The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle

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St. Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin

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Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

2010–2011 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall
Stephanie Murray
"Lot's Wife"

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award
Dylan Phillips
"Listening to Reason: Swift's Simultaneous Awareness of a Literal and Fictional Audience in 'A Modest Proposal'"

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award
Stephanie Murray
"Lot's Wife"

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award
Kelsey Yoder
"At Your Service"

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award
Sarah Badger
"Tio Terry"

Judge for Writing Awards

KATHERINE RUSSEL RICH is the author of *Dreaming in Hindi* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), about a year she spent living in India learning to speak Hindi, and *The Red Devil* (Crown). Her awards include the Top Ten Books of 2009 in *O: The Oprah Magazine*, Top Fifty Books of 2009 in *The Business Standard* (India), and the New York Public Library Cullman Center for Writers award, as well as fellowships from the New York Public Library Cullman Center for Writers and Scholars and the American Institute of Indian Studies. She has written for a number of publications, including *The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, Vogue, O: The Oprah Magazine, Salon,* and *Slate.* She currently teaches a seminar in writing to doctors at Harvard Medical School and teaches graduate students in narrative nonfiction at Lesley University. She has conducted workshops at George Mason University, University of Nebraska, Rutgers University, Princeton University, Bennington College, and University of Chicago Medical School.

Contents

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle, Volume 86, 2011

Poetry

Lot's Wife 10
Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall
Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Him 11
Stephanie Murray

On the Dangers of Open Water 12
Brighton Beach: August 13
Elizabeth Wager

While Waiting 14
Nur Soliman

You said you liked oranges 15
Rebecca Kean

Carnival, or Yeats Cries Wolf 16
Turning 18
William Hurst

Rapidan Dam 20
Emily Urlacher

Daughter 22
Larissa Runkle

Elegy in Snow 23
Jake Branigan

Eventide 24
Tiffany Erdmann

Finding Janus: An Afternoon of Butterflies, or A Reflection on Cultural Politics 26
Marjorie Laydon

Cardiology 28
Montserrat Luna

How Time Tastes 30
Todd Petty

On Man Monkey 31
Josh Perry

Tea Leaves 33
Corbin Parker

Sighting–February 2005 36
When I First Sit Down in Dr. Conover's American History Class 39
Brian Cook

Origami 41
Kyle Strohschein

Creative Non-Fiction

Tio Terry 43
Sarah Badger
Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-Fiction Award

Of Caliban and Faceless Glasses 56
Lara Southgate

Twenty-Seven Outs 63
Jesse Snavlin

We Are Five: A Party That Was Not a Party 73
Mary Stephens

Defining Moments 81
Joy Neaves

A Processual Dictionary 86
Abby Travis

Greasy Mitts 93
Cynthia Robinson

What I Know About AIDS 97
Brandi Ballard

Shades of Gray 102
Jena Rumer

Hope 108
Azra Halilovic

Short Fiction

At Your Service 114
Kelsey Yoder
Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

Variations on a Large Hadron Collider 122
Meredith Harper

The Cellar 127
Stephanie Ruesch

The Farthest Shore 135
Bryce Mainville

USPS Standard 144
Jordan Monroe

He Did Warn Me 152
Nicole Pieri

Moss *159*
Alyssa Gillon

The Tragedy of the Little Red Chaperon *166*
Steven Moss

Tale of an Alchemist *175*
Matthew Mercuri

Tall Tales of the Appalachian Mountains *182*
Patricia Graham

Poetry

Lot's Wife

Him

On the Dangers of Open Water

Brighton Beach: August

While Waiting

You said you liked oranges

Carnival, or Yeats Cries Wolf

Turning

Rapidan Dam

Daughter

Elegy in Snow

Eventide

Finding Janus: An Afternoon of Butterflies, or A Reflection on Cultural Politics

Cardiology

How Time Tastes

On Man Monkey

Tea Leaves

Sighting–February 2005

When I First Sit Down in Dr. Conover's American History Class

Origami

10

Lot's Wife

Stephanie Murray

She stands as Lot's wife,
All angles, slightly leaning, preserved
And begs to know—
Which way to Gomorrah,
And to the lover, beloved, in wait
To the gabled steeples and vineyards, ripe,
To golden spires and songs,
To some world not this desert
Not this man
Not this wife.

Him

Stephanie Murray

Him, him cough and spew where over fire him crouch, and from him mouth sweetly arise, golden blaze fingers blue-white. And them, them fly firecrackpop, and them die when first them breathe.

Stephanie Murray is a senior at the University of West Alabama and a double major in English and Psychology with plans to graduate in May 2011. After graduation, she intends to pursue an M.F.A. in poetry and then continue on to a Ph.D. in English with an emphasis in creative writing.

12

On the Dangers of Open Water

Elizabeth Wager

—to Herman Melville

A foreign beauty dwells in oceans deep.
It traces through the flowing strands of grass
that twine and twirl beneath the rippling glass
of waves, then breaks upon the shore. In sleep
all sailors dream of siren songs that creep
into our heads and drive us to the mast
of any ships (of any size) that pass.
This beauty we don't understand will sweep
us out to sea. We look for it below
our bows, but if we try to understand
the workings of that beauty we perceive,
we're driven mad by all we cannot know.
We force ourselves to roam between the strands
'til, like Narcissus, drown to find reprieve.

Brighton Beach: August

Elizabeth Wager

I didn't have to work 'til noon; so, waking
early anyway, I took the Q
to Brighton Beach at eight o'clock. I strolled
along the warming sand, devoid of crowds.
The beach was closed to swimmers, riptide warnings
posted on the fence. This did not stop
the Russian men who splashed in morning swims,
too proud or solid to be towed away
by either grim-faced lifeguards or the tides:
the cries of gulls their only clock, the crash
of waves the only mark of passing time.
I smiled, walking on. I heard the echoes
of their throaty laughter bursting from
behind me in the muscled, taunting sea.

Elizabeth Wager is a senior English Major at Alfred University with minors in Music and Environmental Studies. She is an officer in her chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and is a tutor at the Writing Center. She enjoys playing the piano and trumpet and is currently unsure of her future plans.

14

While Waiting

| Nur Soliman

Joining, running together, streams of painted grey asphalt,
joining wide and narrow rivers along which sail silvery cars.
The roads go
Onandonandon in weaving ribbons forever
turning
Along the banks men and women stand expectantly, looking for the
turn of the road where home waits, waiting where the
"*reek of ether and lead and gas melts into the silent grassy smell
of the earth.*"
They stand where the thick, blowing dust and the exhaust
mingle with the scent of a spent afternoon that lies in withering
And blooming jasmine in dark bushes.
Waiting with tired, bright eyes for a patient delivery
that seems to always be at the coming turn,
"a hundred miles down the road,"
they wait on tip-toes, bending slightly to catch the coming turn,
a slender bar of breath, of light illuminating the underpass.

Excerpts from Dos Passos' The Big Money

Nur Soliman is a recent graduate from the American University of Kuwait, earning a B.A. in English, summa cum laude. Nur was editor-in-chief of The AUKuwait Review, *the campus arts and literary journal, and arts section editor of* The Voice, *the campus newspaper. Nur now works at the Kuwait National Museum for Islamic Arts; she hopes to pursue an M.A. in Art History in the near future. Her interests lie in poetry, the arts, Central Asian culture, and jazz.*

You said you liked oranges

| Rebecca Kean

The pungent spray, like a breath of sun.
The soft, white pulp:
a mass of bedded tendrils, a blanket,
a permanent caress of the sweet wildness.
The seeping juices.

My fingers, nail by nail,
Creep along the bumpling skin.
Seek and rip,
and carefully extract
a slice.

When you're not looking,
I quietly place it on your
blue plastic lunch tray.
Without a word you take it.
Bite and lip and laboriously suck,
chewing as a small line of orange juice escapes
And drips down your chin.

You forcefully slide
the back of your brown wrist across your lips,
the knuckles grazing your chin.
I pull a slice for myself, glancing,
And bite, and smirk,
And place a second
On your blue plastic lunch tray.

Rebecca Kean is a senior pursuing a B.A. in English and Theatre at William Jewell College, in Liberty, Missouri. She is an active member in her Sigma Tau Delta chapter, Vice President of her Alpha Psi Omega (National Theatre Honor Society) chapter, Director of the 2011 WJC production of The Vagina Monologues, *and currently plans to earn her M.F.A. in Acting after graduation.*

16

Carnival, or Yeats Cries Wolf

| William Hurst

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold"

Past the ticket takers, into the arch,
ribbon-tied with rosary-rugged
wood. Unturned soil clings to my boot,
new earth for wilted cuttings. The lines
reach back past the bordering fences.

Into the pulsing masses, past the young,
ribbon-tied with rosary-rugged
hair. A spookhouse without a father
and son; the gate has rust and swings
wide against the breezy smiles, polite

as they hear the ride drifting by them,
ribbon-tied with rosary-rugged
skin. Mournful creaking keeps the structure
upright, fear that it might shatter keeps
the passengers in, clutching their bags.

Will it come round again? The whirling
dervish that spins with child octopus
arms; the face which so squarely met
mine has leaned back to the blood circus
cushion. The carny flips his wrist and pulls.

The tin tornado loses its cen-
ter, spilling its innards onto
the soil littered with con-
fetti. Children detach
and forget the ride,
slouching away
going home
with no
change.

18

Turning

| William Hurst

If I put the needle to the grooves,
let them cruise over me, my own
unruly car with your hands lashed
to the wheel,

I would find in those folds
a midnight drive, friends flying
off of bridges, like they had
two weeks to live;
at the most,

there can only be seventy-five
minutes of you in one sitting.

The record turns, black and bruised,
and pops itself into the fuss
of the middle, the speakers
twitching the night goodbye.

I never turned off, into a ditch,
grooves to the earth's vinyl.
No sleeve, closed up
by cardboard thanks and
liner secrets.

Still the turning ends: the returning
will end, but not before I take
one more listen, rubbing my eyes
with time and grinding black valleys to plains.

William B. Hurst is an undergraduate at Lee University, in Cleveland, Tennessee, pursuing a B.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies. His poetry emphasizes the place of the natural in unnatural circumstances and is influenced primarily by the work of T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, and Charles Simic. He has been published in Asphodel Madness, Word Catalyst, Haggard & Halloo, The Lee Review, Doxa, *and* Blue Route. *He plans to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English.*

20

Rapidan Dam

| Emily Urlacher

In up-current country
the hidden die.

Rapidan, drunk off snowy
Minnesota runoff, pukes crappie
from deep in her underbelly.
Fish are spewed over jagged cement
and sucked down acidic current.

Spotted scales exfoliate,
writhe in revolt down her grainy
tongue and shimmy off the flicked tip,
yesterday's riverbeds blocked
by cement and steel and men, sixty feet up
and gone forever.

Crappie schools follow Minnesota
north to timber cabins and steel docks,
willow trees, fire pits, lightning
bugs and loons.

But this river's alcoholic
and kills.

Small boys will trick
with trolling lures,
and sun-spotted widows with paper-
thin skin will bob minnows to pass
lonely dawns.

They'll spoil by spring,
the last doomed to chomp at a minnow's
middle and feel—in a chilled
January panic—the pierce, jolt
and jerk up a bright
tunnel of slush.

Fisherman's face is hooded to a small 'o,'
scrub bud-beard splayed out and over
in a spiderweb of icicles, belly overlapping stool
on six feet of ice and fish below. Tin
shacks with marshmallow tops
shudder. Chapped
hands measure the crappie's
worth by size.

Emily Urlacher is a recent graduate of Minnesota State University in Mankato with a B.A. in Creative Writing.

22

Daughter

| Larissa Runkle

We buried the moth
An orange moon had found her
dying
on my back porch
Part of the light brown dusted wing
missing

We didn't *bury* the moth, but rather,
Laid her to rest in my mother's garden—
By the Virgin Mary's stone skirts
Clicked off the flashlight
Our silent prayer was lost

A slug found her.
And being the mother:

I took it off and killed it.

He clicked off the flashlight
And another of my prayers
Was lost to the mosquitoes
As she lay shaking in the cold night.

Larissa Runkle is an undergraduate at Lesley University in Belchertown, Massachusetts.

Elegy in Snow

| Jake Branigan

I had never thought to walk
To the other end of the neighborhood

Through the matted carpet of snow,
But I hadn't seen Andrew in a year

Though he lived just a few streets away.
We talked about his private school

About the girls and the uniforms they wore
Until we reached the massive drainage ditch.

I laid down my greased-up saucer.
He maneuvered into his snowboard.

We sat there in the shards of icy snow, the same snow
That would catch him when he fell alone in the darkness

When his medications clashed inside of him
And snuffed his heart out like a candle.

I said, *I wish that I knew more of you,*
That you gave me more to lose.

This hill, he replied, securing the final clasp,
Is the fastest hill in town.

Jake Branigan is a proud graduate of James Madison University, where he received a B.A. in English and an M.A. in Teaching. He currently teaches high school English in Fairfax County, Virginia and plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing in hopes of eventually publishing something that someone–anyone–will read and enjoy.

24

Eventide

| Tiffany Erdmann

Eve sits cross-legged
On a hotel bed
Her red dress clashing
with her Clairol hair
She thought the shade
would be luscious
like a ripe blackberry
But its tint makes her look,
she thinks,
like one of the mourners
at a salamander's funeral

If only she were brave
like a fireman
who can run up the driveway
of a house with flames
licking at it like coyotes
around a fresh corpse
drunk on the blood flowing forth
like juice from a fresh peach,
He the only one who could
rescue the occupants
She needs strength like that

Instead the lashes on her eyelids
stick out like quills on a porcupine
from cheap mascara
that has dried with her tears
Who buys cosmetics
at a hardware store?

The pillow on the bed
is losing its stuffing
bursting open like a milkweed pod
wanting to share its seeds
But Eve throws it onto the stained
pea-green carpet
and crushes out her cigarette
in the cavity
of a black plastic ashtray

Rain outside pelts her window
sounding like the silver scales of a fish
as they are scraped off its body
and Eve steps outside onto the balcony

This is the moment
if life were a musical
when everyone below
would stop what they were doing
The man with the dolly
loading cinderblocks onto his truck
would serenade her
Songs about honeybees
and rainbows
as the sky clears
But Eve only hears the song
of gravity.

Tiffany Brault (née Erdmann) is a senior at Marian University of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, where she majors in English and minors in Cultural, Media and Gender Studies. She plans to graduate in May 2011 and then pursue her M.A. in Library and Information Science. She resides in Horicon, Wisconsin with her husband, a beagle, an iguana, and three of the most adorable cats in existence.

26

Finding Janus: An Afternoon of Butterflies, or a Reflection on Cultural Politics

| Marjorie Laydon

"*Gaijin* smash—when a foreigner commits a serious faux pas in Japan, like using your cell phone on the train."
—Sarah Frazer, Summer 2009

A black bean, rankled between the fingertips of ghosts, plucked up with chopsticks, plunked down into the gullet of the water jar: a muted *tink, tink, tink*—the nimble undulations curve gravity. A deluded game—child's fare, like *janken*, only the winner wins. A passing of quick feet, *jan-ken-pon*! A tug at dinnertime; the chime of a *keitai*—Mother's txt to return for *gohan.*

Koi kite floats on foil fins—burnt malachite; its gasping mouth nibbles cumulus clouds. A pigtailed kid wonders, *Okaa-san, doushite koi-san no onaka ga suiteiruno?* Her mother's laugh: the mind of youth's so refreshing. Belittled disaster, one step too far. Shuttle out *Totoro* and *Doraemon*, whisk in cubicles and early morning alarms. Just a moment of fresh air, and it's gone.

Dancing silk, draped corded bells and flowers—the *maikos* practice, *clap . . . clap, clap . . . clap . . . clap, clap*. Amidst the laughing and clacking of *geta*, the *geishas*' ivory hands clasp pearl fans pristinely in lap—angels in the daylight. Heads bowed genteelly as peacocks, petals catch in their coiffured hair; satin so heavy—that loose, its bolts flood the *tatami* and glossy as the freshly blotted ink stone. Photograph flashes interrupt; tourists run high, rashly unwinding the treasures of *Nihon*.

Coiled beneath the pert, bulging *Sakura* buds, whose bustling leaves shed chlorophyll shadows onto my cheeks, a widow nurses a *Kirin* bottle—its contents palpably anonymous. The netted veil is a bone-toned excuse for heavy mascara and a salute before lunch. Nevermind her bulbous belly, manicured toes, or the uneven lipstick line on the bottle's head—she's pure, cloaked in the white memory of the dead.

Meiji Jingu rests high, its bell rope at mass with yen coins and spoken prayers. Souls brush the Gates of *Kami's* warmth, sealing in humility. Wash from its mouth; seek fortunes from its underbelly. Hovering fingertips yearn to nestle in its porch stones, smooth with wide, gaping mouths. The *Torii* gate does not seep with rust, only ancestral tidings of *kaze* voices.

Nestled in a short row together, hands extended—gravestones, progenitors in the dirt. An old man's back, curved like the willow branch, rakes the leaves to reveal their names. My feet on the bridge, heavy under the weight of America. The water whispers; a trickling spirit line straddling a baby sapling I cannot cross. I am *gaijin*: guest and outsider equally. But I bow, respecting his work to remember all that is lost: his sweat that washes their stones, a trial of rebirth.

Marjorie Laydon is a recent graduate from Pennsylvania State Altoona, where she received a B.A. in English. She worked as the Executive Editor of Hard Freight, *her campus' literary and visual arts journal, three years running. She now continues her studies with the M.F.A. program in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University.*

28

Cardiology

| Montserrat Luna

You taste like rusting iron, like a
Metal toy that has been forgotten
In crooked trunks, next to fading
Photographs and tourist trinkets.

You seem like the kind of guy that
Hides behind the bottle, enjoying the
Yellow tint it gives the world, making
It look as sick as you are.

I wonder that liquid travels in your veins,
What substance keeps you alive, what
Uneventful chemistry allows you to be.
I wonder, if only, because *I shouldn't.*

But I'll begin it with a smile,
With my curving lips in cracked carmine,
And my hand poised against your heart.

(you keep asking *where is it?*
I want to say *I don't have one*)

I'll begin it with a smile,
With my cheeks flushed after your kiss
And my voice raspy against your neck.

(you keep asking my name.
I want to tell you *I don't know*)

I'll have you in less
Than three
Beats.

Montserrat Luna is a junior at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, where she majors in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Film and a minor in Asian Studies. Following her graduation in 2012, she plans to pursue a career in publishing and screenwriting. Montserrat enjoys spending her time writing in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and combinations of all three languages at the same time.

30

How Time Tastes

Todd Petty

We always have time for time, and nothing else. Think of time as the antithesis of the diamond in the rough; the elephant stuffed inside of an atom; an abstract anvil that can lay man flat if he tries too hard to discern its exact weight; etcetera etcetera. Time is a sphinx hanging itself with Gordian's knot in the backroom. Time doesn't exist but it can be perceived through osmosis or through the isolation of specific sensory details. For example: if you press your wrinkled lips to your fractured palm, you are tasting time. Different palms taste like different times; some taste like analog and others like eastern standard. Every day my empty palms meet with Renaissance palms and Enlightenment palms and all I get are hand-me-down presents.

Todd Petty is a senior at The College of New Jersey, where he majors in both English Literature and Journalism. He is the current president of his Sigma Tau Delta chapter and plans to pursue an M.A. in either American or Japanese literature.

On Man Monkey
(1906 etching by John Sloah)

| Josh Perry

Sidewalks filled
with men conversing
on the conservation
of a system
that plays like a game.

Bricks to the left,
laughter to the right,
and a man in the back says,

"These are the ties
that keep us together,
or rather keep us apart,
or rather tethered
to a life we didn't choose."

A diagonal of straps that binds us
to a drum or a horse,
or a horse to a man,
making animals of us all.

But the monkey
in the middle
seems content playing
for his food, and only
the butcher knows
what that means.

That the children will grow
up like their fathers, depending

on bricks or the money of others,
unable to choose their strap,

but only which shoe to tie it to.

Josh Perry is a recent graduate from the University of Scranton, where he received a B.A. in English and a minor in Economics. His poetry has previously appeared in Esprit: The University of Scranton Review of Arts and Letters.

Tea Leaves

| Corbin Parker

Tonight, at nine-thirty,
I realize that my earl grey has gotten cold.
I look into my cup,
and find that my tea bag has burst:
soft leaves, floating, held captive
by the remaining liquid.

I get on my laptop
and Google fortune-telling
in hopes that my tea leaves
will not have gone to waste,
and perhaps I can find
a rabbit or a key
in the remaining green mush.

Like any good journey,
there are roadblocks.
I first find that traditionally,
women did the reading
and fortune telling.
But my online mentor,
Serena, assures me
that being male is OK.

Step one
is where I prepare the tea:
Kettle boiled, the old-fashioned way.
I figure a microwave will do.

Step two
is where it gets exciting.
I strain the excess liquid in my cup,
and swirl the moist leaves.
Now I search for symbols.

Serena lists all the possible symbols
I could see in my cup.
Some seem straightforward:
The pistol means danger
and the curtain means secrets.
Others I don't understand:
The cabbage means
that I will cause jealousy at work,
and the shoe means inertia.

I take a breath, and look into my cup:
Two bison, or buffalo,
and I think they're having sex,
but Serena knows nothing about this.
I search for similar symbols,
and happen upon cattle: prosperity.

I decide to move on.
Anyone can find "prosperity" in his leaves.

By step three,
I must check the surroundings
of my tea cup.
Bubbles mean peace
which I see none.

"That's OK," I tell myself,
because I am to also check
for teaspoons on my saucer,
which there are two:
one for my cup
and one for my wife's.

Twins.

I look over at my wife
who is reading a knitting magazine
and looking for baby sweater patterns.
She is curled up on the couch next to me
in her favorite socks: pink and fuzzy.
I reach over to play with the wisps of loose hair
floating outside her ponytail
and then tuck them behind her ear.
She smiles, and absentmindedly
rubs her swollen belly.

"Honey," I say,
"We're going to have twins."
She looks at me with delicate surprise,
and softly says,
"I know."

Corbin Parker recently graduated from Mercer University with a B.A. in English and Theatre. He will be spending next year in Oxford, UK, reading, writing, adventuring, and bussing tables.

36

Sighting—February 2005

| Brian Cook

At 7:13 in the morning,
I sit on the Great Salt Lake's shore
With binoculars in my shaky
Hands unused to the early morning's

Chill. I wait, hearing
Seagulls' caws, watching the 'v's arched
Over the horizon—flapping silhouettes.
He appears, squawking

On the western bank, twisting
His neck to snatch something off
The shore. A Chilean Flamingo
(The great Pink Floyd as they

Call him), escaped from Hogle Zoo.
The keepers forgot to clip his wings.
"Not many pink things live
In Utah,"

I mutter, puffing white
Into the air. "How could this creature,
So accustomed to hot tropics,
Survive in this desolation?"

He lifts off, as if in response, cruising
The sky like
A painted javelin spearing
Lightening-blue sky, or

The feathered arrow I never shot.
Year ago, at scout camp,
Others flocked to the
Archery range while I roosted in

The nature tepee, hearing lectures
About forestry, mammals, wildlife. I
Discovered that the term
“Exotic” extends to more than bright,

Colorful, deadly species, but to the foreign,
To what doesn’t belong. In new places,
Some exotic species explode in numbers, others
Survive. But most wither and die.

That solitary avian, strange
Pink intruder, should have starved,
Or fainted from the cold,
Or contracted some disease,

Yet he glides, his bright feathers
Reflecting in the jade lake
That swallows his image, giving birth
To an exact replica, a twin

Flying inverted, parallel.
Floyd might not see it, but the lake
(Saltwater, insect-infested shore and all)
Makes one, two. Two, four. Until

Solitude becomes a type of togetherness,
Comforting itself, giving place
For the lone exotic to spread
His wings and cruise the sky.

When I First Sit Down in Dr. Conover's American History Class

| Brian Cook

Carvings in a desk
Sink into the wood—pictures of
Small stick men, the words
"Burn in hell" etched below.

Maybe the same kid
Came back each day, scratched
Out another image,
To keep proving he existed,

Just like the soldier
Who scrawled "Kilroy was here"
On a ship hull, sparking
Others to carve and recarve

The phrase on walls in German
Cities, into trees
On the Japanese shore
To prove, prove

There is no line
Where carving ends
And the carver
Begins. Once I saw etches

In black desert varnish
Along the edge of mountains.
I had a rope tied
Around my waste to keep

From falling. I saw
The carving of a pregnant
Goat, a large one with
A smaller one inside

Its stomach. I imagined
A nervous boy, thousands of years ago,
Sitting on the edge of the cliff
With a flint knife in one hand,

Carving pictures into the stone wall.
Once I looked around, carefully, before
Tracing my own initials in wet cement.
Years later, they're still visible.

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Origami

| Kyle Strohschein

The hours open themselves like a series of lockets.
Inside, origami doves swim in the dark compartments.
Gifts from a lover you once knew
And intend to know again. She was so kind.
She brushed your hair with nimble fingers,
Fingers that once wove your dreams and fears and pleasures
Into a basket, which you placed in the china cabinet
Because it was precious and every bit as delicate
as the blue arabesques. The doves grow brave.
They expand their wings. They test the air. They soar.
Days. Months. Years. They cut through the dark,
Leaving stardust in their wake. And you wait for her
To pluck them like cherries, and to place them,
Glimmering, struggling, into your mouth.

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42

Creative Non-Fiction

Tio Terry

Of Caliban and Faceless Glasses

Twenty-Seven Outs

We Are Five: A Party That Was Not a Party

A Processual Dictionary

Greasy Mitts

What I Know About AIDS

Shades of Gray

Hope

Tio Terry

| Sarah Badger

When I close my eyes and see my family, I see Mexico. I see them interwoven, thread by thread, stitch by stitch; I see time's illustrious fingers weaving and reweaving the pale, Irish-American fabric of my father's family with vibrant, crowded Mexico until their colors mingle and textures collide. In my mind, my family and Mexico depend on one another for existence. They see through one another's eyes and speak with one another's tongues. No matter how often I try to tear myself loose from my family's beautiful chaos, I remember that I'm my father's daughter, bound to Mexico not by blood, but by a choice someone else made for me 55 years ago. The day Dad's parents decided to leave rural Pennsylvania for Mexico City, they made it impossible for me to pull my own thread loose without unraveling the entire tapestry.

In a Pennsylvania cemetery, far away from Mexico, my grandmother's tears fall slowly, one by one, into her wrinkled, manicured hands. I call her Lita, short for *Abuelita*, and in my imagination, she's the mastermind behind this bizarre tapestry; she's the weaver working magic on the loom. She's made the trek from Mexico City to bury her last surviving brother in their family lot in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and I've never seen her so grief-stricken. Dark brown mascara runs from her beady, dark blue eyes down her tightly drawn face as she walks next to me. My Aunt Donna, Lita's oldest daughter, catches up to us and wraps her arm around her mother's shoulder. I slow down, letting them walk in front of me, unsure of what to say or how to comfort these women I see only once a year on my annual summer trip to Mexico. Here in New Hope, the hometown of her adolescence, Lita looks like a lost child, shipwrecked on a foreign shore. It's hard for me to imagine her growing up here in a small all-American town, the daughter of an Irish immigrant, not a drop of Spanish on her tongue.

A recent March rain has softened the earth and my massively uncomfortable, thin orange heels sink lower into the cemetery

ground with every step. Now I know what Walt Whitman meant when he called grass "the uncut hair of graves." For a moment, I feel as though I'm piercing the decomposing heads of the dead six feet below me and immediately regret my choice of footwear. Teetering down the small hill toward the rectangular hole on the outer perimeter of the cemetery, I come dangerously close to toppling over. Gravity pulls my face forward until it nearly collides with the gravestone of some poor World War II veteran. I catch myself on the cold, grey mass moments before my right knee touches the mud. I can just barely make out a name beneath the years of dirt, dead bugs, and moss caked over the surface of the grave. WILLIAM CONNELLY, it reads.

"Sorry, William," I mumble, using the rounded stone to regain my balance. My near catastrophic fall draws more unwanted attention to me, the youngest face in the crowd. Me, the distant relative no one knows, or even knows if they're supposed to know. All the warmth in my body rushes to my face while I silently will everyone to stop looking at me. Soon enough, they comply and everyone turns their attention to the freshly dug grave. I only recognize three faces gathered around the empty space in the ground, not counting the one still locked away in the hearse, the one I will never see again and can't remember very well in the first place. Lita doesn't seem to notice the fact that I tripped on consecrated ground and takes a seat on a brown folding chair nearest to the grave. Aunt Donna stands next to her, hands folded solemnly. I see my dad several yards away behind the hears, with a slew of other men I had never seen before today. I'm still annoyed that Dad left me amongst a crowd of strangers in order to take up his post as a pallbearer. Lita introduced me to a few of them earlier, but I can't remember their names or how they're related to me exactly. Trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, I choose a spot next to a chubby woman I am pretty sure is called Cousin Tracy O'Something and try to decide what to do with my empty hands.

My grandmother, Aunt Donna, and Dad are important today—the sister, niece and nephew of the deceased. Until a few minutes ago, I followed at Dad's heels while he prodded me into awkward side-hugs with people I supposed were relatives. Too embarrassed to ask Dad to explain exactly who everyone was, I simply smiled politely and nodded a lot until Dad went to hang around the hearse with all the other potbellied, middle-aged men, leaving me to trip over my own feet and make strained small talk. One day, I decide, I will pick up where Lita left off and weave these abandoned pieces together. No one will be strangers. We'll all have our place in the artwork.

