

bioStories



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bio**S**tories

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

*bio***Stories** 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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Black Market Pall Malls

by Emily Rich

2015 Essay Contest Winner, Theme: "War and Peace"

Colonel Troung was getting up from the desk again, excusing himself with a polite bow, pulling at the creases of his threadbare trousers as he stood.



**"Paper Cranes" by Emily Story
(mixed media)**

“Why don’t you smoke at the desk like everyone else?” I asked. I was worried about falling behind on our cases. “It won’t bother me if you do.”

The colonel’s eyes scanned the long folding table “desk”: took in the neat pile of manila folders, the inkpad for taking fingerprints, the stacks of loose forms anchored by a stapler, a hole punch, a small piece of cinderblock.

He gave an apologetic smile. “No ashtray,” he said. “Too messy,” and stepped outside into the dusty heat.

The year was 1989 and the official ends to the conflicts in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were

years in the past. But the borders still teemed with camps of refugees who didn't want to return home. Most lacked proof of official ties to the ousted regimes and would be denied asylum by Western countries only willing to take in the politically persecuted.

My job, as a caseworker for the quasi-governmental Joint Voluntary Agency, was to interview the displaced and mold their individual hardship stories into narratives that would impress the American Immigration officers stationed in the camps. Colonel Troung was my interpreter.

The colonel's arrival had signaled a change in the nature of our work at JVA. That year, in a

gesture aimed at normalizing relations with the US, the Vietnamese government released thousands of former South Vietnamese bureaucrats and army officers who'd been sent to re-education camps after the Fall of Saigon.

Many of the newly freed fled the country immediately, some by boat, others across land through Cambodia, paying "snakehead" refugee smugglers to get them into Thailand, into the camps where I worked. Colonel Truong was in the latter category.

He had been a rising star in the South Vietnamese Army, had been sent to Fort Benning to train with Americans, had been awarded the Silver Star of Bravery by American

forces during the war. He was what we caseworkers called a “water walker,” someone who would be awarded US refugee status, no problem at all.

Because of his excellent English, he was offered a six-month stint as an interpreter for our organization. So now, the military wunderkind-turned political prisoner-turned refugee, was sitting on a folding chair next to a twenty-four-year old caseworker in a bamboo hut on the outskirts of Aranyaprathet, Thailand.

At first, I viewed Colonel Truong with suspicion. I’d been a history major in college and had studied about the war, how it was a mistake, how the South Vietnamese government was

corrupt and undeserving of American attempts to prop it up. The idealistic just-out-of-college me had come to Thailand to help the *victims* of the war, not the perpetrators.

In return, Colonel Truong was nothing but gracious and respectful.

He admired the seriousness I applied to my job, he said. He advised his fellow education camp parolees to wait until they could get me as a caseworker. He was patient, with kind eyes and a gentle manner. With his oversized head and thinning combed-over hair, he reminded me of an elderly Asian Linus from the Peanuts cartoon. More like an egghead physics professor than an American-trained warrior.

He was also a nervous wreck. He would spring up suddenly from our little folding table desk and pace the dirt floor or gaze out the cutout windows of our bamboo wall. His hands shook and his legs were constantly moving even when he was deep in conversation with a refugee applicant.

Sometimes, between interviews, he would tell me about his decade in captivity, about the forced marches, the compulsory labor, the disease and starvation that did in fellow prisoners on a daily basis.

“I was once so hungry I ate another man’s vomit,” he told me, and then laughed awkwardly, embarrassed.

“I’m so sorry,” was my inadequate response.

He seemed to want something from me during these conversations, some sort of recognition of the unique horror of his situation, but I was unable to see him as anything more than one more story in the endless tales of hardship and brutality that were recounted before me on a daily basis. Before my stint in this camp, I’d spent three months stationed outside Khoa-I-Dang camp, interviewing Cambodian survivors of the murderous Khmer Rouge. Imprisonment, forced labor, starvation, it was all part of the cruelty unleashed by the senselessness of war.

One time between cases Colonel Truong unfolded a black and white photo of himself in

dress uniform wearing the Silver Star. It was an eight by ten photo, an official portrait, creased heavily at the folds. He told me he'd taped the portrait to his calf before he fled Vietnam. Other than the clothes on his back and gold to pay the snakeheads, it was the one possession he had brought with on his escape to Thailand. It was his ticket to the US, and he knew it.

In the picture, he is crisp and pressed, grinning with pride. In some ways I could see the familiar Colonel Truong: the wide forehead, the dark eyes, the sharp nose that reminded me of an Indian arrowhead. But in other ways he looked different. His face in the picture is young, angular. His eyes are brilliant, energetic and alert. His smile is cocky and self-assured. Could

such a man be capable of anything in a time of conflict? I wondered. Bravery, heroism, cruelty, atrocity? What would have happened had the war turned out differently and he could be jailer, not prisoner in its aftermath? The idea of it made me shudder.

Because he worked for us, Colonel Truong didn't have to live in the refugee camp anymore, but he was not allowed to leave the cheap hotel compound where the JVA workers stayed. There were five other interpreters in situations similar to his, and the group of them kept to themselves after hours.

There wasn't much to do in Aranyaprathet in any case. On Sundays, our only day off, the other

caseworkers and I liked to wander about the local open-air market. Once, while meandering through the tables of piled sarongs, tin cookware, plastic strainers, and serving utensils, I passed something that caught my eye—a kitschy, ceramic hula girl attached to a turquoise lagoon ashtray. It was the kind of thing I thought was “campy;” something I might have displayed ironically in my off-campus apartment back home. I bought it for Colonel Truong.

I plunked it down on our folding-table desk Monday morning.

“Now you have an ashtray!” I exclaimed, happy with myself.

I guess I thought he would react with amusement, but he said nothing about the ashtray's silliness, only thanked me with a bow of his head and a slight smile. As if I'd given an order for him to accept it.

From then on he smoked at our workstation and did not take breaks outside.

Colonel Troung smoked throat-scorching Krong Thip brand Thai cigarettes, one after another. American cigarettes were banned in the country at the time.

"Can I try one?" I asked once. I wasn't a regular smoker, just curious. I took a drag and wheezed

it out immediately. It was like inhaling field hay infused with Pine Sol.

“These are terrible!” I coughed. “What type of cigarettes did you smoke back home? Were the Vietnamese brands as bad as these?”

He sort of chuckled, and his eyes took on a far-off, remembering look.

“During the war I smoked Pall Malls,” he said. “American brands are always the best.”

Day after day we interviewed refugee applicants. Usually they were single men, but sometimes whole families would array themselves on the wooden bench in front of us.

Western aid groups provided them with decent clothes and they would sit straight and proper as if in a church pew, children scrubbed and combed, parents clutching Ziploc baggies of what few documents they had. The hopefulness in their eyes never failed to break my heart.

One time a young father who couldn't keep his story straight was trying our patience.

"The town he says he was born in is in the North," I said. "But he claims his father was in the Army for the South?" I was trying to pin him down on specifics. *When did the family move? What was his father's rank? Where was his father now?*

The man stalled. In the silence, an oscillating fan whirred and ruffled the stacks of forms on my desk.

The man's wife said nothing but held her eyes on me with a beseeching look. Their three young children focused silently on their hands folded in their laps, as they'd no doubt been instructed to do.

Colonel Truong broke from interpreting my questions and began lecturing the young man in Vietnamese. His tone was stern but soft, in a caring, fatherly sort of way. The man bowed his head and frowned.

The interview was over. We fingerprinted everyone and placed their file on the stack to go

to Immigration. Colonel Truong pinched the top of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He was crying.

“They will never make it to America with that story,” he said.

He was normally so stoic and this show of emotion unnerved me. Did he mourn for the tragedy of this one family? For the young father who reminded him of his own lost youth? Or for the whole sorry state of his countrymen, crammed on a foreign border, raising up children in the hopeless dusty squalor of refugee camps with only the slightest prayer of escape? Colonel Truong had been granted his freedom and a shot at a new life but until that

moment I hadn't understood how irretrievable was his loss. These were his people and this was the tragedy he was destined to carry with him even as he made a new life for himself in the States. A generation lost to war.

I was a rule follower in those days; not someone who would, for example, go to the black market areas of Bangkok and pick up a carton of smuggled American cigarettes. But I knew plenty of co-workers who would. Every smoker on the JVA staff had a supply of Marlboros or Camels or some other American brand. On a Friday when Tan, our Thai driver, was going into the city for supplies, I gave him money to pick up two cartons of black market Pall Malls.

On Monday, I pulled them from the plastic bag beneath my chair and handed them to Colonel Truong.

“I thought you might like these better than the Krong Thips,” I said, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

His hands trembled as he held them out to receive the gift. His mouth slackened, his eyes moistened. He seemed in awe.

“My old brand,” he said. “You remembered.” He held the cartons before his face, marveling at the crimson packaging, the regal lettering. Pall Mall. I watched nostalgia overtake him as he travelled back in time, as he became again

the young promising officer working for the Americans, anticipating a bright future carrying him, carrying his country up and up and up.

Goldenrods

by Annalise Mabe

Poppy showed us where the safety was. How to hold real still while your finger pulled the trigger. We shot at the wall of slate across the river that rose high, shouldering trees that reached the sky. And then into the muddy bank on our side, tracking the bullets through their tunnels. My sister and I ran to pick up the flattened bullets, mined gold—a Kentucky rush.

Nana told me how they met:

Poppy was Cecil then, at twenty-five. 5'7" in a white polo shirt and khaki pants he had cut off as makeshift shorts, leaning up against the rust-metal chain-link fence outside the local pool.

Nana was Sylvia at eighteen with brown-baked freckle arms. In white and red nylon she watched water for days in hot-as-hell Elizabethtown. As the lifeguard on duty, she taught the kids how to swim. Cecil wanted to check her out. This was after their phone call, but before their blind coffee date at the Dairy Queen.

Nana told me how cool she thought he looked. I can hear her eighteen-year-old thoughts seeing him for the first time.

“You looked like a drowned rat” he said later over quarter coffee.

No one tells you what they're really thinking, or what they really remember. I would tell you that when he died, I thought of the words "hard working," and "loving." I would tell you that I remembered the Thanksgiving when he baked the bread rolls on the same cooking sheet that he used to dry jalapenos. That when we bit into them, our mouths were on fire; that we laughed once we figured out why.

I wouldn't tell you that when he died, I didn't cry right away. That the first memory my mind could procure was when I begged for a Frosty from the backseat, how he said *your tastebuds'll freeze; what's the point.*

Or that I was instantly small again, looking up at the glass thermometer on the bookshelf with its lovely red inside that he said not to touch because *you'll break it*. The one that I touched anyway, and broke, making the glass and mercury glitter on the floor.

When he was twenty-one, Cecil worked the pumps at a gas station that stacked cans of oil into a promotional pyramid. It was 1957. Before Sylvia, before my Dad, before my Uncle, before my sister and me, before any of us.

His cousin, Walter Barnes, came in piss drunk at 6 PM as the sky was just melting into pools of florescent soft-serve. Walter was giving everyone a hard time and stumbled into the oil

cans that crashed down and rolled until stopped by some inevitable corner shelf of instant soup. Cecil had a temper and didn't put up with shit. He took his hot coffee, tossing it on Walter, who, offended, left but only to return, swinging the glass doors open with a 38 caliber pistol.

Their backyard in Florida was a forest for young grandkids.

It was my sister's turn to seek. I ran, her Mississippis calling out behind me. I saw the evergreen-painted shed with its white trim. I grinned. It was the best hiding spot, so long as she wouldn't hear the metal door screech open. There was a ramp to the entrance, so I teetered up. I opened the door to the spider dwelling

dark, the smell of gasoline from the lawn mower that enveloped my body. It was just like the smell of their garage where all the wrenches, screws, and hammers hung.

The front of the newspaper read:

“1957. YOUTH SHOT WITH PISTOL IN CRITICAL CONDITION”

Cecil was twenty-one, his cousin Walter Barnes—22. Walter was already on probation on a safe-breaking charge when he thought it wise to blow a bullet through Cecil's side. Cecil lay on the gas station floor holding his stomach, waiting for the ambulance that threw fits, stuck

behind a train on the tracks that blocked its way into town.

Finally, at the hospital, the doctor reported: *the bullet missed your vital organs.*

The paper concluded: “Barnes is being held as a probation violator. No charge has been placed.”



I had a recurring nightmare as a child. Nana and Poppy’s evergreen shed in the backyard was a growing monster with trim, white teeth. It didn’t move, but it loomed in the corner of my eye, silent and watching. I always have nightmares and I always remember.



In 2008, Poppy was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at seventy-four. Meanwhile, at eighteen, migraines led me to a doctor who suggested an MRI. He called Mom and I back to the clinic after the brain scan to go over the results:

“We found something, but we don’t know what it is. It’s a suprasellar lesion, or a mass. We’ll have to do more scans.” Mom didn’t say a word for almost a minute.

“What did you all do for fun when you were dating?” I asked Nana one night.

“Well,” she said, “Cecil liked to hunt for groundhogs and drive us through the rural roads on his motorcycle. He’d take out his rifle and kill them—the farmers wanted them killed! Those

groundhogs would eat up the vegetables and dig holes the perfect size for a horse or cow to put its foot into ... anyway, we'd swim in the quarry. I'd collect goldenrods. The summers were beautiful. Just beautiful."

"And later, when you had Dad and Uncle Gary?"

"Oh, we travelled. Poppy saved so that we could see every state and the provinces in Canada, too. Since he was a math teacher, he



made a modest salary but he was frugal. He said to spend your money on experiences. Not things.”

I wondered what it was like, driving around the country every summer.

“He had wanderlust. He wanted to see all these different places.” Nana said. “I was content with my immediate boundaries, but he, here’s this guy who was raised in Podunk Kentucky who was driven to drive everywhere. That was him. That wasn’t me. I was just along for the ride.”



Memorial Day, 2009, the end of my senior year in high school. My mysterious brain lesion remained under watch while I distracted myself with beach days with my best friend.

Driving back with the windows down, my phone vibrated in the cup holder. Dad's name scrolled across the screen.

"Hello?" I said, rolling the windows up.

"Hey, Anna," Dad said softly. He couldn't say it, almost. "Poppy passed."

"What? How?" I asked. I regretted it, instantly.

"He took his life," Dad said. Then he was quiet.

I saw him standing somewhere, probably at Nana's, crying quietly, trying not to let me hear.

In college, I started working at a bakery, frosting red velvet cupcakes, our best seller, with cream cheese frosting. We had rows and rows of jarred, dyed sugars for sprinkling and decorating.

One day, I scraped the sides of a mixing bowl with a rubber spatula, slow to let the batter fold over itself, dripping like syrupy paint. I got lost thinking of the quick, spiraling events that had happened just three years ago. Of what he said to Nana the night before, “things he never told anybody.” How Nana told me that one night, he steadied his weak arms on the kitchen counter and said: “I didn’t think it would be like this.” Of the glass thermometer with its mercury inside,

like the red on his chair, like the batter I made while I worked and forgot where I was.

I was told the details later. Poppy sent Nana to the store to buy flour, or flowers. I can't remember.

I imagined, in the empty house, he shuffled his sandaled feet, his chemoed body to the utility closet. I don't know if that's where the gun was, but this is what I pictured. I didn't want to picture it, but I did.

I saw him outside, alone, sitting in a lawn chair on the grass, the evergreen gasoline shed looming in the back. I wondered how many

minutes he let pass. I wondered if he was scared or if he couldn't wait.



Six years later, I will tell you the truth.

I'll tell you that Poppy was a quiet man. That I don't remember him being sentimental, or talking much at all. That when he did, it was useful. A teaching moment so that I'd remember the algebra equation and the balance on each side of the equal sign, or how to set a fish hook. That I'm proud of him for taking control of his life, even if that's a thing I'm not supposed to say

Eddie and Me

by Rick Kempa

What we had in common were our differences from everybody else: he was the heaviest kid in our school, and I was the smallest. In a high school of over 1,600 boys, these distinctions mattered. Our lot was to bear their taunts and nicknames. Thanks to a cruel gym teacher, I became known as "Peanut," a name especially galling because it suggested not only my size but the root of all my troubles at that time, my prepubescence. Eddie, too, shuffled back and forth between classes with his head down, dodging nicknames.

One year ahead of me, he was initially my older brother's friend, with whom I hung around by

invitation only when they needed more bodies for the hockey games that were played in his backyard. (To lure friends over, his father and he had sculpted a miniature ice rink, piling up dirt embankments in the fall and diligently flooding it all winter long.) In Eddie's eyes, I was of the same low rank as his younger brother Joey, a sixth grader. In fact, I was inferior to Joey because I couldn't skate. Thus I was always the goalie, my mission not only to keep the puck from entering the makeshift goal, but from smacking their back door. A fearful sight it was, to see Eddie advance like a mountain in motion and then loom above me, poised to strike! But I had three things going for me: agility, a goalie stick big enough to guard my groin, and a fierce, almost suicidal hunger for

respect. I lived for the sound of being cussed out when I stopped a breakaway.

Winter was not half over when the hockey season abruptly thawed out. For my brother and the rest of the gang, Eddie's thirty by thirty-foot rink, with its no slap-shot rule and his smiling mom always in the window overlooking us, suddenly became claustrophobic, and they began instead to hang out in someone's garage. I was not invited, and neither was Eddie.

No greater misery exists than to come home from the school halls full of laughter, shouts, and promises of phone calls and to have nothing better to do than watch cartoons. For two sad weeks Eddie skated slow circles in his

backyard, a hockey stick dangling from a gloved hand. Then he called. He asked first for my older brother, knowing full well he was out, and then he informed me curtly that if I wanted to come over and shoot the puck around for a while, I could. And so out of sheer need our friendship was born.

Our routine that winter involved two games, pinochle and chess. Always we played at his house, huddled over a card table in his unfinished basement. His mother would unfailingly appear with milk and cookies. A transistor radio, its antenna pointed towards the one square shaft of light, would be tuned to top forties. In time we were comfortable enough with each other to croon along with the songs that

held no literal meaning for either of us: "Honey, Sugar Sugar. You got me lovin' you."

Pinochle was Eddie's forte, chess mine, and so alternating the games meant switching roles of champ and underdog. Eddie kept a record of the pinochle results, arranging the data in as many ways as he could think of: won lost record and percentages, total points scored, average points per game. These tabulations were posted on one of the basement beams, open to the world, had the world cared to see. I kept the chess records in my diary, along with blow by blow accounts of the games.

When the weather broke, we added a third game to the repertoire, one on one basketball

on Eddie's backyard court. In this we used our physical traits to full advantage. I would run like mad, side to side, back and forth, until Eddie dizzied and I could break for the hoop. Eddie's main move, infuriatingly unstoppable, was to back in towards the basket, guarding the ball with his body and fending me off with his elbows, until he got to a certain familiar crack in the driveway, whereupon he would whirl and unleash a hook shot. Swish!

And so my first year in high school swung from worst to best. Having an upperclassman for a friend raised my status immeasurably, at least in my own eyes. The heckling probably didn't diminish any—it may have in fact intensified, to celebrate the sight of the two of us, Biggest and

Smallest, together—but I was newly deaf to it. As for what our coupling did for Eddie, what I lacked in terms of status I made up for with raw devotion. I was like a cute pet. His mother could've saved herself a sack of sugar that winter. Had she fed us bread and water instead of cookies, I wouldn't have gone anywhere.

When the locker next to Eddie's became vacant and Eddie helped arrange for me to move into it, our happiness was complete. As often as our schedules would allow, sometimes for just a few seconds, we would meet there. At last we could add our own spirited voices to the babble of sound! We belonged.

But although we rubbed elbows all day long, we would not make after school plans in the hall; we

had a more delicious way to do that. We lived just two blocks apart, but took separate busses. I would race home to drop my books and change my clothes. Then, just as I was getting my sneakers laced, without fail every day the telephone would ring and Eddie would nonchalantly ask, would I like to come over for a game? Oh the sweet shrill sound of that phone! The respectful gaze of the younger brother!

The following year, Eddie was the first of any in his class to learn to drive, which restored to him the status of the backyard hockey days. This was especially so because he drove a car befitting his size, his uncle's Monte Carlo. He steadfastly refused my brother's overtures to be the chauffer for the Friday night dances, but he

was soon recruited for the week night "open gyms," those three hour long orgies of pick-up basketball. You'd think Eddie would not bear up well in such a scene, but he did fine. Sure he was slow, but he was a master at positioning, a true force beneath the boards, and even without cracks in the floor to guide him, a deadeye.

His only problem came when, playing with guys who did not know him, he would end up on a "skins" team, the ones who were supposed to play without shirts. Eddie would flat out refuse to take his off, pretending not to hear the other's orders, turning his back on their snide remarks. Finally he'd bark, "You know who I am. Let's play."

With his fleshiness and my persistent hairlessness, the locker room continued to be a place of shame for us both and so we conspired to avoid it. At night's end, when the gym moderator would herd us all off the floor, Eddie and I would dawdle at the water fountain or stare into the trophy case, until we were sure that the other boys were safely in the shower. We'd then hurry to our lockers where, back to modest back, we'd shed our gym suits for street clothes.

The rate of change in high school is phenomenal. Weeks are like years, while each school year, punctuated by the infinity of summer, is a lifetime. And in each new life, the allegiances shift as easily and quickly as in an evening of pickup basketball.

In my third year, Eddie's fourth, the luster was gone from our after school routine. We still enacted it a couple of times a week, when I wasn't involved in one of the after school clubs I'd joined. (He knew my schedule; the phone still rang on cue.) But pinochle and chess were definitely "uncool," and our one on one basketball games were serious affairs, in which winning, or as we said it, "owning" the other, began to matter too much.

The truth was Eddie was "uncool" too. For me, all kinds of welcome changes had occurred. I had worked my way into a clique that specialized in all night poker games. I got a driver's license and ventured out on a date or two. But the best development by far was

physical: I had begun to grow, an inch at a time, and had finally sprouted body hair. Eddie, meanwhile, seemed to stay the same, a big relic from an earlier, darker age.

