not. My dad is white, I mean really white; he was born and raised on a farm in Utah. I don’t look like my dad, but I don’t look like my mom either. I look and act like a white girl. Korean was never spoken in the house, though I know enough to be fed and loved were I to be homeless in Korea. Literally, I know how to say “hello,” “I’m hungry,” and “I love you. I have, however, become familiar with the noises that all Korean mothers make. There’s the “ai-goh,” the hissing noise of inhaling through her teeth when she’s mad at you; and of course, the occasional swear words that she never admits to using.

I wouldn’t call my mom and I close; she doesn’t really know a lot about my personal life. Over the years, I have noticed that in our daily interactions the conversations usually fall into one of several categories.

## Compliments

Every time I leave the house to go to school my mom insists that she open the gate for me (which always takes much longer than if I had just opened the gate myself), and she tells me I’m beautiful.

“Bye Uhm-ma.”

“Oh, Baby-ya, let me open the gate for you,” she says excitedly. Her slippers shuffle up quickly behind me, and she pushes past me—intent on opening the gate before I get to it.

My mom explained to me once that when someone leaves or comes home in Korea they are always accompanied or greeted by their family members. In the old days in America this might have been appropriate. Her favorite memory of Grandma (my dad’s mom) is when we left her house, and she stood on the porch waving good-bye to us with a white handkerchief. Mom doesn’t see this in modern American culture, to which she accuses Americans of being barbaric.

As a consequence, every time I or anyone else leaves the house, my mom goes outside to wave until you leave—minus the white handkerchief.

“Bye Baby-ya, you look so beautiful today.”

“K, see you later.”

I already don’t react well to compliments, so my reaction to that statement is usually a scoff or a rolling of the eyes. She’s my mom; she’s supposed to think I’m beautiful. But she tells me nearly every day, and nearly every day I don’t take it seriously.

We also have an abundance of rose bushes in the driveway that we hardly take care of. My mom’s version of tending a garden is to drown them in water once a month. The roses surprisingly bloom yearly, and in the spring my mom makes her favorite comparison:

“Baby-ya. You are like this flower. It’s fully blossomed and is at the prime time of its beauty.”

“Mom, there’s a bug in that flower.”

“You know what I mean!”

I’ll always be her baby, and beautiful in her eyes. But in my small slightly Asian eyes I don’t see it yet.

## Warnings

When I go out at night it's a completely different dynamic.

My mom walks me to the gate, tells me to be safe, and then there's the pause before she musters up this utterance as I'm walking away:

"Be safe! Don't get shot. . . . DON'T GET PREGNANT!"

Like I'm going to an orgy on Skid Row. Most of the time I'm going to Disneyland or shopping with my friends. Nothing that needs protection.

However, my mom is desperate for grandchildren, and since the family has deemed my sister having children akin to Hell freezing over, that burden has been placed on me. I use this to my advantage during the "Don't Get Shot" spiel.

"What if I just moved out with a boy roommate Mom, what would you do?"

"If you value having a relationship with your mom you won't do that."

"Don't you wanna be a grandma? I could make that happen."

"If you're married you can do THAT every night! Don't walk on the wild side!"

As I continue walking to my car I count the seconds until she shouts the last warning. Normally it's about two to three seconds until I hear:

"NIGHT TIME IS EVIL TIME!"

## Boys

My mom worries that I don't have a boyfriend, because if I don't have a boyfriend I won't have a husband, and if I don't have a husband I can't be "protected." Therefore, maybe as a ramification of wishful thinking, she immediately assumes that any male that comes over to the house is my boyfriend. She doesn't understand how boys and girls can be friends. She also doesn't believe in homosexuality. Then, she met Paul.

Paul is on the dance team with me, and as you may guess, he is

a flamboyant homosexual. His eyebrows are perfectly plucked, and he has a fondness for leather pants. He came over one day with the other girls, and my mom came out to greet us as usual.

“Welcome home Bab—Oh! Hi Jessica, Melody, Mindy . . .”

“Hey Mom, this is Paul,” I said, gesturing to Paul.

“Hello Mrs. Dahl,” he said.

My mom took his hand in a handshake.

“. . . Are you Angie’s boyfriend?”

“Oh Christ,” I muttered, while Paul turned bright red. The girls started laughing hysterically, as I shook my head and pushed them and poor Paul through the front door.

Later that night:

“Uhm-ma, you can’t just call any guy that walks into the house my boyfriend. It’s actually counterproductive.”

“Why isn’t he your boyfriend?”

“. . . Because he’s my friend . . . and gay.”

“Moh?! How do you know for sure?”

Well Paul wasn’t wearing his leather pants. But I could feel the flames of his gayness just by standing next to him.

“He likes men. He’s a homosexual. I really don’t know how to explain it further. . . . He is on *the dance team* with me.”

“Is he a part-time gay?”

“What does that even mean? As opposed to a full-time gay?”

“Two of my bosses were full-time gay. You can tell right away from their actions, how they talk, that kind of thing. Part-time gay you can’t tell.”

“Yeah Mom . . . he’s full-time.”

“I guess that’s ok then. Part-time gay leaves temptation for adultery.”

Despite my mom’s Catholic upbringing I continue to connect with gay guys. But I stopped bringing them home with me just to save them the embarrassment.

## Food

More than anything, my mom cares about what I eat. Because of this concern there is always an abundance of fruit in the house that I am constantly guilted into eating. And if I can't eat it at home she'll make me take it with me, which could have messy consequences.

"Take a banana with you."

"I don't want fruit."

"Look, I even put the little cut in it already so it's easy for you to open."

"I'm not gonna take a banana with me to school, Mom, remember that time it exploded in my backpack?"

". . . I'll go get another fruit."

When my friends come over she offers them fruit right when they enter, and as they leave. I advise my friends and their families to never do anything nice for us, because then I will have to show up at their door with a watermelon. When she found out that Jessica liked grapefruit she kept a stash in the fridge for three months just in case she came over.

She also assumes that my friends and I are always ravenous.

"Here's some fruit. . . . Take some more—it's good for you. . . . Here let me put it for you just tell me when to stop."

"Stop."

"Wait, you need more."

"Mom, stop! That's too much."

"You hardly ever eat fruit. And Jessica likes fruit. Don't you, Jessica?"

"I sure do."

"Thanks a lot Jess. . . . Mom, seriously, stop!"

"Ok. Are you sure that's enough?"

"Oh yeah. I didn't realize we were also feeding Pavarotti tonight."

"Make sure you finish it, or else I'll be mad!"

And believe me, you don't want to see this woman mad.

She may be petite, but she can kill fruit flies by clapping her hands together. I always finish my fruit.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Notes

The other medium that my mother uses to communicate with the members of the family is written notes. She sticks Post-its or scraps of paper with her perfect handwriting in places she knows you will see it. For me, that's either the bathroom mirror or inside the refrigerator.

Most of the time, the note is just to tell you where to find the food she has made before she left. But sometimes there's also a crisis that requires your attention:

Baby-ya!

Please throw the soup into the noodle and microwave for about one minute. Ants are around the sink. I had hard time to kill an army of ants this morning while rushing for many thing to get ready for school. So please put all dirty bowls, pant, and whatever in the refrigerator, or inside of the microwave oven.

Have a good day!  
Love, Mom

P.S. I washed the grapes for you & dad.

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When I told my mom that I was writing a story based on her, her immediate reaction was to put her head down and wail that people would think she's a "silly goose." Well if it looks like a goose and sounds like goose it must be my Korean mother. We don't always see

Asian eye to slightly Asian eye; but behind the silliness, the paranoid warnings, and the mountain of fruit is love. If it's true that girls are cursed to end up as their mothers, at least I'll be entertaining.

*Angela Dahl is a graduate from Cal Poly Pomona's English Literature program. Her other short story, "The Knight with the Squirrel," was accepted for the 2009 Sigma Tau Delta Convention. She is currently working toward her M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition from her alma mater.*

## Ex Libris

| Jonathon Ciani

### New York, 1987

To get to the end of the line, they had walked from the subway stop (after pausing briefly to pick up two coffees from an umbrella-covered stand) to the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Third Street. Once there, they both made a quick turn and found themselves in a crowd: people wandered wag-tag willy-nilly up and down the sidewalks and even spilled out into the usually car filled pavement. The moving figures occasionally became stationary figures, stopping at one booth or another and peering down at the table. Different pairs stopped in mid-walk at the sight of apparent old friends or distant acquaintances. He could hear them talking about things on which everyone could agree, watched their smiles swim through pools of generality and pleasantness before moving on with a brisk step to see what else the *New York is Book Country Fair* had to offer. At the sight of this giant crowd moving as crowds do, she grabbed his hand and directed her steps to a pattern more closely aligned with the movement of his own feet. Threading their way through these people, hearing snatches of conversation, they kept checking their event programs and sometimes scanning the faces that passed them by, looking for familiarity.

“Who are we here to see again?” she asked him.

“Tom Wolfe. Remember, he wrote that book I’m crazy about.”

“Oh yeah. That’s right. He’s the journalist or something.”

“The *new* journalist if you want to be exact. People toss around some labels, but at the end of the day he’s a writer,” he said, trying to sound like he knew something. “He puts out books. Good books.”

“Oh. That’s interesting.”

By the time they found the back of the line, it had several undulations.

“Looks like some kind of breadline,” he said, pleased with the allusion.

“Yeah. Why do you think so many people are here? I mean, I’ve never even heard of him.”

“Well. They want to talk to him. See what he’s like.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“I’m not that different from everybody else.”

As they waited, playing silly games like eye-spy and different incarnations of paddy-cake, their ears picked up bits and pieces of conversation, both from the hungry fans in front of them and those who continued to add length and coil to the line. Two girls, both carrying side-slung book bags and smoking cigarettes, talked airily about Wolfe’s abilities, and the questions they just *had* to ask. “We’ve just got to ask him how he knows how many exclamation points to use!” The girl flipped through a copy of Wolfe’s collection *The Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Stream-line Baby*, eyes full of wonder, as though looking on the pyramids. The girl may have cradled an artifact from an ancient civilization recently unburdened of concealing soil, or perhaps received special permission from a museum tour guide to step over the protective chain and actually hold one of Cleopatra’s earrings or touch a moon rock. After drawing in some smoke and swirling street sounds, the girl’s friend asked, “That’s not your copy is it?” followed by the quick observation, “It looks brand new.”

“Yeah,” said the first girl. “I bought it last night. I figured he can sign a fresh copy and mine can stay nice and marked up. It never hurts to have two of these anyway.”

The friend nodded.

The line moved slowly, with one or two steps marking the progress of at least fifteen minutes. After one brief shudder forward, he looked at her and said, “Will you ask him anything?”

“I don’t know anything about him.”

“It couldn’t hurt to ask him something.”

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something about how he knew he was going to write. Or, maybe how he settled on prose over poetry. I

don't wanna sound stupid.”

“That'll take a lot of energy.”

“Ouch. Right through the heart.”

“You knew it.”

“Well, I've gotta ask him something. Maybe I'll ask him about the white suit.”

Before she could respond, a voice called out: “Hey, you two!” Turning, they saw a man sporting socks that spiraled up to his knees in shades of orange and blue, a knit cap that glared brightly in sharp green tones, and a scraggly beard, graying in patches. “How you like a picture in the paper?” He asked, pointing to the black shape of the camera he held cocked to the side in his right hand. “Just stand there together and smile. Maybe say ‘BOOKS’ or tell the kids to stay in school . . . alright . . . one . . . two . . . three!”

### Indianapolis, 2008

White walls splotted with black and white photographs surrounded the display case. The figures in the pictures jumped out sharp, some looking straight into the camera, others staring at a sight just beyond the lens. The manuscript—held tightly in the display case propped up on smooth wood floors in a manner not unlike a wide balance beam—unrolled in the middle of the room. Standing up close, I could look down on the actual words as the typewriter had left them. Ink smudged. Pieces held together with yellowing Scotch tape. Little shreds ripped out and reattached. Notes blotted into the margins. Words underlined or crossed out by red and blue and black pen and sometimes pencil. From the beginning to the end, I think I walked about twenty yards following the spontaneous long imperfect embryonic roll of *On the Road*.

As I looked intently at the words, a security guard came up to me. “You ain't tryin' to read that?” asked the old timer.

“Nah. Just trying to get a feel,” I said.

“He sho did pack them words in small. Ain't know how you *could* read it.”

I laughed and turned back to the manuscript, but only slightly.

“Go on down to the end and look,” continued the guard. “Down there he write a little piece say ‘my dog ate it!’ hehehehe! His dog done chewed up a piece.”

“Really?”

“Sho. Go on and see it. And have a nice day now.”

I made my way down the display case and saw that the end of the manuscript, the part with the long description of sunset in America, had in fact been chewed up—and, sure enough, Kerouac had blamed it on his dog in some penciled-in remarks.

Kerouac didn’t seem too distant. I understood what he meant when he sang, “Straight from the mind . . . with no hand intervening.” I felt him plucking away at the keys on an old type writer, singing some parts out loud, letting others role by in silence like quiet moments on the highway. I felt the real words. Nothing stood between those words and my experience of them: no wires or cables or scroll-bars present to intervene.

### **New York, 1987**

I snapped a picture of a cute young couple, just happy-looking kids with candy cane smiles swirled on their faces. After the flash went off, they waved at me and turned back into each other. He pointed up at the top of a building. Her head turned to follow him but dropped real quick-like. Then, she put her hands on her hips and turned a posed frown on him before looking away to hide a smile. My right shoe felt a little loose, so I bent down and tied the strings back together, the new ones Mae bought me with rainbow frizzy lines. Then I walked back into the crowd.

A photographer’s dream opened up as the crowd moved in and out of the different booths. Every face carried a different expression, most of them elated like when I’ve seen people move through a buffet line, or the way kids walk away from an ice-cream truck. The people who sat behind the tables looked nice and relaxed and moved their hands soft-like across the tops of books. I snapped

pictures of a fella carrying a large cardboard cut-out of Shakespeare. Then saw a young girl with a pen as big as one of those jumbo candy bars, maybe even bigger. I snapped that too and kept walking up and down the street.

One of the booths showed off some pretty impressive old books, bound all up in leather and sorta molding at the corners. People had to touch glass. They never actually got to feel the book. I snapped some and felt sorry. At home, I have a shelf about buckled under from leather books. Mae calls them one step above dust and waits every day for them to evaporate, so she says. I can't get enough of 'em even if I don't have particular plans to read 'em all the way through. I just like looking at them, reading the gold wording of their titles, maybe reading the print on a page here, a page there. Simple looks like that, to get the feel.

Seeing the booth with all the old books reminded me of my dream. Well, one of my dreams. A dream different from a crowd of people walking down a street, say. Really, what I wanna do is get myself into the Morgan Library. The big one they got here in the city where they keep the real old books, the real fancy ones. Somewhere in there, actually right in the center of the place, they've got a stand that holds up a glass case and inside the glass case is one of the oldest print Bibles. One that came all the way from Germany way back when. My dream is to walk up to it and take a picture. A true dream I guess, because reality won't ever allow it. Light damages the paper, so pictures aren't allowed in Mr. Morgan's old place. But, if I could, I would walk up and take my time to frame the shot. Looking from up above wouldn't get justice. Everything would look flat-like, too flat and one-dimensional. A straight-on view would only let you see the curved wings of the book. But then you wouldn't know exactly which book it was. I'd need an odd angle. One that lets you drop in on the book from a little bit high, but would give you a feel for the texture of the pages and the way they did in fact curl into wings like a dove's. What I'd do is come up from one of the bottom corners so the text faced right-side up. I'd hunch down and heave

the camera up over my head with a downward angle of about ten degrees with the lens tilted only slightly to the left. Then I'd snap.

I've told the plan to Mae. She can't visualize it the way I see it in my head. She can't see exactly how I'll get that feel that I want. How I'll be able to snap the image into something that tells you about the shape of the book and the feel. Again that feel. She tells me to keep trying. Sometimes I think maybe a picture ain't worth so many words in this case. But what do I know?

*The night before*, New York, 1987

Darkness surrounded the glare of New York City lights. Tom Wolfe, tired from a day of scribbling down descriptions of the faces he saw pass by the Empire State Building, decided to walk a few blocks and get a drink. Shaking his hand out, placing the pen inside a plastic bag, and then inside the pocket of his white suit, he shook his head a little bit and took his first few steps. While walking, he noticed the clouds collecting around the tops of the skyscrapers, like moths around a flame, white shapes buzzing with a polluted glow. Horns and tires squealing—it was rush hour—added up into a cacophony for his ears. Tom Wolfe thought it all felt *real*, and so he smiled a bit as he rounded the corner and walked into a revolving door to the hotel lobby where he sometimes enjoyed a drink or two.

At the bar, he took out the notebook. Staring into the big mirror, he could see the darkened tables and the people who, again like moths around a flame, flitted about them. People in serious suits and polished shoes. A glowing television set propped up honorifically in the back corner near the ceiling. Women taking long-stemmed martini glasses from men. Cigar smoke hazing the air. Everyone, he noticed, laughed. He opened the plastic bag, took out the pen, and started to write: "*What's it about! This here America we've got?*"

Before he could write more: "Well, well. Or maybe I should say Hooooow! Hooooow! Hey, Tom! Whattdya say?"

Tom Wolfe turned around to see Vonnegut—good old

Vonnegut!—knocking his knuckles on the wood of the bar and smiling in that grizzly way. “Why, Kurt. It is a pleasure.” The two writers shook hands jovially, like immigrants who’ve just seen someone from the old country.

“Writing in public. Can you explain yourself, young man?”

Tom Wolfe smiled at Vonnegut. “We gotta do what we gotta do.”

“And someone’s sure as hell gotta do it, eh?” suggested Vonnegut. By this time, he had a glass of whiskey in his hand. After speaking, he raised it up and toward Tom Wolfe, who picked up his own glass of the good stuff, and raised it without clinking into Vonnegut’s. Both men took a healthy drink.