Now I'm standing here next to Cousin Tracy and a guy with an unfortunate neck-beard watching my dad and five other men carry a long, wooden box from the hearse to the gaping hole in the earth. Dad has the front right corner hoisted over his left shoulder and sweat glistens from his balding head. His face focuses on the earth and his eyes fill with determination. It's like there is nothing more important in the world to him than to ensuring that the casket arrives safely to its eternal resting place. Aunt Donna catches my eye and gives me a comforting smile. She's my mirror in so many ways: blonde hair, dark blue eyes, and a cautious smile. Only a few years younger than my dad, people still mistake Aunt Donna and me for sisters. I wonder briefly if I could hobble my way over to the other side of the grave to stand next to her without anyone noticing, but I take too long to make my move and a robed, white-bearded man steps out of the crowd and begins speaking as my father and the others lower the casket toward the earth:

"Terrence Keenan was my beloved uncle," says the man. "My father, Jim, was his older brother." I draw a quick family tree in my head and deduce that the priest is my father's cousin which means he's my first cousin, once removed. Not that knowing how much DNA we share means anything, but it makes me feel better knowing he's part of the family.

"My name is also Terry Keenan," he continues. "My namesake, whom we all called Tio Terry, was truly an inspiring man." As he speaks, I examine Cousin Terry more closely. His footwear, peach socks and brown Birkenstocks, suggest that he is not ordained by the Roman Catholic church, unless there's some new Bob Dylan-led Archdiocese no one told me about.

"Tio Terry, as we all called him, wanted a simple graveside service with all his close friends and family near. Nothing was more important to him than family and so, although I am of the Buddhist tradition, he requested that I officiate the service rather than a priest or member of the Christian clergy."

My shock and amusement at the news that I have a white, Irish-Buddhist monk for a cousin fades as the service continues and I begin to wonder if Tio Terry would want me here at all. I mean, I only met the guy once when I was four years old, and my knowledge of him stemmed largely from old family stories and the Christmas cards we exchanged each December. As the ceremony continues, my mind begins to wander. I think about how I ended up spending a sunny afternoon in early spring listening to a Birkenstock-and-socks-sporting Buddhist monk bless the soul of my Catholic great uncle who only knew me as a tow-headed toddler and a sloppy signature beneath a two-dimensional paper nativity scene.

Dad persuaded me to take the train in from New York for the service, waves of guilt threatening to escape from the other end of the phone if I dared attempt to escape my family obligation.

"It'll mean a lot to Lita," he said, calling from his office in San Antonio, as I grudgingly scribbled *Great Uncle Terry's Funeral* into the Saturday box in my day planner. A long time ago, I figured out that everything my father does is for Lita's sake. She's the grandmother who likes me, except for the fact that I'm my mother's child; the grandmother who moved to Mexico 50 years ago, started a family, and hasn't left since. Lita and my grandfather, Papa, are the reason we all speak Spanish even though we're blonde, the reason I have to answer so many questions when people find out my father has two

passports.

"This is my only free Saturday until spring break, *Papi*," I argued half-heartedly. "I have a lot of homework to do."

Even as I said it, I wanted to gouge my own eyes out with a plastic spork. I mean, this guy—the *last* of my grandmother's five brothers, a veteran of the Second World War, a goddamn national hero—had kicked the bucket less than 24 hours ago, and I was unwilling to sacrifice a few hours of my life to stand around his casket and pat my grandmother on the back?

"Besides, Pennsylvania is kind of a trip," I say. "And I don't really have a lot of money to spare."

The thing about living in New York is that it makes every other place in the world seem far, far away. New Jersey becomes the Wild, Wild West.

"I'll pay for your train fare and pick you up at the station," Dad said. "The service is at two."

He knew me too well—selfish enough to whine about a family gathering but not quite selfish enough to miss it.

"I'll catch the 9:15 train to New Hope," I sighed. I swear I could hear Dad nodding triumphantly at the other end of the line.

The word "funeral" loomed ominously on the page of my day planner for the rest the week; it seemed foreign, like some strange animal I'd seen in *National Geographic* years before but never expected to encounter in real life. "Real life" was a small college in Manhattan, a small apartment in Brooklyn, and a small dance career that wasn't heading anywhere.

Most people say all of that is just the framework for the more important things: the classes, the auditions, the bookselling job to pay the rent. But the way I see it, without a frame, a picture becomes irrelevant. It needs permanence, context, a place to go on existing. Without a frame, a picture just sort of floats around on the wall looking for someone to take it home.

On Friday night I tried laying out my clothes for the next day, something I hadn't done since the first day of kindergarten. My

fiancé, Graham, came over for our weekly Friday evening dinner not expecting to find me in pre-family-gathering panic mode. He occupied himself by flopping down on my bed and using my laptop to answer emails while I fumbled through a pile of skirts on my closet floor. As I discerned the dirty from the freshly laundered, Graham executed a Google search of my grandmother's maiden name, Keenan. He obsesses over my family's history, which he calls "a lot cooler" than his own.

"What do people wear to funerals?" I asked him, holding up each unit of black clothing in turn. In movies, people wear black at funerals, and everyone knows that one's life decisions should always be determined by Hollywood, particularly when tact and modesty are concerned. "I mean, what's appropriate?" I continued, throwing a black t-shirt to the floor in defeat.

"You've never been to a funeral before?" Graham responded finally, looking up from the computer screen. His long, turned-up nose crinkled as his almond-shaped eyes widened in disbelief.

"I guess no one close to me has really ever died," I said. "Is that weird?"

"I don't know. People around me just have a habit of dying, remember?" he says.

It was true. Graham had attended more funerals in the last decade than most people will in their entire lives. His mother passed away ten years ago, and since then, beloved friends, family, even hamsters had shuffled off the mortal coil. Knowing Graham, by the time he dies he'll be so bored with funerals he'll refuse to show up at his own.

"Ha," I said even though it wasn't funny. "Yeah, I remember."

It wasn't like we'd never discussed death before, but it still made me guilty somehow, having thus far avoided the agony of losing someone I loved. Nineteen years old, and I was preparing for my first funeral and the most trying part was deciding what to wear.

"Well then," I said, standing up and holding my plainest black skirt and frumpiest sweater on display. "In your expert opinion,

how's this?"

"Too much black," he mumbled returning his focus to the Google search results page. "Too much black, but fine, I guess."

I held the sweater and skirt ensemble in front of my body and turned toward the full-length mirror hanging on my closet wall. Something about the outfit depressed me, but I figured it was appropriate to be depressed at the funeral. As I threw the skirt on the bed behind me and began carefully folding my sweater, I stared hard at my own reflection. My blonde ponytail hung limply at my neck as though anticipating the grim day ahead. My round face and short, compact features contrasted humorously with Graham's long, lanky frame and curly hair, and I watched through the mirror as his earnest eyes dart rapidly from left to right across the computer screen.

"Hey did you know that when he lived in Dublin, your great-grandpa was an acquaintance of James Joyce?" He said this as though revealing some sparkling new informational gem.

"Yeah," I responded turning from our reflections in the mirror and placing my folded sweater neatly on top of its matching skirt. "One of my great-uncles was named after him. Joyce, I mean."

As far as fun facts about my dad's family go, this one is by far the most exciting, but at the moment, it seemed kind of irrelevant. I mean, so what? So this writer, who basically revolutionized the western literary world, had a pint with a C-list artist, and then the artist had some sons and a daughter. The daughter traded in Dublin for Mexico City. The last of the sons was now dead. And I was going to wear too much black.

That's why I'm standing here in burnt orange stilettos, sinking into the roots of the uncut hair of graves. It wouldn't be too much black, I reasoned, if my feet were orange. As it turns out, this is not entirely true. I look like some hybrid between a pumpkin and a recent convent escapee, but none of that matters anymore. No one is looking at me. All eyes dart between the wooden casket, which has been so thoroughly polished that I can see the clouds reflected

on its surface and the other Terry Keenan, who speaks softly and reverently. Lita, Aunt Donna, and another woman with a long, grey ponytail clutch hands while Cousin Terry recites a prayer.

"Something from Tio Terry's own religious tradition," he says opening a black leather bound Bible, which takes me by surprise. It's the kind you expect a televangelist or Baptist missionary to carry around, not a hippie Buddhist monk.

"The Book of Psalms, chapter one hundred and sixteen," he reads. "'Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.'"

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Lita whispering the psalm as Cousin Terry reads. Behind her, the Catholic church where she married my grandfather towers over the cemetery like a king keeping watch over his kingdom. It makes me think how strange it is that death is sometimes the only thing that can bring a person back home.

Cousin Terry closes his Bible and acknowledges the important members of the family. I learn that the woman with the long, grey ponytail is Tio Terry's widow, Joette. She's one of the people Dad assumed I knew and forced me to hug before the service. She smells strongly of cats and stale smoke. Her bloodshot eyes shimmer with tears. Cousin Terry continues the ceremony, first reciting a Buddhist mantra and then asking all of us to share our own memories of Tio Terry. Shifting my weight awkwardly and staring at the gleaming coffin once again, I try not to make eye contact with anybody, hoping no one will expect me to say anything. Soon, everyone around me contributes a story: Joette describes the way Tio Terry proposed, my Dad remembers visiting New York City for the first time with Tio Terry, Lita reveals that her brother's hard work once saved the family from poverty following the Second World War. Cousin Terry interjects every so often with another memory and the cycle continues.

As all of these people, relatives and strangers, weave their memories together, I notice the dance of Terry the Living with Terry the Dead. The sight of a white-bearded Buddhist monk performing burial rites for his devout Irish Catholic uncle shocks me at first, but soon all I see is the little boy's admiration for his beloved uncle. Soon everyone else raises their voices to contribute. The stories all run together, but paint one complete picture of the deceased man: the son of an Irish immigrant. Lived in New York. Loved people. Did good things.

I'm jealous of all of them for knowing him better than I did and jealous of him for being so loved.

"Tio Terry," I hear over and over again through the chaotic tapestry.

Tio Terry.

These words stir up a memory, the only memory I have of this man all of the others in the crowd seemed to have known so well. I choose not to think about it, afraid that if I do, it will disappear forever.

My glance still fixed on Tio Terry's casket, I watch as Joette and Lita each toss a handful of dirt over the casket of the man they loved. They're both crying and finally, I let my tears join theirs, falling rapidly toward the soft ground.

The ceremony ends with a moment of silence. Lita crosses herself and stands up. My dad, still hovering near the right hand corner of the rectangular hole, keeps his head bowed longer than everyone else. Finally, he lifts his head and crosses himself. For a moment, I consider crossing myself as well, but decide against it, irrationally afraid everyone will know and realize I'm not really Catholic, but then I remember Dad isn't anymore either—he just plays one in front of Lita.

A half-hour later, I've hugged Lita, Aunt Donna, and other assorted relatives whose names are still unfamiliar to me, and Dad ushers me

into his emerald green rental Honda. We drive away, leaving the rest of the funeral attendees standing around their cars in the cemetery parking lot.

As he pulls up in front in front of the tiny New Hope train station, he turns to me from the driver's seat.

"Thanks, Sarah," he says. "I'm sure Tio Terry really appreciated you being there."

It's too much. Hot, wet tears bubble up from somewhere in my chest. As I open the door and step out, orange stilettos wobbling on the gravely concrete, the tears start to fall and I can't stop them. My dad reaches out his hand and I grab it. His fingers squeeze mine and I know that's as much comfort as he can offer. He's not cold exactly, just not very physically affectionate. I got my people skills from him.

I hear the whistle of my train arriving in the station.

"Bye, Dad," I sniffle, pulling my hand away and wiping tears from my cheeks. "I'm glad I came."

The already setting sun glows bright orange as I board the train and find a seat in the back of the car, right next to the window. I watch my dad drive away, and as the train pulls out of the station, I let a memory take over me. I push my fear back into the pit of my stomach and allow the memory I'm so afraid to think engulf me.

The conductor punches my ticket and I am very small and wearing my favorite frilly blue dress. It's summertime in Mexico City, and I'm sitting in one of the big, green chairs at my grandparent's kitchen table. Lita fries banana slices in a pan for a sweet afternoon snack. The oil sizzles and the delicious and pungent smell of ripe bananas punctuates the air. But I never get to taste them. Instead, I hear Lita say, "Why don't you go play with your Tio Terry?" and a pair of strong hands lifts me from my seat. The hands belong to a man who hoists me onto his shoulders and parades me into the adjacent living room as I laugh and squeal at being up so high.

Usually, I don't like strangers, but I love Tio Terry. The memory is fuzzy at times and unclear, but he tells me stories about the fairies and goblins he used to encounter in Ireland and gives me piles and piles of picture books and helps me pick out the words I know. His tan windbreaker brushes against the pages as he turns them, and his deep voice draws out each word.

My grandparent's living room is dramatically different from the rest of the house, which has become more and more reminiscent of Mexico itself—disorganized, brightly colored, and loud. Panels of dark wood cover the floor of the living room and portraits gaze down at me from every wall. We've neglected the leather sofa in favor of sitting cross-legged on the floor. I have just finished one of the picture books when Tio Terry points to the silver-framed portrait on the wall in front of us.

Inside the frame is a painting of a little boy about my age, leaning against a white stone wall and holding a round, red ball with both hands. His bright blue eyes, a little too close together, twinkle with unspoken mischief, and his mouth curls up at the corners like he has a secret he can't wait to tell.

"That's me a long, long time ago," Tio Terry says, squeezing my arm softly. "I was three years old. Just the same as you. Your great-grandpa Keenan painted it."

At first, I can't believe the man next to me could be the same little boy in this painting, but I look up at Tio Terry once more. Through his yellow-tinted glasses I can see the crinkled shape of those brilliant blue eyes. Suddenly I realize that this little boy grew up and put on that khaki jacket and glasses and that someday I would grow up too. I hope silently that I will never have to wear glasses. Especially yellow ones.

"Why did he paint you, Tio?" I ask.

"He painted a lot of things," Tio Terry responds. He leans back and sighs and I study his wrinkles, wondering how they got there.

"Why?" I ask again. The smell of bananas cooking carries over into the living room and mingles with the dusty, burnt smell of the furniture.

Tio Terry smiles. His teeth are the same yellow shade as his glasses. It's difficult to explain how fascinating I find this at the age of three.

"Do you know, I asked him that same exact same question he was painting that? Do you want to know what he said?"

I nod and lean into him a little more.

"He said, 'Art is a way of communicating with God.'"

Tio Terry pauses and takes a deep breath, his eyes still fixed on the painting.

"I never forgot that," he says. "Art is a way of communicating with God."

By the time I pull myself out of the memory, we're halfway through New Jersey and I'm suddenly full of worry about the life I have to go back to: school in New York, a fiancé who's lost too much, a dance career that needs a home. Before the funeral, New Hope, Pennsylvania did not seem part of real life. I found it in family folklore and old, worn out stories about a little village by the river and an old dairy mill where my great-grandfather used to paint; they were the stories we always came back to. But as we barrel past Newark, I realize that places can't unite us, not really.

We all move away. We move to Mexico and never come back, or go to New York where we try to forget the rest of the world, or into the ground where people's burnt orange heels might cause them to stumble into our gravestone one day and read our name. Only loss can unite us, bring us all back to one place, pull our threads together. It doesn't matter who we marry, or where we move or whether or not we are acquainted with well-know writers—death is our inescapable common frame. I may have woven my family into the framework of a place, into Mexico, but ultimately we will all end

up where we belong.

As my train rolls past the bleak New Jersey landscape, I picture Tio Terry sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor in Mexico, pointing toward his silver-framed portrait. Images of Mexico and New Hope swim in my head; I pick up my pen and write my tapestry, opening my mouth toward God.

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56

Of Caliban and Faceless Glasses

| Lara Southgate

I am my father's daughter, more than I realize or possibly care to admit. I have his sienna irises—far darker than my mother's nutmeg-colored ones. According to my mother, I have inherited my father's aptitude for math, as well as his quiet nature married to a sort of distant impenetrability. My grandmother says that, like him, I know what I want and make up my mind straightaway. I have inherited his taste in music, at least partially, rifling through his CDs to find odd gems such as Donald Fagen and some not-so-odd ones like Bruce Springsteen. I have inherited his perfectionism, several of his expressions, and also his preference for dark chocolate over milk chocolate.

I have also, finally, inherited my father's suicide.

I have known that my father killed himself since the sixth grade, when my mother revealed to me that my father's death seven years earlier was not the result of a "brain disease," at least not in the sense that the direct cause of death was organic. A bullet is certainly not organic. From that point on, my own psyche began to rear up against itself, resulting in a series of incredibly bad poems as well as occasional self-mutilation, and culminating in my very own trip to the emergency room. I had figured out by then—or I had told myself—that my father's chemical imbalances were as much a part of my genetics as those brown eyes of mine, which every psychologist that I talked to seemed to confirm. I was my father's daughter, only I had managed to survive.

The psychologists praised me for this fact, for being self-aware, blah, blah, blah, and recognizing the suicidal feelings before doing anything serious.

Before doing anything serious.

I don't think I ever told them about my greatest regret of the whole incident at the time: *I never actually tried to kill myself.* Not that I want to be dead; I have a wonderful life, even if sometimes I forget it. Besides, having witnessed the effects of suicide on my mother, I

would never wish that upon her a second time. No, the reason that I wish I had done something more serious is that I wanted to be more like my father . . .

It is perhaps a consequence of growing up fatherless that the feminine ideal of being "Daddy's little girl" is necessarily warped. This is not to say that I had no male role models; after my father's death, my maternal grandfather played a large role in raising me. And then there were my mother and grandmother, both of whom provided me with strong female role models. But none of this is the same. None of this is the same as having the living man who helped create you nearby. This man will, in an ideal world, wrap you in a blanket of warmth and security and defend you against the evils of the world. Somehow, a mother is not the same. Mothers are warm and loving and protective, but there's supposed to be someone else as well.

With most losses comes the tendency to romanticize the person who was lost. When a girl loses her father, she romanticizes him even more. My father worked as a computer programmer for a firm that worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. He was only about five-foot-nine, slightly balding, with thick glasses to make up for his terrible eyesight. But, to me, he becomes the übermensch of digital exploration, a man working at the forefront of capital-S Science to greater mankind's understanding of the universe that this planet of ours swims in.

Of course, my father also committed suicide. This takes some cognitive restructuring to make it work, but the larger-than-life image can still be made. Here was a man burdened so much by the strain of his disease that, rather than subject his family to endless trips to psychiatrists and expensive treatment, he decided instead to take his life into his own hands and annihilate himself. After all, a man who lives for others when he desires otherwise is not a free man.

Now, under scrutiny, especially having seen the effect of my father's suicide on my mother—the way her eyes tear up and her lips purse when we talk about him—my rationalization does not hold up.

The beauty of our minds, though, is that both the ugly truth and the glossy, idealized version can coexist, each to be pulled out whenever emotionally appropriate.

It was July 12, 2009 when I came to possess the last fragment of my father's suicide.

My mother and I were standing in the basement, by the dusty old workbench peppered with greasy tools and a mélange of other clutter. I was finally talking to my mother after avoiding her all day as a result of an argument over whether I did enough housework, for which she ended up apologizing. She said that teenagers do not naturally volunteer to clean floors. Then tears welled up in her eyes, and she said that it was the anniversary of my father's suicide.

This was the first time that I had learned the exact date of my father's death. Now that I was able to connect the event to a date, I needed time to process this. I gave my mother a hug; she blinked the tears away and kept working. My feet plodded up the tousled rust-colored carpeting on the basement stairs, across the living room hall, and up the steps to my room.

I was only in my room for maybe 10 or 15 minutes when I heard a set of footsteps echoing mine. I heard a drawer rumble open in my mother's room, then came the tap, tap, tap at my door.

"You need to see this," she said. "I meant to have given it to you by now."

She handed two sheets of paper to me, stapled together. The first line, Dear Sheree, was somewhat faded.

"This is a photocopy," my mother said softly. "The original is in my safe-deposit box."

I was holding a copy of my father's suicide note.

I began to read, mainly just skimming. The note was handwritten—its paragraphs short and varied in regard to the topics they covered. I looked up at my mother. She looked back at me, her lips somewhere between pursed and scrunched, the way lips get when you force them to bear the brunt of your emotion because you want your eyes to stay as expressionless as possible. After skimming

it another time, I thanked my mother, gave her a hug, and waited for her to leave the room and close the door behind her.

The first and only visual memory that I have of my father, unaided by photographs and videos, is an image of the back of his head. We were at White Marsh Mall, which I remember from the vivid tangerine- and lemon-colored lights of the Italian ice shop in the food court. My father was carrying me on his shoulders, and so all I could see was his dark hair, which I vaguely remember touching to steady myself. The rest—his face, his glasses, his manner of speaking—are all keepsakes of the technology of the early nineties.

I looked down at the note in my hands and began to read:

If you're wondering what happened to me today, here it is. I stopped at Bob Evans for breakfast. I then bought a few things and drove around alot in the process. I didn't want to be near Baltimore because of the news coverage. I also, for whatever reason, wanted to be somewhere where it was cool. I started driving west and ended up at the lake (Deep Creek).

I've been to Deep Creek Lake. The air is so brisk that it cuts into you, slicing away any of the polluted Baltimore air that might have still been lingering in your lungs. The mountains yawn out in front of you as you drive west until they threaten to swallow you up. Before you know it, you're past seeing them, you're in their jaws, flanked by two lines of trees that rise up like giant, green supple teeth that on an angry day could clamp down and swallow your car whole.

So, Deep Creek. I had a place now. And that bit about the news coverage was thoughtful, or at least as thoughtful as you can get. There was more on that, the thoughtfulness:

I didn't see a future for us. You were the best wife you knew how to be. I was lost. I didn't belong, and I felt like I had no home.

Although this will be hard for you now, I think this will be better in the long run. I don't think either of us could survive a separation. Our marriage

was starting to hurt Lara.

Really, I thought. Really? I was three. How on earth could their marriage possibly have been hurting me? The thoughtfulness went on to include how my father's inheritance would help support my mother and me, and how my father's father would also help us out.

Then there was this:

I wanted to be Lara's father. I love Lara more than anything I have ever loved, but I was destroying our family. Lara should grow up in a family of love. I know you love her more than anything in the world as well. Together, you will be a family of love. You can be happy together.

In spite of myself, I started to cry. Don't put this on me! I wanted to scream. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask you to blow your goddamn brains out and screw up my mother for life! I couldn't understand it; I read the rest of the letter again, then again. It was all wrong. I had been told that my father had recently been promoted at work and then missed an error made by one of his subordinates, which, as a perfectionist, drove him over the edge. A psychologist had even told my mother: people commit suicide on Mondays (as my father did) to avoid going to work. They commit suicide on Fridays to avoid going home to their families for the weekend. My father was a Monday suicide; he couldn't have done this . . . for me.

But in the note, there was no mention of work at all. *Together, you will be a family of love*. I could see his face fading from our photographs; I think *he* could see his face fading from our photographs, with the torso evaporating first, then the hair, and finally the face, like a ghastly Cheshire cat, leaving behind only the mouth and perhaps a pair of glasses, only the glasses were cold and eyeless, and the mouth wasn't smiling.

With a final rereading, I flung the note across the room. It landed softly and flopped to one side, like a crane with a mutilated wing. I looked at it, just shaking my head, putting together what it

meant, what it was, and then I knew: it was a bad poem.

Now, I'm not saying that the note was literally poetic or meant to be anything other than a suicide note, scribbled out in a few minutes—there were very few scratch-outs, so he planned what he wrote in his head—but I knew the sentiment behind it just as well. This could have been one of my bad poems. Sure, it lacked the forced metaphors and polysyndeton and so on, but the angst was there. Yes, the legitimate anguish of a 35-year-old man shone through in places, but this might have well have been one of my own journal entries from when I was twelve. *I felt like I had no home*—hadn't I written that so many times in so many different ways? What was it Oscar Wilde wrote? Something about "the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass"? He was talking about public reaction to realism in literature, but it applied here too. What was I but a girl with a deformed psyche, looking at a note that told me, in no uncertain terms, that my father was his daughter's father, and nothing more?

Over the summer, I watched videos from my parents' wedding, as well as a few from my early childhood. I was struck by the image of this man holding my mother's hand, or holding my hand as a little one-year-old Lara wobbled around the backyard in a tiny magenta bathing suit. The video of my parents' wedding came complete with a speech by my father's cousin, which included a series of anecdotes about my father. The one I remember best has to do with my father getting separated from his friends at Mardi Gras in New Orleans only to be found drinking bourbon at three in the morning with a local.

My father was *alive*, I realized. At one point, he had a life.

I was at that point where crying is no longer a conscious act, where the tears leak down in rivulets of their own accord, when my mother knocked on my door. I snatched up the note and set it by my bed as if I had not thrown my most direct connection to my father away in disgust. Perhaps it is another resemblance to

my father that I find myself unable to show sadness in front of my mother; my lacrimal ducts shut off as my mother entered the room, leaving me to sniffle pitifully as she gave me another hug. We talked for a while, and then she left me alone again with those two little folded pieces of paper.

After a few deep breaths, I picked them up again. The smell of baked chicken began to waft up from downstairs, the aroma of poultry mixing with the taste of draining phlegm to tie knots in my throat. I retrieved my journal from one of the drawers of my marble-topped furniture and made a note of the significance of the day's date. On July 12, 2009, around 9:30 in the evening, I put down my father's suicide note, walked out of my room and shut the door, breathing in the essence of warm food.

On July 12, 1993, probably sometime in the afternoon, my father put down his suicide note, stepped out of his Acura and shut the door, breathing in the crispness of cool mountain air.

I'm thankful that you have been and are such a good mother. I'm thankful for our beautiful child. I'm thankful for my family and the friends I have made . . .

Love,
Stephen
7-12-93

Lara Southgate is a senior at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where she majors in English and minors in Political Science. In addition to Sigma Tau Delta, she is also a member of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. After she graduates in May 2011, she plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Twenty-Seven Outs

| Jesse Snavlin

"I believe in the Church of Baseball. I've tried all the major religions, and most of the minor ones. I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan."

–Annie Savoy, Bull Durham, *1988*

"You have to get 27 outs, and we didn't do that, and they did. That's how the game's played."

–Tony LaRussa, manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, September 28

It was September 27th. The last Sunday home game of the Colorado Rockies' regular season. The St. Louis Cardinals were trailing us by one, but pitcher Franklin Morales, once reliable but now "Gas Can Morales," he who giveth the runs, placed the Cardinals dangerously close to overtaking us. Relying on strategy, His Holiness the Honorable Jim Tracy, National League manager of the year, turned to Street.

The role of a closer in baseball is to get up there and take the last three outs in quick succession. Winning in the ninth, therefore, is extremely difficult. A precise, fresh, and entirely sharp pitcher (such as the venerable Huston Street) deletes from the record any comeback's last gleaming. This becomes increasingly more difficult when the closer is asked to perform a six-out save. Though we'd liberated him from the Oakland A's, our lowly small-market Colorado still couldn't fathom such a difficult save. My mother, father, and I sat over far left field, just above the scoreboards, and dealt with disaster.

Anything off-beat throws my mother's ulcers into a tizzy. A born Yankees fan, she couldn't stand to watch a losing game, let alone a tight comeback squeeze. The Rockies conversion foisted upon her a chronic rally team without the hard-knock nerves to go with it. Watching the game, she became consumed with her inability to

foresee a good *ending.*

I, however, became far more consumed with the verifiable fact that the game was ending.

When this game was done, so were the bimonthly outings with my parents, the connections, and the chronic texts. I'd become ingratiated with baseball. One with the plate, the bat, and the dramatic comebacks that marked the Rockies' season. I hoped Street would blow it, and the game would find itself tied. Six outs then stretched into infinite outs comprising infinite innings where both parents sat beside me, and I, a suicide survivor in July and a baseball born-again in September, could revel in saving myself.

Out One

My friend Elyssa says that baseball is a feminine sport. She points out the yonic diamond and the lack of exploitative female imagery. Right before she left for Germany, Elyssa, her boyfriend, and I attended a Rockies game.

The Rockies were a joke. The third worst record in baseball. Dead-last in their division. A sinking dingy full of men refusing to bail out water. They won the game, but not without Elyssa's ominous warning: "If they don't do something about this, we're going to be a laughing stock. Something's got to change. Management, maybe."

Turns out Elyssa has a considerable amount of women's intuition.

Prior to baseball saving my life, I'd never known a single female in my family. Both grandmothers died before I was fifteen—the first before I was born. Aunts lived in far away states. An aggressive, generally selfish person, my sister rubbed me until blisters popped and calloused over, leaving no room for any love out or in. That left my mother, the furthest of all.

My mother spent (and still spends) her days off laying on the red suede couch in our living room. Next to the couch were (and still are) just a mere fraction of her romance novel collection, the numbers of which peaked a few short years ago at over 10,000. Along with the constantly open novel, replenished weekly in fours, her laptop was on her lap, open to online gaming sites and the television was on, playing all those wretched straight-to-DVD Disney movies or sports, specifically those played upon grass.

My mother's emotions hid (and now don't hide) inside her pocket book. An example: middle school, distraught, I tucked myself on the vast corner of my parents' king-sized bed and begged her, standing in the doorway, to hug me. It took several shots, but soon her arms jerked about me and tucked me against her for six heartbeats. On the last press, she was gone, and I returned to sobbing alone.