There came a day when, to his phone invitation, "Whattya say to a game of one on one?" I answered, too proudly, "No thanks, I'm going over to some other guy's house." In the few seconds of stunned silence, his breath came fast and wheezy. Finally, he muttered "no problem" and hung up. From then on his calls were studiously irregular, and his voice, when he did call, had a fierce don't care if you do tone to it.

In fact, Eddie was doing his own desperate best to belong, venturing out with my brother and me to the Friday night dances, where he'd plant himself stoutly at the fringe and pretend it wasn't agony to be there. We would drop in on him between our forays out to the parking lot to swill more apple wine. But as our alcohol levels climbed, our visits grew more infrequent and less genuine. It became possible to forget that he was there.

Dropping him off at his house at the end of one such night, we indulged in one of those mindless fits of cruelty that can come so naturally to young people. As Eddie was walking up the driveway in the glare of our headlight beams, his shadow looming against the garage door

suddenly struck us as funny. My brother began to flash the brights on and off. He revved the engine, inched up close behind Eddie, so that the shadow was immense, and we began to chant, mimicking, I suppose, his mother, "Eddieeee! Eddieeeeeee!" He fled inside.

The enormity of our crime dawned on me at once. The look on his face had been more like terror than anger, as if we might hit the gas and run him down. All night on the slow drift back to sobriety, that look was fixed on me. Sometimes it shifted to one of reproach—how could you do this on my own turf?—then back to the blind fear of the hunted animal. These were not mere dream images; he was lying wide awake in his own bed, I knew, and these were his eyes. I

wanted to race back over that very minute and beg forgiveness. The next day I did go over, but a long leaden sleep had blunted my urgency, and I did not beg. His mother did not smile, and Eddie would not see me. Not then, not ever again.



There is one more scene. It is near the end of my third year, Eddie's last. I am up in the balcony of the gymnasium with four hundred other boys. Down on the gym floor, a game of dodge ball is in progress.

As with all forms of war, the rules of dodge ball are few and basic: two teams of thirty or so boys, four soccer balls, each team trying to decimate the other, either by smacking opponents with a

ball or by catching a ball and thus eliminating the thrower. There's a safety zone for each team at opposite ends of the gym, a line which the other team may not cross, and so, seen from above, the action is more wavelike, ebb and flow, than it is chaotic.

The contest proceeds with the usual quick attrition until on one team there remains four of the best and strongest, while on the other team just one, and lo and behold it's Eddie.

It looks bad for him. Each of the four guys has a ball, and Eddie is backed into a corner of his safety zone. The crowd is laughing, yelling out fat-boy jokes, itching for a quick, fierce kill. My ears are burning, my lunch flip flopping inside

me. I'm afraid of the hurt that is occurring, that is going to get worse.

The four unleash their throws all at once, and as if he has an eye for each ball, Eddie twists and turns, like a ballerina in slow motion, and eludes them all. He manages to capture one ball, while the other three bounce back to his attackers. Again they synchronize their throws, again he writhes away, and again captures a ball.

Up in the balcony, the tide is turning, the insults snuffed out by a growing sentiment for the underdog. Twice more his attackers throw, and now Eddie has all four balls, and, with two of them under each arm, he is advancing.

The four are running backwards to their safety zone. They don't have to retreat; instead they could surround him, like wolves around a lone bull, and simply wait. In order to attack, he'd have to put down one, maybe two balls; he'd have to turn his back on half of them.

But a host from on high is pounding its feet in unison, screaming in a rising frenzy, "Go! Go! Go!" It's not one against four, it's four hundred and one. Against such odds, teamwork means nothing. Each of the four is running for his life. And Eddie is advancing. His bigness is not fat, it's power. The four are not wolves, they're jackals scattering before a lion.

When they can retreat no further, Eddie puts down two of the balls. He paces back and forth along the edge of the safety line. He singles out one of the four, glowers at him until the kid is half dead with fear, then finishes him off with a scorching blow to the back. The multitude is delirious. He does the same with the second guy, but this time one of the survivors catches the ball on the rebound, and like any cornered beast will do, he charges. Eddie scurries backwards, drops the ball he's holding, and faces the kid head on, palms open. The throw gets him right in the belly and he smothers it. The kid is out. Eddie then reverses himself, bears down on the last guy, who is squatting above one of the other balls. Smack! The impact is heard even above our shrieks (for I am

shouting now too). The kid is sent sprawling, and Eddie is alone on the floor.

And now amidst our bedlam a new chant is taken up. Soon the gym is rocking with "Eddie! Eddie! Eddie!"—a no nonsense cry of adulation this time. In his person, every boy's fantasy has come true, has been exceeded even. The anonymity that was his life before now is no longer. He could be student body president. And I'm clapping and stomping with the rest, but not chanting, because I'm too choked up. And I'm wondering, Eddie, does this destroy the echo of that other chant?

He does not wave or even look at us. He walks to the sidelines, to the back-slaps and high fives

of his teammates and to the locker room, where, finally, he too can shower with pride.

Red Wings

by Susan E. Lindsey

“Your stepmom and I are sorting stuff,” Dad said over the phone. “Is there anything of your mom’s you want? When you come out to Washington, you can take what you want back with you to Kentucky.”

My mom, an educated, well-read, and articulate woman, had been dead nearly twenty years. She died of cancer in her fifties. We had sorted and disposed of most of her belongings shortly after her memorial service, but Dad had kept a few things.

My father and beloved stepmother, Bernice, had been very happy together, but they were getting older and more aware of their mortality. Dad was calling his kids to pass along his possessions, starting with the things of Mom's that he still had.

I pondered his question for several days. I had loved my mother very much. Shortly after she died, my father gave me her wedding and engagement rings. I had since passed them along to my daughter when she married and she wore them with pride and affection. Nothing of Mom's would mean as much to me as her rings, but Dad obviously wanted me to have something else of hers. I thought about durable, but sentimental things—things that had meant

something to her and would mean something to me, but that were portable enough to survive a trip of more than 2,000 miles. Not the delicate rose-covered china or the beautiful lead crystal—my sister, who lived closer to Dad, could have those. Not furniture or the boxes filled with her many books—too bulky to transport or ship. My brothers could divide them.

I called him back. “If no one else wants it, I’ll take the sterling silver flatware you and Mom got for your wedding.”

“OK. I’ll hold it for you.”

A couple of weeks later, Dad greeted me at the SeaTac Airport baggage claim and wrapped me in a bear hug. Bernice said, “Hi, sweetie,” and kissed me on the cheek. At their house, I dropped my bags in the guest bedroom and wandered into the kitchen. There, spread on the kitchen table, was Mom’s silver service. Knives lay in long, neat rows. Bowls of spoons glimmered. A bottle of silver polish and several cleaning rags lay nearby. A pile of blue flatware storage cloths sat next to the bottle of polish.

“I went to the bank and got it out of the safe deposit box,” Dad said. “I’ve been trying to clean it up for you.” I was oddly touched at the thought of Dad storing Mom’s silver at the bank, making a special trip downtown to pick it up, and polishing it in anticipation of my arrival.

I sat down with him and as we polished the silver, we caught up a little. I told him news of the family in Kentucky. He told me news of the family in Washington. It was an easy conversation. When it lulled a little, Dad stepped into the family room to check on Bernice.

I polished a teaspoon, working the blue liquid into the Damask Rose pattern on the handle. I thought of my parents on their wedding day—Mom, twenty-one, and Dad, twenty-three. They had married in the church her parents attended, the same church where my father's grandfather had preached. Neither of them came from money, but my grandmother had well-to-do friends, and my mother worked in a jewelry and china shop. The couple registered for china,

crystal, and silver, and received enough gifts to set a table for twelve.

They didn't know on their wedding day that they would have seven children and little need for such elegant tableware. We grew up eating off Melmac plates and drinking from cheap glasses with painted-on daisies. We used everyday stainless steel flatware. We never got out the china and silver, even on holidays. Counting Dad, Mom, and all of us kids, we had a family of nine, and usually Uncle Ed and Aunt Jean and their six kids joined us. Even service for twelve wasn't adequate.

So the china and crystal sat in the cabinet—lovely and fragile and representing an ideal at

odds with reality. Perhaps when my mother was a young bride, she and my father had a few romantic dinners for two on the rose-strewn plates. Maybe she dreamed of someday holding supper parties or inviting the pastor and his wife over for dinner. Somehow, in the process of raising seven kids, she never found time to host formal meals. I wondered if she ever had the urge to tug open the china cabinet doors and set a lovely table.

When I was a child and dusting the dining room, I stared through the cabinet's glass doors and dreamt of elegant dinner parties. Sharing a table with five brothers and a sister was usually loud and crazy—no formality, no grace, no elegance.

I often yearned for something several steps above Melmac and meatloaf.

Dad walked back into the dining room and broke my reverie. He held a sturdy shoebox. “Red Wings: The Fittin’est Shoe for Work” was emblazoned on the side. Dad had worked for the phone company most of his life. He installed and fixed phones, and climbed poles to repair storm damage or string wire. He loved to work outdoors, in the garden, or in his workshop. Red Wing shoes, his first choice in footwear, were a lot like Dad—sturdy, hardworking, dependable, and without pretention.

“I think it will all fit in here,” he said. “This box should hold up well on the plane.”

I had a sudden post-9/11 realization. “Dad, we’ll have to ship it. They aren’t going to let me on the plane with a box of knives—even if they are Damask Rose.”

I researched shipping options. When we finished polishing the silver, we carefully inserted the knives, dinner and salad forks, teaspoons and soup spoons, seafood forks, butter knives, and miscellaneous serving pieces into the pockets of the tarnish-proof cloths, rolled them up, and tied them. We tucked them into the box, alternating the rolls, placing handles to the right and then to the left. It all fit beautifully and Dad taped it up eight ways to Sunday.

We took the heavy box to the Fed-Ex store, bought insurance, and shipped it to my workplace. I flew out of SeaTac that night and the box arrived safely.

To this day, I'm not sure why I chose my mother's silver. I don't lead an elegant life or host champagne suppers or dinner parties. A few times, I used the silver for holiday dinners—always with great joy—but most of the time, it remained stored in the Red Wings box.

I recently bought a wooden silver chest at a garage sale. I took it home, retrieved the Red Wings box, and unpacked all the silver. I slipped the knife blades into the velvety slots, stacked the forks and spoons into narrow channels, and

found perfect places for every piece. The silver was lovely shining against the dark blue lining.

I picked up the Red Wings box and opened the kitchen trashcan. I hesitated. I thought of my mother and her china cabinet filled with beautiful things she never used. I thought of my father and his work shoes; I thought of him polishing an expensive set of silver and entrusting it to a shoebox. In the end, I could not throw away the Red Wings box.

Years from now, when I'm gone, my daughter and son will sort through my things. My son will kneel to pull things from under the bed, pick up an empty old shoebox, and raise a quizzical eyebrow at his sister.

Give Me a Sign

by Linda Tharp

There's a lava rock wall in front of a Maui condo complex from which a nondescript sign announces the complex's name, a series of leapfrogging *n*'s and *o*'s heralding vacation before you've even dragged your jet-lagged self out of the rental car. The wall's rocks are rough and my daughters' skin, still mainland pale, appeared delicate in comparison as they stood under the sign for the requisite photo in their matching sundresses and Salt Water sandals, their hair not yet chlorine-brassy and their noses not yet peeling.

Nine years later Mom and Dad invited me back to Maui; they returned every April or May and always stayed at the complex with that rock wall.

My husband endorsed my joining them, probably hoping time away would have a mellowing effect on me, and assured me he could handle his job, the house, three kids, and our Dalmatian for a week. A week! It was too good to be true.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” I asked him. “Because you’ll have to get the girls back and forth to school.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Don’t worry—I mean, I *can* drive.”

I shook my head. “It’s not just that. Things come up that you never have to deal with, things you don’t even *know* about: permission slips, missing library books... There’s more to it than just driving.” Then I said, so quietly he asked me to repeat myself, “Besides, what about Erin?”

“What about her? I told you, we’ll be fine. Just go have fun.”

I half-heartedly bought sunscreen and a paperback or two, and agreed—perhaps too enthusiastically—when others said, “That’s so exciting you get to go!” What they didn’t know was that a lethal cocktail of melancholy and guilt threatened to derail my trip before it even started. Worse, I feared my cocktail glass would

be refilled every time I saw the sign hanging on that rock wall and remembered my girls standing under it.

I'm not sure how old they were in that photo—probably five, six, and eight. It seemed as if time stood still then, like I'd be forever unsnarling tangles from tender scalps and refereeing turns in the front seat, and I remember feeling comfortably stuck, contentedly itchy with life's predictability. Now, even though it had been six years since life morphed from comfortable and predictable to *this*, returning to a spot we'd all enjoyed seemed callous, like I was trying to forget—or ignore—what has happened. Because today, Erin, our oldest, is in a

wheelchair, nonverbal, and permanently disabled. She will never stand or speak again.

Six years after that photo was taken—six years after she tied a plastic grass skirt around her waist and swayed her nonexistent hips, six years after buying her sisters puka shell necklaces with her allowance—Erin lay in a teaching hospital's ICU in a medically-induced coma, her private room so crammed with monitors and IV pumps and nurses that she seemed inconsequential by comparison. She eventually survived the tenacious virus that breached the usually unbreachable blood-brain barrier. Or, that is to say, doctors called her existence survival.

I expected things to become more complicated as the girls got older, and when Sarah, our middle daughter, accidentally baked her pet rats Phoebe and Camille in a misguided attempt to give them a morning of fresh July air (which became intense heat sooner than Sarah anticipated), I felt a perverse sense of relief despite my rants about irresponsibility. The complications I anticipated were along the lines of nefarious boyfriends and speeding tickets; sun-dried rats, I decided, would provide exemption from future catastrophe.

Often I wondered if Erin's doctors were misguided, if their achievements weren't necessarily in Erin's best interest; if her survival—by their fluid interpretation, anyway—

would be enough. In the era of that photo, I believed Erin's future held more than the comfortable predictability she was raised with. The particulars swirled in my imagination like glitter, bits of hope and promise catching the light but not settling into a discernable pattern. That pattern took shape in Erin's early teens, her passion for space exploration blossoming into dreams of a NASA career, and while she lay fighting for her life in ICU, a dog-eared NASA application packet with the return address of "Astronaut Selection Office" lay at home on her bedroom desk—which illustrates the fluidity of the word "survival."

We did our best to maintain an illusion of normalcy during Erin's eleven-month

hospitalization, but life felt like a series of wrong choices: spending time at Kelley's science fair awards instead of at Erin's bedside, or letting Sarah and Kelley go to Catalina Island with Mom and Dad for the day despite a nagging fear that the ferry would sink. I was governed by guilt and doubt, no longer trusting instinct or common sense. Part of that, I know now, is because life was upended for no reason other than a willful virus. Nothing seemed safe anymore, or sacred, or sure. In a matter of hours, I had gone from weighing Erin's desire for our attendance at her space launch, to listening as a neurosurgeon recommended sawing away part of Erin's skull. Now I was afraid seeing that condo's sign would unnerve me more than finding those two caged heatstroke victims in our backyard.

I was in no hurry to leave our rental car's backseat despite the five-hour flight spent seat-belted to a barely cushioned concrete slab, my reluctance having nothing to do with comfort and everything to do with avoiding that sign for as long as possible. But as fate would have it we neither hit traffic nor careened off a cliff so here we were, pulling into the condo's parking lot, and there it was, not thirty feet in front of us. Empty, is what I thought—the wall looked empty without three little girls in front of it. I waited for the smack upside the head I'd expected, the harsh realization that all three girls would never stand here—or stand anywhere, for that matter—ever again. The smack never came.

I spent hours on the same chaise lounges the girls squirmed on as they waited to go swimming after lunch, Coppertone making them slick as eels, and on the same beach where they built castles that melted like sugar with the tide. The smack never came, but a revelation did: even if Erin hadn't gotten sick, even if our whole family was here right now, the girls wouldn't be in matching sundresses, I wouldn't pose them for another cheesy picture, and there'd be no more sand castles. It had nothing to do with Erin's illness, and everything to do with the passage of time.

After Erin got sick I spent countless nights wondering if her survival would be enough, if blinking and breathing and swallowing would be

enough for a girl with the former determination—and the former smarts—to join NASA. But in my either/or mind, I'd lumped “survival” and “NASA” together: Erin couldn't have one without the other. When those sand castles were washed away, the girls built new ones, some more elaborate than the original, some less, but they didn't stare at their now-vacant lot pining for what was.

The nonverbal, wheelchair-bound Erin will never join NASA. But the able-bodied Erin would not have received a standing ovation upon her high school graduation three years after she was almost declared brain dead, or be named Ambassador of the Year for her involvement with a nonprofit that provides wheelchairs to the

disabled in Third World Countries ten years after that. The old Erin lived large, but so does the new Erin—without ever uttering a word.

I've returned to Maui every year since then with Mom and Dad. That rock wall is still there, but it no longer symbolizes evaporated plans—now it's simply jagged stones, possibly thousands of years old, possibly manmade and bought at Home Depot, stacked like a jigsaw puzzle. And if I look closely, I see tongues orange from POG juice, fingers sticky with Roselani ice cream, and am reminded of what's waiting at home.

A Ha'pence of Sense

by Peter Wadsworth

Soon after reaching his hundredth birthday, my father decided he had finished with looking after himself and moved into a nursing home.

I visit once a week.

I enter the room to find him slumped in a chair. The thought insinuates: "he's dead!" A rattle, and saliva trickles from his mouth. I shake myself and stride towards him. "Hello dad," I say, and repeat louder when I get no answer. A gentle pressure on his shoulder elicits no response, neither does a firm grip. I retire, defeated, to fetch his jacket from his room, and

pass a resident in the corridor determinedly making progress while clutching her walking frame and muttering to no one in particular. Returning with the coat and a wheelchair, I grasp his shoulder. He stirs, eyes flickering open and shut as his consciousness struggles to return to the resident's lounge. Still a little confused, he looks around and notices my presence. After a few seconds his dazed expression turns to recognition and a little smile flickers across his face. I sit next to him while he gathers strength, inspecting his face. The forehead sports a large plaster earned from his latest fall. Yellow teeth few but still his own. Hair pure white, the waves hinting at once lustrous full locks. The face still remarkably unlined, belying his 102 years.

When I was fourteen he constructed a kayak in our garage: a two person—well, a one man and one boy. We were going on an adventure. A template was ordered, paper patterns for tracing the cross members in ply, and detailed instructions on how to form the skeleton and clad it in canvas. But my father had a better idea: he had acquired the very first samples of a new development, glass fibre. Little by little we (that is he, while I watched and occasionally passed a tool) built up the frame until we had what looked like the bones of a twelve-foot prehistoric sea monster. Over this were stretched layer after layer of glass fibre fabric and lashings of resin. This was not a light nimble craft but a dreadnought, only just able to be lifted by the two of us. That long hot summer my father and

I cannoned down the river Wye. Water levels were low and we were the only kayakers on the river. Stories are told to this day in those whereabouts of the two crazies who barreled down the half dry river bouncing from rock to boulder to rock in a miraculously undamaged kayak.

He has little conversation, and grunts as I ask him if he wants to go out. He readies himself for our little routine. The wheelchair is positioned next to his chair. I take his hands and become his strength. "On three," I intone and pull him gently forward while he rocks his body. A second pull and he has the rhythm. With the next he pushes himself forward and I carefully draw him out of the chair as he gradually, with

great effort, rises to his feet. He steadies sufficiently for me to guide his left hand to the wheelchair, and I lead him on a slow, unsteady pirouette to line him up with his destination. On my command he trustingly slumps backwards and is safely ensconced in the seat. I propel him purposefully down the main corridor towards the entrance, passing staff who wish him a good trip or teasingly place orders for fish and chips.

Inserting my father into the car takes all of five minutes for a drive of a thousand yards to an ordinary looking pub, which unaccountably but delightfully has an excellent chef. Our five-minute disembarkation routine has us safely inside the building. Seating is tricky. I get my father out of the wheelchair with the one two

three routine and plonked down on the bench seat. Then I need to maneuver the heavy table as close to him as possible. I gently lift one foot up and move the table base under it, repeating the procedure for the other foot. I scramble up off the floor and smile inanely at the bemused fellow diners. I roll up my father's sleeves and tuck in a number of napkins under chin and chest. We are ready. My father orders lamb, which comes on a raft of sweet potato with assorted vegetables, all beautifully presented. I have had the dish before and it is delicious. I cut the meat into bite-sized pieces and place the cutlery in his hands. Food has always been an important and serious occupation for my father and we proceed in strict silence. He struggles to grip his knife and fork, then spends much time

and effort in persuading sufficient morsels of food to remain on his fork as he lifts it waveringly towards his mouth. I find myself transfixed by the spectacle, hoping that his efforts will be rewarded and saddened at his frequent failures. A residual determination drives him to persist. Forty minutes after commencing his meal he is pursuing the few remaining rebellious peas around his plate with a persistence worthy of a door stopping reporter. "Did you enjoy your meal?" I ask. "No", he responds, looking down at his empty plate. "I like it plain and simple."

Like all seventeen year olds I realised that I knew more than my parents. They were old, behind the times, could not understand. One of the less objectionable manifestations of this

obvious truth was that I believed I was a better cook than my mother. So, with the arrogance and ignorance of youth I took over the preparation of the evening meal. Not having trained with Escoffier I would raid the pantry and refrigerator, pillaging anything vaguely edible. Unique and scary concoctions, often of ill-assorted vegetables, perhaps some dubious meat or fish, seasoning, spices and/or herbs, were placed triumphantly in front of my long suffering parents. Unlike my mother, who often retreated to wedges of bread smothered in butter, dad reveled in the strange and unexpected, and so looked forward to his evening repasts. After a particularly enjoyable meal my father said he would like the dish again sometime. I did not reply. I had created a

concoction of such complexity that re-creation was an impossibility; I could not recall all the ingredients or quantities. I sighed, another culinary masterpiece was lost to the world.

After the meal we complete the afternoon by a drive in the country. The hinterland of West Yorkshire is a mosaic of crisscrossing roads linking once industrial towns with ribbon development. But this seeming megalopolis contains unblemished hills and moors, prosperous farms and dense woods. These hidden places are what we seek. Each of these trips is an exploration, every turning done on whim, meandering through unexpected villages and stone bounded fields. My father gazes

around, trapped in a metal box but enjoying the views. "Perfect clouds," he volunteers.