“What about you, Kurt? Why have you graced the streets with your presence?”

“I was out. Just rumbling around. Feeling restless I guess. And then chasing it.”

“That sounds a little . . . poetic. Got anything better?”

Vonnegut put down the glass and looked at Tom Wolfe. He ran a hand through his curly hair, the hand acting like a rake. “I’ve been reading. I guess. I got caught up in something. Something you’d like.”

“You don’t say,” said Tom Wolfe.

“I’ve got some journals of Jack Kerouac. Little log books he kept while he was out on the road or sitting at home up in Lowell. You ever read ‘em?”

“Not the journals. You’re right though. I’d love to get a look at ‘em. There’s something about the freeness of his words. You can see America when you hold that thing in your hands and let your eyes run over the pages. He had it. He knew about spontaneity. Gave me a couple of lessons.”

“Oh yeah. He’s your man.”

“That he is. How do you find the journals?”

Vonnegut paused and looked into the mirror. He reached into the inside of his coat, and pulled out a thick bound volume. He ran his hand down the spine and over the cover, just looking at the

book. He held the gaze for a while and then shifted in his seat to face Tom Wolfe.

“The journals remind me of a time, not that long ago, when there were still a few people passionately responsive to writing. I think. I think, those folks are pretty much extinct now.”

Tom Wolfe gave him a long look. “Oh really? Completely extinct?” With his eyes, Tom Wolfe hinted at himself as best as he could.

Vonnegut chuckled. “You know what I mean. Just think about it.”

“Oh sure. I know it. I remember that as a boy I read and read and read and read and read, and then I read a little more. Nothing really got in the way either. Now, I think stuff gets in the way.”

“Like the television. Or the movies. Shoot. That’s where you go to make money now.”

“And so many of ‘em do. Writers, I mean,” said Tom Wolfe.

“At least we can count on two of ‘em to keep turnin’ out books.” Vonnegut pointed between Tom Wolfe and himself.

“Sure we can.” He slid his hands across the smooth wood of the bar and grabbed hold of the journals that Vonnegut had placed there. He opened them up, and began to flip through them, at times running his index finger underneath a line.

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As the night deepens outside, the two writers will talk about Kerouac, and mention their children and families. They’ll stay away from the future of writing, and the future of books. Neither one of them really knows anything about that, anyway. Tom Wolfe doesn’t know that the internet will explode across the globe and close down distances, while drawing attention spans to a minimum. He’s never heard of Wikipedia, a concept he’ll eventually call shameful. Vonnegut cannot imagine the decay print journalism will experience. He cannot envision a world where people spend hours staring at a screen and scrolling through text. They have never heard of an eBook or even imagined writing on anything other

than a typewriter. They will talk about the goodness of books: the simple joys of opening and closing, the rebellious satisfaction of dog-eared a page, and the emphasized mystery naturally accompanying an underlined passage or comments found written in the margin. Always alert, even they will fail to notice the great shift that, like the invention of the printing press, will propel the world into a new stage of thinking.

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Instead of dwelling on the consequences and causes of this inevitability, they sat and read aloud from Kerouac's journals. Tom Wolfe showed Vonnegut some pages from his notebook, and they laughed at the way that some people walk, or the ridiculous things they shout to each other.

When they leave, Vonnegut will offer, "Anything on the board for tomorrow?"

Tom Wolfe will reply, "I've got the book fair deal. Gonna sign and smile and talk to people. Should be quite a show."

"Make sure you get that suit pressed."

"Always do."

### **New York, 1987**

"Lookit! That guy's gonna jump!"

"Where!? Oh, You!"

"I couldn't resist."

"I don't know why I always fall for you."

"I do. Really, though. See that plane up there, dragging the sign?"

"Oh yeah. What do you think it says?"

"Probably something about the book fair."

"Yeah. Tom Wolfe is a celebrity after all . . ." she said slyly.

"Shut up!" he laughed.

The line inched forward. Interested people passed by, talking about this book or that book, or what they saw in the booth just around the corner. He noticed several older men sitting on a bench, working on a crossword puzzle. Later, he saw some young kids rush

by with coloring books, anxious parents tagging along as they lugged cloth bags stuffed with even more books.

“Have you thought of what you’re going to say to him yet?”

“Well. I have to think of something. I mean. It’s Tom Wolfe. I just need to—it’ll come to me when we get up there” he responded.

“Why *does* he wear that white suit?”

“That can be your question.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

Barely twenty minutes passed, and he stood three people away from Tom Wolfe. Sitting in the sun, wearing that brilliant white suit, Wolfe looked relaxed and happy, smiling and chatting, clearly engaged and interested. He noticed that the writer’s face seemed a bit tired, the skin beneath the eyes beginning to bag together. Wolfe crossed his white shoes over and over each other. At the end of the each conversation with an eager fan, he saw Wolfe reach forward for the book and scribble a little something onto the inside cover. He checked his thick copy of *Bonfire of Vanities* to make sure it was all set. He ran over the question one more time: “So Mr. Wolfe how exactly did you decide on that particular narrative—”

“How’re ya doin’ today, young man?” Tom Wolfe had spoken to him.

He looked up and made eye contact. All his questions cleared away as he felt his hands clutch the bound book even tighter. One question, however, did hold fast in his mind. He knew he had to ask: “Will you sign my book?”

*Jonathon Ciani is a senior pursuing a double major in English and Philosophy with a minor in History at Marian University in Indianapolis. His writing has also appeared in The Marian Undergraduate Journal of History & Social Science and the quarterly magazine Indiana Charter Schools Today. Hot-air balloons fascinate him.*

# The Professional and the Polar Twin: A Five-Act Drama (With Author's Notes)

| Mark Kelley

## Prologue: The Curse of Mankind

*"In each of us there are two natures. If this primitive duality of man, good and evil, could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that is unbearable. It is the curse of mankind that these polar twins should be constantly struggling."*

*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

*"He does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking. He is a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."*

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

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Dr. Henry Jekyll was a good and honest man, but once he drank his potion, he was also a homicidal maniac. Dr. Jekyll convinced the world that his evil nature was in fact a different person, Mr. Hyde, and resolved to fight this other nature alone. My father, Dr. Kelley, faced a similar fate: through a potion, he unlocked his other nature and attempted to hide the result from the world. Dr. Jekyll's evil nature ultimately led to his demise. Would my father die?

## Act One: The Phone Call

It's a warm September afternoon: like most nineteen-year-olds, I spend the day ignoring my schoolwork, playing videogames in the dorms instead. Midterms don't start for a month anyway. Until then, I have time to focus on more important things: TJ has just bought Madden 2008, and I'm struggling to learn the controls. The phone rings. It's my father. Why is he calling on a Monday afternoon? I answer: he can talk while I make this critical third-down conversion. "Mark?" he asks in a weary tone. He's been crying.

I leave the room. I brace myself. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m going to have to go away for a while, and I don’t know what is going to happen. I fucked up.” My bracing does little to soften the blow. Words escape me. He says some other things, but I’m not listening. Instead, I’m thinking about all the times this call probably should have happened. I think about all the times my father has “fucked up” in my life and his. “Mark, are you there?” I refocus. He tells me what happened. I desperately hang to every word. It can’t possibly be as bad as it sounds. He always fixes it: even when he fucks up, life eventually returns to normal. I hold out hope that this is the case. But the more I listen, the less I hope. This time is different.

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My most pressing question about that day is also the most obvious: why did my father go to work with alcohol still in his system? The hospital knew his condition and didn’t discriminate so long as he came to work completely clean. He knew he was going to be tested that Monday morning. Yet he failed. Why? I still don’t know, but I can guess. My father didn’t have as much control as he wanted us to believe, as he wanted to believe. His confidence, charisma, and intelligence made him a good doctor. They also made him a good alcoholic—“good” in the sense that he was skilled at hiding it, hard to catch. “Is Dad drunk?” I often asked myself growing up, not wanting to know but asking anyway.

## **Act Two: Power Rangers and Nosey Teachers**

It’s a chilly November morning: I missed the bus, so Mom is driving me to first grade. But I’m not thinking about school. Sitting in the back seat, my mind engages in a feverish debate: which Power Ranger do I want for Christmas? The red one is more popular, but I like the blue one. Mother disrupts my concentration. “Honey, did you remember your spelling homework?” I answer positively. She keeps talking, but I’m lost in thought: Mike already has the blue

one. Do I want the same one as Mike? We arrive at school. As I exit the car, my mother includes a final direction: “If anyone asks, tell them Daddy is on a business trip and will be gone for two weeks.” Kissing me goodbye, she leaves me to my thoughts. Why is Daddy on business? Who would want to know about Daddy anyway? But these thoughts are fleeting. I’m late, and it’s time to go inside.

After lunch, Mrs. Davis calls me to her desk. Did I forget to hand in my spelling homework? As I reach her, she leans close. “Where is your Daddy? I heard he is out of town,” she asks softly. Now everything makes sense. Mommy wanted Mrs. Davis to know where Daddy is. I eagerly recite my lines: “Daddy is on a business trip and will be gone for two weeks.” She doesn’t seem satisfied but directs me to my seat. By the time I reach my desk, my mind has shifted to more important matters: I think I want the red Power Ranger instead.

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As a child, I knew my father drank. And I knew his absence during those two weeks had to do with his drinking. But the connection was made clear only after my mother heard what happened at school. She told me Daddy was “sick” and was in Chicago to get better. I understood, as much as a six-year-old can understand such a thing: Daddy was at the hospital where he could be cured. Only now do I understand fully: he was in Chicago for an Alcoholics Anonymous program. And he wouldn’t be cured. But that wasn’t the story I told the world. If anyone asked again—and they would—I would stick to my lines. That day, I learned I had a role to play. That day, for the first time but certainly not the last, I played my part beautifully: Mrs. Davis bought my act. In two weeks, my father returned, and the production was allowed to continue.

In this production, my father had the leading role. In our small Midwestern town with a population of 9,000, my father was “Doc.” Around town, “Doc” was well liked and respected—he had a beautiful wife, four accomplished sons, and a successful medical

practice. In short, his life was perfect. Naturally, my father did all he could to protect this reputation. He never went to the bars. Too public. Same went for the local AA meetings. If you asked around town, most people would tell you that “Doc” didn’t drink. But my father drank. He drank in secret, alone, sneaking pulls in the bathroom, in the car. He drank at home. And we knew. We saw the empty bottles in the trash. But we were willing to let my father struggle alone. As the years passed, we desperately ignored his other side. Sure there were good days, months, even years, but without notice, the monster would always come back. Each time, we pretended that *it* wasn’t real, that *it* would all go away. *It* didn’t.

### **Act Three: The Polar Twin**

It’s a rainy June evening. My three brothers and I are sitting in the living room of our cabin in Wisconsin. We spent the day in the boat, but it has gotten dark, so we have nothing better to do than watch *Law and Order* and talk. Brendan can’t wait to get back to Notre Dame, and I’m excited to get my driver’s license next month. Chris and Mike just sit back and enjoy the show. We’ve owned the cabin for a few years, and we like it. Dad likes it more. He drives here every free weekend. The brothers know why he comes so often. At the cabin, he no longer needs to be “Doc.” Far from the watching eyes, he gives up his struggle and indulges his other nature. Out Dr. Jekyll, in Mr. Hyde. But we don’t talk about that. Enjoying each other’s company, we can ignore this grim reality. That is, until my father stumbles in. His already tanned face is redder still. His hair is a mess. The room gets quiet. Should we ignore him? He stands a few feet away, staring at us. We sit. He stares. Someone has to say something. “Just go to bed, Dad. Go to bed,” Brendan says. My father isn’t usually a mean drunk, but on this night, these words send him into a rage.

“Fuck you, don’t tell me what to do,” he snarls back. My father

stumbles toward us, eyes raging. We wrestle him to the ground. He wails. He moans. As I fight to restrain him, I see something. Is the man before me really my father? Looking into his eyes, I do not recognize him. Looking into his eyes, I see a tormented soul. I see a tortured man losing a lonely fight. It's over in an instant. We let him go and he stumbles to his room. The brothers make plans to leave in the morning. We can't stand this place anymore.

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Didn't Ezekiel write that "the son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?" Yet, this episode, among countless others, has defined my personality more than I care to realize. I am the textbook definition of a child of an alcoholic. I didn't realize how true this was until I actually read the textbook. "Fear of conflict?" Check. "Constant need to maintain control?" Check. "Always wanting to please others?" Check. "Inability to relate to peers?" Check. There are many more symptoms, some of which I don't fit, most of which I do. I tell myself that I will never be like him—my father probably said the same thing. But his father, also a "Dr. Kelley," was an alcoholic; my great grandfather was too. In fact, children of alcoholics are four times more likely to become alcoholics themselves. My brothers and I have been blessed with great genes, but the genetic tendency toward alcoholism haunts my mind. It's all but certain one of us has a polar twin.

#### **Act Four: The Phone Call, Part Deux**

It's a cool September morning: a day after my phone call with my father, I walk around like everything is normal. Yesterday, TJ asked why we didn't finish our game. I told him I was losing anyway, that I had a call about a sick relative. At least I didn't lie. But I can't tell him the whole truth. He wouldn't understand. I focus on school. If my mind is occupied with the War of 1812 and Aristotle's metaphysics, then I'll forget that my life is falling apart. I stare at my

books but find myself distracted. The phone rings. This time, it's a friend's mother. Willing to accept any distraction, I answer. We exchange pleasantries, but I can tell she has something to say. Then a pause. Why isn't she saying anything? As I prepare to break the stalemate, she asks, "How is your dad's back?" His back? What in the hell is this woman talking about? I remain silent. She continues, "I heard Doc broke his back and had to leave town for surgery. If that's not it, what *really* happened?" Now I understand: it's a trap. I want to scream. I want to cry. Instead, I quickly compose myself. I tell her I have to go, that I will call right her back. I don't. I call my mother. She'll tell me what to say. She always has the right lines. Trying to start my sophomore year in college, I feel like I'm in first grade once again.

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At heart, not much had changed. I was still an ashamed little boy trying to hide a secret from the world. I guess some things were different. Over the years, I had practiced my act. It had become second nature. By the time I had reached college, our "perfect" life almost seemed like reality. I desperately wanted it to be so. If I performed well enough, perhaps what I showed the world would become reality. On that September morning, I realized the foolishness of this hope. In reality, the production was falling apart. My father was gone, off to a treatment center in Oregon. The leading role was vacant. The rest of us were left wondering how to save face.

### **Act Five: The Thanksgiving Feast**

It's a frigid November evening. With my father gone, the rest of the family sits in Brendan's studio apartment in New York City. It's Thanksgiving, but you can't tell that by looking at us. I think about previous Thanksgiving dinners at home. Joined by friends and family, we would eat turkey and watch football. None of us say

why we are in New York, eating leftover turkey without the gravy, but we know. We are running away. None of us have the strength to face family and friends. And it's all his fault. Words of thanks are replaced with damnations. It's hard to determine who says what. Venom shoots in every direction. "He ruined everything. The stupid drunk has thrown our lives away. Mother should leave him. She should have nothing to do with such a failure." All the while, my mother sits in the corner, stupefied. What has become of her Thanksgiving feast?

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In previous years, we had been quick to give thanks. That Thanksgiving was a test of our ability to recognize our blessings when they were unclear. We failed. We drank deep our resentment. In our confused pain, we were searching for an outlet. As the man who shattered our delicate production, my father was the obvious choice. It was true that he had destroyed our old life, but was that a bad thing? As we grappled with an uncertain future, one thing became clear: we did not want to restage the farce. With that, a new question arose: Was my father to take part in this new life, whatever it may be?

### **Epilogue: End of Production**

*"The most satisfactory years of your existence lie ahead."*

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

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If the story had ended on that November night, it certainly would have been a tragedy. But a lot has changed over the past two years. No longer a notable family in that town of 9,000, we live happily as nobodies in a city of 115,000. We have sold the cabin.

My father has enrolled in an Alcoholics Anonymous program. He has joined a new medical practice. As I write, I am confident in his ability to remain sober. But I also know that, while my father no longer drinks, he is still an alcoholic. He cannot be separated from his polar twin: he is cursed to constantly struggle. For too long, my family was unwilling to face this fate. Letting him struggle alone, we relied on a production to mask the truth and give the perception of perfection. That production seems so foolish now that the props of our former life are gone. Over these past two years, our life has been restaged. Only this time, it isn't an act. And it doesn't need to be perfect. It's real.

*Mark Kelley is a senior at Marquette University, where he majors in English Literature and History and minors in Philosophy. He is also the current President of the Beta Delta Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. He hopes that this particular work will not only elucidate the realities of alcoholism but also serve as a beacon to those under similar circumstances.*

An Open Letter to Target Guests Who,  
On the Occasion that an Item Doesn't  
Ring Up at the Register, Exclaim,  
"It Must be Free!!" Followed by Obnoxious  
Laughter and That Look Like You are Quite  
Proud of Yourselves for Delivering Such an  
Original Joke (You Know Who You Are)

| Marissa Mason

Dear Morons:

1. You are roughly the 500<sup>th</sup> person to deliver that joke to me in my illustrious 3 year career as a cashier.
2. It's still not funny.
3. Just because an item happens to be missing its barcode sticker does not make it free.
4. Just because an item happens to be "Not on File" in our computer system also does not make it free.
5. There's no such thing as free.
6. I am really not that angry and pessimistic of a person; I love almost nothing more than a clever, original, well-timed joke.
7. You strolled up to my register, chatting loudly into your Bluetooth earpiece, completely ignoring my polite greeting. You piled your mountain of clothing items on the belt, watched as I removed the hanger from each item, scanned, folded, and bagged to your liking, then allowed your bratty

child to spend 5 minutes debating which gum he/she wanted. You finally ended your very important phone conversation, at which point I was struggling to locate a tag, barcode, anything, attached to some flimsy, sequined, out-of-season clothing item you no doubt fished off a clearance rack somewhere in the obscurity known as Women's Ready-to-Wear, and just *have* to have. I finally locate a DPCI code printed on a tiny inside tag. I punch in each number: Item Not On File. No Price Available. I have been cashiering for five hours already today. My lunch is in 15 minutes. It's too hot in this store, I'm sweating, and I'm a pear-shaped woman in khakis. I am pissed. Tired, too, and hungry. I disdain the precious time I lose here each week, but I have to work at least part-time to pay my bills. And, now, you've brought me a ridiculous garment with no barcode (a sign, perhaps?). This is where we are. It is at this moment that you deign to speak to me for the first time, loudly interjecting your hilarious quip, "IT MUST BE FREE!"