My mother habitually wrote (and still writes) messages on envelopes, little notes in a bottle tossed to the sea. They bob to the surface of various clutter piles, these pieces of her shipwrecked conscience.

They are most often on unopened bills.

Her father died in July, 2002, murdered in a veteran's hospital scandal that made it as far as the Fox News ticker. When I moved out I found hidden amongst old textbooks and clothes too small an old Wells Fargo bank statement with the following scratched along the back (exactly as transcribed):

> Mr Kornack you may feel absolved of all responsibility That you wer a "pawn following orders to keep the research studies thriving." Mr Kornack you knew this was wrong—you ~~are responsible for~~ could have used the Federal Whistle blowing law for your benefit—you decided and only you ~~decided~~ to continue forging medical test + ~~getting~~ making the treatment sound like ~~a~~ miracle treatment so that individuals like my dad can will say yes.

A habitual wall scrapbooker, I hung it on my wall. It still remains the one true physical piece of my mother I own. She hung her memories in a keepsake case: a photo album from his funeral with those far-flung aunts, a cross from the military, and his near pristine New York Yankees cap.

When things got bad, I hung them on my wall. Just as my mother had, I scratched them out on internal envelopes, except my ship hadn't wrecked, and the pieces couldn't be found amongst her racy novels. My mother never knew the chasm my fresh broken heart would cause me, nor the permanent disconnect between soul and body being raped three days later would produce. She didn't know the friends who were too absorbed in their new love to notice I'd forgotten how to understand myself and was only vaguely aware of the sudden and debilitating seizure disorder that'd emerged from the stress of what would've been my graduating semester. She watched me walk but didn't understand how I could've failed my last semester, even with the doctors' notes, neurology appointments, and HIV screening. She stood impotent in the doorway of her daughter's continual downward spiral, and I'd learned from the last time that begging didn't produce anything but a bad memory.

My health deteriorated to a point where I could barely attend classes and spent most of my time in and out of the emergency room. In my days off, which were daily, I laid on my white couch with computer games and books. I'd become my mother, and thus, I'd started to learn her.

I mentioned the game Elyssa and I attended in passing. My mother, delighted to discover I did enjoy the Rockies and did joyfully attend games, quickly began purchasing a third ticket for every game she and Dad could attend. If I hadn't had a Rockies game to go to that July weekend, I might've taken far more than 25 acetaminophen that Wednesday night.

Out Two

Elyssa was right: something had to change.

The Colorado Rockies fired manager Clint Hurdle on May 29, 2009. His Holiness the Honorable Jim Tracy took the wheel of our ailing team, bandaged the gaping holes in our hull, and had us sailing into recovery. We blasted through June, winning 21 out of 24 games.

Ask any player the root of their sudden turn around and they'd tell you: "Losing Clint sucked."

Listen: taking 25 acetaminophen? Sucks. You puke all night, your stomach isn't well for three days afterwards, and when you want to sleep the doctors poke you awake with as much concern as a veterinarian has for the fleas on your dog's back. Next, you've got to explain to your parents, your primary insurance holders, why all summer you went to Rockies games smiling and laughing and then swallowed 25 acetaminophen, puked all night, and became a flea on a doctor's dog. Finally, you get shuttled into a mental ward where (most) spend 72 hours on mandatory lockdown, have to explain *why* you puked all night and became a flea on a doctor's dog, and sleep on a flat cot in a two-bed room with regimented mealtimes and a staff that does not understand *vegetarian*. It sucks. Don't do it.

I had the good fortune to have both a Sicilian mother and a ward full of baseball fans. Every night, like clockwork, the Rockies were on television and my mother would call, ask if I was watching the game, and quickly remind me that I had to be out by that weekend. If I didn't put myself together I'd miss the game, and thus, I bitterly assumed, would waste her money. As I held the handset to my ear, I'd listen to her encouragement and wonder if I'd ever been loved at all.

Out Three

Oh, I got out all right. When things have to change in my universe, I piecemeal rafts out of wreckage rather than let the sharks have my ass.

Like my mother.

Most when introduced to the ward are under mandatory hold for 72 hours. I, however, made it a scant 32. By the end of my scant 32, I'd helped facilitate a workshop for the other half of the ward, taught a troubled teen who "hated anything that wasn't physical" yoga, and made headway with a gentleman from Iowa who'd tried to drive himself off a mountain ledge. The doctors could find no discernible trace of the obstinate, pale and incredibly ill-advised girl who'd entered 24 hours earlier.

On the other end of the phone, my mother barely slept. While I assumed I was unloved, she took each day off from work to make sure that if I should even think to call I'd have someone to answer. Even so, the day I was released, the only words she could muster out were: "Great! Now you can go to the game!" The tight, 20 second hug that followed transformed those words into a thinly disguised but infinitely more powerful: "I'm sorry I didn't hug you that one time."

Out Four

Huston Street entered the ninth inning in poor shape. We'd nearly given up a run in the eighth from just plain bad pitching, and my mother wasn't able to watch. I became her eyes in that unseasonable September evening, my faith in Street's arm fighting with my need for more time. With just a little more time, I could really settle into my first healthy semester in nearly a year. With just a little more time, I could invite Elyssa out to another game and truly saturate myself in the end of the summer of silence. With just a little more time, I could do so much, and so hoped against my mother's desperate need for a win.

Lugo opened the inning for the Cardinals with a base hit.

A bad start. Perfect.

My grandfather moved to New York when my mother was 13. She'd been born there, but through his history in the Air Force his ex-wife, my mother, and her brothers had ended up in Myrtle Beach, Florida. This left her in the incapable hands of my off-the-boat Sicilian grandmother. The stereotypical battle-axe favored my mother's brothers, ignored her academics, and expected chores and cooking from her lowly female daughter. My mother chose someone my grandmother didn't like for prom. Naturally, my mother spent prom locked in her room.

The second my mother left school, she moved to New York. There, she flirted with secretarial school but eventually settled for waitressing. While she walked down the street toward her interview at Victor Milling Company in Rochester, my father, head chef and co-owner, watched from the window. He would say she had the worst make-up, the messiest hair, but fantastic breasts. Married three times previously, my father didn't waste much time making his sentiments known. My parents have been married, for better and often worse, since.

My father understood from the start two things about my mother. One: she didn't perceive herself as anything but another insignificant human and would never be made to understand that she existed in the world outside her imagination. Two: he meant nothing in the face of her father and never would.

I learned to lie to my grandmother for a living. When my grandmother called, I remember holding the receiver and leaning over couch after couch in the four various homes my family and I lived in growing up finding reasons why mom couldn't talk right now.

It wasn't just for Grandmother. I tried to find reasons why neither parent could ever "talk right now." The most I got out of my parents involved drunken rambling from my underwear-clad father on the couch. I learned about everything and anything, punctuated

by assurances I knew nothing. When I went to prom, I picked a woman. My mom worked chaperone for my sister's prom. She did nothing for mine.

In between the silence of my mother's living and father's drinking, I hid amongst the Internet. I played games where I was anyone but me—the unimportant, youngest daughter who only got attention when she fucked up. I read any book I could get, sometimes my mother's, sometimes saving my few pennies to grab some to my own tastes, and wrote stories with broken scenarios and even more broken families.

I watched my mother decay after my grandfather died. I decayed alongside her, but always skimming the water in parallel.

My parents and I have never discussed my attempted suicide any further. Instead, I found myself at more and more baseball games, squinting in the sunlight and hoping for foul balls. We discussed Mom's or Dad's work, the hilarious fallout that came from my ex-boyfriend's inability to grow up, or my prospects as a novelist. We discussed what friends I still had, the start of the semester, which grad schools I *had* to get into, and whether we thought the Rockies would make it. We ate, we drank, and then we went home.

Every time I saw my mother after leaving the ward, I thought of that hug. When we parted on the light rail and we shared the customary parental-goodbye-hug, I extended it just until I had to run through the doors to catch my stop. My strict determination to prolong the attention soon evolved into a strict determination to continue being a part of things.

Skip Schumacher pinched hit for Thurston and groundout. Shit. One out.

Outs Five and Six

Lugo made second when Skip Schumacher ground out. Then, Street intentionally walked Albert Pujols (only *the best* hitter in the National League) and Lugo grabbed third out from under his nose.

With a scoring runner poised and ready and still two outs to go, my hopes were on the verge of being granted.

My mother wrung her hands together and habitually sucked on her lemonade. She blamed "my boy" for letting us down. She darted her eyes across the stands, picked out faces of other anxious Rockies fans, and sought consolation in their own personal desolation.

There is nothing a fan can do when their team is losing. They sit on their hands and boo the opposition, but all they're allowed to do is watch their hopes, however externalized they may be, evaporate with each poor pitch and well-placed hit. The field, littered with men who are paid to enact for over 150 games a torrid, hopeless, uncontrolled drama for their spectators, becomes filled with expectation. Fans shed their money for small paper tickets that promise a dream. That's it, and that's all. It's nothing but spectators.

Ludwick came to home plate. In baseball, home is but a five-sided white piece of rubber that leads to three individual, vinyl waterproof specks of white in a sea of footprints and specially shaped grass. Home is only a series of touchpoints. As my mother hoped for no one else to cross, I realized that my mother had but come from a touchpoint, but the further and further she ran, the less she saw home again. Romance novels and computer games, months of silence and acetaminophen—all of these things are soft and spongy vinyl bases, just stops on the way to finding some place to belong. When a player steps on home plate, affirming or denying all the spectator's dreams and extrapolated hopes, all he's doing is abandoning a previous position to wait for another go-around. Sitting next to my mother it occurred to me that there sometimes never was another go-around.

All my mother and I would ever get are 27 outs, just like a team, and just like everyone else. I'd tried to stop at just six when all my mother wanted was just six more. For however similar those months of silence had been to my mother's daily life, all she wanted was six more outs, and managed, somehow, to live.

Ludwick sent a ball soaring towards right-center field. Finally, my

soul and body came together. All my mother and I had ever wanted was a five-sided home plate, and she'd been waiting much, *much* longer than I.

Clint Barmes ran for it, and in a rolling catch somehow produced the ball. However, a fly ball on the second out doesn't stop the play. A runner can still score. Kneeling, dumbfounded, Clint snapped to when Ryan Spillbourghs ran to his side. Spillbourghs pointed wildly to first, where Albert Pujols had uncharacteristically gotten a late start towards second. The delay would be Pujols' undoing. Barmes sprang to his feet and ended the game on a spectacular double play. Pujols caught at first.

The Colorado Rockies had gotten out number 27. The Colorado Rockies had won. My mother sputtered through jittery relief: "I need to learn to have faith like you. It's just that they always have such a bad start, it's so hard to imagine a good ending."

Jesse Snavlin finally graduated in May 2010 from Metropolitan State College of Denver and will attend Portland State University for an M.A. in Writing and Publishing in 2011. She intends to drive four hours, both ways, barefoot and uphill to see the Rockies every time they visit the Marlins or the Giants, but knows there will never be any place quite like Coors Field.

We Are Five: A Party That Was Not a Party

| Mary Stephens

Chatter like birds, that's what it's like. Endless nonsense like, "I just loved *Sex and the City*, but you know I always followed the show. Her clothes were always fabulous. I mean, tell me where she shopped, right? Right?"

The Buckhead Betties talk on, letting their children play unsupervised in the yard. The Betties are wearing their designer clothes (cool and breezy for the Georgia heat, of course) and their triple-digit shoes (because they were so "cute" on the shelf).

I'm there, seated quietly at the patio table maybe five feet away. My ten-dollar peach skirt was purchased at Wal-Mart, my blue t-shirt a colorful scene of smiling fruit. I'm not white trash yet, but by the standards set before me, I'm on my way to a trailer park in rural south Georgia.

They're always like this, these family gatherings. It's not my family per se, but an extension of it, you know, the extension that involves many children, none of which know me or have the decency to be polite or well-mannered. This gathering has been organized by Mom's boyfriend's family, and if that wasn't complicated enough, the child that has instigated this party is adopted and spoiled rotten in comparison to his more ethnic adopted brother. It's not my place to say anything now, but after the party my mom and I will openly discuss corporal punishment and neglecting parents.

The occasion is a birthday party that is not a birthday party. My mother rolls her eyes when she hears this and says that the whole concept is ridiculous. Since when do five-year-olds run households? It's a birthday party, and whether anyone acknowledges that or not, all the ingredients are here. Presents lie scattered around the house, complete with brightly colored wrapping paper and bows. There's something sweet chilling in the fridge with a cursive "Happy Birthday" scribbled across the top in royal blue icing. Someone here is a year older; there's a gathering.

Add cake and presents and it's a birthday celebration even if the five-year-old wants to call it a "playdate."

So the kids are running and crawling all over an inflatable water slide that's impressive even to a cynical college student. My mother's still talking, something about slip-and-slides made of discount trash bags and dish detergent. The table we're seated at is precariously close to the edge of the second-story deck, and it's easy to see the children fighting. They spit water at each other, kicking and shoving, the product of too many viewings of movies dealing with robots in disguise. The Buckhead Betties don't say a word. They're still concerned with Carrie's latest box-office smash, still chatting it up about a television show that went off air years ago. Just because it's "in" right now. Whatever "in" means. Can they even see the kids from where they sit, cool under the fan, talking now about where to buy the best high-end school uniforms and organic milk? Secretly, I'm hoping one of the kids falls off the slide. You know, a survivable plummet into the perfectly green, perfectly cut lawn that would break an arm maybe. Just something, anything, to cause a scene.

But I'm thinking about sometime in the past, back when I was the same age as this spoiled birthday brat.

* * *

It's 1992.

I am five, wearing my "Robin: The Boy Wonder!" pajamas. For years my parents will wonder if my fascination with superheroes, action figures, and comic books mean that I am a lesbian. They will wonder this until I start dating someone in college, but that's another story, in another time.

Today is my birthday, and my parents are throwing a party. More specifically, my mother is throwing a party, but my father will agree half-heartedly to make an appearance as Batman. I will not recognize him, nor will any of my friends, but we will remember the event later as the best party of our childhoods. There will be cake in a few

hours and presents. Everyone will have a good time, even the adults, listening to Batman make a speech along the lines of "Be a good citizen and stay out of trouble, kids!"

While leaving the party, "Batman" will trip over a folding table and take three plates and a plastic table cloth to the ground with him. The adults will look on, terrified, mouths open, then begin to laugh while the kids stare in disbelief. After all, this is Batman. The Dark Knight doesn't trip over furniture and fall, getting up only after a few moments of grunting agony. The humiliating moments will be caught on videotape.

But that's in a few hours, at the party. Until then, I get to listen to my parents argue. Within a few years, they will be divorced.

* * *

Back in the present, I'm wondering who is this non-birthday birthday party for, anyway? Five-year-olds don't drink wine, but there it is, a bottle of something French chilling on the counter right by the fizzy water that the kids gulp down.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the new cocktail hour. It starts at 3 p.m. Bring your children, it's okay. They can drink the tonic water just fine. And look! There are little sandwiches for you to enjoy! Don't worry if little Johnny isn't a fan of complicated noshes. He can eat a hot dog while you enjoy the hors d'oeuvres.

Looking around, snapping out of my alcoholic observations and broken-arm fantasies, I realize that I'm sitting at the table of the hypothetical dead. My group of fellow sufferers consists of my mom (the ever present sarcastic voice of wisdom), her boyfriend Dan, and the birthday boy's paternal grandparents (who share our sympathies). We aren't the elite like the self-absorbed moms. We don't have young ones to talk on and on about, and I doubt that anyone wants to hear my opinion on their out-of-control brats. Hesitantly, I mention my classes at the university, how I love my English professor and can't get enough of my poli-sci class. No one

says anything. We're zombies, I think, the living dead, like our perky-gene is defective.

A child wanders up to the deck and asks about cake. There's some sort of hushed conversation about not calling it a "birthday cake." Suddenly, I'm trying not to laugh.

The cake arrives from the fridge and before there, some upscale bakery downtown. There's no singing and no candles, all because this special five-year-old demanded so. Two feet away from me there's an out of tune chorus of boys wailing, "Happy birthday to you! You live in a zoo!" Mothers send looks, and the song stops. This is not a birthday party, and there will be no singing. We're just having cake, ladies and gentlemen. And remember, cocktail hour is still in progress.

* * *

It's 1992.

My cake is in the shape of the Bat-signal, you know, the one that Commissioner Gordon always shines across the city so Batman will know there's trouble, a crime that needs solving. I'm still in my Robin pajamas, hesitating before blowing out the five tiny flames. It's my birthday and I get to make a wish, even though my parents tell me that wishes don't count like prayers do. Wishes are only happy thoughts, and God would rather have prayers, direct messages instead of vague longings. I wish for something I don't remember now, probably a toy or a trip to Disneyworld. In 21-year-old retrospect, I think I should have wished for all that arguing to stop, for my mom not to move to Ohio, for me not to be so bitter about the whole thing.

I blow out the candles and everyone claps. My grandmother announces that I'm going to open presents, and all the children are forced to watch by their respective parents. Kids yawn and chatter amongst themselves, not interested in the toys that they won't get to play with later, that they didn't pick out as gifts. I'm overjoyed, of

course. What kid doesn't want Christmas in September?

For some reason, I don't get the typical toys that children wish for and receive. There's no Easy-Bake Oven. No children's science lab set. Those things are too dangerous. My mom even took away the Stretch Armstrong I got for Christmas, because she said that I was too interested in the white goo that was housed inside him. She said I'd kill myself on toys that weren't well planned by their manufacturers.

* * *

At the party I cross my legs and sigh, sipping on the fizzy water. It's hot and boring and there's no place to go but home. My mom twists a napkin between her fingers and begins dipping it in her water, then using it as a pen to make a pattern on the overpriced disposable table cloth.

After the sweets, there's not much reason to stay, so my mom motions for us to leave. Before we go, she makes sure that the boy who is not having a birthday party gets his present. She's calling it a present because she's also calling this a birthday party.

"I'm not letting a child that hasn't even started kindergarten tell me what kind of goddamn party I'm attending," she mutters despite young ears.

Here's the thing about my mom. She's been an educator of some sort or another for years, first teaching Special Education classes in my hometown, then moving to Atlanta to teach elementary school. Being a teacher, it's kind of like an unspoken rule to give children books as gifts. When I was young, books were an understood part of my household. There would be books, always, and they would be read, and that was that. My mom thinks that everyone should be this way, so anytime there's a birthday, there's a book.

Ripping off the red wrapping paper, the kid has to realize what's underneath. That thin, flat object in his hands is quite obviously a book, right? Children are very aware what clothes, socks, and

books feel like when smothered in glossy paper. The kid knows and immediately throws the book on the table of the dead where we'd just been. He wanders off without a thank you, apparently ready to play with another, more exciting toy. His mother is apologizing indirectly, oozing out compliments about the gorgeous illustrations and the thoughtfulness of such an educational gift. I'm biting my tongue when the compliments turn into talk of suggested read-alouds and the benefits of private school. Public schools are full of discipline problems and low funding. I'm imagining adolescents running down dimly lit hallways with semi-automatic weapons and homemade bombs strapped to their chests. I'm thinking, I went to public school.

* * *

It's 1992.

After everyone leaves my party, my family moves to their respective stations. Clean-up begins and I'm left with a mound of birthday gifts and time. Since most of the toys require batteries, assembly, or an adult to crack into the packaging, I retreat to my room to look at one of my favorite comic books. My dad has been teaching me to read with comics, a fact that hasn't made my mom very happy. It's not that comics are a bad thing, she says, but they aren't exactly appropriate for a five-year-old girl. This is another aspect of my life that my strict Southern Baptist mother will try to censor.

At first, my dad shows me Batman comics, which is really the reason why I'm having a Batman party today. There's something about the Caped-Crusader that I like, maybe the fact that's he's not really a superhero. He's not super at all. He's just a man with a cape, and maybe some knowledge of martial arts. Even little girl me can understand that when the ordinary does something amazing, it ceases to be ordinary.

But the comic I'm reading today isn't about people at all. It's

about a superhero that is also a worm. Later, this won't make much sense, but at the time it's exceptional, complete with mooing magical cows and lots and lots of fart jokes. My reading skills are lacking, so I thumb through the pages, staring at the picture and imagining the story from what I can remember. In another room, my mother is complaining about how my dad never helps her. At the opposite end of the house, he's reading his comic books, too.

* * *

We leave and the words start coming before the car doors close, criticisms ranging from the Buckhead Betties to the undisciplined children. My mother's still talking and I'm still grinning uncontrollably, on the verge of laughing, refusing to wonder out loud what I'll tell my friends later. How do you explain the demands of a spoiled five-year-old whose discipline problems are excused by sensory problems, genius IQ, and ADD? I decide to say, if the situation presents itself, that it was a birthday party that was not a birthday party hosted by the fancy uppercrust of Georgia society. They can imagine the rest for themselves.

"Fucking five-year-olds, always going on and on and never a thank you." My mom lights a cigarette and exhales hard out the rolled down window. "Don't have kids, Mary Allison. Don't have any fucking kids."

I sigh and nod and promise not to have any kids without thinking about it long and hard first. I think about the conservative mom of my childhood and the new, recently vulgar mom of my present. Two religious conversions and a second failed marriage later, my mother is jaded and bitter towards anything with a penis, a cross, or a Star of David.

Yet that's okay. My mom—my entire family—isn't what the Buckhead socialites would consider acceptable, but it's what I'm left with, and I do love them in a dysfunctional way. And although I could say, easily, that I would change many things about the way my

life has turned out, I can't now, and it's undeniable that the ride to get here has been entertaining.

"Dan, fucking stop poking me!" my mom yells.

"Language, Mary Frances!" Dan grins and pokes my mom in the side again with an index finger.

And I smile.

Mary Stephens is currently a senior at Georgia Southern University, where she is pursuing her English B.A. She has served as the Vice President of her newly formed Sigma Tau Delta chapter and is excited to see the club grow in the coming years.

Defining Moments

| Joy Neaves

The wood of the desk still felt warm from riding in the sun. My grandfather brought it in his truck from the flea market especially for me. It had heavy metal legs designed to be screwed into a wood floor.

"Like the one I sat in as a boy," he explained. His wrinkly eyes smiled. I felt suddenly important. He chuckled as I climbed onto a stool to sit behind the desk, pencil in hand. To write, I would need my favorite overalls, I decided, not this ruffly dress. I wrote sequences of letters and numbers on pads of ruled paper. The desk had a secret cubby for hiding things from my sisters. A groove carved into the top held my pencil in place—the red one with my name printed on the side, right above the eraser. My mother bought some activity books. I sighed, imitating my older sisters who always complained about their homework. I had a lot of work to do.

One day, I sat at the desk and wrote out the alphabet. When I finished, I ran to display it to my mother.

"Wow," she said, "but you skipped some letters. Here. Where is the K?" My heart sank. But my mother sat next to me and combed through the marks to make sure I had all the letters. She showed me how to write some words. I kept practicing. I wrote numbers up to five hundred. My mother hung the pages on the walls of her sewing room—the warm room with the piano and sewing machine and lots of good hiding places.

Three years later, after my first seizure, I wrote down the distorted dream—the one where I climbed the stairs in another ruffly dress to ask my mom for jeans. I wanted to play football with the boys. At the top of the stairs, I opened the door and saw all of the adults talking—my grandfather, my mom, her best friend, my dad—before they lifted, spinning into the air. Then Ganny wafted into the hospital room with her bright colors and costume jewelry, balloons and bubbles in one pocket, magic tricks in the other.

Ganny had lived in big cities, and she always dressed sharply, her

silver hair perfect in messy curls. She brought a giant teddy bear out from behind her back. She held him in her lap and explained that his name was Robinson, but not after my middle name, "Another girl, named Robin, you see, was once sick . . ." She wove a long, elaborate story about the bear's travels. I was entranced. At home I wrote most of the story down and sent it to our local newspaper for the kids writing contest. A few weeks later, my writing appeared in *The Elkin Tribune. Seven-years-old and a prodigy*, I thought.

In the fourth grade, Ms. Dillon made us write about our weekends every Monday morning. I wrote elaborate tales about the torture I suffered at the hands of my older sister. I wrote all about her terrifying ghost stories, the bribes, and the day she sprained my arm.

One day my mother was talking to my teacher on the phone. They laughed robustly. I picked up a few words here and there; the laughter had something to do with my stories. It dawned on me that my teacher was my mother's best friend. The implication of that sank in: I was in for it. Ms. Dillon knew I had been lying all those Monday mornings. Terrified, I locked my mom out of the green Ford the next morning. She found the spare key. When I got to school, Ms. Dillon handed back some of my stories.

"Very imaginative! Terrific job!" she'd written at the top next to a blue good-conduct star. She patted my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and said, "You're destined to become a novelist. You're so good at making things up." Her laughter smelled like coffee and cigarettes. I began to think of myself as a writer. When I grew up, I'd live in a cabin on the rocky shores of Maine with my faithful dog. I'd drink coffee and smoke cigarettes like my teacher. My boyfriend would have to live a few miles away. Or maybe in another town. I'd need time to myself to create brilliant works—something along the lines of *The BFG* or *The Mouse and His Motorcycle.*

Later, I wrote badly rhyming poems. I climbed the Magnolia tree for a view of the river. The climb, complete with slugs, broken limbs, and terrifying height, provided the best way to feel profound enough

for writing. One poem went, "There's a river right out back, it sings to me when I'm in the sack. . . ." Another about a boy I babysat went, "Willo walks upon the wall. He says to me 'don't let me fall.'" His mother laughed and told me, "Keep practicing and maybe forget the rhyme." But I couldn't revise the poems. I wedded my words. I set them in stone. Her laughter was my raging success.

Then came the research paper about Picasso. I found out saucy things about his life that I was too young to find out. I didn't write about them. My teacher made me write an outline and change a few words. I made an A. I became an avid reader. In high school, I worked in the library after school. In the senior yearbook, I got voted "most likely to read." I was always in trouble for reading during class.

In college I worked in the writing center and thought I knew all about writing. I never admitted being lost. If I kept quiet maybe they'd never find out that I didn't know a thing. My senior year, I stayed up all night writing an essay that was due the next day. My professor wrote an endnote: "This is not senior-level work. D." A friend who'd had him before stood over my shoulder as I rewrote. We laughed about the crazy old guy who liked poetry so much that he always talked in *ta-dum, ta-di-dums*. We worked to reaffirm my brilliance. I graduated a few weeks later.

During my first month of work at a children's book publishing company, my boss gave me a manuscript to edit right away. I read the manuscript and made a million line notes all over every page. In the margins, I left no question unasked. I wrote a long editorial letter—six pages. I showed it to my boss before sending it to the author. He took a long time to read it. A long, long time. Then he walked briskly into my office, slapped the pages on my desk, and asked me if I had in fact been taught to write. Where? And by whom? He wanted to know. He proceeded to show me all the ways in which I had been roundabout, indirect, unorganized, and redundant. I grew bright red. I felt sick. My future was at stake. But I became a writer that day—the moment someone I respected told me

(in no uncertain terms) precisely how my writing was lousy.

I still have the little desk. My son likes to sit at it and paint pictures. He hides little toys in the secret cubby. When he starts to write letters, I will sit down next to him to talk about them. My grandfather who gave me the desk had only an eighth-grade education. He carried steel in a textile factory for more than 30 years. As an adult, he never had an office or a desk—a place of his own to think and be. Ganny's story must have been my first (and I hope only) act of plagiarism. And Ms. Dillon? Well, I would love to discuss the emotional truths we find in fiction with her sometime. I did manage to stop writing in rhyme. That professor? He's still there. People come into the writing center, terrified of his red pen. "It's the commas," they explain. They can never get them right. And that author, the one who received my eventual three-page letter? Mildred. She wrote a response. Nine pages front and back—a rebuttal. Line-by-line it disputed my entire edit. In response to a note that said, "Explain why" she wrote, "*Why* would I do that? It would ruin everything." I am grateful to her for all that she taught me.

After the day my boss told me all about my lousy writing, I spent years telling people that I wasn't a writer. At conferences I'd discuss at length the difference between reading and responding to a text (being an editor) and being a writer—how the two things were related but different. *You have to be crazy to be a writer*, I thought. *Who wants it?* Eventually I came to think of writers in more positive terms as those who possessed creative genius (and as such were entitled to be crazy). My respect for authors and their ability to invent and reinvent grew. My writing became tied to the writing of others. I write about their words—the way they fit together or don't, the effect that they have on their audience.

Over the years, I developed as a writer. I'm not brilliant. I don't have a dog and I don't live in Maine. I drink coffee, but I don't smoke. My desk is a laptop on the dining room table surrounded by sippy cups and soggy Cheerios. The process of seeing and developing ideas lures me in and keeps me engaged. I'm not afraid of throwing

things out, of radical revisions, of starting over. I don't wed my words. I write. I revise. I go forth and write again. The meaning in the diction and syntax ebbs, flows, and continually evolves.

Joy Neaves has more than ten years of experience as an editor of children's picture books, poetry, middle grade, and young adult fiction. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in English with a concentration in Composition and Rhetoric at Western Carolina University. She is also a freelance editor of children's books at www.namelos.com, an assistant in the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and an instructor in the Great Smokies Writing Program.