In his fifties he took up gliding. It became a passion. The silence, the freedom, the vantage of an eagle. He became a skilled but individualistic pilot. Low speed flight was a fascination. As air speed drops lift caused by airflow over the wings decreases and eventually the craft stalls, one wing losing lift completely. The glider drops suddenly to that side, spiraling down out of control unless the pilot has the skill and sufficient altitude to recover by putting the nose down and diving to gain speed. My father wondered if it would be possible to keep a stalling glider from losing control. On a series of flights he gained maximum altitude for safety,

and gradually, after repeated stalls, he found he was able to keep flying by innumerable subtle adjustments of the ailerons. The slower he travelled the faster the plane dropped, but still under control. Back at the clubhouse he eagerly told the flight instructor of his discovery. The instructor was furious, said that was impossible and that if he tried such a stupid maneuver again would be grounded.

Later that season my father had a launch by winch. The driver, inexperienced, released him too soon. He did not have sufficient height or speed and was therefore unable to circuit round to land. Rather than spiral into the ground, he used his new technique to keep flying, dropping ever faster to the ground. The glider landed

normally but very heavily. Both he and the glider survived. He with a painful back, the glider with scratches. Ground staff were astonished. "Why did the glider not crash, you could have been killed!" My father kept his silence.

He awakes as we pull into the nursing home drive and I decant him into the wheelchair. He needs his bathroom; I can see that his pad is leaking. In his suite I manhandle him onto the toilet seat. Exhausted, he rests for a while as I close the door to give him privacy. Looking around his bedroom I notice a faded photograph in a silver frame. A pleasure boat on a river, a glimpse of a man leaning out of the cabin. My father swings open the bathroom door. He is ready to have his pad replaced.

When my sister and I were in our early teens our parents bought a thirty-foot cabin cruiser: four berth, galley, washroom, centre control cabin, gleaming white timber hull, sparking chromium fittings. It just happened to be called Yvonne, my sister's name. My mother was afraid of water but that was of no concern to my father. It was his pride and joy. The boat was berthed in a small marina hidden on a minor tributary of the River Severn, a pastoral idyll. We would drive down for the weekend, my parents disappearing into the boat to get things ship shape while my sister and I were free to wander. I loved exploring further up the little river, now too narrow for pleasure craft. I passed through swathes of nettle, both white and pink flowered. Tempted to stroke the leaves in the direction of the barbs to

avoid being stung, invariably I had then to search out dock leaves to rub on my inflamed hands and legs. Being brave in the face of adversity, I would continue further into the wilds. A plop caused me to look across the river bank, a plump water vole was sculling towards its muddy hole. On a stagnant outreach of the waterway busy water boatmen skittered on the placid water surface, whirling legs bending the elastic membrane. A little upstream I caught a flash of turquoise and froze, moving my head round very slowly until I espied a kingfisher perched on a thin branch stretched out over the water. A full five minutes passed but the bird remained a statue. I slowly and quietly withdrew, only to hear a splash. I hurried back to see an

empty branch and ripples spilling out from the water below.

During one long languid summer spent on the River Severn we ventured down a small tributary of the main river and chose a shady clearing to camp. My father made the craft secure, then began to forage. Mystified, my sister and I watched as he gathered broken tree branches and bunches of reeds. Squatting down beside the boat he began to strip the branches of bark, the green wood shimmering in the dappled sunlight. To our delight, half an hour later an elegant yet sturdy child sized stool with willow frame and reed woven seat stood before us, created using but saw screwdriver and hammer. The stool was used constantly all

summer, supporting our fidgeting bodies without complaint until joining that optimistic group of goods mentally labeled “will be needed again” and consigned to the furthest recesses of the garage.

We head for the lounge and his favourite armchair. I retrieve his walking frame and he transfers to it from the wheelchair. Always a man of few words, he waves at the chair. I eventually deduce that he wishes for it to be moved alongside the adjacent armchair. "Not fall," he mutters, and I realise that placing the chairs together would prevent cups or biscuits placed on the arm falling down the gap. After flopping down into the soft upholstery of his chair he fiddles with his walking frame against

the chair front. I reach over and move it to one side. He bristles and harrumpfs. The thought comes to me that his fiddling had been to some purpose. He had placed it hard against the chair so that his leverage would be maximized when he later had to struggle out of the chair by himself. I am comforted that in such a reduced existence his intelligence was still at work.

He hated school. Most of his teachers regarded him as "thick"; dyslexia had yet to be recognized. But in mathematics he excelled, particularly with problems, exercises in logic, the harder the better. Later in life he ran a plumbers' shop in a chemical works, but spent much of his time solving problems throughout the massive site. On one occasion he was presented with the

first samples of a new wonder plastic, polythene, and asked to play about with it. Some of the samples were of tube, which sprang back into shape if bent. This was a challenge to my father, and he tried many possible techniques until finally succeeding in having them retain a bent configuration. A little while later he attended a seminar run by the scientists and chemists who had invented the plastic. During their presentation it was stated categorically that the tube could not be bent permanently. Although a man of few and hesitant words, my father stood up and explained that he had devised a method of doing so. The experts laughed him down. "Impossible", they cried. Dad, disgusted, walked away fulminating against "so called experts who don't have a ha'pence of sense between them."

In his nineties this under-educated man obtained one patent for flood defenses, and a second for generating electrical power from ocean tides.

He looks around at fellow residents, some asleep, others staring into the void. Helpers position a hoist over a chair and gently lower an old lady into place. A heartbreakingly dispiriting environment. He wishes to be moved to the dining room, even though the evening meal is an hour away. We go through the one two three routine, I move him the thirty feet to the dining room, and lift, adjust, cajole, and shuffle him into place at his favourite table. He is dismissive of the food at the home. "All reheated from the day before," he grumbles unfairly. But any food is

better than no food, and so alone in a sea of plastic tables, confident that he will not miss his next meal, he retreats into his memories as I withdraw until next week.

On Raising Snakes

by Ed McCourt

Corn Snake Mike is pointing out a wooden bird house on the edge of his property and is beginning to tell the story of how he came to build it when a broad-chested blue jay darts down to rest on its roof.

“Almost as big as a kingfisher,” I say.

“Close.”

Instead, Mike tells the story of an abandoned hatchling blue jay a neighbor found squeaking on his porch. That neighbor knew to bring it to Mike. He took it in, hand fed it, raised it up

indoors: “It learned to imitate the sounds of the house.” He tells me about the first time the blue jay barked like a dog, then when it learned to whistle, and finally when it started imitating the ringing of his kitchen phone.

“My father would come in and answer the phone and yell about pranksters because no one would be on the line!” He follows this punchline with his habitual, guttural laugh and a push of his glasses. He is wearing a black T-shirt and on it is an eagle carrying a banner that reads “100% American” and practical sneakers. I know that, before becoming a Corn Snake guy, Mike was raised here in the south and retired from the automobile manufacturing industry. He tells me more about blue jays, how they love anything

shiny, how he trained his to take pennies from his hand and drop them into his shirt pocket only to land on him later to ensure the coin was safe.

I'm not sure how I first found Mike, but I do remember that at the time an internet search of "Corn Snakes" and "Florida" turned up his home-made website as a top result. I asked him once how his website got so much traffic; it turns out he had taken a continuing education course search engine optimization, and the next month, he was in the top ten results in Google for "Corn Snakes." We are friends now, but at first, I was just a guy curious about snakes and he was a popular google search.

Why snakes? Slithering, yes. But isn't there something elegant about it? And their skin! Cooler, smoother, and much softer than anyone who has not held one might imagine. That curious flicker of tongue, those severe (concerned?) eyes. For such a simple animal, it can be polarizing; as an order the serpent elicits a response matched by few, save the arachnid. My curiosity includes serpents, but also extends to other reptiles, or more accurately 'herps,'—a commonly truncated nominalization of the word 'herpetology,' the scientific study of reptiles and amphibians.

When I talk with Corn Snake Mike, we stand between the side by side sheds: the snake house on the right, fully insulated and

temperature controlled, and the smaller, less sophisticated hut on the left that he calls the “Mouse Farm.” It houses hundreds of adult mice alongside their thousands of offspring, many of the females puffed out awkwardly at both sides like those pickup trucks with obtrusive double wheels on the back axle. All generations live together in plastic tubs: pinkies (the babies, named because they are furless), fuzzies (for their short fur), hoppers (they are jumpy), and other adults. Screens top each tub, pinned down by old peanut butter jars filled with water, a small hole drilled in the bottom so the mice can lean up and suck a droplet through the mesh.

There is also the side of the ‘farm’ I choose not to see—the table where Mike does the killing. “I

just grab them by their tails and wham!” He gesticulates a fast turn of his wrist, a quick, mechanical snap—a motion he repeats hundreds of times each week. “They never feel a thing . . . it is like falling off a twenty story building for them.” The silent victims of the pet trade, millions raised like miniature cattle, slaughtered to sustain pets, mice and rats are used in lab experiments because they share DNA strains with humans. Ultimately, we sacrifice these millions of mammals, our close genetic kin, to facilitate the hobby of keeping cold blooded species.

This is a world I have found myself in, but not without reservations. Animal husbandry has always operated on a basic tenet of symbiosis:

grain for eggs, pasture for milk. The arrangement with traditional pets is a bit less concrete, but clear; well-timed treats for loyalty, affection, or a coy purr.

This is more difficult to explain in terms of herps.

Yet they are bred nonetheless, in impressive numbers. According to a study presented to the 112th Congress, some five million homes in this country house nearly fifteen million reptiles, and as a nation we exported an additional eleven million. Most of these are produced by hobbyist breeders in small spaces like Mike's, and a huge cottage industry has risen alongside it.

Mike has huge varieties of corn snakes in his collection. I would drive up his long dirt driveway and park along the chicken wire he uses to coral his hens and tortoises, and he would appreciate my interest and explain to me the tenets of good snake husbandry. But there was one piece of the corn snake puzzle Mike never really addressed: the science.

So I read. I found online forums and bought corn snake books written by the respected breeders in the field. I got a juvenile 'normal' (the 'wild' coloration and pattern) from Mike and kept him as a pet, mostly because I wanted one, but partially for the purpose of familiarizing my wife with the notion of having a reptile in the house. This wasn't an easy sell at first. "I don't think we

are snake people,” she would say, invoking the stigma of the snake.

In my research I learned that, like the modern dog, reptile breeders work to isolate aberrant genetic traits. For corns, these genes have been mostly recessive, and include amelanistic genes, anerythristic, hypomelanistic, diffused, dilute, stripe, motley, lavender, sun-kissed, lava, charcoal, caramel, and cinder. What is further is that these genes are on separate alleles and hence can be combined to make literally millions of potential varieties, called ‘morphs.’ There are candy cane corn snakes and pewter ones, avalanche and coral, plasma, gold dust, and citrine. There is snow, opal, and both—snopal. And each year people are breeding to further

diversify the offerings in what is the largest segment of the pet trade running, though being outpaced in terms of growth by more exotic snakes like pythons and boas (for the corn snake is a species of colubrid native to the US). Eventually, I found a pair for myself that were heterozygous for multiple traits and could hence produce variegated offspring.

And like that, I was a snake breeder. I have learned that it doesn't matter how many pairs one has, even if it is a single pair of domestic and otherwise non 'exotic' colubrid, if they produce eggs, then one is irrevocably a snake breeder. My wife can say goodbye to her weekly book club if that gets out.

As a father of snakes, I have become much more attuned to the stigma surrounding them, particularly in a state like Florida where venomous species are indigenous. There is a kind of ubiquitous serpent mythology here; local newspapers document rattlesnakes simply for having the nerve to be seen in public. In my neighborhood, I have seen dozens of ‘rattlesnakes’ killed and laid out with the trash, only to identify them has harmless, overgrown Florida garters, racers, or banded water snakes. A friend of mine actually will not use the word ‘snake’, and instead calls them esses (for the letter S, and the sound they make), because in his experience, uttering the very word conjures them.

It would be misleading to say it is a local phenomenon. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first man and woman were duped by a devil in serpentine form. Similar mythology has sprung up around the Ebola virus. The story goes that the virus originated from a woman carrying a basket containing a snake. When opened, the snake gave Ebola to the first man it encountered. It is said that the serpent is still alive, roaming the country side, only now it can, like the equally terrifying snake-headed medusa, stricken a man with Ebola just by fixing its gaze on him.

The fear of snakes is logical as metaphor. The snake—as an extension of nature, of death, of disease—can live in plain sight undetected, and

then when it is not at all expected, rise and strike with unmatched accuracy. For that reason, it is not quite the danger that scares us, but the quiet cunning of the thing.

Of course, this is not the experience with a clutch of eggs. Like an expectant mother, I fretted over the oblong eggs and watched them swell. I checked temperatures, humidity levels, and practically prayed over each nose ‘pipping’ out of its egg. I was, after all, growing living beings from a shoebox of peat and perlite in the stifling heat of my office closet. I did end up with some genetically unique animals, though when I compared them to the morphs Mike had in his collection, they weren’t really anything new,

other than how vivid the 'cube' pattern was that graced the dorsal line of a handful.

Breeding aside, my favorite snakes of Mike's aren't the unique, strange, genetically aberrant in his collection. My favorites, by far, are a pair of 'wild' sub-adult yellow rat snakes that have found their way into the Mouse Farm and have taken up residence, pressed into the narrow slot between two tubs of mice.

In the shed, Mike opens a mouse rack: an offering. The rat snakes come over and peek in, look back at us for a moment, and snatch one of the scurrying bunch.

I love these yellow rat snakes, not because they are more beautiful than the selectively bred specimens next door, but because of their condition. Their presence, in as much as we can anthropomorphize the behavior of cold blooded reptiles, is an act of volition. They are free to leave, but because of Mike, because of his mice, they remain—without enclosures.

When I happen upon a wild snake, I try to give them that same choice. Choose not to bite me, and you might come to my home. Choose to eat my food, and you can stay. It is a simple system that creates some sense of contract between two living beings.

So why not stop there, with a wild snake that has ‘chosen’ to stay? If husbandry is ultimately a refined form of biological symbiosis, and we do not receive the obvious benefits from reptiles that we do from other animals, what is it that we gain from the keeping of herps? Perhaps I raised snakes for the same reason I write—to accomplish the most challenging thing in the world: creating something unique, beautiful, and complete.

Perhaps the entire “exotic” pet trade is, in some way, an effort to compartmentalize the wild element of nature into something manageable and urban. We restrict animals to square boxes the way the sun is contained behind the right angles of the neighbor’s house, the high-rised

skyline. The mouse farm, the snake racks, our own homes and neighborhoods—all of us in boxes.

But there are other explanations that I worry about. Does this make the animal into spectacle? The same kind of misguided apotheosis as the circus elephant, crowned, bejeweled, glorified, but depressed and severely malnourished when back in its cage? Perhaps it is a symptom of the dissonance between man and nature: the best we can do is scrape together this facsimile of wildness, a tamed pseudo-beast that would rather allow itself to be manhandled than to strike out in its own defense, to provide ourselves a surrogate for nature. Does it in some way relieve the

burden of our manufactured cartons, the various cloistered spaces of our lives? Perhaps we find it more tolerable knowing that something 'wild' is similarly confined and still surviving. Or worse, is it vindictive: I am in a box, and so it will be for you. Misery loves company, scales and all.

It wasn't long after writing on this subject that I went back to see Mike, and of course, to pick up an order of mice. It was spring and as we spoke I noticed the boughs of his white grapefruit trees were full and bent to the point of breaking. He offered me whatever I could reach, and told me about his two varieties of fig trees. Through the branches, I noticed one of his bird houses that line the southern corner of his property. It is always difficult, I thought, to imagine the bird—

with all its darting and soaring—contained in a wooden box.

“There are actually two nests in that—one in the house, and another below it in the top of the log where something bored out an opening. You can lift up the house and see a second nest beneath.”

We walked over. Mike told me he had seen a tufted titmouse going in and out, and hoped that the nests would be full of eggs, or better, hatchlings. “Unless a rat snake has made a meal of them,” I joked. Macabre, but this was the same place where we let patient rat snakes feed on live mice practically from our hands.

His face was solemn, “I sure hope not.”

We didn't see anything at first, but I whistled a bird call, and by the end, we counted five down coated heads, popping up, mouths agape, waiting to be fed.

It was these hatchlings that reminded me why we kept these corn snakes: the natural world is magnificent but ever fleeting. The whole industry is but an attempt to keep in boxes some connection to nature that is otherwise uncontrollable and transient. We whistle and call it up to us, and after a glimpse, its downy head is back, low and hidden in some thicket. This practice is a meager attempt to sustain that singular instance in which nature is summoned

to us, all beaks and scales, down and fur, and
graces us with a moment of mutual recognition.

Daddy Was a Thief

by Perry Glasser

We are not talking about armed robbery or breaking and entering. Not even pickpocketing. Daddy was no crook. You'd risk a punch in the snoot for even suggesting such an idea. Honest, square-dealing, he was no cheat, either, not even at gin-rummy, the card game he played at low stakes with cronies or his children for the sheer fun of the banter.

"What's the name of this game?"

"Gin."

“That’s what I’ve got,” he’d say and lay down his cards, laughing.

My father, Dave, considered smash-and-grab guys to be lowlifes; he thought of himself as law-abiding. Unless you count his years as an old man, unsteady on his feet from several toe amputations when he might sneak a mini-Mary Jane or cherry-flavored hard candy from the acrylic bulk sale candy bins at the food market, he never so much as shoplifted.

My mother would scold him, but he’d dismiss her nagging. “They expect a certain amount of the stuff to disappear. Like grapes.”

“That’s not the point,” Muriel would say with exasperation, pushing their cart into the next aisle while Dave inspected the caramels.

His behavior was partly denial, but it was more defiance. A diabetic whose wearying last years were little more than dragging his failing body from one physician to the next, Dad preferred to believe that purloined candy had no effect on his blood sugar. His logic was persuasive; if no one saw him eat, how could the candy be counted against him? The podiatrist, the endocrinologist, the internist, the ophthalmologist, and the vascular surgeon—what they did not know could not harm Dave.

The disease eventually killed him, despite the nutritionist who had prescribed an Exchange Diet, a scheme by which people might control the glucose levels in their blood by attending to the carbs that they ate. Dad understood the instructions to mean you could exchange a body part for hard candy, a deal he did not think was all that bad. The sawbones did their work until his heart failed under anesthesia, yet another case where the operation was a success, but the patient died.

This final event of his life also proved his post-eighty-years philosophy: *You have to die of something*. A worldview worthy of Lucretius, his resignation was a counterpoint to more than a decade of imposed rules he hated, rules

compounded by a regimen of ever-changing pills whose names he never troubled to learn but identified by color and shape. Maybe other men ingested medications; Dad took pink for blood pressure and several shades of blue for everything else.

The body that betrayed him had been his ally most of his life. My father was an articulate man who had enjoyed three semesters of a college education on his football scholarship to William and Mary, quite a turn of events for a Jewboy from the Bronx in 1933. After he left school and worked at odd jobs requiring muscles and not much else, Dad settled on being a housepainter. He hauled drop cloths and ladders, not to mention five-gallon buckets of paint, brushes,

sawhorses, rollers and God alone knows what else. In a day when colors were mixed on the spot from pigments whirled by hand into white paint, his eye could match any hint of color in a rug or upholstery. He started his own company, but he was a better craftsman than businessman; rapid expansion in the post-war boom led to bankruptcy in the mid-1950s. His greatest regret was being unable to pay the workmen whom he considered his pals.

Later, Dad maintained an upscale clientele on Park Avenue and the wealthier suburbs north of New York City. Decorators adored his precision and neatness; he charmed client housewives. While painting never could make him rich, most years Dad was able to support a wife and three

children in our two-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a building on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, a tonier address than most. When money became scarce, Mom returned to the workforce. I was the youngest, so they looped a hemp cord strung through a door key around my ten-year-old neck so I could walk home and let myself into the apartment after school.

I am still neurotic about not losing my keys, patting my pants or coat pockets repeatedly. I inspect the floor near my seat before exiting a movie theater. There is no telling what may be inadvertently lost in the dark. It is simply prudent.

As a similar matter of prudence, Dad's clients locked their liquor cabinets. It was not as though he'd earned their distrust, but everyone knew painters were notorious drunkards. Fact was, no one ever saw Dad touch a drop other than at bar mitzvahs, weddings, and, later in life, at the Irish wakes that marked the passing of his childhood friends. I never saw him drunk, though on a few occasions I did see him merry and bright-eyed with wine. I am sure that clients also placed their silverware and jewelry under lock and key, just in case the soft spoken, well-mannered man in white overalls had sticky fingers.

Their precautions were misdirected.

Dad's palms itched, but only at the sight of their books and records.

I was mall-shopping with my daughter, Jessica, when some doo-dad in a technology-computer outlet made it into my pocket. The store chain is long gone, bankrupt, either by the collapse of the earliest technology boom or by desperadoes like myself who while passing a workbench littered with wires and screws and circuitry palmed a \$.79 adapter plug before a furtive run to the parking lot.

Such items were unmarked; they were probably not even for sale. But that did not prevent a security guard from emerging from behind some one-way glass to pursue me to the car. He was a skinny guy, all red goatee and sunken blue

eyes, jeans hanging on his hips like unfurled sails.

My daughter—maybe she was fourteen—looked on while I explained I had had every intention of buying the item, but since it had no wrapper and no price-tag, I'd assumed it was junk and put it in my pocket to keep my hands free and then simply forgot to check at the cashier. Even as I spoke the lie, I realized how lame it sounded. My daughter, Jessica, always my ally, never engaged in adolescent histrionics. No eye-rolling, no deep sighs. She'd come into my custody when she was eight, and we were partners in most things, in this case, partners in crime. I think I could have risked smuggling a valise filled with heroin through

airport customs, and even if Jessica would have looked bright-eyed and forthright as a Girl Scout selling peanut butter cookies.

I offered to pay for the doo-dad then and there, but since it lacked any price-tag, the security guard could not tell me its cost. I asked if he was sure it was the store's property: after all, it had been on a table with a litter of other parts. Maybe another customer had abandoned it. But he was not having any of my excuses. I suppose he had heard them all before. I was fairly sure he could not legally stop me in the parking lot, much less ask me to empty my pockets, but the niceties of law seemed irrelevant on the sunny afternoon.