No, it isn't free. The Front End Team Leader will have to come to the register, assess the situation, call back to the Women's department and wait another 5 minutes as some other equally apathetic part-time team member searches to locate a price for obscure, flimsy, out-of-season bikini top. Eventually we will give up this nonsense and offer it to you for the low, low price of \$4.99 because that's about how much our clearance bikini tops are going for.

"No thanks," you say. "I don't really want it that much anyway." You hand me the slimy wrapper from the string cheese your kid just ate.

8. Thank you for shopping at Target. Please, come again.

Sincerely,

An Ex-Target Cashier

*Marissa Mason is an English major with a minor in writing at the College of Saint Rose. She plans to graduate in 2010 and pursue a career in academic librarianship. Her passions include travel, photography, nonfiction writing, and building her personal library.*

# Running In Water

| W. Dillon Tripp

I put some bait in my mesh side-bag, hollered at my buddies to hurry up, and started out. Every time I strap on my bag, I consider how ludicrous it is to strap live bait to your person and walk out into shark-infested waters. Logic doesn't really have a place in this pastime.

Surf fishing has always been a passion of mine. There is nothing like getting up early, heading out towards the beach, and walking out waist deep into the ocean with a fishing rod, reel, and some bait. A number of different feelings run through your mind as you walk out. I have never once trekked out into that dark water that I did not feel things bump and brush against my legs. Adrenaline pumps through you with every step as your mind goes over every possible situation that could occur that morning. Most of these scenarios end with you legless or eaten.

Now there are certain things surf fishermen have to get used to. The most difficult of these is the sharks. Yes, there are sharks everywhere, and you catch them frequently. Each one draws up memories of *Jaws* 1-4, and you can't help your stomach dropping a little when you feel one hit your line. Most of these sharks are small, but the ones around three feet can get scary. As you reel these big ones in, you frequently question your choice of hobby. Imagine standing in waist-deep water, trying to get a hook out of the mouth of a three-foot-long shark, while the shark is biting at you with all those rows of pearly whites. You are in their element, and they have an obvious advantage. When you reel the shark close enough to get your hands on it, the shark is practically swimming around your legs. I try to keep the shark as far away as possible from my legs and crotch, and get a vice-grip on it with my free hand. I remove the hook and throw the shark as far away from myself as possible. If I am fishing with a friend, we usually end up throwing the small sharks as close to one another as we can. It is kind of like tag, only with sharks. The small sharks aren't so bad and quickly become

more of a nuisance than a threat.

Out of the three of us out there on this June morning, I was the only one who wore a side-bag. This meant that Marc and Nick would have to go back to shore every time they caught a fish or something took their bait. The other main difference between me and the other guys was the rod I was using. Marc and Nick were using regular fishing rods, with saltwater reels. I, on the other hand, went out that morning with “the Juggernaut.”

The Juggernaut is a bright yellow rod that is over six feet in length and four inches thick at the base. Combine this with 100 pound test line, and the thing is virtually unbreakable. If something were ever to manage to break the rod, you should have let go of it long before that point and have made a grave error in judgment.

The three of us stuck really close together as we walked out into the early morning waves of Galveston Beach. We heard each other gasp and yelp as the unknown touched legs and feet. We talked to one another to try and keep our nerves under control because that morning. We had decided to go way out. We had walked out into this area many times before in the past and knew that there were three sandbars under the water. There were dolphins jumping a good distance out, and they would push the bait fish in toward the shore. This would in turn cause the speckled perch to come further into the shallows—we could literally stand in the middle of them. It had all the signs of a good day for fishing.

We found the fish were biting fairly well this morning. We caught a few specks that we put in an ice chest, caught a few sharks (and threw them at one another), and we also dodged a lone jellyfish. As the morning progressed, my side bag started to run low on bait due to the fact that I was catching a good number of fish, and also because my lazy friends kept bumming bait. I shut them off at this point and told them they would have to walk back for anything else. In unison, the two lost their bait. I laughed at their misfortune, and they cursed at me as they swam back to shore with their rods overhead. I watched them for a little bit and then turned

back to fishing. I noticed for the first time that I was a hell of a long way from shore and all alone. I started getting a little nervous but tried to laugh it off and focus on the fishing. I threw my line far out and watched as in the distance my shrimp and weight struck the water and sunk down to the cork. I noticed some bait fish jumping nearby and got excited. This is always a good sign. A second later, a number of really large speckled perch started jumping as well. I got a good grip on my rod and prepared myself to pull hard and reel one in. However, none of the fish took my bait. I started looking around for another place to cast my line when I noticed a large dark spot out by my cork. The sun was up a little higher now but not enough to cast a shadow like this on the water.

I was trying to figure out the origin of this dark mass when it moved right under my cork. I was really excited now. Whatever this thing was, it was huge, and I was about to catch it! All at once the shadow jerked and disappeared. As it did, my cork shot out of sight. The quiet of the morning instantly vanished with the *whiz* of fishing line being pulled violently from my reel. This is the kind of moment you fish for. I grabbed the reel to stop it from giving anymore line and pulled back hard on the rod. I almost got jerked out to sea. I pulled hard and fought the best I could. I tried hollering for the guys, but I was so far out that they couldn't hear me. I turned back and continued with the fight. I saw the shadow appear again, still a long ways out. "Good, it's near the surface," I thought. I would be able to see what it was if it jumped. I was hoping for a really large redbfish. I pulled hard one more time and watched as the shadow surfaced and jumped straight into the air. There was no mistaking what I saw in the early morning light. Time froze. The sun seemed to catch the teeth in such a way that they shone brighter than anything else that morning. A six-foot-long black-tip shark flew through the air.

I felt all the blood rush from my face and a little bit of bile came up into my mouth. It really sank in; I was a long damn way from shore, standing in chest deep water, with a shark large enough to

kill me on the other end of my line. I didn't have time to think, so I reacted. I did what I felt like anyone else would do in this situation: I ran. I don't care what anyone tells you, you can run in water. You just have to want it bad enough.

I threw the rod over my shoulder and took off towards the shore. I could have just thrown the rod, but it was really expensive, and I was not thinking clearly. I was not above tossing that sucker if it came down to it though. As I ran/swam back to shore, I screamed. I did not holler. I did not yell. I screamed like a little girl on Halloween. Marc and Nick heard this and saw me frantically heading toward the shore. They started running for me, realizing I was in trouble. I felt the shark jump behind me again. I swear it was close enough for a piggy-back ride. I then watched as my friends caught sight of the shark, dug in their heels, and slid to a stop. They instantly turned back around and started running away from me! I could hear over the breeze something to the effect of, "No, fuck him! Run!"

I finally made it to shore—by myself—and turned to find the shark. When I said it felt close, I wasn't exaggerating nearly as much I had hoped. The shark was in the surf next to the shore, and I could get a really good view of it through the water. I started reeling my line in as fast as I could. The excited feeling had returned now that I was safe, and now I wanted to catch this bastard. My useless friends had returned to my side by this point with a knife and a net far too small to be of any use. I was so close to getting the shark now. Again I pulled as hard as I could. And the line broke.

Actually, the line probably got caught in the shark's teeth and it bit through it. I was relieved that the line was the only thing bitten. We were all pretty disappointed and went to sit down at our little beach area. We spent the next twenty minutes talking about the shark and calling each other dirty names for the way we acted. (I held that my screaming was legitimized by the fact that the shark was on my ass.) As we talked, I re-strung my rod—the shark took my hook, weight and cork with it when it cut the line. After a while, we

decided to go back out and fish a little more. You have to get back up on the horse. We eased out into the ocean and threw our lines out.

We were fishing for a few minutes when we saw something come to the surface a little bit away from us. It was my cork. We all laughed that the shark wanted to eat me and not my bait. Marc said he would grab the cork and bring it back. He started swimming out towards it. He was a little ways from it when it disappeared underwater. It surfaced again and started quickly going back and forth! That bastard was still on the line! Marc screamed and headed for shore as fast as he could. Nick turned to swim back and realized I was not standing by him anymore. I was already halfway back to shore, running in water for the second time that day.

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# Steam

| W. Dillon Tripp

The large, naked Russian General said something to me. Sweat ran into my eyes, blurring my vision. My entire naked body was covered in sweat. The room was filled with no breathable air. I couldn't see or breathe. The fact that I was lying facedown didn't help. I told him that it was hot as fuck in this room and that my dick was roasting on the wooden mat under me. I knew that he didn't speak English, but it was still a small relief to share my misery. There was a moment of silence and then the large, very naked man let out an uproar of laughter. I heard the "swoosh" and grimaced as my back was flogged by branches yet again, throwing sweat and water into the air to become more steam.

I crossed my arms in front of my face to try and find a small escape from the heat. No such luck. Every time I took in a deep breath, my lungs filled with nothing but scorching air. It felt as if I was slowly suffocating. I felt the long, slender sticks hit my back again. I could feel my body tingle all over from the menthol. It would have been really nice if it would not have been so damn hot! However, the heat kept my mind off the naked General beside me.

Being naked and beaten with sticks is a strange way to get acquainted with your future father-in-law. My fiancée Natasha had assured me that the Russian *banya* was a tradition dating back hundreds of years to before even the Soviet Union. Natasha also said that I would be able to wear swim trunks. Only one of these was true. Not being one to go against tradition and wanting to make a good impression on the General, I accepted the offer to go to the *banya*. The steam room was at their family's winter home, and I had been assured was private.

Natasha, the General, and I stood outside the *banya* and chatted for a little bit while the fire in the adjoining room became hot enough for steam. He was a very nice man and not at all what I was expecting. He really liked me, and we had gotten pretty close in the short time I had been in Russia. Chatting was a little difficult

considering I spoke very little Russian, and the General spoke no English. Natasha translated, and the General and I had gotten pretty good at communicating with hand signs and gestures. It would be all right.

While the *banya* filled with steam, my fiancée began going over what exactly was to happen. We would steam for a while, cool down, have a shot of vodka and some fish, and then do it all over again. “Ok,” I thought, “this isn’t going to be too bad.” I started to strip down to my swim trunks. The wind blew over me and froze me to the bone. Still, I enjoyed the novelty of standing in the snow in only shoes and swim trunks. As I was about to enter the *banya*, the General said something to his daughter. I stopped at the door and waited to be told what they were talking about. I didn’t even care what they were saying at this point and just wanted to go inside. I didn’t want to be rude, however, so I waited. The whole conversation couldn’t have lasted more than a minute, but it seemed like an eternity thanks to the snow and wind. Now that they were done, I got ready to go in again. As I did, Natasha stopped me. I asked her what was up. “Get naked, baby,” was her response. I told her not until later. It was a lame attempt at humor, but my mind was working slowly in the cold. She explained to me that her dad wanted me to get naked because it was how it is supposed to be done and that he wanted me to experience a true Russian *banya*. I told her that I understood, but that getting naked with other men really wasn’t something we did in my culture. She said that she had told him that. He didn’t care. Damn.

As we walked in the door of the *banya* I noticed that this room was pretty cold. There was a table in it with a bottle of vodka, glasses, some bread, some fish, and other meats. I told myself that this part wouldn’t be bad.

The General started getting undressed. I decided to suck it up and got undressed too. He handed me a little felt hat to put on. I found out later that it was to keep my hair dry, but at the time I just felt goofy being naked except for a little felt hat. At this point, I

followed him into the next room. This room was a little warmer and had two large basins filled with water. I wondered what they were for. We passed through this room though and finished our naked journey in the room at the very back of the *banya*.

The first thing I noticed was that it really wasn't so bad. It was warm, but not hot. The General motioned for me to get up on one of the raised areas where I was supposed to lie down. I did, and he went to the other one. The room was made entirely from polished birch logs, and the light brown shine of them was beautiful. The raised areas had wicker mats on top of them, and there were little shelves on the walls holding little glass bottles filled with different colored liquids. The glass of the bottles was yellow from age, and I wondered how long they had been there. Lying on my back, I felt the stream roll over my body. I heard the *hiss* of the water as the General poured some over the hot rocks and watched as the steam billowed out and fill the room. This was pretty nice. I lay my head back, closed my eyes and started to drift to sleep. . . .

And then I noticed it was getting pretty hot in the room—really hot. Hot as fuck hot. The heat didn't bother my body, but it was making it impossible to breathe. I looked over to see how the General was handling it. He was holding some wet branches over the volcano rocks. What the hell was he doing? I also noticed he had one of the little bottles in his hand. He poured a little liquid out of it onto the branches. It seemed that almost instantly the room filled with the smell of menthol. It was nice for a second, then blinding! My eyes watered up, and my vision blurred. The *banya* was kind of sucking at this point. While I was attempting to see and breathe, the General walked to my side, holding the branches. Then, in what could possibly be the most awkward gesture ever, motioned for me to cover up my “twig and berries.” I did, and grumbled to myself that this would already have been taken care of if I would have been allowed to wear my swim trunks. Suddenly, “THWAK!” What the Fuck! The General busted me in the chest with the branches! He started going up and down my body, slapping me with them. I can't

really describe what it feels like to be blinded, while lying naked, covering your junk, and having a large naked Russian man beat you with sticks. What I felt would be most closely described as a mixture of embarrassment and just a small dash of fear. I couldn't really focus on how peculiar the scene was though, as it was too hard to breathe to focus on anything else. The General motioned for me to roll over, and I did. I tried to focus on enjoying the *banya* and breathing. The General never stopped smiling.

When it seemed like I had reached the limit of what I could take, I motioned that I needed to go out. He and I went out the door into the room that had been a little warmer than the first room when we had first walked through. It seemed a good deal cooler now. The General directed me over to where the large, metal basins full of water were. I staggered over to one of the basins, but the steam, menthol, and lack of air had me really disoriented. The General took the other basin, picked it up, and dumped the water over his head. It looked very refreshing, and I hurriedly grabbed my basin and threw it over my head. Only, I was still pretty dizzy from all the steam and menthol. Instead of throwing the heavy metal basin over my head, I managed to somehow hit myself in the forehead with the full weight of it. I almost knocked myself out. Before I could recover, I felt a hand on my back, ushering me towards the door to the first room.

When I started to come out of my steam, menthol, and basin induced haze, I was sitting at the table in the first room. There was a robe over me, a shot of vodka in one hand, and a big chunk of cold fish in the other. I had no idea how I had gotten any of the three items. I also realized that somewhere I had lost my little felt hat. It was not missed.

The General was enjoying his fish and held up his shot of vodka for a toast. I toasted him, and we drank. We ate some fish and did our best to talk for a bit. After a while, I started feeling pretty good. My body was really tired, but I could see why people did this. He was happy to have showed a part of his world to me, and even though I

was happy to have survived it, I was glad that it was over.

The General all of a sudden got up and walked toward the door. Not the door back to the other rooms either, the door outside. He motioned to me and walked outside. What the hell torture was I about to have to endure now? I slipped the robe on, grabbed some slippers and stepped outside. I was standing on the path that led back up to the house, and there was snow everywhere. The wind was blowing right through me, and it was lightly snowing. I pulled my robe tight. I missed my little felt hat.

I saw the General standing at the end of the path. I hurried to him and felt strange again that now we were two naked men standing outside in the blowing wind and snow. I was really hoping Natasha and her mom were not looking outside of the window.

I looked to the General to see if we were going to head inside. He looked at me, grinned, and pointed at the snow. I looked to where he was pointing to see if there was something I was missing. The General now pointed at me and pointed at the snow and smiled. No. Nope. Not going to happen. Well, the General pulled my robe off and gave me a friendly little push. I took a step forward and fell directly into the snow.

I was chest down in the snow. It felt like needles were poking me all over my naked body. I decided to just own it and started rolling around in the snow. I was really missing the *banya* now. I couldn't even be upset though because the General jumped into the snow as well.

After a little bit, I jumped out of the snow and headed running for the door to the *banya*. I looked like a giant yeti coming out of the snow. I have never been so cold in my life. There was snow all over me; all over me. It felt like I was being molested by Jack Frost. I almost slipped and busted my ass running towards the door but kept my feet under me. I could hear the General coming up behind me laughing as he ran. I got tickled that two grown men were now running naked in the snow and laughed as well.

When I got inside, I sat down and covered in another robe; mine had been left outside, and I was not going back for it. I was happy to be inside and warming back up. It was strange to be a part of something so different from my comfort zone, but I could tell that it meant a lot to the General. He had smiled all day and was really enjoying showing me something so important to him. I had been through a kind of crash course in bonding but felt I did well in the General's eyes. Even though I thought he was proud of me, I was glad that I was finally done. I started to get dressed and head back up to the house. I really wanted to get something to eat and tell Natasha about my adventure with her father. I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the General, and he had something in his other hand. He handed it to me. It was my little felt hat. The General smiled and motioned towards the steam room again. I sighed, got up, hung my head, but smiled as I walked naked back into the steam.