86

A Processual Dictionary

| Abby Travis

The following project borrows inspiration for its form from Dan Beachey-Quick's A Whaler's Dictionary *(Milkweed Editions, 2008), which was inspired by Ishmael's abandoned "Cetological Dictionary" in Melville's* Moby Dick. *Beachey-Quick's work takes terms from the novel–from "Accuracy" to "Wound," "Adam" to "Child" and "Silence" to many others–and meditates on them. The following is a sort of "literacy narrative," a work that encapsulates my own writing process. Like a dictionary, it is not meant to be read in any particular order and therefore has been organized alphabetically. Rather, the reader is free to start anywhere and may jump from one entry to another by interest or by following the "see also" notes that follow most entries.*

*

Conclusions

Can be restrictive. Are inevitable and weak in design. Overanalyzed and underthought. Should tend towards the collective and must always be conversing. All too often nonexistent or unrealized. Slapped on in the final hour, defined by many as a paragraph that typically includes a restatement of the thesis and reminder of what has been discussed, closing thoughts including outcomes, inferences, or implications of the argument or topics explored. Too many advocate writing this piece of any work first. Doing so absolutely stifles and restricts the breadth and depth of the work, the text, the impulse. Example: it is impossible to write a good poem and know exactly where the ending is going, to know exactly what the resulting poem will be about. How is it so difficult for academic writers to grasp this? Why do so many insist upon beginning at the end? This is not to say that no conclusions may be drawn prior to writing the work itself, but let these become your precipice from which to jump—this is no suspension of logic, no leap of faith, dear Kierkegaard. Be Sartre, risk the annihilation of that future paper and create something new. In some cases it would be better to leave a sheet of

college-ruled notebook paper unadorned.
When does my thought end and yours begin?

See also: Impulse

*

Development
A game of ping-pong between love and hate wherein the volley lasts anywhere between 30 seconds and several weeks, sometimes months, sometimes years. The game is unending and results in numerous drafts, comments, notes, scraps of scribbled thoughts in notepads and journals. Each ensuing draft must be saved and nothing permanently deleted. Each draft becomes its own match from which to light a fire. This, of course, results in a lack of memory space on your personal hard drive—prepare accordingly. The due date is the final buzzer—tends to sound mid-impulse. Regardless of restrictions, take all the time necessary.

See also: Draft, Distractions, Impulse

*

Distractions
The sound of chewing, particularly crunchy things and bubble gum, heavy breathers, noisy talkers, the hum of dead silence, inclement weather, a cozy bed, the ticking of a watch. A grumbling stomach fed moments ago, the world's smallest bladder and the world's worst internal temperature regulation. Dry lips and cold feet, the lump left over from that tick in North Carolina, any symptom of "Travis Syndrome." Anything exciting, anything boring, anything irksome, and anything generalized. Horde email (hoarding all the time in a day), things that sound funny and things that are over-worded. Typos and proofreading blunders, widows and poorly managed tracking, the limitations of all Microsoft programs when compared to Adobe. Planning ahead and replaying the day, minor curiosities and fleeting thoughts (who determined the symbols for stop, play, and pause?),

knowing that what appears on the page is not remotely what I had in mind.

See also: Night, Research

*

Draft
Stages of production, an ongoing metamorphosis of impulse as it moves from prompt to the hand-off. Academically often exists only as a "first," though several weeks post-hand-off the original—through reflection—takes a new direction that no eyes but mine will ever see. Creatively exists by the hundreds, meticulously catalogued and dated for "easy" retrieval. In both creative and academic, the mind often disregards what it preaches, instead rewriting the first paragraph before the next is even conceived. The curse of all perfectionists—moving on when the aforewritten is badly done has always been a near impossibility—that is, until Prof. B encouraged writing a poem every day, as many do. How is this possible? Lower your standards. This method has been clearly demonstrated here, though not in terms of poetry. This, perhaps, is the failure of the draft. Or is this simply the Music of Failure singing its tune out across the country roads at dusk?

See also: Revision

*

Genre
A peculiarity often explored, suspicion arises from the labels, and the hybrid is a curiosity, the elusive reflection on a moonlit pond.

*

Grammar
The dissonance encountered between communicative competence and linguistic competence—the difference between "as long as you

know what I mean" and that which is grammatically, linguistically correct. The increasingly large number that seems to beat upon the pipes of mainstream culture—particularly native English speakers, who insist that communicative competence is all they need and that things like grammar, punctuation, and anything above a bare-minimum vocabulary is excessive suggests a communicative incompetence of "excess." The more informal the text-types become (blogging, email, SMS messaging), the less space, time, and assumed need there is for such formalities as more people contract linguistic indolence. I might be a hypocrite and might be seen laughing in the face of Syntax, though probably to my own demise.

See also: Distractions, Punctuation

*

Impulse

It begins by way of a sudden thought. Not so much as the image of a light being turned on but as when one notices something in the sky and stares intently at it for a prolonged period of time—when every bit of attention is projected onto identifying something thousands of miles away, something one only initially perceives because of a small sensation, a sense of light, of movement, of curiosity, until nothing else matters but pursuing that impulse—awkwardly standing at the center of some road, neck tilted back and beginning to burn but it doesn't matter because you sensed something and will force an identity out of it if it takes all night. But then, knowing that thinking and creating by way of force is an absurd notion, the attempt at identification is resigned—but in resignation only does the hope of recognition truly exist. Unaware, your mind works most effectively when unencumbered, when thought is eliminated—until that which was initially sensed is realized in recognition, often clear as if that thing from the sky fell down at your feet, so fragile. And even then you become your own worst enemy: as you stoop to examine it, your shadow hides it from the light and while reposition-

ing, you every moment risk destruction. The impulse gives way to all else and thoughts roll furiously; words, phrases, and ideas tumbling now, faster than pen or fingertips can set words to. In the confusion, ideas are inevitably lost, pouring out and over the edge of the page, cascading into the abyss of thoughts never recovered.

See also: Distractions, Night

*

Night
The best time for writing in peace; it is best to sit in a room with windows for walls.

*

Opinion
"Since you never said anything, you didn't form the habit of thinking."

–Willa Cather, *One of Ours*

Precisely.

*

Personal Pronouns
Rarely preferred in academic papers, thought of as tacky as a result of embracing early prescriptive writing instruction from high school. This window, formerly shut and locked with the shades drawn in a sterile hospital room of recycled purified air, now permits the occasional summer breeze to reveal the possibility of tactful exception.

See also: Genre, Grammar, Punctuation, Opinion

*

Punctuation
Used liberally but with clear intention, always with the rules in mind, though not always followed. Open to criticism, but this is all too infrequent. In editing others' work, it is often a source of discon-

tent and is a hastily overemphasized prescription, but only on first thought.

See also: Draft, Grammar, Revision

*

Revision

In a recent interview, Russell Edson said, "revision is deadly." Sometimes he's right. Sometimes he's wrong. Prof. B, however, had a better approach to revision, and he quoted Ezra Pound, "Make it new." Taking a risk, it seems, is only rewarding if the original draft was also saved. Edson's prose poems are often dialogue. Revision can both add sense and remove it, like revising poems that sound like prose. Be brave, and cut half the words out. "Trust your reader to make the jump," that's what Joyce said. Revision comes from thought, but she's also told me to stop thinking so much when I write. At first I was confused. Sometimes I still am, but I'm not right now.

See also: Development, Draft

*

Research

Occasionally beginning as an in-depth inventory of the contents of the room from the perspective of a given seat, this eventually dwindles in interest until the room is too boring, the music's lyrics become too distracting and uninspiring, the desk chair a little too hard, and an imperative need to provide sources prevails. Often feeling more like some cruel scavenger hunt through time where interesting and unhelpful balances precariously in the air; the meaning of "don't judge a book by its cover" translates into the cold-hearted judgment of the eye-catching and mundane titles. A chaos of pages spilling off the top of the printer while hands fly out to catch them before they fall out of order and running up and down the hall ensues. A backpack full from the library, stealing away all texts on the

topic, and trudging hunch-backed towards home. Remember to use pencil for the margins.

See also: Distractions, Night

Abby Travis is a recent graduate from Gustavus Adolphus College, where she majored in English with a writing emphasis and was the Managing Editor for Firethorne, *the Gustavus Journal of Literary and Graphic Arts. Her fiction, poetry, essays, and book reviews have been published in* Rain Taxi Review of Books, Firethorne, *and* Heterodoxy. *Abby is currently pursuing her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.*

Greasy Mitts

| Cynthia Robinson

They asked for hot cocoas, very chocolate-y, most likely. They were told to say "please" and "thank you" to the nice people, the ones making their hot cocoas. One Daddy, two little girls. One girl a little taller than the other, a little skinnier, knowing. The smaller one, a little more stumpy, big blinkers eyeing the sugary confections glittered with chocolate chips. Her hands made imprints on the glass, fogging up the image of yummy treats.

I was reading Kafka and the news, because it had meaning. But I ate a chocolate chip muffin, just like the one the little stumpy girl with the big eyes was staring at with the utmost determination. When she walked by me, we met. Big eyes to big eyes. Her muffin idealized, mine already eaten. She grew up in a different town than me and wore pink sweatpants and tiny tennis shoes and had brown hair. I used to have blonde hair, and played with trolls in the bathtub, those things which used to be in style.
But those eyes . . .

When we met, I knew. We had somewhat of the same life. The one Daddy and the older sister. The older sister, Kate, who would be surprised if she didn't always get to ride in the front seat of her daddy's 1990 Blue Dynasty. I rarely rode in the front because I was too small, and the black and white and red label on the back of the pull-down visor with the mirror that lit up warned against it if you were under 12 years old. I was too little (and, of course, in my older sister's eyes, the incompetent Potty Queen who must sit behind everyone else). To the roller rinks, to the amusement parks, to the Video Connection store which housed VHS tapes (including my favorite, *The Brave Little Toaster*, to perhaps just heading off to the store down the street, I was always in the back, behind all the action. I held on to the front two velvet seats tightly as we rounded the corner of the highway, attempting to guess the animal Daddy was thinking of for our ride-home-from-Olive Garden game. Kate always

guessed before me, although my eager head poked through the two front seats, willing to take a stab at anything that came my way. My backseat lower-class position lead me to believe I would be lucky if I guessed the right "giraffe" or "blue-footed booby" as we rode back to Daddy's house on those weekends and Wednesday nights.

I did get to sit in the front, however, from rare time to time. It wasn't perhaps due to an earlier "Shotgun!" call or a speed race to the front of the shiny-handled door; rather my daddy finally saying that I could ride in the front—it was my turn. Kate didn't like this. Herman Gertrude Agatha Morton Norman Potty Queen Poo belonged in the back, with her wispy blonde hair and chubby cheeks. But Daddy allowed otherwise, and I willingly obliged. I rode dangerously, with no seat belt and almost gymnastic-like, throwing my feet and legs up in the air and feeling the cold windshield glass beneath my heels, the sky blue illuminating through my toenails. We should have been scared, as the caution image on the pull-down visor with the light-up mirror warned against front seat sitting tactics like this; but Daddy just laughed. I may have been Agatha Morton Poo, but I humored him with how funny I could be and the imprints my feet left on the clear windshield. "Greeeassyy mittzz!" he would exclaim, as the heat from my feet and toes left unflattering images on the glass. I remember giggling, but do not remember how it sounded, as most giggles grow older as people do. But the funny was there, and so were the funny feet prints.

Kate told me sometime later she heard someone said that Daddy picked up one of her old Little Mermaid Velcro shoes in his garage and started crying. I could never imagine a Daddy crying, and in that garage. The one which seemed more like a magical playground, with a million discarded toys like riding horses and worms that made funny squeaking sounds when you sat on them. We would always play the old piano that was also in that garage, while Daddy would sort through the piles of toys and we would find something to do before walking into his house. I didn't understand why Daddy would ever be sad about those piles of toys and that Little Mermaid

shoe, because they were fun and the shoe was one of Kate's favorites. Kate and I loved the toys and going to Daddy's house—probably because Mommy's house didn't have as many toys, although she had a pool. She would always teach us how to synchronize swim and sometimes we would have those Little Debbie pecan rolls which would be yummy in the microwave, but only if you didn't cook them too long, or they would get too hard. Her pool was the best and fun to run out of at the first sound of the ice cream truck music. Daddy didn't come over to synchronize swim, though, but it was fun to play with all those toys in his garage, and his place also had a pool we would swim in, however cold.

I don't really remember where the toys came from or why they were in the garage and the basement, but to Kate and me they seemed special. There were spots of pink on many of the toys, messily spray-painted in what seemed like out of curiosity or rebellion. They were funny, and Daddy said it was actually my greasy mitts which spray-painted those spots one time in the past. I didn't know where I was in this past, or from where I got the can of spray paint, but he told me of a place where I took a tube of lipstick and ran it down the white stairs, and then spray-painted many things with spots of pink paint, leaving permanent marks. I remember giggling, partly out of guilt and partly out of mystery, since I couldn't recall my crimes; I didn't have an alibi, since time and place were hard to understand.

In the Blue Dynasty, Daddy would drive us past a big gray house with the "big willow tree" in the front, drooping over high glass windows. We would always slowly drive down Brittany Road, and Kate and I would gawk. Of course Kate was in the front seat, but I had more viewing room, placing my hands to the glass of Daddy's back seat window and staring at the big gray house. It was there, Daddy said, where I supposedly spray-painted pink many of our belongings and where Kate would sometimes run around the driveway naked. That image always made me giggle and Kate scoff.

As we would pull away and head to Olive Garden where they had

good breadsticks and salad, I would sometimes look back at the big gray house, trying to figure out where and what it was. The fog from my hands, however, usually got in the way of the image through the window, disabling my view. I would turn back to the front to then try and outsmart Kate with the next "I'm thinking of an animal . . ."

She'll never guess this one, I thought. *Blue-footed-booby.*

Cynthia Robinson is a senior at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, where she majors in English and French and minors in Film Studies. She is Director of Activities for Sigma Tau Delta and President of Phi Sigma Iota (French Honor Society). She is also involved in theater/performance groups and campus magazines. She plans to pursue higher education in English and possibly Creative Writing after graduation.

What I Know About AIDS

Brandi Ballard

Fulda, Germany 1987

The AIDS scare had spread to our elementary school. We were no longer allowed to use the school's recorder flutes during music class, even though they were boiled afterwards. My family couldn't afford to buy me a flute, which were sold out in the music shops off base, so I wasn't allowed to participate any longer. At the same time, rumors were whispered in the classroom and on the playground about all the ways you could get AIDS. The most popular were from kissing or from toilet seats. Little education existed at the time, and our imaginations were allowed to run rampant. We didn't comprehend the level of fear related to this invisible foe.

Telling someone they had AIDS became an insult. "Your momma has AIDS" was a playground favorite. I didn't participate in the talk as I was a sad, nervous child who spoke little. That year, after constant bouts of strep throat, I was taken out of school to have a tonsillectomy. The tonsillectomy was very hard for me—not only the surgery and the nights alone in the hospital, but also my return to school. I was in the third grade and didn't really have any friends.

When I returned, my classmates claimed they wrote me at the hospital and were angry that I hadn't written back. That's when the rumors started. The more popular kids in the class decided to spread it around the school that I had AIDS. I felt alienated, isolated, and ashamed. I was thankful when my dad was reassigned to the base in Mannheim.

Mannheim, Germany 1991

Growing up on army bases in Germany meant not having a hometown stateside. This also meant not having a sports team to cheer for. My friends and I picked our teams based on the color and designs of Starter gear available in the Post Exchange.

Regardless of our chosen teams, we were all aware of the truly great players and followed them closely. Thus, we were all watching when Magic Johnson announced that he would no longer be playing for the NBA because he had tested positive for HIV. With his exuberant energy still visible during the press conference, I couldn't help but admire him. Practice safe sex, he said again and again. My friends and I vowed that we would listen, that it wouldn't happen to us.

Blende, Colorado 1999

Craig and I run off together and end up living with his Uncle John in a suburb of Pueblo. At times, John seems perfectly healthy. He's robust, strong, and exudes a sort of powerful masculinity that I am unaccustomed to, yet drawn to. At other times I see the way AIDS and cancer have ravaged his body. I see the sores on the bottom of his feet that he beats with a long piece of scrap tile because it helps. His partner, Todd, has AIDS too. They've never told me how they were infected as it has simply become a part of their existence. They tell us to wash the dishes with bleach, just in case.

John spends each night with a bottle of Wild Turkey, a can of Skoal, and crack cocaine, if they've managed to score. He tells us that the sex is amazing when you're high. I wouldn't know: one hit and Craig can't get it up. Instead,

we sit around, having the most in-depth conversations and digging in the carpet fibers just in case a small piece of rock fell. Craig and I don't talk about their disease; we simply navigate around it, pretending it isn't there.

When Craig and I married that September, Todd did my hair. He grabbed fresh flowers from the garden and clapped his hands together in admiration of his work. He was one of the few men, along with John, who had ever made me feel beautiful. At the ceremony, they beamed like a couple of proud parents. In a month, I would run back home in an attempt to put my drug addiction behind me.

Pueblo, Colorado 2002

The last time I saw them was the last time I relapsed. John and Todd had moved into a new home, this time in the city of Pueblo instead of the outskirts of Blende. Craig and I were invited to spend the day with them. We walked through a neighboring park, not returning until dusk, when the mosquitoes had become unbearable. I noted an odd tension as we reached the house, but didn't understand until Craig took me aside to let me know that they were planning to smoke crack that night and wanted to share. They watched me nervously from the other room, and as soon as I smiled in agreement the kitchen swarmed with preparation.

"Have you ever shotgunned?" Todd asked as he held a cut-down straw aloft.

I shook my head and simply watched as they loaded a pipe made from a tire gauge and began to portion out hits, so we'd know how much we had. It was oddly sensual, the straws locking our lips together as the smoke moved from one person's lungs to the other; the four of us locked

together in our addiction. The energy was electric and it made my body tingle. It was late that night when we headed back to Colorado Springs, full of hope for our renewed relationship with them.

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2005

I'm getting an HIV test after my boyfriend David dumps me. He waits until after we've broken up to tell me that he never got tested, even though he assured me he was clean when we got together. I am angry with him, yet I know in my heart I am just as guilty. I keep thinking back to that time when I was eighteen. Despite all of my personal vows, all of the health classes and filmstrips, I didn't use protection when I lost my virginity. I was supposed to be an adult and yet, at a critical moment, I made a horrible decision. I wasn't protected that night I spent with Angelique either. Or even Craig, my now ex-husband—what diseases could he potentially have brought home while he was out cheating on me?

The woman at the Southern Colorado AIDS Project, a petite brunette named Kathy, is nice. She tells me that I am a low risk category as she hands me the cotton swab. I am told to rub it on the inside of my cheek, avoiding hitting my teeth and gums or touching it with my tongue. The test takes seconds whereas the interview takes forty five minutes. I don't mind so much, Kathy is patient and has a soothing way of talking. I appreciate her not making me feel like a degenerate or pervert for needing a test.

I talk openly with her about my sexual history, omitting nothing. It amazes me that the one person I am truly honest with is also the person who can hand me what I take to be a death sentence. I am relieved to find out that my test was negative.

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2009

John, Todd, are you out there or did your bodies finally succumb to disease? Is there a hole in the hearts of your family, your community, like there is in mine? Or are you still here, just hiding your faces from my view? I scan the obituaries from the last nine years, looking for some clue about you. Nothing. Doesn't mean you aren't dead though. My grandfather didn't have one either, but he was an alcoholic who died alone.

I think about contacting my ex-husband's mother but cringe at the thought. Last time I saw her was at a gas station in Fountain. Too afraid to face her, I slouched down in my seat and waited for her car to leave my peripheral vision before moving. I have no way of knowing if he is alive or dead. My curiosity and concern get the better of me, and I write a short letter to her. In the morning I will send it out into the ether, not knowing if I will ever hear back from her. This is what I know about AIDS.

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102

Shades of Gray

| Jena Rumer

I watched my mother as she threw away the contents of our housewarming gift. One by one she tossed the items: milk in a box, fish flavored noodles, local fruit, seaweed snacks. It was our first time stepping foot into our new apartment in Hong Kong. Knowing we'd be jetlagged and hungry, upon our arrival our realtor had left us a generous basket filled with typical Chinese snacks. To my American family, each item of food was mysterious and unappealing, and in the end we threw everything but the Cadbury chocolate bars away. Little did we know, all the milk in Hong Kong comes in a box.

Days after we arrived, I was whisked off to Beijing on a week-long field trip with my fifth grade class. I was the typical tourist; I didn't know what I could eat but had been warned to forgo almost every type of food. My parents warned me, "No meat. No fruit that could have been grown with water. Avoid the eggs. Be wary of fish and vegetables. And whatever you do, don't drink the water!" I survived my week in Beijing slowly picking at the white dough on my dimsum, carefully avoiding the dangerous meat inside. The puffy outer layer was tasteless. I longed to taste the Sloppy-Joe-like filling and clung to the sweet tangy scent of the sauce. Still, I knew if I took even one bite, I would soon regret it.

When our class ventured to a traditional Chinese restaurant one night, it was not the familiar Chinese food I knew. General Tso's chicken was replaced with crispy chicken feet, bok choy, and thick slippery noodles drenched in peanut oil. Large platters of fish were brought out. I cringed as my fellow classmates fought for the head and ate the eyes without a flinch. There was no beef and broccoli, no wonton soup, and definitely no fortune cookies. Overwhelmed by this new culture, I sat picking at my dimsum and occasionally tried a few bites of the fried rice.

The next few days of the trip we spent biking around the city. One day, my classmates and I ventured into a small village to meet

the residents and play with the children. When we arrived, the men were strategically planning their next move in chess and the women were chattering as they chopped an assortment of vegetables. The children were running around outside with a golden colored dog. I came bearing gifts and immediately was drawn to a young boy playing outside. I went over and blew up a balloon for him. He was amazed. The little boy had never witnessed anything like that before. He laughed and rummaged through my bag to see what other surprises he could find. His bright eyes widened at the sight of yo-yos and slinkies. I handed him a Tootsie Roll Pop and a look of utter bliss crossed his face. I then took out photos of my friends and family back home. Pictures were my way of communicating despite the language barrier. We made it into a game. I would point to a picture of my mother, and he would point to his mother. The boy was thrilled when I showed him a picture of my little white dog. He eagerly ran up to his dog, giving him a big hug.

A short time later, I joined my classmates inside one of the small huts to practice my Mandarin with the locals. We were attempting to interview the villagers, asking questions about their life in China. In the midst of our conversation, I looked across the room into the kitchen. In one split second, what I had accepted as black and white turned to shades of gray. The same dog the little boy had been hugging and calling his pet was now covered in blood. Within seconds, the dog's throat had been slit, and he was being boiled. I looked away. Tears filled my eyes as I began thinking of my pet dog back home. How could anyone have the heart to slit their pet's throat? I stood and held the wall; I knew without it, I would fall.

With the image of the dog haunting me, I spent the rest of the trip cautiously immersing myself in the Chinese culture. I assisted women harvesting rice in the paddies and helped carve gravestones at a local market. Alongside Chinese residents, I biked down busy highways weaving in and out of cars. I even spent one day in a factory working with children younger than myself. Their hands were not soft like mine but raw and blistered. My days in China were long

and hard. The week-long trip came to an end, and I was filled with relief.

Only months had passed, and I was now eating fish flavored noodles like everyone else. I indulged in Hong Kong's hole-in-the-wall noodle shops on weekends. I thought very little of being seated on a crate and eating over a newspaper table cloth. At school, my Western friends and I would desperately try to trade our Oreo cookies for dried seaweed during lunch. The green filmy sheets of salt and sea melting slowly on our tongues were far better than any cookie. Some days, my sister and I would take the double-decker bus downtown and buy fried plantains dipped in sweet sugar. We let the distinct aroma of oil and honey lead us to the vendors. The plantains were always my favorite. The outer layer was hot and crisp with the warm soft fruit hidden within. The sugar added a burst of sweetness and an unexpected crunch of which we just could not get enough. When we were feeling daring, my friends and I would venture into the wet markets after school to play the game of "guess that meat." We'd squirm at the freshly butchered corpses hanging at each stall and try to guess what they were: "Rabbit!" I'd yell pointing at the bloody meat. "Pig! Cat! Chicken? No no, let me try again, Duck!" After playing the game over and over, I must say, we got pretty good. Despite my newfound love for Hong Kong and the Asian lifestyle, holidays always seemed to remind me of how far away I was from friends and family back in the States. Halloween was spent riding the elevator up and down for hours only to collect candy sushi, white rabbit taffy, cat fiber marshmallows, and a few pieces of puzzling candy we ended up throwing away. Thanksgiving became an intimate occasion. Our large turkey was replaced with a few wings and the cranberry sauce, which was nearly impossible to find in any supermarket or market, was taken off of our list. My family's New Year's tradition of eating Grotto's pizza was substituted with steaming bowls of Indian food. We sat around waiting for the clock to strike midnight and dipped thin slices of naan bread into the buttery tomato sauce of chicken tikka masala. The exotic spicy flavors of

paneer makhani folded into Indian rice became a tradition I gladly embraced.

Christmas was always spent traveling, and while I loved exploring the world, it was bittersweet being away from family. To stay connected with our relatives back home, my mom insisted that we bake chocolate clove cookies and send them half-way across the world to be judged at our family's annual Christmas cookie contest. For years it had been a tradition that each family member baked a batch of these special cookies in hopes of being deemed the winner. During our Christmases abroad, my family would crowd in our tiny kitchen overlooking the South China Sea to bake and reminisce. Using the same recipe but with personal tweaks, each family member's batches would come out very different from one another—soft and fluffy, flat and chewy, too much clove—too little clove, they were always unique. As the comforting smell of chocolate and clove filled the kitchen, my sister and I would peek into the oven to watch the cookies' dark brown crusts crack open to reveal deep wedges of oozing chocolate. Since shipping the cookies usually took over a week, our cookies would arrive in the States stale and faded. Although we never stood a chance at winning, the cookies kept us grounded and gave us a sense of home during the holiday season.

While American holidays were tainted with a slight longing for home, the Chinese holidays were quite a different story. My favorite Asian holiday quickly became Chinese New Year, after parents and friends forced dozens of red Lai See envelopes filled with money into my hands. My family received numerous gifts of small tangerine trees that symbolized good luck in the upcoming year. Although we never ate these tiny fruits, our house smelled of sweet citrus for weeks.

My favorite part of Chinese New Year fell on the fifteenth day of the celebration. The Lantern Moon Festival was a time to worship the moon goddess and gather with friends and family. After the sun had set and the moon had crept into the night sky, my friends and I would run down to the beach. Alongside the large crowd we bought

dozens of boxes of little red candles which we lit and stuck into the cold hard sand. Hundreds of colorful lanterns were filled with lights and pushed out to sea. The Lantern Moon Festival also marked my first taste of a moon cake. These palm-sized pastries boasted foreign flavors from sweet bean to black sesame. For my first taste, I stuck to the somewhat familiar lotus seed filling but was still taken aback by my first bite. I opened my mouth wide and sank my teeth into the soft custard. The thick sweet filling was like eating mouthfuls of gooey peanut butter, and I choked as I struggled to swallow. The flaky pastry stuck to my lips and fingers as I awkwardly tried to consume the rest of the cake. I quickly learned that these pastries were to be cut into tiny slivers and eaten slowly, letting the filling dissolve in your mouth. I never became particularly fond of the traditional treats, but I ate them that night regardless to mimic my local friends. When the excitement had died down and the moon cakes were gone, my friends and I slowly marched back home. In our twenty-first floor apartment that overlooked the sea, my family and I packed onto our small balcony to watch the celebration. The shore was now flooded with thousands of twinkling white lights and we watched as the specks of color floated out to sea.

When it was time to move back to the States, my family was devastated. Pop-tarts and hot dogs had lost their appeal and we struggled to adjust back to the American way of life. I now craved the flavors of where I had labeled as home for the last three years: sweet plantains, spicy Indian cuisine, even the white rabbit taffy we received at Halloween. It was hard to leave Hong Kong, but the lessons I learned, the perspectives I gained, and the love of travel that I developed will remain with me forever. On my first day in Beijing, I was horrified to see a man slit the throat of his own dog. I feared food that was different than my own, and I refused to accept that Chinese food didn't come in a box. However, after living abroad, my ethnocentric values diminished, and I began to open my eyes and mind to a world beyond my own.

My black and white had changed to gray.

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108

Hope

| Azra Halilovic

I'm not your typical tourist, you see. When I go on vacation, I go back to my home country to visit my family, not somewhere "nice," like a fancy resort in France or Switzerland. And I go to Eastern Europe—you know the poor, ex-commie parts with names most people can neither pronounce nor locate on a map? Yeah, *there.* But you know what? It's fantastic.

Unfortunately, culture and advertising tend to exalt Western Europe and grossly overlook the Eastern portion. But these former satellite nations have their treasures too. They've got mountains, beaches, and centuries-old architecture just like the West. And maybe because they've had it so rough for so much longer, they've got something too. They've learned humility, you see. After visiting and living in both Western and Eastern Europe, I learned that the West rarely gave me more than sights and souvenirs. It didn't give me what I really needed—hope, which I found wafting in the air of a deep valley in East Europe. I found it in my home country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which I suspect you can neither pronounce nor locate on a map.

Each time I went back to Bosnia, I'd stay at my grandmother's flat in Sarajevo, the capital, which despite its many war scars is very much alive. And each time, similar things stood out: the inescapable and appetizing aroma of lamb and grilled veggies and of rich, dark coffee; the not-so-attractive (but perhaps even more inescapable) smell of nearly everyone around you smoking cigarettes; the wily, dark-haired gypsies who prey on tourists and natives alike; and the architecture, a clash of Austro-Hungarian geometric decorum with Ottoman earthiness and exoticism. And even after coming back, some things stayed deeply embedded in my memory—like the redolent smell and rich taste of *cevape*, grilled beef and onions in pita bread (our version of fast food, since we are currently yet to be privileged enough to have anything like McDonald's), or the dry cackle of old street vendors, seated on short wooden stools, making

small talk while smoking hookah.