I handed over the doo-dad. The rent-a-cop sternly told me that he had a photo of me that

would be posted in the security office. If I ever showed up in the store again, he would personally make certain the police would be summoned. I imagined a darkened booth festooned with Polaroid pictures of ruthless shoplifters taped to the walls, all of us crazed and desperate wives and husbands, all of whom were steps away from the slammer, all of whom would be incarcerated after a police car came bearing down on us in a Code Three lights and sirens scream.

In our car, Jessica stifled her giggles. "A photo?" she said, and lost control. She laughed harder. She was not humiliated. This was just another day with her father the lunatic. I asked her not to

share this story with her friends, and she informed me there was no chance of that.

I smiled and said, "We're entitled."

Even as I said so, I remembered Dad and his loot.

The one time I asked, he said, "They'll never miss it." He slapped his forehead in mock amazement. "You have no idea how many books and records this guy has."

Maybe I was fifteen. The first album at issue was a Seraphim recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by Herbert Von Karajen conducting the Berlin Philharmoniker. The brown cardboard of the album cover was worn and frayed, so it

must have been frequently handled. I thought the German spelling interesting, and I did not think hard about my father's rationalization that the collector in the freshly painted apartment would hardly care. I still have the recording. The other recording he presented to me was a collection of arias sung by Maria Callas. At least I'd heard of Beethoven, but I was sure opera was awful. I still have that album, too.

Dad's taste was not elevated: the albums had been randomly chosen. They were monaural at a time when our Magnavox fake walnut stereo cabinet featured a control knob for Volume and another for Balance, state of the art for stereophonic sound. Our family had begun to accrue vinyl records that had been specially

made for that dawn of new acoustics, multiple track recordings. They were mostly big band music with absurd sound effects that popped and cracked and hurled sound from left to right like the ball in table tennis. Sound engineers could make that happen. Dad loved that stuff.

“You never saw so many records,” he told me.

“A whole bookcase of them; floor to ceiling. We spent half the day moving them so we could paint the shelves. When they are dry, tomorrow, we have to put the records back. How could they notice?”

Over a few years, in this way, I also obtained some hardcover books, often with dustcovers and a few in slipcases. Those might be illustrated; color plates were preserved under

tissue paper. Most books were postwar classics. I remember *Marjorie Morningstar* and *All the King's Men*. Unlike the records, they are long gone, but for all I know they were first editions. I still have a slender, numbered volume signed by Rebecca West. I believe the stolid outsized *Atlas and Gazetteer* that stood in our apartment's built-in wall shelves came from the same source. The maps were colorful; the paper heavy.

Dad had no personal interest in these things. I am sure he could never have afforded to buy them; I am equally sure he acutely felt the gap between what he liked and what he was supposed to like. Though he lacked the financial

means and personal passion to inject high culture into my young life, he stole it for me.

I wish I could write that I stole for my daughter, but that would not be true. I am not the Jean Valjean of the computer age. No one ever required a computer conversion plug to survive.

I also wish I could write this was the one and only time I shoplifted, but that would not be true, either. My crimes were always petty, pocketing an object I could afford, the money in my wallet.

It was about validation, the thrill of getting away with something. Everyone had so much; I had so little, and there were always hands in my pockets seeking to relieve me of what little I had.

Braces for the kid? School clothes? Summer camp? Stealing was how I defied the circumstances that made me an itinerant professor and single parent. Morality is an abstraction. I was motivated by self-righteousness entitlement.

Gaze, Universe, I steal with impunity, for I am destined to win.

Fear

by John Guzlowski

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood on the near northwest side of Chicago, an area sometimes called Humboldt Park and sometimes called the Polish Triangle. A lot of my neighbors were Holocaust survivors, World War II refugees, and Displaced Persons. There were hardware-store clerks with Auschwitz tattoos on their wrists, Polish cavalry officers who still mourned for their dead comrades, and women who had walked from Siberia to Iran to escape the Russian Gulag. They were our moms and dads. Some of us kids had been born here in the States, but most of us had come over

to America in the late 40s and early 50s on US troop ships.

As kids, we knew a lot about fear. We heard about it from our parents. They had seen their mothers and fathers shot, their brothers and sisters put on trains and sent to concentration camps, their childhood friends left behind crying on the side of a road. Most of our parents didn't tell us about this fear directly. How could they?

But we felt their fear anyway.

We overheard their stories late at night when they thought we were watching TV in another room or sleeping in bed, and that's when they'd gather around the kitchen table and start

remembering the past and all the things that made them fearful. My mom would tell about what happened to her mom and her sister and her sister's baby when the Germans came to her house in the woods, the rapes and murders.

You could hear the fear in my mom's voice. She feared everything, the sky in the morning, a drink of water, a sparrow singing in a dream, me whistling some stupid Mickey Mouse Club tune I picked up on TV. Sometimes when I was a kid, if I started to whistle, she would ask me to stop because she was afraid that that kind of simple act of joy would bring the devil into the house. Really.

My dad was the same way. If he walked into a room where my sister and I were watching a TV show about World War II—even something as innocuous as the sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*—and there were some German soldiers on the screen, his hands would clench up into fists, his face would redden in anger, and he would tell us to turn the show off, immediately. Normally the sweetest guy in the world, his fear would turn him toward anger, and he would start telling us about the terrible things the Germans did, the women he saw bayoneted, the friends he saw castrated and beaten to death, the men he saw frozen to death during a simple roll call.

This was what it was like at home for most of my friends and me. To escape our parents' fear,

however, we just had to go outside and be around other kids. We could forget the war and our parents' fear. We'd laugh, play tag and hide-and-go-seek, climb on fences, play softball in the nearby park, go to the corner store for an ice cream cone or a chocolate soda. You name it. This was in the mid-50s at the height of the baby boom, and there were millions of us kids outside living large and—as my dad liked to say—running around like wild goats!

In the streets with our friends, we didn't know a thing about fear, didn't have to think about it. That is until Suitcase Charlie showed up one day.

It happened in the fall of 1955, October, a Sunday afternoon.

Three young Chicago boys, thirteen-year old John Schuessler, his eleven-year old brother Anton, and their fourteen-year old friend Bobby Peterson, went to Downtown Chicago, the area called the Loop, to see a matinee of a Disney nature documentary called *The African Lion*. Today, the parents of the boys probably would take them to the Loop, but back then it was a different story. Their parents knew where they were going, and the mother of the Schuessler boys in fact had picked out the film they would see. At the time, it wasn't unusual for kids to do this kind of roaming around on their own. We were "free-range" kids before the term was even

invented. Our parents figured that we could pretty much stay out of trouble no matter where we went. We'd take buses to museums, beaches, movies, swimming pools, amusement parks without any kind of parental guidance. There were times we'd even just walk a mile to a movie to save the ten cents on the bus ride. We'd seldom do this alone, however. Kids had brothers and sisters and pals, so we'd do what the Schuessler brothers and their friend Bobby Peterson did.

We'd get on a bus, go downtown, see a movie and hang out there afterward. There was plenty to do, and most of it didn't cost a penny: there were free museums, enormous department stores filled with toy departments where you

could play for hours with all the toys your parents could never afford to buy you, libraries filled with books and civil war artifacts (real ones), a Greyhound bus depot packed with arcade-style games, a dazzling lakefront full of yachts and sailboats, comic book stores, dime stores where barkers would try to sell you impossible non-stick pans and sponges that would clean anything, and skyscrapers like the Prudential Building where you could ride non-stop, lickety-split elevators from the first floor to the forty-first floor for free. And if you got tired of all that, you could always stop and look at the wild people in the streets! It was easy for a bunch of parent-free kids to spend an afternoon down in the Loop.

Just like the Schuessler Brothers and their friend Bobby Peterson did.

But the brothers and Bobby never made it home from the Loop that Sunday in October of 1955.

Two days later, their bodies were found in a shallow ditch east of the Des Plaines River. The boys were bound and naked. Their eyes were shut with adhesive tape. Bobby Peterson had been beaten, and the bodies of all three had been thrown out of a vehicle. The coroner pronounced the cause of death to be “asphyxiation by suffocation.”

The city was thrown into panic.

For the first time, we felt the kind of fear outside the house we had overheard inside the house. It shook us up. Where before we hung out on the street corners and played games until late in the evening, now we ran home when the first street lights came on. We started spending more time at home or at the homes of our friends, and we stopped doing as many things on our own out on the street: fewer trips to the supermarket or the corner store or the two local movie theaters, The Crystal and The Vision. The street wasn't the safe place it once had been. Everything changed. Now we were conscious of threat, of danger, of the type of terrible thing that could happen without notice.

We started watching for the killer of the Schuessler Brothers and Bobby Peterson. We didn't know his name or what he looked like, nobody did, but we gave him a name and we imagined how he might look. We called him Charlie, and we were sure he hauled around a suitcase, one that he carried dead children in. Just about every evening, as it started getting dark, some kid would look down the street toward the shadows at the end of the block and see something in those shadows. The kid would point and ask in a whisper, "Suitcase Charlie?" We'd follow his gaze and a second later we'd be heading for home.

Fast as we could.

Home again, we'd catch our breath and sit down at the kitchen table with a glass of milk and a sandwich. Our moms and dads would come from the living room or the basement and sit down across from us. They'd want to talk. They'd smile and ask us why we were home so early. It wasn't even ten o'clock, time for the nightly news.

We'd tell them about how we were playing outside, joking about stuff, making up stories about Suitcase Charlie, trying to scare each other, nothing but joking around.

They'd nod and say, "It's good to laugh, good to joke around."

We wouldn't tell them about the fear we felt, the fear they knew in ways we never would.

Tao of Poo

by Mara A. Cohen Marks

My home is an oasis of beauty and order, but as much as I enjoy it, I spend most of my time in my head. Which sometimes feels like a dangerous neighborhood.

That's why I've started meditating. It's a remodel for my internal landscape.

I'm carving out time each day to just sit quietly. No multitasking, no worrying about the future or rehashing things that happened in the past. Just paying close attention to what's happening right now, moment by moment.

And in this moment, I'm perched in a lovely half-lotus atop my brand-new meditation cushion. Although my eyes are closed, I know the cushion complements my bedroom's decor. Its curry color looks quite handsome against the wheat-colored background of my antique wool rug from China. This pleases me. What's more, although my eyes are closed, I know the brand-new standard poodle napping beside me atop my antique wool rug from China will not shed. This also pleases me.

In point of fact, the poodle's eight years old, so it's only brand-new to me. My daughter was the main reason there's a poodle in my bedroom. She's wanted a dog for the longest time. "Oh Mommy, see that fluffy dog? Isn't it cute?"

Please, can I have a dog? Someday? Or at least a fish?" But every time my daughter said, "dog," I envisioned slobber on my silk upholstery, scratches on my glossy black floors, and fleas in my Egyptian cotton sheets. I felt like a failure as a mother, more concerned with maintaining the museum-like atmosphere of my home than with my daughter's happiness.

I wasn't entirely sold on getting a dog, but my interest was piqued when I heard about an eight-year-old standard poodle that needed a home—a retired show dog who'd given birth to several litters of champion poodles. Such a dog would be obedient and even-tempered. As far as dogs go, this one sounded ideal.

But adopting a champion standard poodle is an entirely different prospect than say, bringing home a fish. Prior to welcoming such a creature into my home, I wanted to feel confident I'd be able to welcome her into my heart. My husband and I didn't tell our daughter what we were up to the day we went to meet the poodle. I stroked the poodle's curly black fur and enjoyed its surprising softness. I held the poodle's long, elegant muzzle in my hand and admired her regal face. I imagined how comforting I'd feel at night, knowing the poodle was there in my room, asleep on the antique Chinese rug. The poodle and I gazed into one another's eyes, and I decided that yes, I could open my heart to such a creature.

I imagined my daughter's excitement to finally have a pet. She'd have her pet, and I wouldn't have to contend with an untrained puppy.

Come to think of it, my mind is like an untrained puppy. Notice how my attention just wandered off—replaying events of the recent past that explain why there's a poodle beside me right now? And the thing I need to remember right now is that I'm breathing. I'm perched atop my meditation cushion, paying attention to nothing but my breathing. I'm paying attention to my breathing as I sit atop curry-colored meditation cushion that complements my bedroom decor beside the poodle napping on my antique wool rug from China.

The poodle sure sleeps a lot. I hope she isn't sick or anything. That growth by her rectum doesn't look so good. It's probably nothing. Her veterinary records indicated it wasn't anything to worry about.

The next day, a veterinarian recommends surgery to remove the growth beside the poodle's rectum. But his floors are dirty, so I decide to get a second opinion. The veterinarian at a well-regarded animal hospital where the floors are immaculate explains the poodle suffers from an enlarged perianal gland at imminent risk of rupturing. I present the poodle's health records, which indicate the perianal gland in question had been surgically removed two years earlier, but the veterinarian at the well-

regarded animal hospital with immaculate floors is unimpressed. "They probably didn't get all the cells," he shrugs.

The poodle undergoes surgery later that week. It costs approximately what a reputable poodle breeder charges for a healthy puppy, but afterward she's given a clean bill of health. Back home, the poodle spends most of the next two days sleeping. She dozes on the antique Chinese rug while I read instructions for a walking meditation by Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. "Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet," he writes. "... every step makes a flower bloom under our feet."

That night I awake to the sound of the poodle barking. Undoubtedly she's attempting to alert me to an intruder. Glancing at my husband's unoccupied pillow, I surmise that poodle has mistaken whatever action movie my husband is watching downstairs for an intruder. "It's okay," I whisper groggily. But the poodle keeps barking. "It's okay," I say again as I stagger out of bed. I head toward the bathroom where my robe hangs from the hook on the back of the door. I tiptoe over creaky hardwood floors until I feel the antique Chinese rug under my feet. "Shhh," fearing the barks will wake my daughter. "It's just Daddy watching TV—"

My voice trails off as my right foot slips on something cold. Recovering my balance, the

ball of my left foot comes down on something squishy. “Oh-no. No, no,” I chant. My stomach tightens as whatever I’ve just stepped in oozes between my toes. Hobbling on my heels, I traverse the remaining distance over the antique Chinese rug to the bathroom, punctuating each step with my desperate mantra: “Oh-no, oh-no, oh-no.”

I reach the bathroom and flip on the light. Time stands still while I struggle to comprehend what my eyes are seeing. My feet are covered in brown sludge. Turning to face my bedroom, it is as if an army of Buddhist monks have conducted a walking meditation there, tracking enough dung across the antique Chinese rug to fertilize an entire meadow of flowers.

I conduct a triage operation on my feet and bathroom tile and return quickly to the bedroom to assess the situation. The situation is not good. The poodle, its vision obstructed by a lampshade-shaped surgical collar, paces the antique Chinese rug. Coppery marsh-like paddies are spaced irregularly over the wheat-colored wool. Several paddies bear smeary imprints of feet—some human, some canine, some both human and canine. “No, no, don’t move!” I plead. “Stay!” I correct myself. I lift the poodle, careful to avoid her sutures, and carry her to the stairs.

“Help!” I call my husband’s name in a loud stage whisper so as not to alarm our daughter, then louder: “Help! Help me!” I stagger down the

stairs toward the landing. In all the excitement, I've forgotten my robe, and as my husband and I reunite before the giant window overlooking the street, I have only the poodle to cover my nakedness. Exposing myself in the light of the moon and the glow of the street light, I bark, "You take the poodle! I'll handle the poop!"

Back in the bedroom, I flush what's flushable and scrub whatever's left over with Nature's Miracle, a scented product meant to prevent repeat offenses. *Why? Why? Why?* asks my puppy-mind running in circles. *Stop*, I command. The poodle just had surgery, and her bowels are just now waking up. The poodle was barking. The barking was probably the poodle's attempt to warn me she'd had a mishap. The poodle

probably feels terrible about this entire episode. I'm surprised by my equanimity, and I credit my meditation practice.

Sure enough, the harrows of the night recede in the dawn of the new day. I lie in my bed, my attention focused on my breathing. Nothing to do right now but breathe. Outside my windows, the morning sun kisses the top of the eucalyptus tree, and I watch the branches sway gently in the breeze. When I'm ready, I rise and inspect the antique Chinese rug. The wool feels coarse where I'd been scrubbing, but the color seems fine. This rug is very old, I tell myself. Probably it has been through worse. As for the poodle, the veterinarian has given her a clean bill of health,

and with luck, she'll see my daughter through her high school years.

Wearing her surgical lampshade collar, the poodle snoozes beside me while I settle into half-lotus on my meditation cushion. I close my eyes and feel my lungs expand and contract. I feel the cool rush of air through the tip of my nostrils as I inhale. The smell of Nature's Miracle is very strong. It reminds me of Tang. Did the astronauts really like that stuff? I feel my shoulders relax as I exhale. I inhale again. Do I smell poop? I peek at the poodle to reassure myself she's still sleeping.

After dinner the next night, I'm cleaning kitchen when I hear the click-click of the poodle's claws

climbing the stairs. *Isn't that sweet*, I smile to myself. *The poodle is tired and has decided to retire to the antique Chinese rug.* Fifteen minutes later, I head upstairs toward my bathroom, intending to floss my teeth. When I reach the landing, I look up, and the poodle's eyes lock on mine. Her face, framed by the lampshade collar, wears a mournful expression. "What did you do?" I say accusingly. I tell myself not to jump to conclusions, but my heart pounds with dread. I race up the remaining steps and down the hall to my bedroom.

I arrive at the doorway and flip on the light. I'm dismayed to discover that the poodle hadn't gone upstairs in innocence. Instead, she'd returned to the scene of last night's crime with

the express purpose of repeating her offense. Anger, denial and betrayal compete for dominance as I take in the tableau—smeary turds deposited at random intervals across my antique Chinese wool rug.

I cry out for my husband who rushes from the den. “Bad dog!” he scolds. The poodle cowers and attempts to run away, but she’s no match for my husband. I think he’s been watching another action movie. He scoops up the poodle and deposits her in our kitchen. Where she will pass another night.



My sleep is fitful, and the sky is the faintest violet when I feel a set of eyes staring at me. The poodle has managed to push open the kitchen

door and now has her front paws on the edge of my mattress, two inches from my face. “Off,” I growl.



A few hours later I head to Petco where I purchase a crate for the poodle to sleep in at night. The crate is beige and brown plastic and clashes with my decor. I put the crate in my kitchen. Beige and brown and hulking, it looks like a VW bus. I look at it parked there, and I feel sad as I drink my morning coffee. I look at it parked there, and I feel sad as I sit down to dinner. I move the crate to a corner of my bedroom, near my closet, off the antique Chinese rug. With my eyes closed and my back turned on the crate, I sit on my meditation cushion, and I feel sad. Very, very sad.

“Hello, Monarch Rugs,” says the voice on the other end of the phone.

I tell the voice the size of my rugs and give my address. I tell the voice about the antique Chinese rug and the fact that it is wool. “Wool is highly absorbent,” observes the voice.

“Think you guys can get rid of whatever the poodle is smelling so she doesn’t keep doing it?”

“We don’t guarantee against red wine or pets.”

“Okay, I understand you don’t want to give me a guarantee. But do you *think* you can get rid of whatever it is the poodle’s smelling?”

“We don’t guarantee against red wine or pets.”

I perch atop my meditation cushion on my bedroom's naked hardwood floors. The room seems austere and uninviting. I close my eyes, and try to follow my breath. Instead, I follow the click-click of the poodle's claws as she wanders around the room. I hear her walk behind me, toward my side of the bed. I make my eyes slits, and see the poodle is sniffing my pillow. I close my eyes, and I hear the poodle click-click back to the floor beside me and lie down. I hear the poodle sigh, and I know for now my bedroom is safe. After a time, the poodle stirs, and I follow the sound of her click-click walk to the French doors overlooking my backyard. There she stops. I imagine her crouching in preparation to poop. Opening my eyes, I see the poodle

standing alert, ears cocked, facing the backyard. She is the very picture of focused attention.



The full gravity of my situation begins to sink in as the next days and weeks unfold. One morning, I'm unloading the dishwasher while I drink my morning coffee. Turning around, I realize the poodle has wandered off. I discover her standing on the vintage Japanese rug in my dining room, and on the ground beside is a pair of fresh, brown turds. Several days later, the poodle savages a meticulously woven Navajo rug. And twice the poodle lays siege against a humble mass-produced doormat *hecho en Mexico*. The poodle embraces multiculturalism and does not discriminate.

But I do not blame the poodle. Instead, I greet each doo-doo boo-boo as a fresh opportunity to judge my shortcomings. It's my own fault for failing to anticipate that even a former champion show poodle would need to be taught where it's acceptable to "go." It's my own fault for not realizing that even a mother who'd raised several litters of champion show poodles would need instruction as to how to navigate her new home and to recognize which door leads outside. It's my own fault for not watching her every moment. I have to be more vigilant.

This awareness of my failings doesn't prevent me from feeling irritated and bitter. The poodle anticipates my every movement, and she accompanies me everywhere. Sometimes she's

so close she causes me to trip. I tell myself I should be generous and offer the poodle some affection, some token of reassurance that she's welcome in her adoptive home. Sometimes I pet the poodle, but inside my heart feels closed and stingy. Sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to kick her.



Things were better before the dog. Things were better when my antique rugs were safe. Things were better before I had to pay such careful attention to the comings and goings and bodily needs of the poodle, before the poodle transformed the oasis of my home into a prison. At night I toss and turn, analyzing each new mishap. In the light of day, the situation appears equally bleak. I sit on my meditation cushion, I

close my eyes, and all I can picture is the poodle and her pooping. The poodle's life expectancy is another four to seven years. I envision that time stretched out ahead, one long trail of excrement leading throughout my once-beautiful home.

"I'm sure the poodle can learn where she's supposed to poop, but I'm not sure I'm the one to teach her." I've interrupted my husband's action movie to tell him this. It's the middle of the night, and I'm exhausted. Sleepless nights have become a regular thing.

My husband pauses his movie. "Look," he says, struggling to sound patient and reasonable.

“Training a dog just takes time. And until then, we just have to watch her, that’s all.”