# Short Fiction

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*An Alarming Lack of Lactose and a Pretentious Plethora  
of Pigs-or-Demon Pig Goes to Wal-Mart: An Innovative How-To Guide for  
the Would-Be Procrastinator*

## grave-digger

| Jesse Snavlin

At apex, they are only three, four feet deep. It is not because he means to perform lackluster or to avoid doing what is his best, but recently his work has become more charitable. The increased work leaves pick-axe over shoulder, pick-axe over shoulder, pick-axe over shoulder for myriad cadavers. He, a good boy before his work, is a better boy now. He is paid in memory currency for the extra holes he places in the crumbling clay earth. He is paid with their faces, those once were full but are now skulls dressed in thin layers of ash, rubber skin.

He wonders if she will fit, because the American was a round woman.

The American was round in all things—her hips, her breasts, her mind—and unable to cease from rolling each part of her whenever the momentum breathed one way or the other. Her eyes to the left, her hips to the right, she was an excellent dancer, her grave is shallow, shallow, shallow. . . .

The American always wore a pretty silver cross. When they raped her they said it burned its corners through her round, milky breasts. The cross came before the flag, they said, and so they will take the flag out from her pussy and burn it, they said, and they did, and she was a different American afterwards.

Before the American was raped, she would hand out candy to working boys. It was chewy and came in wax paper wrapping and was nothing like the pickled fruits they ate. He didn't like it, and pick-axe to dirt, he thinks of it and cringes.

He used to say, if it sticks to my teeth I have no water to get it out! The American had a pretty smile even if she was someone who was not pretty all the time.

After the American was raped she would distribute what she had without smiling. She would not look at anyone in the eyes. She kept wearing her cross.

The grave-digger wears one yellow jumpsuit. It is washed every

night by his mother and hung outside, and to his surprise, it is dry in the morning despite the humidity. He watches, knees bent to his concave chest, as she scratches the cotton against the rigid board.

“It sounds the same, mum,” he says, “as the dirt under the pickaxe.”

A man does his best until his destiny is revealed, she repeats, and she scrapes the yellow suit until there is no visible uncleanliness.

Today his work is charitable. The curved holes will be filled, and they only go so far as three feet today. He has not eaten this morning. He has not drank. There is no oil to boil the water. There is the sky and there is the ditch. He wonders if three feet is big enough for her.

Before the American was raped Banga was nicest to her. Banga was thin and did not eat a lot. His whole family did not eat a lot. Banga had a lot of children, and they all did not eat a lot. No one ate a lot, except maybe the American. She would bring him the horse pills, saying they would help, and he would take them.

You are prettier everyday: Banga missing his corner tooth.

You are still missing a tooth: The American always has a sunburn.

My cherry savior, do you have a gift for me: Banga is touching her cross.

Jesus brings gifts for everyone: The American pulls away, her round, round breasts hug her neck, and she hands him a plastic bag with a week's supply.

The American is now sunburned skin pulled over skull, and her blue eyes sink beneath the rows of wrinkled dehydration. There are flies crawling out of her triple-pierced ears. Where the sun has not touched, the cross has burned a white spot on her skin. He fumbles her body into her ditch. She fits, and he starts putting the clumps of mud over her, and the cross shifts and reveals the perfect spot of white, and he covers that in dirt. He covers everything in dirt.

Jabulani is and was his eldest brother. Jabulani did not like Banga, nor did he like Banga and the American, nor did he like the Americans at all. Jabulani is four graves south of the American.

“Did you work hard today?,” his mother scrapes the yellow cloth.

“Today it was Jabulani,”

grave-digger mutters, tucking his knees to his chest.

“What we see is unfair is God’s will testing us. I am certain God does not like me much, mum.”

He disappears into the one-room cornerless and thinks about the one meal he will get tomorrow. He is hungry for it, even if it will only be samba again.

I want you to know: Banga is raping her: that I only want to be better.

I think that this is what the entire country wants: Jabulani is smoking by the shed two days earlier: I think this is what we all want. We all want to be better, but we never will be. It is those white people. They have come here, they have done this, and they will always do this.

I am not sure: Banga is raping her: that you really understand this feeling. I am inside dying, and outside loving.

You think that you are going to be better: Jabulani puts his cigarette out under barefoot. He has circular scars about the ball of his feet from all of his cigarettes: just by taking the white girl’s medicine. You will never be better.

The American held her medicine, the little plastic bags full of pills of rainbow colors, and counted the pills across her fingertips. They slipped past each finger until they collected in the corner of the bag. Her night’s water was boiling on the stove.

He pats her face flat underneath the mud. The pick-axe is up and down again. He is a wiry youth, the grave-digger; he is muscle and bone. He is eating cornmeal all the time.

A man does his best until his destiny is revealed: Banga whispers against her ear when he is done.

The American counts the pills over and over. She is underneath

the mud, now, and she is staring up at the grave-digger, and her eyes are pieces of chewed candy.

Jabulani smokes his last cigarette in a hospital bed. The American resides over him. She is a doctor, Jabulani realizes in this moment. She pours his pills onto the floor beside his bed. Jesus says hello, she says, and she smiles, and she is missing a tooth. Banga has knocked it out.

You think that you are going to be better: Jabulani talks to himself in the mirror: but no one is ever better, Jabulani. It is this country. The world doesn't care about us. She doesn't care about us.

Banga is at the base of her grave the next morning. His yellow jumpsuit is without uncleanliness. You work too hard: Banga mutters, and kneels at the base of the grave: You work too hard.

The grave-digger admired Banga. Even after he raped the American, the grave-digger thought he was a wise man. He always seemed to have a good smile. The grave-digger thinks he is a pretty strong man for only eating for what he has. He thinks he has done his best, but when death was his destiny revealed he gave up. He takes the pick-axe, and he shrugs and moves to the next grave.

Who's grave is that?, I'm not sure., Do you think you will ever be sure?, I don't think there is sure., You are a good boy., There are a lot of people dying in Harare today?, There are a lot of people dying everyday., Did you hear Hondo's family ran to the South?, Did you hear they would not let in Annan?, Did you hear they kicked out the Americans!, Does your mother wash that suit?, Yes she does, everyday., I will get you a new one so that you can have two.

You do not want her forever on you: Banga is dizzy upon standing: She will stink and sting forever. Sour cherries are like this.

I have never had a cherry., You will have one if you are older.

He drops the pick-axe again and again.

This is the grave he is digging on page one. It is a shallow one. They are no more than three or four feet these days. They are not very deep even if he is trying his best. His work is charitable, now.

The government offers free graves to those of cholera, and he is certain that he will never be paid again. It would be worth nothing, anyway.

There are a lot of people dying in Harare.

There is an absolute to the pick-axe. It drops with each wail, and he is absolute, and it is absolute. It is a strong weapon that digs the life out of the earth and replaces it with death. He hopes that there will be many trees in this field. He hopes that the blue sky and the trees will come together and the spirits of all these lumps of clay-covered body will be something that is beyond him, but for now, he crawls into this page-one ditch. He has died today.

*Jesse Snavlin is a senior at Metropolitan State College of Denver, where she majors in English and History. She has been published previously in The Rectangle and in the fiction collection Tales to Oddify. She hopes you are sleeping well.*

# Polyhydramnios

| Christopher Brown

This world reflects the faintest traces of light. Not in any tangible ways. There are no softly luminous blotches on the wall in which I might cast a silhouette. But I have the strangest, most vague memory of brightness lying just outside the bounds of my perception. Light that will burn in my eyes and swallow me up greedily and spin me around and slam me against the wall; contort me until my muscles are like rubber bands stretched to whiteness, and pull my body apart slowly at every seam just as I cease to need it, expanding like an endless gulp of air scraping in my lungs until I have become everything that I used to see around me.

Now the arch of my back is fluid, bending silently in the darkness, thick and viscous and heavy where it sits in the back of my throat. And tubes running into me, running into tubes running through me. In the dark where the steady drip of oxytocin finally punches me right below the belt. I remember a fistful of electric wire fence on my grandfather's farm at seven years old and the way muscles that you've never even known how to use will pull on your little girl bones with a ferocity that bends them like they're fucking paper clips.

Women have been doing this for years. Around nine months, rubbing your nipples will stimulate hormone production John tells me in a voice echoing from the deep recesses of his prostate and sliding off his tongue, salivating with a lushness that he would love to feel reciprocated, his hand slowly hovering over his little soccer player.

I've also been told that you can do a few lines of coke. The danger with this second method is that you risk the placenta tearing away from the uterine wall before it should. Think about the sounds of peeling Velcro and sweaty, bare asses squeaking across steel sliding boards as someone pulls a thick strip of duct tape off the hair on the back of your neck. Think of the way your thighs spasm when you hear nails on a chalkboard.

Of course, inducing labor around the due date has become fairly safe and normal in hospital settings. But they'll only do it at eight months if what they call complications arise. Preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, chorioamnionitis. And so Doctor So-and-so has me roll onto my back, knees up, knees out, latex pulling at the skin on my inner thigh, my palms feeling the sharpness of my own fingernails, my chest crushing, forcing out the air in my lungs like the dregs from a tube of toothpaste beneath the almighty, latex-gloved palm of oh Jesus sweet Jesus mother-effing Jesus God Christ our lord in heaven Jesus.

The fluorescent lights over my head quiver and shake in time with the clenching knot of me convulsing. The hotness of blood flushing in my face and the pressure of it in my head, squeezing my eyes, forcing them into squinting slits as the bright tube pulses, pulses. And the pressure in my body. The pressure of someone else being inside of you, sucking up everything that you have, taking everything that he wants from you and you wanting him to at every moment. To take you all and suck you all up like salt on a slug, drying you out and using you up completely so that there's none of you left for anyone else. The world outside you grows as you shrink under your being absorbed. And you feel the blackness of nothing in your eyes, massaging them into gentle holes, and you smell the sent of your sweating hair and sweating skin and hot breath, acidic with the stomach fumes of no-food and the blood of your bitten lips and tongue, and your fingers squeezing and wrenching and whitening until your nerves dissolve, all becoming one great and final offering for someone else to feed on and feel the firm substance of between his small, sliding gums.

And before, John inside me with me on my side and him on his side wrapping around me from behind, and feeling the soft cotton of sheets that forms a shallow rift between his chest and my back, my stomach resting on the sheets and sliding slowly back and forth, getting hot with the friction, and my ear hot with John's breath as he breathes how do you ever give enough of yourself to another

person?

And clenching his hand at the thick strong part like you were a girl in kindergarten deliberately squeezing five fat crayons with your tongue stuck between your teeth bringing them back to your table, and pulling him down into your face and him feeling the ripping of your breath like knives on his skin that its like trying to fill the oceans with your spit while you're choking on a fucking chicken bone, coughing dryness into a never-ending hole and feeling the press of hardness in your throat at every moment, and if you know, tell me where all of your spit and breath and eyes and nerves and lips and tongue and white squeezing go when your doctor tells you at your ultra-sound that he can't find a heart beat, the baby has stopped moving, by this time, he's too big and that you'll have to just deliver him. What do you say then, while you're lying there with a cold wad of jelly smeared across your stomach that's big and round from holding all of the not-enough-love that someone's been sucking out of you these past eight months John.

Where can it all go, everything that you've wanted to give that is now forced back into you? It squeezes back through every vein and every artery, splitting them open as if it were a razor blade scoring their soft fleshiness from the inside out, coursing through my body in a wave of bitter ecstasy going back where it came from, all the love that wasn't enough splitting you in half, your insides boiling in the heat and pressure and your skin sheering into pieces like tectonic plates above the rolling, dense surface.

After the tearing squeeze out of me, they wrap him up in a blanket, just like in the movies. The doctor cuts the umbilical. He hands my baby to the nurse. The nurse is careful to wrap it up; turns; walks behind the doctor. Her soft-soled tennis shoes make the sound of nothing on the hard floor. The swish of her scrubs, one leg passing the other, sounds like nothing as she walks towards the door. She won't look me in the eye.

"Massaging your nipples will help to slow the bleeding down," says Doctor So-and- so.

Inside me, I feel all of myself coming back more quickly than I can stand, racing to my tight heart echoing faster and faster on the machine. It's like a heaviness in everything, in my mouth especially. My brain chemistry helps the pain to subside. My limbs swallowing ice-cubes. The weight of me is crushing.

John says how do you ever give enough of yourself to another person? How can anyone do that? How do you take yourself back when you weren't enough?

I can feel it all in my heart like a sledgehammer that vibrates and rolls through everything and in my lungs like a soft burning warmth, wet like John's tongue, hot and cold. All of me coming back is not enough, still not enough, never enough always washing up the beach barely knocking the tips of my toes, but still coming every time and then turning back to light tan under the blue-white of the sun. The sun back in my little girl hair, winding around John's fingers. Then his fingers in me again, not like a heaviness or tightness but like a fullness that doesn't have the hot salty taste. I can see that now. And from above I look sunken, flattened, shriveled. My arms are sinking down into the hard mattress. My eyes have fallen back into my head. They look wet with sweat like they were on the other side of a foggy mirror. The sun above begins to warm my bare back wrapping softly around me from behind while the water touches my heels instead, and John is up to his ankles with my hair in his fingers still stringing out while I walk up the beach with the sand around my feet. All the while becoming brighter.

"We call it an amniotic embolism." Doctor So-and-so stood in front of John. John sat in the chair, his bony ass pressing through the cushion and resting on the hardness below. John looked at Doctor So-and-so's waist. The surgery smock. The hands hanging by his sides, white with the powder of latex gloves.

"It's a very rare thing; a freak accident. There was no way of knowing that it would happen and nothing we could do."

"What do you . . . I guess I just don't understand. What

happened?” John slid his hand off the wooden armrest. He placed his hand on his lap.

“Well, the amniotic fluid . . . it’s . . . inside the placenta, in the uterus, the fetus sits in what we call amniotic fluid. It nourishes the fetus by providing nutrients from the mother. When the mother . . . woman goes into labor, the placenta breaks and the amniotic fluid comes out. But bleeding occurs inside the uterus when the placenta tears away from it. In some . . . extremely rare cases, the amniotic fluid will travel into the bloodstream. Once inside it makes its way to the heart. When it gets to the heart . . . there is nothing that we could have done.”

John sat still.

“I’m extremely sorry.”

Doctor So-and-so turned and walked away. The hallway was long, and his footsteps echoed beneath the cold fluorescent lights.

# Till the End

| Megan Childers

When I awoke everything was different. The field was still there. The trees were still there. The mountains, the rocks, the birds, the rain—they were all still there, yet everything was *different*.

I saw Leika, my older sister at the time, running toward me. Her mud-splattered skirt, soaked with rain and tears. I should have been dead. She mouthed these sentiments as I stared at her stupidly. Sound returned with the high squeal of a songbird.

“ . . . by lightning! You’re alive! I can’t believe you’re alive. You were struck by lightning. It’s a sign, oh bless you! I can’t believe you’re alive. Mother would never have forgiven me if anything had happened to you,” Leika went on as I tried to focus.

I could see *her*. All around her, glowing, flowing like wind, I could see *her*.

This was back in the days of my childhood. Back in the days in the ramshackle village, before Leika carried me home and told the wise man of the village how I was struck by lightning. Back when I was still Shia, the unruly youngest daughter of ill-fated parents, before the priests came to our village to whisk me away from all I knew and take me in royal procession to the grand temple of Ashkeel, a place I have not left since, and declare me a goddess-incarnate, the human vessel for high goddess Imbala: holder of power, seer of truth.

“Imbala-incarnate,” the servant’s voice wavered in the dark, disrupting my morning memories. “It is time to wake up, high goddess.”

I had been awake for quite some time but remained in my bed nonetheless. These fleeting minutes in the dark were mine alone. The servant glided over and whispered in my ear. She was not allowed to shake me awake. I sat up.

I cooperated all through my bath. I did not complain as her gloved hands rubbed the violet-scented wash over my shoulders. I did not try to help her reach my feet or wipe between my legs, as I

was wont to do. After eight years I still desired to bathe myself, but I behaved like a good little doll. I stood patiently as she toweled me dry and called for more nameless servants to help dress me. I held out my arms and submitted to their hands: dressing, placing, chaining, buttoning, tying layer upon layer of silks and satins embroidered with priceless jewels.

The hands covered my face in white cream. I was a blank canvas on which they painted eyebrows, lips, eyes, cheeks, and more, until I was masked with the face of the goddess.

Then Abali knocked on the door. Everyone else called her Mistress Abali because she was the head servant, but I was required to call her Lowly Abali. All are inferior to the high goddess Imbala. One of the servant girls ran to get the door, and I wondered what color my hair would be today. I hoped for black, but the outcome depended on who had donated hair to the priesthood the previous day. The priests thought I was pleased by exotic reds and golds, so if any of that color appeared they were sure to use it for my hair instead of a lesser wig worn by the elite. I wished they would choose black.

Abali entered carrying my hair. Today's color was brown. I have come to expect this.

"Great and honorable goddess-incarnate," she began. "It pleases us this day to bring you your glorious hair. These gorgeous tresses have been generously gifted by your loving people to grace your most noble and perfect head. Please accept this gift unto your countenance."

The usual speech, to which I replied, "Lowly Abali, I accept this gift," as is tradition.

Her storm-grey eyes surveyed me from across the room, scrutinizing my outfit. She lifted her head a bit higher as she walked toward me. The other servants bowed. I prayed they had done a satisfactory job dressing me. I had no idea what happened to those Abali dismissed for failing in their duties, but I imagined it was something like the way I had been punished by my father for spilling

rice or beans or some other substance I have since forgotten. Once a servant was dismissed I never saw them again. This, among other reasons, was why I never learned their names.

Abali cemented the hair to my head, a towering mass of brown ringlets. My neck strained to support the pile of curls. Abali looked down her nose for any sign of complaint. From the swirl of her aura I could tell she was displeased with something. That's what the priests called it, 'aura.' My sight—my gift from the goddess—was the ability to see auras. That word always sounded strange to me. I didn't see 'auras.' I saw people's true selves. Abali adjusted my hair once more before *she* was satisfied.