These are the things that I, like every visitor there, saw and can always expect to see when I go to Sarajevo. The last time I went, though, I took something else away. I was 19 and I knew it might be my last visit in a long time, so I tried to keep my eyes peeled open to absorb as much as I could. I wanted to take as many mental snapshots as I could so they'd last me for years. But I ended up focusing on the wrong things. I spent too much time "looking" and not enough listening. That is, until one day.

The entire stay, I forced myself to be hyper-observant. For the first time, I noticed how deep the valley of the city is, and how from just about anywhere, you could see a few white marble staffs and bubbles protruding through the clutter of wild nature and gray urbanization. They were the beautiful, beaming minarets and domes of mosques centuries old. For the most part, though, I found myself distracted by other sights, and most of them made me uncomfortable.

That particular visit, I felt inundated. For two months, I floated in a motley sea of towering, dense trees; decaying houses with stacked, red clay, barrel tile roofs; rusting, boxy, decrepit cars zooming around every corner and ignoring most traffic laws; and destitute people, mostly nomadic gypsies, sitting on curbs begging for money and selling intricately woven Persian-like rugs. Just about everywhere I went, I was overwhelmed by the images flashing before my eyes. I felt like I was suffering from photosensitive epilepsy like all those Japanese kids who experienced "Pokémon Shock." My clips, however, were real images: imperial Austrian architecture stained by nationalist graffiti. Street vendors grabbing you wildly by the arm to show you their one-of-a-kind product that's actually made in China. Young women, promiscuously dressed, lurking in dark alleys, waiting. Young women, covered in *burqas*, suffering the scorching heat while men accompanying them parade in light, open garments. Famished gypsy kids pouring into slow traffic to solicit

drivers for money. Reckless drivers brawling with honks and cursing. The entire city was like a strobe light of provocative images, and they were constantly playing back in my mind. They were frighteningly inescapable.

Then one day, I was saved. Suddenly, all the sights faded into the background, and a sound stepped forward to save us. It threw us a lifesaver and pulled us up to safety. It had been there all along, but I hadn't noticed it because I was preoccupied with sight. My eyes had become overwhelmed and weary from paying attention to the city. Now, it was another's turn to speak. We all turned to the mosque, listening.

From one of the tall, smooth, slender marble minarets of the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque, the muezzin would call *salah*, or prayer. He'd recite the prayer in Arabic, which felt potent even though many of us didn't know the language. I may not have understood the words, but I understood the feeling, and I welcomed it. As the muezzin's voice traveled through the amplifier for the entire city to hear, it was clear he wasn't just reciting the prayer—he was singing it.

It wasn't a particularly complicated tune. The pitches did not vary drastically, but the minor second intervals had an unforgettably haunting yet calming effect. As his vibrato intensified between sustained, adjacent pitches, I felt my skin begin to tingle and my heartbeat relax. I stood in the lingering heat of the sunset and started to breathe through my mouth, *deeper, sloowweeeerrr.* A passage with a colorful ornamentation of suddenly rapidly varying pitches coincided with a particularly heavy drop of sweat sliding down the already moist skin of my neck and chest, tickling me. My senses were on fire, and yet, I was not distracted from listening to his prayer, to his song, which was melodic and tender and accessible to all.

Time seemed to slow down, and everyone around me paused their busy lives to rejuvenate themselves, if only for a few minutes; to refill themselves with hope, which is all too quickly exhausted in a place like this. The fast-paced film I was watching of a busy and diverse city suddenly had hit slow motion. At the end of the prayer,

an echo of silence followed. It was as if people were still trying to absorb and retain what he stated. And then it began again. The film continued its normal speedy pace, and people went about with their lives. I found myself staring again into the strobe light that was the valley, hypnotized by the scenes it flashed.

From then on, I always watched the clock and anxiously waited for prayer to start. I longed for that feeling—sticky and raw, knowing yet pure. The more I listened to the muezzin's song, the more attached I grew to it. Not only did I feel more connected to my country of birth, but I also felt proud of it for having far more than just aesthetic beauty. It had faith and hope, even if it took me a while to find it.

One particularly beautiful evening of dusk, my grandmother found me sitting alone in the living room on her comfortable but tiny, cheap-looking, faded butterscotch couch. My eyes were closed, and I was listening to the muezzin's soothing voice. As she sat down beside me, she remarked, "You know, this would have been you." Her comment startled me, and I opened my eyes. She was, of course, referring to Islam and Bosnia. Had I not emigrated, they would have been more than the observations and keepsakes I was making them out to be. She was right, but in many ways, it was too late for anything more than that. And I felt content now, finally. My rationalizing, secular mind had finally succumbed to religion, and that more than sufficed for me. So what if I didn't know the Qur'an intimately? So what if I wasn't proficient in Arabic? I had acquired hope, which is more than I had arrived with or expected to gain.

Neither of us spoke for the remainder of the prayer. We continued to sit on the couch and look out the window at the minaret, a subtle white streak against the crimson red sky. My grandmother placed her heavy, tanned, vein-protruding hand upon mine, soft, beige, and un-worked. Our breathing slowed, our eyes closed, and we let the feeling overcome us.

The Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque." Personal Photo. *The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. 2009. 21 Oct. 2009. Web.

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Short Fiction

At Your Service

Variation on a Large Hadron Collider

The Cellar

The Farthest Shore

USPS Standard

He Did Warn Me

Moss

The Tragedy of the Little Red Chaperon

Tale of an Alchemist

Tall Tales of the Appalachian Mountains

114

At Your Service

| Kelsey Yoder

Big, black Iggy filled my two-wheeler with tampons and pads as he spoke sarcastically to me. "Girl, we're so glad you stayed. We got something special for you."

I wheeled myself to aisle 7. The shelves were empty. *Bitches in this city are synched-up*, I thought. *Blood red sewer system.*

I'd stayed after my help-line shift was over. Stocking shelves wasn't my forte, but the bills were due and the night stock fellas liked having somebody to push around.

When he had come in today, I'd felt something, something different than my normal malice towards the human race. Maybe that's the real reason I stayed. *There's not much difference between drinking yourself to sleep at 11 p.m. or 1 a.m.*

We first met four years ago. I was working at an inexpensive and quickly serviced restaurant. We had a discount for active military officers in uniform, half-price combo. He had approached my register, ordered his sandwich and an upsize of fries and drink, as I was forced to offer. He then said it: "I'd like the military discount."

He was in his mid-fifties and no longer built for service. He was short, stout, and not happy. His face was bronzed like the war heroes of his time, but scowling in that timeless shining manner when one would steady their gaze and gun, killing their enemy.

My sixteen-year-old face smiled the smile that had won me this job. I stated our policy. "I'm sorry, sir, but you have to be active and in uniform to receive our generous discount."

I held the smile plastered across my face like a walking billboard for teeth whitening as he sized me up.

"I served in Vietnam," he said. "I fought for this country." His voice grew progressively louder and his face redder. "Do you know what it's like? I fought for you. You want military identification: How about the shrapnel in my leg?" He picked up his leg with both hands like it was dead and set his calf and foot upon my counter.

His face was so red I wondered if he hadn't been taking some pulls off the bottle before, a little self-meditation for shell-shock and a decomposing life.

I stood in front of him, stunned. Two months of work had not prepared me for such an encounter. He began pulling up his pant leg.

Dude, I would love to give you a discount for your struggle and support of the nation during its troubling times. However, I've learned that Vietnam was a huge mistake, and I totally would have been a hippie. Plus, I'm not willing to break the rules at this upstanding establishment.

Katie, the most motherly twenty-three-year-old on crack that I had ever known, came up behind me. "Is there a problem?" she said, wearing the same corporate issued smile.

Katie took care of the little fiasco as any crack head working for a large corporation would when the boss is out. She gave his food to him free and forced me to deliver his extra-large sandwich and fries directly to his table. I set it down on the table, gave him a once over with my eyes, and held my head higher than a soldier's as I marched back behind the counter.

Katie's decision to let him slide by had its repercussions. He thought he was above me now. Give in once and they'll think you're easy, like my ex-boyfriend told all his friends. For the next year, he regularly came into the drive-thru restaurant and demanded the military discount.

It didn't take me long to figure him out. He occasionally came through the drive-thru in his shitty, rusted blue Tercel. Rarely did he have his Papa John's delivery sign removed from the roof of his car. Papa John's—he dealt with prank phone calls and drunken college kids all night. He lived on the west side of town, three blocks from the park I used to drink wine in regularly, before the bars were an option. I'd walk myself right down his street, all juiced up, even though it was out of the way. He was always alone.

*

I sat outside his house once. I was bored, had been drinking, and needed to go outside to have a cigarette. Getting into my car and driving over to his house made perfect sense. *Why not drive all the way across town to sit in my car and watch my cigarette burn while getting a little bit closer to a man who had made me feel like a complete fucking corporate powered asshole?*

His house was white. The Tercel was parked in the driveway without a garage. Just another rundown rental on the street except his had a nice big window for me to peer in. The blinds on his living room window were still tilted from letting in the afternoon's sunlight. I watched him. The lights striped him as he glowed from the colors on the TV. I'd already seen him red. But this man in blue, green, yellow, and gray, seemed sickly, sad, and boring.

I stayed out front of his house only long enough to finish my cigarette. I'm no creep.

*

I graduated high school, seventh in a class of 78. I stopped seeing high school friends. I stopped seeing high school boys.

After two years of fast food, I changed jobs. My favorite coworkers had moved on. I couldn't stand the couple who split a #5 every Saturday night at 9:50 when we closed the lobby at 10. And, I was sick of coming home smelling like cooked beef and horseradish. I moved to a grocery store. A real strong step up in the world. I worked at the after-sales service desk paying electricity bills for old ladies who had forgotten its due date, going home to cold, dark houses. I sold lottery tickets and best of all, refunded customers for their rotten chicken they threw down upon my counter. *You're right, it needed sterilizing, you fuck.*

My second week on the job, he came in. Fresh off of work and still in his Papa John's uniform, he handed me his power bill. Then, he threw down his money on the table, a quarter rolling under my register and a penny spiraling to the floor. He kept his head raised

high, haughtily. Our eyes met. He attempted to invade my space, pushing and probing to get behind my friendly gaze. It was clear I had made a lasting impression on him. I smiled.

"How are you today?" I said, overly perky.

He held my gaze and nodded his head sharply.

"Would you like to add a dollar on to your bill to help those of lesser fortune this winter season?"

He grunted.

"OK." I began to pick up the change that had sat motionless on the counter. One at a time I placed the coins in the palm of my hand, smiling all the while. I moved meticulously and deliberately slow. I hoped he was on his way to work, and I could make him late. I wanted to slam his change back on to the counter and watch him pick it up. I wanted him to bend.

But he held out his hand for the change. Never before had I seen hands like these. Never before had I noticed. His hands were plump and the skin tight around his chubby fingers. His palms were white and hard. They weren't callused. They looked scratched endlessly by tiny needles and sandpaper. I hated to hand back his money and see that stiff out-turned palm. My nails grazed his damaged hands as the vibrations ran through my body.

The next lady in line approached as he stalked off, "Must be having a bad day."

"No," snapping back from my study of his motions. "I'm quite fine, thank you."

"Oh honey, not you. Him. I suppose he just had a bad day at work, but you did a good job of trying to cheer him up," she said, "and I'd be glad to donate a dollar." *Thanks for donating to the needy–me*. I smiled at her but the thought of his hands and the ignorance of this woman made it difficult.

*

"Thank you for calling your local Food Lion. How may I help you?"

"Oh, hi." The lady on the other end of the receiver sounded confused.

"Can I help you with something?"

"I'd like your opinion. Do you think it'd be okay to microwave cornbread?"

"Well . . ."

I'm twenty-years-old, lady! I don't bake. Did you read the directions? Ask Google. Don't you have a mother you could call? Don't you have southern relatives?

"Ma'am, I think that could definitely work. I don't know if it will rise exactly how it's supposed to, so you're going to have to keep an eye on it."

I recommend covering it in tinfoil before you nuke it.

"You think so?"

"I do. However, I'm going to connect you with the bakery for a double check."

"Oh, than—"

I never waited for "thank you" on the phone. I just park 'em and page someone who cares.

A line had formed behind my counter, and I began the task of dissolving these pitiful patrons into empty space.

He was the third person in line.

"Sorry about your wait, sir. What can I get for you?"

"I need three money orders. One for $313.21, another for $63.67, and one for $194.35. I also need Lotto, Mega, and Powerball tickets and three stamped envelopes."

What the fuck man? Like I can remember and ring up this shit when you rattle it off like your Christmas wish list.

I stood in front of him smiling, as usual, not moving towards the cash register. Slowly, I turned to the register and said deliberately, "OK. Now, how much was that first money order for?"

I was happy. I can make you go through your little list as many times as I want.

Over and over, I attempted to exert my power over the sheep of Food Lion. At least once a month, he walked in. We fought for command. We wreaked havoc upon each other until one gave out.

If he was in a hurry, he would be forced to repeat whatever I asked so he could leave. If I had customers behind him, I was forced to finish our battle in a timely manner and move on. Our wars, unknown to all, were the highlight of my work day—of my life.

*

Let the ladies of this domain rejoice, for I alone have restocked the feminine product shelves.

I didn't speak to anyone for hours. I had been trapped inside the past while stocking Midol and extra-large pads with wings.

Earlier that day, hat pulled down over his face, a man had handed me his power bill without a word. He never looked up. He set his money on the counter, and I picked it up. This man was passive. Passive people pissed me off the most because they gave me no room to vent. It was wrong to push them. There was nothing left to break. He moved like a man in great physical pain, dragging his limbs across the tiled floor to my counter. I typed the numbers into the system and as usual, checked the name on the bill.

This was the man who pisses me off with the drop of a coin?

I looked back at him over my right shoulder. Could it be? It'd been a month, tops, since I'd last done battle with him. He had to hurry away to work; another win for number one. But even the thought of the last match made smiling pointless; he wouldn't see it. His face was still turned down, covered by the hat. He had lost 50 pounds. His sweatshirt and jeans hung off of him and his head looked like it wanted to roll right off his shoulders and rest on the counter.

I returned to him with the receipt. His hand opened and before that point, I didn't believe it was him. Yet his hands were the same, rendered insensitive by time and care.

He turned to go and lifted his head only enough to see in front of him. I saw his face. The skin seemed to be melting off of him. His eyes were nearly closed. He looked drained and delicate. The hands, scratched, scarred, inflexible, no longer fit the body. Hands that had fought in wars.

"Have a nice day," I said more out of habit than a peace offering but with that tinge of sympathy one has when they slay their greatest enemy. With the enemy dead and the battle won, another war must be found.

I stood in dismay, watching him slowly slink away. As he went out the door, he wrapped his coat tightly around his body for security. A walking casualty.

My head too wanted to rest upon the counter. There was no battle to be fought when one was as weak as him. How could I have never shown him how sweet and understanding I could be?

The thought of him dying entered my mind. I would see his name in the newspaper obituary. I would attend in one of my classic black dresses I hoarded for such occasions. I would weep by his coffin and repent of my sins while my mascara dripped down my face and off my chin.

*

I went home and opened a beer. I walked to the bathroom and set my beer upon the sink.

Recently, every time I sit on the toilet I feel as if I'm asleep or in a dream. It's disturbing to sit there and feel as if you're pissing in your bed but you can't wake up.

I removed myself from the throne and stared down upon the remnants of my last meal.

What did I have for supper?

I couldn't remember. I could remember every wrong this man had committed upon me.

Get over yourself.

"No," I said as I stared into the toothpaste-dotted mirror.

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122

Variations on a Large Hadron Collider

| Meredith Harper

I. Adagio

Over one hundred meters below the earth, where the rumbling of tectonic plates makes a distant symphony amid an orchestra of stone, there is a man-made ring of worming tubes that run in a rabbit's warren 27 kilometers around. This is the Large Hadron Collider, the opera of particle physicists. With all due deliberation, they have rehearsed this moment for years: the moment when the lights will dim and the first beam of protons will shoot through the structure, racing on opposite courses until they collide in a quantum frenzy. The physicists hold clipboards and take readings, tuning their instruments one last time.

II. Andante, con moto

Louis Gestaut stands alone in the men's lavatory, combing his hair. At 35, he has already begun balding, and his process of combing his hair to minimize this reality is a lengthy one indeed. After ten minutes of careful grooming, he washes his hands and leaves the well-lit lavatory for the gray of the corridor.

Down the corridor he goes: Two doors stand before him. He takes the door on the left, which leads to a small kitchen and a coffee-pot. Had he taken the door on the right, Louis Gestaut would have found himself—after several more twists and turns and choices of doors—confronted with what he and his colleagues refer to as "A Large Ion Collider Experiment." ALICE, for short. This experiment is a vertical rabbit-hole, a chamber to monitor the creation of quantum goo, something in which quarks and gluons—funny little particles, those—manage to deconfine themselves.

But Louis Gestaut chooses the scalded coffee in the pot behind the door on the left, and he drinks two cups, ignoring the bitter taste. He is waiting for the moment when the control room will

sound a high-pitched tone, like the tinkling of a bell, to announce that the switch—the giant black switch—will be turned on. Of course, there are many, many switches—some blue, some yellow, and even some green—that must be flipped in special sequences.

Of course, Louis reflects, returning to the dim corridor, they did not make any red buttons. There are never big, red buttons, and it makes him wish, in a faint sort of way, that there could be, the way science is done in the movies.

III. Presto

If there are many possible worlds, existing at this very moment, propagating unto and into themselves, in at least one possible world, there exists a scenario in which—

IV. Dolce ma non troppo

Katherine Sundall walked down the street to her hotel. She had taken a taxi from the CERN headquarters on the Rue de Meyrin to the Quai Gustave Ador, getting out in front of the Jardin Anglais. As she handed her fare to the taxi driver, she wished she had remembered more of her French. But French was so long ago, before she had fallen in love with particle physics. The university had been more than kind in sending her to Geneva to witness the debut of the Large Hadron Collider.

She could hear music coming from the Jardin Anglais as she walked—a symphonic band, rehearsing for an open-air concert—and she lay on the grass in a park on a summer evening, 20 years ago. The memory startled her in its violence, and she swayed on the street corner, recalling:

The band-shell in the park was turning to gold as the sun set, and Katherine lay on the grass on her stomach with her hands folded under her chin. The piece was slow, and her eyelids were starting to droop until a sudden crash of cymbals rocked her from her lethargy.

Awake, she rolled onto her side and watched as the insects of the evening, the mosquitoes and the fireflies and the midges, floated upward from the ground and mingled in the air to the soft crooning of the horns. Another crash, and the flying things whirled madly.

It was like an atom, Katherine thought, like a macrocosm of the smallest piece of matter, a snippet of the fabric of the universe—the flights of insects on a summer evening, the drifting of dust motes catching the light of a window. This was, she felt sure, the moment when she had fallen in love with particle physics.

V. Cantabile, con misterioso

If there are many possible worlds, existing at this very moment, propagating unto and into themselves, in a least one possible world, there exists a scenario in which we know what happens in another world and not in our own. And there exists a scenario in which we only know what happens in our own world.

VI. Scherzo

Nine thousand six hundred and eighty kilometers away (giving or taking a decameter or five), a physicist sits in his office in Japan (it is a bright afternoon) with the windows open, finalizing his calculations. According to his theories and his numbers (which are happily complemented by his theories), the Large Hadron Collider should try to destroy itself upon initialization, because the universe cannot allow the discovery of—

A knock on the door. A woman comes in, bearing a tea-tray. "Tenki ga yoi," she says. (The weather is fine.)

"Arigato," the physicist says, as she places the tea-tray on his desk. (Thank you.)

"Doushita no?" (What is the matter?)

The physicist shrugs and takes his tea. "Saa dou kana?" (Who knows?)

Certainly not him. According to his theories and their corroborating numbers, the Large Hadron Collider seeks to destroy itself because the discovery of what physicists intend for it to discover is abhorrent to the universe. At least, that is how it seems.

The woman collects the tea things and leaves his office, careful not to slam the finicky office door (which always slams itself shut when the windows are open because of the draft). The physicist glances at his watch and recalls that soon the switches will be turned to their on positions and the initialization of the Large Hadron Collider will take place. Very soon, actually—moments—and then he will see if his theories are correct, if the thing they seek (the Higgs boson) will reveal itself, drop its pretenses and bathrobe and stand before them all, naked and alive. But, at the same time, the universe could be playing a game, and find the naked form of the Higgs boson so ugly, so appalling that—

VII. Alla marcia maestoso

Speaking statistically, it is highly improbable that the Large Hadron Collider will signal the end of the universe. Not impossible, but highly improbable that the Large Hadron Collider is the agent of the apocalypse, as some might choose to believe. The physicists have made the necessary calculations, and are assured that the Large Hadron Collider is perfectly safe. Statistically speaking.

VIII. Calando, a tempo moderato

"Mummy?"

The mother pauses, and looks up from the book.

"Mummy, can you really fall down a rabbit-hole?"

"I don't know—but it happens in this book. Maybe you can, though I wouldn't suggest you try it." The mother searches with her finger for the place where she left off reading. Her daughter frowns and twists the bed sheet in her hands.

"But rabbits aren't that big."

"Anything can happen in a story."

"Anything at all?"

"Yes—anything that you can imagine can happen in a story."

"But what about—?" The little girl frowns again. "What about when it isn't a story?"

The mother leans forward and kisses her daughter's forehead. "That I don't know."

She turns down the corner of the page they are on in the book and goes to the door of her daughter's bedroom, turning off the lamp as she does so. Another window in Geneva goes dark. "Good night," the mother says, as she turns down the dim corridor to her own bedroom, where the lights are still on. She sets the book on her nightstand, undresses, puts on a dressing gown, and brushes her hair. Then she flips the light switch, and another window in Geneva, another yellow beam of light shining over the black outlines of the city, goes dark, 100 meters above the cold ring of the Large Hadron Collider.

Meredith Harper is a graduate of the University of Alabama and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Mississippi.

The Cellar

| Stephanie Ruesch

When I was nine, I went into my grandparents' cellar to pet the cow.

I had heard about the cow all my life. Everyone knew about the bovine down below ground, and every adult swore to having seen her lurking among the canned preserves and Christmas decorations. Encouraged by the tales passed down by my mother and father, aunts and uncles, grandmother and grandfather, I would descend into the cellar to gleefully scavenge for the legendary animal.

In those days, we all lived on the old farm about 15 miles south of town. My grandparents had given each of their three daughters a piece of the farm on which to build a home when they married, and all the land was farmed communally. I was in my teens before I realized how unusual my living situation was, but hints of it would crop up now and then. I remember being irreparably fascinated when I opened one suburban friend's refrigerator and found store-bought white eggs in cardboard cartons rather than scrawny brown eggs in wire baskets.

My cousins and I were known at school as those red-headed kids who barely lived within the school district limits, who stood at the top of a dirt driveway so long that no houses were visible from the road. I had three sisters and was the only boy, and the cousin closest in age to me was Jeremy.

Jeremy was older than me by four years. He kept his hair shorn short and had the thickest freckles of us all; he perpetually looked liked someone had attacked him with a brown Bingo dobber. Because he was older, Jeremy was delegated to tend the sheep with his brother Luke. One rutting season, he took a bad knock from a particularly worked-up ram, which landed him in the hospital for a night. Us younger kids were put in charge of the fowls, chickens, ducks, and turkeys. As I mucked stalls and scraped coops, my eager eyes were on alert for the cow. I knew she dwelled in the cellar, but she surely had to come above ground sometimes, and nothing was

going to stop me from catching the cow.

"Jeremy!"

I had been lost in quiet reverie on the floor of my grandparents' living room when he ran up behind me and knocked me over. As I righted myself, he snatched up Wolfie, my favorite stuffed animal, who had fallen from my grip.

"Jeremy, give him back!"

He held Wolfie up above my head and smirked devilishly.

"What are you still doing with this thing? Are you ever going to grow up?"

"Jeremy—"

"None of the other kids cart around stupid stuffed animals, except for the girls. Is that it? Are you really a girl?"

"Jeremy, give him back!" I implored once more, tears of worry beginning to well up in my eyes.

That devilish smirk spread wider across his lips.

"Maybe it's time you grew up some, cuz." He pulled a cheap yellow lighter from his pocket. With a sinister snap he flicked on the orange flame and inched it near the end of Wolfie's bushy tail.

"Jeremy!"

He held my beloved friend high out of reach as I frantically tried to snatch him away to safety.

"Jeremy, please, don't!" I was really crying now, as Jeremy inched the flame closer and closer.

I shut my eyes and screamed.

"What's going on?"

I opened my eyes to see that Jeremy had dropped Wolfie, the lighter now clasped behind his back. Grandpa stared down at us, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his powerful arms folded across his broad chest. I snatched up Wolfie, inspecting him frantically for singe marks. Assured my friend was unhurt, I clutched him tightly, burying my face in his soft fur.

"Give me what you have hidden behind your back, Jeremy Andrew." It was a marvel how he could command a person without

raising the tone of his voice. There was barely the suggestion of force, but there was something in the timbre of his words and the edge in his eyes that put the fear of God in us all.

With a hesitant hand, Jeremy held out the lighter. Grandpa took it, causing Jeremy to flinch.

"We'll talk about this later, Jeremy," he said, dropping the lighter into the breast pocket of his plaid flannel shirt. "But know that I'm not happy."

"Yes, sir," Jeremy muttered weakly.

A curt nod dismissed him, and he ran off, the slam of the screen door telling us he had gone outside.

In the silence, I became aware that Grandpa was looking down at me. I glanced up from the refuge of my stuffed animal.

"Wash up for supper."

"Yes, sir."

Like every supper, we ate the meal at our grandparents' house. The dining room was the longest room in their home, and it had to be to hold all 15 of us. Grandpa had modified the table with extra leaves of MDF in order for us all to sit together. If I close my eyes, I can see the dark wood paneling of the walls, the black wood burning stove at the far end of the room, and finally the table itself, covered in a thick plastic tablecloth patterned with nasturtiums.

I remember Jeremy sitting across the table that night, glaring at me for the duration of our meal. I focused my eyes on my plate, poking at whatever food was there, as the laughter of my aunts and uncles lilted around the room. Suddenly, their boisterous but indiscernible conversation sharpened in my ears. They were talking about the cow.

It was Aunt Florence, my mother's eldest sister, recounting with great zeal and many giggles her encounter with the cow. All the adults were smiling and laughing—another one of those topics that was only fully understandable past a certain age.

I waited for her to stop speaking before saying, "I can't wait til I find the cow."

"There is no cow!" burst Jeremy, slamming his fist on the table. The laughter died. The air stiffened. Everyone turned to him.

"There is no cow," he repeated, quieter, but still with firm frustration. "You all talk about this stupid cow, but I've never seen it. There isn't even a cow on the farm. It's just a lie you all tell. It's impossible."

"Why do you say it's impossible, Jeremy?" asked Grandpa patiently.

"Because it is," he retorted automatically. "Every time I've been down there, I've never seen it. It's not there."

"Remember, Jeremy, what Our Lord said to his disciple Thomas: 'Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

"That's different."

"There are more things in this world than you will ever see, and things you cannot see, but that does not mean they do not exist."

I was grinning triumphantly as Jeremy's shoulders drooped in resignation.

"And you," whispered Grandpa in my ear, causing me to jump, "blessed are the meek."

After our plates had been cleared, everyone returned home. But I stayed behind, waiting to see if Grandpa would go downstairs to his workroom or relax in his chair.

It was an agonizing wait. He seemed to purposely be taking an eternity to dry the dishes. Finally, he went to his chair with the newspaper. When he was settled, I approached quietly, my mind filled with recollections of Jeremy's outburst at the supper table and his earlier attack on me.

Standing at his knees, I asked, "Grandpa, why is Jeremy the way he is?"

He folded down the top of his newspaper to expose his scrutinizing blue eyes. I straightened up.

"He's just at that age," he replied at length.

"What age?"

He leaned forward, and from behind my ear pulled a silver fifty-cent piece, or Kennedy Coin as we called them. Between us cousins, we had dozens of these coins that always materialized mysteriously from behind our ears.

He held the coin in front of me between his calloused thumb and forefinger. Even though I had seen the trick before, I was smiling in awe. He was smiling too.

"The age when the magic starts to disappear."

I had skipped home that night, clutching the coin in my fist, as crickets serenaded my journey, not really understanding what he had meant, but being perfectly content with knowing that somehow I was right in the end.

The next day, my mother sent me up to fetch Grandma's recipe for pineapple horns. I was in the breezeway about to take off my shoes when Grandpa came in through the backdoor. It was midmorning, but he was already covered in a light sheen of sweat.

"Don't take off your shoes."

I straightened up immediately and faced him. As he pushed his cap up off his forehead, a grin began to sneak across his lips.

"Before you go in the house, go down to the cellar."

"Why?"

"Just go on."

The stairs leading down to the cellar were behind him, and I nearly knocked into him in my haste to leap down them. At the cellar door, I paused briefly to take a deep breath, then slowly pushed it open.

The cellar was a long hallway with rooms built off the main aisle. Immediately to my left was the washroom and store of preserves, while to my right was Grandpa's workroom. The aisle was cluttered with boxes and seemingly endless shelves filled with endless things that no one knew how to successfully navigate or organize.