“We?” I say, my voice rising. “What do you mean ‘we?’ I’m the one who’s stuck here all day! I *can’t* watch her every second!”

“We should just put all the rugs in storage,” he proposes.

“Turning the house upside down? That’s the whole reason we went with an eight-year-old dog!” Struggling to regain my composure, I express the thoughts I’ve been afraid to admit. “Listen, I know we just paid for this big surgery. B-b-but it’s just not working out!” My eyes turn to faucets and the words tumble off my tongue

before I can stop them. “I mean, it’s all I do—keeping an eye on her to see if she needs to poop and waiting for her to poop and cleaning up her poop and never knowing if maybe she’s going to poop!”

“Oh my God, you’re obsessed! I don’t want to talk about the dog and her poop!”

But there’s little else I can talk about. There’s little else I think about. My daughter sees I’m coming unhinged. “Mommy, it’s okay. I understand if we can’t keep the poodle.” I don’t want to disappoint this little buddha. I think of the effort I’ve already invested and the sickening possibility it’s all been wasted. I decide I’m not ready to concede defeat.

I spend hours in the yard, watching the poodle for some signal, some indication she is ready to poop. “Go poo-poo,” I say brightly. “Go poop!” I command. But the poodle seems more interested in eating the herbs we’ve planted in the garden. Tiring of my vigil, I bring the poodle inside. Wearily, I ask my husband to please keep an eye on the poodle so I can meditate before dinner.

Twenty minutes later and feeling quite refreshed, I decide to prepare my family a nice dinner. But there’s been an exciting football game on television, and my husband’s gone off to watch it in the den, leaving the dog locked in the kitchen. When I encounter her there, the

poodle greets me enthusiastically. Unlike me, the poodle does not worry about the future, and she doesn't regret the past. The poodle lives only in the present moment, and she's forgotten about the three small turds she's deposited on the kitchen floor while I've been upstairs meditating.

But I've been meditating and am the picture of calm as I clean up the poop. Sure, I'm disappointed to have missed a teachable moment while I was off meditating. But because I've been meditating, I have the clarity of mind to recognize there's no point reprimanding the poodle for an offense that occurred during some indeterminate past moment I hadn't been present to witness. Anyway, no rugs were

damaged because the poodle pooped on hardwood floors. I have the insight to recognize this as progress. Because I've been meditating.

I feel my heart pumping from the morning's brisk walk as I bow low behind the poodle. "Good girl!" I enthuse in an octave higher than my normal voice. "Good poo-poo!" I make this pronouncement with genuine pleasure. That's because for the past several weeks I've subjected the poodle's bowel movements to mindful attention—charting their time and location. The wisdom born from this daily practice enables me to recognize the small sack of shit dangling from my right hand as a precious gift. The poodle has given me a gift of freedom, good for the next five hours. During that time,

I'm free from worry about the dog, and I'm free from worry about my rugs.

I'm also free to enjoy to the poodle. So later when I settle onto my curry-colored meditation cushion that complements my bedroom decor, the poodle will stand before me. She will stare at me with soft brown eyes, demanding my focused attention. I'll cup her chin in one hand and stroke the back of her neck with the other. "You're a goo-ood gir-rel," I'll whisper. When I drop my hands to my lap and close my eyes, the poodle will nudge my arm with her wet nose, and I will pretend to ignore her until I hear her lie down on the antique Chinese rug. When I hear her sigh, it will be my signal to focus my attention on my breathing. And to ponder the

environmental impact of those plastic bags of
poop.

The Shop

by Robert Maynor

The Shop sits on a road called Farm. It's a cinderblock building on a concrete slab that is divided in half by a thin wall. One half is offices, the other is a warehouse full of tools and steel pipe, an old Murray lawnmower without a hood, a white 1994 Ford F-250, tubs of Gojo, motor-oil, two tall wooden shelves full of pipe fittings, an ice-machine, a STIHL calendar with bikini models on it, five-gallon buckets, a cardboard cutout of Bill Elliot, a big monkey stuffed with beans, ladders, one hundred empty cans of Kodiak, a scissor lift. Across the street is a transmission shop. To the left is an empty lot

where a VW bus is parked with sweet-gums growing out of the windows.

My grandfather bought the Shop sometime in the early eighties after telling the bigwigs at Grinnell to suck his ass and after working for a little while from my grandmother's kitchen table. My grandfather will be turning seventy soon. He likes to talk about retiring. I think if he really does retire, he'll die, despite his health. Good health can only take a man so far.

His secretary, Nance, is at least as old as he is. She still uses a typewriter and a rolodex and sticks post-it notes all over the Shop like they're wallpaper. She was always kind of fat, but these days it's gotten to where it's almost fascinating.

Normally my grandfather hates fat people, even though he's growing a little liquor gut himself. He yells at Nance like he's married to her.

My dad started working for my grandfather when he was seventeen, as a helper. After he graduated, he went to school in Sumter for two years and got an Associate's degree in Forest Management, then went to work full-time fitting pipe. He is forty-seven now. He hates his job. I think he hates his life. He haunts the Shop like a ghost.

When my dad goes to the gas station for a drink or a can of chew, he brings Nance back a snack-cake or a pack of Jolly Ranchers. He always picks on her about Jesus. She thinks he's the

funniest man in the world. She probably loves him more than she loves Jesus.

When I was sixteen, I started cleaning the Shop. They paid me fifty dollars a week to scrub the commodes and vacuum the floors inside. My grandfather gave me a key. It was the first key I ever had to anything. My dad gave me an apron.

“Don’t pay no attention to that dickhead,” my grandfather said, grinning beneath his thin little mustache.

“I don’t,” I said.

My grandfather keeps a lot of pictures in his office of me and my cousins; my dad and my

aunt and uncle; my grandmother. There's a stuffed pheasant on the wall and a piece of paper with a cartoon buzzard that says: "Patience, my ass. I'm going out and kill something." I've never known what that means. There's also about fifty copies of handprints tacked over the window from biggest to smallest, with the owner's name written on the bottom of each one.

When I was seventeen, I had sex with a girl named July in that office, on a drafting table, at a kind of weird angle. Afterwards, cleaning the toilets, my back was sore as hell. Driving her home, the whole car stunk like bleach.

At the Shop, trucks cling to the parking lot like the shed skins of men. My dad drives a tan colored Chevrolet with a broken tailgate. My grandfather drives a Ford Sport-Trac: it's green. It used to have two gold racing stripes down the middle, but it doesn't anymore. My uncle drives a two-wheel drive F-150; clean and well-oiled, like him. The workers drive dirty, faceless trucks that cough when you crank them.

In the mornings they gather, these working men, in the lot like dogs. They are every color. They stand in a broken circle, wearing short-sleeves, even in winter—thankful for the cold. One of them has a mustache and one of them has an eyelid that sags half-way over his eyeball. They don't drink coffee. My father stands before them

like a priest. He lays blueprints out on the hood of some truck and draws on them with a square pencil sharpened with a knife. He brings home a little over eight-hundred dollars a week.

My uncle moved to the Shop from Texas. He is my dad's younger brother. He lived in Texas for my entire life with his wife and two poodles, one black and one white. They knew how to do tricks, like play dead. When he moved here, my grandmother said he was coming *home*. The floor of his office is covered in the shells of sunflower seeds. Sometimes he leaves his radio on over the weekend. He tries to teach Nance how to email.

My own brother loves to go to the Shop. He's eleven now. He climbs up in the lift and grabs the joystick like it's his own dick and drives the thing around like a madman. He hooks the safety chain onto one of his belt loops, but he never goes up. He says he's never going to college. He says he's going to own a Shop that sells and works on lifts.

"There's only one problem," my dad says.
"You're scared to go up without me."

My dad's office is outside, in the warehouse. It has a cracked tile floor and a desk and a metal folding chair that I've never seen him sit in. He wears boots every day until the leather begins

to peel off of the steel toes and then he throws them away and buys another pair.

I quit cleaning the shop when I went to college and they hired a woman to do it. I took up working odd hours for a plumber.

“School comes first,” my grandfather said.

“I should’ve know you’d turn full queer,” my dad said. He calls plumbers hockey jockeys. “There’s only three things you need to know to be a plumber,” he says. “Shit flows downhill, payday is on Friday, and knockoff time is at 3:30.”

I quit that job too.

There's a squirrel that lives in a pine tree that rises up over the Shop like a steeple. It jumps from its tree onto a power-line and then from there onto the roof. My grandfather wants it to be killed because he says it's getting into the Shop through the roof vents and eating the insulation. My uncle bought a pellet gun and spends at least two hours every day trying to shoot the squirrel. If he ever kills it, I think he'll cut the tail off and zip it up in his fly and walk around with it hanging out like that until it rots.

"You know," my dad says, eating a gas station hotdog off the hood of his truck, his shirt soaked through with sweat, his knuckles black and scabbed; he is smiling with the thought in the

corner of his head that in a few hours he will drive home and have the opportunity to run his truck headfirst into an oak tree, but won't; will go home instead to my mother and that crumbling yellow shack and count the hours until he can go back to the Shop; leave his family behind for a little while; further break his gnarled back. "That ain't the only squirrel that can climb."

Someone painted the front door of the Shop red. It looks like lipstick on an old woman. It shows her age: her tits are sagging, there's cobwebs in her eyes, her carpet has grown moldy and is starting to stink. She could use a new set of shingles.

My grandfather will be turning seventy soon. My dad will be fifty, half dead. Nance goes home at 4:30, and my uncle knocks off at five. When the men come back from their jobs, they get in their emphysematous vehicles and leave. My grandfather goes out into the warehouse and runs a push-broom over every inch of the cement floor. My father sits on an upturned bucket, reading the paper and spitting into a bottle of motor oil.

“Go home, boy,” my grandfather says. “Go home.”

“I will.”

“There’s nothing left to do here.” He leans his broom against the wall and stands in an open bay-door and looks out. The sun is beginning to set over the top of the transmission shop. He is nothing but a shadow.

He reaches up and grabs a string, pulls the door shut, and the whole warehouse is dark. My dad folds his paper and stands. “I’ll see you tomorrow then,” he says.

“I’ll be right here.” They go inside to my grandfather’s office together. They look silently at the photographs strewn about the room like dust—vestiges of another life outside of the Shop. They turn off all of the lights, lock the doors, and go out to the parking lot. They nod

their heads and get into their trucks and drive towards home.

Hallmark Moment

by Joseph O'Day

Another Saturday afternoon and I'm sitting with my ninety-three-year-old mother in her parlor watching TV. She's in a cushioned chair in one corner; I'm to her left on the couch. At the end of the room facing Mom is her wide-screen Toshiba HD television propped atop a Quasar console. She had me buy the Toshiba a few years ago when the Quasar wore out.

We've managed to keep my mother at home by hiring caretakers who alternate shifts with my sister, my wife, and me. I learned quickly that this job of caretaking requires lots of sitting and watching: Mom watches TV and me, I watch TV

and Mom. I've tried to make the time productive by cleaning and tidying up, doing bills, or attempting to read or write, but I get sidelined by the loudness of the TV and by her repeated requests to rise and walk around. Even with a walker, she's unsteady and at risk for falling, so I'll assuage her concerns, for example telling her the milk definitely was returned to the refrigerator and promising to check again to make sure. I've figured out tricks to get me out of her sight, out of her mind, like staying in another room, but near enough to respond. However, I'd rather she knows she's not alone, so I'm back on the couch.

There's an obstacle to my being productive, though, that's more disruptive than my mother's

demands to get up three times in an hour. It's not the temptation of the peanut butter crackers on the kitchen counter or Snickers ice cream bars in the fridge, or even my wish to lie back on the soft couch for a nap. Rather, it's a TV station, the Hallmark Channel, and its afternoon movie romances, with titles like *Puppy Love* or *The Wish List* or *Recipe For Love*, and story lines like "A perfectionist makes a list of qualities she's looking for in a mate, finds an ideal guy, but is instead drawn to a kooky barista who encourages her to loosen up." Predictable, sentimental, addictive as hell.

When I mentioned this to a co-worker, he reacted badly—"If I watched Hallmark I'd never

admit it”—making me wonder if he might be a closeted Hallmark guy.

In front of guests at a dinner party, I asked another friend if he watched. An ex-Marine, he glared at me and let out a two-tone low-high “Nooooooooo!”

My own habit started last summer. I arrived at my mother’s to find that the previous caretaker had left a Hallmark story on. It was about a woman attracted to a brilliant astrophysicist, unaware an aneurysm had caused him to have short-term memory impairment. He’s kind and gentle and one evening directs her attention towards the clear sky, explaining fascinating facts about star constellations and the universe.

They're young, shy, and falling for each other. He conceals his impairment by recording their conversations on an electronic pen for later review and by scattering post-it note reminders around his apartment. His sister warns that if he cares for this woman, he'd better reveal his problem. But he fears he'll lose her. When she inevitably discovers the notes and recordings, she's repulsed and breaks up before he can explain. This causes me to jump at the screen; they're so right for each other!

I realize the story should end well—it's *Hallmark* after all—but I want to see them reconcile, to *witness* their embrace. Problem is, the show has thirty minutes left and it's Saturday and my wife's turn to stay with my mother and my turn

to get to church for the 5:30 mass. Since it's ridiculous to miss church for a TV show, I plead with my wife to stay focused and fill me in later. After church, she tells me "yes they got back together" and mentions that there was "also something about brain surgery to correct his memory problem."

"Did they perform the surgery?" I ask.

"I think so, but I got a call and don't remember much else."

Many of the Hallmark stories have a similar path: two people are right for each other but something interferes. In the end, they realize how much they care and their love overcomes

all. They're attractive, often rich, successful ... this *can* get monotonous and boring. I'm usually seduced anyway, but sometimes left with the feeling that I've wasted my time.

So I've tried to avoid the TV. I'll mute it—Mom only grasps the visuals anyway—and turn away to read from my iPad or key my laptop or clean the kitchen or tidy up the dining room. But I'll see the show's characters reflected on the iPad and laptop screens. Or I'll take an inadvertent glance at the TV from the kitchen or dining room and wonder what's going on. I'll grab the remote, press the info button, and I'm done.

During my teen years, I had a friend at the YMCA, an elderly guy, who'd discuss everything

with me. He'd attended law school, was incredibly well-read, loved discussing politics, was a proud liberal, had strongly held opinions. He could be tough with someone espousing anything but harsh reality. I once told him that there's someone out there, one special companion, for each one of us. He smiled and said "Joe, you're a romantic and I love you for that." He may have rubbed my shoulder or given me a hug, as he'd done on occasion, but he was saying I was young and naïve, and would learn in my own time about the harshness of life. He wouldn't be the one to bring me down to earth.

I'm sitting in my mother's parlor. The colors of this room, once a vivid mix of white and aqua, have faded since her renovations forty years

ago. The wall-to-wall carpet is darker and threadbare in spots; the couch and chair, though well-kept, show wear, their edges frayed. The white paneling that made Mom so proud seems outdated, as does the white drop ceiling with its built-in light. However worn this room may be, the bright color scheme and five windows and



cushiony furniture lends a cheerful, cozy ambience.

On top of a white table next to Mom's chair is a phone, a box of Kleenex, and a framed 3 x 5 photo, circa 1980, of my parents. They sit at a restaurant, shoulder to shoulder, looking up to the photographer, Mom smiling, Dad savoring his meal. When I hand it to her, she rests it on her stomach, holding it with both hands and silently focusing on it. After several minutes, she asks me to return it in place next to her.

Dad and Mom loved watching TV in this parlor, laughing at the shows, discussing the news, cheering the athletes. When Dad died, the TV reminded Mom of these moments. She told me

that watching it lessened the loneliness. She took over Dad's chair until it was replaced by one that assists her up and down and elevates her legs. The corner spot is hers now, and the couch, her old spot, is mine. I turn my head from the TV and catch Mom looking at me. When I match her gaze, her eyes remain undeterred. I don't know what's in her mind, but her face is calm, content.

A Hallmark movie is playing: *Meet My Mom*—"A divorcee falls for a soldier who has become a mentor to her son. They're hesitant to start a romance in light of the soldier's upcoming deployment overseas." My mother is comfortable and seems to be admiring these pretty people and assessing their hair-dos and

manner of dress. I'm hoping the divorcee and soldier take a chance and allow themselves to fall in love.

M'AIDEZ: Of War and Peace in Iowa and Delle

by Claude Clayton Smith

All Hell broke loose in Iowa City after the National Guard killed the kids at Kent State.

It was just before Mother's Day, 1970, a sunny May day toward the end of the semester. Several thousand students were loitering on the wide grassy area along the Pentacrest—the five original buildings of the University of Iowa—the ground so littered with blankets and beer cans and bongos that I could hardly find a spot on which to squat.

Frisbees were flying everywhere. Strains of George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord* wafted on

breezes laced with sweet-smelling pot. The mood was festive despite the tensions dividing the nation, simply because it was such a grand and glorious spring day. The weather had turned unseasonably warm. Girls were in shorts or granny dresses, their long hair held back with colorful headbands. Some wore blue jeans with peasant blouses or tie-dyed tee shirts, their breasts as unfettered as the breeze. Bare-chested guys sat on the grass in shit-kicking boots and old jeans with wide belts and bellbottoms. Others wore bright tank tops like old men's undershirts. Shoes and sandals had been shed in favor of bare feet. Everyone was wearing love beads. I'd made some myself, alternating earth tones on a length of elastic that hugged my neck as if it belonged there.

Final exams were approaching but no one was in class. It was early afternoon and I'd just come up to the Pentacrest from the OAT—the Old Armory Temporary—where I'd been holding conferences with my freshman students. I had an office in the OAT and was avoiding the TA cubicles in the English-Philosophy Building in order to avoid Ann-Margret, a wannabe actress who looked like the original—hence my nickname for her— because our relationship had run its course. The OAT sat beside the Iowa River, which bisects the campus. As it turned out, it was *old* all right—a pre-fab thrown up after World War II—and equally as *temporary*, because it would burn to the ground before the day was out.

But first I had to hurry to my basement digs on Church Street to check the mail. I was expecting a letter from my college roommate in Vietnam. He'd been drafted from his high-school teaching, while I had landed safely in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Gary's last letter had hinted of a move into Cambodia.

Half an hour later, when news of Kent State broke, I was back at the Pentacrest, my hair bound with a pheasant-filled tie filched from my landlord's closet, sitting in the street with a thousand others, the words of Jane Fonda echoing in our heads. "Take to the streets!" she'd urged during a campus visit. So we'd taken to the streets. I was feeling guilty because my college roommate was squatting in a rice

paddy somewhere in Vietnam while I was literally screwing around in Iowa City. I'd recently been purged of venereal warts with dry ice at the university hospital—there was an epidemic at the university—and the current chaos seemed like Armageddon.

Then the festive mood turned ugly. We were blocking traffic to end the War. It seemed entirely logical. The only vehicle we let through was a florist's van, in honor of Mother's Day. "*Flower power to all you mothers!*" we yelled, and the van driver caught the spirit: "*Right on!*" Then a pickup truck came roaring at the crowd, its redneck driver putting an end to our demonstration with one of his own. He was protesting as a citizen, he was later

quoted as saying, since his taxes paved these city streets. We thought he'd stop but he didn't, effectively parting us like the Red Sea. After which everyone scuttled home.

That night we congregated at the river to watch the OAT burn. I don't think anyone to this day knows how that fire started. The OAT was a firetrap that deserved to be burned, which was why I kept nothing of value in my office there. Or the OAT just might have gone up in flames as a matter of principle. Or it might have been a burnt offering to the great God of War. The timing was uncanny, and the OAT lit up the night sky with red flames like an Iowa sunset. "*Right on!*" everyone yelled. And the OAT burned right on down.

But not everyone enjoyed that fire. Several graduate students watched their doctoral dissertations go up in smoke, and one of the professors from the English Department, addressing us by bullhorn, was choking back tears. In the morning it was clear that, fearing further violence and destruction that might rival Kent State, campus officials had had enough, declaring an end to the semester although final exams were yet to be taken. They announced a variety of policies for those worried about their grades, then sent us home to our parents—who didn't want us either.

Fortunately, I'd been selected to go abroad that summer as a group leader on The Experiment in International Living. I was taking twelve high

school students to live in Delle, France, a village of less than three thousand inhabitants on the Swiss border just south of Basel. I was relieved to be out of the country.

In contrast to the States, Delle, a medieval village in the heart of rolling farm country, was tranquil and timeless. No one there spoke English, and my hosts—Jean and Liliane Lassauce—had no TV. Each of my students had a host family too, making my job of roving ambassador relatively easy. I'd been an Experimenter to England in 1965, when the program was restricted to college-age participants, but this summer was a test case for the younger kids. They were only sophomores,

and if they did well, the program would be opened to high school students in the future.

Several dozen people of all ages, waving signs emblazoned with our names, were waiting at the tiny station when our train pulled into Delle in the late afternoon. For a few minutes the platform was a confusion of scrambled luggage and welcoming embraces, then the family groups dispersed one by one.

The Lassauce family lived in a restored nineteenth-century farmhouse just across from the station. Jean and Lili were in their early thirties—I was twenty-seven at the time—and their son Eric, away at a *colonie de vacances*, was eleven. The Frisbee I brought as a gift for

young Eric was the first Frisbee ever seen in Delle.

Lili, a caring and spirited individual, worked at the bank in the village. She was old enough to remember German bombs exploding in the neighborhood, one of which had killed her childhood friend. When I asked if the people of Delle ever discussed World War II, she said *le moins que possible*, given the gamut of stances from *resistance* to *collaborateur*. But it was easy to tell where her sympathies lay. Jean, more reticent than his wife, was a supervisor at a local factory. He was slim but wiry, with a shock of black hair and a prominent nose. When we visited his *usine* for a brief tour, each worker greeted him with obvious respect. Later, I solved

a mystery that had been plaguing his staff for weeks. They were having problems understanding the instructions for a new machine from the States. The instructions were in English, and Jean had no idea what the word “drawing” meant—*drah-vange*, as he pronounced it.

“*C’est le dessin*,” I said. And everyone smiled, then cheered.

