

# bio**Stories**

*sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives*



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Cover Photograph: "Window 1" by Tammy Ruggles

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*sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives*

*bioStories* is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly conveyed can help strangers peer briefly within its whole, hold that life momentarily in their eye, and quite possibly see the world anew through that lens.

We feature new work weekly on our website, gather materials twice a year in issues like the one you are now reading, and offer thematic anthologies cultivated from work featured on the website.

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# Kindness

by Sharon Frame Gay

According to legend, angels are mystical, ethereal beings with feathered wings, gauzy gowns, and Mona Lisa smiles. They perform miracles from afar, gently pulling on the strings of our lives to veer us out of oncoming traffic, heal our sick children, or act as messengers for our prayers.

But I have learned that there are angels who fly much closer to the ground, touching our hearts with their kindness in unforgettable ways.

One such lesson arrived on a cold January day, the kind of day when even God was snuggled under blankets, sipping cocoa. He must have fallen asleep on His watch, because the winter skies cracked open with a ticker tape parade of snow, inches upon inches falling on our neighborhood. There was no filter to this storm, but rather a winter snowfall of such abandon that the dog could barely navigate his daily rounds. Absent intriguing scents, snow to his belly, he begged to come in and stretch out by the fire.

My husband, Ben, was huddled under two quilts, shivering. Radiation to his brain left his body regulating devices askew, and he was just shy of hypothermia. We both kept our fingers crossed that the power wouldn't go out, a common occurrence in our neck of the woods.

By nightfall, the snow miraculously stopped, leaving behind a night blanketed by flinty stars, illuminated by a fresh moon. Outside, the snow glittered, lying crisp and unmarred, several inches covering our yard and driveway. Pretty as it was, there was danger in the cold, and I prayed that the streets would be navigable should Ben have a seizure and require help. As the only driver, and a poor one at best, I felt not a little panic.

As we watched TV in the back of the house by the fire, I heard a scraping noise out front. There was a steady staccato to the sound, interesting enough for me to crawl out from my blanket to peer out the front window.

There, in the moonlight, were several neighbors. Some I knew well, others I had never met. They each had a snow shovel and were quietly shoveling our driveway. I hurried into my boots and coat, grabbed my shovel, and

drifted out into the snow to greet them. The world was quiet under the cloak of white, stars so brilliant that they cut holes through the cloth of the night sky, and the moon shimmered on the fallen snow, a spotlight on the faces of those who were there to help. There was little talk, just gentle smiles with a few softly spoken words and the steady shoveling. Working alongside my neighbors I experienced something deep in my soul that expanded out through my blood like tiny bubbles of champagne—a feeling of joy. Snow angels had fallen from heaven and left their mark indelibly on my driveway and in my heart.

As the cold gave way to February, there seemed some hope that spring might join us. But despite the promising slant of light as we crept closer to the sun, Ben's condition wasn't improving, and although the days grew longer, our lives felt shrouded in darkness. Ben needed to be moved to a facility. He left our house one dark afternoon in the back of an ambulance, both of us knowing he would not return.

I learned then that the halls of hospice are filled with angels. They occupy the corners of the rooms and walkways. The winter windows are frosted from their gentle sighs on cold panes.

Some are there to welcome home the weary traveler, while others hover to support and bring comfort to those destined to be left behind. Candles flicker in the windows of those who have passed, a lighthouse for the angels, a beacon showing the way.

But not all hospice angels tread on heavenly planes. There was the man, a stranger, who spoke to me in the hallway. For a moment or two we were joined by our sorrow, commiserating, exchanging hugs. Then we turned away with sad smiles and resolve to continue our vigil with loved ones. The next morning he came to our room with flowers for me. "Happy Valentine's Day," he said with tears in his eyes. "These are from your husband. He would want you to have them." I never knew his name, or where he lived, I knew only that he walked on this earth, an angel of bone and sinew.

Angels entered the room each day in the form of nurses, social workers, friends and neighbors. They made blankets to keep Ben warm and put hummingbird feeders outside to attract the tiny birds to Ben's window. The birds would come, even though the February rains threatened to weigh down their feathers and push them to the



ground, still they came, defying all odds, dancing in the wind.

One weary, grey afternoon, I returned home from hospice alone. It had been a sad day. A day of weariness and sorrow, exhaustion and trepidation. I needed to return to the house, feed the dog, pack a bag, get the mail—the everyday duties we must accomplish in the teeth of life's turbulent changes. The sun was setting as I drove down my street, the hills beginning to darken, another day swallowed up in the great business of dying.

As I pulled into my driveway, I looked up towards my front door and the planter beneath the sidelight window. To my amazement, the planter was filled with bright, colorful primroses, their little faces peering out, illuminated by the last rays of sunshine. They were merry, hopeful, completely unexpected, a symbol of friendship and caring—the perfect gift when my heart was so heavy. More angels had touched me. Lovely neighbors, transforming the twilight in my heart to happiness.

Over time, angels brought us meals, drove us to radiation and chemotherapy treatments, took Ben for little jaunts and out to movies, called,

wrote, and visited. Each one touched our hearts in ways that will never be forgotten. In the dark night of winter, these angels gave us wings.

# Legs

by Lou Gallo

When they cut off my Uncle Henry's legs I was off smoking weed with a girl who said she was the great-great-great niece of President William Henry Harrison, the one who never made it to the White House. I remember an efficiency rank with cat piss and stale Purina, a green cotton spread on the mattress, Southern Comfort, vanilla candles, and Jim Morrison in the background, her favorite, though I inclined toward Jackie Wilson or Ben E. King. I'd hate to think we reached the sublime right as that blade dug into my uncle's bones—must have smelled grisly like when dentists drill into some sick molar.

He was a big man who would capture you at reunions and boom the secrets of direct marketing, mail order, and free advertising. My cousins and I tried not to meet his eye, but he always cornered Sandy because at the time she had those new breasts, which he always managed to brush against. Back then it disgusted us, though now I think I understand; I was out trying to do the same thing, not with Sandy, although she too crossed my mind. He just seemed so old and his teeth had turned into

kernels of corn. He had a wife, of course, my mother's sister, but aunts and mothers don't figure when it comes to love you can call love.

The decline began when a drunk broadsided Uncle's van and they had to pry him out with crowbars and two-by fours. A miracle he survived, everybody said. Broken ribs, two crushed legs, spleen damage—there's more, always more, but at some point you lose count. We saw him a few times buzzing around in a wheelchair with two massive casts on his legs. The doctors discovered diabetes during their probe and that's what finally ruined him, not the accident. His skin started to swell and blacken with gangrene long after the broken bones had mended.

Years later I saw him out at his ranch-style house in Picayune, where my family and I drove for a mercy visit—even I dimly aware that a finale had commenced. He slumped in the same wheelchair with a green shawl hiding the missing legs. He didn't talk much anymore but sometimes he'd laugh at a joke or groan. Aunt Ruth said he had high fever all the time and felt horrible. He no longer tried to corner anybody and his voice had shriveled to distant static. He didn't even notice Sandy, who'd come along for

the ride. I saw him pick at a tray of cheese cubes stabbed with party toothpicks. Mostly, he sat in the corner and stared at some game show on television.

Before the funeral I had too much to drink. My sister, cousins and I clumped together in a vestibule—I'd brought along a new girlfriend who smirked a lot as we made snotty comments about relatives we hated. Everyone wore black except us. We planned to invade the French Quarter soon as we could slip away from the wake. My mother had dragged me over to the casket to take a last look at the man who once spent an entire day locating a suitcase of mine; the railroad has lost it on my trip to New Jersey, where Uncle and his family lived before he retired back home to the south. It was easy and free staying with them while I spent my days and most of the nights prowling Manhattan. I never thanked my uncle for his trouble.

We headed straight for Bourbon Street. My cousins and sister disappeared soon enough and I wound up in Lafitte's Blacksmith shop with Wanda, who smoked two cigarettes at once, white fangs dangling from the meat of her glossy violet lip. I drank vodka martinis until all the shitty things she said about life, love,

politics, men and God shrank into the screech of some pitiful insect. But, God, she had gorgeous legs, chiseled, they seemed, right out of a vat of Coppertone. Someone started to plunk "I'm Walking" on the bar piano and patrons gathered round to sing.

Dimly, I heard Wanda call my uncle a pig. It was my fault. I'd told her all the stories. But just then I felt pretty sorry for him. "You don't know one God-damned thing," I growled as the room spun. When I stood up to leave my knees quivered and I knew I was headed straight down before I got anywhere, faster than that dumb president who missed the White House or an old man with no legs.

# Hidden In Plain Sight

by Kirk Boys

Don's group home is painted the same yellow as a sunflower. And it strikes me as odd that a place that holds so much sorrow within would be so bright on the outside. To see it you need to be willing to get off the main road. You need to know where to turn.

I volunteer for the library. My job: select and deliver books to people who can't make it in on their own. My client, Don, is one of those people. He lives near Renton, Washington. There is no sign; you have to know where to turn off the county road, maneuver down a long, steep driveway at the bottom of which you take a sharp right, and the group home is there, hidden in plain sight.

Four other people live with Don. His caregivers are all from the Philippines and they are very good at what they do from what I can tell. The other residents at the sunflower colored house are there, like Don, for medical reasons. They all require full-time care and more often than not, this is the last place they will live. This past July, Don turned ninety-seven. My father would be the same age if he were alive.

Don can't see very well and his hearing is even worse, so I end up shouting at him. Not angrily of course, although, it is frustrating when you have so much to talk about and it's so hard to communicate. I know this.

When I walk into Don's room he smiles. That causes me to smile too.

The first and most important thing I noticed about Don is that he has an open mind. I find this remarkable for a man with ninety-seven years of living life a certain way. For example Don had not read a lick of fiction since his high school English class. So I bring Don fiction. He is open to reading anything though. I brought him Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume* on my third visit. When I asked him what he thought of one of America's most avant-garde authors, Don said with a smile, "Pretty good."

He appreciates the smallest kindness. He spends most every day in his room, sitting in his wheelchair reading or napping. I usually find him facing into his closet, a book in his lap. He likes that spot because the light pours through just so.

I visit Don every three weeks. He causes me to experience aging in a very personal way, to



consider how it must feel to need someone's help to use the bathroom, someone to clean you up after, to wear a bib when you eat. To make the simplest decisions like taking a sip of orange juice knowing it will cause you to choke. That is the kind of person Don is though. The kind who is willing to take that risk for the sweet taste of reconstituted orange.

I had three library clients before I got matched up with Don, but each has passed on.

My volunteer coordinator at the library warned me, "Try not to get attached."

I didn't believe her. After all, I just deliver books.

Each of my clients has been different, their taste in books, what they wanted or expected of me. Diane was eighty three and was very specific. "I don't want any romance or suspense. Don't bring me biographies or memoirs or nonfiction of any kind. No sex or violence, I only want books on tape and I am most fond of cat mysteries." Diane's home had stuffed animals on display. A moose head was mounted in the home's community room. There was a cougar on the prowl. A wild boar and a lynx stuffed in life-like poses prowled above the dining area.

There was an elk head, a deer and buffalo too, their eyes glassy, as if unsuspecting of their fate. Diane never complained about the dead animals that stared menacingly down at her while she ate her meals. They would have bothered me.

Diane's request for cat mysteries on tape seemed a tall order, but I looked around and found Lillian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who Had Sixty Whiskers* and *The Cat Who Read Backwards* on tape and I took them to her. Mostly though, Diane and I would talk. In her tiny room she told me stories about her life. She bragged about her grandkids.

"Both girls are exceptionally bright," she said.

We'd known each other about a year when I got a call. A lady told me Diane had died and the cat mystery tapes had all been returned. She said, "There is no need for you to come back." And that was that.

Don is only able to read large print. I go to several libraries and scan the large print stacks in hope of finding something I like and Don might enjoy. I want to believe this is not self-serving. That pushing my personal literary taste on Don is not a way of validating my own taste

in books. But I must say, Don is one of the best read ninety-seven year olds in King County.

This is how it usually goes. I gather four or five books and I head over to Don's. I knock on the door and wait, after a minute or so, Cynthia answers. She is petite with short hair and kind eyes. Cynthia almost never smiles, her demeanor is deadpan, but there is something about her. She has this warmth, a confidence, a knowing that shines through.

"Hi, is Don here?" I always ask. This is a stupid question of course. Don's not able to go anywhere. So I guess I am really asking, is Don still alive? I hold my breath for that split second. It makes me sad to tell you this, but it is the truth. Bringing books to Don a few undeniable truths jump out at me. They come unexpectedly and they are powerful.

"Back in his room," Cynthia says, turning and pointing with a sort of made-up annoyance. I think Cynthia actually likes seeing me, but doesn't want to show it, thinking it would be unprofessional. Cynthia is one of those matter-of-fact people. The ones who have the attitude you probably need if you are going to spend your days with people nearing the end of their

lives. Cynthia wears a light blue caregiver outfit. She likes Don and Don likes her too. I can tell.

In the living room I see five brown recliners in a semi-circle, facing the TV. Only two are occupied. In one, a man sits, his head is laid back and drool is streaming from the corner of his mouth. His name is Joe. When Joe is awake, he screams and groans. No one is quite clear why. Maybe he wants something or he is in pain or just wants people to know he is alive and pissed off about it. Or it could be, he just wants someone to take notice of him, but that's mostly me just guessing. Don told me he found Joe irritating.

The TV is always on the Filipino channel. A game show or soap opera of some sort blares in the background with beautiful Filipino women talking fast or singing. Just behind the recliners, out the living-room window, I can see Lake Washington. No one else can. They are faced the wrong way.

In the other chair, Lily sits with her black and silver hair knotted in a bun atop her head. She is missing a good part of one leg, from the knee down. Her stub is wrapped in heavy bandages.

"Hi there," I say.

"Hello," she answers politely. "He's in his room." She points.

I have offered to bring books for Lily, but she declines. I guess she would rather watch the Filipino channel. I don't believe she understands Tagalog. It is as though Lillian is marking time and it breaks my heart.

I head back about then, past the table where the residents eat, their places set for the next meal. There are no lights turned on, instead, natural light fills the room with a dull gray. There is a faint smell of urine. If you were to ask me what color is sadness? I would say it is gray, without question.

"Sure you don't want me to bring you a book?" I ask Lily, one last time.

"No thanks," Lily answers. I feel bad for Lily. I feel bad for Joe too. It looks to me that getting old is frustrating, lonely, painful and hard. I can see it in her face. I see it in her weak excuse for a smile. They both look miserable. Then Lily looks at me as if to say, *"Why are you acting so jolly buddy? Don't you see how we are here? Don't you see I am missing my leg, or that the guy next to me is drooling all over himself? Don't you see this existence we're living, here,*

*in front of the TV and the Filipino channel? What the Hell are you doing here with your books and smiles?"*

I find Don in his room, his back to me, hoping to catch enough light to read. It's hard to tell if Don is reading or asleep, so I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Hi Buddy," I say, trying to catch his attention.

Don smiles, "Well ... hello ... there," he answers. That smile of his is worth a million-billion dollars. That smile is worth all the trips to the library and the long drive and the sadness of watching people trying their hardest to live out their remaining days in dignity. That smile of Don's lights up the inside of the Group Home.

"How are you doing?" I shout. Then I wait. It takes a long while for Don to answer.

"Pretty good, I guess," he says ever so slowly.

"How did you like the books I brought you?"

Don stares back at me, silent, our eyes locked. I feel uncomfortable at first, then, my patience begins to wane. There is so much I want to say, so many things I want to ask Don. Among them may be things I wished I had asked my dad

before he was suddenly gone. But Don's response is painfully slow. He can only hear half of what I say, so I repeat the question. "Did you like the books?" I shout louder this time.

As I wait for his response, I look around his room. There is a twin bed with a faded navy comforter. A single white pillow lies at the head. Next to it, on a small table, sits a Big Ben alarm clock. I notice how its ticks fill the long pauses. I observe what Don has brought to this room after nearly ninety-seven years on this earth. An old computer monitor rests on a small desk, its hard drive fan whispers, nearly imperceptibly. Two flannel shirts hang in the closet, next to some tan pants and a sweater. There are a few pictures taped to the wall. His kids, his sail boat, his wife, the pictures are old, tired, their color nearly gone, the people in them appear to me as ghosts from Don's past. I wonder if he has somehow outlived them all.

"Life is more than one room," Don says finally as I stand to leave.

It's easy for me to forget, in the sparseness of his room, how smart Don is. He did research at MIT, worked on perfecting radar during the war, and then as an engineer for Boeing. He begins

to cough. It happens every time. His torso heaves and his eyes water as this deep, rattling, choking, cough takes over his body. He coughs so ferociously that I begin to go for help. For I fear this to be his last cough. Then it stops, as abruptly as it began. Don swallows hard and looks at me and smiles, as if to say, "Fooled yah."

I sit back down and begin going through the books from my last visit. I show him the cover and ask, "How did you like it?"

"Good," he answers to a few, "Not so much," to others. "You haven't let me down yet," he adds.

I don't always have the endurance needed to stay long with Don. I don't much like that flaw in my character. I don't flatter myself believing that my visits are that big a deal in Don's life or that I impact the quality of his days. It's more convenient for me to think that way. Maybe the truth is that I don't want that responsibility. I always feel different leaving Don's group home. Three weeks from now, when I go back, I will have forgotten that feeling. I need to be reminded how fortunate I am. The group home does that.



When Don and I are finished, I walk past Joe and Lily and out the front door and into my car. There is a cold breeze. The air smells new, fresh and clean. I make the hard turn, then straight up the driveway and out onto the county road. I think about what the coordinator at the library said, "Don't get attached."

## **Paid by the Inch**

by Michael K. Brantley

I remember exactly where I was sitting — the next to last seat, last row, just in front of the door — when the Bantam rooster who taught our journalism class perched on the corner of his desk and began to squawk about his disappointment with our efforts on the forthcoming first issue of the student newspaper.

What a load of garbage, he said. Did anybody listen to directions? Do you want to be the class who kills *The Phoenix*? Mr. Transou was new to the school, and I think he even compared the pieces on his desk to dog turds.

Then Transou did the unthinkable. He said let's read some of this crap. And he started reaching for manuscripts from his pile. There were grumbles as he shot down one piece after the other, mostly making the point that no one had put any effort into the assignment. I waited for my turn. People were doodling on notebooks, looking at the clock, hoping for a fire drill or bomb threat or something that would save us all.

I felt alone in my first year at the senior high school. Sporting a bowl haircut, a disproportioned body I was trying to grow into and Coke bottle glasses, I knew just one person in class — a girl I'd had a crush on since seventh grade. Everyone else was a junior or senior, mostly popular students. We had a couple of blonde cheerleaders, a couple of athletes, a handful of slackers, and some "popular girls." Naïve as one could get in the mid-1980s, I didn't realize that Journalism was a crap course. I thought it was a calling.

Now, Transou said, after about seven or eight pieces, listen to this one. "So, you think you know sports, huh?" As he rolled the first line of my story off his lips, I looked down and cringed. What does that make you think, he asked. No one answered.

I'll tell you what it makes me think, he said. It makes me want to read more. That's a lead. And the worst part is, he continued, is I've got a roomful of seniors in here and you let a dad-blame sophomore show you all up. That guy right there, he said. I looked up just in time to see him point my paper back at me.