The door slammed behind me on its spring. I waited, letting my eyes adjust to the dark. I had just thought to find the light switch when I noticed a dark, unfamiliar shadow about halfway down the

length of the cellar. It was big, much bigger than me, with a long, thick, boxy shape. It resembled very much the silhouette of a—

"Whoa."

Trying not to make any noise that would startle the creature, I stepped forward. My fingers were shaking as they stretched out towards this impossible, but wonderfully real, thing. I felt them graze against the coarse hairs of the shadowy monstrosity.

It was all the confirmation I needed or wanted. Too scared to scream, I bolted out of the cellar, tripped on my way up the stairs, and shot out the back door.

Jeremy and Luke were walking to the far field with their mitts and bats. Out in the open air, I found my voice, yelling for them to stop. When I caught up to them, I forcibly dragged Jeremy to the cellar. But the thing I had seen was gone.

The triumph of my validation propelled me home, sending me bursting into the house and shooting into my eldest sister's room. She sat on her bed with a group of friends, and they all turned to me in surprise at my sudden appearance. Before my sister could tell me to go away, I breathlessly recounted my adventure, knowing it would spark instant jealousy.

They laughed. I could feel my ears burn with shame.

"You really believe all that, don't you?" asked my sister, once she had stopped laughing.

I tried to say, "It's true," but the words wouldn't come. I left the room quietly, slowly, accompanied by the echo of their mockery and weighted down deep in my stomach by the very first seed of doubt.

Like the child who hears his first whisperings that Santa Claus isn't real, I searched for proof. For years afterwards, I would steal away into the cellar, jumping out around corners in hopes of catching the beast unawares. But I never found my proof. The cow disappeared.

At major holidays now, when my cousins and I are reunited as adults, the conversation never turns to the cow when it reaches a lull, like it had always done with our parents. If it should come

up by accident, the laughter is mocking and cruel, not the warm music from my childhood that danced in the dining room. There is nothing special or worth remembering about two stacked sawhorses with a fur coat thrown over them. To us, the joke isn't funny.

I moved to town after school, which would have been devastating to my family if all my cousins had not done it before me. Jeremy went away the farthest of us all—he married, settled with a wife we never met in Albany, and had a baby. I found work as a bank teller and filled my fridge with store-bought white eggs. But twice a week I drive down to the farm for supper after work; the last child to be sent into the cellar after the cow, and the only one to still come home.

When I stepped out of my car, I spotted a note taped to the front door of my parents' house, saying they were waiting up at Grandma's. I plucked the note from the door and started walking. As I walked, I unloosened my tie. The breeze picked up the old odors of manure, ripening hot peppers, and the faint perfume of dill and thyme. I could hear the cornstalks rustling down in the lower fields, and the short, low quacks of a gaggle of ducks as they snaked along back to the barn. I added my own music by jingling the change in my pockets and felt one of the Kennedy Coins bouncing around with the rest of my money. I took it out of my pocket and clutched it reverently in my fist.

Nudging the chickens out of my way and ducking under the clothesline, I reached the backyard. In the grass at the backdoor was a pair of Grandpa's boots, cobwebs covering the openings, standing like silent sentries, deluded into thinking he could still come along and put his feet in them.

I wiped off my shoes on the mud rugs in the breezeway. Glancing around, I didn't see my parents' boots, and when I poked my head into the house I was greeted only by the smells of our meal.

"Grandma? It's me," I called out but received no answer.

I went back into the breezeway. Thinking she might have gone into the cellar for peaches to eat with our dessert, I went downstairs.

"Grandma!" I called as I pushed the door open. With a quick step I walked into the cellar and looked into the empty washroom.

I heard falling nails tap the cement floor. I turned around to Grandpa's half of the underground space to see what had caused the disturbance.

Peering into the little workroom, I stared in quiet awe at the mysteries manifested. The cow swished her tail before letting out a low, contended moo, then knocked another box of nails to the floor with her wet, pink nose.

I tiptoed out above ground to find out what was for supper.

Stephanie Ruesch is a recent graduate from the State University of New York College at Oneonta, where she received a B.A. in English. She has returned home to Buffalo, New York, where she is farming, reading too much Sherlock Holmes, and creating public spectacles with her mother.

The Farthest Shore

| Bryce Mainville

Balaena anaerobia was what we named the creatures found swimming in the mesosphere above Alpha Centauri B's third planet, designation Proteum. They looked nearly identical to Earth's bowhead whales in size and shape, except the flippers were larger and the skin a dusky blue-black that made them stand out against the brown and white contours of the planet below. But how could this be? Convergent evolution: The acquisition of a similar biological trait in unrelated lineages. Birds and bats both have wings, but they are only distantly related through phylum—they came to possess their similar forms of locomotion by occupying the same ecological niche. How then, does an animal floating 85 kilometers above a planet, four-and-a-half light-years away from Earth, just happen to look the same as a plankton—eating Arctic cetacean? Part of our research was to find out why. When I first heard about Proteum and the new possibilities for biological research it would have to offer, I was elated. But this was just before data started to come back from the first expeditions. Proteum was nothing but vast mountain ranges and plateaus with the occasional pool of liquid methane dotting the landscape. The atmosphere was not breathable by Earth-dwellers, and the only life forms seemed to be microscopic organisms in the methane pools. This was before anyone had noticed the *balaena anaerobia*. But you might think, Alaine, aren't alien life forms always interesting? To tell you the truth, microscopic organisms bore me to tears. I recognized the opportunity—prestigious study of new life forms in Alpha Centauri—but was not excited by the news. Then I heard about the space whales.

We've been calling them "space whales" colloquially, since using a scientific name all the time can get annoying, even to a researcher. Besides, we don't even know if *balaena anaerobia* will stick once the more senior biologists begin to arrive.

"I wonder if they absorb rays from the star somehow, you know, some kind of weirdo animal photosynthesis?" Laura peers through the porthole in the side of the observation room, watching a whale float serenely through a dust cloud of tiny asteroid particles. "There just aren't enough microorganisms at this level of the atmosphere to power a body that big."

Laura was with me during undergrad, where we met in Biology II because everyone else already picked their partners for lab. What did I fall in love with first? The sweep of her strong forearms and calves, tanned yellow-brown from soccer practice in the sun, the heavily-lidded eyes, sleepy and blue like kingfisher plumage, or the shock of blond hair cut punk-rock short and flecked with purple highlights like pomegranate juice? All of them at once, I'm sure. She was quick with a jest—I thanked her for that; it was a time in my life when jests were few. Her athleticism attracted me, the mystery of it. She was not foreign but seemed to display a startled interest in the world around her, as if seeing it for the first time. I spent most of my youth turning over rocks in the backyard to look for pillbugs and millipedes. Hers had been spent near a beach where the waves broke high along the sand. Do opposites attract? Or is the magnetism of one too greater than the other? Perhaps I was too stricken with lust or love or whatever they're calling it these days to notice what must have been obvious.

A few months later as I rounded the corner of the library I saw, at length, two figures walking towards me. My mind refused to catch up to what my eyes were seeing. I said, "Hey there," as I passed, and she said "Hi," with a terrible strain, eyes wide with—shock? dismay? realization? The basketball girl she was holding hands with did not notice me, preoccupied by a text on her cell phone. After a few more steps I stopped in my tracks and bit down on the peppermint I had in my mouth, shattering it and chipping a molar.

"Well, we know they have to be getting nutrition somehow. We haven't seen them open their mouths, so they don't seem to be filter feeding—or perhaps we just haven't observed it." I scribble on my

notepad, little figure eights with my pen.

"Perhaps there's some kind of, I don't know, symbiotic relationship thing going on. Maybe they have microorganisms living in them that keep them going." She turns to me, opens her eyes wide and says, "Or maybe they're spaceships for tiny little super smart aliens that are planning to destroy us." She mock gasps at the thought.

"Oh yeah, they're just biding their time until they can attack us in their whale ship." She chuckles. I chuckle.

The intercom buzzes on and the voice of Shoshanna, the pilot, echoes through the tiny room.

"Tycho has the suits all fueled up for whenever you guys are ready to go check out the pod."

Shoshanna had made a pass or two at me during the long flight to Alpha Centauri, but I ignored them. No sense in mixing business with pleasure, especially when you're inside a tin can the size of a townhouse for the next year. I was plagued by bouts of nausea and dizziness that flooded my senses at random. Just your body acclimating to space travel, they said. The low grav, they said. Sleeping in a steel chamber the size of a closet with breakfast, lunch, and dinner packed into toothpaste tubes—perhaps a tenured position at an Ivy League when I get back to Earth for my trouble? Doctor Alaine Erstwhile, Chair of Space Whale Studies. Sounds delightful, I'm sure.

"You think it's a good idea to go out with them again?" I ask Laura.

A week before we had approached a pod of the creatures just as a dawning Alpha Centauri B crept over the horizon of Proteum and washed the whorls of brown mountains in gold and vermilion. Our suits are tethered by long O_2 and life support lines to the hull of the ship. Small jets on the boots and hands of the suits offer a degree of movement in the vacuum. Our third researcher, Michael, had tried to approach what we guessed to be a young female. They seemed docile enough, surely? The creature bucked as he came within a few

yards of it and the right flipper smacked against his suit, sending him spiraling off until the tether jerked him to a violent stop. He had been in bed with bruised ribs since the incident.

"We just need to be more careful. Just stick to basic observation until we get a better handle on how they respond to stimuli," Laura says, drumming the end of her pen against her chin.

She has two freckles, evenly placed, on her right jaw line. She lost the pomegranate highlights when we went to grad school, University of Maine. Thought they might cost her a job opportunity. Her dissertation was on sperm competition in north Atlantic right whales; mine was on deep water feeding habits of basking sharks. Two of the sharpest young researchers at UMaine, the director had said, of course you would love to go on a once-in-a-lifetime research trip to Alpha Centauri? He had said. Of course we would. Of course.

"Let's roll out," says Laura with cheer, springing up from her crouched position at the porthole.

I rise, my knees popping and creaking as they go. My joints had already sounded like clicking door latches back on Earth—I couldn't blame it on the gravity. I push off the wall and follow Laura through the door into the close hallway. The walls are bright steel and white corrugated plastic of high-tech construction, cramped like an eighteenth-century mine shaft. In a perverse way, I was looking forward to the commencement of mining operations on the planet—if they started building on the planet's surface, I might actually get to walk through hallways wider than a foot across. Methane-dwelling microorganisms be damned.

We duck through a low hanging door into the "docking room," where we would leave the ship in our suits. Tycho is pulling at lead lines and tethers, lower lip protruding from the tobacco dip he just can't seem to kick. He looks like the fellow who used to work the ovens at Antonio's Pizza back in my home town. My brother called their pizza, "Guidza," since race and ethnic jokes were just about the only kind our high school knew.

"No Michael today? I forgot he had a previous engagement with the board of directors," says Tycho in unaccented English as he twists a valve on Laura's O_2 line.

Laura jibes back, "he's been very busy with the investors from Tokyo. Probably bringing them to a show." She steps into the legs of her suit.

The fall of undergrad senior year, what had the movie been? I can't recall. It must not have been very good. But there was the pumpkin festival that night in town, a celebration before Halloween when the main streets pack with bundled families and college students taking in the rows upon rows of carved jack-o-lanterns lining the sidewalks, and staring up in awe at the five-story-tall scaffolding in front of the church—just one of four others like it on the street—a thousand glowing gourds rising high in the dark. She had never seen the festival before, or the towers. She said, "It's very pretty in its own way, isn't it?" And I had said, "Yes. It is."

I slip into the suit legs first then arms, Tycho zips up the back, and then buckles it, then another zipper, and another, then a special putty that seals the suit and must be removed with a chemical. Inside the helmet, the world is tinted black. I had never been claustrophobic, but the suit always inspired slight fear in me. Is it the loss of peripheral vision? The shading? The thought that, once we step out the docking door, beyond the glass is a negative 148 degrees Fahrenheit void?

Once we're both suited up, Tycho hops over the lead lines and heads into the observation room. The radio in my helmet snaps on, and I hear him say, "All right, depressurizing the room. You guys ready?"

"Ready," I say.

"Ready," I hear Laura say.

There is a hissing noise like helium leaving a balloon as air leaves the chamber. I feel the gravity start to drop. Tycho says, "Opening the doors." There is a pop and a whirr as the heavy gate before us starts to slide open. I feel myself pulled forward very slightly as the

remnants of air are sucked out into the emptiness of space. It never fails, every time I wonder, will the pressure somehow go screwy, and will we be sucked out into the blackness, our tethers snapping, our bodies reeling?

But we do not, and the doors open to reveal the dappled form of the Milky Way. Laura pushes off the lip of the door first, like someone stepping off a sidewalk. I follow.

If I hold up my arms and cup my hands, I can hold the entirety of Proteum between them like a big beach ball—the swirling brown and white like a delicate glass bulb in my hands. One hundred, maybe two hundred yards away, the pod is floating through the heavens, backlit by a far off orange nebula which frames their massive forms. There is a large one out in front, probably the dominant male or female, five medium-sized individuals, and two young. We had never observed them breeding or birthing and had yet to collect a body for dissection—no corpses could be found on the planet in the early sweeps by other research groups since they probably burn up on entry—so who's to say they are even male and female in the same sense that we are?

I hear Laura's voice say, "Let's go slow now," over the radio.

I buzz back, "Roger Roger." I see her shake with a quick snort of laughter inside her suit.

We push towards them, jet boots making my feet sweat, hands held out in front to keep myself from simply shooting forward into the pod. Slowly, slowly. One of the questions we're trying to answer is if they somehow vocalize to each other. Since sound cannot travel in a vacuum, how do they communicate? Was body language enough? I once read a book on body language that said the left side of our face is more active when we lie, since lying comes from the right side of the brain. Therefore, whenever you fake a smile, the left side of your mouth curves up more than the right. But I've always smiled with the left anyway—even when I was being sincere. Had that been my undoing?

I see the pod shift and say, "They're turning, Tycho, tell Shoshanna to keep us alongside them."

"Gotcha."

We swim alongside them, letting the drift take us. We push through a small patch of meteoric dust shining coral blue in the open expanse, the particles hit by visor with a noise like gently falling sand. A member of the pod breaks off from the group and starts gliding in our direction.

"Uh oh," I hear Laura say.

"Stay cool," I reply. "It might just be curious."

I hold my drift, but my heart starts to race. The whale corrects its position when it is a mere four meters away and starts to swim alongside me. Its eye is big and glossy and in the brassy-black reflects a tiny man in a space suit and a tiny ship behind him. I push forward a meter.

"Alaine, no—"

"Shh."

I hold out a hand. Another meter. No violent response. Another meter. I see the pull and twist of the heaving muscles underneath the layers of blubber, the crags and bumps of skin worn rough by radiation or asteroid chunks or the cold, the curving mouth just slightly agape, filled with baleen, surely baleen, what else could it possibly be? I touch the skin. I'm sure Laura takes a sharp intake of breath inside her suit. The only time I had ever felt whale skin before was on a beach on Isle au Haut off the coast of Maine. It was a humpback that had beached itself the night before. It died before it could be pushed back into the sea. It had felt like a smooth wetsuit still warm with life. This is different, rockier, but the heat is unmistakable. I look into the eye. It looks back. I think it says, "What are you waiting for?" I push myself up onto its back.

"What the hell are you doing!?" cuts over the radio simultaneously from Laura and Tycho.

"Trust me."

I grip the skin gently, expecting to be thrown or crushed by a

flipper at any moment, but it does not come. The creature kicks off with two quick flaps, falls into an easy cruise.

I guess this makes me a pioneer? I see another one break off from the pod and pull alongside Laura. I say, "Do like I did." She reaches out.

Seven years before, on May 5th, at the close of our junior year, two weeks after that miserable Rachel dumped her for no apparent reason, I asked her if she wanted to go get a bite of dinner at a restaurant 20 minutes to the south of school. We had only ever dined before in the cafeteria, or at fast food joints. In the restaurant, we talked of classes, of majors, of grad school ideas of recent movies, of lousy professors, of dorm oddities, of soccer, of politics, of travel. When we got back to the car, she turned to me and it all came rushing out.

"Listen, thank you for taking me, and I'm really happy, but please understand—"

"It's all right."

"You're really great, and I want you to know that, but it isn't me, I just can't, and—"

"It's all right, really"

"I'm sorry, I am, but you're wonderful, but I can't, it's not possible, and I wish I could try, God I wish I could try, but it won't work—"

"Please, it's all right. It's all right. I know. I understand."

"You do? You do?"

"Yes, it's all right."

Proteum stretches out below us like a canvas, ready for the people of Earth to come to claim it, to leave their mark. Will the hills and valleys still look the same from up here after they have been stripped of ore? Will the clouds that look like spiraling feathers still flutter once we've bent Proteum to a more agreeable shape? I look forward, and I see Laura, head high, hands gripping the crags of the whale's back. She is laughing, and I hear Tycho cheer over the radio. The

pod moves in around us, sweeping through the aether, avoiding our ship tethers, skimming above and around us. Playing.

A young one crosses above me. I reach up and feel it push across my glove and kick off towards the front of the pod. The whales ahead of us begin to do graceful rolls, singularly at first, and then, as one.

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144

USPS Standard

| Jordan Monroe

Someone writes a letter. They fold it up and slide it into a standard 3 ½" by 6" commercial envelope, making sure the front of the letter faces the front of the envelope, the part where you put the stamp. They print the address with a black marker, put on the postage (a spray of purple flowers with a 37 under it), and only then do they lick the flap and seal it.

The mail collector collects it with dozens of other letters and takes it to the local post office, where it is sorted and shipped away.

Two weeks and a hundred miles later, a post office employee marks it as undeliverable and sends it to a mail recovery center.

A dead letter is this: officially it is mail that cannot be delivered to the addressee or returned to the sender. Usually this happens because (1) both the sender and the addressee move before the mail can be delivered, (2) the sender didn't comply with postal regulations and failed to give a return address, or (3) the sender, who invariably didn't provide a return address, sent mail to an address that does not exist.

This is what happens to a dead letter: it gets sent to an MRC (read: dead letter office) opened, examined, and if the addressee is still unknown, destroyed. Any valuables (jewelry, art, money, etc.) found in dead letters, besides pornography and firearms, are saved and sold at auction.

This is what happened: a dead letter, marked "Undeliverable," arrived in a box of other undeliverable mail at the desk of Gloria Maryellen Sickinger, and instead of destroying it, she folded it up small and stuffed it down her shirt where it remained hidden against her stomach until she got home that afternoon.

The letter said this:

Dear baby,

Sometimes when I'm not thinking of you, I can still feel you asleep on my chest. If you were here now, I would sit you in my lap and teach you how to write your name. Not with an I, but with a Y. I would teach you how to hold a pencil properly. I worry that there's nobody who loves you enough to do that where you are.

Sincerely,
[unintelligible signature]

Gloria read the letter three times. Then she put it back in its envelope, folded it in half, and shoved it into her wallet. Gloria's wallet was one of those giant, clutch-type items with a hinge and a snap at the top. Whenever she closed it with a jaunty *click*, she felt strangely satisfied, so she used the wallet often.

Gloria had received the wallet for Christmas the year before from her parents, and it was the only gift she had liked. The others (an emergency car first-aid kit, thermal underwear, a small vacuum, and a set of frying pans) were thoughtful yet functional, but she was not a very thoughtful yet functional person. The vacuum and the pans were stashed unopened in her closet, the thermal underwear was given to charity, and the first-aid kit was under her bed. The wallet, however, was shiny and much more appreciated. It's not that Gloria didn't comprehend the usefulness of cookware and vacuums and safety; she just preferred pretty things to useful things.

This line of reasoning may have been why she had dropped out of college. She had studied to be an lawyer because she was good at arguing and heard that lawyers made a lot of money, but she got bored of the constant reading and writing and memorization when she realized there was nothing glamorous about law school. She thought she would try to be a writer instead, and then a musician,

and then an actress, and then she got a job at the post office a few years ago out of desperation and never left it.

The day after she intercepted the dead letter, a Wednesday, she went back to work at her little desk in the MRC. She spent her time at work reading the undeliverable mail of unknown people, trying to find a name or an address or anything that could identify the sender or the addressee. When she succeeded, she relabeled the letter, slapped an MRC seal on it, and threw it back into the stream of deliverable mail. If not, she put the letter in a pile to be taken to the shredder. Dead letters were destroyed to protect the privacy of the non-recipient; she knew this. She also felt heavier with every letter added to this pile.

There were days when she read the love of complete strangers, days when she read someone else's good news, days when she looked at photographs of people she'd never met. There were days when she knew she was the only person ever going to read the words intended for someone else, words the sender entrusted with the USPS, believing they would get to where they needed to go. They never imagined the fate that awaited their letters, carefully typed out or handwritten, licked and stamped and sent out like soldiers on a battleship, handkerchiefs waving, *Goodbye and good luck.*

These were the sort of letters Gloria destroyed every day (except federal holidays) from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (with a lunch break from 1:00 to 1:30). At least a boxful. That first letter she shoved down her shirt was the first one she ever saved—the only one she had ever risked her job to save. Dear baby, she recited in her mind as the sorted, *Sometimes when I'm not thinking of you. . . .*

She paused over an envelope. A 3 ½" by 6" standard commercial envelope with a purple stamp. The address read:

316 Abby Hunter Lane

Concorde
No name, no state, no zip code.

Concorde, spelled with an E, was a city in Luxembourg; Abby Hunter Lane didn't exist anywhere.

The letter in her wallet had been addressed the same way. She put aside her sorting and focused on the one in her hand.

Dear baby, (in black ink)
I frequently change my mind.
Sometimes I think I'm writing to a ghost. I feel that you'll never read these words and I don't know why I bother.
Don't worry. Even if you aren't substantial, I won't stop loving you.
There was no signature on this one.

Gloria's stomach hurt with each word. It was a good feeling, but it was a bad one too, like when you hear a song or read a poem and you choke on another person's emotions.

"God," she said out loud. She stuffed the new letter in her wallet. After five years of reading the dead words of strangers, she had never been so affected. Maybe, she thought, I'm just hormonal.

It would make sense. The week before, a few days before the first letter, she had been dumped by her boyfriend, a med student from Atlanta. He had taken her out to dinner at a family restaurant and invalidated almost a year-and-a-half of emotions she could've saved for something else. After that sort of thing, no wonder she was getting hysterical.

Well, there were other things, too. Like the little blue line on the pregnancy test she saw the morning before she went to work the day she found that first letter, and the fact that she still had no idea what to do about that. Hormones explained all of it.

Knowing the problem did little to help her. She lay up nights thinking about the letters. Who could've sent them? And where

were they supposed to go? Why would the sender address them to somewhere that didn't exist? Didn't they want the letters to get sent? They said they were worried that the recipient would never read them, so why wouldn't they put a state and a zip code to make sure?

At work, she read mail with half of her brain; the other half was turning the mystery over and over. And she found five more letters in a period of six days. She was amassing quite the file.

She worked in a kind of frenzy, never stopping for lunch, waiting until the last possible moment to leave, every day saying she would turn out the lights and lock up. Every day she expected a letter, and when she found one she would save it. Then she would work even faster. It was possible to get two in one day, right? The more mail she went through, the more of a chance she had of finding another one.

After work, she went home and read them. She lined the letters up in chronological order and went through them once; then she read them slowly again, memorizing every word. Then she put them back in her wallet, which had been emptied of everything else to make room. After three weeks, she had 18.

Dear baby,
It's hard to imagine you living in this world. You're so small.

Dear baby,
I wanted to live in the mountains where it snows every winter. I wanted to take you with me.
You could climb trees and fish in the summer. I will teach you how.

Her supervisor wasn't as observant as he could have been. He was a tall, heavy man of fifty-something years called Patterson. He never noticed the letter theft or Gloria's new state of agitation until Belinda, the woman who worked the counter, told him Gloria wasn't going to lunch anymore.

The day Gloria found the nineteenth letter was the day Patterson

decided to check on her. He ambled out of his sectioned-off cubicle 15 minutes before lunch was scheduled to begin and, keeping a polite distance from Gloria's desk, asked her for a moment of her time. The wallet was in the little cove above her knees, a corner of it peeking out from where she shoved it in a second before; she was keenly aware that Patterson was standing only five feet away from it. The best thing to do would be to encourage him to leave the area.

"Certainly," she said and hurried to get out of her seat.

As she stood, catching her foot on the leg of her chair, she swiped the wallet out of the desk with her elbow. She could only watch in mute horror as it hit the linoleum floor and caromed off a wall. The poor, abused hinges burst open immediately and the letters, still in their envelopes, slid out like a fan. Patterson picked one up and read the front where "UNDELIVERABLE" was stamped huge and obvious in red ink.

Time slowed to half its usual rate. He took forever to read, and Gloria, in the clarity of her panic, saw every line, every pore, every shadow on his face shift in realization.

"What is this?" he said. All the saliva had left her mouth, leaving her speechless. Her heart pounded in her brain.

"Why are you keeping these?" He bent down in slow motion to get another letter, and then Gloria was moving. She flew over her chair, hit the ground on her right foot, took a flying leap, and tackled him. Mr. Patterson wasn't a small man, but Gloria had surprise and momentum on her side. She knocked him as far as the wall, and they both slid down it and landed in a dazed heap.

She snatched the letter out of Patterson's hand before he could regain his grip on it and gathered the other fallen letters. She held them close to her chest, cradled them like a baby, and glared at Mr. Patterson as he lumbered to his feet.

"They're just letters," she said.

He was understandably upset but was more willing to be shocked than mad. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

"They're just letters!" She was visibly shaking. "Let me have

them!"

And now he was concerned. "Gloria," he said, his hands up in a sign of supplication. "It's alright. Let's just calm down."

"Can I have them? They're just letters. There's nothing important in them." She was backing toward the exit. Belinda behind the counter and Greg at the other desk were watching, eyes wide. Greg had gotten half out of his seat when Gloria tackled Patterson, and now he was frozen, his backside poised above his chair.

"Please."

They all looked at Patterson. Nobody moved. A bead of sweat trickled down his hairline.

"Okay, let's just talk about this," he said, but Gloria was gone at the word "okay."

There was no Abby Hunter Lane, but there were people named Abby Hunter, and at least of few of them lived in a place called Concord. Gloria looked it up some time ago; there was no Concorde with an E, but there were cities called Concord in the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, California, and North Carolina. None of those places were located in the mountains, but the one in North Carolina was relatively close to the Smokies. It was a bit of a stretch, but she thought it was better than nothing.

Maybe someone named Abby Hunter would know something about these letters. Maybe whoever wrote them was confused and the letters were *for* Abby Hunter or *by* Abby Hunter. She didn't know if she would get any answers; there was a huge chance that she would find nothing, but she had to do something. The thought of going back to her empty apartment was unbearable.

She got in her car and locked the doors, sure that someone was chasing her down, even though she could see nobody had followed her into the parking lot. She stashed the letters in her glove box, moving aside napkins and receipts and bottle caps.

She consulted her road atlas (another gift from her parents that she kept under the driver's seat of her car and never thought about using until now). North Carolina was at least in the same general

direction as Atlanta, she thought. She could stop by Concord on the way (sort of, it was a kind of a large detour). At least she had a reason to go south besides a wild goose chase for the mysterious writer of mysterious dead letters. Two birds with one stone and all that.

She shifted the car into reverse and exited the almost empty parking lot.

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152

He Did Warn Me

| Nicole Pieri

There would come a time, much later, when I would stand before my Almighty Maker and be expected to answer for every indecent thought, meaningless infraction, and the thousand and one tiny heresies that made up every one of my mortal days. You will do it too. You will probably stand with your head craned back as far as it will go, trying to force your mind to think in numbers big enough, trying to find some piece of it small enough for your eyes to focus on, trying to remember how to breathe and speak and stupidly forgetting that you gave those both up not too long ago. You'll babble and stutter and probably drool a bit but that won't matter because it isn't like He hasn't already seen it all, doesn't already know not only every action but every intention, and how many times you've lied on your tax returns and every "Goddamn" you let fly and exactly how much, to the nearest teaspoon, you wanted it to hurt that time you slammed the door in his face. You know you're just as screwed as those guys on *Cops* that try to talk their way out of a full set of fingerprints, six months of wiretapping, and some parking garage surveillance tapes that caught the whole deal from three different angles. Except you know you're even more screwed because He assigned you that set of fingerprints, and those guys didn't have their testimonies screaming in size 72 Courier New font on the insides of their skulls, which for reasons unknown is suddenly constructed out of plastic wrap and scotch tape. I'm sure you see that the theme here is transparency, and while I was discovering new and horrible meanings of the word naked He spoke in a voice that sounded like solar systems spinning and said, "He did warn you."

The fun thing about the Almighty Maker is that He is not capable of lying. (This negation—"not capable"—is a silly construction of our language that describes a second negative, a negation of truth, meaning that the entire thing forms a double negative and really only means that he is infinitely capable of

telling the Truth with a capital T. There is nothing that He can't do. Nothing. Don't think about it too hard.) So, I had to admit that I had been warned. When I first met him I was a skinny and over-eager undergrad. Way before I was to give up or hand over everything that made me loveable or human or worthy of the Infinite Grace, he looked at me straight-faced and told me exactly who he was and why I shouldn't associate with him.

He introduced himself as Tom—or maybe someone else did—and after he gave me my first hug since being dropped off on move-in day, we sat and talked for hours, still sitting after all of the rest of the crowd had left. And there had been a crowd—that was the first thing you noticed about him, that people flocked to him. They gathered, chatted, formed sub-groups of side conversations around him, ate, drank, partied, all in a nebulous fuss of talking and laughing with him at the apex. About 20 minutes into the conversation, he said to me with a straight face, "I am the devil."