I visited Lili at work, too, taking Jean’s bike up the lane and over the railroad bridge, descending into the village along a series of twisting streets, always struggling to remain upright on the slippery cobblestones. This was usually at mid-morning or just before lunch.

Sleeping late, I'd throw open the wooden shutters that kept my tiny bedroom in total darkness, and, blinded by the daylight, make my way down to the high-ceilinged kitchen for the wonderful coffee and fresh bread waiting there. At the bank Lili would chide me for sleeping in, but once the jet lag was behind me I was up at dawn. Jean kept regular working hours, but Lili had to stay at the bank each evening until the day's receipts tallied. Any error would keep the entire staff overtime, often for hours.

I loved to bike around Delle. The central square held an ancient statue within a circular fountain, and the landmark clock tower prevented me from losing my way, rising as it did above the

sloping, tiled rooftops of the village. Quaint bridges crossed a shallow river here and there, the water rippling out to the ruins of distant ramparts where it had once filled a defensive moat. The local watering hole—*La Buvette*—occupied the ground floor of a narrow five-story building of which the top three were broader than the bottom two, leaving room, I was told, for wagons to pass by in the old days. Another curious structure boasted *Les Cariatides*—five painted wooden carvings like the figures on the prow of a sailing ship. Spaced along the façade of the building, they rose at a forty-five-degree angle to support an overhanging roof. Each represented some quality of justice. *Chateau Feltin*, just around the corner, dated from the sixteenth century. It was in need of repair, an

enormous gatehouse to a much larger chateau on an estate now lost to the ages. At a shop beyond it I bought a béret.

Next door to Jean and Lili lived a local character known as *Charlot*, a squat old man with a bulbous nose and shrewish wife twice his size. The two were perpetually at war. To keep the peace Charlot disappeared each afternoon, dressed in baggy pants, a loose long-sleeved shirt and black vest, a béret pulled aslant of his forehead. On his arm hung a woven basket, and within the basket was a checkered linen cloth. Heading for the local woods by a circuitous route, he would return just as stealthily several hours later, his basket laden with mushrooms beneath the checkered linen. Then he'd hand

the basket to his wife and there'd be peace for a while.

Yves Michalet was my counterpart in Delle, a local teacher in his early forties who lived in an apartment adjacent to the village schoolhouse, a building with a castle-like stone turret and winding staircase. He too had a young son named Eric, a schoolmate of Eric Lassauce. But his attractive wife, Marie-Rose, was a bit standoffish. Though born in France, she'd been raised speaking German, and her French accent was telling. They had a younger daughter as well.

Yves was a handsome man with fashionably long black hair and one eye that drooped

slightly, as if he were perpetually squinting. Being a teacher himself, he knew how to address me at just the right speed so we always understood each other perfectly. To get acquainted he took me on a tour, including *les pas du diable*—legendary stone footprints in a shady glade—where the Devil had allegedly appeared to a would-be saint. Nearby, I stood with one foot in France and the other in Switzerland, a cliché pose, as Yves pointed out. We spent much of our time visiting my students in their French family homes. Yves knew all of the French students, since they'd been in his classes, and was familiar with their parents as well. It took us several weeks to make the rounds, a happy task that meant long evenings at table. My students had been placed with

families of similar socio-economic backgrounds, and so the wealthiest American lived in “the American quarter,” a section of the village with the pretensions of a suburb. But even the lovely modern home where we dined that evening—like all homes in Delle—had no screens on the windows, and as luck would have it, a large bluebottle fly was soon swimming in my wineglass. What to do? Spoon it out and put it on my plate? The conversation was bright and convivial, growing louder as the hours slipped by, and whenever I tipped my glass, the fly would float away from my lips to the opposite rim, so I was safe for the time being. It was a large wineglass—the fly had appeared on my third refill—and by the time I had sipped my way to the bottom, that fly was so pickled I shut my

eyes and chugged it, maintaining the international peace.

On another wine-related occasion the luck ran better. We had taken our French and American students on an excursion into Alsace-Lorraine, where we visited a local winery. While down in the wine cellar one of the girls in my group casually mentioned that her father was an importer of fine wines. She was asked her father's name, and our guide's mouth fell open. "*Monsieur Aaron?*" he said. "*C'est pas possible!*" We were soon skipping through the cobblestone streets with gift bottles of wine.

But there were difficult times as well. One of my students should never have been accepted to the program. The youngest of nine children—

and the only boy—Arthur had shown up for orientation back in the States with his mother and eight sisters. His mother had confided that she was glad I was Arthur's group leader because he was in need of a father figure. Arthur coped with his fear of The Experiment by taking photographs, his new camera his first line of defense. He took photographs of everything, keeping France at arm's length rather than confronting it head-on. On our very first night in Delle, as I was later told, he drove his "French brother" from their shared bedroom, insisting, "*C'est ma chambre!*" Fortunately for me, on the following day his host family left for a vacation on the coast of Spain, where Arthur passed a month alone, playing in the sand.

Once my visits with Yves were completed, I was free to enjoy my time with Jean and Lili. On one occasion we traveled to Belfort, where the famous lion sculpted by Bartholdi guards the chateau. On another occasion, drinking late at someone's third floor apartment, I felt so peaceful and happy that life seemed surreal, a feeling confirmed when I glanced out the window to see a motorcycle rising into the night sky. Blinking, I looked again. Some sort of festival had gotten underway in the little cobblestone square down below, featuring a daredevil who rode a motorcycle up a wire.

A few days later, as Jean roasted a pig beside a pond outside of Delle and Lili sunned herself in the grass, I paddled about in a kayak. Finding a

bamboo pole, I went fishing, catching a hefty carp that I held up for them to see. Lili guessed that it weighed four kilos. Later still, visiting Eric at his *colonie de vacances*, I won a sack of groceries by guessing its weight—identical to the weight of that carp.

Then the kind of thing happened that I'd dreaded all along. One of the girls in my group—there were seven in all, innocent and dewy and unaware of how attractive they were—telephoned to say that her “French father,” who was actually Italian, had tried to kiss her. I solved the problem by hastily arranging an American “sleep-over” at the home of one of the other girls. The amorous father seemed to take the hint, and peace was restored.

Then there was Peter, a shy prep-school boy who had brought his guitar to Delle and often went off to strum it by himself. One afternoon I found him sitting alone with his guitar and crying softly. We were at a lake in the Vosges Mountains on a joint excursion, and the students had paired up to go paddle boating. Peter had gone too—that wasn't the problem. The problem was that, for the first time in his life, he actually felt a part of something. The *esprit* of the day—of the experience in Delle—had overwhelmed him, and he was weeping with joy. During the final week of our visit we threw an American party for the French, complete with hot dogs (“*chaud chiens*”) and custom-made buns (“*les petites pains*”) created by the local baker from my elaborate *drah-vange*. The

students made a tree to present to the village, decorating it with fake dollar bills to perpetuate the myth that, in America, money grows on trees. The idea was supported by Lili's schoolgirl English text, in which the first lesson began "*My tailor is rich.*" There was singing, a series of skits, and Yves read selections from *Le Petit Nicolas*, a favorite character in books for young children. Then someone put an old Paul Anka album on the record player and Lili introduced me to Michele. She was a friend from the bank—half French, half Vietnamese—a product of the days when the Vietnam War had belonged to France alone. The resulting mixture of the races had produced a kind of Polynesian princess. Twenty-five years old, Michelle was the reigning beauty queen of the *territoire de*

Belfort. The lights were dimmed and we danced to Paul Anka: *Put Your Head on My Shoulder*. It was after midnight when I walked Michele home. The stars were out, the summer evening chilly, and as we wandered the cobblestone streets I suddenly found myself trying to explain about the War. How some of us had been drafted and some of us had not. How I'd taken part in protests in Iowa City. And now here I was in Delle.

I don't know if Michele really understood anything I tried to explain that night. It was the attempt, I hope, that mattered. I just held her—she was shivering and crying softly—after which the remaining days in Delle became a blur, permeated by the melancholy perception that

something wonderful that had just begun was already ending.

The Holy Fool in Winter

by Vic Sizemore

My sister Alma, my brother Vaughn, and I have converged on mom and dad's house to see if the danger is real. Might dad snap and stab mom with a kitchen knife?

The rain has let up, but the sky is dark and low. From where I sit in mom and dad's living room, I am looking down Route 119 toward Coonskin Park, which is visible on the other side of the Elk River. The picture window is a gray slab splashed with the blacks and greens of wet trees along the mud-brown river. An occasional car hisses past on the wet road.

It smells like Christmas inside, though it is April. I stopped at Kroger on the way in and grabbed two rotisserie chickens—they are heavy on the sage and rosemary today—a pound of roasted red potatoes, and another pound of roasted Brussels sprouts. Mom cannot cook anymore, and dad was an old-school Baptist preacher, so cooking was never a part of his description—except for scrambled eggs now and then; when we visited, he used to yell out through the sleeping house that he was cooking eggs as if he were throwing a party.

For the past several years, my sister Alma and I have loaded up supplies and done the holiday cooking here, but even this is petering out. The kitchen is emptied of knives sharp enough to

easily use for violence. The chicken is tender enough to tear off the bone with forks. That will have to do.

Two nights ago, dad called mom's best friend in the middle of the night and asked her to come quickly—he couldn't stop obsessing over the kitchen knives and he was afraid he was going to hurt mom. Understandably, she asked him how she could be sure he wouldn't hurt her. He assured her he wouldn't. In the end, Vaughn, who still lives within thirty minutes of them, drove over, met the friend in the driveway, and accompanied her inside.

One day later, here we all sit in mom and dad's living room. We are circled as if for Christmas,

only without the kids fidgeting to get through dad's preacher shtick before opening gifts. I sit on a dining room chair in front of the fireplace. To my right, mom's best friend leans back on a dining room chair with her ropy, athletic arms crossed. To the right of her, mom sits on a dining room chair as well. Then dad, in his blue-gray recliner, and then Vaughn and Alma, and my brother-in-law Mike, squeezed onto the couch below the picture window.

The oldest of us, Alma starts the conversation, and eventually tells dad we are at a loss as to what to do. Was he still obsessing over knives? Vaughn had taken the kitchen knives out of the house, but there are scissors, and letter openers—dad's workbench down in the garage

is covered with hazardous tools. If he is going to hurt mom with something sharp, confiscating the kitchen knives is not going to do much good. Alma asks him for a second time if he actually thought of doing something to mom with the knives, and if so, what.

Dad has his recliner folded closed and sits on edge leaning slightly forward, as if ready to jump up and flee. After a long pause, he says, "No." "I just couldn't stop thinking about the knives. I worried that I might start thinking about it."

"So you weren't actually tempted to hurt her?" Vaughn asked.

Dad nodded, his eyebrows pinched down like a boy in trouble. He was the center of attention, which was usual. All our lives he had been the center of attention, at church, or group meetings, reunions, family gatherings, pool parties. He was always speaking up, and the man stayed on message to the point of obsession, trying to steer the focus of every event or meeting to one single thing: you need Jesus, and if you already have him, don't forget the rest of the world needs him too.

Just four months earlier we sat circled with children and spouses in this very room on these very chairs for dad's Christmas routine. He tried to lead us in singing "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night," and "It Came

upon a Midnight Clear,” his strong preacher voice carrying the melody, mom accompanying him in her clear alto. She enunciated all the correct lyrics—she could not remember her grandchildren, but Alzheimer’s had not yet started corrupting her hymn files.

No one else felt like singing, but the preacher pressed on—he’d had plenty of unresponsive congregations over the years. Plant the seed, and let the Lord take it from there, you can’t know what kind of soil your seeds are landing on. After the hymns, dad read the story of Jesus’ birth from Luke 2, all the way to verse 20 where the shepherds all return home, “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

In lieu of the usual mini sermon, he pulled out a piece of glossy paper snipped from a magazine, and read from it a prose poem-like thing about Jesus designed to convince us that every pursuit in the world, if not done to win people to Jesus, was bullshit. Remarkably, the poem managed to get all of our professions in—military, law, teaching, economics, writing—so that, but for the glossy magazine page from which he read, he could have penned it himself. I'd been lectured directly from the pulpit enough in my childhood and youth. I pursed my lips and waited through this part, aimed at me: "He never wrote a book, yet more books have been written about him than any other man in history..."

“He can’t turn off the preacher,” we used to say of our dad. That is what he was to us, the preacher, whether he was behind the pulpit or driving downtown to Shoney’s Big Boy after Sunday morning church. He spoke in Bible verses and aphorisms, his clear, strong preacher voice carrying to all in the vicinity.

As we packed up to leave his house after Christmas, he said, “Thanks for stopping in, folks,” as if we were just friendly acquaintances. We could have easily said, “Goodbye, preacher,” with a smiling handshake. It would have felt more natural than filing past them like a receiving line, giving awkward hugs.

During this family meeting to figure out what to do about dad's knife obsession, Mike has sat silently down at his tablet. Toward the end, he breaks in and says, "Everything I'm reading says that whatever the focus of the obsession is—knives are not uncommon—that's not the real problem. Something else is causing the anxiety."

We follow that, ask the preacher what he feels anxious about. Yes, mom has Alzheimer's and is in decline; yes, they went to a support group which, instead of helping, gave dad a glimpse into what could be his future as she declined, and it scared the living shit out of him. Also, yes, mom can no longer run the household—plan meals, shop, cook, wash dishes, do laundry—

which she had done as dutifully as any Baptist preacher's wife ever has. Dad is retired and has plenty of time for these chores, yet the thought of learning all this woman's work fills him with dread. Although he still travels all over to preach, church people have been bringing them meals three times a week.

He has not been able to preach recently, and this, we discover, is the real problem. Without a ministry, his life has no value. "I feel useless," he says.

"Isn't taking care of mom a ministry?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "I consider it a privilege to minister to your mother in this way." As he says

it, his brow stays knit into its deep wrinkles and his eyes do not meet anyone else's.

In his book *God, Guilt, and Death*, Merold Westphal writes of the believer's ambivalence toward God. Ambivalence begins with the awakening to the "ontological poverty of the believing soul." In short, if there is an Ultimate Other, who is not contingent and upon whom all existence depends, then by comparison, I, the center of my own observable universe, am really worth nothing at all. My very existence is less than shit.

If this is true, then the only way I can give my existence meaning is to figure out how to tap into this Ultimate Other—I must find God. The

realization is expressed in phrases such as this one from a Baptist invitational hymn I sang countless times:

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way
Thou art the potter, I am the clay
Mold me and make me, after thy will
While I am waiting, yielded and still

In another stanza, worshipers tell God, “Hold o’er my being absolute sway.” From our earliest years in Sunday school we are taught to say, “He must increase, I must decrease,” a mantra that only brings our attitudes into plumb with the already-established reality of our nothingness before the Ultimate Other.

Add to this ontological poverty the notion that whatever measly existence we do have disgusts God, and you have dad's religion. He grew up in a home marked by tragedy, bitterness, and booze. When he and his parents heard the hellfire-and-brimstone preaching at the Brethren church, they knew it to be true. They understood that, as Jonathan Edwards preached, "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you ... looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire..." In a novel, I once imagined an obsessed soul winner's vision of the world as:

a meaty mass of human flesh sprang from the earth and rolled like a swollen creek down a

mountain crevice—anguished faces, flapping arms and legs, twisting, churning torsos. Then, off a cliff as high as Hawk's Nest, they hurtled for a brief instant into the sunlight, and then tumbled over themselves, screaming and crying, into the dark and craggy gorge below. Endless bodies continuously tumbling over the edge like a great rushing waterfall, their souls sprayed like spume out into misty air and disappeared into eternity—into eternal torment and flame.

Dad's parents knew that they were indeed sinners in the hands of an angry God. Yet they were also eternal souls, of infinite value to God. In Mark 8:36, Jesus says, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose

his own soul?" *World* here is the Greek *cosmos*. The implication is that one human soul, since it is eternal, is worth more than the entire cosmos, the whole space/time/matter creation, which is passing away and will end.

In another piece of fiction, I recounted a story I'd once heard in Sunday school about how long the unsaved would burn in hell:

A bird lives on the moon. Every one thousand years this bird comes down to earth and pecks one sand grain from a rock the size of the Empire State Building. It gets one tiny grain and flies with it back to the moon. One thousand years later, it comes and gets another grain. And so on plucking one grain every thousand

years. After that bird has moved the whole, massive rock and rendered it a pile of sand on the moon, the time spent would still not be equal to one second of eternity.

If living human beings who die “without Christ” really do burn in excruciating torment for eternity, nothing could ever be as important as saving a single soul. Nothing.

My dad got a heavy dose of this message at ten years of age when his parents accepted Christ and his home transformed from booze and fighting to peace and Jesus. Seeing this, he surrendered to Jesus as well, and determined to share this good news far and wide. Preaching the gospel so that, like the Apostle Paul, he

“might by all means save some,” became his entire life and identity. Out of high school at sixteen, he left home for the newly established Appalachian Bible Institute. That was in 1957 or 1958, and his jaw has been set on this mission ever since. It is not just his calling, but the very substance of his existence, nothing less than his bid for immortality—not as a measure of time, as trusting Jesus gives eternal life, but as a quality of being. His air-hollow, empty being was filled with the heft of God.

When my wife and I announced our wedding date a few years ago, dad was not sure he could make the ceremony. He had a preaching gig and he could not get out of it. It came as a surprise to the woman preaching the ceremony,

but not to me. Close to fifty years earlier, dad had missed his own sister's wedding for a preaching gig. Alma, Vaughn, and I have reminisced about how our childhood was absent dad-the-father and chock full of dad-the-preacher. He passed out tracts, started up conversations with the sole purpose of setting people up for the big ask: "If you were to die right now, do you know...?" Talking to mom's friend on the phone—the one he had called in the midst of his breakdown—Alma mentioned that we didn't remember him being around much. Plainspoken and brutally honest, mom's friend said, "You don't have to tell me. I was there while she was home and he was out saving the world."

When he retired in 2006, we assumed he would have a rough transition into retirement. He had only ever been a preacher. Our worries were premature. He found ways to keep preaching. He went on at Appalachian Bible College as staff evangelist. He traveled all over West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky, preaching the Word in season and out. He was ever more urgently seeking out preaching gigs. We changed our language about dad in retirement: it was not so much that he wouldn't know what to do with himself—take up golf, or fly fishing—but that he wouldn't know who he was. We predicted an existential meltdown for dad without his preaching.

Even during this intervention, brought on by his knife-obsessed meltdown, dad frets aloud that he has been forced by this episode to cancel one preaching engagement, and stresses that he might have to miss another one on Wednesday.

“I don’t know what to do,” he says.

“The first thing you need to do,” Alma says, “is start taking the antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication your doctor gave you.”

“I don’t like that stuff,” he tells her. “It makes me woozy and I can’t drive.” Mom cannot drive him. If he can’t drive, he can’t preach.

At last we get him to acknowledge that he simply has to take the medication, and that he must see a psychiatrist for an evaluation—not an easy thing to get out of him. He does not want to see anyone who disagrees with his theology. (How can they help him if they do not have spiritual insight, cannot see through to the eternal tragedy—comedy, I guess, if you consider the ending—that has shaped his entire life.) “This is not about philosophy or theology,” Alma says. “They are medical doctors.”

After some discussion along these lines, he agrees to do it. From there, we make practical arrangements to keep mom safe and fed in the meantime. After that, we break up the meeting. Mom’s friend springs up and strides to the

kitchen where she makes a plate of food for mom. Dad follows and makes himself a plate. I pick at a couple roasted Brussel's sprouts halves. Garlicky and bright with lemon, they are delicious, and my stomach again cinches in hunger.

Mom sits in the dining room eating with her friend. Dad goes down the hallway and returns with his journal. Alma looks through it to get an idea of when the obsession started and how concerned we should be. She calls me over to look. On one page, along with some Fox News-fueled hand wringing about Obama and the moral decline of the country, are the words, "The fields are white unto harvest."

At eighty, he is still crying out in prayer, “Here am I Lord. Send me.”

Hungarian-American writer Lawrence Dorr has a fine collection of stories called *A Bearer of Divine Revelation*. In the last story, “The Angel of His Presence,” an old religious man takes in his enemy, feeds him, cares for him, does not allow his own people to harm this man, their sworn enemy. The religious old man lives “in total abnegation of the self ... amidst the running tide of killings and hate, praying for the peace of God for all.” He does not just pray for peace for all; he lives it, loves his friends and enemies alike while war rages all around him. He ignores the tribalism and hatred because he sees through his immediate surroundings to a

deeper, spiritual reality. He lives his life by this spiritual light. He is a holy fool.

The Russian term for this kind of holy fool is *yurodivyje*, literally “fool for Christ”—Katerina in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* calls Alyosha a holy fool; Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* is a holy fool. Dorr’s example is the historical Nicholas of Pskov. Nicholas stood before Ivan the Terrible after the Czar had massacred thousands, destroyed homes and farms, and sacked monasteries. Nicholas castigated Ivan, who could have him killed with no more than a nod, to his face and then, for emphasis, slapped a bloody piece of raw meat into his bare hand. In the short-lived HBO show *Carnivale*, near the end of the second and final season, Sampson,

a midget who runs the carnival, talks to Ben Hawkins, a gifted kid—a holy fool—who is out to stop the evil Brother Justin. Ben is determined to carry out his mission although it is almost certain to kill him.

“What the hell is it with you people?” Sampson asks.

“What do you mean?” Ben says.

“You know what I mean,” Sampson says. “You, Jesus, John the Baptist, the whole bunch of you—all fired up to throw your lives away.”

It is only throwing your life away if what you believe turns out to be untrue. The holy fool lives

by a different reality. I remember reading stories about holy fools who threw rocks at the homes of people they knew to be righteous and left the homes of evildoers alone. It makes no sense until you discover that they are seeing into a spiritual realm where demons roam. They skulk around the homes of the righteous because they are barred from entering; they are nowhere to be seen at the evil homes because the doors were flung open to them and they are inside.

Last year, dad and mom went and saw the movie *Son of God*, in an actual movie theater—something that was forbidden in our youth in Elkview; were they loosening up in their old age? Dad was very much moved by the movie,

called me on the phone and went on and on about it.