Then the rings came, the final piece in my costume. The only part I was allowed to put on myself. One by one I slid them onto my fingers. Their weight in my hands emphasized my position. Ten gold rings with three diamonds each. Ten rings, one for each finger. The rings of the highest rank: a deity-incarnate. As we walked into the halls I peered at the hands of the servants I passed by. Only one copper ring with one diamond apiece. The bonds of servitude, yet their hands were free to sew, cook, and clean.

Thus my daily duties began. I sat on the imperious throne of the vast golden hall while priests called out the names of an endless stream of pilgrims. One after another they came to see the mighty Imbala-incarnate—village wise men asking for predictions; farmers begging for rain; lonely girls wishing for true love. They sought miracles and aura readings, offered up coins and trivial prayers. Always the same petty worries, the same selfish desires, and all they needed to solve their problems was a long look into the truth-telling depth of a mirror. But I served them nonetheless. I looked to their true selves for the answers they already knew.

The line of pilgrims stood mesmerized as they walked past rows of marble pillars—the priceless bars of a gilded cage. I watched *them* change as they walked, each one the same, starting with fear as they stood waiting, progressing to awe as they walked the lonely path down the hall, followed by reverence as they remembered

the iconic symbols of their faith, and finally fear once more when they first gained the courage, the audacity, to gaze upon the face of a goddess and make their feeble requests. I wanted to say I hated them. I wanted to hate them, and some days I worried I did, but the goddess does not hate. Still, I often hoped they would hate me in return. What would they think of such liberty? What would they do if they learned their loving goddess, the all-powerful Imbala, deeply despised every desperate thread of their dreadful beings? I gazed at the hands of farmers and merchants, timidly awaiting their turns. Not a ring could be found, not a single one. No heavy rings to daunt their fingers. I know at one time Shia's hands must have looked like theirs.

The next pilgrim to approach was a noble, the first surprise of the day. Nobles usually sent servants to make their requests for them, but this one had come himself. He was a tall, sharp man with flaming hair and the most excitable self I have ever seen. He blathered on about his marriage problems, the way nobles are wont to do. He was trying to ask the goddess if his wife was unfaithful but couldn't get his tongue around the words. I paid him no mind. My mind was absorbed in other matters. One of the servants accompanying the noble caught my sight. There was something incredibly wrong with him, something that reminded me of the first time I had viewed my father with my new eyes. There were dark spots in the glow around him like he was made of something empty. And the eyes. There was a hollowness to the eyes which evoked a certain fear. He was a knife in human form.

The priests startled as I interrupted the nobleman's speech, "You need not worry for the safety of your marriage. Your wife is as loyal as you yourself, lowly noble." He knew this to be true. He had always known, yet he had allowed the rumors begun by jealous relatives to impede his judgment for months now.

"Nevertheless," I stopped him in the middle of his traditional display of praise and gratitude, "be wary of treachery in your house. Those who serve may also be those who deceive." The servant never

stirred, but surprise and distaste flowed from his being.

Then I saw the rage. A girl my age paced toward the throne. Sorrow, thick and palpable as stone streamed from her being. A young girl with long brown hair she detested. I swore I did not know her, yet the presence was haunting. A familiar presence. I wondered if she once had a perfect sister or an uncontrollable father. I wondered if she once had a desperate mother—some desperately lonely woman who kept those around her safely locked away in a web of selfishness and endless chores. Had she ever tried to escape? Had she ever failed?

The girl rushed the stage. I saw the blade in her eyes before the knife in her hands. The line of pilgrims broke with a start. Shriek spread in a ripple of fear. An old man in white fell to the blaze of the crowd. I saw the nobleman with his fiery hair consumed by the panicked inferno. I saw a farmer's daughter, so full of beauty and love, throw aside her small sister in a rush to escape. The persistent sound of a subtle something rang in my ears, pierced my core, and all the while the sad girl advanced with knife in hand. The foot-long length of steel echoed the very essence of her being as she ran onward. The words she spoke then were true.

“I hate you! Why? Why did it have to be you?” She moved closer.

“Why did the goddess pick you?” And closer.

“What makes you so special?”

Trapped behind the wall of fleeing pilgrims, the guards pushed their way through, but they had too far to go. The only thing left in her way was an empty man, the hollow servant to the departed noble. For a moment I thought he would stop the girl. The big man that he was could have reached out and grabbed the knife from her like the child that she was. He stood aside with ease, and as he turned I saw reflected in him such deprivation I was rooted to the spot.

“Why?” Closer.

“Why?” Closer.

“Why?” She was so close I could almost reach out and touch her. Almost, but the guards grabbed her arms and pulled her back with such inexplicable violence I wanted to cry out and stop them. The knife was still in her hand, she could have thrown it straight to my heart if only she had the strength. If only . . .

The priests hurried me back to my chambers and openly locked the doors, saying it was for my own good. I walked to my balcony, defeated. Off in the distance, a songbird chirped its cheerful tune. Over the edge, I could just make out the swirling patterns carved on the stone below. I removed the rings from my fingers and stared at each one in turn, then let them drop, drop, fall and sink, through the air to the sudden stop at the end of it all. By nightfall, the servants would notice my rings were missing. By morning, the rings would be back. They always were.

I calmly walked back inside and slammed the balcony doors shut. In the golden mirror on the sky-blue wall, I *saw* a goddess remembering in sleepy silence the long ago time in a place far away, when a small girl named Shia stood in the middle of a field, arms outstretched, waiting for something magical to happen, desiring freedom, yet wishing for change. And the one inevitable moment of pure joy when she saw the lightning descending from above to encompass her world in black and send her on to a life that would be wonderful and new.

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# The Lawn Chair Balloonist

| Meredith Harper

Carlos was a champion lawn chair balloonist.

It was a science and an art for him. He tied balloons to bricks. Five to a brick. He weighed seventy-six bricks. The math from there was simple and he did it on the back of an envelope. Three-hundred-eighty balloons. Helium was eighteen dollars for a two-litre canister, and thirty dollars for four litres. It was very cost-effective to buy in bulk. Carlos ordered his canisters of helium from an outlet company that supplied circus clowns and other artists. They sent him catalogues of special balloons for the formation of giraffes and fancy hats. Carlos was always careful to read every page and then recycle the catalogue. Perhaps one day he would see something he wanted. One day, maybe, he would become interested in making latex-free balloon animals for children in green fluorescent hospitals.

For the moment, he was interested in lawn chairs and flight.

His first lift-off came one October afternoon as he sat, drinking a beer on his back patio. The idea came to his head, and the beer was flat. He wanted something floating. His neighbors were not home, and their daughter had just turned eight. Carlos jumped the fence and took the box of pink balloons from their open garage. Three hours later, he was hovering a few feet in the air, still nursing a flat, amber beer that tasted like sewage and wheat. Only the beginning, he thought, scratching his stubble. Then he started investing.

A light, aluminum-framed lawn chair was the preferred apparatus. The balloons were cloth, coated on the inside with a special polymer, and sealed against outside leaks with a thick coat of paste, the kind he used to glue puzzles together to frame and hang on his walls. It was constant experimentation, but the minimum for his weight was three-hundred-eighty balloons. He tried to lose a few

pounds, just to cut back on the number, but the weight persisted. He was not a good cook. Since Juanita had left, he'd started eating frozen dinners daily. They were bland—they would never be Juanita's *tamales*, or her rice and beans, or her *chorizo*. He ate them when he was not hungry, and drank flat, wheaty beer when he was not thirsty.

\* \* \*

The sky was cloudy for once. It was November. Carlos watched the ruby sun fall into New Mexico, and he crinkled the empty beer can in his bare palm. His hands were tough, and the crushed can did not cut him. He wanted to go up, very high. It would take a lot of planning. But he had the time.

There were only red balloons at the party supply store in the strip mall. Carlos bought out the entire stock.

"You must have a special occasion coming up," the girl behind the cash register said through her blue chewing gum.

Carlos shrugged. "Gracias."

"De nada." The bell of the glass door dinged, and Carlos left the store with two huge bags of red balloons. They were like the deflated insides of grapefruits, moist-looking in their gluey sheen, fibrous with cotton cloth construction.

The trick was to tie the balloons to the chair and inflate them one by one. It only took about ten balloons before the chair itself started to levitate, so Carlos staked it down with iron tent pegs and hemp rope and kept inflating the balloons. He pumped them full of air slowly, imagining the helium gas seep into the sack and impregnate the slouching flump of garnet and rose.

It was like breathing life into a garden of roses, like fertilizing carnations and roses and wild-eyed hibiscus.

It took three days to blow up all but one of the balloons, and the tent pegs and the hemp rope strained to keep the flimsy aluminum chair chained to the earth.

Carlos settled himself into the chair and kicked at the tent pegs and the hemp rope. He took the last balloon and pumped one last litre of helium into the limp bladder.

He rose.

He kicked off his shoes and wiggled his toes as the brown clay of his patio dropped away from beneath him. He had time to gently jettison his tank of helium and reach out on the patio table for one last flat beer. At twenty feet, Carlos popped open the can and took a sip, feeling the liquid flow over his lips.

Carlos watched his house get smaller and squarer, and his neighbors' houses get smaller and squarer, and finally his whole neighborhood was a block in a quilt of other neighborhoods, all neatly squared off. Blue threads in the corners were swimming pools. Green borders were privately-watered golf courses. The overwhelming color scheme was tan. Carlos felt a wind nudging him south, and he looked down on a desert of differing shades of brown. The tops of mesas were light brown, almost ochre, and the desert floor was a rich, muddy color.

Carlos took another sip of beer and did not feel hungry. He did not want to eat, and he did not feel sick to his stomach. He wanted to fly up and on for a very long time.

The cold clouds wrapped around his shoulders. Carlos shuddered and looked up at his ceiling of red balloons. They looked like a scab in the mist of the cirrus. He looked down and saw small hills and recognized the crooked coast of the Baja. He plugged a finger in one ear and heard the waves beating the shore.

The clouds grew thicker, and there were no longer any birds. No vultures, no hawks, no falcons. Not that he could have told the difference among them. The lawn chair rose up above the clouds, and Carlos felt like he was riding a second sea in the sky.

At sunset, this second sea grew thicker, ever thicker, and Carlos could not see the ground. He imagined the world underneath the clouds was very, very dim. Here, close to the sun, the light was still strong, like the slap of Juanita's black braid as she slung her wet hair on the bed pillow. Carlos tried to remember her smell, the smell of her shampoo and the smell on the sheets after she lay there, naked and covered in rainwater. He could not smell her now, but the clouds under him smelled like rainwater.

It was probably raining below him.

It was getting colder, and it was getting darker. Carlos heard the whine of an engine and saw an airplane flying below him, racing in an angry black, bee-like drone across the white rug of clouds. The sunset was still pearly and red and the deepest cerulean, where the atmosphere of earth ended.

Carlos could not feel his bare feet, and when he looked down, his toes were the color of grapes. The beer can was stuck, irrevocably, to his hand. He did not want any more to drink, but he had to hold on to the can. And besides, it would be a great sin to the earth to litter her deserts—or her oceans, Carlos did not know over which he hovered at the moment.

He did not breathe much, and the balloons were starting to wilt, like roses gone without water for too long. Carlos waited, but none of the balloons popped. The air was so cold; he expected the balloons to freeze, to become angry frozen bulbs, like bare nose tips, and to gush viscous helium into the pale, fragile blue. If he slanted his eyes, he could see the halo of the earth, the dear sainted earth, demarcated by the cross-cut of the sun's rays.

Carlos looked back at the sun and was surprised to find he felt very little. Juanita's smell eluded him, so he remembered rainwater instead, and breathed like a sick fish, gills gasping in a shallow pool. The sky fell away from his unconscious, depressurized feet and grape-colored toes.

The three-hundred-eighty balloons sparkled like drops of blood against the total studded universe.

Mikhail paused at the portal of the space shuttle. There was a flower petal stretched over the earth. He rested his hand on his chin and regarded the sudden flush of rose that covered the aquamarine marble below him. The petal winked by him as the shuttle kept to its frantic orbit, and by the time he had made a complete revolution, Mikhail had forgotten to look for the flaming swath again.

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## The Gospel According to Mark

| Micah Dean Hicks

*Luke 23:34*

It didn't seem real until the blood hit her windshield.

At first, there had only been a roaring sound. It was so foggy out this morning that she could barely see the other cars, their lights slipping in and out of view. The noise became louder, and two dull coals of red light melted into sight ahead. She pressed the brake.

Through the haze, heavy wooden beams appeared: a cross chained to the back of a truck. The woman in the Suburban slowed down a little more, watching the tip of the cross drag the pavement only a few feet from her front bumper, its edge worn white and soft by the road.

A young man stretched across it, naked except for a pair of black Dickies snapping in the wind. A railroad spike capped each of his hands, driven in so that the wide top pinned his palms to the wood. Another spike wed his feet to the trunk of the cross. His eyes were closed, his hair whipping past his face.

In the cab of the truck, a blonde-headed boy stared back at her through the glass. She lifted her fingers in a small wave. The boy just stared.

She eased up as close as could get. A red droplet pooled in the crucified hand and struck her windshield. Then a few more hit, until red streaks wandered over the glass like veins.

She followed for a while, transfixed. She turned the radio down so that she could hear the sound of the cross dragging, hear every tremor and change in timbre when it scraped over uneven pavement, or when the truck lurched one way or the other. The truck hit a bump, and she watched the trembling body jolt against the nails, leaping out at her in mock ecstasy.

Seeing her exit, she let the truck slip into the fog ahead of her and turned off.

*Luke 23:43*

Mark stood by the back of the truck and waited for his sons to get done inside. The light spilling from the gas station awning, neon pink and green, gave everything under it a strange hue. Mark thought the light made it look just like a church under here, like the glow from stained glass windows. He looked around to make sure he was alone and pulled the sheet back so that he could see his oldest boy's face.

“Hey.”

His son gaped at him, his eyes red from tears and wind.

“If you hadn't howled so much earlier, maybe you'd be able to say something now, huh? I hope that won't be a problem. I been reading and praying on it, and I don't think it'll be a problem.

“Hey, lookit.” He waved the atlas at his son, a little red scrawl around Calvary, Texas. “See that? We're almost there. You ain't got but a little ways. I know it's a long climb up that hill, son, but you ain't got but a little ways.”

Seeing a car pull into the station, Mark put the sheet back and whistled for the two youngest to hurry up.

*John 19:26-27*

“Mark, don't do it! He's our boy, Mark.”

“He's the Lord's. Ain't you never read it? *God loved us so much, he gave us his only son.* The only one he had. 'Cause that's the only way you can deal with the sin. Now, here we have three good boys. You said when we had the first one, that God had special things for him.”

“Please, Mark! God don't need our boy!”

“You're a selfish, evil woman is what you are. And you're not coming with us. This is our chance. This is our chance to give God back as much as he give us. This is the only way to deal with the sin. Ain't you never read it?”

*Matthew 27:46*

Even in January it was a touch uncommon to see sleet in Texas. The tires threw it back over the arms of the cross, where it ran in an icy sluice over the boy's hands, forearms, armpits, and down his sides. He mumbled, his lips and tongue chapped from the wind. Words poured from his mouth, but he could not understand them, and no one was there to hear. His hair was heavy with water and hung limp across his face. His body no longer pulsed with the vibrations from the road, but hung slack, heavy as the wood it was nailed to.

Gradually, the boy's skin whitened under the pounding of ice and rain, the drops leeching a little more color out of him and rolling off heavy when they'd had their fill. His lips stretched wide as they could, his teeth bared in a quiet grimace. Calvary was only a few miles away according to the signs, but the weather made driving slow. Gradually, the boy's breaths became less and less regular. Finally, his chest rose slowly, fell, and rose no more.

*John 19:28*

Mark was uneasy about the rest stop, but he couldn't make the kids hold it forever. The sheet had blown away about an hour ago, and he was starting to worry about someone calling the police. It hardly mattered now, though. It was late in the day, almost dark, and they'd be there soon. The sun would rise the next morning on his son's cross at Calvary.

He gave the kids a couple of dollars to get drinks from the machine. They trudged over to the building, gawking back over their shoulders at their brother. Neither of them spoke to the other. Neither of them had spoken very much the whole trip.

Mark knew he'd have to talk to them about all this when things were over; make sure they understood.

"What about you? You thirsty?"

His son on the cross nodded weakly.

His youngest came out of the restroom and stopped in front of the machines. They came back waving the bills at him.

“It’s jammed, dad. It won’t take our money.”

From below, Mark’s son whined and kept nodding.

“What have we got in the cab?” Mark asked one of them.

The boy clambered up into the truck. He came back with a half-empty bottle of Dr. Pepper.

“We just got this, dad. It’s hot, though.”

Mark took it and twisted off the cap. He let the warm liquid drizzle into his oldest’s mouth, a sticky line of it tracing its way down his throat and chest.

“Yeah. Yeah, drink it down. This is right. Anyone who read it knows this is right. We’re doing okay, then.”

*John 19:30*

Behind a Seven-Eleven in Calvary, a man and two boys levered the end of a wooden cross into a dumpster. It hit the bottom with a clang. One arm of the cross stuck out over the lip, a blue-white hand fixed to it.

Sirens whined in the distance, and the man shoved his kids at the truck. “Let’s go. I just don’t know what happened. There was sleet. Maybe we came a day too late? He wasn’t supposed to be dead yet. I don’t understand.”

They got in the truck and sped off, leaving the back street quiet except for the hum and snap of a light above. The sirens faded. A stillness settled over everything. The flickering glow from the street-lamp put a lid over the area that kept out moon, stars, and the blackness that swallowed the surrounding buildings. After a time, a rat fell out of a hole in the brick and onto the arm of the cross. It sniffed at the stiff fingers and the clotted blood around the nail. After a curious nip, it slithered down into the dark of the dumpster.

*Luke 23:46*

“I didn’t want it to have to be this way. This don’t seem like it.”

“This is crazy! I’m not what you think I am. I can’t do this.”