Deep down, I was excited. I had spent some time on the work, banging away on a typewriter, not really knowing what I was doing. I felt the laser-like burn of eyes cast my way, eyes showing resentment and scorn. I saw what I would later come to appreciate and know as Mr. Transou's devilish grin — a sort of sideways, sarcastic twist of the mouth, like a poker tell, which preceded wrath, a smart aleck comeback or a slash to cut someone down to size. He pushed his glasses up on his nose, flipped his black mop of hair and said it: Brantley's going to be our sports editor. The teacher had hung a bull's-eye on me, giving a bottom-feeding underclassman an editorial position.

The girl I had the crush on reached across the aisle and touched my arm. Good job, Mikey, she said. I no longer cared who else in the room hated me.



Maybe it's therapeutic, maybe it's egotistical, maybe it is just angst. Dylan Thomas gave it a good turn in "In My Craft or Sullen Art," where he compares writing to two frustrated lovers, mentions that he doesn't write for money or fame or ambition or for a certain class. He writes

for the people who won't even read his work:  
"...But for the lovers, their arms/Round the  
griefs of the ages/Who pay no praise or  
wages/Nor heed my craft or art."

A colleague once asked me if all writers were damaged. Maybe. I think my story is more about "labour by singing light," only in my version, I'm more like a clumsy plumber in a jumbled crawl space trying to use McKenna's left-handed monkey wrench — I keep banging my knuckles against all the pipes.

There is deep satisfaction to making something where nothing existed, not even raw material. It is no different than the feeling a maker of fine guitars has when he puts that last coat of varnish over the headstock adorned with his name; the pride of the furniture maker who burns his mark into the underside of a cherry dinette; or the artist as he stands back and admires his work before at last blessing it with a signature. Artists don't make a career choice, they respond to a calling, sometimes with only a byline and two contributor's copies to serve as compensation.

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Within a couple of weeks of being named sports editor and getting my first two articles published in the high school newspaper, I became a professional writer. *The Nashville Graphic* needed a part time sportswriter — stringers, they were called — to cover my high school. The publisher had seen my stories and she had a paying job for me if I wanted it. The job paid by the inch, she said. Stringers started at 50 cents per column inch of copy published. I wasn't sure how much money this would amount to, but I knew being paid to watch sports beat shoveling manure for the \$2 an hour I was making on my brother's hog farm. There was just one hitch. I hadn't yet become eligible for driver's ed. I asked the publisher if I could call her back, once I checked with my folks about transportation.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. "Michael, are you telling me you aren't old enough to drive?" the publisher asked.

"Yes ma'am."

She laughed. "You talk to your folks and call me back."

So, for six months, Mama dropped me off at basketball and baseball games, and later at town hall meetings, county commissioner

meetings, election nights and other events important to community newspapers.

I had great editors at the *Graphic*. The first one was straight-laced, by the book, and taught me all the rules. He taught me how to “write tight,” and take notes in a way that would allow the stories to be quickly constructed. He toughened my skin, sharpened my writing (the fewer words the better) and insisted on unbiased reporting.

My next editor at the paper was more of the artistic type. He taught me to add color, to appeal to the senses, to think beyond the plays, to put the reader in the scene.

Between them I got an education, eventually working in every department at the newspaper, and earning enough money to buy a wrecked '84 Chevette. I was soaked deeply in printer's ink.

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My experience got me freelance work in college covering sports for the Raleigh *News & Observer*. It was good work. I got plum assignments in the eastern half of North Carolina, especially during football season, and it kept me in gas money and books. There was

something wonderful about working a game, and just six hours later picking up a copy of the paper and seeing my story in the sports section. It was akin to seeing a black and white print come to life in a darkroom developing tray. In the early 1990s, there were no laptops and no smartphones, so I had to call my stories in from the nearest pay phone I could find after a game. Some nights, there was no time to write out copy. The night editor, an old school reporter I had grown up reading, had me compose my pieces verbally, straight from the notes, encouraging me as I rattled off paragraphs from phone booths in the parking lots of country stores and gas stations.

After college, I worked as editor of a local newspaper and then rejoined *The Nashville Graphic*. But as much as I loved the work, I started considering the future. I was newly married and we wanted to start a family at some point and have some stability. The news business is all about movement. To get ahead, you have to keep stepping up the ladder, moving and hustling and working long hours. I started to realize that very few of my colleagues in the industry stayed married, and an alarming



number had drinking problems. I soon left for a job in public relations.

It didn't take long to miss writing. I started hunting freelance work, first with a regional business magazine, then a national sports magazine, a farm publication and a bluegrass music monthly. Just as I was considering jumping into freelancing fulltime, a friend wanted to know if I was interested in purchasing his photography business. I would still be able to tell stories, just with images, not words. My notes and journals went into the bottom drawer of my desk for almost two decades. So did my calling.



Books were important at my house growing up. Every night, Mama read to me — Dr. Seuss, Curious George, Sunny Books and all sorts of children's literature anthologies. Of course, there weren't a whole lot of alternatives after the work on the farm was done. Our tiny black and white television picked up only three channels — four if the weather was just right — and all my brothers and sisters were grown.

Though we lived on a tight, cash-only budget, my parents subscribed to the *News & Observer*.

They read every page of it every day. There was one columnist who was a family favorite. Dennis Rogers hit every back road in the state for decades, going into towns and finding stories to fill his space five days a week. Rogers wrote about dive bars, veterans, upstanding citizens, crooks, hangings, legends, good old boys, and women down on their luck. His work was sometimes funny, sometimes gritty, but always authentic. He created vivid scenes. I learned that everyone or every place has a story, it just takes a writer to find it and make it ready to be read. My family would talk about Rogers' pieces, and I was motivated to read so I would not be left out of the conversation.

I devoured books like a stray dog attacking a plate of table scraps. Whenever I had questions, my parents would tell me to "go look it up," in a set of World Book Encyclopedias so old it didn't have any mention of the Vietnam War. I read biographies of the Founding Fathers, moved on to the Hardy Boys, American history, spy novels by Ian Fleming, Ellery Queen, and *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I read all the Peanuts Gang collections, and every Time Life book on World War II. Today, my favorites are Hemingway, Carver, O'Connor, Fitzgerald, Moore, Rash, and

Talese. Gatsby is much better at 40 than 14. I acquired a taste for poetry after discovering Collins, Makuck, Chappell, Heaney, Hayden and McKean.

Because we were so far out in the country, many miles from the nearest library, an old converted school bus known as the bookmobile made the rounds in our end of the county, with a regular stop at a country store a few miles down the road. This library-on-wheels was a treat to look forward to every week, especially in the summer. I still remember the smell that enveloped me as soon as the hiss of the doors sounded and I climbed aboard. We didn't have air conditioning in our house, and the bookmobile had a friendly chill to it, the cold air offering a break from the stifling summer heat. It was the smell of aging paper and glue and binding and book jackets and the hands and homes that had all touched the books. It was being in the presence of words stacked floor to ceiling, higher than I could reach, that transported me to another place even though we never left the yard.

Since Mama and I were the only patrons, the library eventually made our house an official bookmobile stop, and the two ladies who drove

it would load us down with an armload of new editions every two weeks. They seemed as excited to have readers as we did to have things to read.

As I got older, most of my friends started reading *Sports Illustrated*, but I preferred *The Sporting News* — it was still published on newsprint, and the writing from the venerable reporters and columnists such as Art Spander, Furman Bisher, Peter Gammons, Peter Vecsey and Dick Young had much so more style and depth. I loved stories that put me in places and ballparks and cities I dreamed of seeing one day, stories that could make me see and touch and smell the surroundings — stories that I wanted to write.

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In early 2012, I walked across a stage at East Carolina University and took a piece of paper that represented a Master of Arts in English. It was the end of a whirlwind year and a half that began when I decided I'd had enough of Photoshopping, crying babies, late night alcohol-fueled wedding receptions, a tanking economy and more than a few difficult customers. At 41, it seemed crazy to my family

and friends for me to try to start over, especially after 17 years of running my own business. To me, it seemed long overdue. It was like the scene in "Forrest Gump" where Forrest runs across the country for years and then decides one day that he doesn't want to run anymore, so he stops.

I was going to back to writing, the thing I was called to do.

Two weeks after finishing my degree, I dropped my bags into a dorm room at Queens University of Charlotte to begin coursework on an MFA in Creative Writing. It is strange, but liberating when you stop denying who you are.



Writing is no different than sports or photography. Talent comes in handy, but really, it is sweat that makes it work. That, not talent, is how I made a living behind the camera for so long.

Those who have known me a long time must think I'm having one hell of a midlife crisis, going to school, writing and teaching college English. I love it because the more I teach writing, the more I learn about it. Writers

outgrow stories, much like clothes, as the writer gets taller and broader and the work adds maturity.

It has taken me a long time to realize a career can be enjoyed, but in the end it is just a job. A calling is a passion that may burn at different temperatures, but never flickers out.

# Kitchen Elegy

by Jean Ryan

I need to write a cook book, a friend has told me. By this she does not mean recipes, she means secrets. The kind only cooks know.

We worked for the same catering company, this woman and I, and she wants me to tell our story, to tell the story of *all* cooks. She wants me to lay bare the work we did so that someone might acknowledge it.

I understand this. I spent sixteen years as a line cook and four years as a caterer, and when I finally left the cooking profession, scarred and exhausted, no one noticed. After two decades of hard labor, I wanted to see some mention of it: a note in the local paper, a plaque with my name newly etched. All those thousands of mouths I fed—didn't they add up to anything? They did not. Like a plate of food, I was there and gone.

Line cooking is a sort of magic act. Before you are eight sauté pans, smoking and bubbling, and a grill loaded with meat and fish in various stages of readiness, and somehow, amid the firing of orders, you are delivering every one of these dishes in the right combination at the

right time. You have no idea how you're doing this; you're moving too fast for thought. Suddenly a cowering server appears. He has dropped a plate and needs a re-fire. For a second you look at him without comprehension, and then a murderous rage floods your body. Your tickets have turned into a blizzard. You will not find your way back.

I still have cooking nightmares, endless dreams in which I can't get my food from the stove to the warming lamps. There is a white scar across my knuckles, a wound from the blade of a food processor. My forearms are blemished with old burns, most of them from oven racks. I can point to each one and tell you which kitchen it came from.

And then there were the other accidents. Walk-ins gone warm. Hours lost replacing a ruined soup or looking for Band-Aids swallowed in bread dough. Never a lax moment in the cooking arena. I recall the day I pulled on one of those giant oven mitts and felt something fast and urgent streak down my arm. I screamed and flung the mitt across the kitchen, and the mouse it had harbored scurried under the sink. I couldn't blame the little guy—it had been a cold night.



While restaurants are riddled with trouble, catering can be even more dicey: the terrain is unfamiliar and access can be difficult. Once inside these grand homes, you have to figure out how all the high-tech kitchen gadgets work; it's no good asking the trophy wife—she's never spent time in that room. The most dreaded disaster is food shortage: one of your ten fruit tarts gets crushed on the journey, or a waiter breaks a wine glass near your mashed potatoes and destroys the entire dish. I don't think people appreciate the scope of catering: how you have to prepare the food, then load it into a van, then unload and cook it and serve it, and then wash all the dishes, all the pots and pans, all the forks and plates, every water goblet, wine glass, coffee cup and brandy snifter. And god forbid you should break anything.

While I was still working in restaurants, I often escaped into the walk-in, the only place a cook can scream. Sometimes I went outside, sat on an overturned bucket and just let my body tremble. One evening a rat emerged from a dumpster a few feet away and paused to study me, his black eyes bright and questioning. Comrade, I thought, looking back at him with tenderness.

Oh, there were high times, too—I wouldn't have lasted without them. Magnificent victories. Indulgence. Hilarity. Cooks play as hard as they work. This is the bargain, the immutable law.

In the end, it wasn't the cuts and burns that made me hang up my apron. Nor was it the work—I figure my body could have lasted another ten years at least. It was the incidentals that finally undid me, the avocado under my fingernails, the veal stock that wafted from my clothes and hair. I was sick of the whole soggy mess: the bloody bar towels, the greasy stove vents, the mountains of innocent carcasses. That's what began to bother me most, the doomed innocent.

Very early one morning I was in a kitchen fileting salmon when I heard the unmistakable cheeping of a mouse in distress. My heart sinking, I went on a search and found the poor thing under the stove, stuck to one of those horrible glue traps. I tried to pull him off, but it was no use. Drowning, I thought, would be the least violent way to go, so I filled a bucket with warm water—it seemed kinder than cold—and slid the creature in. I turned away, unable to watch, and when I looked back a few seconds later, he was freed of the trap and swimming

circles at the surface—the warm water had dissolved the glue! I cupped him in my hands and carried him out to the garden. Not long after that, I freed myself.

I'm employed at a plant nursery now, a gentle job that leaves no blood on my hands. Having traded my chef's knife for a pair of bypass pruners, I'm happy trimming shrubs instead of meat, deadheading flowers as opposed to fish. Even if I wanted to return to those trenches, I no longer have what it takes.

Before enlisting in a cooking career, one might first consider the lexicon. Cooks work at stations "on the line" and orders are "fired." Microwaved foods are "nuked," well-done dishes are "killed," food picked up late is "dead." "Buried" is probably the most evocative term. This is what happens when a cook loses track of her orders, when the long row of tickets in front of her face no longer makes any sense. This affliction can strike at any time and there is nothing a cook fears more. Response is swift. The stunned soldier is shoved off the line and someone more fit for duty takes over.

Last week I dined at a posh Napa valley restaurant with an exhibition kitchen. I eyed the

cooks with sympathy, remembering when this trend began, how much we resented being on display. Watching my kin in their natural habitat, their heads down, their arms in constant motion, I felt a surge of solidarity. I wanted to make eye contact, to show my support, but I knew they couldn't risk it.

# Existential River

by Daniel W. Weinrich

"You don't drown by falling in the water;  
you drown by staying there."

The headlines today told of how somebody went missing in the Snake River. I'm not sure if there was alcohol involved, but there's a damn good likelihood someone was stewed to the gills when they hit the water and sank to the bottom. The message gets repeated. "Don't drink and boat, or don't drink and swim, or don't drink and drive and so on." In spite of the warning, people still decide to take nasty risks.

A few years ago, a guy I knew, a drinker and a non-swimmer, climbed on a rubber raft to float the frigid water of the Snake River with four other people. Ready for the party, they also dragged along two ice chests full of beer. Oh, and no life vests.

I can hear them now: "Life vests are for pussies."

A beer fell off the raft and my friend dived in after it.

Fast forward twelve hours when search and rescue dragged the river for his body.

Here's something: Instead of having to pull old dental records to identify his body, he owned one distinguishing mark. "Existentialist" was tattooed in big block letters on his back.

"Existentialists" are people who believe they are solely responsible for creating the meaning of their existence. This belief system suggests that personal essence is flexible up to the terminal point of death. No one can define what kind of person you are until all the votes are in and your potential is exhausted. If you have been a bad person for most of your life, at the last moment you can redeem yourself, repent or do something heroic. Up to our very last breath, we have the potential for determining our role in history.

Anyway, two days after the existentialist drowned, they found his body wedged in a head gate several miles from where he'd dived in to save the beer.

"Is that him?" I imagine a searcher asking.

"Not sure," another one says.

"Roll him over."

"What's does that say on his back?"

"Exist, Exist-ential-ist...something like that. That's a big word to have tattooed on your back. I'll bet that cost a pretty penny. Maybe he should've spent the money on a life vest."

Rather than the cost of his tattoo, I wonder about the horror of dying from the lack of oxygen. That's got to be such a bad way to go, struggling like mad to find sustenance where there isn't any. And really, that's the heart of the existential concept, trying to find meaning where there might not be any at all.

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When I was younger I went on a search for meaning in Asia and I discovered how to survive under water. I spent time in Phuket, Thailand learning to scuba dive. The dive shop was later demolished by the Tsunami of 04. Some of the people who taught me how to survive in the depths probably died from all that water. The thoughts of them drowning keep me up at night.

Looking back, I have a history with water running amuck and destroying property and

killing folks. While I was in high school, the Teton Dam collapsed and flooded the Snake River Valley, ruining good stuff and killing lots of animals and a few people. After the devastation my friend, Boyd, and I volunteered to help clean up in Rexburg and Sugar City.

Boyd has a dry sense of humor. He makes hilarious observations and never cracks a smile. Recently I cruised to the old neighborhood where we grew up. We used to swim and float in the irrigation canals and were forever getting yelled at by farmers. They didn't want us drowning in their ditches. "That's what swimming pools are for," they would shout.

I stopped over at Boyd's house. While we were talking he picked up his son's box turtle and dropped the softball-sized creature into the full wading pool. The turtle sank like a rock, settled on the plastic bottom and started walking as if oblivious to the change of environment. Little bubbles wandered to the surface.

"Do you know what he's thinking?" Boyd said.

"Not a clue," I said.

"He's thinking, 'where did all the air go?'"



I laughed. The turtle motored along under the water, looking side to side on a leisurely stroll and patiently searching for whatever was missing. I rescued the pet, put him back on the grass where he didn't miss a beat and walked into a world full of air.

Boyd's life is similar to the turtle's experience. His world has changed. My deadpan friend has a serious medical condition. His career as a policeman and DARE officer is finished. Doctors suspected a stroke, but tests didn't indicate that conclusion. The results of the medical and psychological examinations indicate a problem with his thinking since he occasionally makes wacky decisions. There appears to be a lack of oxygen or a lack of something that occasionally chokes out his rational thoughts.

Boyd's supposed to stay home and collect disability checks. Some people might see that situation as a windfall. He doesn't. I don't either. We want more meaning. We've always talked about living a full and complete life where people remember us as being kind and generous. Being remembered for living off the system's charity feels like the legacy of a parasite. He hates that idea.

Here's a little good news for Boyd's life change from police officer to retired citizen lacking oxygen: Instead of hanging with the criminal element and teaching students about the evils of drugs and alcohol he now gets to spend quality time with his kids and grandkids. That's a nice thing he's looking forward to.

We need that. Something to brighten our lives so we aren't overwhelmed by the array of tests and challenges life can serve up. Boyd's situation leaves me thinking about a quotation from Fredrick Nietzsche, who died from a brain problem, the advanced venereal disease called "tertiary syphilis." I doubt he died with anything tattooed on his body, although "Existentialist" in capital letters would've been quite appropriate.

"They played by the sea, and a wave came and carried off their toy to the depths: now they are crying. But the same wave shall bring them new toys and shower new colorful shells before them. Thus they will be comforted; and like them you too, my friends, shall have your comfortings—and new colorful shells."

I like the image of that rhythm Nietzsche describes, the waves moving in and moving out, taking and giving. Human beings can learn how to appreciate what is in front of them and not be resentful when predictably our toys are dragged off to the depths, which is pretty easy to preach and extremely difficult to implement.

How do you explain to the mother who lost her son to the river, or to the mother losing her son to some brain disease, not to have resentment or other negative feelings about the workings of the universe? This is the certainty of the past. The universe predictably removes things we value and replaces other things that aren't always as attractive or functional. And people want to know why we lose good things. People want to know the punch line before the joke is over. What does this all mean? And the answer is? You can't peek. You have to wait for the ending.

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A college friend offered a novel answer to the existential question. We were hunting jackrabbits near Hamer when the topic of life's meaning came up. A freak-of-nature explosion of the rabbit population caused millions of

rabbits to eat everything edible in Hamer's farming community. The frontage roads were covered in bloody gore from all the varmints attempting to cross the asphalt. My buddy Eric said, "Why do you think rabbits go to the road to die?"

We laughed with gallows humor. The question is pretty ironic if you think about it. All those dead rabbits on the frontage road either were victims of multiple accidents or, according to Eric, responding to an unconscious choice created through instinct.