What I had read about the movie was that movie Jesus was a sexy European man, with long brown hair and straight nose. The Satan character—cut from the movie, but clearly present in the miniseries *The Bible* that came before it, and from which some of the footage in *Son of God* was borrowed—had been made up to be a dead ringer for the despised and feared President of the United States. I found that fact alone disgusting, but I was also confident the movie was the worst kind of kitsch.

I listened silently, not wanting to ruin the experience for dad. He went on to talk of his

health problems for a while, and eventually said,
“Keep us in your prayers.”

“I’ll be thinking about you,” I said. Our two
visions of the world no longer meet.

“You need to pray too,” dad commanded into the
phone in his preacher voice.

I waited for the moment to pass so we could
move on to other things.

“Are you on speaking terms with the Lord?” he
asked.

“That’s not a conversation I’m going to have with
you,” I said.

We waited through an embarrassed silence. We would have been using the same words to talk about vastly different realities—it would have been a pseudo-conversation at best.

Dad wrapped things up cordially but abruptly after this. I'm sure he was praying for my soul before he had even set down his phone. I was in danger of hell because I no longer believed essential truths about God and humanity, life and history.

Apparently, many people still believe what dad does, or at least say they do. According to a recent Gallup poll, 42% of Americans believe God created the world in its present form sometime between six and ten thousand years

ago; 76% of Americans believe the Bible is the actual holy words of God. Polls by both Gallup and the Pew Research Center show that four in ten Americans believe that all humanity has descended, with a sin nature, from a literal Adam and Eve who were created full-grown, Adam from dirt, Eve from Adam. Another poll by Life Way Research found that 61% of Americans believe in a literal burning hell, and 53% believe that salvation from that hell comes through Jesus Christ alone.

The real question might be why there aren't more people like dad, obsessed with saving souls. If you truly believe that people are dying and going to hell—to eternal burning torment, don't forget—and you believe they must accept

Christ as their Lord and Savior to avoid that fate, and that Jesus has tasked you with trying to save them, you have two choices: disobey God's command or win souls to Christ. What else could possibly be more important than winning souls?

After our family meeting about dad's knife obsession, each one of us calls him within a few days to encourage him to see a psychiatrist as he promised he would. After a week, I call to see how things are going. The preacher admits that he has not called his doctor about seeing a psychiatrist yet, but promises he will.

Instead of seeing a psychiatrist, he sits in his own basement for informal counseling with one

of his church deacons—a very nice guy, and, coincidentally, a retired butcher. When we are not satisfied with that, he lines up a few sessions with a licensed counselor—one with his degree from a Southern Baptist seminary. The counselor tells him he is fine.

A couple weeks later, Alma calls him. The anti-anxiety meds have alleviated his knife obsession, which is good since he is still there at the house with mom, who is herself doing better on new Alzheimer's meds. Not what we wanted, but it will have to do.

Then, several days later, Alma calls. "Dad stopped taking his meds," she tells me.

“Why?” I say. “I thought they were helping.”

“They made him woozy,” she said. “He couldn’t preach.”

She tells me he is, as we speak on the phone, driving up the Elk River with his guitar, which he uses to lead singing—ladies ready to accompany him on piano are dwindling—in the back seat. Even if no one repents and turns their life over to Christ—which is ever more unlikely since the churches he visits are peopled with oldsters who have been listening to gospel sermons about as long as dad has been preaching them—he is going to preach the gospel, woe unto him if he does not.

This holy fool will preach until the day he can preach no more. Maybe when he can preach no more he will snap, find something sharp, and harm mom. It is hard to imagine because he has been a gentle, nonviolent man his entire life. Maybe, the day he steps from behind that pulpit for the last time—a day that looms ever closer—the preacher will begin to empty out. Empty, he will wither. Withered, he will dry and crumble. Crumbled, he will blow away and scatter in the breeze. No longer connected by his purpose to the Ultimate Other, he will exist no more and be gone.

God's Vagabond

by Tom Darin Liskey

If you compared Buddy Burch's Christian ministry to the high-flying evangelism so prevalent in America these days, you'd probably conclude that his was a flop. Burch and his wife Lydia rarely had a head count topping more than ten in the storefront church he pastored near a brake repair shop in Waveland, Mississippi.

Unlike the financially well-oiled megachurch-malls dotting the country, the members of Burch's mixed congregation, mainly poor blacks and whites, had to dig deep in their pocketbooks for a Sunday offering. More often than not, the loose change and crumpled dollar bills these

salt-of-the-earth kind of believers tossed in barely covered the bottom of a collection plate. Yet Burch was not into that hard sell religion of pledges and fund raising. He just didn't believe that it was his job to admonish people over money. Burch had realized long ago that the people who came to his small church gave what they could, and he'd always trusted God for the rest. That was no stretch for a couple well into their sixties living off a fixed-income and disability.

The Sunday offerings were usually enough to cover the light bill and other expenses, and Burch never drew a salary from the funds. To help make ends meet, he would park his pickup

on the side of the road to sell firewood from the tailgate.

There was one irony never lost on Burch where he served as a pastor in the tiny Gulf Coast community he called home. Before “getting saved” as a young man, Burch was an unreconstructed racist who believed whole heartedly in segregation. That is until the night God spoke to him. And he would tell you, he didn’t like what God had to say.

Burch was at a revival when a preacher from Jamaica took the pulpit. The way Burch described it, he sat in the pew of that little church fuming like a smokestack on a fast-moving locomotive. He just didn’t think it was right for a

man of color to be preaching to white folks, God or no God.

He only stayed seated because his Cherokee wife urged him too. She liked to hear the preacher's message delivered with a soft Caribbean lilt.

Once the preaching was over, Burch stood up to bolt from that church. That is until God whispered in his ear. It was the first time he heard God speak to him. But there was no great revelation or epiphany; no answer to life's biggest question. What God uttered was a simple command: "Hug my son."

Burch stood there in the aisle of that church, dead in his tracks. He tried to shake it off, but the command came again. Firm, but simple: “Hug my son.”

Burch turned around and looked at the revival preacher. His voice was shaky.

“Sir, I don’t know you, but I need to hug you,” he recounted later.

That’s what he did. He embraced the preacher from Jamaica. And what had been until then an impregnable edifice of race-hate crumbled like dust.

Burch was never a freedom rider during the civil rights movement, yet while the fight to dismantle segregation in the South raged, Burch found himself drawing in African American churchgoers to his services like never before. At one point Burch received threats for preaching in black churches. Was Burch color blind? No, but there was love. A love so compelling that it was tangible. He'd shrug off any hint of praise for doing what he did by taking the message of Christ to black churches.

"I went where God said to go," he said once.



I had met the Burch family through my mom when I was about four or five. My mother played piano in a Southern Gospel group, and she

crossed paths with Lydia Burch in the small world of roving tent evangelists. The two women became fast friends early on, and Lydia would often spend a week or two with us in the summers. Buddy, when he wasn't pastoring, would come up with her. I ended up going to college in Mississippi, and I drew close to the Burches at a time when the world around me—and inside me—was opening up.

This was the South and I, like most of my classmates, grew up in church. I saw some of my friends' faith eroding as they pondered scientific theory, but the history and literature that I devoured blasted away the old dust of religion I had grown up with, revealing a new bedrock of belief.

I didn't find the answers to life I was looking for in the dusty fossils of Darwinism or in political theory. My mind was feasting on Faulkner and O'Conner. I saw faith revealed in Rembrandt's hues, in Johnny Cash's lyrics, and in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's writing. For the first time in my life I began to see the grain beneath the varnish. The more I saw, the more I wanted to scratch that lacquer away. The arts opened my eyes. Faith became my iris.

My college, the University of Southern Mississippi, was only an hour's drive north from the Burch household. I'd often drive down to visit them on the weekends with the excuse of doing laundry. What I really wanted to do was talk to Buddy and his wife. When I came down for a

visit, sometimes Buddy would load lanterns and gigs in his truck and we'd fish for flounder in the tidal shoals of the Mississippi Sound.

But most of the time Buddy and Lydia and I would sit at their kitchen table while I waited on laundry. I chain smoked and talked about my dreams and my hopes. Instead of browbeating me for my lofty, if not footloose ambitions to see the world and write, they encouraged me.

"Follow your dreams, son," Buddy Burch would always tell me. "Money will follow."

Once, when I was facing a steep learning curve in my college courses and I was close to dropping out, Buddy Burch prodded me on with

this advice: “An education is something they can never take away from you.”

Some may have frowned on the stark content of my writing, but they were proud of me for following the muse.

“Truth,” Lydia would tell me. “Speak in truth.”

I knew book-smart believers brushed Buddy and Lydia aside as backwoods bible-thumpers. True enough, Burch and his wife were foot-washing Christians who could barely pronounce the jumbled consonants of Biblical Hebrew, but the Word of God to him was sacred, and he treated it as such. He savored every tittle of scripture as

if it were a wonderful and redolent vintage, something miraculous.

Later in life, as a journalist in South America and in other parts of the world, I met presidents, ministers of state, economic leaders, and the executives of some of the world's largest companies. And yet, for someone who never made it past middle school in the hardscrabble South, Buddy Burch always loomed large in my mind and heart as a wise man.

Even more importantly, Burch and Lydia showed me something pretty wonderful. That an extraordinary God is often seen in the most ordinary people. Because in the end that's what

they were, ordinary and imperfect people who had the capacity to love God's vagabonds.

The Last Thing He Was Afraid Of

by Caroline Horwitz

Unexpected Fact: If you have dinner with your uncle on Saturday, and he jokes, eats heartily, and makes future plans with you and your relatives, it doesn't mean he won't be dead by his own hand on Tuesday.

The body in the coffin didn't look any different from the man I had known.

I hadn't felt that way at his wife's calling hours five months before, or at either of my grandparents' a decade ago. Those bodies looked fake and heavily coated with makeup—wax figures of those people I knew so well. But

their deaths had been caused by cancer, emphysema, and congestive heart failure. They hadn't looked like themselves for some time, their appearances ravaged by their gradual expirations. My uncle's suicide lasted only as long it took a 9mm Glock to send a bullet from one side of his head to the other.

I was shocked to learn his calling hours would feature an open casket given the nature of the death, but the funeral home director assured my family that a closed casket wouldn't be necessary.

"Of course, we'll have to turn it the opposite way against the wall," he said, "to show the left side of his face instead of the right."

To hide the entry wound.

My mother and I were the first ones at the funeral home. I'd never seen the body of a gunshot victim and expected serious damage. The movies seemed to indicate that huge portions of the skull would be blown off. But there was Jim, handsome as ever, perhaps just resting on those blinding-white pillows.

If I looked a little closer at his face, though, I could make out the edges of gauzy bandages on either side of his head and a hint of puckered, dried scabs peeking from beneath them.



He started drinking again right after his wife Amy died. He promised her on her literal deathbed

that he wouldn't. She endured over twenty years of his drunken episodes, and the emotional and sometimes physical abuse that came with them, only to be cancer-stricken a year after he finally got clean and started therapy.

A shadow of the perky, glamorous woman she used to be, she begged him to maintain sobriety.

"You can't go back to drinking when I'm gone, no matter how sad you are," Amy said. "Promise me."

"I won't," he said. "I'm done with that."

But he did, and he didn't try to hide it either. Just weeks after her funeral, his refrigerator was stocked with twenty-four-can packs of Coors Light. Some of his siblings wanted to confront him about it. Others wanted to leave it alone, feeling they weren't in the position to tell a grieving widower not to have a few beers if it made him feel better. My mother was livid at them more than at him.

"When he drinks in front of us, he's pleading for us to say something!" I heard her cry to one of my aunts or uncles over the phone. "He wants to know that we care enough about him to stop it."

He was nonchalant when she addressed it. "I'm being careful," he said.

It was easy to tell when he had been drinking. He was loud and red and giddy and said nonsensical things, often concerning dead celebrities. T.S. Eliot and Johnny Weissmuller were particular favorites. Countless times we heard him claim that Eliot was almost illiterate and his wife was the writer behind most of his work, and that Weissmuller was closely related to our family.

"We could trace it, I bet!" he'd say, voice booming. "If we really wanted to." Eyes unblinking shards of blue so bloodshot they

might be terrifying, if not for that irrepressible glee.

The Glock 17 is one of the best-selling handguns in the world. Jim only owned his a few years, seemingly purchasing it for work-related purposes. As a security guard, he earned more per hour any time he wore it.

That gun disturbed my mother as soon as she learned of Amy's diagnosis with advanced skin cancer.

"She's everything to him," she told me. "I'm worried what he'll do."

I don't know how many days passed after Amy's funeral before my mom attempted to convince Jim to give up the gun. Not many.

"Please let me take it for a little while," she implored him. "You can have it back later, but I just don't think it should be in your house right now."

He refused. "I'm not going to do anything stupid," he said.

It wasn't an explicit promise not to kill himself, I suppose.



He was the seventh of twelve children, my mother the eighth. Though a year apart in age,

they were in the same class throughout school since Jim was held back in first grade.

“He was always self-conscious about that, I think,” my mom said.

She had great affection for him despite having little in common. She was well-behaved and studious, reading the newspaper every day by fourth grade. He had little use for rules and little fear of authority, crumpling notes from teachers and swiping his parents' cigarettes.

Shortly after Jim was born, my grandmother suffered a nervous breakdown. It was so severe that she became catatonic, remaining in the hospital for months while my infant uncle was

cared for by a nursemaid. Could this have been the catalyst for his tragic life, my mom wondered?

“A newborn baby needs to be around its mother,” she said. “Mother always said he noticed everything.”



Jim earned a bachelor's degree in marketing but opted for manual labor after working an office job for less than a year. Working in factories and operating cranes guaranteed he wouldn't have to wear business attire forty hours a week.

“I'm not taking another job that makes me wear a monkey suit,” he said.

He met his wife in one of these factories. She was a seventeen-year-old small-town beauty queen. He was thirty-one. When he picked her up for their first date, her father sat on the front porch of their rural home, a shotgun in his lap. "He didn't understand," my uncle said years later. "Dying was the last thing I was afraid of."

When I was a child, he was my favorite uncle of the six. He was the fun one, the charming one, the leather jacket-wearing, motorcycle-riding black sheep. By the time I was eighteen months old, I'd shout his name upon hearing the rev of any motorcycle engine. Perhaps there was some draw besides his cool-guy persona. He was the only uncle to never have children, and I had no father.

He was hardly a substitute, though. As I grew older, his visits with everyone grew more sporadic. He was hard to contact, sometimes avoiding family functions for almost a year despite living less than an hour away.

He had somehow managed, despite his best efforts, to be the fittest of the twelve siblings. He drank, smoked tobacco and marijuana, ate greasy



food on a regular basis, and hardly exercised. But he was trim, muscular, and healthy, unlike many of my more-disciplined aunts and uncles

who still struggled with their weight and a myriad of health problems.

A month after Amy's death, my mom asked how he was feeling.

"I'm cursed with good health," he told her, with no trace of humor.



Jim spent a summer of college in the seventies working at a cattle slaughterhouse. He hated it.

"They could smell the blood," he said. "They knew they were next."

I never knew what position he worked. I didn't want to ask. He didn't kill them; that much I knew. He was farther down the line. Close

enough to hear the cows' panicked lowing, though, before each was silenced with a shot to the head from a captive bolt pistol.

Was there any pain?

At dinner three nights prior, I sat across from him at my aunt's dining room table. I faced a man who, that night at least, was cheerful and sober and knew he was seeing us for the last time.

I combed through my memory hunting for any possible foreshadowing comment, but there was none. He fooled us all.

Most suicides seem to be accompanied by a resounding survivors' cry of *Why?* Not so with

our family. You want reasons? Take your pick: lost his wife; flawed husband to her; no children; alcoholic; history of depression. The query that prickled beneath our skins was far more uncomfortable: Why now?

Five months. It seemed an odd amount of time. Too late to be an immediate reaction to losing Amy and too soon to have fully sampled life without her and decided against it. There was no significance in the date he chose—no anniversaries or birthdays or milestones of any sort. The reason was a simple and surprising one.

Dependent upon a variety of factors, headstones require different amounts of time to

produce, inscribe, deliver, and affix upon a grave. Amy's took five months.

It arrived the week before he killed himself. The last piece of the puzzle, as it were. The last task he wanted to see to completion for her.

His body and gun were found in the woods adjacent to the cemetery. A pink rose, Amy's favorite, lay on the new headstone.

The police found no note of any kind when they searched Jim's house—my childhood home. He and Amy had planned to buy it from my mother after she moved out of town. Almost right after they moved in, though, Amy received her diagnosis. They couldn't afford the purchase anymore, so the title remained under my

mother's name and she let them live there for free.

The house was immaculate. His two small dogs, like children to him, were in their crates as they always were when he was out. He knew it wouldn't take the family long to find them. I imagine they were the only ones to receive a goodbye.

The coroner's report found no alcohol in his bloodstream. Why would it? He didn't need to be drunk for this.

Every step of the bullet's journey is measured and chronicled in the report as the "hemorrhagic pathway." It's a trail, really. A trail that passes

through tissue and muscle and bone and lobe,
leaving rhyming verbs in its wake: Lacerate.
Macerate. Perforate.

“I should have gotten that gun,” my mother said
after the funeral.

“You tried,” I said. “It wouldn’t have mattered. It’s
what he had, so it’s what he used.”

“Jimmy,” she whispered.

I hung my long-sleeved black dress back in the
closet. I’d only worn it once before, five months
ago.

“He just didn’t want to be here anymore,” I said.

It was all I could think to tell her. And it occurred to me that it could very well be the truth.

What I Know about Dads

by Sharon Frame Gay

What I know about dads fits into a 3 x 5 photograph, ragged, faded, and dog eared on one corner as though someone was trying to save the page for eternity. The photo was taken by the shore of a lake. He sits in a chair, with me firmly planted on his lap, a child of few months still sporting my milk teeth. The wind is rustling his hair. His eyes squinted into the camera and the sun. My tight ringlets must be tickling his nose as the wind tosses my hair like a dandelion.

He is a handsome man, Irish as Paddy's Pig, as they say, with dark hair, light brown eyes, an

athletic build. There is an assurance about him, the kind of confidence one exudes after fighting in the South Pacific during the war. His gentle fingers wrap around my body, though I can imagine that in another life they may have thrown hand grenades or clutched his cross in violent prayer in a distant foxhole.

He was a gifted skater, a bar room brawler, a sweet talker, with just a hint of cruelty at the corner of his mouth, coiled like a sleeping snake. He met my mother when she was home from college one December, a restless young woman looking for somebody to waltz her around the frozen pond and warm her feet by the makeshift fire in the moonlight. By spring thaw, they had married and began a life

together, a life filled with chaos and drama, long nights at the pub, the scent of other women.

With the storms and turbulence, one autumn, before the first snowfall, he simply vanished. Slammed the door on his children and wife and skated down some angry highway, leaving my mother to waltz alone, and my brother and I to spend endless days in new schools explaining to other children that we had no father. No father. As though he whimsically appeared one day, then fetched a magic carpet and took himself away to another realm.

When I look into the mirror, or at my brother, I see him in our faces. We resemble his Irish heritage much more than we do my Swedish mother with her glacial blue eyes and Viking

figure. I see him in my cheekbones and in the color of my iris, in the slant of shoulder. I see him in my brother, in his quickness to brawl as a young man, though later my brother harnessed that energy and put it into becoming a Marine, and later a pilot, following in footsteps that were only marked in sand.

My father remarried, I heard. Asked his entire family to never tell his new wife that he had two children. We no longer existed. We didn't die. We were never even born. Ghost children, perhaps peering out from an old photograph, creased and tucked into an ancient leather wallet, hidden from the light of day.

My photograph of that summer morning so long ago by the lake is one of the few reminders I have that I was once held in his arms, the light summer breeze bearing witness. In the old dog eared photograph, I am peering up at his face, but I can see now that his gaze was already far off into the distance.

My Mother, From a Distance

by Jean Ryan

I used to open my lunchbox and find notes from my mother. “Don’t swap this for a flutter-nutter,” she’d write, or “Snoopy says eat the apple last.” At that point she was making lunches for three of us—my younger sister came later—and she gave each meal the same consideration: a Wonder Bread sandwich, a package of chips, fresh cut fruit, and a couple of Oreos or Vanilla Wafers. Sometimes there’d be celery sticks filled with peanut butter, sometimes a cupcake instead of cookies.

This is the mother I recall most often now, the one I’d find at the ironing board when I came

home from school, her face flushed from the steam created by a water-filled coke bottle with a metal sprinkler top. Always she would be humming, happy for reasons I cannot guess. Or maybe the humming had nothing to do with happiness; maybe it was involuntary, a sort of self-soothing. I will never know—my mother has moved too far from that question, too far from so many of the questions I want to ask.

My mother is eighty-three. For the last several months she has not been able to walk, her legs thwarted by poor circulation and recalcitrant shin wounds, for which she receives daily and painful dressing changes. She is further hampered by macular degeneration, lupus flares, shoulder impingement, and limited

dexterity—remnants of the surgery she had a few years ago when she broke her hip and hand. Despite all this, she still lives in her home, with the help of four aides who are there, on a revolving basis, twenty-one out of twenty-four hours each day.

If I did not work full-time, if my mother lived closer to me—she is two plane trips and one long drive away—I could manage much of her care myself; the fact that I cannot do this for her distresses me more than she will ever know or believe. I could cook for her and take care of the chores and shopping. I could handle her bill pay and other business matters. I could help with her personal hygiene.

I could not lift her out of her wheelchair, not with my lower back issues, nor do I have the training, or sufficient fortitude, to attend to her wounds, either present or emergent.

All this is beside the point as my mother insists on staying in her house. Considering the cost of home health care, a nursing facility might be cheaper, but my mother will not consider this option, and I can't say I blame her—I've heard the stories, too. These places are where you go to die, where you will die, and it's no use pretending otherwise. Living with one of her children is also off the table, for various reasons, particularly now that my mother's needs have outpaced our abilities.

But beyond all the practical considerations, there is this. My mother, who used to give funny voices to our pets, who once put underwear on the cocker spaniel for our amusement, is no longer pleasant to be around. Disappointment, I assume, has depleted her, washed away the soil of charity. At least once a year I make the journey to see her, and the only gratification I feel is knowing I was of some help.

How many of us wind up with the mother we had in mind? How many mothers give birth to the children they envisioned? It's a draw.