I laughed in the nervous, mousy way that I had at the time because I was still getting used to blasphemy, and it seemed like the type of thing someone might say if they were trying to be funny or trying to justify in that unapologetic way how many terribly cool and dangerous things they'd done. Like when you make a Helen Keller joke and close it with, "I'm going to hell." He smiled but he didn't laugh and I laughed in an offhand way because I was supposed to, because he knew I wasn't supposed to take him seriously. But I was an English major and I had been well-trained enough in recognizing narrative patterns to detect irony, even where it probably didn't exist. Which meant that I saw his smile and instinctively wondered if it was because he was in on a joke that I, the main character, was not. And because I was just Baptist enough to believe in a Satan, I thought about how ironic it would be if he really was the devil, and that he could be smiling because he knew by the simple act of announcing himself as such that it would ensure that I couldn't ever believe that it was true. Hence the irony. You can already see what terrible things happen to students who spend too much time

in meditative, existentially ambiguous thought and not enough time doing things like laundry. We all did at the time. We loved progressive politics, pretentious thousand-year-old debates and words that had the prefix "meta." I didn't like to be outside of any joke, but I didn't say anything because I had recently kicked up a fuss when a friend rolled a page of the Holy Bible into a joint, and I didn't want to make any more waves. Apparently the high quality and thinness of the paper is perfectly suited to joint construction, and it was cool to be an atheist since it proved that you were too smart for that sort of thing and not a sheep, so I kept my mouth shut here. But it would come up again.

For the three years that we attended that school together, he never once retracted, amended or qualified that initial statement. Not once. I tried to catch him at it, but he was just the sort of guy that would stay in character for years to make a joke that much funnier. Of course, there were plenty of hanging out occasions where it didn't come up at all. But not long after I told the Corinthians-smoking kid that he was a douche it happened that Tom and I were alone together.

I believe the subject came up when I called Tom an asshole for encouraging the kid who liked to refer to me as Tits McGee. Tom answered the way he had answered many such accusations before: "You know why I did that? Because I'm the devil." Since blasphemy didn't send me into wide-eyed apoplectic stutterings anymore, I shared with Tom my initial conclusions.

"You know, Tom, it would be incredibly ironic if you were telling us this because it was actually true. That's the thing—if you are actually trying to steal my soul right now, that is how you would do it. You would say it up front, knowing that I would never believe you, so that when you eventually succeed, I can't say that I didn't know any better, because you already told me. It would be completely fair. I'd be damned."

"First of all, I'm not trying to steal your soul. I'm willing to buy it. And you're right, maybe that is what I'm doing. But maybe it

isn't. Maybe I'm just a dude that thinks it's really funny to screw with you and watch how far you'll go if you believe I tempted you. Maybe I really will get you to start sinning. But, if I succeed, will it even matter if I really am the devil or not?"

No matter how many times I've justified it to myself since, I truly can't blame him for what happened. And even if I'm not entirely convinced, The Eternal Lord and Savior is. Generally, He's the only person whose convictions matter. But I think I still want to believe that I don't really deserve to be here, that there's been some sort of mistake? I don't know. There are no mistakes with Him. But even if I could just believe that I were a martyr or a lamb that had gone to play with wolves because the shepherd couldn't be bothered to stop me. But being able to believe that I was a lost lamb would require that I had been naïve and unaware of the consequences and left with an inadequate shepherd. Being unaware of something and not believing in it is not the same thing.

The Truth, the kind with a capital T which I haven't seen since I was allowed to stand for a moment in His Holy Presence, is that I knew that he was just a tall, funny, charismatic poli-sci major who was just as terrified of telling an unfunny joke as the rest of us. I let myself believe his joke because I was just waiting to give up until I could say I was being tempted. God is supposed to forgive you for being tempted. Except I think He's looking for a different kind of "sorry" than what I had to offer, and it's funny how you always run out of time for things like asking for forgiveness, no matter how easy it's supposed to be. Sometimes I even think I still could.

One day when we were together, I pulled out a tape recorder and asked him for an interview. He was greatly amused and accepted my request congenially.

"So—tell me about humans. You hate them? Are you jealous of them? You want our souls, yes?"

"Do you hate your pet dog? Lower life forms such as yourself are not worthy of my hate. This is a big contest between me and Dad for the dog's love. You see, we don't really need it, because you are too

stupid to love either of us out of any appreciation for who we really are and the endless sacrifices and gifts that have been given in your name. You only see a pair of knees and a hand holding your food dish. We are both calling to you, but here's the beauty of it. You don't even need to come to me. You just need to not go to Him. If I call you, and you come, I win. If I call you, and you wander off, walk in a circle and pee on the rug, I still win. It really is just to screw with Him. But I think He only wants to get your love to spite me, so I don't even feel bad doing it."

He had struck upon a chord that I had never dared to play out loud. But I continued.

"What are your plans for my particular damnation?"

"Your what?"

"My damnation. How are you going to convince me to turn my back on God?"

"Oh, that's painfully simple. I'm just gonna make it so you can't have kids. I'll put some random nebulous spot on one of your ovaries that the doctor can't fix, and when you do finally marry Brandon, you'll be so distraught that you won't get to cook and knit and sing lullabies to your nonexistent kids that you'll come to me in a heartbeat."

I didn't laugh as sincerely, because I did love Brandon and I did want to have his kids and I did dream about cooking and knitting and Susan B. Anthony did not fight for my rights so that I could go and choose to be heterosexual and a stay-at-home mom. It was almost as cool to be gay as to be an atheist. But I still laughed so he wouldn't notice me thinking all of this. I had one last question.

"Did the devil really go down to Georgia?"

"Lies! I did go to Georgia and meet Charlie Daniels. I gave him a golden fiddle for killing a man. But there was no contest. I wouldn't have lost to Charlie Daniels. I invented fiddling. Any more questions?"

There weren't. He had already given me all the prompting I needed to believe that I had lost God's grace and could stop trying

to live as though I had it. I was completely prepared to buy into the conviction that I didn't have to hate the fact that God was a tyrant and cruel and arbitrary because He didn't have to exist. We were stupid. People who don't actually believe in sin don't feel compelled to do it as often as we did. I know exactly when I decided to come here, and it happened a long time before I died, when I could have had all of those things that he told me he would take from me. Tom, I mean. He didn't, because I did marry Brandon and I was perfectly fertile. God actually gave me all of those things, and I still gave them away.

I remember the exact moment that I was damned in minute detail. The sun was going down and it looked weird because the light was slanting into the kitchen through the screen door in an artificially bright way in the few moments before twilight and the long shadows made the moment seem more final than it was. The moment came when we were fighting and our voices had risen steadily and we each pushed each other farther and farther because we wanted the other to break first and he put it all in my court when he asked whether or not I had ever really wanted the life that he had given me with the house and the kids and the dog and I could have said yes, I could have told him that I loved the sweet slavery of the cooking and the laundry and the sounds they made when they were asleep because all that ever fulfilled me was for those three to be happy. I could have said all of that and he wouldn't have felt guilty that I left the job in Salt Lake City when we moved here and that I got pregnant so soon after and that we'd struggled since then to keep afloat when I could have had something so much different and we would have hugged and I would cry and he would have kissed me when we woke up in the morning. But instead I lied and refused to believe, just for a moment, that their happiness and mine could be the same thing and let myself actually believe that I could want more and I ended up saying exactly what wasn't true and slammed the door. I even convinced myself that if he made a mess of it with the kids when I was gone it was his own fault and that they might

understand the plight of their overqualified and underpaid mother when they were older.

But I know now that he wasn't really the Unholy Dark One who caused my fall. Because obviously he had never made good on his threat. But I also know that it was all his silly lie because he isn't here.

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Moss

| Alyssa Gillon

"Did you quit yet? You know I heard about cancer at school," Maureen said, looking down at her muddy black sneakers and then at the dog. The dog sat next to the weedy stoop where Maureen's father had propped his fishing poles. She avoided eye contact with her father and glared at the dog. The shoes on her feet were Vinny's. They fit loosely and gave her blisters around the ankles, and they were still muddy and wet on the inside from crabbing the day before. The dog had peed on her foot when she was first introduced to him, and he wasn't fixed, so he was always jumping up and thrusting on her. Maureen's father's face was pock-marked, and he had broken blood vessels around his eyes and on his nose; his hair was smoke-yellowed and gray, and his blackened teeth were filled in with dulled silver, giving the impression that he perpetually had a spinach leaf lodged there.

"I quit. Don't smoke any more," Maureen's father said, as he lifted her up onto the squeaky bicycle seat, "How can I, when you throw all my cigarettes in the trash?" He glanced over at his friend and roommate Tommy, lifting his eyebrows and laughing hoarsely. "I can't believe your mother hasn't taught you how to ride a bike."

"Push me please," Maureen said, the tips of her toes aching against the road. Her father's leather boots didn't quite reach the cuff of his jeans, and Maureen looked at his white cotton socks. Tommy took a long drag on his cigarette and looked up toward his bedroom window, where a poster of a redheaded, nipple-pierced woman hung on his ceiling directly above his pillow. His dresser was nearly empty inside, its surface stacked with orange pill bottles and rubber bands.

"You have to learn to get started alone." Maureen's father looked mildly sick. He and Vinny's mother had fought the night before, and later in the evening, Maureen had rubbed her smarting back and sat by the space heater, which buzzed throughout the night and created a circle of warmth on the kitchen floor. For the 15 minutes

that Maureen had spent in the bathroom with her father, Kelsey had stayed in Maureen's bedroom as instructed, listening to the radio.

"I know. I will," Maureen said.

"Don't ride too close to Mr. Cooper's," Maureen's father said.

The bike should have been purple with a basket for collecting chunks of moss and stones strapped to the front, but instead, the bike was rusty, red in some spots and blue in others, and its seat was too high. Gripping the handlebars, Maureen watched Kelsey ride in circles, waiting for her. The night before, Kelsey had huddled with Maureen under a torn blue blanket, drinking sugar-water and listening to Maureen's father and Tommy snore. By the light of the space heater, they had looked through the snapshots of naked women that Tommy kept in a shoebox under the bathroom sink.

Vinny raced up and down the street, popping wheelies, leering and giving the girls the middle finger. He mouthed *Fuck you* and stopped in front of his driveway across the street. He stared at Maureen from under the deeply bent brim of his baseball hat.

Maureen's father called, "Knock it off, Vinny," got behind Maureen, and pushed, his hands stiff against her back. He smelled like shaving cream, morning breath, and cigarette smoke, and Maureen winced; the dull pain in her back sharpened. The hair and freckles on her father's arms were both faded orange. Maureen struggled to match her pedaling to the speed her father's shove had given her. Maureen looked back, but her hands started to shake, her arms noodling to every curvature and pothole in the road, her legs uncertain and feet slippery on the pedals. Maureen's throat and lungs tightened and her vision blurred with impending tears.

"Reen, you OK?" Kelsey was close by, pedaling steadily.

"Re–en." Vinny sped by, leaving Maureen with a distortion of her own name stretched through the air.

Maureen's head snapped up; she looked ahead and her leg muscles began to tighten and work. Maureen glanced at Kelsey, who waved her hand and smiled nervously. Maureen's elbows were locked and her palms ached.

"Slow down, Reen!" Kelsey called. Maureen tried to turn her pedals backwards, to slow down, but she started to lose her balance. She pedaled evenly and eased into the right turn at the corner; she could no longer hear her father and Tommy laughing as they stretched the dog's jaws apart, their hands on his wet black gums, the dog's yellow teeth snapping.

Just as Maureen began to gain stability, Vinny looped back and cut her off, spraying gritty sand with his back wheel. Maureen skidded and swerved badly in the sandy gravel; the left side of her body went numb and limp, expecting impact. She shut her eyes and imagined scraped skin, ripe and fresh in the second between the flesh's clean lineation and the blood that comes, obscuring the view. Maureen's leg was a fish on a gutting table—slit open, the insides spilled out for passersby to see.

She opened her eyes wide, because as she was beginning to fall, Maureen imagined her mom at home in the brick house wiping the kitchen counter dry, waiting to scold Maureen for hiding her portion of macaroni and cheese under the checkered padding on her chair. Maureen's arm muscles tensed, straightening out the handlebars. The end of the street was in sight, where the asphalt was wide enough for Maureen to turn around without pausing.

Mr. Cooper lived on the corner of the street, and Maureen's father and Tommy rented a house from him. Maureen knew that Mr. Cooper's hostility toward her father involved money, and understood that if she saw him, she was to smile but not talk. Maureen began to make a slow arc back toward her father and Tommy, looking toward Mr. Cooper's, squinting past his sun-faded blue curtains and into his living room.

As Maureen leaned forward, craned her neck, and squinted to see past the glare on Mr. Cooper's window, Vinny bumped into her, and she fell on the gravel, arms still stiffly reaching, fingers shaking. Her right arm, knee, and both hands were grated with fine rock particles, and the neat pink fish meat under Maureen's skin was visible for a second until her blood filled in the deepest cracks,

engorging and oxygenating the gills. Maureen began crying loudly as she watched Vinny's billowing t-shirt shrink down the block. Kelsey expertly rotated her pedals backward, jerked to a stop, and swung one foot to the ground. She agreed to ride back and get Maureen's father, to tell him what happened, to get him to come and push her home.

Maureen pulled her legs into her chest and touched the little stones that were lodged in the gills on her knee, positioning her head so that her dripping tears would mix with the blood. Mr. Cooper had two wizard's ball lawn ornaments, one purple and one silver, and they sat up on concrete pedestals. They reflected his rocky lawn and Maureen and the bicycle, stretching out their images so that Maureen looked small in one, large in the other. She looked at the trees and noticed a blue jay, and she thought about the car ride game she and her father would play, where he would give her a sip of his beer if she correctly guessed an animal he described.

"I am an arthropod with a million quick-moving legs," he said once, taking a swig from his can. "Do you know, Maureen? It's a millipede. Arthropods have an exoskeleton." Maureen never understood what his words meant, but she memorized the sounds and repeated the correct answer whenever she was asked about arthropods.

Sitting in the gravel, Maureen fingered the tiny wet stones. She began to worry that Mr. Cooper would come outside and yell at her because he didn't like Maureen's father, and because she was sitting out in front of his house, looking at his lawn ornaments. Maureen pushed herself up with her scraped and rock-embedded palms and moved slowly towards the bike. Maureen bent to lift the bike but couldn't hold it steady.

Maureen squinted to see Kelsey riding back down the block towards her.

"Uncle John said you have to learn to ride back on your own. He's not coming." Maureen's cuts felt sharp and dirty, her knees still stiff and numb.

"I'll meet you back there. Go ahead," Maureen said.

"Are you sure? I'll wait for you."

Maureen shook her head.

Kelsey rode her bike slowly away, looking over her shoulder and circling once back before rounding the corner. Perhaps Maureen's father had refused to come because a woman was over. Maureen hoped that a woman was the reason, so that someone would know how to remove the coating of concrete and black-pepper pebbles.

The walkway to Mr. Cooper's front door was overgrown with moss and grass, and Maureen walked stiffly forward as not to disturb the blood clouding in her knee. Reaching the door, Maureen sat on the concrete slab that was covered with a straw Welcome mat, crying loudly so that someone inside would hear. She listened to the pitch of her crying and studied Mr. Cooper's concrete squirrels. Kelsey and Maureen had come this close to Mr. Cooper's stoop before to see if there were real squirrels under the concrete coating. When they had asked about the squirrels, Maureen's father had told her, "Mr. Cooper doesn't want your dad and Tommy to live here any more. If he makes us move out, we won't have a place to live, and you won't be able to visit." He hadn't told her whether or not the squirrel figurines were concrete all the way through.

The rock squirrels looked suspiciously real, frozen in the action of reaching for a nut, their heads all turned to varying degrees, their faces in mutual shock. Maureen heard footsteps approaching from behind her and turned to see Mr. Cooper looking down through his screen door, like a beekeeper through his costume.

"John's daughter? Maureen?" He held the door open for Maureen and let her inside. "Are you alright?"

"I fell off my bike, but if I could have a drink?"

"Sure. I'll call your father." Mr. Cooper's hair was whiter than Maureen's father's; his lips and skin were the same peachy tone. There was a pair of dirty gardening gloves on the radiator, warming and drying, in the hallway inside Mr. Cooper's.

"No, not yet please."

"Alright. Just sit tight for a minute and relax."

Mr. Cooper brought Maureen a glass of skim milk and a wash cloth with dishwasher liquid bubbling on top of it. Sitting on Mr. Cooper's orange wooly couch, Maureen drank the milk and worked out a few stones from her leg with the wash cloth, and Mr. Cooper brought a box of Band-Aids.

When Maureen stood up and began to pull up her shorts, Mr. Cooper stared. Maureen wanted Mr. Cooper to see what was there: the deep-down blood that had leaked from its veins but was still caught inside. Did Mr. Cooper have a washcloth for that? Mr. Cooper's eyes moved over the purple blotches rimmed with yellowish-green and tiny veins spread like spider webs toward her lower back, but he did not look long enough; he had not seen it all. Maureen stared at Mr. Cooper's wiry eyebrows, glancing back to her upper thigh, trying to draw his eyes back to the area beneath her shorts. Mr. Cooper's open mouth made a wet clicking noise and he turned and walked quickly into the kitchen. He plucked the telephone from the wall, its long coiled cord clicking against the linoleum, and jabbed at the numbers. The phone gave a green glow to his face, and Maureen could hear the buzzing ring from the other end. Maureen stood with her shorts pulled up as far as they could go, but when she saw that Mr. Cooper wasn't looking, she sat down on the sofa again.

"John? Rob Cooper . . . Maureen is here."

Mr. Cooper led Maureen out to the slab, down the walk, over the chunks of moss, and left her by the bicycle to wait for her father. Maureen watched Mr. Cooper's face, but he kept his eyes on the moss in the cracks of his walkway, and when they approached it, he looked at the bike. Mr. Cooper went back into his house and locked the door, and he went to his desk and found the folder where he kept prospective renters' phone numbers.

Outside in the sun, Maureen's scrapes seemed smaller now, puckered at the edges, and they looked empty without the stones and sand; they weren't worth complaining about at all. Maureen's

father walked slowly toward her, and when he saw the cuts, he bent down to give her a terse hug. The brick house had a clean yellow bathtub and green soap with sand flecks. Maureen looked down at the bicycle.

"I didn't mean to go inside," she said. He nodded, patting his front pocket. The pocket was empty, sticking out into the air like an inquiry, shaped by the cigarette box that usually sat there.

"You're scared of those squirrels," he said nodding and, without looking down at what he was doing, Maureen's father flicked a cigarette butt onto the gravel and crunched it out under his boot. Maureen noticed the movement and smoky smell, but she stared only at his cratered cheek. Maureen's father grasped her arm and pulled her toward the closest of Mr. Cooper's concrete squirrels.

"Pick it up," Maureen's father said, but the squirrel was anchored to the ground with a rusty metal stake, and Maureen could not lift it.

Maureen's father kicked the squirrel with his boot, leaving it cock-eyed, its rusty stake exposed. He let Maureen's arm fall to her side, up-righted the bike, prepared to push it home.

"You tell your mother you fell off the bike this weekend, learning to ride, Maureen."

Maureen nodded, thinking about the chunks of moss that she had dislodged from a fallen tree trunk early that morning. The moss had taken weeks to affix itself to the cooler, shadier side of the trunk and spread to a considerable sponge, but it had only taken Maureen seconds to peel it away in wet, broken clumps.

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The Tragedy of the Little Red Chaperon

| Steven Moss

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

GABRIELLE, a widow and former wife of the late Prince Landry (Prince of France)

BRUNO, her male mistress, later disguised as a beggar and Queen Landry

QUEEN LANDRY, Queen of France

ALICE LANDRY, heiress to the throne and daughter of Gabrielle

1.1

Enter GABRIELLE and BRUNO

GABRIELLE So little are thy manless limbs of flesh
That shake the bowels that was formed of thee;
Withholding the pursuit of a worthy wealth,
Prizèd above all that is to be prized.

BRUNO The high sun that rises and breathes breath
Is the most prized amongst my lying roots[2].
In good time* do deeds rot by those you care, **indeed*
'Tis value lying to the roots thou knowest?

GABRIELLE If my troth* is not buried, yea. **good faith*

BRUNO Hide it not, behold I shalt see it done.
Give this red chaperon to thy daughter,
For it is a mark of my devotion
Of the weakness in my heart for thee.

[*They embrace and kiss*]

Exeunt GABRIELLE

BRUNO A seed does live at the depths of earth
To spot a day the lengths of its girth.
Our core purpose[4] lies deeply within;
Great worth such as this, is worthy of sin.

Exeunt

1.2

Enter QUEEN LANDRY and ALICE

QUEEN LANDRY You are the one daughter never bred
To whom my blessings I most freely give.
I am proud to pronounce thee princesse[5]
Of France, give me thy hand my fair daughter.
[*places a ring*[6] *on her finger*]

1. *Chaperon*: a fifteenth-century versatile burgundy hat warn in all parts of Western Europe
2. *Lying roots:* sexual organs
3. Relatives or family tree
4. *core purpose*: a purpose that "contains corpses" (shakespearswords.com)
5. French for princess
6. Foreshadowing and puns on eye-socket (shakespearswords.com)

Let this be a token of which shall come,
France shall laud[1] and leap for the likelihood!
ALICE O my Mamie[2]! I love thee so!
'Tis my dearly honour to court* thy path. **follow*

Enter GABRIELLE

QUEEN LANDRY Thou art lately come my daughter's mother.
GABRIELLE Other matters of importance stole my willing.
ALICE Look! Is it not precious Gabrielle?
GABRIELLE Most precious[3] I've yet to see.
QUEEN LANDRY What dost thou hold in thy bosom?
GABRIELLE A sign of love for the state of affairs.
[*gives the red chaperon to* ALICE]
ALICE It holds a most lovely shade of cherries[4],
Doth it not Mamie?
QUEEN LANDRY Truly spoken.
GABRIELLE Young madam, come be about our business;
And trouble our ill-resting Queen no further.
Rest for now, till thy wellness returns. Farewell.
ALICE Farewell Mamie.
QUEEN LANDRY Fare thee well, Princesse. *Exeunt*

2.1

Enter GABRIELLE and BRUNO

BRUNO The bitter* pastry and pot of butter **poisoned*
Is for your own wisdom.
GABRIELLE I shall think to't. Do not fret the hour
Of her coming; the moon shouts forth at night,
She will light the path with a crimson hue.
BRUNO Alas, she comes hither.
Graces be with thee, my love.
Exeunt BRUNO

Enter ALICE

GABRIELLE Daughter, I have received word that Mamie
Is darkening in her complexion
Carry along a portion of butter and pastry,
I bid thee, go.

ALICE I will!

GABRIELLE Hang your red chaperon about you
For Mamie t'note with gladness of heart thy coming.
Speed my young child. *Exeunt*

2.2

Enter ALICE and BRUNO, hiding among the forest disguised as a beggar

BRUNO [*aside*] Passes the yarely dame[5] staining the set.
Stars shall fall and bid their homely welcome

1. Praise or honour (shakespeareswords.com)
2. French for grandmother
3. Good-for-nothing (shakespereswords.com)
4. Metaphor for lip (shakespeareswords.com)
5. *Yarely dame*: lively girl (shakespearswords.com)

To the earthy ground before the lune[1] lapses,
Calling the sound to bear death's-head*. Come, after *skulls
T'night shall thy import* be mine for 'er more. *importance

[BRUNO *coming forth*]

ALICE What art thou?[2]
BRUNO A wolvish man that hath not a hovel* *poor shelter
Wherein to lay his head.
ALICE In the dreadful ill-favouredly* weather, *unpleasant
Wouldst be a crime to leave thee where you stand.
The abode of my Mamie is not long,
For my own pleasing you may bear* me there. *accompany
And thou shalt have a place within.
BRUNO I will not sit right in this.
ALICE It is a great merit to assist thee,
Let us be off.
BRUNO Blessings be upon thee. But I must aver* *provide
The engagement of other advancements,
Then we shall pleasantly meet at grandma's.
Though, how long off?
ALICE I do but say beyond the mill 'tis found.
BRUNO Very well. Speed my young child; the night has come,
It is not well to be amongst the brush. *Exeunt*

3.1

Enter GABRIELLE

GABRIELLE Soon at the brisk of morn', a brazen* *powerful
chair Shall strike off the walls encircling it.
I'm justly justified in my pursuits,
And for what use does my tongue quiver?
The end for gold will give us means,

But do the means goldenly give us end*? **results*
The light will hold an excellent feel,
But to what purpose plays the nighted night?
Surely, to give hope to the mornin's sun!
Sun! Sun. Sun. Thy stand was clear in the beam*, **balance*
Racking thoughtfulness' race in the clouds[3],
Why so young, so young, so ever young.
Leafs begin t' fall at times taking times time[4]
With the point to wage* at the moments fine. *Exeunt* **risk*

3.2

Enter BRUNO *and* QUEEN LANDRY

QUEEN LANDRY Who knocks there?
BRUNO Mamie, it is I, the princesse! I arrive to attend thee;
My arms packed with pastry, my mouth with butter,

1. French for moon
2. *What art thou:* Who are thou (*King Lear* 1.4.9)
3. *Racking . . . clouds*: being suspicious he didn't pause to be thoughtful and kind. (shakespeareswords.com)
4. *times time*: life's age (shakespeareswords.com)

And heart galled* with grievance in thy behalf. **swollen; battered*
QUEEN LANDRY Glance the bobbin and free the latch.
BRUNO I thank thee Mamie!
[*enters inside with a sword*]
QUEEN LANDRY I am dreadfully tricked!
Fie, Fie! Vie fatal visit! O, my young daughter,
Tread not upon this path, I pray thee!
BRUNO [*stabs the Queen of France*]
BRUNO Vex thyself no further with marred knees,
For it is Gabrielle that grants thee
With a gift graved in life, vacant of all
Treasure and fruit to satisfy raticles[1]
And tender you with losses fashioned
To a vanishing ghost distrained from orison*. **prayer*
The little red chaperon is attending thy page* **following like a page*
What will come is to be and what will be
Is surety, none have utterance in part.
Fare thee well, Mamie!
QUEEN LANDRY No. Granddaughter. [*She dies*]

4.1

Enter ALICE, *at the door and* BRUNO, *in bed dressed as the Queen of France*

ALICE Mamie! It is I! I arrive to attend to thee,
I carry pastry, and a pot of butter
In thought from Gabrielle of well-wishing.
BRUNO How do I suppose 'tis my granddaughter?
ALICE For I dress in a red chaperon and
A heavy loop made of thy metal.
BRUNO Precisely spoken.
Glance the bobbin and free the latch.

ALICE Mamie, a shadowed cast has edged thee;
Hast thou eaten in any recent times?
BRUNO I am pained of the thinking.
Please, draw the pastries, I am unable.
ALICE Speak not in ill-rooted* manners, **unsteady*
In the morrow will speedy strength allow—
BRUNO Of my portion take!
ALICE I partake not in waning thy visage
Or deepening the taste* of your illness. **degree*

[*placing the pastry and pot of butter on the chair*[2]]
Grandmother?
Unproper* are thy limbs, eyes, and t— **shared with another*
Enters GABRIELLE *screaming*
GABRIELLE Stop you fiend and beastly being!
[BRUNO *releases his sword from* ALICE'S *eye socket]*

1. The first root that comes from a plant
2. *Chair:* the throne seized by Gabrielle

No! No, no! I have come too late!
BRUNO Silence! [*Alice dies*]
Unproperly unproper were her limbs, eyes, and throne!
Do not utter thick*
speeches of ignomy*. **Clouded/dishonor; shame*

GABRIELLE I wish to not speak at all.
From both here and hence* I am of naught! **In the next world*
[*She eats a portion of pastry and butter and she dies*]
BRUNO Fare thee well my love.
For I did fully entreato thee of furtherance* **persuade/assistance*
In revealing the corner-cap[1] of plans.
For no petticoat inherits the chair,
It awaits a codpiece to enter its chambers! *Exeunt*

1. *corner-cap*: cap with three corners (shakespeareswords.com); indicating that Bruno had three stages of his plan and Gabrielle was the third

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Tale of an Alchemist

| Matthew Mercuri

Charleston
1890s

Beneath the brick skin of that holy city, Leer Von Kertzel set his hands to work. A professor of natural science at the College, Von Kertzel lived in an apartment near the harbor, his personal domicile comprising three narrow floors and a spacious attic. Until the late hours of the night, Von Kertzel toiled within his residence at a table cluttered with papers, glass tubes, and odd metal trinkets, the peaks of his vertebrae visible under the cloth of his shirt. If German phrenologists were to mark a man's intellect by the thickness of his spine, then Von Kertzel would rank among the species' greatest. Poring over pages of weathered notes and diagrams, mania penciled in the lines of his forehead, Von Kertzel sought a genital power yet hidden from man: to create, by a series of physical mutations, value from the valueless to direct the transformation of detritus into precious ore.

Von Kertzel chose to conduct his work at the greatest possible elevation, which, in this case, was the thin-shingled attic of his residence. To access the study, he would ascend three flights of steep stairs that groaned with every footfall. Once situated in the attic, the ambitious professor would remove all but his undergarments, crouch on a cleared space of floor near the center of the room, and bend his body into a series of unnatural positions, to the point where his head pulsed from deficient circulation and his ability to think almost vanished entirely. It was only then, in the circumstance of those strange contortions, that Leer Von Kertzel's greatest ideas came to mind. Numbly, he would relocate to his workbench, stepping carelessly over candle stubs, test-tube racks, and empty liquor bottles, and there let instinct guide his hand.