"Like salmon swimming up river to spawn or birds flying south for the winter, maybe jack rabbits go to the road to die."

Eric, the potato farmer, expanded on his theory of eternal life: "If all roads lead to death, then no roads would lead to immortality. Without roads to die on, the jackrabbits could live forever. Avoid those things that kill you and you might live longer. Tell people to avoid roads, go back to the woods and deserts and sea-sides and see what happens."

That's a silly notion with some profundity. We have the capacity to avoid things that might kill us. There is a ton of academic and medical

research telling humans to stay away everything from food additives to iPhones. Our parents and our public service announcements tell us to be careful and not take unnecessary risks. Don't eat paint chips, avoid exposure to radiation, wear sunblock, use a helmet, put on a damn life jacket, don't use intoxicants and engage in dangerous activities. Even with that there's no promise of living forever. From my experience, eventually time sneaks up on you and defines you.

None of the jackrabbits we hunted in Hamer appeared to live forever. Statistically rabbits that didn't get run over or shot or poisoned were allowed to starve to death over the long winter. Eric offered this summary. "Death is death, whether injected by lead poison or delivered via lack of nutrition."

The end is the end. At least that's how as college students we justified taking the lives of rabbits in the desert. "They were gonna die anyway." In spite of Eric's theory of immortality, all the evidence suggests we are all destined to die.

Shooting at a million jackrabbits spoke more to the thrill of camaraderie than some morbid fascination with death. Some of my college

chums drank beer while handling firearms. One of them took shrapnel to the face that left a permanent scar under his eye. There's another example of survival skills given to human beings lacking common sense. "Mindless Youth," should have been tattooed on our backs. Whether you fall into the Snake River or get hit by a bullet intended for a jackrabbit, you end up completed. Defined for eternity in the local paper.

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I spend time reading obituaries in the *Post Register* and often assume between the lines of those who died after combating a "life-long illness." The life-long illness creating all this suffering is life, of course. Life is an illness for some people. Existentialists would say human beings "decide" to live in misery. They believe human beings enduring the most horrific conditions can develop positive meaning in their suffering. "It's not the kind of disease the man has; it's the kind of man that has the disease."

That's a quotation I like. I also like this one: "Life is terminal." Or better yet: "I have one less thing to worry about. I know I'm not gonna die young."

I'm at the point in my existence where death is happening more frequently and moving ever closer to me. My mom has failing health. Dad is gone. My buddy's father is waiting for death. "He's just tired of being in pain." Pain without relief might encourage folks to give up. Morphine agitates him and makes him crazy. The pain puts him into a life of unbearable torture and no narcotic can knock out the agony. He just wants it over. He wants the process of aging arrested. He wants to pull a "Freud."

Sigmund Freud killed himself in addicted approximations with cigars and cocaine. In his final moments he requested a lethal injection of morphine to complete his essence.

Unlike Freud my current goal is to grow old well and die naturally, if that's possible. I've lived with the delusion that I wouldn't get old when that's not the case. Time ticks by, my hair grows thin and gray and my offspring are young and vital as I once was. Look at my cohorts from Ammon. Look at the folks I went to high school with, or attended college with. They look old. Real old.

Not surprisingly, certainly they are making the same judgment of me. In spite of my stout belief in personal agelessness, people from my past must see me rambling around a Home Depot looking for paint or weed killer and think, "Damn, he's getting old."

In the blink of an eye I'm no longer the boy running through the potato fields, climbing barbed wire fences into pastures, jumping over ditches, navigating a trail through the foothills to the succulent apples and plums in the Smith's orchards. I'm the old man sitting on my back deck watching the kids trudging through the fields and thinking, "I'll bet those kids are up to no good." I inhibit myself not to yell at them or to warn them or somehow intrude on their day.

I want to shout: "Watch out climbing the fence that you don't bust it down or get cut on the barbed wire. Be careful in the big ditch, there are some deep and swift spots." Or maybe I could warn them: "Look out, you're gonna get old just like me and that can be scary." Even though I can argue either side of youth or age when it comes to scariness, I often prefer those summer days, those carefree goal-directed moments when a group of young boys searched for pop bottles to exchange for candy at Kelly's



market or hiked miles for a green apple or floated the ditch in old hot black inner tubes. We gulped water from garden hoses and rested in the shade of ancient trees in afternoons lasting forever.

So I could yell from my deck overlooking the Ammon fields irrigated with muddy canals, "Love these days! Love these beautiful meaningful days!"

The kids would probably remember the grumpy old guy who used to yell crazy things at them while they explored the wilderness around their homes. I hope they would remember me screaming about the love of life and the preciousness of each moment.

Mostly I hope they learn to appreciate the roaring of destiny, the giving and the taking waves that wash over us all.

# Recordings

by J.D. Scrimgeour

I was named after my grandfather, John Harold Scrimgeour, a man who was over seventy by the time I would be old enough to preserve any memories of him. My mother said once that she wanted to name me "Jonathan"" and spell my name the less conventional way—J-O-N—but my father said no. Like his father, I would be "John"—J-O-H-N.

I hardly remember my grandfather. By everyone's account, he was a kind man. In some tapes I made with my Uncle, also named John, before he died of a brain tumor, my uncle said that my grandfather "had an acceptance and love of others as they were. He wasn't concerned if you were a success or not, he just wanted you to be happy and be yourself."

My grandfather worked most of his life driving a truck for his brother's electric company, though he could have taken an easier, higher-paying office job. My father and John have told how he used to take the neighborhood kids for rides to the swimming hole in the back of the company pickup truck after he got off of work.

My grandfather lived in a decrepit house in West Boylston, Massachusetts, with his mentally troubled wife, who almost never left her bedroom. In my childhood, my family lived in Illinois, and so we didn't visit often, maybe on Christmas if we came back east. There was always a clutch of cats around the house, and I remember the grimy kitchen smelling strongly of tuna, an unwashed can sitting in the sink.

The bedroom was not small, but seemed dominated by a huge bed that my grandmother always lay on. The headboard was against the wall perpendicular to the door, so that someone lying in bed could turn her head and see down the hall that ran through the center of the house. The curtains were closed, the light faint and dusty. The floorboards were thick, and dusty, too.

It was the bed, though, that remains in my memory, the blankets aged, like the spreads over the sofa in the living room, like everything in that house, colored a dull brown like dirty light, like there was no such thing as color. The thick smell of unwashed life rose from the sheets.

I rarely saw that bed without my grandmother in it. Sometimes when our family would visit after my grandfather had died, we'd peek in and see her sleeping, or almost sleeping, coming to consciousness in response to my father's shouts of "Ma! Ma!" when we pushed open the unlocked front door. If she was awake, she'd be sitting up against the headboard, her mat of dingy hair pressed behind her, looking like a round loaf of grey bread.

Once or twice I was told to go into the room and "say hi to Grandma." She'd look at us, smile tiredly, ask a few questions. I was glad when we would be released and could go breathe the outside air.

What was it that kept my grandfather minding her all those years before he died? Love? Duty? Fear of change? Kindness? Kindness.



One evening when my son came home from a baseball practice, he told me, frustrated, that he had done poorly in a running contest.

I sighed. "You've got to get faster," I said.

"I know," he said, turning away from me, and I caught in his voice a slight tremor that told me he was fighting back tears.

My parents happened to be visiting, and my father, sitting on our second-hand sofa, didn't miss a beat. "I never could run fast," he said. "I don't know why."

It was a helpful line, letting my son see that his lack of speed may have been inherited—he was not to blame—and letting him know that someone else had endured the same failure. Unlike my comment, it would hold off tears rather than bring them on.

My father isn't always a particularly sensitive conversationalist. In fact, he often misses beats, even whole conversations, too engrossed with a Sudoku puzzle or with the newspaper. But thinking about his comment, I realized that he had been a parent who never said anything mean or cutting to his children, who never made them feel that they were a disappointment, who rarely let his own frustrations show.

I love this about my father, this gentleness: how, knowing what words could do, he wielded

them carefully, seriously. Perhaps it's the reason that I took after him and became a writer.

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My grandfather died in 1976 in West Boylston, in that house that smelled of tuna and dust. A few months before his death, my father had sat down with him and recorded an hour or so of conversation about his life.

As a child, one of my favorite toys was a tape recorder. We had it for years—almost all black, save for the red “record” button. My brother, sister and I would fill tapes with various imitations of the grown-up world: sports talk radio interviews about the baseball game in the cornfield across the street, or “albums” by our made-up bands, one of us slapping an old, untuned guitar, another pounding on our chipped xylophone, making up lyrics on the fly.

The tape my father made somehow ended up in the shoebox that held all of our family tapes, and when, two years after my grandfather died, we moved back to New England, it was tossed in the moving van with all our other

possessions. A few years later, my father came across it and rattled it into the family tape recorder, which he had set down on the kitchen table.

The tape began. The quality was poor, the hiss of ambient sound loud. The recording was especially hard to listen to because my grandfather had been quite deaf, so my father had shouted all his questions. As the tape unspooled, we would turn the volume up and down, depending on who was speaking. Still, it was hard to catch many of my grandfather's words. It felt as dusty and drab as that house where the recording had been made.

Suddenly, there was the sharp crack of the record button being pushed down, and the sounds of my siblings and me. We were singing, or talking, making the kind of noise we liked to record. The recording was much clearer and louder than the interview—a burst of life and laughter.

Disappointment flooded my father's face when he realized what had happened, and I might have even seen a flash of anger. I don't recall specifics—his response was mild—but I know

there was a rebuke, and I know that I felt guilty. It was something that couldn't be rectified. The interview, those words from a man now dead, were gone.

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A few years after my grandfather died, I read my father's poem about waiting in the hospital as his elderly father has prostate surgery. The poem made me think more about the man I knew—my father—than the mystery he had gone to visit. In the poem, my father looks out a window and sees the wind whipping up the lake beyond so that it looks full of dark fingers. And, after a moment of calm, the fingers reappear and, as he puts it, "wiggle seductively into question marks/ like worms/ on the hook."

Reading that poem as a thirteen-year-old, I felt the presence of death: how we can't escape it—those fingers return—how it looms beyond all words. The poem also gave me a sense of what writing was: lamentations, elegies, confronting brute facts. Writing should end tragically, perhaps because life ends tragically.



Yet now I go back to that moment of calm in the poem's center, when "the dark ripples die down/fade away into light blue." I go back to how my father, in the poem, recalls talking with his father, John Harold, the previous night, how grateful he was to hear his father's voice. And there, in the poem, are some words of my grandfather himself, words my father presumably transcribed, words not erased by a foolish son:

*I think age is an illusion  
We all fade into each other  
Like colors in a rainbow.*

# Trouper

by Amanda Forbes Silva

I stretch on tiptoes to inspect the choices behind the glass. Although I am only six years old, I already know my passion—chocolate chip. Besides, the Northville A&P doesn't have as many choices as Custard Time, so there aren't any new flavors to distract me from the tried and true combination of chocolate flakes folded into vanilla ice cream. Mom pulls a ticket from the deli counter while I wait for my cone.

I am the oldest child and the only one who can help Mom run errands. For that, she treats me to an ice cream cone before we scan the aisles for Similac, diapers, and dinner ingredients. A single scoop is a nickel and I can already feel the coin in my palm growing warm and sweaty.

"Here y'are." The man behind the counter extends the treat towards me, and I can tell the scoop is just barely balancing against the edges. I hand him the nickel, eager to cup the cone with both hands, determined to fix the wiggle with a quick push of my tongue.

"Say 'thank you'," Mom reminds me.

"Thank you." I repeat, turning toward the shopping cart. I'm ready to help Mom find everything on the list, which is long, and we have more errands to run after this.

I take two steps away from the counter, trying to secure the scoop in place with my tongue. I fail, feeling the mound tilt. In an instant, a dripping chocolate chip flower blooms on the scratched linoleum by my toes.

Heat rushes up my neck and spreads across my face. Mom brought me along to help and I'm making a mess.

"Oops! What happened?" Mom swipes a few napkins from the metal holder on the counter and scoots around me. She spreads one over the splatter, picking up the melting mound in her right hand, and zips another over the rest with her left. "There we go, honey," she says, rubbing a few drips off the toes of my saddle shoes. She strides over to the trashcan and pushes the runny napkins into the barrel. I just stand there, empty cone in hand.

"Let me see that." She takes the cone from me and approaches the man behind the counter. "Excuse me? Can we please have another scoop of chocolate chip ice cream? The last one got

away from her.” She tilts her head in my direction and smiles.

The man bends, disappears to the sound of metal bouncing against metal as he lifts the lid against the cooler. Mom leaves another nickel on the counter and turns around to face me with a new cone. The ice cream is sitting on top like a figurine on a wedding cake. Mom notices, too. “Just be careful, I don’t think he pushed it down hard enough,” she whispers.

I nod, about to explain how that was the problem the first time, but I stay quiet. We have shopping to do. I take the cone and lift it to my lips. Mom wraps her hands around the cart handle and we maneuver our way around the displays and deals. The towering boxes of crackers and cookies and the rows of polished fruit distract me, and my second lick sends the ice cream into a free fall before it meets the floor.

I am horrified. We are still in plain sight of the deli counter and haven’t even pulled one item from the shelves. Next time, Mom should just leave me home and bring the babies instead. Oblivious, she chooses tomatoes, sliding each one into a plastic bag. I don’t want to tell her.

But I have no choice. I can't reach the napkins on the counter, so I will never be able to clean this up on my own. Leaving it here isn't an option either. I could never eat the sugar cone fast enough to distract anyone from the evidence on the floor.

"Uh, Mom?"

"Mm-hmm." She still hasn't noticed. I stand there, wordless, until she spies the hollow cone in my hand. Her brows furrow. "Again?" I look down, manage a quick nod before Mom brushes past me and I hear the snap snap snap of the napkin holder as Mom yanks out a bunch and cleans up my mess.

I don't even want ice cream anymore. I just want to get away from the deli and out of this store. My eyes cloud up and heat rushes the back of my neck. Crying will just prove that I am a baby, but the faster I try to blink and hold back the tears, the harder they push forward.

Mom leans her palm into my shoulder and guides me back to the counter. The same man stands there, hairy arms resting on each other over his chest. He reminds me of a muscled man I saw on a poster when the circus came to Northville last spring. He has seen the whole

thing happen for the second time but doesn't register any expression of surprise, aggravation, or even amusement.

"Me again!" Mom chuckles and pulls another nickel from her wallet. She takes the cone from me and hands it to him. He leans toward the vat, scoop in hand, silent. "Do you think you can really push it down into the cone so it doesn't fall again?" He nods, but emerges with another precarious looking creation.

Mom eyes it, one brow raised, but takes it and bends down to face me. I wait for the reminder to be more careful, but instead watch as Mom pushes her tongue onto the ice cream until I am sure the cone will crack. She moves her tongue around the top and edges, flattening the initial drips into a neat little mound before handing it to me. Her lipstick somehow remains intact after the process and she straightens up, beautiful, confident against any obstacle.

"Everything takes practice, honey." She winks at me, rises, and leaves the nickel on the counter. "Thank you very much," she says to the man. Smiling, she takes my hand, and leads me back to our cart.

I spend the rest of our shopping trip mimicking Mom's control. I think I've done well, finishing the cone and depositing the napkin that once secured it into the trashcan on our way out to the parking lot. But, I'm disappointed when I climb into the car and catch my reflection in the passenger window. The smeared ice cream around my mouth reminds me of the circus clown who made balloon animals and I try not to think about how much practice I need.

# Night Watch

by Paul Pekin

I'm no good at political arguments, one side always right, the other always wrong. The current uproar over police shootings finds me outside my comfort zone, finds me disagreeing with very good friends. "I'd like to see," I told someone I very much like and hardly want to quarrel with, "I'd like to see Jon Stewart make a traffic stop on a dark lonely road, walk up to the driver's window, and make that arrest."

"That's not what we're saying," she replied, with some heat. Of course there were good police officers, and no one was blaming them, she acknowledged. It was just that ...

My side of the argument was lost before I could find words for it. Could this be because, after many years and many jobs, I finished my working life as police officer? Not something I ever planned on doing, but a man needs work, health insurance, a shot at a pension, and sometimes you take what is out there. Life, you know, happens.

So I stay out of these arguments. They bring me back to the days when I drove a beat, wore a



uniform, carried a weapon, and was expected to routinely do things I never, in all my life, planned on doing. Such arguments feel personal to me.

Instead of making an argument, let me tell you a little story. Imagine me, a man in his fifties, finding himself working for the county forest preserve police, a small department, but police all the same. Guns, squad cars, uniforms, radios, all the stuff that sets you apart from the rest of the citizenry. Walk into a Burger King on River Road at nine pm and you will be seen not as a person, but as a cop. And, as a cop you will, almost certainly, take a seat facing the door, because you never know who might come walking through it.

When I drove these late shifts, I was always alone. It was my job to lock up the forest preserve gates and see that no one came into the woods after hours. If it had been up to me, this sunset to sunrise rule might have been a bit different, but it wasn't up to me, just as it wasn't up to me to decide how fast people could drive, or where they could park. I locked up the gates, I chased people out, and I arrested those who were up to mischief, mischief mostly being large bonfire parties involving teenagers and alcohol,

parties I would have gone to myself when I was a teenager.

The night I almost shot the kid happened in this context. I'd already closed all my gates. It took hours to do that. And now I was just driving from one grove to another, looking for a little action. Yes, I did look for people to arrest. The nights were long and tedious, and time passed so much faster when I was processing a drunk driver or, more likely, chasing a gang of kids out of a picnic shelter.

That night there was someone in the shelter at Davis Woods. When I pulled into the parking turnaround, planning on killing a few minutes going over my reports, I heard what sounded like firewood being broken in the shelter. It seemed odd because I could see no fire, nor could I smell smoke. But this particular shelter, a stone structure built back in the WPA days, was distant from the road and surrounded by trees, which made it popular with certain people. It was a place I kept a watch on.

But the last place on earth where I thought someone would point a gun at me.

I got out of my squad-car, locked it, and started down the path, flashlight in one hand, baton in

the other. The moon was out, I could see pretty well, and my flashlight was turned off. If it turned out someone worth arresting was waiting for me to arrest him, well, I didn't want to scare him off.

What seemed odd was there was no sign of a fire in the fireplace. So what was that cracking sound I had heard? As soon as I stepped off the path and onto the concrete walk, I switched on my light, one of those long black police flashlights with about eight batteries, very bright, and also very heavy in case of a fight.

Instantly I caught a figure in the beam, a male who spun around before I could identify myself and, using a two hand grip, aimed a pistol directly at my face. I'm dead, I thought. My own weapon was safe in its leather and no way to get it since my hands were already full, one with my flashlight, the other with my baton, "Police," I shouted, pointing that metal baton at him, exactly as if it were a gun. "Put that down or I will blow your head off!" I may have used the f-word as an intensifier. In certain situations, a wise cop will try to sound a little fiercer than he actually is.

This is a story I have told many times, and the next line always is, "It took me and that kid almost fifteen minutes to find his gun, that's how far he threw it." Then I explain it wasn't a real firearm, just a pellet gun, not quite a toy, for no one in his right mind would want to take a pellet to the forehead, but still, not a real firearm, nor did it even look all that real once we had found it.

The kid, and now I saw he was only sixteen at the most, had been playing "war" with his buddy (who, I suppose, was still running). They had been shooting at each other with these pellet guns and when I arrived with my flashlight, quite naturally he had mistaken me for his antagonist.