A common language. That's what we lack at the time we need it most. The frailer my mother becomes, the more I want to connect with her,

to learn what will soon be gone forever. Frightened by a recent hospitalization, my sisters and I visited her in April, intent on sharing our feelings and hearing something tender and revelatory from her. This didn't happen. Instead of basking in the glow of togetherness, I was hurt and miserable, stunned by a revelation I had not counted on, one that only widened the chasm between us. In typical family fashion, this information came secondhand: my younger sister, observing our pact of transparency, reluctantly divulged my mother's meanness.

As usual, I didn't confront her. I lowered my standards another notch and counted down the hours until my departure. In her waning, pain-soaked years, I pardon my mother everything.

She'd clam up anyway, refuse to explain herself. Even if I did get an apology from her, I wouldn't trust it. My sisters and I have caught my mother in so many lies that we are no longer sure she knows fact from fiction or cares about the difference. The secrets of her life are slipping away.

I have not lived near my mother since college, and so I am familiar with only the bare facts of her life after that. She was married three times, divorced twice, and finally widowed. I know she worked as a medical transcriber and lived in a stylish condo in La Jolla before relinquishing that stability for her last husband, who led her from one godawful place to the next. I recall that she favored biographies and history books,

especially accounts of World War II, that she loathed Red Skelton and loved Johnathan Winters, that she was frugal and tidy.

I cannot reconcile what I remember of my mother to what is visible now. Walking around her house I am mystified. When did she trade *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* for *How to Talk to a Liberal*? What use does she have for eight bottles of shampoo, or the legions of canned goods exploding from (and occasionally in) her kitchen cabinets? Why do so many of her clothes still have price tags? How can she abide these stained carpets, this bleak town? What happened between here and La Jolla?

And what of her youth? The first three of her four children were born less than a year apart. How did she manage the diapers in those pre-Pampers days? When did she find the time to make our clothes? My mother was a consummate seamstress. I remember those trips to the fabric store, the long tables, the endless bolts of cloth, my nearly unbearable boredom. How, with stairstep children, did she accomplish the shopping and errands, the holiday preparations, the pristine home my father demanded? He was no help. That she bore his cruelty for fourteen years is yet another mystery.

If I were asked to account for my twenties, I could offer nothing more than a rough timeline.

Why should I expect my mother to recall her own twenties with any clarity, especially now that her days are simply something to survive, when memories are of no use to her?

A few years ago I asked her if I smiled easily when I was a child. She squinted through her cigarette smoke and said, "I don't think so. I'm not sure. Jane did. I think." Then she laughed. "Hell there were *four* of you."

These are some of the questions I want to ask my mother: Was I happy? Did I smile a lot? Was I quick to hug? What scared me?

They are the same things I want to know to about her. Were you happy? Did you smile a lot? Were you quick to hug? What scared you? And later, after we all moved away, what happened then?



Time for Reunion

by Mary Pfeiffer

For some forty-eight years, Ronald Kraft harbored a nagging notion of an unfinished task. If he retained a restlessness, a feeling of having left a work not completed, a war not won, he tried to push it aside, catalog it next to things too difficult to talk about. But he couldn't forget. He had once been a Marine.

Ronald came of age in the 1960's when a war in Vietnam threatened to hijack America's draft-age men. Rather than wait for his inevitable draft notice that offered no choice of time or service, Kraft voluntarily joined the Marines. He was appointed to the rank of First Lieutenant at the

same time he received his master's degree. A few days following graduation along with two hundred eighteen other newly commissioned lieutenants, he reported to the Marine Corps Basic School, a required training ground for all new officers.

In 1967, the escalating war and its rising casualty rate required increasing numbers of troops and lieutenants to lead them. To fill that need, The Basic School (TBS) squeezed training for Kraft's Alpha Company into five months instead of the usual eight. Their schedule included grueling, often fifteen-hour-days, of combat conditioning, both mental and physical. The new lieutenants quickly came to realize that failure was not an option and that

donning a uniform in service to their country wasn't an abstract idea. With an ever-increasing likelihood that they were going to be involved in a shooting war, the men worked together to strengthen those weaker and encourage the discouraged. In doing so, they forged friendships and pledged support to have one another's back always.

TBS graduation ended what the young men assumed would be years of camaraderie. The majority were immediately dispatched to Vietnam and assigned as platoon infantry officers. Spread among 82,000 Marines fighting in Vietnam, the classmates of TBS had little means of contact or communication with one another.

Coming home a year or more later, Alpha Company scattered still farther. Even if there had been an easy way to find a fellow officer's whereabouts, it was time to plunge into the lives they would make for themselves, not to look up Marine buddies. Alpha Company men were three years and more behind those who, having seen no military service, were already making names for themselves in their professional fields. With youth passing too quickly, the men needed to focus on family and careers. They did so quietly. Lessons learned in the war zone—detachment, vigilance, control, anger—were habits not compatible with home and were stuffed away as much as possible.

When retirement from his civilian career finally gave Kraft time to look back and reflect, he wondered how his classmates had fared, if they too experienced vague, un-ended dreams. He emailed and phoned the few former classmates whose locations he knew. They compared their various post-Vietnam experiences and discovered common lingering feelings: hesitancy to speak of their war experiences, dread of stumbling onto someone who had protested against what they had risked their lives for, determination not to appear to “live in the past” or “glorify war.” Wondering if looking back together might bring closure to a time so separated from the rest of their adult lives as to read like fiction rather than fact, and, in doing so, influence their futures, Kraft called for reunion.

He directed a yearlong search for class members, from Acly, P. to Zimmerman, J. Several of the first found joined the search. They combed social media, looking hard at today's photos to see resemblances to those twenty-one-year olds who stood beside them at muster. They explored in *Ancestry.com*. They discovered three post-Vietnam military deaths and thirty-one who had passed away during the ensuing years. Eventually they found every class member, widow, or family of a fallen. Phone calls went out to the men; letters invited widows and family of those fallen.

By the time they assembled at a hotel in Fredericksburg, near the Quantico Marine base, the planning for the five-day event was evident

in every detail: the opening Welcome Home ceremony, young Marines in dress blues posting the flag against a mango sunset, the national anthem sung over lumps in throats, and the bugler signaling evening roll call before a sobering reading of the names of the fifteen who gave their lives in the war.

Reggie James, Marine turned minister and emcee for the program, stated the purpose for the gathering—to “perform reunion, to get back together, to remember, to reconcile who we’ve become with who we were”—and declared the reunion begun.

Those who came to the reunion included career officers, men who left the Corps for civilian

careers, and the classmate whose career ended with one bullet to both legs. The attendees were different from their earlier, physically-fit, shorn-hair, straight-standing selves, though the difference wasn't as great as might be expected. At seventy, these men retained practiced military postures. Even grayed, bald, or bearded, the men recognized one another. They greeted one another with loud voices and shouted nicknames. Although a map on the class website showed the location of every living member (and burial site of the fallen), they still asked, "Where are you now?" "Retired?" "Did you stay in?"

Conversations accounted for what they were doing in retirement: tutoring kids at a Carlsbad

library, authoring a book on Vietnam, bicycling in Colorado, rescuing dogs, making pottery. They came from dentistry, clinical social work, and the priesthood. They took time away from law practices from Maine to Texas. One left his sailboat in New Zealand; another, his fifty-foot yacht in the Bahamas.

The second morning they field tripped to Quantico, site of The Basic School. As the busses pulled into the parking lot, a chorus went up from the men. A new building and air-conditioned classrooms had replaced the stuffy ones they endured. And gone was the mock Vietnam village where they studied Viet Cong tactics and various types of booby traps they

would encounter in the sweltering tropical country.

A lieutenant colonel, currently teaching at TBS, addressed the group. He reminded the men—as if they could forget—that The Basic School had to mold Alpha Company like so much clay into leaders who would defend freedom half a world away, their firing kiln the shortened schedule never used before or since. Every day for five months was filled with all they had to learn if they were to survive Vietnam.

He recalled that two dozen brought brides with them to The Basic School, from weddings squeezed in between college graduation, commissioning as lieutenants, and traveling to

Virginia. Brides may have thought it time to start their married lives. In truth, their husbands were consumed with preparations for deployment to the war zone. One veteran confirmed what was on every mind. “At TBS I was so focused I’m sure I neglected my new wife. Constant in my mind was the thought, *Did I miss something; do I understand it correctly?* I had to get it all and get it right.”

The Quantico visit sparked remembered experiences—or escapades—from TBS days: the bachelor party pillow fight that accidentally knocked the groom-to-be out cold, the Friday night drinking parties before Saturday morning practice on the obstacle course, their final test—a three-day “war” in an unfamiliar forest when

temperatures dropped to record lows with sleet and snow.

Before long, talk took on a serious tone. Wives from TBS days told newer wives that during the final days of school, the men wrote their wills and filled out ready-to-send insurance letters lacking only date and cause of death, “in case . . .” It was a scary time, but neither men nor wives allowed the worry to surface. Husbands didn’t want to worry wives; wives didn’t want their husbands to worry about them.

The men’s conversations that followed compared assignments and experiences in Vietnam. Eventually a voice offered, “Real sad about Allen (or Sandberg or Gray).” Then a

silence before someone recalled an incident in Basic School involving their fallen friend. Someone recalled that Ted was the first to fall only three weeks after arriving in Vietnam, before some of the Company finished specialty schools and shipped out. Married while still in college, he left his widow with two small children. These comments cast a somber shadow over the room.

By the fourth day of reunion, with Basic School days revisited and their war experiences shared, friendships renewed. Classmates once again felt trust for one another. They let opinions about the war creep into conversations. Gathered in pairs, sometimes threes, men talked about coming to the reunion. Gerald

Aveis admitted, “I had to come to find out what it was like for the others. I needed to discover if they had the same feelings—fear, disappointment, disillusionment—and settle the period in my mind.”

Most of the two hundred four classmen came home with no visible scars from their ordeal. They let themselves imagine that the nation would greet and welcome them and be as thankful for the safe return as the returnees were. Instead, they saw everyone hurrying about their busy lives beneath puffy-clouded US skies. The Marines were treated as if they had just returned from picking up dry cleaning that needed to be put away so they could return to the business of American life. Snatches of

conversations mentioned sharp edges. One says they returned from war like pottery shards and fragments of glass. But instead of being ground down and scrubbed until they were polished specimens ready to be displayed and admired like beach glass, he recalled feeling as though he was shoved into a crevice, beyond the tides' ministering sands, ignored, abandoned to exist with whatever jagged edges the war left on him. Gathered here, they finally could admit their disappointments and disillusionments and turn their talk philosophical. This reunion had, as one man put it, "let me get my old and young selves back together."



The alums of TBS 68 finished their reunion with a visit to the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Exiting the buses in D.C., everyone paused for a moment to take in the black panels stretching head-high across a sun-spotlighted stage. Without breaking the early Sunday quiet, they separated into couples and threesomes, spread across walkways, consulted lists. Gray heads and navy blazers were patterned over the more than 58,000 names etched into the granite. Come to pay respects, their manner said. A long time coming.

A man of slight build, a 4th Platoonier, moved along the wall, passing several panels, pausing, reading, moving on, searching. "Conway." He traced the letters as though reading Braille,

fingers lingering over the name just found. He squinted, lost in thought, then touched a patriotic-ribboned rose to the name, let it drop, moved on. He found others: *Hoffmann*, *Figueroa*. When he hadn't found a name in several panels, he retraced his steps, reread.

"They have to be here. Together," he spoke to the wife of forty-eight years beside him. He ran his finger along one line then down to the next. "It was the same day, their deaths. They're grouped by date."

His wife knelt to inspect names that ran all the way to the ground. "Kelley," she pronounced, touching a name. "And Knollmeyer." The final name was spoken as benediction before she stood to watch her husband place a rose in front

of this panel. He didn't stoop but bent slightly and dropped the white flower to the ground. These found names were not among the fallen from TBS Alpha Class.

Speaking almost in a whisper, more to himself than to the one who watched his actions, he claimed, "Seven are mine, my platoon; twelve in the company. We were hit by heavy fire: rifles, machine guns, mortars, grenades ... I remember them all ... every September ... call their families."

All here knew his story, the man who carried himself confidently, white hair clipped military close, gray eyes, tanned complexion testimony to an active life. His classmates spoke in regret

for him, that he should have followed in his father's, his uncle's footsteps, both USMC generals. Then they added admiration for the life he had made for himself. They watched for but failed to find hint of his career-ending injury, his souvenir from that September skirmish. Their eyes said they recalled his brief bio, the one each man prepared before the reunion, printed for all to read but never spoken of.

Someone might think that it was foreordained that I would become a Marine, given that my father, uncle, and brother-in-law all served in the Corps; and unquestionably, I was immersed in everything Marine from an early age. ... No one ever said to me, "Are you going to be a Marine when you grow up?" However, it was clearly

communicated to me that I had an obligation to serve my country.

Several Basic School classmates and I arrived in Vietnam the first week in January, 1968. It was going to be a very bloody year. We just didn't know how bloody it was going to be.

On the morning of [September] 19th, near the intersection of Route 4 and a railroad berm, the battalion encountered a large force of NVA hidden in holes and trenches concealed by tall grass, banana trees, and a tree line. Fox Company mounted an assault only to be hit by heavy fire. ... In a brief period of time, we had twelve men killed and thirty wounded, of which I was one. One instant I was erect, and the next I was splayed out on the ground. It was as if I suddenly had an amputation without any

anesthesia. I kept staring at my right leg, trying to figure out why it was on backwards, with my right heel inches away from my eyes. I was paralyzed, and it was dawning on me that I might not make it. Not once did it cross my mind that I might be wounded and never be the same again, that my “career” in the Marine Corps would consist of ten and a half months in a body cast, rehab, and a medical retirement.

A short distance from the wall, three soldiers frozen in bronze looked on in solemn tribute to the names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their comrades and nation. Time for ceremony. The reunited Alpha Class assembled in front of the statue and assumed its same respectful gaze until eyes were drawn to a

Marine in dress blues. He paced a distance to dappled light filtering through tree branches and lifted his bugle. The observers caught their breath at his slow, mournful sounding of “Taps”. Shoulders squared, backs straightened in muscle memory of long-ago training; the moist eyes reflected another kind of memory. Every clear note pulled at hearts with *all is well*.

Maybe Kraft’s magical five days of reunion accomplished his purpose. Their fallen were honored and remembered. As important, classmates not seen in forty-eight years discovered they had wrestled with common feelings of abandonment and rejection after they returned home from the war. They weren’t and hadn’t been alone in their recollections of a time

more difficult than anyone who hadn't been through it could understand. That realization fostered healing. In reuniting, reconnecting, and remembering, they put back together the pieces that hadn't fit since that time. As the remaining members of the class—those they referred to as “sitting up and taking nourishment”— were pulled back into the supporting body that sustained them through Basic School, the last jagged edges from that early duty finally were smoothed, allowing them to feel like the polished specimens they are.

Contributors

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.

In 2012, **Perry Glasser** was named a Fellow of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in Creative Nonfiction. *Riverton Noir*, a novel, won the Gival Press Novel Award in 2011. He has published three collections of short fiction, as well as a collection of short memoirs entitled

Metamemoirs (2012). Glasser lives in Haverhill, Massachusetts where he drinks staggering amounts of coffee while working on a young adult novel.

John Guzlowski's writing appears in Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*, *Ontario Review*, *North American Review*, *Salon.com*, *Rattle*, *Atticus Review*, and many other print and online journals here and abroad. His first novel *Suitcase Charlie*, a mystery set among Holocaust survivors in Chicago, is available from Amazon. His poems and personal essays about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany appear in his forthcoming book *Echoes of Tattered Tongues* (*Aquila Polonica Press*, March 2016). Of Guzlowski's

writing, Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz said, “He has an astonishing ability for grasping reality.”

Caroline Horwitz’s essays have appeared in publications such as *Animal*, *Forge Journal*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Mothers Always Write*, and *The Summerset Review*, among others. Her work has been nominated for the 2015 Best of the Net Anthology and listed as a notable entry in *The Best American Essays 2014*. She has an MFA in creative nonfiction from Chatham University and lives in Las Vegas with her husband and son.

Susan E. Lindsey fell in love with words in the second grade while reading *The Wizard of Oz*.

After a nearly 20-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.

Annalise Mabe is completing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of South Florida where she writes nonfiction and poetry. Her work has been featured in *The Offing*, *Animal*, *Proximity Magazine*, and is forthcoming

in *Hobart*. She reads for *Sweet: A Literary Confection* and is a poetry editor at *Saw Palm: Florida Literature and Art*. She also teaches English composition and creative writing at USF.

Mara Cohen Marks's stories have appeared in *Alimentum*, *The Hairpin*, *Jewrotica*, *Medium*, *Mothers Always Write* and *Pentimento*. Her essays and op-eds have been featured by *New America Media*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, *LA Business Journal*, *La Opinion*, and rarefied scholarly journals including *Urban Affairs Review*, *Sociological Perspectives*, and *Political Research Quarterly*. She holds a doctorate in political science, an invaluable degree for her current position in the field of uncompensated

domestic labor. She lives with her family in Los Angeles. The poodle is doing just fine.

Robert Maynor is from the Lowcountry of South Carolina. He has worked as a commercial plumber, dishwasher, cook, landscaper, and musician. His stories and essays have previously been published in *Bartleby Snopes* and Lander University's *New Voices*. He is twenty-two years old.

Rick Kempa lives in Rock Springs, Wyoming, where he teaches writing and philosophy at Western Wyoming College. His most recent books are the anthology *Going Down Grand: Poems from the Canyon* from Lithic Press, which he edited with Peter Anderson, and a

poetry collection *Ten Thousand Voices*, published by Littoral Press in Richmond, CA.

Tom Darin Liskey spent nearly a decade working as a journalist in Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil. He is a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. His fiction and nonfiction has appeared in the *Crime Factory*, *Driftwood Press*, *Mount Island*, *The Burnside Writers Collective*, *Sassafras Literary Magazine*, *Hirschworth* and *Biostories*, among others. His photographs have been published in *Roadside Fiction*, *Iron Gall Press*, *Blue Hour Magazine* and *Midwestern Gothic*. He lives in Texas.

Ed McCourt is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Jacksonville University.

His essays and poetry have appeared in the *Little Patuxent Review*, the *Portland Review*, *Gravel Magazine*, the *Bacopa Literary Review*, and elsewhere.

Joseph O'Day obtained his BA and MBA from Salem State University and BS from Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. He has served as the Director of Pharmacy at Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital since 1998. He has taken several graduate writing courses and is a long-standing member of Salem Writers' Group. His writing focuses on the personal essay form, exploring family relationships and life transitions. Besides pharmacy and writing, he enjoys athletics and spending time with his family.

From procrastinating to editing to teaching, **Mary Pfeiffer** loves all aspects of writing. In her teen years, she wrote a weekly newspaper column. Then she taught writing to teachers in her local school district. Currently she teaches Memoir Writing at Collin College in Texas, edits for other writers, and works on her own and her family's memoirs. Her recent writings are anthologized in *Ten Spurs: Best of the Best* and *Widowhood for Smarties*.

Emily Rich is the non-fiction editor of *Little Patuxent Review*. She writes mainly memoir and essay. Her work has been published in a number of small presses including *Little Patuxent Review*, *Welter*, *River Poet's Journal*, *Delmarva Review* and *the Pinch*. Her essays

have been listed as notables in *Best American Essays* 2014 and 2015.

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Napa, California. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals. Nominated several times 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 and was short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award. “Greyhound,” one of the stories in this collection, also appears in the anthology *Among Animals*. Her story “Manatee Gardens” appears in the anthology *Outer Voices/Inner Lives*.

Vic Sizemore's writing is published or forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *storySouth*, *Connecticut Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Sou'wester*, *PANK Magazine*, *Silk Road Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Superstition Review*, *Ghost Town*, *Entropy*, *Eclectica*, and elsewhere. Excerpts from his novel *Eternity Rowboat* are published or forthcoming in *Connecticut Review*, *Portland Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Burrow Press Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Letters* and elsewhere. Sizemore's fiction has won the New Millennium Writings Award and has been nominated for Best American Non-required Reading and two Pushcart Prizes.

Claude Clayton Smith is professor emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University. He is the author of seven books and co-editor/translator of another. His own work has been translated into five languages, including Russian and Chinese. With the late Alexander Vaschenko of Moscow State University, he is co-editor/translator of *Meditations After the Bear Feast: The Poetic Dialogues of N. Scott Momaday and Yuri Vaella*, forthcoming in the spring of 2016 from Shanti Arts Publishing.

Emily Story (image) is a classically trained artist residing in Raleigh, North Carolina. She received her bachelors in history from the University of North Carolina at Asheville. She seeks to combine her art training with

an interest in wealth disparity and social inequality. Emily works primarily in mixed media, combining found objects, watercolor, chalk, graphite and spray paint. She has a guinea pig named James Franco and a Siamese cat, Ramona. Emily is open and outspoken about her struggles with anxiety and depression but hopes to display her hesitant optimism in her work as well.

Linda Tharp loved language from an early age when she first realized words *can* hurt you, a tactic she employed against neighborhood bullies due to her inability to throw either sticks or stones very far. She lives in Southern California with Gary, Erin, and grand-dog

Maggie, and is currently writing a memoir based on the impact of Erin's illness.

After leaving a long career as an architect, **Peter Wadsworth** now uses time once consumed with his work to pursue writing. Following the advice and encouragement of Alex Shoumatoff, the renowned *Vanity Fair* travel and environmental writer, Wadsworth has recently dusted down old scribbles and now works on new ones, delighting in recording the lives of people in all their complexity and the places they inhabit. He loves to travel to far flung places, recording both people's differences and their common humanity, but is always drawn back to his homeland of West Yorkshire with its

gritstone towns, purple moorland, and proud, friendly people.

Harry Wilson (cover photograph) is a retired professor of Art at Bakersfield College. He has had solo exhibits of his photographs at the de Young Museum of Art in San Francisco and at the Bakersfield Museum of Art, as well as in galleries and art centers around the country. His work has been published in *Rolling Stone*, *The Sun*, *Cerise Press*, and *Zyzzzyva* among others. The old timer still uses film and a darkroom.