“You’ll do it ‘cause God has decided you’ll do it. I can’t believe—  
You were gonna run away from this?”

“Dad, please.”

“Don’t talk to me, boy. It’s your heavenly Father you need to be talking to. Only His will matters.”

The boy struggled against the chain holding his arms to the wood. His breathing came fast and shallow as he watched Mark pick up the hammer and nails. He scarcely believed what was happening until he felt the blunt tip of the rail-road spike settle into his palm.

“Daddy! This isn’t what He wants. Nobody wants this!”

Mark raised the hammer, its shadow big on the grass. The other boys stood in awe beside him, their cheeks wet and eyes red, Bibles in their hands. Mark handed one the keys with his free hand.

“Go start the truck. We’ll be ready to go in a minute.”

His oldest started to cry.

Mark squeezed his son’s shoulder and sighed. “It’s gonna be alright. The climb is the hardest part.”

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# Astigmatic

| Matthew Mercuri

1935

Veils of incense rose from the censer to the rafters while reflections on the stained glass drowned the congregation in spectral light. Gowned in a garment of generations, an infant girl was held above a cruciform fixture located at the entrance to the nave. She shivered in her godmother's hands as an old man of the cloth, in a single swift and graceful movement, drew his palm through the font and aspersed its water upon the infant's forehead.

After the ceremony, Alodia rested her cheek upon her father's breast while he rocked her in the cradle of his arms. Motes of dust floated in the bands of light that filtered through the blinded window, and when he placed his thumb in the cup of his daughter's palm, he felt her fingers tighten slowly around it. Her eyelids fluttered, her grip slackened, and he set her carefully into the crib he had purchased.

Alodia's father softly shut the door behind him and stepped into the growing shadows of the parlor. A gentleman named Jakob stood before the mantle, admiring a songbird that chirped inside its cage. The man wore a small, gold star on a chain around his neck and held in his hands a package wrapped in the daily paper. At the sight of his friend, Jakob smiled widely and opened his arms. The two men embraced and took seats before the fireplace in chairs upholstered in red and white leather.

Dusk fell in the quiet Polish city as the men sat and smoked in the warm glow of the fire, the package still wrapped on a table between them. Alodia's mother entered first, her ears and neck adorned with small, round pearls. She wore a slim, satin dress and tread lightly in slippers upon the carpeted floor. Jakob's wife, attired in a modest skirt and blouse, followed closely behind. As the women approached, Alodia's father reached forward and tore the newspaper from the package, revealing inside a silver bracelet bearing the inscription of his daughter's name.

1943

Gunfire rattled the south of Poznan as the snow quickened its descent, blanketing the city in deep white powder. Under the cover of dusk, men in grey uniforms populated the streets for a third consecutive day. They demanded entrance at every business and residence and shot out windows when the latches failed to lift.

Inside a stone-faced house by the river, a young girl lay on the floor shielding her face against a soldier's mud-caked boot. She cried out as he reached down and tore a bracelet from her wrist and stuffed it quickly into his coat pocket. Choking on her sobs, she glanced up at the brutal reddened face, allowing time for the soldier to note the light, tousled hair strewn before her frightened blue eyes. With a dirt-encrusted thumb, he wiped the blood from a cut upon her forehead and hoisted her swiftly onto his shoulder.

He carried her out through the foyer of the house, and though she glimpsed something dark in the back of parlor, his movement was too quick and her vision too blurry for her to recognize the shape of bodies fallen.

Alodia drifted in and of out consciousness, her cheek pressed to the concrete cellar floor, her hands clasped about her knees. Blood sat and hardened in a cut below her eye where the instructor's stick had struck her face. She had been sitting near the back of the classroom when the instructor pointed to a word on the board. Unable to explain how the chalked letters ran together, she felt the warm rush of redness to her cheeks, and when the instructor asked for her name, she answered incorrectly.

Now saliva ran from the corners of her mouth. She bit her bottom lip and clawed at the floor beneath her. What had her mother said about the bird in its cage? She tried to remember the faces of her playmates, and the look of the schoolhouse, and the smell of the clover in the field beyond the church. She wanted to press her nose into the dirt and taste the earth upon her tongue. She thought of Jakob's bracelet and how her mother had told her

not to wear down the inscription by rubbing her fingers over it. She was standing in the yard behind her house. The tall spires of the church were bending over her. Father was calling, but she could not understand his words.

Her nostrils filled with the smell of something sour. Limbs outstretched, she could feel no chair or bed from where she lay, and as the darkness continued to press heavily upon her, she thought of the girl with the ruddy face. The girl had lived at the camp for over a month, and still no family had come for her. She had spoken once about a boy who had misbehaved in class. No one saw him again, she said. Just vanished.

Music from the loudspeakers filled the air. She recognized the tune from class and quickly recalled the name of its composer. She had been drawn to his picture on the cover of a textbook. Clutching a quill and pad in his hands, he wore a black coat with a red scarf and carried a stern expression on his face. He had steep, dark brows and wavy hair of grey and white. She listened intently to the rise and fall of notes, staring at the gravel beneath her feet and running her fingertips gently over a bruise on her forearm.

The director called her name from across the yard in thick, guttural tones. She squinted into the distance and began to walk in the direction of the gate, her back held proudly upright, her shoulders square and arms evenly at her sides. When the director impatiently summoned her again, she closed her eyes and called back in the loudest tone she could muster, tasting every syllable before it left her mouth.

Dinner was held in the mess hall at four-thirty. She ate ravenously, drawing looks from the other children who sat near her, and retreated to her room as the final rays of daylight vanished. There she untied the bodice of her *dirndl*, drew off the blouse and stepped out deftly from the skirt. Her forehead throbbed when she unpinned the bun which sat high upon the back of her head, and as she swung her hair from side to side, it unraveled into long, golden

strands. She climbed onto her bed and pressed her cheek into the pillow, repeating softly *Adalheid*.

She awoke to gunfire and distant explosions. Clutching the edges of her mattress, she heard strange voices and a stammer of boots approaching from the hall. The room smelled of sulfur, and the high pitch of sirens rushed through the open window. Hands were grabbing firmly at her body, but in the darkness she could hardly see at all.

1946

The Third Avenue elevated clattered through a sleepy high-rise district in the Bronx. Huddled beneath her blankets, Allie awoke to the vibration and looked out at the sky from the third-story window of the orphanage. A bank of dark clouds held the promise of rain.

She climbed out of bed and opened her closet, smiling wryly at the provided arrangement of colored garments. After a moment's hesitation, she grabbed a flannel shirt and overalls from the rack. While holding the clothes in her hands, she looked at the reflection in the mirror that hung upon the closet door. She studied the subtle curve of breast beneath her top and the knotted locks of auburn hair that dressed her neck and shoulders. Mrs. Potter had purchased the dye as soon as Allie suggested the idea.

Catching the aroma of eggs and toast, she quickly changed her clothes and headed to the staircase that led into the kitchen. As she set her foot on the bottom step, Mrs. Potter looked up from the head of the table and wished her good morning. Allie smiled back and looked hungrily upon the half-eaten trays of scrambled eggs and toast, jellies and jams. The table was still lined with dirty dishes and silverware, and as she sat at one of the vacant chairs, she heard foreign words and laughter from the children who played in the other room.

As she ate, she glanced out the window and noticed that the sky

had darkened. She rose quickly from the table, averting her blue eyes from the curious face beside her, and grabbed her raincoat from the rack at the front door. Once outside, she removed an old newspaper from her pocket, set it open on the ground, and knelt at a bed of flowers which lined the edge of the building. She first drew a patch of weed-choked lilies from the planter, and clutching the stems in her hand, shook the dirt from their roots. She then reached into her overalls and produced a handful of new bulbs. She laid them each gingerly in the divot, and as her spade glided into the rain-softened soil, she felt the sudden patter of drops upon her head.

Knelt beside the flowerbed, Allie looked upward at the sky and allowed the water to speckle her forehead and the lenses on her face.

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## Soon Enough

| Peter Simes

The noise from all the military air traffic coming and going conceals the arrival of the Marine CH-46, which catches all of us off-guard. It never ceases to amaze me each time I see one of these choppers touch down. It's really impressive how quickly they swoop down to land. The whole process almost looks like a controlled fall; an unexpected fact for the newbies that initiates a panic.

I calmly watch as they scramble to strap on their helmets. I turn my attention to the chopper as it gently rolls to a stop. I race out to meet the medical corpsmen, who are already running out the back ramp of the helicopter with one of their own on a stretcher. I reach the helicopter first. All the newbies are wearing full body armor, something I'm sure they're not used to wearing, let alone running in at a full sprint. The only protective equipment I'm wearing are some tactical goggles I bought at the Camp Sather BX to shield my eyes from the swirls of fine desert dirt the dual-rotors kick up. The newbies don't have goggles, but I'm sure they will tomorrow.

I learned the necessity of quality eye protection during my first pick-up six months ago. It took me a week of scorching desert heat to realize that I didn't need body armor within the Green Zone or the Baghdad International Airport area. Besides the fact that it's just too hot to wear that much equipment, the Kevlar will do little to stop rockets, mortars, and the armor-piercing rounds that local snipers use. It's not the newbies' fault; they're only doing what they were told. They'll learn soon enough.

We transfer the patient to our wheeled gurney and start back to the waiting ambulance. One of corpsmen yells the injury information and patient status as I take over squeezing the bag valve attached to a tube in the wounded Marine's throat. The CH-46 is already taking off as we load into the back of our ride. I guess they're busy.

The ambulance quickly takes us to the hospital, which is only one in the loosest sense of the word. Originally a remote hanger at the BIAP, its sole purpose now is to stabilize the wounded and decide who is driven to the Ibn Sina Hospital within the Green Zone or is flown out of country for more serious treatment. It's just a more organized and better-equipped triage center than they have in the field. The whole trip shouldn't take more than five minutes, even for an inexperienced driver.

I focus on the Marine in my care and begin hooking him up to the ECG while the newbie starts a new IV drip. A blood-stained dressing covers his whole head and most of his torso. It looks like someone performed a crude tracheotomy so that he could breathe easier. Poor guy. I resume squeezing the bag valve attached to his throat.

His dog tags are dangling off the head of the gurney. I learned after my third week to never look at them. It's the hospital's job to record personal information, anyway. I don't want to know who they are, and not knowing is the only way I can keep doing my job. All I have to do is keep these guys alive long enough so the doctors can work on them. I don't need to fill my mind with their personal information. All it does is make them real.

"Don't take those off," I say as the newbie grabs the tags and examines them.

"I won't," he says.

"And don't—"

"LCpl. Richard O'Shea," he says, "US—"

"Stop!"

"Whoa, relax man. I won't read anymore."

For the first time in months I feel panic. I can feel a nervous sweat bead up all over my body. My skin feels hot, but inside I feel cold. My hands begin to tremble and my lunch feels like it's trying to climb out of my stomach.

"What's wrong with you?" the newbie asks.

"Nothing."

My hands must be shaking pretty bad if the newbie notices. I have to concentrate on compressing the bag. I wrap my world around this one act, trying to distract my mind. That name. It couldn't be. I'm sure there is more than one person with that name serving here. I know Dick is in-country, but he has been out in the field since I've been here. I don't have authorization to leave Baghdad, and it's not like Dick can just come here and visit. I've sent him letters to let him know where he can reach me. We talked on the phone once last month, but only for a few minutes. He couldn't tell me where he was. I'm not sure where this guy was wounded, but Iraq is a big country. It's not him. It can't be.

Dick has survived two tours in some of this country's most dangerous regions without a scratch, and now he is working on his third. He was always cut out for this sort of work. I wanted to be, but I've come to terms—at least I tell myself that I have—with the fact that I'm not soldier material. When the government was recruiting civilian medics to assist the over-burdened military medical personnel, I jumped at the chance. It was, and still is, the best way for me to serve my country. I could never bring myself to kill, but Dick never held that against me, not once.

We talked about it when we were eight and decided that when we both turned sixteen, we would be big enough to shoot his Dad's twelve-gauge shotgun. His dad disagreed. The day has finally arrived. Dick turned sixteen four months ago, and has been waiting patiently for my birthday. His gift to me is the first shot. Everything is falling into place. Dick's mom is over at her friend's house, and his dad is asleep upstairs.

Dick spent most of the summer hiding in the basement, hoping to see his father unlock the gun safe. Now, Dick has the combination and we are ready. I'm sitting out in the cab of Dick's truck with the engine running. I can't wait to shoot this gun. I've never shot one before. Dick sneaks out of the front door and jumps off the front steps. He opens the truck door and slides the gun

under the seat and jumps in the cab. I hit the gas, and we speed out to some land close to his family's land where all the juniors and seniors have their parties on the weekends.

"Maybe you should slow down," Dick says.

"Why?"

"Cause if a cop pulls us over and finds the gun, we'll be in deep shit."

"Whatever."

"Think about it, man. Neither of us is licensed to carry a gun."

"So?"

"So, we'll be arrested, and our dads will beat our asses, then our moms will die of shame."

"Oh. I guess you're probably right."

I ease up on the gas and look out for hidden cop cars.

"Remember, you get the first shot, birthday boy."

"Hell no—you did all the work. I'm just driving the truck. You go first."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm the driver, and you're the scrounger slash equipment expert, so you go first to test everything out."

"Okay. So what do we shoot at?"

"I don't know. Stuff."

"We can't shoot at air; we need to have something to shoot at."

"I never thought about it."

"We should've brought some old cans or bottles with us. I know. We'll shoot at birds—they're everywhere. I'm sure we won't have trouble finding some."

"Sounds good to me. Turn here?"

"Yeah, right after that post."

I turn down a dirt road, and we drive through some trees and park on the edge of a clearing. Dick pulls out his dad's shotgun and a box of shells. I watch as he carefully loads each shell.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Hell yeah."

“Okay, get some rocks and when I say so, throw them into those bushes, and I’ll shoot whatever comes out.”

“You got it.”

I walk around and pick a few good-sized rocks perfect for throwing.

“Okay, ready when you are.”

Dick cocks the gun and aims it in the air above the bushes.

“On three. One . . . two . . . three.”

I toss the rocks into the bushes, and dozens of small birds come flapping out. Dick fires and flies back a few yards, landing on his ass. I run over to him as he sits up and shakes his head.

“Oh shit, you alright?” I ask, trying not to laugh.

“I guess so.”

I help Dick to his feet, and he checks to make sure nothing is broken.

“That was a helluva ride,” he says, dusting himself off.

I start laughing. Dick smiles and breaks out in laughter too. My eyes tear up, and I start to cough.

“I bet it was,” I say.

“Your turn,” he says, handing me the gun, “Happy Birthday.”

We walk a few hundred yards to the other side of the clearing along the tree line. Dick gathers some rocks and we decide on where to throw them. I brace myself back against a thick tree. I don’t want to get blown backward from the shotgun blast. I’m a lot smaller than Dick and nowhere near as strong.

“On three. One . . . two . . . three,” I say.

Dick chucks the rocks into the bushes. A big flock of birds flies out. I take aim and squeeze the trigger.

That’s the last thing I clearly remember until I woke up at the hospital a couple of hours later. The tree kept me from getting knocked back, but it worked too well. When I fired the gun, the heavy wooden butt was driven into my shoulder, smashing the joint to pieces against the tree. I had to have surgery to completely replace

it with one made from metal and plastic. I've never had problems with it, but it hurts like hell on cold days.

Dick told me that when I fired the gun I sort of grunted and passed out. My parents said he carried me the few hundred yards back to the truck and drove me to the hospital. He called his dad and my parents, taking the fall for everything. He visited me every day that I was in the hospital and even came to help with my shoulder rehab. After that day, I never shot at a living thing again. I took the whole event as a sign that I shouldn't take life, a belief I once shared with Dick over too many beers. He never teased me about it, and it was never brought up in conversation; Dick just accepted it and moved on.

"Let's go," the newbie says.

"Huh?"

"We're here. Let's go."

The driver opens the back door of the ambulance, and we pull out the gurney. The newbie holds the IV fluids above his head while I continue to squeeze the bag valve. I can't help but stare at the gauzed-wrapped face. A group of civilian doctors and nurses rush out to meet us.

"What've we got?" the doctor asks.

I hesitate and the newbie excitedly takes advantage, passing all the patient information on to the doctor.

"Thanks, we'll take it from here," the doctor says.

I don't notice that I'm still looking at the Marine's face, or rather where his face would be if it wasn't covered with bandages.

"We got it, you can let go now," one of the nurses says, taking the bag valve out of my hand.

I stop and watch as the medical staff takes LCpl. Richard O'Shea into the hospital. I've done my job. There's nothing else I can do. It can't be him. Move on. He can't be the only Marine in Iraq with that name. I'm sure of it. Plus, I don't even know where that guy came from. All I have is a name, which doesn't mean anything. I'm sure it's some other O'Shea.

“It’s all just coincidence.”

“What?” the newbie asks.

“Nothing, just talking to myself.”

“You okay? You look sort of pale.”

“Yeah, I’m fine, let’s go.”

We climb back in the ambulance, and we hear over the radio that there are more incoming CH-46’s loaded with wounded.

“Looks like we’re in for a busy day,” I say.

“Good,” says the newbie. “That’s why I’m here.”

Damn newbie. What was he thinking reading the dog tag like that? If he wants to do that then he needs to keep it to himself. I can’t really blame him, though. He doesn’t know any better, but he’ll learn soon enough.

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# The Fight

| Greg Stanley

The Point Diner's early bird special ends and Johnny Moss replaces the breakfast menus for lunch. He refills the coffee for the few old timers still in conversation and clears an emptied booth. As he slides the dishes down the rack to the kitchen, the bells above the entrance chime, and a kid just out of high school walks to the counter with a greasy smile.

"You know Big Country's coming for you, Johnny?" The kid slithers into the stool nearest the door and leans his boney elbows on the counter.