"Don't you know you can put an eye out with one of those things," I said. I couldn't resist a little joke. Meanwhile, I was thanking all the gods that protect the police that I had been reckless enough to approach that shelter with my baton in my right hand, and not my loaded Smith and Wesson.

I wrote the kid a ticket and confiscated his pellet gun. We met again about a month later in court. I never expected to see him there because these

personal recognizance tickets we gave out were little more than invitations. But there he was, and my favorite judge, the one who tossed out so many of my tickets, was in charge. This isn't going to go well, I thought. This judge had never looked favorably upon me or my fellow officers. He seemed to think cops wrote tickets just for the fun of it and routinely lied in court. But this time, fingering the kid's pellet gun (offered in evidence) he got it. And delivered a very well put lecture to that kid. "You can thank this officer for your life," he said. And the kid did. No further penalty was necessary.

I suppose the point of this story should be obvious. When the talk turns to "police shootings," I think first of myself, and there is no way this cannot be. So I back away. I say, yeah, that cop shouldn't have used the choke hold, shouldn't have fired the extra shot, shouldn't have done whatever they say he did. I leave unsaid the way it feels to get out of a squad car and walk toward the unknown, and why a person would do it.

I could have killed that kid. I think that.

And if he had been something more serious than a kid with a pellet gun, who knows what he might have done with me.

# Trousseau

by Lisa Richter

My father has collected us from our scattered lives to huddle here with him. We are in the family home, in the basement, the den of my childhood. My older sister, Lori, stands to my right, my younger sister, Lynn, to my left. We fall into position unconsciously. This is the way it's always been. In countless family photos and events we stretch our smiles, eldest to youngest, me pressed between.

He sets a deep box before us. The aged thick cardboard is embossed with a bronze hue. Paper peels at its edges; dust stripes its lid. *Hutzlers*, the logo says, a once glitzy Baltimore department store now defunct.

A tabletop fan whirs on a steady swing. A dull, flat light falls from the ceiling bulbs and is sucked into the concrete. The floor is thickly painted to keep the dust down. Anchor straps on the storage shelves keep the danger at bay. Bars on the window keep the bad out.

Forty years ago, this room breathed open and free. I drew highways with chalk on the then raw, unpainted floor. I created magical kingdoms from shelves left mobile. I climbed through that window, always gaping wide.

Strapped to the ceiling beams is my grandfather's handcrafted seesaw and jungle gym, squeals of laughter memoried deep in their aged wood. Laughter once owned this basement, now gutted. The drone of the fan swells in this strange emptiness where memory pulls. My father's drying Levis dangle from a strung clothes line, swaying in the pushed air. The A/C runs. It's early autumn, but the air feels icy. A blast from the fan catches me. I shiver.

The box waits, centered within our huddle. Mom's box. My father taps its lid. "It's time," he says.

I gasp as the fan pushes another blast across my skin.

My mother died in my old bedroom, four spring-times ago, bathed in the same soft light that I had known as a child. When I arrived that evening, the hospital bed had been dismantled, the drugs and syringes packed, the boxes taped over and brought downstairs, the TV moved back to the kitchen. Only the IV drip remained as a reminder of her presence, the gangly apparatus standing where my Humpty Dumpty lamp once sat.

It's how my father processes life: tidy up and move on, stick fiercely with the positive. Anyone asks, the answer is an upbeat "Can't complain."



"Hey, girls," he says. "Look through this." He taps the box again. "The last of Mom's things. And listen, whatever you don't want, hand it over." He yanks his thumb in the direction of the driveway as he strides outside to the gaping mouth of the dumpster. The largest one available, it smothers the bottom of the drive. It's filling too fast. In a couple of days, the seesaw and the gym will find their way into it.

This is it. The final weekend. Right now, right here. My sisters and I are to take what we can of what remains, the rest goes. There will be no discussion. The house is sold. The car donated. Truckloads dropped off at the Catholic charity in Baltimore. Taxes paid. Lawyer notified. Inheritance discussed. My father wields a ten page checklist, and he will settle it all, so that we will not be burdened.

He will take his bed, a dresser, his Lazyboy, the family photos, and a small suitcase of clothing and check himself into a senior facility near his church, where he is a beloved elder. Six months ago, my father looked ten years younger than his age. Now he is a withered man, though his smile is still bright. His doctor has said he has a couple months left, maybe six if God allows. He is dying, too.

The tape on the side of the box is yellowed and dried. The fibers barely grab the cardboard. Lori runs her finger under the band, and it releases with a dusty pop. She lifts it slowly, then looks at me and Lynn, offering. We don't move. She wedges the lid off. Nylon fluff, satin embroidered flowers. A gust from the fan grabs the fabric, tosses its blossoms in a flutter.

The lid slides away. Tissue, brittle and gray, wraps the contents. A card rests on top, my mother's handwriting.

There is no stopping it now, our descent over the edge. I'm already there, in the barren blue-black where orphaned bodies float, where impressions sink in padded silence, where lungs echo with the swell and shrink of fake breaths, where pulse drags and ticks like a metronome set low, where not a whimper is allowed, not one, because that tear, that first tear, will be the end.

My father slams another item into the dumpster. His will is his strength. When my mother was moved home to die, he selflessly tended to her medication, performing a ritual of injections every two hours day and night, to ease her pain and chemically nourish her. He pushed on relentlessly, unaware that a kiss, an embrace, might have healed so much more.

My sisters and I read the card silently. *My wedding trousseau, 1957*. Written for us to find. I lift out the fabric, a cloudlike fairytale of full, translucent white. It smells of tired cardboard, but it is exquisite. Two pieces unfold: a negligee gown and a light cover-up. The gown's tight bodice of woven lace falls to generous yards of sheerness. Wide lace bands flow over the shoulders. The sleeves of the cover-up poof wide, trimmed in satin with a satin tie at the neck, the same airy nylon, the same fullness. The effect is at once both angelic and daring, a holiness awed by sensuality.

Her spirit flies from the box as I hold up the gown, its wrinkles already disappearing. I lay the trousseau garments on the table.

There is a second tissue-wrapped package. Two 1950's crinoline half-slips unfold. Lori shakes them out, and they bounce open into wide stiff skirts. There is, too, a glamorous scarf hat, also white. Its satin label reads *Christian Dior, New York*.

A third package contains a silk communion dress, my mother's from 1936. The veil is included, its delicate lace disintegrating, and a pair of small white gloves with a pearl button closure. We have a photo of my mother wearing this, kneeling in the cathedral receiving

communion for the first time, her eyes glistening restless, shining dark like her hair.

The box is now empty. We stand motionless, unable to close it, or move it, waiting for my father to return and take it away.

The fan swings, its current stirring the abundance of white before us. Lynn finds a loose rosary protruding from some tissue. It slips easily into her pocket. When her son lay critically ill with leukemia at age three, word spread until the entire archdiocese of Baltimore was praying for him. The moment the oncologist gave up, Nicholas regained strength and made an inexplicable, complete recovery.

My mother was buried on Nicholas's birthday; my father will be buried on mine. "That makes us special, Aunt Lisa," he will whisper to me in the approaching spring as we share a seat in a cavernous sedan, his suited young body in black.

Lynn folds the communion dress, the veil, the gloves. She lays them in a pile behind her. These will be hers. Being touched by grace gives her the right. Lori and I nod.

Lori looks at Lynn, then me. Lori has survived a divorce and stomached already one divide of shared goods. She has learned to be selective

and cautious. She lifts the crinoline skirts. "Take them," I say. "They are perfect for you." She smiles, relieved. "I'd like the hat, too," Lori says, looking at Lynn. "It would mean a lot to me." Lynn grasps the Dior and strokes its sides. She inspects the weave, smells it briefly. After a time, she returns it to the table. Lori takes her pieces, puts them aside.

The trousseau remains. I lift the sheer gown, and it swings before me, flaunting the desires of a woman alive in her skin. I imagine my mother as she once was, the woman in the photos, the electric mind in fabulous clothes laughing with friends and dancing on the boardwalk. The woman she was a lifetime ago, before the silencing began.

I want to believe that it was beautiful for her, at least those initial days of the exuberant freeing from virginity. I want to connect with that spirit, its powerful innocence, its vibrant determination. I want to unfold in its embrace.

My sisters look solemnly at me. Though they will not give up their treasures, they are sorry, sorry for me, sorry that I must retain the trousseau of that first night. It makes them uneasy, this billowing enticer, a participant in our parents' coupling.

I don't explain, I don't have to. This is my right as the one silenced in the middle. I don't tell them how thrilled I am, that it isn't exactly the gown that I want, but the energy it contains. If I can touch my mother's essence maybe I can once again find my own truth, and through this, offer my daughter a possibility to claim hers.

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It's evening, and I soak in a rose mint tub. A bubble hovers on my skin. I blow it a gentle puff and it is carried off perilously on an air stream. I pull a toe through the foam at the surface. A fragrant mist rises.

I step from the bath and towel dry, tapping each water droplet until it pops on my skin. I wrap my hair up high and slide the negligee over my warm shoulders. The bodice's soft lace presses against my breasts. The fabric is forgiving, light as a joyous thought. It's true: my mother was my size once.

I slip into the cover-up letting the satin tie dangle open. The aroma of rose is rich in the soft light. "Mom," I whisper. "Are you here?"

I spin a pirouette. The fabric lifts, the flowers dance.

## Lessons in a Chitlin

by Carol D. Marsh

I'd had it.

No matter that I was the one who had dreamed of this place for years, had slogged through the building's three-and-a-half year gut demolition and renovation using untold quantities of dogged determination and more yelling at the contractor than I'll ever confess. I'd been ecstatic to move with my husband into our apartment on the second floor in December 1995 and prepare the building called Miriam's House for its first residents—Washington, DC's homeless women living with AIDS—in March 1996.

And no matter that I already had fifteen months as resident manager of a house for homeless pregnant women, where I'd been taught a series of painful lessons about the difficulties a middle-class suburban-raised white woman encounters when living with eleven street-wise black women. Why I underestimated the power of our differences after having learned it so painfully then, I couldn't have told you. Perhaps I thought I had already discovered everything I'd need to know to live and work at Miriam's House.

I hadn't. And so, by June, I'd had it.

This resident hated the rules, all of them, and complained loudly every chance she got. That one snarled at my cheeriest greetings. And Tamara. Oh, goodness, Tamara. Who had walked up the front walkway, the first resident to move in on our first day, with a call that I knew immediately I'd remember forever. "I'm home!"

Home, a concept I'd formed while growing up in not-one-bit-integrated suburbia in the sixties and seventies, had become so fixed in my mind that there was little of the conceptual left in it. And though part of me knew this home would be very, very different from my pretty imaginings about how well we would all get along and how grateful they would all be, imagination dominated nonetheless.

Tamara—with what was to me a gleeful, sometimes spiteful, persistence that made a mockery of that cheery greeting on her first day—set about disabusing me of these notions and any others I might have had about myself and how I would be in Miriam's House. And though most of the residents were friendly and willing to help me bridge our differences, I let Tamara's combination of bold disrespect and sly baiting overshadow all that was going well.



At a house meeting: *Why ain't you piped purified water into the ice maker? Makes no sense to have good water to drink if we have to put that ice into it. You ain't thinking.*

In the dining room after dinner: *You all shoulda heard Carol in the car on the way to the emergency room when I had that fever.* (Taking on an overly sweet, childish voice) *'I hope you'll be okay. You know I'll stay there for you.'*

Before long, I was avoiding her. I'd slip away from the TV room or dining room when she came in. I'd brace myself for her onslaughts in house meetings and wait for her to be done, responding with just a few words if at all. I couldn't figure out how to relate to her without incurring her contempt and getting my feelings hurt yet again. I gave up. Avoidance seemed the best policy.

But best policy or not, it simply was not sustainable in that small community.



I stop on my way down the stairs and sniff. *Good lord, what stinks?*

What I'm smelling cannot possibly be food, at least, not in undigested form. So, in mystified ignorance, I follow my nose into the kitchen, where the nauseating odor seems to emanate

from a pot on the stove. I lift the lid, take a whiff of the steam rising from the boiling mess, and gag.

I look around and see Tamara, watching me and grinning. "Chitlins. My favorite."

Oh. It *is* food. And that is Tamara, ever ready with the quick and slicing jibe. I rearrange the expression on my face. "Hmm. Chitlins. What are they?"

"Insides of pigs. Don't worry, I cleaned 'em good. I ain't triflin'." She gives the pot a stir, sending another plume of noxious steam into the kitchen's humid air.

*Insides?* I want to gag again. Watching me, Tamara's smile broadens. Something in me stiffens its spine against my too-easily hurt feelings and decides to try something new as she asks what I had for dinner.

"Tofu stir fry," I say.

"Tofu? What the hell is that?"

I risk a quick grin at her. Here's my chance. "Sorta like fermented soy beans."

"And you think chitlins are bad? Fermented beans? Sounds disgusting."

"Not as disgusting as chitlins."

I'm a bit shocked at myself for answering in kind, stiffened spine or no. This is not how I usually speak to the residents, especially not Tamara. I steal a wary glance at her to gauge her reaction: still grinning. Whew.

"No way my chitlins is worse than them beans."

Once she has settled the lid back onto the pot, *thank God*, Tamara turns to send the spoon clattering into the sink and pivots back to me. "No way."

"You don't know that. Have you ever tasted tofu?"

Later, I realize this is what she's been waiting for.

"Okay, I'll eat a tofu if you eat a chitlin."

Oops. This is not where I expected the conversation would go. But her knowing smile galvanizes my pride—it surely cannot be my stomach—into agreeing.



The women who taught me the most—about myself, about life at Miriam's House and life in general—were the ones who fought me. Well, I saw it as fighting me, at the time. Averse to conflict and wanting to be liked, I wished we'd

all just get along. Meaning, I realize now, I wished they'd all act like I needed them to act.

I came to see that women like Tamara, the ones who complained and resisted and stomped on my every frayed nerve, were waiting and watching. Too many well-meaning people had proved unreliable. Too many ill-meaning people had doled out injury. I believe those who struggled and pushed were those with the most to lose, precisely because they had lost so much already. And as the one with the power, with a lifetime of advantages they'd not had, it was for me to prove my trustworthiness to them. Not the other way around.

What finally worked, what finally broke through, was almost always some small, spontaneous gesture of mine that grew out of an otherwise mundane encounter in the course of a regular day. It was almost always something simple, yet that nonetheless set the stage for a moment of grace and generosity made possible because I relinquished a little bit of my desire for control.

Tamara happily goes to the cabinet for a plate as I leave, rather less happily, for my apartment upstairs to get "a tofu." Belatedly suspicious of the alacrity with which she had proposed and been ready for the deal, I realize my sense of having the upper hand is an illusion. I look at

the innocuous bit of tofu as I put it on a small plate. At worst, tofu is tasteless, but since my husband stir-fried it with soy sauce and a few spices, this has a pleasing flavor I couldn't imagine chitlins having. *I've been had.* But the tofu and I go downstairs to our fate.

As soon as I enter the kitchen, Tamara grabs the tofu off the plate, pops it into her mouth and chews enthusiastically. Watching me. I stare at her, suspicious.

"At the treatment center they only cooked vegan food. Never did get to like it, but I can eat it."

She swallows, turns to the stove and lifts the lid off the pot.

"Okay, and now for the chitlin."

Dipping into the pot, she pulls out a pale, half-curved strip of something pale and limp. The now-familiar odor sidles toward me. She puts the thing on the plate. She holds the plate out. I put the chitlin into my mouth. My teeth close on it. Already anticipating the taste—as judged from that smell—I had firmly resolved not to allow my expression to reveal any disgust or, what was more likely, fear. But I had neglected to prepare for the texture, and it feels as though I've placed a slimy, hot rubber band in my

mouth. My resolve, conquered by a chitlin, falters and flees.

"Acccchhhh!" I spit out the offensive thing onto the plate. "It's like rubber!"

Brown eyes regard me slyly from beneath a wig's bangs. "You have to eat it. I ate the tofu."

She's right. Very quickly, so as not to give my mind or stomach or taste buds a chance to protest, I throw the chitlin into my mouth, give a couple of ineffectual chews, and gag it down.

Then we go into the dining room, Tamara and I, and we take chairs in front of the stereo where she fusses with the CD player so we can listen to some Yolanda Adams. The sun is setting, the room in dusk, but we turn on no light. It's just the two of us, smelling of chitlins and finding the beat.

# **I See Dead People (Well, Not Exactly)**

by Anna Mantzaris

It started more than a decade ago when I lived in a studio apartment in the Mission District of San Francisco—waking up in my Murphy bed I'd see a table that wasn't there, a plant I had never purchased, a stack of books that didn't belong to me. Maybe I had been in Northern California too long but I immediately credited the images as lingering energy, remnants of years past. I told a handful of friends—the kind who would drive to San Rafael for psychic readings at Aesclepiion, an "intuitive training" school with a well-known clairvoyant program that hosted trancemedium retreats—who were happy to back my theory. The place was haunted.

My Greek-American family had numerous "tales from the dark side," like my *yia yia*, who on more than one occasion, would wake to relatives and friends sitting at the end of her bed, later finding out they had died during the night. It wasn't unusual for us to make the trek to New Jersey from our Hudson Valley home to visit relatives where I would have my tea leaves read in the kitchen by a *theia* who had powers from the Old Country. So when I started seeing things from the "other side" I simply accepted

it. Did I catch the occasional episode of “Ghost Hunters”? Sure. Did spirit objects really seem so implausible? No. Am I embarrassed to admit this now? A little.

After a series of moves in and out of state and back in again, I found myself, five years later, living with my partner in a San Francisco Edwardian flat, built circa 1922. I was happily enjoying domestic bliss and a new neighborhood. One night I dozed off on the couch. I woke up, looked down and saw a man sleeping on the floor. Wiry, with long hair, he was curled up and looked like part of the aftermath from a pretty good party we hadn’t hosted. I had forgotten about the sightings in my previous apartment but was quickly reminded over the next few months when I saw a small woman floating by the bedroom window, a large crest hovering above a mirror, a chandelier we didn’t own hanging over our bed. The images were usually in white, and would dissolve as I watched and my heart raced. My partner, a creative yet rational man, suggested I was still asleep.

I gave his theory a lot of thought but there was no delineation from seeing the objects to me screaming and getting out of bed. Each time it happened I would go over the experience again and again. I was definitely awake. After I saw a



large button-down shirt making its way around the room, I was convinced this apartment was haunted too. While we thanked our urban stars for the square footage, the lack of direct sun made for dark rooms and strange shadows, which even our collection of bright paintings and red sofa couldn't offset. We're talking spooky vibe, even at noon. I did rough calculations of all the people that must have lived in our apartment (my rudimentary math equation was 2-3 people every 3-5 years over nearly 100 years = a lot of people who were probably dead and haunting us now).

I kept the circle of who knew about my visions small. I had mentioned sightings to my sister (an overworked New Yorker who suggested I was overworked myself and needed a spa day) and mother, who didn't think twice about a daughter who told her she had seen a small glowing angel wings flapping around. Giving me close to a, "That's nice, Dear," before asking me if I'd tried her lemon syrup recipe (yes) and if I was using the dust-buster she had sent (no). The few friends who knew would occasionally ask me if there were new sightings, and I felt obligated to update on the spot as if I were an investigative ghost-hunting reporter on a deadline, usually texting my accounts at absurd hours, breaking polite, adult punctuation rules

by using multiple exclamation points.  
OMG!!!SAWTWOHEADED BIRD IN  
BEDROOM!!!!!!