From the attic window, circular in shape like the porthole of a great vessel, Von Kertzel sometimes observed the harbor where barks

nodded lazily in the surf. In the profundities of his soul, he felt an attraction to the dark waters that stretched into the horizon. Since the time of his youth, he had enjoyed the mysteries of the sea and had suffered a terrific wonder at the prospect of thousands lost and entombed in the gardens of the deep. Moreover, he felt an unlikely kinship with the brutish sailors of the fishery, those heroes of the water who, by their voyaging, brought distant worlds into being.

Enough, however, with philosophizing. Like the masons of Rome, whose ionic temples endure to this day, Von Kertzel prayed that his work would leave a permanent mark on civilization. Yet, to whom or what he prayed is uncertain. Baptized a Roman Catholic, Von Kertzel lived in faithful observance of the tradition until 1886, when the ground beneath his feet quaked violently during a saint's day service. Upon leaving the congregation, he observed in the street one of the many chasms that had opened throughout Charleston on that day, pulling the cityscape from under itself. This phenomenon so rattled the faith of our protagonist, who interpreted the event as a preternatural warning, that he never again stepped into a house of God.

Now, for fear that our story should continue without full accuracy of detail, remove the crucifix that you might reasonably presume hanging upon the wall in the stairwell (for Charleston was home to one of the country's largest Christian populations) and replace it with a tapestry of the Zodiac, for Leer Von Kertzel, after his near 20 year engagement in the Church, began to meddle in astrology. Not unlike his fascination with the sea, Von Kertzel felt a sense of oneness when observing a star-laden sky, whereupon he believed were written the codes of human conduct and the laws of destiny. From the expanse of space, he drew the notion that those suns were blinking for him and him alone.

Nor did this man—scholar, scientist, dreamer—nor did he live in solitude. Think not that Von Kertzel toiled uninterrupted through the night, the only sound the scrape of his pencil, the hiss of chemical mutations, and the intermittent moan of aging timbers in

his apartment. Rather, hear through the floorboards the keening of an infant whose parent was lost to what the public regarded a passing fable and to what the publican deemed the idle fancy of an unrobed scholar who spent too many hours twisting his mind in the corner of a drinking hole. (Suddenly, the aspect of Professor Von Kertzel that you envision grows a bit more defeated; the hair upon his temples is grey and receding, the bags under his eyes profound and discolored.)

Von Kertzel's wife, Lydia, was a lifetime resident of Charleston and daughter of the local fire chief. Like her mother, who gained renown during the Civil War for her treatment of soldiers on both sides of the battleline, Lydia attended nursing school. She then worked at the medical college until her marriage in the winter of 1893. Aside from conjugal duties, matters of religion were the prime concern of Lydia Von Kertzel's bridal life, and she undertook them with unbending formality. In weather fair or foul, she attended church twice every Sunday and as often during the week as there were devotional services.

The marriage of Leer and Lydia persisted peaceably for 12 months, during which time Lydia bore a son. However, when a trenchcoated gentleman began to visit the apartment repeatedly with a request to speak in private with the professor, cracks began to form in the plaster of Leer and Lydia's union. The frequent callings of this unidentified figure, one who stood upon the threshold in a derby that shadowed his face, struck a change in Von Kertzel's demeanor. Although he never, under normal circumstances, divulged details to his wife regarding his experimentation, Von Kertzel became mute at this time toward any and all references to the state of his work, assuming a temperament best described as melancholic. In addition to adopting irregular eating habits, he threw hygiene to the wayside, bathing seldom and ceasing to shave. Moreover, his gaze no longer seemed to fall fixedly on his infant son, who, when enwombed, demanded the professor's utmost interest. Most strikingly of all, Von Kertzel resigned his position as

an associate professor at the College. In the days that followed, he would disappear in the late hours of the morning and return after nightfall with a liquored tongue. Upon eating a cold supper, he would ascend to the attic and work through the remainder of the night, the masts in the harbor invisibly nodding him onward.

When questioned by his wife as to the identity of the visitor, Von Kertzel never cared to provide a consistent answer. On some days the gentleman was an associate from the department of natural science, on others an old friend from elementary school, still on others a man from the press. Irked by blatant falsity, Lydia resolved to pursue the mysterious caller after one of his visits. She waited in a dark corner of the foyer while the man descended the stairs, donned his coat and hat, and exited the front door. Lydia then wrapped herself in her warmest attire and followed the stranger out into an abnormally cold morning. She looked upward at the frozen sky and marveled at the snow that fell steadily around her, siphoning sound from the air. The ground was blanketed such that she could identify the footprints of the man in question and follow his path into the heart of the city.

It is here, however, that accounts differ. Some say that Mrs. Von Kertzel lost the footprints almost immediately upon leaving the apartment. Others contend that she followed the trail to an abandoned building, which, despite its boarded windows and doors, issued from its chimney a plume of black smoke. Still others maintain that the footprints vanished in mid-step, and when Mrs. Von Kertzel looked up to assess her whereabouts, she found herself in an unrecognizable and vacant area of the city and nervously retraced her path. All accounts agree, however, that Mrs. Von Kertzel did not, on that snowy morning, come any closer to identifying the gentleman whose recent presence so disturbed her husband's state of being. She thus resolved to repeat her pursuit on the next viable occasion.

The following day in Charleston proved equally as frigid. In the evening, Von Kertzel returned earlier than was usual from his daily outing, during which he had traversed the frosted walks in a black slicker and a bicorn hat. The city was still glowing orange in the late-day sun. Upon entering the parlor, Von Kertzel stumbled toward each of the bay windows, throwing closed the curtains and filling the air with dust from within their folds. Amid the dimness, Von Kertzel towered over the hearth, silhouetted there like Prometheus at Heaven's forge, and trembled with severest intoxication. Lydia dared not speak. Rather than inquire as to her previous day's pursuit, she backed slowly out of the parlor and undertook with industry the dinner preparations.

Early the next morning, an awful odor descended upon the apartment. It was a reek of natural decay, of the kind that permeates the ward of a lying-in hospital. Soon thereafter, Lydia heard the attic door opening and her husband's footsteps proceeding quickly down the stairs. As he passed wordlessly through the foyer, his chin angled downward in anticipation of the morning air, she saw him slip a lustrous item into the pocket of his slicker, something that, for a brief moment—that is, until her mind expelled the notion—seemed to her a leaf of hammered gold.

When the door slammed shut, Mrs. Von Kertzel removed the apron from her waist, slung it over her forearm, and began to search out the origin of the unsavory aroma. As she climbed the groaning stairs, the odor grew more pungent, forcing her to mask her face with the apron. In his hurry, the professor had failed to latch the attic door, which his faithful wife now pushed open with her palm.

From inside there issued a faint hiss, but the dimness of the room prevented her from seeking the source, a black sheet having been draped over the circular window. What Lydia Von Kertzel beheld upon pulling down the sheet was, without question, a scene of disaster. The light beamed hard on the black-topped workbench, whereupon were scattered what appeared to be the links of a broken chain, twinkling altogether like a constellation. Beside the bench sat

a brass basin, which she identified as the origin of the sibilance. She approached it hesitantly, half-expecting to see a serpent lying coiled in the bottom. Yet, what she witnessed instead, after mustering the courage to peer inside, were two clods of a substance like clay, black as peat and sending a malodorous white vapor.

Had she appreciated the powers of the possible, Lydia Von Kertzel would have seized this moment to attune herself to the cause of her husband's preposterous behavior and deteriorating physical condition. However, rather than inspect with curiosity the work of her husband's hands, Mrs. Von Kertzel gathered the contents of the basin into a bag and sent them duly to the street-side trash heap. She returned to the study with rags and a bucket, cleansing the attic from its top to bottom and discarding items of no apparent value. From the chaos of her husband's work, Lydia Von Kertzel brought order. All of the furnishings were taken to their proper places, tidily and logically arranged, until the space resembled any other attic wherein a child at play could safely uncork his imagination. She looked proudly on her work and then moved downstairs to stir the baby from his nap, to prepare supper, and to await her husband's vulgar return. Moreover, she resolved to announce that evening her distaste for his recent affairs and to demand that he reassume his position at the College or else witness the departure of his only wife and son.

However, professor Von Kertzel never returned that day after hurriedly leaving in his afternoon attire. To no avail, Lydia checked the local pubs and thereafter directed her steps to the police department, encountering on the way her husband's bicorn abandoned in the walk. Several hours later, Officer Carroll of the Oyster Point patrol found the drunkard professor sitting in the crotch of a barren tree. His feet were shoeless, his soles shredded. Most notably, his pockets were empty. Carroll transported Von Kertzel to the Charleston asylum, where he was temporarily admitted for evaluation. Designated not an immediate threat to himself or others, Von Kertzel was released in several days' time with

a recommendation of bed rest and close supervision.

On the first day of his homecoming, the professor spent the afternoon seated at the hearth, a genial fire glowing in the grate, a glass of warm milk on the stand beside him. An infant's babble sounded from the adjacent room. Three floors above, the door to the attic was fastened shut, everything inside untouched since the day Lydia searched out the stench and brought the attic to an ordered state. With icy fingers, Von Kertzel clutched the arms of his sitting chair, his feet tapping the floor without pattern, his jaw hanging open, sour breath passing warmly from his mouth. And his eyes, like two black holes, gazed beyond the cracked walls of the room, as if indulging some unearthly recollection, a time before that thing of darkness had displaced him.

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Tall Tales of the Appalachian Mountains

| Patricia Graham

Chapter 1
The Sin-Eaters

(This tale is based on an experience of Verna Crowe Humphrey and is situated in the small town of Kingston, Tennessee)

I reckoned my first experience with the sin-eaters was when my sister, Elizabeth, had died. I was only about eight or nine years old. She had been sick for several weeks, and she continuously worsened to a point to where the doctors could not help her anymore. She died from typhoid fever.

Several hours before her death, an omen appeared at my mother's window. It was a bright red fireball. My brothers and I were sitting on the porch, while my mother tended to Elizabeth's fever, and it was then, when we seen it. Down Buckcreek Road sits our family cemetery and it was almost nightfall. First, the ball began to appear as a mist, and then it began to take on this glow. It grew brighter and brighter until it was all shades of yellows, oranges, and reds. Next, it began to lift off the ground and move down the road toward our house. Well, we were all astonished. We thought the devil himself was coming after us. Faster and faster it moved down the road toward our house. And as suddenly as it got to our house, it stopped right in front of my dying sister's window. It just levitated there for a moment and then extinguished itself. My sister died a couple of hours later.

It should not have seemed strange, because on the preceding night the family had heard screams and cries from the woods. It appeared that all of nature knew that death was lurking. A screech owl had been hollering for a week. But this sound was so eerie. My brother and I looked into the woods with our lanterns to see if we could determine what critter was making this awful noise. And much to our surprise, we would soon have our answer. A mountain lion exited from the darkness and ran toward us on the porch. My

brother grabbed his rifle and we turned around to shoot it, but it had vanished into the darkness. Needless to say, we were on guard the rest of night.

Word had got around the hollow about Elizabeth's death. One of the tasks that my family felt necessary to do was to prepare my sister for her journey in her afterlife. My parents hired a sin-eater. Not many people know about them now. But, we believed then that the soul lingered with its body for three days before it was buried. I was told that a Negro man, named Silas Jackson, would be coming to our home to help Elizabeth prepare for her journey to heaven. I had only seen one or two Negroes in my whole life, and Silas Jackson was one of them. Silas was a former slave and used to sit on the porch of the general store. He was always there on a Saturday afternoon when my family would come to town. He would buy a candy that all of us folks called "nigger toes." It was a chocolate drop with crème filling. We meant nothing by the name. That what were folks called black people back then. He would always offer me some candy from his nickel paper bag full of goodies, but I was scared to death of him. Little did I know he would be at my house two weeks later as Elizabeth's sin-eater.

The custom in those days was to pay a person to come in and eat and drink as much as possible, so the sin-eater could take on any sins that a deceased person might have incurred before going to meet their maker. I did not believe that my sister could have that much sin; after all, she was only sixteen. However, my family argued that this would give Elizabeth a better chance of getting through the pearly gates.

Silas Jackson showed up our house on the second night of Elizabeth's "sitting-up," and he stayed with us, as so the custom goes, until the fourth day. My family called them "sittings," because members of the family would take turns sitting with the body until a proper religious service was given. Silas ate and ate and said some chants and sang over Elizabeth in a language which I had never heard before. I never saw a person that could eat so much as Silas.

There was another practice of sin-eating, which my family did not observe, but others in Dogwood Hollow practiced. The sin-eater was paid a sum of money, but the amount was not disclosed to the rest of the family. The amount was agreed upon between the eldest male of the family and the sin-eater. This chore required the sin-eater to sleep in the deceased's bed for three days in order to take on the sins of the deceased loved one. Beds were so scarce and hard to come by, so they were never thrown away. The belief was if the sin-eater slept in the bed of the deceased, then no harm would fall upon the person(s) who would sleep in the bed in the future. Silas Jackson stayed with Elizabeth until the preacher-man spoke his first words over her; then Silas's task was complete until someone else died in the community and needed his services.

Chapter 2
The Conjuring Rock

(The setting is at Shuler's Point in Whittier, N.C and is based on a day in the life of Cousin Clinton)

When I was just a young boy, about ten years old, I was told by my pappy that I was becoming a man. "In order to become a man, you need to become self-sufficient," says pap. My first task was to master the "conjuring" rock. Times were poor then, and my family could not afford bullets, so we utilized what nature provided us. The conjuring rock is not just any old rock, but a very special rock that glides in the air with direct precision and weighs virtually nothing. My dad and I gathered up our flour sacks and baling twine and began hiking up the mountain to Shuler's Point. Shuler's Point was a secret place for hunters to hone their skills as a huntsman. All types of game wandered those parts, and I was going to learn how to use my first rocks on some rabbits. My pappy would use to tell me about the special powers that a conjuring rock possessed. I had always heard stories about this rock growing up, but I had never seen one until then. The legend goes that when Mother Earth created her gar-

den on the mountain top, everything was connected. Trees, flowers, animals, and the streams could communicate to one another. But the rocks were not permitted to speak to no-one except to man. As the hunters began to search for their quarry, they used the rocks as tools to build, to cook, and eventually to kill. The rock became very powerful and Mother Earth became very angry. So she put a curse upon the rock where the rock could no longer speak to man. Man would have to decide which rock would be appropriate to use from that time forth. I was becoming a man and this was a task I had to undertake to prove myself.

But, I had to learn how to choose my own rocks for the hunt. There are several things that I needed to gain knowledge of before I could hunt with rocks. First, I needed to know how to find these special rocks. The rocks had to be gathered from the Tuckasegee River and it should not sparkle when the sun hit it. The reasoning was when I threw the rock it would attract sunlight and it would alert the rabbits. The stone also had to be dark and round in color; slate rock was the best choice to use. The weight was no more than a pound and about four inches in diameter. Once I found me two or three of these rocks, I put them in my flour sack and was ready to proceed.

The second thing I had to learn was to become skilled at throwing the rocks. This was probably the hardest thing I had ever done. My dad would line up pinecones on top of boulders and I would try to knock them off. When I mastered this undertaking, my dad would throw the pinecones up in the air, and I would have to knock them out of the air. These were the three things I had to learn before I could hunt. You could not throw a rock over handed; it had to be under handed and fly in a straight pattern. Eventually, I learned to throw my rocks with a spin and/or at a curve if the rabbit decided to turn or hop at the last minute.

As I was saying, I am at top of Shuler's Point, and this was the first day of my hunting adventure, a ten year-old boy turning into a man. My father and I camped in a nearby clearing where he knew

rabbits would come out before the sun set. There we stood, in our slyness, behind a great oak tree, waiting for our prey. From the corner of my eye, I spotted my first opportunity to claim my trophy. I crawled through the grass as my father watched patiently. Slowly, I moved five feet at a time toward tonight's supper. As I stood up, I took out one of my conjuring rocks from my flour sack, took in a deep breath, and begin to take aim at the rabbit's head. I let it fly. Wham! The rabbit jumped in mid-air as my rock battered his head. The rabbit lay motionless and it did not move. I killed my first living, breathing creature. As I look down at its bleeding skull, I began to cry. I did not feel much like a man. My pappy told me that it was okay. Drawing blood, no matter how small, should have an act of remorse. My pappy explained to me that this rabbit sacrificed himself for us so that the family might eat and live another day. I did become a man that day, but it was not because I had killed a living thing. I began to understand there were always sacrifices done by others when raising a family.

Chapter 3
The One-Pound Grasshopper

(This tall-tale is placed at Clinch River in Kingston, Tennessee and is told by Cousin Kenny)

I had just recuperated from the chicken-pox and my brother, Clinton, was awful angry at me. My maw had told me in order to get rid of the chicken pox, I needed to go and stand in the chicken lot everyday for an hour and the pox would jump off me and they would leap onto the chickens. So I did and the chicken pox disappeared. What I did not know was that my brother was collecting eggs every day after school while I was resting in bed. Sure as shooting, my brother come down with those pox too. Those dang nab chickens did not want them pox, so they gave them to my brother. He was sore at me for several days.

I thought I would make it up to him by taking him fishing on the

Clinch River. It was a beautiful sunny day and the paddle boats were running and ferrying their passengers to town. While he was recovering from the pox, I decided to gather some bait for our fishing trip. I collected worms, mole crickets, and grasshoppers. Every day I would ask him if he was ready to go fishing, and he would say, "No!" Well I was not about to let my bait die because he was angry at me. I fed my bait faithfully with all kinds of vegetables. I gave my ground crickets some mushrooms, my red-worms had vegetable scraps mixed with dirt, and my grasshoppers were fed spinach from my maw's green patch.

One day my brother asks me if I still have the bait to go fishing. I told him that I did. Clinton gathered up our cane poles while I retrieved all the bait, which was living in their own containers, and then we proceeded to walk toward the river. We had an ole wooden bateau moored off to a Poplar tree. We climbed in, being careful not lose any of our bait, and pushed off to fish for largemouth bass. When we got to a well known fishing hole, in which largemouth bass were spawning, we decided to bait our hooks with our critters. Clinton always used ground crickets and earthworms on a medium black hook. I preferred to use small black hook and the bait of my choice was grasshoppers. Much to my surprise, when I open my box, there stood inside five one-pound grasshoppers. I thought my bait felt a lot heavier. I figured I was still weak from the pox. Nope, it wasn't the pox. I had raised one-pound grasshoppers. I could hardly believe my eyes. I shook Clinton's arm to tell him about these giant grasshoppers, but he did not want to hear it; all he wanted to do was fish and for me to leave him alone.

I set there and thought, "I am going to need a bigger hook!" I searched my tackle, and I found a large, old, catfish hook. If I remembered it correctly, it was rusty too. Those grasshoppers were a slippery sort. I fought to put the first grasshopper on the hook. He had spit all kinds of tobacco juice on me and squirted me in the eye. I was thinking, "There is no way a bass is going to jump on a grasshopper as ugly as this." I was wrong! My line began to tighten

and then my reel began to spin out of control. I do believe smoke was coming out from that reel. I yanked on that pole to show that fish who was in control. By this time, Clinton was in hysterics and hollering at me. He had set there for twenty minutes and did not even get a nibble. I fought and fought that mighty beast. He swerved under rocks, pulled my line underneath some submerge trees and jumped in mid-air, but I would not relinquish my authority over him. Clinton was still yelling, "You have caught a monster! Cut the line!" After one hour of fighting with this bass, I finally landed him in our Jon boat. It was a largemouth bass and he was over twenty-five pounds and two feet long. Even the boat sunk an extra three inches deeper into the water because of the fish's weight.

If I thought Clinton was mad at me before over the pox, I had not seen anything yet. He stared at the fish and looked at my extra big hook and began to question me what I was fishing with. I told him, "I tried to tell you about my grasshoppers. They are over a pound each." Well he did not believe me until I opened up the box. There stood four more one-pound grasshoppers. Well, Clinton was turning all shades of red and he got so mad that he flipped the boat over with all of our fishing gear, my one, twenty-five pound bass, and the other four one-pound grasshoppers. We had to swim for shore. Clinton accused me of not purposely sharing my grasshoppers with him and trying to outdo him once again by making him look bad. We walked back home, on our dirt road, sopping wet, and nothing to show for. When we got home, maw questioned us on how well did we do on our fishing trip. I did not say a word, but Clinton told maw about my five one-pound grasshoppers and the twenty-five pound bass that I caught. And would you believe that she said, "Well, if you did not catch any fish today, just say so. You don't have to make up a fish yarn to fool your old maw." Clinton did not speak to me for two months after that.

Chapter 4
An Appalachian Shivaree

(This story is set in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and told by Uncle Walter)

I remember my wedding day like it was yesterday. I was going to marry the prettiest girl in Rockwood, Tennessee. I was determined that none of my buddies would find me on my wedding night. Most folks don't know anything about an Appalachian Shivaree, but it is not something a groom wants to face on his first night of marriage. It is like a bachelor party that has gone hay-wire.

Lucy Mae Adcox was her name, and I was the luckiest man in the world because she said "yes" to my proposal of marriage. Her cousins and I had been childhood friends all my life. But they were known to pull many a prank, and I was not going to fall victim to their shenanigans. I was determined that they would not find me or Lucy Mae on our first night of marriage.

I am here to tell you that it was the worst day of my life. Not because of the wedding, but what followed later that evening. Unannounced to me, Lucy had told one of her first cousins, Sally, where we would spend our honeymoon for the next four days. My uncle had a cabin about five miles from our future home, and he gave me the keys for us to consummate our marriage. I felt very confident that I had succeeded in my task, and her cousins would not find us. Was I wrong! Sally told everyone.

Lucy and I were married on a hot summer day at Lawnville Baptist Church, at four o'clock, on a Saturday afternoon, during the month of June. We followed the traditional ritual of jumping over the broomstick, to prove that we were man and wife, and no longer considered single folk. We done the customary things that a newly married couple do. We open our gifts from the community, and had some wedding cake that my Aunt Jane had made for our wedding.

Our horse and buggy was already hitched, and some of the local people had tied some tin cans to the wagon in order to rouse up anyone in Bentwood Hollow. Lucy and I had only traveled a mile down the road when I stopped the wagon. I untied those cans,

because I did not want anyone following us to my uncle's cabin. It was already eight o'clock in the evening and the sun had already set. I took Lucy Mae from the carriage and picked her up to carry her over the threshold. I looked around one more time to assure myself that I would not be aggravated by any mischief. I could not the shake the feeling that I was being watched by something from the woods. I figured it was just my imagination. Lucy and I entered into our temporary refuge. I kissed her so gently on the lips and looked into her eyes, oh how they sparkled. I suggested that we should make ourselves more comfortable. We didn't have running water back then, but there were several pails of water that had been placed in the bedroom for us to clean up from the dusty journey on the road. Lucy went into the bedroom to dress in her nightgown as I waited patiently for her.

Suddenly, I heard a strange sound from outside the window. It sounded like a wounded animal. I went to the window to see if we were in danger, and the sound continuously got louder. I ran to the kitchen to search for a gun, but I could not find one. All kinds of knocking on pans, banging of cow-bells, and lots of hollering were going on outside my uncle´s door. I ran to lock the back door when it suddenly flew open. There stood all of Lucy Mae's cousins and other men from the community. I knew I was doomed. Big Joe had a tote bag and wrestled me to the ground. While Joe held me, George pulled the tote over my head; Billy Ray tied up the tater sack with me in it. I remember Lucy screaming, "Please! Don't do this!"

I don't remember exactly how I ended up in the woods, but it seemed that I was driven around in the back of a farm truck for hours. As they untied the sack, I tried to fight all of them, but they disappeared into the darkness. There I stood in my long-johns, all covered with red clay, and other kinds of debris. I looked around to try to gather my bearings. They had taken me down the road, about three miles from my uncle's cabin. Well it is not as bad as I thought; they could have thrown me in the Little Tennessee River, and it was even further from my uncle's cabin. If I recollect correctly, I began

walking back to my uncle's house, and I heard something that I did not like. It was thundering in the distant. Here I was standing in my long-johns, in the middle of woods, with all kinds of critters, on my honeymoon night, and now it was fixin to rain.

It come a big ole storm that evening. By the time I reached my uncle's cabin, well let's just say, I have seen hogs cleaner than what I looked like that evening. My wife was not there at the cabin either. Once again I heard the cousins approaching the cabin and right before my eyes, they were pushing Lucy Mae around in a wooden wheelbarrow. They grabbed me and put me in the wheelbarrow with Lucy, and then wheeled us to the front door. I was so angry! I was ready to kill George, Billy Ray, and Big Joe, and any other man who approach me and my bride.

Lucy Mae and I entered into the cabin and I heard the prettiest sound coming from outside. All of the townsmen began to sing, "Let me call you sweetheart." Big Joe played the fiddle while George strummed on a guitar. My night of "shiveering" was now complete. Lucy Mae and I can laugh about it now, but it was not so funny way back then.

Chapter 5
A Sharecropper Daughter's Tale
(The setting is Kingston, Tennessee, around the 1940's)

My father was a sharecropper and as a child we were always moving from farm to farm. When I was in the fourth grade, we moved to a community far from any town. It was seventeen miles from the closest town, and I had to walk three and half miles to school.

The house we lived in was two stories and with a big wraparound porch. The dining room had one wall that was entirely made of windows; and it the yard directly behind the dining room was solid boulders of rocks. At certain times in the afternoon it would sound like every glass pane in those windows had fallen out onto the rocks

and crashed. When we would check to see what had happened, there stood the windows intact in their panes.

As I lay in the floor in the living room doing my homework, it sounded as if a man in heavy work boots went up the steps, which was in the dining room to the bedroom upstairs. The steps would stop right above my head but no-one was there.

Sometimes when listened to the radio at night, a man's form would appear at the window. He appeared to be looking inside. If we went on the porch to see if anyone was there, we would see nothing. We had to go outside to use the bathroom because there was no running water to our house and I was afraid of the dark. I always made mother get up with me in the middle of the night to go with me outside. I had to use the bathroom one night and got my mother to go outside with me. As I squatted to use nature's restroom a man appeared behind me, but I did not know it. My mother began screaming for me to get to the house, but I told her, "I am not finish." When I got in the house she told me that a man was standing right behind me peering from the woods. If I had known it then, I would probably have had to change my underwear. My family lived in that house until I graduated from elementary school.

The school itself was a one-room school house. And we had to walk about one mile and half to a spring to retrieve water to drink. One day another girl and I were allowed to go fetch the water. Just as we started to fill our buckets, there were two black racer snakes reared up on their tails and they chased us half way back to the school. Needless to say, our buckets were left behind, and the teacher had to send some boys to retrieve them with water.

On my walks to school I would have to pass three deserted houses. I was told by other classmates that the houses were haunted. I always gained a little speed when walking by those houses, which was probably a good thing. I always found that frogs and watercress in the creek were more interesting than school. I was thirteen when we moved from that area and I learned what electricity installed a house, but not before I met the acquaintance of Old Charley Tate.

Between the school and the spring lived a family, called the Tates, that were on a little bit on the illegal side. That is to say, Old man Charley Tate made moonshine. I never knew where his still was. On one hot summer day, Old man Tate was fermenting some of his "shine" in five-gallon buckets, and a revenuer had heard of old man Tate's enterprising business and had come to check him out.

Charlie was quick thinking, smart as a fox he was. He grabbed some hot corn pones in which his wife had just baked and threw them on top of the buckets of sour mash. The government man looked at Charlie's five gallon buckets and said, "You have some fine looking slop sitting there." Charlie readily agreed with the revenuer and explained that he had two young hogs out back and he was fattening them up for winter. When the revenuer was satisfied that charley had no moonshine, he left old Charlie's house. Charlie strained the cornbread off the shine, took a big swig of his white liquor and said, "I believe it is tastier than it was before."

Patricia L. H. Graham is a T.E.S.O.L. graduate student at Western Carolina University. She has a B.A. in English Literature and a B.A. in Spanish. She has a love of languages and a profound understanding of the diversified cultures in her region. Patricia's Appalachian roots are inherent to her moral fiber and a witness to her altruistic spirit. She makes and gives away handmade quilts, she cans vegetables and jellies to give to her friends and neighbors, and she enjoys playing the violin for family reunions in the Tennessee Mountains.

Jurors

Nic Brown's short story collection *Floodmarkers* was published in 2009 and selected as an Editor's Choice by *The New York Times Book Review*. His novel *Doubles* was published in 2010. His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in the *Harvard Review, Glimmer Train*, and *Epoch*, among many other publications. A graduate of Columbia University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he now teaches at the University of Northern Colorado.

John Laflin is an Emeritus Professor of English from Dakota State University, where he taught for the past twenty-five years before retiring this past spring. He founded the Alpha Gamma Lambda chapter of Sigma Tau Delta in 1993. Now that he's retired he can turn his attention to his favorite non-academic pursuits—fly fishing and golf.

Todd Martin is professor of English and Director of the Core Curriculum at Huntington University where he teaches nineteenth and twentieth century literature. He has published on a variety of authors, including John Barth, E. E. Cummings, Clyde Edgerton, and Edwidge Danticat, in such journals as *Studies in Short Fiction, The Explicator, Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society, Literature and Belief*, and *Atenea: A Bilingual Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*. His current research interest is the short fiction of Katherine Mansfield; he will be presenting a paper on her work at Cambridge, England, in the spring.

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