"I know, Squeak." Johnny rolls a set of silverware into a fresh napkin.

"You know it's because you fucked his sister?" Squeak smirks and shows his yellow teeth.

"I didn't touch his sister, Squeak."

"But he thinks you did."

"To hell with what he thinks." Johnny sets down the silverware and strolls through the door to the kitchen.

"But he thinks you fucked his sister," Squeak yells after him.

Johnny takes off his apron and hat and trades them for his jacket on a rack near the back door. He has just finished the breakfast rush and has some time before the college crowd comes in for lunch. "I'm going on break, Sal."

Sal, the diner's owner and morning cook, raises his hand in acknowledgement as Johnny grabs a full garbage bag and slips into the alley.

Johnny steps into the snow and lifts the lid off the dumpster to drop the bag in. The wind drifts the snow into his face as he walks through the alley to Main Street. His car is parked around front, but he walks the couple of blocks to see if Claire is working her mother's gas station. Through the window he can see Claire reading a magazine behind the register.

"Hey, Johnny," Claire says with her eyes on the magazine as

Johnny stamps the snow off his feet. “How’s your brother doing?”

“Why’s everybody think that I twisted with that friend of yours?”

“You mean Jody?” Claire gets up to grab a pack of Camels for Johnny. “Have you been talking to Squeak?”

“I’ve been talking to everybody.” Johnny hands her a ten for the cigarettes.

“You and Jody seemed awful close at the Bin on Friday, that’s all.”

“Claire, she’s fifteen years old.”

“That won’t stop most men. You’re pigs.”

“This town is too small.”

“It’s not that small.” Claire catches Johnny’s eyes.

Johnny gives her a look, an ‘are you kidding me, she’s fifteen’ type of look.

“I know you didn’t do anything.” Claire turns back to her magazine. “How’s your brother?”

“Just fine,” Johnny says as he walks out the door.

He stands outside the gas station to open the pack of cigarettes. The sun peaks through the clouds.

“Johnny, you heading to work?” A young man a couple years older than Johnny jogs up the sidewalk.

“How’s it going, Hall? You coming to the diner?”

Hall fought with Johnny’s brother, Nick, in Iraq during his first tour. They were stationed together in Mosul and drove in the convoy between the Q-West and Anaconda bases. They were in the same truck when it was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device. Hall’s thumb was blown off, and eventually they amputated his entire left hand. The shrapnel punched a nickel-sized hole through Nick’s right calf. Nick volunteered to go back for a second tour two months ago, but Hall had to stay behind. He has a prosthetic claw for a left hand.

“Yeah, I could use a burger.” Hall slaps his good hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “How’s your brother doing, write you anything?”

“Not in a while—it gets pretty busy over there.” Johnny searches his pocket for a lighter and failing to find one throws his cigarette to

the ground.

“It does.” Hall opens the door to the diner for Johnny.

No one has come in yet for the lunch special, and Squeak has gone. Sal wouldn’t let him stay long without ordering. Johnny walks into the kitchen to get his apron and hat.

“What’s this about Big Country wanting to kill you?” Hall shouts to the kitchen.

“He thinks I twisted his sister.”

Hall lets out a laugh. “How’d you let a thing like that happen?”

“She’s got a thing for me, and I let her flirt,” Johnny comes back out and pours Hall a cup of coffee.

“That’s it?”

“Does it matter?”

“It doesn’t.” Hall sips his coffee. “Country’ll kill you just for the rumor.”

The bells chime, and a couple from the college walks in—a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl with a guy on her arm. She’s been coming to the diner now and then for the last couple years. Johnny talks to her when he gets the chance. Her name is Theresa, and she’s graduating in the spring. Then she won’t be coming in anymore.

“You want me to try and talk to him, see if I can get it straightened out?” Hall asks.

Theresa and the guy sit at a booth near the back of the diner. The diner is small enough to see everyone from behind the counter. She moves her hand to the guy’s knee and says something softly that makes them both smile.

“Just a sec, Hall.” Johnny goes to the booth with the pot of coffee.

He smiles at Theresa, and she smiles back. “You know what you’re going to order?”

“I think we still need a sec,” she says. “We could use some coffee, though.”

“Just let me know when you’re ready.” Johnny fills her mug, and

ignoring her boyfriend, walks back to the counter. Theresa looks at her boyfriend's empty mug and smiles. She pours half of her cup into his and asks what he's thinking of ordering.

"I don't think talking will do much good," Johnny says to Hall. "If he's out for me, there's nothing that'll change his mind."

The day goes by. Hall leaves, and then Theresa and her boyfriend. The college rush comes in and as quickly as they come, they vanish too. Other workers come and help in the kitchen. The hombres take over for Sal on the grill. Every time the bells chime above the door, Johnny looks up expecting to see Big Country. But the day passes just like the day before it.

It is 4:30, already dark outside, when Johnny clocks out.

Johnny walks out of the diner and reaches for a cigarette. There's someone waiting by his car. He fumbles around for a lighter, sighs, and throws the cigarette to the ground. He holds his breath and walks towards his car.

"What's up Johnny?" Claire leans against the passenger door. "I feel like taking a walk, want to come?"

Johnny thinks of the apartment that he's going home to. He's lived there since he graduated high school. He doesn't have any groceries. Most of the light bulbs are burnt out so the only thing lighting the room by now is the television.

"Sure," he says. "I'll take a walk."

They walk down Main Street towards the lake. The lake has a park out in front where the beach is in the summertime. Claire and Johnny brush the snow off a bench and sit down. The lake is frozen under a foot of snow. A dozen ice-fishing shanties rest there, all of them empty for the night.

Claire grabs Johnny's arm. Johnny lets her.

They got together on a Friday night in the summer. They went back to her place after meeting at the Bin. He was drunk and distracted and useless to her. After a half hour they both realized he was useless. A good Catholic boy, she called him. He went to the bathroom to get some water and thought of a warning his brother

gave him in high school. He told Nick about this popular girl he wanted to ask to a dance. "If you keep loving people who don't talk to you," Nick said to him, "you're going to get awful lonely." He thought about this in the bathroom of Claire's apartment.

He went back to Claire, and it was better. He succeeded, but it was sweaty and difficult.

Claire lets go of his arm and rubs her hands together. "I'm cold," she tells him. Before Johnny can say anything Claire stands up. "You want to head back?"

"I can give you a ride," he says.

They walk back to Johnny's car.

At her apartment on Highland Avenue, Claire gets out of the car and rests her hands on top of the open door.

"Come up with me," she says.

"I don't know."

"We'll put in a movie."

"I was thinking about going to the Bin."

"That's stupid. You know that's stupid." Claire sighs and looks down at her feet. "Just come up with me."

Johnny leaves his hands on the steering wheel. He tries to think of something to say.

"Can't think of any excuses?" she asks.

"Don't do that."

"I'm not doing anything."

Johnny says nothing.

"Whatever." Claire shoves the door shut and walks away.

At the Bin Johnny passes the pool table and the dartboard and heads straight for the bar.

Squeak pretends not to see him and ducks out the back.

"Johnny Moss, the famous heartbreaker of fifteen-year-old girls." Hall smiles at the bar, a few drinks in, popcorn in his good hand.

Johnny slips into a stool next to him and lays some cash on the bar.

“You, friend,” Hall presses his finger into Johnny’s shoulder, “should not be out tonight.”

“But I am.” Johnny pats himself over as if to make sure he is really there.

“But you are,” Hall says. “So buy me a drink.”

After a number of rounds the bar begins to get livelier. A few people from the college wander in.

“I would have bled out,” Hall says now. “And I know that because I came so close to bleeding out anyway, another hour I’dve been gone. But your brother bandaged me up.”

“I didn’t know that,” Johnny says.

“I have to piss.”

Squeak comes through the door and walks up to Johnny as Hall tries to leave.

“Sorry, Squeak, no crackers today. Come back and we’ll feed you tomorrow.” Hall palms Squeak’s forehead and pushes him aside.

Squeak falls back into a table but keeps his feet. He glares at Hall until the bathroom door closes. Then he turns to Johnny.

“Big Country’s here, Johnny. He’s outside.”

“Is that right?”

“He says you can come out and get it or you can stay here—it don’t matter to him.”

Johnny sets down his beer and strolls out.

Big Country stands in the parking lot a few feet from the entrance. At six-and-a-half feet, he casts a shadow from the streetlight over Johnny. His tight blue jeans wrap up against his cowboy boots. His balding blond hair brushes his collar. He’s got two men with him—a short guy with a baseball bat and a skinny guy with his hands in his pockets.

“This is Johnny Moss?” Big Country asks, almost laughing.

“It’s him, Country,” Squeak answers.

“Here I was so worried about fighting Nick Moss’ brother that I brought all these people.” Big Country turns to the two men behind him. “He’s half the size. Are you sure you’re related to Nick Moss?”

The man with his hands in his pockets lets out a slow, deep laugh.

Squeak's eyes widen and gleam under the streetlights.

Johnny stands still. Big Country shrugs and takes off his jacket. He hands it to the man with the baseball bat. Steam rises from his shoulders.

"Tell your skinny sister I don't want anything to do with her," Johnny slides his hands in his pockets and looks at his parked car. "She's only dreaming."

Big Country opens his mouth. He stands there for a moment then turns to the two men.

The skinny guy smirks.

Big Country clenches his fists and walks towards Johnny.

When Johnny was nine, he and Nick crossed the street to a neighbor kid's house. Nick led Johnny up the neighbor's stoop and rang the doorbell. There were quite a few kids inside. Two came to the door; they didn't open the door but cracked it just enough to talk through. Nick asked if they could come in. He was three years older and much bigger than anyone on the street. He was never a bully, but he was tough and could be mean. The kids in the door said, "No. Just Johnny can."

Nick bit his lip and his face reddened. He stood there for a moment then he turned and walked home.

The door flew wide open for Johnny. The kids smiled. Inside, his friends were running wild. But Johnny turned away from the door and followed his brother.

"No Johnny, you can come in," they called after.

Johnny didn't even turn, he just followed his brother home. He tried to catch up, but Nick walked straight ahead looking at his feet. When they got to their own porch, Johnny looked up at his brother. He wanted to hug him, but Nick went inside and closed the door.

The first fist hits Johnny hard above his left eye. He stumbles and

tries to take his hands from his pockets. He's grabbed by the throat and pulled in close to Big Country. He smells the rotting stink of Big Country's breath, then he's hit square in the mouth. Blood runs over the back of his throat, and his teeth loosen against his tongue.

Johnny breaks away from the grip around his neck and gets his feet under him. Dizzy, he throws all his strength into a hard right jab into Big Country's gut.

Big Country lets out a moan but keeps his wind and counters with a sharp left/right combination to Johnny's nose. Johnny is lifted off his feet and falls flat on his back. His head bounces off the concrete.

Johnny pushes himself to his feet, swings around, and hits Big Country in the nose. The nose crunches under Johnny's fist.

Big Country stumbles back, blood pours down his face. Johnny hops toward him and hits him in the mouth.

Big Country falls to his seat and scrapes the palms of his hands against the concrete.

Something cracks Johnny's arm. He cries out and tries to turn around.

The short man waves the bat at Johnny as Big Country gets to his feet.

Johnny holds his left arm, shattered and limp.

Big Country lunges.

Johnny thinks of his shift that morning at the diner. He thinks of how Theresa, the brown-haired, brown-eyed girl, finished her plate. Hall was saying something to him as she stood from her booth. The guy left a tip on the table and put his arm around her waist, then they walked toward the counter. She looked out the door ahead of her—the guy whispered, she laughed. The guy opened the door, and she walked right through, maybe for the last time. And she was gone.

Big Country grabs Johnny by the head and throws him to the ground. He jumps on top of Johnny and slams his head into the pavement.

Things go dark for Johnny.

Big Country claws at his face and neck and chest.

Hall runs out of the bar.

The man with the bat turns and jabs it into Hall's stomach. Hall never even saw him standing there. He falls to his knees gasping for air. The skinny man takes a knife from his pocket. The man with the bat puts a hand on Hall's shoulder and holds him still.

Red and blue lights reflect off the snow. Police sirens ring. Big Country steps off Johnny, looks down, and gives a bloody smile. The skinny guy jumps into the driver's seat of a pickup truck. The short guy hops into the bed as it pulls up to Big Country. Calm and slow, Big Country climbs in the passenger side, and the truck drives off into the night.

Hall runs over to Johnny.

Johnny tries get up.

"Shit, Johnny." Hall helps him sit.

"She didn't," Johnny mumbles.

"It's alright, the ambulance is coming."

"She didn't even look."

"Okay. Just stay still."

"They don't even look up."

"Yeah," Hall says as the ambulance approaches. "You're going to be alright."

The ambulance pulls up, and the doors open wide.

*Greg Stanley is a recent graduate from St. Norbert College, where he received a B.A. in English. He is a terribly attractive young man and smart as a whip. Greg is currently bartending but hopes someday to be promoted to shift supervisor, which would bring a \$2-an-hour pay increase.*

# Travelers

| Emily Stueven

Travelers came by this morning. John was not at home. I had to hush the dogs, who could sense them before they even set foot in the yard, could hear the whisper of their tracks in the snow. I watched through the window. And I won't lie—I grabbed the gun.

They were two men. They walked in a casual way that surprised me. They had packs, and I looked for weapons, but if they had any on them, they were well hidden. They talked to one another as they walked through the yard; one of them laughed at something the other said, but I could not make any of it out. I cannot say why, but I felt they were safe. John would have wrung my neck, but I unlocked and opened the door. I wouldn't tell him.

When they heard the door and saw me through the slice of space, they did stop, momentarily frightened, I think, at having been caught so easily off guard. There was no smoke coming from the chimney this morning, and so they may have thought it was deserted here. Whenever John went out and left me alone, he pulled the curtains tight, and I sat mostly in darkness with a small lamp.

The men looked at me, and I opened the door wider. Spider stood behind me, not barking; but close to him, I could hear a low rumble inside his throat. I held the gun loosely at my side; I did not want to appear unfriendly.

"What do you want," I said, and Spider barked once.

"Miss," said one with a face full of red hair and a woolen cap. "We don't mean to frighten you, miss, but we're awfully hungry. We thought this was just some old abandoned homestead. We were gonna look around for remnants."

"I'm not frightened," I answered. "If anyone looks frightened, it's you two."

"Well, miss," the redheaded one spoke again, "you do have that gun. And that dog."

"It isn't just Spider," I said. "I've got another one bigger than this inside." As if she knew I was talking about her, Ginger came to the

door and squeezed in between me and Spider.

“Two dogs and one gun. You understand why we’re maybe a bit nervous, then.”

“And you don’t have guns in those packs?”

“Yes, miss, we do. But not at the ready. You could shoot us dead before we even had the pack unzipped.”

“I’m not gonna shoot you.”

“Thank you, miss.”

The three of us stared at each other a little more, and then the other man, who had not spoken yet, cleared his throat and said, “Have you got any food?”

Spider and Ginger whimpered a little when the two men came inside. I held their collars, and the men slipped by uncertainly. I closed the door, and it was dark again. If I opened a curtain to let in the sun, it could be trouble. I still had to use my head. The men stood until I asked them to sit. The redheaded one apologized for the mud and snow they brought in on their boots. I opened the pantry and pulled out a loaf of bread and some carrots. “It’s all I got on the fly,” I said, holding up the bread and carrots.

“That’s fine, miss. We aren’t picky.”

I sliced two big hunks of bread, scraped two carrots clean, and gave the food to the men. I sat across from them and set the gun on my knees. Spider and Ginger sat at either side of me, watching the men and the food.

They ate silently for a time, and then the quiet one spoke.

“Where’re your parents at?”

“Heck if I know,” I said. I haven’t seen them in years. I guess they’re back in Missoula, if they aren’t dead by now. Guess they’re in Missoula, too, if they’re dead. Just buried there.”

“You all alone here?”

“No. It’s me and him.” I nodded up at photo of John on the bookshelf. It was about fifteen-years-old, that picture, and he was wearing a suit in it, which was fascinating to me.

“Your grandfather?” The redheaded one asked.

“Heck, no,” I laughed. “That’s my husband.”

“Scuse me.”

The quiet one removed his hat, and long black curls fell all down his forehead. “Where is he now?” he asked.

I stared at the man’s curls and traced my finger softly round the trigger of the gun. “Hunting.”

The redheaded one looked at his friend, then back at me. “If you don’t mind, miss, what’s he hunting? Paul and I haven’t seen any critters ‘round here, not so much as a track for the last three days. Birds, even.”

“John knows where to look at,” I said. “You still hungry? Want some more bread?”

“Please,” said the redheaded one.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you all coffee,” I apologized as I handed the men two more hunks of bread. “We haven’t had any coffee for a while. You know how it is.”

“Of course.”

“Water?” I asked.

“That would be great.”

I didn’t trust going out to the well and leaving the two travelers in the house alone. We had some jugs of water in the pantry, and I opened one of those and poured two cups. They drank it down quickly, and the redheaded one belched secretly into the bend of his arm.

The quiet one with the dark hair stood suddenly, and the dogs stood, too. Spider growled. My hand tightened around the gun. He stretched his arms high above his head and yawned. As he stretched, his shirt and jacket pulled away a bit from his pants, and I saw his pale belly and more swirls of dark hair. “We should go,” he said to his friend. He looked down at me, and I saw his eyes shift to the gun and my hand upon it.

“You’ve been very kind. But we need to be off, find a place to settle in before dark.”

“Oh, but, John would like to meet you,” I lied. “We so seldom

get visitors. I don't think John's spoken to another man in months. I feel bad sometimes, he's only got a woman to talk to. And I'm not good for conversation. He talks to the dogs, but it's all rhetorical with animals."

The two men looked at each other for a moment and exchanged something significant that I could not discern. "Miss," the redheaded one finally spoke, "I don't mean to seem ungrateful—you've been so hospitable—but a man comes home to find two strange men in his home with his wife, well, it's dangerous. Dangerous for all of us. You know how things are these days."