Over the years, I had become increasingly interested in hauntings. I joined ghost tours in New Orleans, St. Augustine, Florida, and in San Francisco, where the guide, outfitted in cape-like coat and top hat, lived up to his promise of “three hours of unearthly fun!” and wasn’t afraid to shake an oil lamp to prove his point as he led me and a group of graduate-school pals by parks, hotels and spooked-out Victorians in lower Pacific Heights. We did all have chills down our spines, not from aberrations, but from the whipping wind and fog that had rolled in.

“Ghosting,” as I liked to call it, became my hobby and the truth was, having seen things made me feel, well, special. I had always considered myself a sensitive, open-minded, and intuitive person, and growing up in the 70s I didn’t think it was so crazy that things like the Loch Ness monster, Yetis and even aliens might exist. If a giant furry ape-like man running through the woods was possible, then why not a flying coffee pot in our home?

When we got our first iPad, I used the Hipstamatic app and “hunted” in the house with the thermal camera. “I can’t believe that’s what

you're using it for," said my partner. (FYI: only our dogs glowed and *I was half-kidding*). I started DVRing old episodes of "Celebrity Ghost Stories" (I was so distracted by Janine Turner's wacky bleach blonde hair I barely paid attention to her story of an Italian hotel ghost she encountered when filming *Cliffhanger* with Sylvester Stallone). I couldn't stop myself from asking shopkeepers and hotel clerks if "the place was haunted" whenever I picked up a "weird" energy on a visit. When a friend told me her husband had seen the ghost of a Victorian woman come out of their living room wall, I practically ran over with a sleeping bag and Ouija board and started reciting the childhood levitation chant, "Light as feather, stiff as a board" in my head.

I prided myself on not going overboard. I wasn't getting all black magic or claiming to channel spirits. I liked to think in my A-line skirts and bright-colored cardigans I looked more peppy than creepy. I was someone who snagged some good bargains at Nordstrom as opposed to a Freaky Friday who lurked in the Occult section of bookstores.

Then for several months the sightings ceased and I felt somewhat disappointed. Had the spirits moved on? My friends seemed disappointed, too. "Anything?" they would

hopefully ask. "Nothing," I would say, reminding me of fruitless whale watching trips I had endured on summer vacations as a kid. After a while, my "fun hobby" shifted from ghosting back to scouring flea markets. All things were quiet on the spooky front, but just when I thought I had lost my Sixth Sense, I awoke to a small round glowing object near an electrical outlet. Shortly after, I saw a stack of stuffed animals near the ceiling, and the outline of a man near the armoire.

Seeing things now suddenly created a new sense of terror. I saw a number of objects over the period of a few weeks and I became increasingly afraid to sleep for fear I would wake up to another image, often slipping out of the bedroom once my partner began a steady snore, to sit on the couch and read late into the night or surf the web. After one incident, I Googled a variation of phrases about seeing objects upon waking. I don't know why I had never done this before. I had gone Ghostbusters with an iPad and yet ignored the most obvious medium, the Internet. What I found left me more stunned than a floating Ficus. Discussion boards (for some reason this was a hot topic in the UK) gave various accounts of people waking to objects including floating dragons, "an orange thing" and for some reason, *a lot* of

people saw spiders. I spent hours online, which led me to the word hypnopompia, hallucinations upon waking—the kind Salvador Dali and Edgar Allan Poe fostered to spark their creative lives. According to the Sleep Association, hallucinations can be found in 25% of people (usually in females).

With a history of night terrors and sleep walking (as a teenager, I had often taken showers in the middle of the night, woken up with juice stains around my mouth from forgotten, early morning kitchen visits, and was once found in a closet) it should have occurred to me that it wasn't the occult I was dealing with but hallucinations. At first I refused to believe I had a sleep disorder. I slept a minimum of eight, sometimes ten hours a night, if I had time. If there was anything I had been consistently good at throughout my life, it was sleeping.

I took an online quiz to check my Epworth Sleepiness number (designed by an Australian doctor to check daytime sleepiness) and make sure I didn't have narcolepsy since hypnopompia is one of the signs. I thought about contacting my doctor—the logical step—but worried she already thought I was a total neurotic and weren't we all diagnosing ourselves online now anyway? From the accounts I read, other hallucinators with no other symptoms had

come up empty after nights in sleep clinics and MRI's (and the thought of doing either of these things sent me into more of a waking panic), ergo, no call to doctor and more research.

I learned that anxiety could also cause waking dreams and realized the images had appeared at stressful times in my life (after moves, when I was buried in work). I, who had always been well rested, joined the ranks of those who suffered from sleep problems. I scoured websites and magazines for happy, healthy stress-reduction ideas. I refused to write in a nighttime journal (someone, unknowing of my problem, gave me one all powdery blue with quotations like, "A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow" – Charlotte Brontë) or give up my afternoon espresso, but I made sure not to miss my Pilates class and even relented to doing some yoga breathing. We went on a major bedroom overhaul, taking out the clocks and buying insanely fluffy pillows.

I still let myself watch shows like "The Haunting Of" but try to avoid them before going to bed (such shows are not nearly as scary on a Sunday morning over waffles). This has led to more peaceful nights and for now, no hallucinations, but every once in a while—usually late on foggy, chilly nights—I still get a sense there just may be something beyond what I can see.

# Mount Osceola

by Frederick Keogh

Every summer I make the pilgrimage home, flying from Milwaukee to Hartford via a random city I could care less about. I still get joy from looking out the window of the jet, but lately there always seem to be clouds or I am put in the aisle seat. Lately, something always comes between me and joy, and it is with immense relief that I greet the landing at Bradley International, the nets on the tobacco fields circling the runways like spider webs caught in morning dew.

The relief is not long-lived, for I am always going to visit my mother, who lives in the same house that my grandmother lived in before she died. My mother is alone now, her husband—my father—gone, although Mom, in her mind, is never really alone. Sometime after heart surgery when she was eighty, her mind became stronger than her senses, so that of late, she sees and, more importantly, hears things that are only present for her. She talks of her husband in the present tense and is certain, at least for that moment, he is still alive. The doctors say she has dementia, as if a label like that explains anything, but whatever she suffers, it can be nerve wracking. It is far worse

for her, to be sure, for she is the one certain that a child is bleeding to death on the road outside her house, or that men are plotting murder outside her bedroom window, but it is no comfort to us, either. And so, as part of every summer trip to Connecticut, I plan a visit with Jim.

Jim lives not far from my mother, but in summer he spends most of his time at his place in New Hampshire. He can do this because he is a teacher, and it does seem that he needs the break. Every time I visit he seems that much older, and so I blame him for the feeling that I get after visiting that I, too, am that much older. His place, after all, is in the foothills of the White Mountains, and only men who are not old might venture far into them. We venture far into them every year, and so it must be that our increasing age is an illusion. My mother has taught me that illusion is often stronger than reality, and so I must rely on that. With Jim, my old high school buddy, we are forever young and forever we will climb the Whites, and that is how it has always been, since the time I moved to the Great Lakes a long time ago. A time so long that I now bring my son with me, who is old enough to climb not only the little Whites, but even the bigger ones, as we did two years ago shortly after I had



reached my fifty eighth year and my son his seventeenth.

It was our third visit to Jim's place up north together and already we had established a routine. I would pull the rental car into my mother's small gravel drive and begin to unload the luggage, when I would see her totter out, barely able to keep balance, her eyes shining with expectation and a little fear. Who could it be? "It's me, Mom, remember?" I say, and thank God she always does, and she gives me a hug and I feel the bones through her thin skin, her form now more spirit than substance. Then I introduce Jeff, my son, who she takes on faith is who I tell her he is. "How tall he's gotten!" she always says, and we get our things and talk of her times as a child that may have happened and her times now that certainly did not ("I heard you singing in the attic last night—what were you doing there?") I later visit my brother and sister who still live nearby and stay a few nights with Mom, her home sweltering in late summer, always, she always cold, her sweater pulled tightly against a never-ending winter that confounds the heat warnings on the TV. After a few days, we pack up early and I tell her, "Going up north to New Hampshire to visit Jim. Be back in a few days," and she gets that wild look again, not quite understanding: is this forever? I

assure her again and again and finally we are on our way, plodding though the traffic up through Hartford and Springfield until the hills of the north come into view, and then the mountains of Vermont.

It is a tangled trip from there once over the Connecticut River and into New Hampshire, and always I clutch the old, tattered directions for reassurance as we drive through small towns and bad roads until the long dirt driveway to Jim's place comes unexpectedly, always as if by chance. It is a pleasure to be among the steep hills and white pines, and we swim at dusk, where now it is too cold, but we do it anyway because Jim and Jeff love it and that is what we have always done. At night we drink beer and talk and plan for the big hike the next day. That year, Jim had decided on Mount Osceola, a 4,300 footer that is not tall by Mount Washington standards, but I have learned that any mountain in the Whites is tall enough. They are steep, and you sweat going up them, then freeze at the top, so you always carry an extra shirt or a sweater in the backpack with the water and sandwiches. These are always several hour hikes, and that night Jim tells us this is a fairly long one, but I am ready, as I always have been. For Jeff, these mountains are always nothing,

and we—Jim and I—have done a lot together. This will be just another.

And so the stage is set. In the morning I brush off a slight hangover with a few cups of tea and pack some extra sweets for Jeff, who I think could live on them contrary to the laws of nutrition, and then we bundle ourselves into the rental. The rentals always come with satellite radio, and I have to turn at least once to the Grateful Dead station while up there, because the north has always been like that for us, since we were younger than Jeff is now. From the beginning it has been the place of hippy dreams, although no New Hampshire farmer would understand it, pulling out rocks every year that grow in the cold winter like gray, sharp edged potatoes, but to us it has always been so. In Vermont they have somehow really made it into a hippy dream, growing their third-rate high country pot while living on woodworking and who knows what, while in New Hampshire they still want to Live Free or Die, but that, too, is part of the dream. Of course Jeff does not understand—this is ancient history to him, this living off the land, but he has come uncomplaining to climb the mountains as he always has because afterward we will go swimming in an icy river with cliffs over a pool of deep, swirling water, his favorite spot. That

day as we drive towards the mountain, he is happy in anticipation, and sits in the back quietly as Jim and I discuss old times, problems with the kids, problems at work and everything and anything until I am told to turn. "I think it's this one—yeah, there's the dirt road. The pull-off is up a half mile on the right."

The trail starts out gently, as these trails often do, and I am in love again with the deep woods, my home of homes, lost to me now in the rolling farmland of Wisconsin. We cross a river, cold as always, coming past our knees, and then slog through a swampy stretch of road that makes my sandals squeak and slide around my feet. Here the blackflies start, but they do not last long, for soon the angle of the trail picks up and we are on hard rock. The trail splits off, one to the small lakes at the bottom of the mountain, and the other to the mountain itself, but the signs are angled, half fallen down, and we have to guess. In the first half mile I am wondering, if this is the wrong way, but soon the incline increases again and we know that this must be right. Jeff starts to get further ahead, bored with our pace, but it is fine with me. I could walk like this all day, as always. I almost hope that we find Jeff panting by the trailside, exhausted by going too fast, but we do not. Instead, we find him throwing rocks off a cliff, waiting. I save my

strength by plugging on, and the mountain gets steeper. Jeff goes ahead, out of sight again, and again the mountain becomes steeper.

"There, that must be the top. Not too much longer," I think. Getting pretty steep! I pick up my pace a bit, but only for five or ten minutes, for my heart is starting to race and it is still a ways to the top. "Slow down," I tell myself, "another fifteen minutes to go."

Fifteen minutes later and Jim and I see the *real* top, way up there, but no sight of Jeff. It has now gotten impossibly steep, where we often have to grab on with our hands. A family group passes us coming down, the father quiet, almost grim, and the two boys red-faced and sweating. "How long?" I ask hopefully. "Half hour or so," says the man, and we see them no more, almost literally putting our noses to the rock and dirt as we bend into the trail. We go for fifteen minutes more and I have to stop, heart racing again, and I look to Jim.

"Christ, this is effing steep. How long to the effing top?"

Jim looks up at me, annoyed with the same fatigue and says, "You can't just stop. What did you expect?"

That shuts me up. I am no baby, but damn, it hurts. Jeff pops up before me and I offer him some water and ask him if he's seen the top.

"Been there already and got bored. What's taking you guys so long?"

"How long to go?" I ask hopefully.

"I don't know, a quarter mile or so. I'm going back up," and he does, losing us again within a minute, for we are moving slowly now, so slowly. It will never end. I have never been defeated by a mountain before, never, and now ... but we press on, pulling ourselves over the last quarter mile like dying men across the desert. We do make it. The views are not spectacular, much of the top covered too thickly in pine to give us a panorama. What we do see is the vast slope of the mountains, like a massive green wave, trees and trees set in the wide blue of sky, infinite. Yes, as always it was worth it. But this time, this time ...

It would continue to bother me, how hard this climb was, but like everything unpleasant in life, after the pain was gone, all returned to normal. We sat to eat our sandwiches and then were met by a very large man who had made it up, too, impossible though it seemed. In his thirties, young to me now, he took our picture, Jim with his hat and dark glasses, Jeff open to the breeze

as if on a picnic, me, with my gray hair plastered to my forehead. How had he made it, I ask him.

"I take my time. I give it about two-three hours. I've climbed most of the Whites that way." Remember that, I told myself, you need to. Take your time.

Going down was easy, nobody with bad knees, and we swam at the lake towards the bottom, water dark with tannin and cold from the mountains, the water always cold there. I dried in the sun, but when a cloud parsed its heat, had to put my shirt on again. The other two lingered in the frigid water while I thought again—that was tough, that climb. Maybe it was too much beer the night before, maybe the cigarettes we rolled from the hidden can used for such nights. Or maybe I had to take my time now. Maybe something had changed permanently, and time had become as much a friend as an enemy, more necessary than it had ever been even as there was less. Less for me, anyway, but not for the mountains. They take their time in big gulps that are impossible for us to imagine, their year a million to us while we are ground down, made humble and small before them, climbing to the top only to retreat, while they stand tall, always, as we settle below after so short a visit.

We would hike again the next day, this time only along low ridges, and swim in the cold river and listen to the owls again at night over stories and beer, and then Jeff and I would leave the great, heaving hills of forest to see my mother again, to see her tottering out to meet our car. "Is it you?" she asks. "When did you come? How long will you stay?" It is almost as if we never left or never came, all the same to my mother, or nearly so.

Two days later we would leave, as always first thing in the morning, and my mother would stand out by the door watching us go, hanging on for balance as if a slight wind could take her away, as it might. And since that time I have known that this is it—I am following my mother who will follow my father, and her thin skin and varicose veins leave one with the horror of one's future as well as with something sublime. In it, in the mountain, in my mother, I have seen my death; oh, it is coming, in slowed steps and labored breath, and that is the horror. But it is also the way it should be, and in it is a peace, too, a peace like the high mountains and the drift of forest veering off into the great sky. It is time, resplendent, a power beyond all sense, cruel yet beautiful as no painting or poetry could ever be. It is not negotiable, this time; it may be spent on a mountain top, its massive



shoulders holding us like gnats, or in the valleys, warmed by voices and light, but even there, no turn of the brush or pen can change its presence. Cruel, infinite, sublime—it is why we have made our gods, for it and they are beyond grasp, beyond reach. In the middle of time lies death and around it, life, whirling like the stars around Earth, and we cry at our losses or hold up our hands to the sky in wonder, and still it turns, meaning everything, everything that we can never know while the power remains in our legs and hearts to climb the mountain. Then we drift, totter, fade into skin and bone and spirit, and it is a horrible and a beautiful thing.

## **Black Baby Born**

by Toni Martin

My ninety-six-year-old mother, shrunken two inches under five feet, sits in her recliner and waits. She says that she has never lived like this, in a place where she has to wait for everything—to go to meals, to come back from meals, to wash, to dress, to go to bed. As though it is the fault of the help in assisted living that she is stuck in a wheelchair. Because of this limitation, she would have to wait wherever she was. A few years ago, after fourteen years living with one daughter and the next, she wanted her own apartment. In those years, when she could still walk, she said she wanted to be independent, as though she were twenty-one and setting out from her parents' home. She has never seen herself as others see her.

When my mother visited the passport office for the first time in the nineteen fifties, they thought she was white because of her light skin color, and they thought she was crazy because the birth certificate she offered them as proof of her identity read, "Black baby born, April 21, 1914." She had to locate her baptismal certificate, which included her name and sex, before they would issue her a passport.

She left one senior apartment in a huff because the white people there couldn't tell that she was black. Always her father's daughter or her husband's wife, even when she held a job, she had never faced explaining to white people on a daily basis how she could be black. Lucky her.

Lucky, too, that her father was a wealthy man who owned an insurance company, a funeral parlor, real estate, and the only movie theatre in the 'colored' community of Savannah, Georgia. At a time when most white people didn't finish high school, both her parents were college graduates, from Tuskegee and Fisk. In the winter, my grandmother took all the children to live in Columbus, Ohio, where they attended integrated public schools. In the summer, my mother sat on the porch and read. She never needed a summer job. Lucky her.

But marriage was a shock, because she did not marry a man as rich as her father. She had to learn to cook at least, though she never learned to clean.

"Why did you have so many children, Mommy?"

"Because your father liked babies and I always had full time help."

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My maternal grandfather's two brothers went north and passed for white. My mother only met her New York cousins once (they didn't know that their father was "colored"), and now they are lost to our family. When I asked why her father stayed in Savannah, Mother said, "He was a businessman, and he saw more opportunity in Savannah." Opportunity to make money: he was much more successful than his brothers. But the family couldn't eat in the restaurants downtown or shop in the white stores. The police could arrest them for drinking from the wrong water fountain. They kept to their own. As a small child, I didn't think that there were white people in Savannah, since we never saw any.

My father, the son of a doctor, also grew up in segregated Savannah. His father was Cuban, and his skin color gives me my ambiguous ethnic look. Jewish? Arab? Latina? People never know. My bone densitometry results, like my mother's, lists my race as "white". No one asked us.

Anger fueled the ambitions of my parents, who both held masters degrees. My father became the editor of Negro newspapers and then a politician. My mother worked as a free-lance editor until age 90 and wears her Phi Beta Kappa key on a chain around her neck. But anger does

not burn clean. The legacy of segregation hung over our family of five girls like a toxic cloud. The unspoken question in our household was, "What would white people think?"

Since the stereotype of black girls is that we are loose and sexual, we were raised to be uptight and inhibited. "Don't draw attention to yourself." Chewing gum, blue jeans, short skirts, made us look like whores. "Jitterbugging and fingerpopping" were forbidden. Although we were "just like other black people," my father refused to buy watermelon in the supermarket, in case someone might see him. The song from "Porgy and Bess", "I got plenty o' nuthin, and nuthin's plenty for me" sent my mother into a rage. How dare that white man Gershwin imply that black people enjoyed poverty? They were always looking for racism and they always found it.

Their intent was to protect us, but my parents didn't give me much hope. My father said that white people would hate us because we were light-skinned and educated, too much like them to dismiss. And black people would hate us because we were light-skinned and educated, too different from them to embrace. We all coped in different ways but once I left for college, I never spent a summer at home. I moved to California from the east coast, I

married a darker-skinned man whose optimism is a balm, and I became a doctor. I couldn't breathe in their house, and I wanted to see all the stars in the sky

My mother's backbone has collapsed from osteoporosis and she can't walk, but she still nurses her grudges. She is afraid that we will forget. How could we forget? She lived to see the end of segregation, traveled the world and dined with presidents, including the young black one, but in her mind, it is too little, too late. Nothing about her life was lucky. She is jealous of the opportunities we had, and says that her primary role, a mother, was "worth nothing." None of us were ambitious enough for her, despite our careers. The toxic cloud still hovers above her, threatening to envelope me again at each visit.

I type her fantasy memoirs, where she imagines that but for segregation she would have become a Nobel prize-winning psychiatrist, called in to counsel heads of state. This woman who avoided cafeterias because she couldn't make choices quickly and worried about making the people behind her wait, thinks she was tough enough for medical school in the nineteen forties. If she were white, she could probably fly, too.

I wish, in her old age, that she could not forgive, not forget, but escape the segregation of her youth. Ignore who's watching and act the fool. (I wish that for myself, too.) Take pride in what she did accomplish. Create her own happiness. But my mother will die believing that there was another, better life she could have lived, if only she had been born white.

## Set in Stone

by Cathy Warner

The old stone wall bordering the street had long reminded me of the English countryside, stretching as it does, nearly a thousand feet along the road. Above it extends a gentle slope green with bracken fern and full sun in our otherwise heavily wooded mountain town. I had walked to this property often from the local library and dreamed of flapping a blanket under the giant Live Oak like others who had used the land illicitly until old Mildred Johnson died. A granddaughter of homesteader John Bonebrake—who had once owned a hardware store in Oklahoma and travelled west, settling in this lumber town in the San Lorenzo Valley with his wife Elvina—Mildred, was the last of three spinster sisters to call the place home.

Without an heir, the property—one of the first settled in Boulder Creek, California—left the family for the first time in over one hundred years. Four acres of pear and walnut trees, a prolific persimmon, a creek, and farmhouse on one side of the road, redwood groves, sandy expanses, and seven spacious acres with rock-terraced hillside on the other, were deeded to the Historical Society and Park and Recreation District, jointly.



The agencies, unable to agree on whether to build a museum or a park, decided to sell, and my once innocent desire to picnic on the knoll swelled like ripe persimmons to full-fledged longing. I lived nearby at the bottom of a sunless ridge, runoff flooding our basement and septic tank most winters. My neighbors were living in their own derelict states: one about to be arrested for child abuse, drug dealing, and tax evasion, the other camped in a trailer while his house, a burned out shell, yawned behind him. I was home all day with my children. We needed out.

My fellow townsfolk were abuzz with offer talk, and I expected tight competition, but our full-priced offer was the only one made. Perhaps the others felt as I had—unworthy of this land, inadequate in light of its history. And yet it became mine.

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Not until my husband and I signed escrow papers for our claim to this part of Swain's Addition to Boulder Creek, did we learn that the five-acre hillside overgrown with brush was terraced to the top with stone walls, as evidenced in the Historical Society's 1880s photo. The picture depicted twenty-nine terraced rock walls on an otherwise bare

hillside, and a small man, probably Remus Swain himself, wearing a large hat and sitting halfway to the top of the ridge, dwarfed by the rock-scape.

To prevent the house we built from damage by runaway boulders, the County geologist required us to install a heavy-gauge fence with twinned cables extending out twenty feet and posts anchored ten feet deep, with a sign reading: "Rock Barrier Fence May Not Be Removed & Must Be Maintained."

But these walls, made of individually stacked stones placed without mortar, had survived two devastating earthquakes: the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the 1989 Loma Prieta quake. The Loma Prieta struck one afternoon while I stood on a friend's deck, holding my toddler, while her daughter turned cartwheels, until the ground began heaving in waves before us, the epicenter a scant few miles away. Ten homes were destroyed in my old neighborhood two miles from these sturdy walls.



Exploring my new backyard terraces, I found a sandstone monolith engraved with graffiti, modern day petroglyphs carved by hikers and campers on their way to Big Basin State Park.

My fingers slid over the roughly etched names and an eye inside a triangle. I discovered charred fire-pits ringed with empty cans of beans and beer, moldered tents and sleeping bags, decomposing clothes. The day the bulldozer came to dig our foundation a homeless man emerged from a redwood grove roused from sleep by the noise.

How many men had these stubborn walls and overgrowth of eucalyptus, juniper, and Scotch broom sheltered over the years, and where would they go to pitch tents away from prying eyes?

Remus Swain was the first settler to make his home here. He pushed east with others from Santa Cruz into the forest. They forged wagon trails along the San Lorenzo River into big stands of Coast Redwoods, and cut the giants to stumps, paving the way for hard-working, hard-drinking men and the scattered towns that followed: Felton, Bonny Doon, Ben Lomond, Lorenzo, Boulder Creek.

Swain owned a sawmill, and my hillside isn't the only one he denuded. Of course, he didn't do it alone, Swain hired loggers, muscled and rowdy, and who kept the sixteen taverns and brothels in Boulder Creek in business. The Sequoia sempervirens—alive since the time of Christ—

were two hundred feet tall with circumferences big as dance floors when they were felled, chopped, milled, hewn into boards, and freighted to San Francisco by rail to build houses and stores. Swain, and others like him, became rich, until the lumber ran out.

The redwoods are second and third growth now, but the stone walls are original. One lines the street, and another twenty-nine snake across the mountain flank. Nearly a thousand feet in length, they terrace five acres. Each piece of granite and Zayante sandstone was carried, stacked, and fitted into place, one at a time. Between the walls, which are roughly ten feet apart, the dirt was tamped flat and planted with eucalyptus trees and shrubs according to the nursery receipt in the Historical Society archives.

It's undocumented but asserted in the area's slight historical volumes, that the hands building these walls belonged to the Chinese who made their way to the greater Monterey Bay to build railroads that chugged lumber and other necessities through the treacherous Santa Cruz mountains—where dynamiting tunnels proved deadly—to the Santa Clara Valley and beyond. Some of these industrious men (how many, I have no idea), living in camps segregated from the Europeans, were diverted to the more

domestic and aesthetically pleasing task of shoring up my mountainside.

After years of laboring in this yard myself, sweating and swaying in the summer heat as I planted flowers and harvested vegetables—I thought of those men as more than historical trivia: men with bruised legs as they hefted boulders, bloodied fingers as their gloves wore through, throats scratched dry with dust and grit accumulating in their water buckets. I thought of their long trek to the creek in the afternoon swelter. I imagined their cooking fires in the terrace now occupied by my house, swimming pool, and garden. Could they imagine their toil on this naked hillside would one day anchor living quarters so enchanting and comfortable?

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Near dusk one August day, after I watered my potted roses, I pulled weeds near the *for sale* sign we had erected and wondered who would buy this land from us as we planned a reluctant departure from our dream home. An economic recession had drained our resources, just as the lumber had run out for Remus Swain and labor demands elsewhere carried the Chinese workers away. Would the new owners care at all about its history, about Remus Swain, the

Bonebrakes, Mildred Johnson, or the Chinese laborers who built these walls?

Hawks glided overhead on thermal currents, the sun slipped low. That evening bats circled, feasting on mosquitoes as dark fell and an owl called. I slipped into the hot tub, a modern luxury, steam rising off my body like fog, and watched meteors from the Perseid shower streak across the sky. I imagined a dozen braided Chinese men, cracked hands laced together behind their heads while they stretched out on wool blankets in this exact spot looking heavenward at a similar sight 120 years ago. Was it too late to thank them? For surely they paid the price for my desire.

# The Last of the Flower Children

by Susan Lago

My aunt is sixty-eight years old and lives in a two-room house in a picaresque Vermont town. From floor to ceiling and from wall to wall, Aunt Jenny's art hangs on the walls, from the beams, balances on tiny tea tables. A squat black wood-burning stove provides her and her common-law husband, Herb, with all the heat they need, all the heat they have. She is scarves and patchouli and wood smoke. She is cassette tapes and gluten-free and long hair, gray now, but still curly and wild.

In the morning, I wake in an unheated bedroom to Vermont in late November, but I am cocooned under three down comforters. Only the top of my head is cold. I jump out of bed, push aside the heavy damask curtain in the doorway, and emerge into the heated dimness of the main living area. It's six in the morning and the air hangs heavy with marijuana smoke and the scent of fresh-brewed coffee. Jenny is there with Herb and her best friend Grace. "You're up!" they say. "Coffee?" asks Grace. My sister and I are staying at her house, which is about twenty-five feet from my aunt's. Grace has three bedrooms in addition to the main room. Grace has a door on her bathroom. They

call the world formed by their two houses, "The Compound." Now she offers me what's left of the joint, but I decline with a shake of my head and make for the coffeepot.

Time moves differently here. It's not just the weed, it's also the heavy curtains on the windows and the silvery northern sun. I shower in the claw foot tub and dry myself with a hotel quality towel. Later, Grace explains that she's accumulated the down comforters, the towels, and most of her clothes from the odds and ends left at their local laundromat. "You wouldn't believe what people leave behind," she says, taking a hit off the joint. "More coffee?"

Over rice-flour pancakes with berries and maple syrup (Vermont, of course), the conversation turns to the logistics of growing one's own marijuana crop. Hydroponics. Special lights. Cross-fertilization. Grace sighs: "We just couldn't make the cost-benefit work," she says. The clock says seven-thirty. Grace takes out a baggie filled with green buds and rolls another joint.

Here, then, are the last of the Flower Children.

Or maybe they're hippies, but Flower Children sounds prettier and seems a more apt description for the way Jenny, Herb, and Grace harmonize with the environment of The



Compound. In between the two houses is a bower loosely enclosed with wrought iron fencing and decorated with a rug, a bistro table, and several mismatched chairs. The table is covered with a patterned cloth and both it and the rug are soaked with last night's rain. There are gardens, both flower and vegetable. Wherever the eye rests, there's something to see, something lovely and strange and filled with a kind of lambent light. Wind chimes make music in the breeze.

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My aunt was born in late November 1945 in a predominantly Jewish Boston neighborhood. She is the younger sister by eight years to the day. She, my mother, and their father—my grandfather—all share the same birthday. In fact, that's why my sister and I have driven from New Jersey to Vermont. My mother passed away ten months ago. This is Aunt Jenny's first birthday alone. We didn't want her to be sad, and we didn't want to be sad, on this first birthday without my mother.

I sit on Aunt Jenny's bed/sofa and flip through an old photo album. I come across a picture of a teenaged Jenny. How old is she here? Fifteen? Sixteen? She has a bouffant hairdo as carefully styled as a wig. Impossible to reconcile this

image with my memories. Yet it's her, despite the tweezed eyebrows, the teased hair shellacked into place. There's her cleft chin, her smile. When did the transformation to hippie take place? Yes, I could ask her, but she's prickly about her past, the same way she bristles when I take out my smartphone to check my email. In 1969, the Year of the Hippie, Jenny would have been twenty-four. She had already been to college, Mass Art, had already been married and divorced. She had lived through the assassinations of MLK and JFK, saw the Beatles morph from mopheads to acid-heads. I have only the faintest memory of her from that year; I was only six-years-old. But at some point, the bouffant was replaced by long hair, and the young married woman went to live with her equally long-haired boyfriend.

To the awkward kid I was, Jenny was my grimy glamorous aunt. She had long red hair and eschewed deodorant. She was a singer-songwriter who traveled around in a van with her boyfriend, their band, and a dog. The van had a bed! and Jenny's artwork on the walls. It smelled like BO and canine, but I thought it was the coolest thing I had ever seen, kind of like my Barbie Camper crossed with the *Boxcar Children*. The band made its way up and down

the east coast, playing at coffeehouses and bars. The dog's name was Home.

She called herself a gypsy. They lived according to their own rules in the van that was their house as well as their transportation. From time to time, they stayed with friends they referred to as family. On the other hand, my family—my mom, stepfather, and me and my sister—lived in a ranch-style house on a lake in suburban New Jersey. We had things my aunt did not—an oven, a swing set in the backyard, mortgage payments. When she visited, these familiar things faded into olive green seventies-ness.

In those days, my mother was different from the mothers of my schoolmates. A poet, feminist, and artist, she wore a hand-knit purple poncho and taught my sister and me that bras and make-up were societal constructs that objectified women. But born eight years before her sister, my mother's life was somewhat more mainstream: married, she had two children, a house, and a job. She lived inside society's conventions while my aunt whirled free in her own orbit. I believe my mother yearned for that life. As much as she loved us, my sister and me, she wanted to be the barefoot artist in the park. Instead she was a suburban mom who had to fit her art in the spaces not occupied by the demands of family.

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By the time Aunt Jenny turns up in my memory, it is the summer of 1972, and we are traveling across country to see Alan Ginsburg. This was my aspiring poet mother's idea. So we take off in a borrowed station wagon: my mother and stepfather, me and my sister, and my aunt. We drive her crazy, my sister and I, with our constant bickering and attention-seeking neediness. For some reason, our journey to SoCal takes a northerly route through Massachusetts, where we stop to visit my grandparents, and then up to Vermont to see old friends.

"This is where I get off," my aunt says. She probably doesn't actually say those words, but that's what happens anyway. She falls in love with the Green Mountain state. She jumps off the merry-go-round of sticky-fingered children and games of I-Spy and License Plate. And so Vermont becomes the closest thing to home my gypsy aunt knows for the next forty years. Vermont is her base even in the years she travels with her band, and then later from craft show to craft show where she sells her handmade silk-screened wearable art. Somewhere along the way, the long-haired boyfriend is replaced by Herb.

I remember visiting her in Vermont sometime in the late seventies. She and Herb lived in a log cabin on the side of a mountain. I remember being horrified that there was no bathroom. "What do I do when I have to go?" I may have whispered to my mother. "We're in nature," laughed my aunt (the cabin was very small; there was no place for the whisper to hide). She handed me a roll of toilet paper and pointed to the door. Why wasn't there even an outhouse? I can't remember. The cabin was heated by a wood-burning stove, and my aunt made me the most delicious cinnamon toast I had ever tasted with thick brown bread dripping with butter. The two-room house she lives in today is an echo of that cabin, only it has a real working bathroom even if its only barrier is a turquoise-colored beaded curtain instead of a door.

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Why does she choose Vermont and not some other hippie enclave such as Haight Ashbury or Greenwich Village? Maybe because Vermont has a proud history of welcoming pioneers, artists, and outcasts. It's no wonder that despite Vermont's inhospitable winters, the state became a haven for my aunt and her friends when they wanted to get off the hamster wheel of the work-to-live ethos and live close to the land. And it's no surprise that my aunt, an artist

and musician who actively lived the counterculture, gravitated to Vermont in the early seventies. After all, the state offered the appeal of pristine mountains, fresh air, and the possibility of living the Flower Children's ideals of peace and love in a communal environment set just outside the boundaries of The Establishment.

There's something else beneath the simple lifestyle, however. Another side. An economic one. Both Aunt Jenny and Grace rent, not own, their houses. Their clothes mostly come from hand-me-downs and scavenging. The economics of The Compound are based on share and share alike. The three adults share one car (Jenny's) and one computer (Grace's). They had also shared illegal cable until the day before our visit when the cable company upgraded their technology to digital and the signal disappeared. Grace is considering splurging for monthly access. After all, the winter nights are long. No one's complaining, but maybe that explains the abundance of weed.

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"Remember Jefferson Airplane?" my sister asks. It's Saturday night, our last night in Vermont. We've eaten dinner at Aunt Jenny's: a quiche made with tomatoes that they grew in their

garden and dried in the sun, salad, falafel, and white wine. Now we're back at Grace's, finishing off another bottle of wine and passing around a joint.

Nods all around. My sister is younger than I am by three years. Lean from years of yoga and holistic juicing, she's approaching fifty, but she's not there yet. In Jefferson Airplane's heyday, the "Summer of Love" 1967, she was one-year-old. She's nostalgic for a past that she never experienced.

Grace is sitting on a period sofa covered with a white linen cloth. She's wearing an old-fashioned cotton nightgown and robe, white with lacey flounces and puffed sleeves. She has masses of gray-streaked hair and wire-framed glasses, and holds a roach clip that's about a foot long, which she waves like a conductor's baton while she talks. The rest of us sit on mismatched chairs in varying degrees of wobbliness. There are doilies. Like my aunt's place, every available space has something on it: framed photographs on the wall, including one of a young Bette Davis, china figurines, lamps, a stack of wood next to the stove. The effect, though, is less chaotic than at my aunt's where angels made from recycled materials hang from a rafter and her mixed media sculptures share space on her kitchen table with

stacks of books and an altar. Grace's place is more rustic bed-and-breakfast than bohemian artist.

"I have a videotape of a George Harrison concert," says Herb. More nods.

"We could watch it," says Jenny, but nobody makes a move to go get it.

I take a couple of hits off the joint and feel my brain slow and softly stall.

"Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young," says Grace. "They don't make music like that anymore."

I am overwhelmed with missing the dark tropes of the gangsta rap my son listens to. The anger, the misogyny, the shameless worship of material wealth—everything the Flower Children reject---may seem as quaint one day as Simon and Garfunkel's gentle warning to "slow down."

The talk circles round again to the logistics of growing your own marijuana. I can tell this is a conversation they have often. I don't have much to contribute, but now I'm stoned so it doesn't matter.



Where are the Flower Children now? Some sold out. They're CEOs of companies that exploit workers overseas. They worry about their



retirement accounts and the effect of the recession on the equity of their homes. They take Xanax instead of smoking pot and dropping acid. They take Viagra and Lipitor. Some of the Flower Children live in Florida in gated retirement communities. They play tennis or golf. They're members of book clubs. They shop at Wal-Mart. Some of the Flower Children are dead of drug overdoses or alcoholism. They never got to watch their grandchildren play videogames where they shoot villagers or kick prostitutes in the head. Some of the Flower Children still live by their beliefs in peace and love. They head up philanthropic organizations; they speak out against social injustice.

And some of the Flower Children are right here in this small New England town, kicking it at The Compound, which, one could say, is a kind of retirement community for aging hippies—a mini-commune. They grow their own vegetables and wear clothes they buy in thrift shops or find discarded in laundromats. They may own computers and cell phones, but they are not a necessity. If they can't afford to pay for access, they're fine without. They make and sell art and music and homemade gluten-free pies; they eat, drink, and smoke with friends. They don't have much, but what they have they share. Age doesn't seem to matter. Jenny speaks fondly of

a twenty-year-old woman with whom she works at their local health food store. "She's an old soul," Jenny says. "She's one of us." To me, accustomed as I am to various electronic alerts, traffic, the demands of a full teaching load, and two college tuitions to pay, life here feels stagnant, yet it's filled with beauty. They live a humble existence, but I'm not sure if that's because they dropped out of society one day and never wanted to drop back in, or if they surprised themselves by getting old. When you're young, it's hard to imagine yourself forty, fifty years into the future. Then suddenly, ironically even, there you are. Smoking weed or shopping at Wal-Mart.

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After the wine has been drunk and the weed has been smoked, I pull out the yahrzeit candle I brought from home to light in remembrance of my mother's birthday. Tradition says you're supposed to light the candle to commemorate the loved one's death day, but my family has never been big on tradition. My aunt is a practicing Buddhist; my sister follows her own yoga-inspired path. We were all born Jewish, but I'm the closest thing this family's got to a practicing Jew so I brought the candle. My aunt takes out some old photographs. There's one of her and my mom when they were little girls,

another of me and my aunt taken when I was about fourteen. We're both young and lovely in the way of heedless youth. She spreads the photos out on the low table in front of the sofa. We light the candle. No one knows the prayer in Hebrew so we just wish my mom a happy birthday. We all join hands and cry a little.