Of course I knew how things were, and the men were speaking the truth, but I did not want to see them go. John would be gone for hours. The sun would set, and I'd start to imagine things at the door, and peering in through the windows. I'd do as I always did, draw the dogs near to me on the bed and lay the gun under the pillow and wait.

The dark-haired one was still standing, but he was looking around now, embarrassed, I think, by this protracted departure. "You look like my brother," I said to him, and he turned his eyes to mine. "Jim was his name. Your name's Paul, you said?"

"Yes, Paul," he answered.

"Jim was my older brother. He was a pilot, if you can believe it. He wanted to fly the big passenger planes, but he never had a chance to train for it. I rode in small planes with him, though. He was very good. I was never frightened. He went to college and graduated with a degree in engineering. He never got a chance to engineer, so I can't really say I have much of an idea of what it means to be an engineer. You two go to college?"

The dark-haired one shook his head no, but the redheaded one said yes. "I majored in journalism."

"And did you get to be a journalist?" I asked.

"Not for long."

"I didn't graduate high school," I said. "I have some books here, though. I try to read a lot, 'cause I don't want to be dumb. John

tried teaching me algebra from an old textbook, but he said I was a lost cause.”

“Algebra’s tough,” the redheaded one said kindly. “Without the right teacher.”

“Why didn’t you go to college, Jim?—I mean Paul.”

“Uh, I was working. I thought there’d be time.” He shrugged.

“I like your hair,” I said to him. He looked down nervously at the floor.

“David,” he said quietly, “We should go.” The redheaded one nodded.

Things felt rushed. “My husband says you’re unclean. Not just you, I mean, but all the people out there. When he sees your tracks and finds out you’ve been in here, I’m gonna get it, I just know it. There was this couple up the creek about half a mile. They died, of course, but before that the wife was a real good friend to me. We were girlfriends—like the way I was with girls when I was little and everything was okay. I loved her, but then John got . . . paranoid. I didn’t see her sometimes for weeks, and we had to meet in secret, and it was exciting but difficult. We only did things like braid each other’s hair and talk about movie stars we used to have crushes on. If John knew she’d touched my hair, though . . .”

The two men shared a nervous glance, but I continued. “I haven’t spoken to anyone either, not in months. If John wasn’t so old maybe we could’ve had a baby. He used to say he was sorry that we couldn’t, but now I think he isn’t sorry, because a baby would be unclean. Not new and pure and innocent like a baby usually is, but part of all this, because of the food I’d put in my body to nourish it and the air I’d breathe and the way babies can tell what’s happening outside the mother’s womb. They can hear the voices, and know when the voices are frightened or angry. That’s no good for a baby, you know. A baby should hear happy voices.”

The redheaded one scratched his beard. “Miss, I’m sorry, but we really do need to go.”

And he did look sorry. But I understood. I followed them to the door. Spider and Ginger walked behind me. Soon I would have to go and ruin the tracks, clean the floors, think of an excuse for the missing bread and carrots and the opened jug of water. I watched the two men go out of the yard and begin up the mountain where I saw them as dots for a quarter of an hour, until they were disappeared. I latched the door, and the dogs whimpered. In the dark, I knelt in front of Ginger, taking her face tenderly in my hands. “Now, old girl, didn’t that dark-haired man look just like our Jim?”

*Emily Stueven is a senior at Carroll College in Helena, Montana, where she majors in English for Secondary Education. She will graduate in spring 2009 and hopes to find a job teaching high school English. Her poems have appeared in a few tiny online zines (which can probably be found by Googling her name).*

# An Alarming Lack of Lactose and a Pretentious Plethora or Pigs-or-Demon Pig Goes to Wal-Mart: An Innovative How-To Guide for the Would-Be Procrastinator

| Kathryn Williams

It is important to note that procrastination, just like anything else, takes a great deal of practice to perfect. Many ignorant individuals are unaware of the hours and hours of carefully coordinated spontaneity that are required to become a master procrastinator. You, however, are not one of them. You are one of the few who understands what it takes: You will become one of the best of the best, one of the elite, and you will get there through good old-fashioned laziness. Be warned: it will be a long, hard journey, one that requires a new lack of commitment each day.

Come back from class at 2:00 p.m. on a Tuesday, for example. Contemplate starting your homework but don't give in to the urge. In fact, scratch it entirely. Start real work at 2:00? Naw. *Step one: Think like a procrastinator.* You have an eternity to be productive. Step away from the backpack. Hide it in the closet. Cover it with that blanket you've been meaning to wash. Forget it even exists. Sit down at the computer desk, and absently brush away the Pop Tarts wrappers you've been meaning to throw away but can't, because the trash can is full and somehow you just haven't had time to empty it yet. Check your email. Discover there is nothing tremendously pressing to do, and smile at the discovery of three new Facebook messages. Tell yourself (as you are waiting for the webpage to open) that at least you are not like *those* people who have to check their MySpace page every ten minutes. You never thought you'd be addicted to the Internet, and you were right; you're not. Not really. Remind yourself of this at least six times while you update yourself on the lives of your 147 closest friends.

Two hours later, pretend that you didn't fall out of your chair when you hear an ear-splitting scream erupt from your living room. Leave the cluttered comfort of your room and investigate. Find your roommate Rachel dancing around the living room clutching a little brown box. Wonder what weird antique item she's ordered on eBay this time, then act like you're not surprised when she pulls out two brand new DVDs.

Don't worry when you find yourself planted in front of the living room TV watching a movie from a glittering pink box about three drag queens and their adventures in the Australian desert. *Step two: Accept that temporary losses of memory and sanity are totally normal, even if they don't tend to go over well in court (pray these lapses are never serious enough to lead to anything that might land you in court).* Congratulate yourself that you subconsciously thought to bring your laptop with you to this movie screening—it's a brilliant bluff that allows you to exude an aura of productivity while you secretly lose 238 games of solitaire in a row.

Hide your surprise when the man you recognize as Elrond from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy comes on screen wearing a dress made entirely out of plastic orange flip-flops. Consider asking your roommate if this actor has been in the movie the whole time, then reconsider since it will prove that you haven't been paying the remotest sliver of attention. Glance sideways at your roommate to see if she noticed your indecision, raise an eyebrow, and look again to make sure that she is, indeed, scribbling in a Disney princess coloring book. Ah-ha. *Step three: Change it up. Boredom and monotony are only for amateur procrastinators.* Set aside your laptop. Pick up the 64-color box of crayons. Offer to organize them all by color and shade. Set about this daunting task with artificial enthusiasm. As you move each one, glance at the name and reminisce about the simplicity of the good ol' days, when there was none of this "macaroni and cheese" and "robin's egg blue" nonsense. Fail to contain that embarrassing snort when you come across the "Kid's Choice" colors. Ponder what inspired a seven-year-old to determine

that a fuschia pink stick of wax embodied the adjective “famous.” Furthermore, you must wonder, what misguided child could have possibly decided that blinding neon yellow (your least favorite color) should merit the name “Super Happy”?

Ask for a coloring page. Pick out the most meticulously detailed picture in the book. Begin to color deliberately, and be extremely selective about your colors. Is orange the right color, or do you need red-orange? Or maybe “Fun in the Sun” or melon? Look at Rachel’s picture for inspiration and blink a couple of times to clear your eyes before doing a double take. You don’t seem to recall Princess Aurora being that particular shade of sea green. In fact, none of the objects in her picture are colored according to standard Disney conventions. Decide that this could spark an enlightening discussion on conformity to the rules of society and the value of rebellion. Open your mouth to speak. Pass Rachel a tissue instead when she snorts out some Dr. Pepper at the sight of Hugo Weaving (apparently he’s the main character of the movie after all) and his fellow performers bursting into an excessively glittery, positively flamboyant, ‘70s-style rendition of “I Will Survive.”

Try your best to look disappointed when the movie ends an hour and six decently lip-synced songs later. Stare for a moment at your obtrusively blank computer monitor and revel in your first success. Nothing. You have accomplished nothing. Four hours, beautifully spent in the evasion of work. Ignore that little voice that starts to whisper, “Hey, you . . . maybe you should get started on your homework.” That voice doesn’t know anything anyway, and whoever it is always underestimates your ability to work under pressure. Contemplate leaving the room when Rachel pops in the next movie. Reread the box one more time and decide to give it a chance. Stop paying attention after ten minutes of non-existent plot and a scene where the main character magically changes from a red shirt in one frame to a yellow one in the next frame. Start a new game of solitaire with renewed hope. Your losing streak can’t go on forever. Turn to Rachel after four more attempts to share your inevitable

victory with her. Try not to stare. Ask her why she has a porcelain white piggy bank in her hands. Let your jaw drop a bit when she answers by pulling out an enormous black Sharpie. Watch, enthralled, for a few moments as the innocent white clay before you transforms into Demon Pig, a creature obviously spawned in the underworld that stares boldly at you with hungry, furrowed eyebrows. Laugh nervously and hope Demon Pig doesn't notice. Stare him down. Prove that you are tougher than you look.

Search for magenta in the crayon box; it will be the perfect color for Cinderella's shoes. Stand up in indignation when you discover that magenta bears only the English name, and not the Spanish and French equivalents like the other crayons. *Step four: Always take advantage of an opportunity to embark on a completely useless quest.* Search the box crayon by crayon. Invite Rachel to help you, and act touched when she accepts your ludicrous suggestion. Make an elaborate show of pulling out each individual crayon, checking every inch of the wrapper, and replacing it in its proper spot by shade and height. Half an hour later, offer to edit Rachel's letter to the Crayola Company complaining about their blatant racism towards the lighter spectrum of red colors and their brutal mistreatment of that heroic martyr, magenta. Make sure to take a great amount of time to select the perfect font from the myriad of options she downloaded onto her laptop last week.

Decide you can no longer ignore the rumbling in your tummy. Stand up, stretch, venture into the kitchen. Glance at the sink full of dirty dishes. Let your eyes linger joyfully on the plate of two-day-old peanut-butter-chocolate-chip cookies in the corner. No baking required, no dishes to do . . . commend yourself on a marvelous selection. When that obnoxious voice pops up again and points out that you'll probably regret it a few days from now when you weigh yourself at your PhysEd class, argue that you've always lived in the moment, and there's no reason to quit now. Place a few cookies on a paper towel. Heck, grab a few more. They'll only go stale if no one eats them, right? Open the fridge and gape at the measured bars

that stare back at you. There is only empty space where once sat cookies' most loyal companion. *Step five: Recognize that sometimes even humdrum times call for desperate measures.* Announce to Rachel with the gravity of a president announcing to his country the defeat of his army: "We're out of milk."

Smile as Rachel, who obviously understands that this is a tragedy of mediocre proportions and therefore dreadfully urgent, dons her jacket and snatches some cookies for the car ride. Lead the way to the car, crunching cookies as you go, and try not to make eye contact with Demon Pig, who has apparently decided to accompany you and peers out ravenously from Rachel's handbag.

*Step six: When shopping for one item in particular, always buy that item last.* Conspire with Rachel to turn your noble quest for milk into a golden opportunity to practice your sweet ninja skills. Concoct a brilliant scheme to embark on a perilous photo shoot of Demon Pig that could get you thrown out of the store before you have a chance to retrieve the coveted ivory liquid. Begin in the frozen food section. Offer to sneak Pig onto various displays while Rachel takes the pictures. Start with bacon. The photo is beautiful. Pig is versatile. His angry glare suits so many subjects. Pork. Ham. Asparagus. Crappy beer. By the half-priced bakery shelf, a Wal-Mart employee looks at you suspiciously and begins to shuffle towards you. Shove Rachel into the baby aisle. Plan to rendezvous by the fish tanks in fifteen minutes if both of you are still alive. Offer to take Demon Pig with you; divide and protect, you know.

Sneak stealthily into the accessories department and put on a hat and scarf to disguise yourself. Throw an extra scarf into the basket to cover up Demon Pig. Notice that his eyebrows show through the fabric. Choose a darker color. Roam aimlessly over to housewares. Smell all the candles innocently and hide your paranoia that Mr. Shuffle might return. Smell them all again and rank them in order of fragrance strength. Utilize your knowledge from past jobs in candle retail to determine what ingredients compose each fragrance. Slip down another aisle every time you see a blue vest, and weep

with false joy when you find Rachel safe and sound hidden in the cat food aisle.

Take photos next to all nineteen plastic and plush swine representations in the toy section. Complain that pigs are viciously underrepresented in relation to the other animals. Restrain Demon Pig when he spots the cheesy pink blob that is the “Laugh and Learn” piggy bank. Complain that pigs are grossly misrepresented by current media. Take a grand total of 83 photos of Pig in every department in the store, just enough to make any supermodel feel mildly insecure about his photogenic qualities. Lament that you couldn’t find one of those giant fans to add more drama to the shots. Regret that you didn’t think to bring new batteries and that Rachel’s camera died just before you could pull off a daunting underwater shoot at the fish tanks. Rejoice that after two hours of roaming and shooting you were not caught by Wal-Mart employees and that you walked out of the store on your own free will. Stand outside and take in that amazing feeling while Rachel lets Demon Pig ride the gaudy carousel horse in the outer corridor by the gum machines. Look up at the stars that are vaguely obscured by the gleaming overhead lights. Ask Rachel if she recognizes any constellations. Ask Demon Pig when she says no. Note that he looks a little dizzy after his ride, and tell him he doesn’t have to answer. Walk back to the car in perfectly measured strides. Stop at the gas station by your apartment to pick up the gallon of milk you forgot to buy at Wal-Mart. When you return to the apartment, don’t start your homework right away. Finish that horrible movie you’d almost forgotten you started. Try to convince Rachel to use that shot of Pig glaring at the tampons as her new Facebook profile picture. Don’t start your homework until she gives in. Eat some more cookies.

At 3:00 the next morning, turn off the techno music that has kept you awake long enough to scrape by on your homework assignments and add the two Snickers wrappers from your midnight snack to the growing pile of Pop Tarts foil by your laptop. Now you can go to bed with pride. Reflect that you didn’t accomplish

anything of grave importance. Remind yourself that you weren't trying to accomplish anything of grave importance. Tell yourself that, by this logic, you must be a success. Resolve to wake up a little early to finish up the last of that Italian homework. Think to yourself, "I really wish I could get more sleep at night. Maybe tomorrow I'll start working a little earlier." Fall asleep so quickly that the thought, "Funny, I thought the same thing last night, too" doesn't have a chance to occur to you.

*Kathryn Williams recently received her B.A. in English and French from Ohio University, where she is currently pursuing an M.A. in French. In addition to her studies, she works as both a teaching assistant and writing tutor and hopes to one day become a professor of literature in one or both languages.*

## Jurors

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**Christopher Flynn** is Associate Professor of English at St. Edward's University. He is the author of *Americans in British Literature, 1770-1832: A Breed Apart*, several critical articles about eighteenth-century British literature and Romanticism, and is the editor *Defoe's Review*, an online edition of Daniel Defoe's early periodical, *A Review of the Affairs of France and Great Britain*. He has also published poetry and creative nonfiction in various journals.

**Donika Ross** received her M.F.A. from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a Cave Canem Fellow, and a former fellow of the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Folio*, *Tempe Tupu!*, and *Best New Poets 2007*. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in English at Vanderbilt University.

**Shannin Schroeder** is an Associate Professor at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches creative writing and world literature and directs the Writing Center. She is the author of *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*; in fact, most of her scholarship is in magical realism. She is on the editorial board of the *Philological Review* and has peer reviewed for such disparate journals as *Comparative Literature* and the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.

**Sidney Watson** is Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University where she teaches courses in American literature, Film, and Western Civilization. She is a co-sponsor of Chi Delta Chapter and is Vice President/President-Elect of Sigma Tau Delta.

## Retraction: *The Rectangle*, Volume 83, 2008

It recently came to our attention that the short story entitled “Broken Silences” (*The Rectangle*, Vol. 83, 2008, pp. 84-91) and attributed to Michael Ferrier is, in fact, the work of Matthew Vollmer. Originally published in *Fugue* (Summer, 2004) as “Second Home,” the story has recently been reprinted in Mr. Vollmer’s first collection of stories, *Future Missionaries of America* (MacAdam Cage, 2009). Sigma Tau Delta regrets the misrepresentation of “Broken Silences” as the work of Matthew Ferrier and apologizes to Mr. Vollmer. As an honor society, we accept in good faith the works submitted for publication in our journals; unfortunately, in this instance we were deceived.



# SIGMA TAU DELTA

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

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## Subscriptions Information

*The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* is published annually. Subscriptions include a newsletter and both journals, *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Review*. Please e-mail the national Sigma Tau Delta Office for enquiries: [sigmatd@niu.edu](mailto:sigmatd@niu.edu)

## Submission Information

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The Sigma Tau Delta Journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active chapters of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society.

These journals are refereed, with jurors from across the country selecting those members to be published. The journals have had illustrious head judges including: Jane Brox, Henri Cole, Jim Daniels, Maggie Dietz, W.D. Earhardt, CJ Hribal, Kyoko Mori, Lisa Russ Spaar, and Mako Yoshikawa, to name a few.

The best writing is chosen in each category from around 1,000 submissions. Not only do these publications go to over 10,000 members worldwide, of an over 17,000 member organization, but they also honor the best piece of writing in each category with a monetary award. There is also an annual reading at the national conference from *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* by any of the published writers who can attend.

All currently-enrolled undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their original work. Chapter sponsors, faculty members, alumni (including members of the Alumni Epsilon chapter), and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

*The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle* (founded in 1931) is an annual journal of creative writing that publishes poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Submission by a single author for each issue of the journal should not exceed two pieces of prose and four poems. Prose manuscripts should not exceed 2,500 words.

For complete submissions information, guidelines, and link to submissions: [www.english.org/sigmatd/publications](http://www.english.org/sigmatd/publications)