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On the day we leave, I take pictures of us all with my iPhone. Herb asks to see the pictures so I hand him my phone and show him how to swipe through the images. Now seventy-six years old, he suffers from COPD. He quit smoking cigarettes years ago, but still smokes weed every day, all day. "Where does the picture come out?" he asks, turning the gadget over in his hand. I am in a place outside of time, or stuck in time, or timeless. When I step outdoors, the cold is like a slap in the face. I see the wisdom of burrowing. But time rushes back to me all at once and the effect is disorienting, yet heady.

As we drive away, my sister and I wave and wave. Jenny, Herb and Grace, a tableau in front of The Compound, wave back. I don't know then that this is the last time I will ever see my aunt. In less than three months, she will be diagnosed with end stage uterine cancer. Shortly after, she

takes to her bed, barely able to put two words together. On March 20, 2014, my Aunt Jenny dies, barely more than a year after her sister. One less Flower Child, one last glimmer of light and love gone from this world.

# Chasing the Dead

by Susan E. Lindsey

I kneel in the damp sod in front of Lydia's lichen-covered gravestone. It's a chilly October day in southeastern Kansas. The wind scatters white clouds across a cornflower blue sky. Dry oak leaves skitter through the graveyard and collect by the thirty or so gravestones.

I press my palms against the soil covering Lydia. I'm not sure what I expect to feel—surely not a pulse. Lydia's heart stopped beating more than 140 years earlier. I had been haunted by dreams of her for months.

I'm an amateur genealogist; we live for these moments. Call us crazy (many do), but there's something fascinating about chasing the dead.

Lydia died at the age of eighteen while giving birth to her first child. Her baby boy survived his mother by only a few months. Lydia's husband was my great-great grandfather, David Lindsey.

"Alas, she hath left us, and we mourn our loss," the inscription reads.

Just to the left of Lydia's stone is a similar gravestone. David's second wife, Sarah Sophia, lies beneath it. The two arched stones look alike—made from the same material, inscribed

in a similar style, and each has a weeping willow at the top. A small lamb lies beneath the willow tree on Sarah's stone—symbolizing the baby boy buried with her. She, too, died in childbirth. My great-great grandfather had three sons; only Sarah's older boy survived.

The two women didn't know one another in life, but spend eternity next to each other in this small family cemetery, a speck in the midst of rolling farmland.

Mine is a sometimes gruesome hobby. I spend hours in old cemeteries, dim basement archives, old county courthouses, and historic battlefields. I am caught up in lives long passed. I admire their courage. I'm touched by their tragedies and moved by their grace.

I feel as though I almost know them, that I understand something of their lives, joys, sorrows, and passions. They have become more than dates and names.

Lydia's story haunted me. By the time she married David, she was an orphan. She had lost both of her parents, two sisters, and a brother in less than six months. I've never learned why—maybe one of the countless diseases of the past swept them away.

She married David when she was seventeen. Exactly ten months after their wedding, she died in childbirth. After I found her grave, placed yellow grocery store roses on it, and whispered a prayer, my dreams about her stopped.

Others now take Lydia's place in my thoughts and dreams and haunt me. They are my direct and not-so-direct ancestors, and their neighbors and friends.

There's James, who packed up his wife and family, and moved from Kentucky to Illinois twenty-seven years before the Civil War because he was determined that his children would be raised in a state free of slavery. Most of his relatives remained in Kentucky and continued to own other human beings.

Jane, his wife, had courage and strength of her own. She gave birth for the first time just ten months after her marriage, and for the next twenty-one years, she had a new baby on an average of one every twenty months—twelve children in all. She raised all of them to adulthood, an extraordinary feat in an era when half of all children died before they were grown.

James and Jane had a good friend named Ben. He also opposed slavery even though he was a slaveholder. But after living and working in New Orleans, Ben wanted no part of slavery. He

spent the next few years educating his slaves to ensure they were literate. He then freed all of them and paid for their passage on a ship to Liberia, Africa. Ben's involvement didn't stop when his former slaves boarded the ship. For fifteen years, letters to and from the freed slaves and their former master crossed the Atlantic. Some of the letters still exist; I've held and read these yellowing pages.

There's William, Ben's brother-in-law. He lost his father when he was only five and his mother when he was eighteen. He and his wife had eleven children and William, a preacher, buried nine of them. He unknowingly brought home cholera after a trip. He survived the disease, but his wife and two of his sons did not. He struggled with guilt, tragedy, and debt the rest of his life.

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I didn't descend from powerful or famous people. My ancestors were mostly preachers and teachers and farmers.

My family's history is entwined with the nation's history. My grandfather pursued Poncho Villa. My great-great grandfather helped Kansas join the Union as a free state. My great-aunt served as a nurse at a first aid station at the Chicago World's Fair. My paternal grandmother could



shoot the head off of a chicken from across the barnyard. My maternal grandmother made exquisite bridal gowns. Her great-aunt was murdered by Plains Indians. My father, when he was just a teenager, helped get Pretty Boy Floyd's car out of a ditch.

Some of my friends are researching their families. I hear their stories, too: the great-grandfather who, while drunk, smothered his own crying child; the woman with talent too big for her small town, who left her husband to embark on a stage career in New York and European capitals; and the father who walked across the frozen Ohio River to bring home Christmas gifts for his children.

These people were real. They lived through tornadoes, blizzards, drought, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, wars, and famine. They fell in love, married, had children, and buried loved ones. They made good choices and bad ones. They were human.

There's no soap opera more compelling than these very real lives. Their stories should be remembered—these people helped shape our nation and literally brought us into being. But we also learn lessons from their lives about the nature of true sacrifice, and about honor, hard work, conviction, and courage. I complain less

about trivial annoyances in my own life when I recall the very real challenges they faced.

So I continue to chase the dead, coaxing stories out of old documents, and trying to bring long-forgotten lives back into view.

# **My Summer Mother**

by Sharon Frame Gay

The corridors in the nursing home were quieter than usual. It was a Saturday, only a skeleton staff striding the halls.

I slipped into her room and found her sleeping. Nodding at her new roommate, I set up a small table from home, fitting the little Christmas tree on it, lighting it, and fetching decorations from my bag, I placed them around the tree.

"Mom," I whispered, "Wake up. See what I brought you." Her eyes opened slowly, then widened with happiness as she looked at her surprise. "So pretty," she murmured.

"It's your own tree, from home, Mom," I reminded her, and she nodded, staring at the fiber optic tree that she had bought several years ago. She smiled sweetly, drinking in the sight, then turned and peered up into my face.

"I want all my money, my checkbook, bank account statements, and credit cards, right now," she hissed, " I am canceling Medicaid, leaving this place, and I am completely finished with you. You're a liar and a thief, and you have even tricked your poor brother into believing the things you say."

So begins another day, channeling through the sundry personalities that morph like the lights on the Christmas tree, daily, hourly, minute to minute. My mother. My jailer, my muse, my genetic partner, and my childhood fairy princess, now turned into an evil witch who smears poison apples against my teeth and begs me to swallow.

Stumbling out the nursing home door in tears and rage, I was like a dog hit by a car, wanting to bite whoever comes near.

At home, I crumpled into tears, keening as I rocked back and forth in exhaustion from spending months handling my mother's medical affairs, finances, household, and pet, while she languished in the nursing home in a flurry of psychotic dreams.

"Your mother is suffering from delirium, visual hallucinations, delusions and confusion. She has progressive dementia and failure to thrive. She is likely terminal." I nodded thoughtfully as the doctors and nurses, practitioners and psychiatrists gave me their diagnosis, but inside I thought, "Oh no, she's not. She is far from terminal, only a dream away from coming back into the swirling world where she has always reigned. She is going to rise again, for she is immortal."

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I was first introduced to my mother under a bright white hospital light on an oak-lined street in Chicago, pulled from her womb, wet and squalling. But I did not truly meet her, nor fall in love with her, until I was four years old, as we left the city behind one day on the way to our lake house in Michigan. I was bundled into a small red sweater, stuffed into the back seat with our old spaniel. Peering up at the front door of the bungalow, I saw my mother emerge in a flash of long legs, her sneakers skipping down the steps, hair in pigtails under a cap, with the brim snapped over her Nordic blue eyes. This was not the Ice Queen who came home each night from work in the dark, trailing the cold of January on the hem of her long, grey coat. Nor the enigmatic young woman, seated with her parents and my brother and me around the kitchen table in the golden lamplight after dinner. Then, she was more like a bigger sister, sharing her day with her two young siblings and her parents. No, this was the Lake Fairy, gliding into the car with a grin plastered on her face, her troubles left behind in the rearview mirror, as we departed the curb in a flurry of joy and laughter. My Summer Mother. I felt a flash of

excitement and mystery with just a hint of fairy dust as we headed to the lake.

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"Come with me," my mother smiled, one hot July afternoon. "I am going to give you the greatest gift in the world. Books." I followed her down the dusty road to the public beach, where a dingy tan Book Mobile sat, low on its tires in the shifting morning, the lake in the background like blue silk. Inside the musty bus, a treasure trove of books waited on shelves, motes of dust in the sunlight glinting off the spines as though they were enchanted. On the bottom shelf were children's books. "May I borrow one"? I asked tentatively. "You may borrow as many as you can carry", she grinned, and I filled my tiny arms with volume after volume, excitement rising as we hurried back down the lake road and into the cool glade of the front porch. She read to me into the evening, sharing pirates and ponies, puppies and faraway lands. I hung on each word, my head on her chest, hearing the rumble of her voice and knowing I would recognize it anywhere.

And so began the enchantment and bewitching, the blessings and the curse that came with being my mother's child.

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One day I walked into the nursing home and found her in tears. "What's wrong, Mom?" I asked, alarmed. She sobbed, "I am thinking of Troy". Troy. My brother who died a year ago, but until yesterday, my deluded mother thought was on a ferry boat with her on their way to Germany in happier times, he forever nine years old. She had been sending me out into the facility hallway for days now, to call him in for supper. Now, she remembered the truth. I nodded in empathy, as she raised her sorrowful blue eyes to me. Then, she began to cry again. "Look at me", she sobbed, "I'm a cripple." She reached out her hand to me. I clasped it between mine, staring down at her. "What have you DONE to me!" she wailed, and I felt every word like an incantation, hexing me, driving me down with her into an abyss so dark that the night seemed bright by comparison.

She had been lying in a pool of misery for over three months. The doctors and physical therapists had given up on her, recommended only comfort care. Mom did not eat, she did not drink, and needed round the clock assistance. I called my brother to discuss if we wanted her to be tested for a cancer. The doctor said she was declining, and not wanting to add another layer

to her grief, we agreed not to have her undergo painful biopsies and procedures.

Two days later, a physical therapist called me. "It is a miracle", she trilled. "Your mother suddenly stood up by herself, and walked! The aides came running to my office to bring me in to see it. Your mother can WALK after nearly 3 months bed ridden." I thought, "No. It is no miracle. She has simply decided to wake from her dark dreams and start moving again".

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When I was twelve, she married a terrible man. A man so rank and evil that ravens began to nest on our roof tops, so dark that even now when I tell the tale my heart skips and I tremble inside. And for eight long years we lived like paupers in a snake's nest, going from town to town in hopeless abandon while my mother alternately tried to kill herself, then him, and succeeded only in killing the spirit of my brothers and me. Beneath the terror and the heartache, Mom was sweet and guileless. We thought she was a victim, too. We gathered around her, shielding her from coming storms. At all costs, we protected her, we as drones and she as the Queen Bee. Protect. Get hurt. Protect again with our young bodies, our frightened souls. Still, the scales did not fall from my eyes.



I returned again and again to drink at the pool of confusion, as she was the only adult now in my young world. I thought all families were like this. I rejoiced at the magic, and cowered at the curse, losing myself in canyons so vast, that it took me years to find daylight again.

I can remember her on a summer swing, her laughter trailing softly in the coming dawn, singing songs with me as trout breached the still waters, the smell of wood smoke in the air. Mom was a nymph, skirting in and out of my consciousness like quick silver, while my grandmother was the one who held my head over the toilet, washed my hair in the bath tub, or brought me lunch while I lay, prostrate in bed, too terrified to go to school, afraid that when I returned, it would be to an empty house, and I would be left behind down some dusty road with no map, no way to find my family again.

I can remember her screaming at me, her hands like talons, reaching to grab and scratch at me like a trapped cat. And I remember her calmly beside me, my heart broken over a lost love, her hand cupping my head like an eggshell, as I find solace at her knee.

Now we bring flowers and candy, promises of spring, all to lay before her feet as she travels

first down one road, then another in her delirium. I am left forever behind, always trying to catch her long enough to gather some warmth on a sunny day, or to turn the corner and find her waiting for me, hand outstretched, as she says, "Hurry down the road with me, for the moon is coming up and the hills are awash in starlight."

I had followed her through canyons at midnight in the Arizona high country, my small legs barely spanning the back of an old mule, as her horse picked its way through the gullies, heading true north under a promising star. I had hid in terror as she ran through the house screaming with a shotgun, had felt my heart thud when I found her standing on a chair with a noose around her neck, threatening to jump.

My brother and I rode in the back of a pickup truck as we moved from town to town, stopping by the side of the road to cook. We left pieces of our souls from one end of this country to another as she chased demons up and down the highway. We were in limbo, ghosts passing through town after town, pausing each summer to return to the lake, finding our reflection in the water. Our love for her was fierce, our gypsy spirits held in her thrall, children of her rebel soul.

"It was magical," my brother said one dreary afternoon, and I paused. Yes, I think. It was magic. And still is. For how else can she rise from her bed and enchant the entire nursing facility? How else can she drive me to my knees in fear and distrust, and keep me wandering through so many sleepless nights? How else can I hate her and love her all in the same breath, while she continues to dance in the shifting change of darkness and light, sweetness and cruelty, while the world spins on in stoic indifference?

My brother sighed. "Nobody would ever understand." I nod. Nobody can. For it has been a lifetime of colors and threads, wafting and weaving into something so beautiful, so cruel, that my eyes burn if I stare at it too long. "She can't live forever, you know," he said. "Life's impermanent. This, too, shall end."

I scoff, take a sip of jasmine tea. "Oh no, you're wrong, my friend. It stays with us forever," I say as I hear the sound of laughter and tears trailing down the nursing home corridor, across time, to the dusty road by the lake.

## The Fisherman and a .410 Shotgun

by John Messick

One summer Saturday in sixth grade, my father offered to drive me fifteen miles down the road to go fishing with an old man whose wife had recently passed away.

"John," my father told me, "You'll make Mr. Radevich happy if you do this."

"Sure Dad," I replied, and rushed to our garage for my tackle box.

At twelve, I held the opinion that there was no greater pursuit in life than fishing, and I believed still that the whole point was to catch fish. I was obsessed. While my classmates watched cartoons, I would don my father's waders and slog through icy streams in pursuit of wary trout. On Sundays, I brought a rod to church because we sometimes stopped at a nearby lake on our way home. The rest of the week, I spent hours in our front yard with a plastic plug, perfecting my cast. I memorized the regulations for every lake and stream in a three state radius; I hid *Field and Stream* articles in my school desk. I studied underwater maps with a flashlight under my blankets, well after bedtime.

Whenever the chance to go fishing arose, I took it. It didn't matter to me that Dragisa Radevich was almost seventy years my senior, or that he had an accent so thick it was almost incomprehensible. He was old, which meant to me that he probably had a lot of fishing experience. Logically, this improved my chances of catching more fish. Back then, I would have hedged almost any bet, suffered any embarrassment, endured any hardship, in order to catch more, and bigger, fish. It never occurred to me that an old fisherman might impart a deeper wisdom as well.

In junior high, I could not imagine a world where angling success might require some deeper understanding. On float trips down the Red Cedar River for smallmouth bass or when we paddled the shoreline of some small lake in the Chequamegon National Forest, it baffled me that my father always had better luck. For Dad, fishing was a flippant endeavor, something to pass the time while he looked for bald eagles and great blue herons along the shore. He insisted that we fish from a canoe, though we had two perfectly good outboards stored in our barn, and it frustrated me to no end that my father's success seemed effortless.



My family knew Mr. Radevich from church. As members of the Russian Orthodox Church, we drove thirty miles one-way each Sunday to attend a country parish founded in 1900 by a handful of immigrants—dairy farmers who could chant Church Slavonic so mournfully that the old people would cry on Good Friday. Mr. Radevich was Serbian, not Russian, and had come to America after World War Two. Our little congregation welcomed him anyway; we counted as members, Greeks, a Romanian monk, and several convert families mixed in with the old Carpatho-Rusyn names. In places where Orthodox churches are few and far between, cultural differences tend to get a little mashed together.

I knew Mr. Radevich as the man who slipped five dollar bills into my hand each week after communion as gratitude for my service as an altar boy. I served behind the altar because I couldn't sing, and because I liked the ritual of wearing altar robes—carefully folding the vestment, presenting it to the priest, bowing for the blessing. Now, more than 20 years later, I sometimes miss those rituals. The effort to transpose them elsewhere—to a successful hunt, to tying flies, to writing—has only occasionally succeeded.

"You are goot boy," Mr. Radevich always told me, before he went out to the cemetery, in rain or snow, to visit his wife.

My father said Mr. Radevich reminded him of his grandfather, and I think his demand that I spend the day with Mr. Radevich was due in part to this association. Dad saw this fishing trip as a sort of character-building exercise. He treated church the same way—as a thing to endure. In my father's view, God was less a figurehead and more a conception of servitude. I learned very early that it is through servitude—and through stillness— that we find faith.

For an impatient and restless kid, one who prays more to water than to God, the hardest thing in the world is to remain still. I was as restless as they come, and worse, I had a bad obsessive streak. I now know that coaxing a rise to bait involves more than technique, but back then, I hadn't made the leap from religion to fish. My father's demands in the end would lead me to that connection, but it was Mr. Radevich who would show me that the sufferance involved in prayer is worth the resolve it takes to stand fast.

There is a kinship with water that fishermen embrace. Mr. Radevich taught me something else: if I was to become a great fisherman, then I needed first to understand something of my

weaknesses. And to understand weakness, I had to know something about tradition, and about God. The connection to fishing is almost too obvious.

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Mr. Radevich stood on his porch when we pulled in, and he jogged over to open my car door. His shoulders were still strong; sagging jowls didn't hide the square, high jaw, or temper the reddened nose which turned almost blue when he drank brandy. Two cats crept into the bushes as we stepped out to shake hands.

Later in my life, I would become a reader of fishing stories not for what they would teach me about fishing, but for what they could teach me about the nature of obsession. I would discover that to fish was to experience a form of grace. I would learn to appreciate the beauty of a trout rendered in watercolor as much as I valued the quality of its flesh.

But that Saturday, I sensed only that this old man shared my ache to have a rod and reel in hand. He too, was an addict. Talking to my father, Mr. Radevich had none of the enthusiasm that I heard later when he unlocked the tool shed containing his fishing equipment.



My face lit up at the rows of rods and boxes of tackle. He pulled a few things off the shelves and we went to load the boat.

I was a small twelve years old—maybe 85 pounds, and he had an enormous rowboat, the hull scratched and dented, leaning sideways against the pole shed where he kept his chickens. There was no trailer. My father had left, and it was up to the pair of us—tiny kid and arthritic old man—to load the boat into his battered pickup.

We drove to Bass Lake. There are about four Bass Lakes in the area; the one we chose banned the use of outboard motors. Mr. Radevich liked it for its silence. I liked the weed beds where big bass surfaced to eat dragonflies.

Mr. Radevich insisted on running the trolling motor. We trolled along the shoreline, stopped at promising holes to try our luck. That day, our luck was good. With Mr. Radevich's approval, I tied on a spinner—its hook tufted with chicken feathers—and on the first cast, felt a hard strike. The fish ran deep, turned, broke the surface—a bass. I played it with slow turns of my reel. Mr. Radevich fumbled with the net, and when I brought the fish in close enough, he scooped it up.

"Goot job, Yon," Mr. Radevich said. His hands shook when he helped remove the hook. I cast again. I snagged a large crappie. The sun beat down on the aluminum seats. It burned a little when I shifted my weight. This was paradise, I thought—like having a professional guide along. There weren't enough fish in the lake to contain my joy.

By the end of the day, we had a full stringer—several panfish, a nice sized bass and the smallest northern pike ever to bite a line. Mr. Radevich had made me keep everything.

"Is okay. We keep to show you Papa," he said, and sent me home dangling a rope of pathetic bluegills, a little sick from drinking four cans of Pepsi as I waited in his kitchen for my ride. I confirmed what I had begun to suspect out on the water: that Mr. Radevich enjoyed taking me fishing more than he enjoyed fishing itself.

"Look at the fish I caught, Dad," I said on Mr. Radevich's front porch. My father was silent; he nodded, looked at me hard. In the car, he raised his eyebrows and asked me, "Don't you think those are a little under the size limit?"

"But...Mr. Radevich said I had to keep them," I protested. My father was quiet for a moment, and he couldn't quite hide his tightlipped grin.

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Despite his vigor, my fishing companion suffered not only from chronic arthritis, but annual bouts with malaria. Mr. Radevich had fought in both the African and the European theaters during World War Two. He would make statements that were incongruous with his kindness—complaints about race, religion, game wardens.

Once, he spent a half hour cursing about a neighbor who had taken advantage of him. "This boy, he like to come to shoot foxes. But he drink too much. He drink four, five beer every time, then one day a case of beer. That damn boy—I tell him, 'you drink my damn beer, you don't come over no more.'"

It wasn't Mr. Radevich's job to give me a well-rounded perspective. He only wanted some company. Still, some of what he said bothered me—especially the xenophobia. He didn't like Muslims, or Blacks, or Asians, or most members of the clergy. I couldn't help wondering why he shared such opinions with a kid.

In the years since his death I have tried to dissect his stories, to separate the lore from the real history, but what I have discovered has only deepened the mystery of his past. I wanted to see his words as instructional, or at least be able

to disseminate meaning from memories that had been skewed by time.

Recently, searching for some way to corroborate my childhood recollections, I wrote to a priest who had visited Mr. Radevich when his wife was still alive. "I enjoyed his goats," the priest replied. "He fed them cigarettes to keep them healthy." Of Mr. Radevich's war years, he knew little.

On the lake, I learned that Mr. Radevich had played professional soccer in Europe and South America. He had attended a military academy in Yugoslavia. When he mentioned his wife, his eyes filled with tears. He visited her grave nearly every day—a forty mile round trip to the cemetery.

"Your family—it is good they go to church. It is important," he would say.

Mostly, I remember his stories about fishing: the day he filled the bottom of the boat with panfish or the twenty-pound pike he once caught below the Chetek Lake Dam.

"Fifteen people, they watch while I fight dees fish. Two hour it take me to bring to shore. But the meat is no good. I feed it to the cats."

Like all good fisherman, he exaggerated. Writer Nick Lyons says that in great fish stories "big

fish are caught or lost; people say wild and spontaneous words; event becomes memory and sometimes, in the hands of a master, bleeds into art." The fish Mr. Radevich had caught were huge, impossible maybe. He always presented these fish—crappies as big as dinner plates, record bass, vicious muskies—in an offhand manner, the same way he presented his past. And when we fished together, he rarely dropped a line in the water.

Still, if the memories of our youth allow us to form the narrative that guides our philosophical present, then from this old Serbian, I learned the power of stories.

And I learned too, the importance of faith. Faith, I realized, isn't a moment of Zen understanding, but a slow and tedious practice. Through faith comes grace and through grace comes understanding: we never fish the same water twice, but the past can repeat. The sadness of youth will be revisited in old age.



Mr. Radevich had just one daughter, who lived in Omaha. Except for the priest who only came once every few months, I was often his only company.

He succumbed to the isolation of his farmhouse. He gave up fending off the foxes and coyotes and let his chickens die. His garden filled with weeds. His house smelled strongly of cat food, and Meals on Wheels delivered his dinner on Styrofoam trays. Cataracts clouded his eyes; it became harder to visit his wife's grave.

Our lives were like opposing mirrors. I joined track and dreamt about the girls' volleyball team. My obsession with fish quieted. I neglected our friendship.

One Sunday at church, when he was still able to drive and I was just headed into high school, I asked Mr. Radevich when we could next go fishing. He complained about his arthritis, but mentioned a slough not far from his house. I felt that sudden flush of unrealized potential, the kind that starts in the stomach and leaves your throat aching. The lake's obscurity, I thought, assured a trophy catch.

"Only...Very difficult to get in. My boat is no goot. Only canoe will work," he said.

"We can take my dad's," I said. He patted my arm and agreed.

A week later, my father helped tie the fiberglass Old Town canoe to the top of our station wagon,

and at Mr. Radevich's house, I unloaded the boat without any help.

The creek access to Moose Ear Lake wound through a maze of stagnant swamp. It didn't bother Mr. Radevich that he needed help getting into the canoe, or that we got lost multiple times, tangled in weeds and unable to pivot. He was just happy to be out.

The sun burned hot overhead. A light breeze scraped at the tall grass. Milfoil swayed in the green August water. It was terrible fishing weather.

Once we had navigated the marsh grass, we paddled quietly, feeling less cramped on the open water. I cast occasionally toward promising holes. For a long while we didn't speak. The fish weren't biting, and my thoughts wandered.

"Tell me about the war," I said. He didn't reply, and I worried I had offended him.

"War, is no goot," he spoke finally. "You are goot boy, and is goot you never know war..." his voice trailed off. I watched the funnels made by my paddle strokes trail off into the dark water.

After a while, he began again. "I tell you. I was goot soldier. If I was young man again, I go....I

fight these Moslem, these people are no goot," he said.

Mr. Radevich, even though he had not been back to Serbia in fifty years, was speaking of Slobodan Milosevic's atrocities against ethnic Albanians and Muslims, stories of which appeared in the daily news. It must have been willful ignorance that allowed me to forget his prejudice.

Even now, I remain forgiving of his bigotry. My memories of Mr. Radevich are shrouded in a certain obtuseness, like when fishermen return with full stringers and say it was a good day, but block out the slime and stink of so many dead fish.

When Mr. Radevich next spoke, he did not mention current events. He spoke instead of his war, the World War. He spoke of the horror, of courage, of the friends who had died next to him.

As gunner in a fighter plane, he had been shot down during a battle over Italy. Though he survived the crash landing, Mr. Radevich was wounded. The only doctor they could find in the field hospital was a German prisoner-of-war. Someone held a gun to the doctor's head, and promised that if Mr. Radevich didn't survive, neither would the doctor.



"I still have bullet, here," Mr. Radevich said to me, pointing at his chest. "Next to my heart, for fifty year now."

Behind watering eyes, shaking hands, and the pained look on his face, I tried to imagine the young soldier going off to battle. My childish notions of war and bloodshed dissolved, and I was left scared of the horrors that had defined the life of my old friend.

We didn't catch a single fish that day. After a while, even I broke the golden rule of fishermen—keep the line in the water—and stopped casting. As Mr. Radevich spoke, I discovered that fishing involves more than the thrill of a trophy catch. To be a fisherman is to know solitude, to respect peace, and sometimes, to learn what it has means for a man to have lived.

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The fall after I turned fourteen, I passed a hunter's safety course, and with that, my sporting obsession came to include hunting. Mr. Radevich was the perfect man to stir this enthusiasm. While I casted for bass, he talked about shooting ruffed grouse, fox and deer out of his backyard.

"One day, I see three buck in dee field. One have ten point, one eight, and one have maybe twelve. Every night, they fight in the field. I shoot dee big one."

A full day in the boat had gotten to be a strain for Mr. Radevich's health. We headed back to the truck early in the afternoon.

"We get back my home, Yon, you can shoot .22. I have priest from church, he love to come over, shoot gun with me. Now his family live in Cleveland. Every year, they send Christmas card. Nobody now to shoot with, so we try."

Back at his farmstead, he retrieved a rifle from his bedroom and showed me how to work the action. We set up a paper plate on a maple tree, and I spent half an hour shooting holes into the paper. Mr. Radevich smiled, satisfied. Back inside, he offered me something to drink.

"You want something? Pepsi?"

I cringed. Every time we went fishing, I came home sick from sugar, and besides, I hated Pepsi. He frowned at my pained look.

"You want beer?"

"Okay," I said, and I drank my first Leinenkugel's while he fed his two cats. We started talking again about hunting. Reaching

into his kitchen closet, Mr. Radevich pulled out the .410 break action shotgun, his grouse gun. He passed me the weapon.

"Is it loaded?" I asked.

"No...no...is okay," he assured me.

I lifted the gun to my shoulder and pointed it toward the door. I cocked the weapon and took pleasure in the click of the hammer. Then I couldn't figure out how to release the action.

"Here, I show you," said Mr. Radevich. The cats slunk away along the flower pattern wallpaper into the bedroom. "Uncock it, like thees," he said, and pulled the trigger.

My ears exploded as the shotgun blasted in the confined kitchen. I stared, mouth agape, at the shattered window. Shards clung like teeth to the pane, then crashed into the flowerbed outside. For more than ten seconds, the room rang with eerie silence. Mr. Radevich looked dumbfounded.

"Oh no...oh...no, no, no....Yon!" he dropped the shotgun and gripped my shoulders so tight that I squirmed.

"You are okay? ....is okay....no, no, no." He slumped down into a kitchen chair, and both of us looked at the jagged shards, all that

remained of the window he had just blown away.

Slowly, our fright and confusion gave way to a guilty amusement. We went outside to look at the glass that had rained on his flower bed. After a few minutes, Mr. Radevich said, "You want Pepsi?" and everything was all right.

It was years before my parents heard what had happened to the window that day. After he died, I discovered Mr. Radevich hadn't even told his daughter. "He told me somebody tried to rob him!" she said.



That was, I think, among our last trips. His health continued to decline; old demons caught up to him. Instead of fishing, when I visited, we just sat at his kitchen table and talked.

When he went into the nursing home, I didn't go to see him. I had started college and never seemed to find time when I was home for holidays. I knew he would have appreciated a visit, but I convinced myself that part of him would have been ashamed.

In my mind, I wanted to keep him as my fishing partner. So I pretended he hadn't gotten old and that I wouldn't be missed. Perhaps too, I

wanted to hold on to my own memories of childhood.

The writer and fisherman Thomas McGuane believes our reasons for fishing have Biblical connections. "The Bible tells us to watch and listen," he writes, "Something like this suggests what fishing ought to be about: using the ceremony of our sport and passion to arouse greater reverberations within ourselves."

The Book of Job mentions fishhooks. In Genesis, water came first. Izaak Walton, who in 1653 wrote the first guidebook on the pursuit of fish, claimed that fishing is the perfect merger of science and God. As for me, I have found no better place to observe nature or to contemplate existence than from the bank of a river or on a lake at sunrise. There is an old cliché that says: better to think of God on the boat than to think of fish while in church. A decent sentiment, but I think Mr. Radevich would disagree. Better to think of God always, he might say—fishing is just a nice metaphor.

On all of our trips, I never caught any fish big enough to tell stories about. The trophies I caught and the monsters that got away—times when the line broke or the reel malfunctioned or the trout slipped from my hands as I tried to bring it into the canoe—came at other times,

fishing with my dad. Perhaps Mr. Radevich was not such a good fisherman. More likely though, I learned from him not how to be a good fisherman, but rather, how be attentive to myself.

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Mr. Radevich died around the time I graduated from college. At his funeral, I was asked by his daughter to be a pallbearer. I stood in the back of the church in the same pew Mr. Radevich had stood in for years, and watched the altar boys concentrate on the dripping wax of their candles. I had done the same once; I knew how hard it was to stand so solemnly for so long.

We carried his casket out to the graveside, to the freshly dug hole next to his wife. And as we laid roses or sprinkled a handful of dirt or said a parting prayer, I watched my father slip a five dollar bill to one of the altar boys. I understood then what Drago Radevich had taught me: that we are expected, from generation to generation, to carry on the old traditions, in order that they be rendered anew.

After the funeral luncheon, I walked back out to the cemetery, where his casket had already been lowered into the ground. As I crossed myself, I noticed that next to his name on the tombstone was inscribed a soccer ball and the

Christian symbol of a fish. I drew a fishing lure from my pocket and left it on the fresh-dug dirt.

## Contributors

**Kirk Boys** is a writer living outside Seattle. He holds a certificate in Advanced Literary Fiction from the University of Washington. His work has been published in *Storie-all write*, an Italian literary magazine, in *The Springhill Review*, and was recently honored as a top twenty-five finalist in a *Glimmer Train* short story contest. He has two daughters and four grandkids under the age of five, including twins. In addition to his library outreach service, he is a volunteer mentor for young writers at Richard Hugo House in Seattle.

**Michael K. Brantley** is a writer and Visiting Instructor of English at North Carolina Wesleyan College. His creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry has most recently been published in *The First Day*, *The Dunes Review*, *Word River*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Revolution House*, *Stymie*, *The Smoking Poet*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Fat City Review*, *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, *The Rusty Nail*, *The Circa Review*, *The Cobalt Review* and *Prime Number Magazine*.



**Louis Gallo's** work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Rattle*, *Missouri Review*, *Southern Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Portland Review*, *Texas Review*, *storySouth*, and *Greensboro Review*, among many other journals and anthologies. His chapbooks include *The Truth Changes* and *The Abomination of Fascination*. Gallo was the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Barataria Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. He teaches at Radford University.

**Sharon Frame Gay** grew up a child of the highway, traveling throughout the United States and playing by the side of the road. Her dream was to live in a house long enough to find her way around in the dark, and she has finally achieved this outside Seattle, Washington. She writes poetry, prose poetry, short stories and song lyrics.

**Frederick Keogh** is the author of the memoir, *Dream Weaver* (2011). His essay, *The Finger*, was chosen as a semi-finalist in the 2013 Writer's Digest essay contest. After fieldwork in the Venezuelan Amazon, he completed his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Michigan in 1995, and has worked as a teacher and an

editor. He now resides in rural Wisconsin with his wife and son.

**Susan Lago** teaches composition and literature at Bergen Community College. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in publications such as *Pank Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *Per Contra*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Prime Number*. Her short story, "Songs from the River," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2011 by *Pank*. She lives in New Jersey with her two children and a sweet little cat.

**Susan E. Lindsey** fell in love with words in the second grade while reading *The Wizard of Oz*. After a nearly twenty-year career in corporate communication and public relations, she now leads a much happier life as a writer, professional editor, and speaker. Her essays, short stories, and articles have been published in various newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. Susan earned a degree in communication at Pacific Lutheran University. A member of three writing groups and numerous historical and genealogical societies, she is completing work on a nonfiction manuscript.

**Anna Mantzaris** is a San Francisco-based writer and editor. Her writing has appeared in publications including *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Cortland Review*, *Ambit*, *Poets & Writers*, and *Salon.com*. She has been awarded writing residencies by Hedgebrook and The Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts.

**Carol D. Marsh** is a recent graduate of Goucher College's MFA in Creative Nonfiction program. Her master's thesis is a memoir of seventeen years as Founding Executive Director of Miriam's House in Washington, DC. Her stories have been published in *Soundings Review* (awarded Runner-Up in the 2014 First Publication Contest), *Jenny Magazine*, and the *Chronicle for the American Chronic Pain Association*.

**Toni Martin** is a physician and writer. Her second book of non-fiction, *When the Personal was Political: Five Women Doctors Look Back*, was published in 2008. Her work—medical essays, memoir, and fiction—has appeared in the *East Bay Monthly*, *The Threepenny Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *LiteraryMama.com*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *The Bellevue Review*. She lives with her husband in Berkeley, CA, where they raised their three children.

**John Messick's** essays have appeared in *Tampa Review*, *Cirque Journal*, *Rock and Sling*, *Superstition Review*, and other journals. In 2013, he was awarded the AWP Intro Journals Prize in Nonfiction. He is a graduate of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks MFA program. John lives on the Kenai Peninsula, where he works as a writer, sled dog handler, and freelance journalist. John was the winner of the bioStories 2015 Spring Essay contest.

Born in 1928, **Paul Pekin** currently draws a pension from the Cook County Forest Preserve Police, the last of a succession of jobs that included teaching Fiction Writing at Columbia College of Chicago, English Composition at the School of the Arts Institute, owning a little mom and pop store on Diversey Avenue, and working as a letterpress printer back in the days when there was such a thing.

**Lisa Richter** is a fiction writer and poet and a member of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Her work has appeared in *The Santa Monica Review* and is forthcoming in the *Squaw Valley Review*, *Orange Coast Review*, and *Unbroken*. She mentors at WriteGirl, cooks when she's not writing, and lives hilltop in

Laguna Beach, California. She has a daughter and a son.

**Tammy Ruggles** (cover photo) is a legally blind photographer who lives in Kentucky. She thought the door to fine art photography would always be closed because she couldn't read the settings on a camera or see in a darkroom. But then point and shoot cameras with auto features came along. With this, her forty-seven-inch computer monitor, and sometimes a little help from a companion, life as a photographer is possible. She is also a writer and a finger painter.

**Jean Ryan**, a native Vermonter, lives in Napa, California. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Other Voices*, *Pleiades*, *The Summerset Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *The Blue Lake Review*. Nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published in April 2013 by Ashland Creek Press.

**J.D. Scrimgeour** is a poet and nonfiction writer who coordinates the Creative Writing program at Salem State University in Salem, MA. His

second book of nonfiction, *Themes for English B: A Professor's Education In & Out of Class*, won the AWP Award for Nonfiction. Recent essays have appeared in *The Quotable* and *Pangyrus*. He has also published a book of poems, *The Last Miles*, a chapbook of poetry, *Territories*, and has released a CD of poetry and music, *Ogunquit & Other Works*. In June 2014, a musical, *Only Human*, which he wrote with his two sons, was produced in Salem's Ames Theatre.

**Amanda Forbes Silva** received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2012. Her work has been published in *Empty Sink*, *Emrys Journal*, *The Riding Light Review*, and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, later anthologized in *The Best of Vine Leaves Literary Journal 2012*. Amanda spends times away from her own pages working as an adjunct professor and freelance writer.

**Cathy Warner** moved from her historic California property to Puget Sound, where she writes, edits, blogs, leads workshops, and renovates homes with her husband. Cathy holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Seattle Pacific University and has authored a poetry volume *Burnt Offerings*. Her poetry, short

stories, and essays have appeared in dozens of literary journals and anthologies.

**Daniel W. Weinrich** received his BS and MS in Experimental Psychology from Idaho State University. He spent several years in Japan studying marital arts and seeking enlightenment. Later, at the University of Utah studying Counseling Psychology, he worked in Salt Lake County for the Substance Abuse Division. He has worked in the public and private sectors with issues related to addiction and mental illness. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Idaho in Adult and Organization Learning. He currently works for the Idaho National Labs as an employee assistance counselor. He has won several writing awards. Dan enjoys being with his family, writing, snowboarding, testing prototype park-boards and collecting Godzilla toys. His family enjoys avoiding him.