

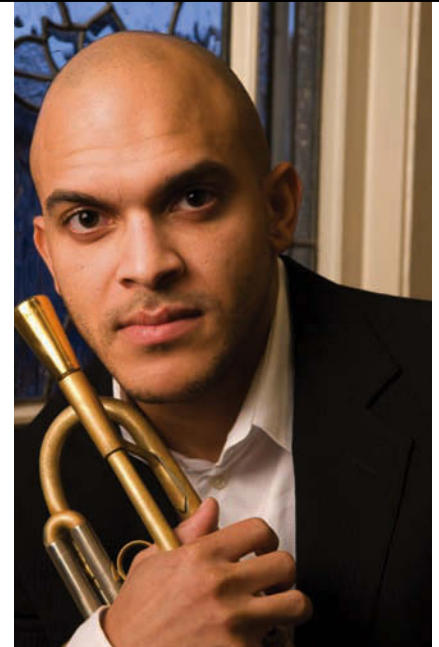
The 2012 DOUBLE DEALER

Legends In Their Own Time...

*Clockwise:
Ernest J. Gaines,
Irvin Mayfield,
Judith "Jude" Swenson*



...And...



...Literature Out of Time!



The

DOUBLE DEALER

PUBLISHED AT NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

The Double Dealer, the Society's literary journal, was created in the image of the 1920s and 30s *Double Dealer*, a New Orleans journal, which was first publisher of the work of William Faulkner and the early work of such important authors as Ernest Hemingway. The original *Double Dealer* was founded by Albert Goldstein, Julius Weiss Friend, John McClure, and Basil Thompson, along with dedicated Louisiana guarantors, who were tired of hearing the South described as a literary backwater by Eastern Establishment critics, including notably H. L. Menken (who later became a cheerleader for the journal). The Society's goals in re-establishing the journal were to provide a forum for showcasing developing writers alongside established authors, and to provide a resource for teachers of English, literature, and creative writing.

The Double Dealer Salutes Its Guarantors

Bertie Deming Smith & The Deming Foundation
Cathy & Rivie Cary

Judith "Jude" Swenson In Memory of James Swenson

Randy Fertel and the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation

Joseph DeSalvo, Jr., Rosemary James & Faulkner House, Inc.

The J.J. and Dr. Donald Dooley Fund: Samuel L. Steel, III, Administrator

The Arts Council of New Orleans

The City of New Orleans Community Arts Grant

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The State Library of Louisiana, The Louisiana Festival of the Book, The Louisiana State Museum

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Sandra & Louis Wilson, Mary Freeman Wisdom Foundation,

Joyce & Steve Wood

The

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*Faulkner-Wisdom competition years are organized in the following order: Novel, Novel-la, Novel In Progress, Short Story, Essay, Poetry and Short Story by a High School Student. 2010 Winning Submissions are available by clicking [HERE](#).

Welcome To The Double Dealer

A Long Time Coming!

The literary journal of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, *The Double Dealer*, went to press in hard copy for the last time in the Fall of 2007. Paper and printing costs skyrocketed and revenues for all non-profit organizations in New Orleans have been hard to come by since Hurricane Katrina. The Faulkner Society is an all volunteer administered organization and with many of our volunteers absorbed with getting their own lives together and back on track, volunteers have been almost as hard to come by as money! It has taken us six years to come to grips with our decision to keep the journal alive by converting to an on-line publication and then to get up to speed technically with all that involves.

We went live with our first on-line edition back in June. For that edition, we selected material relating to 2010, including papers presented at **Words & Music, a Literary Feast in New Orleans** that year, as we had an obligation to get those papers published. In that edition we also published manuscripts from winners of the 2010 **William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**. In the meantime, the competition winners from 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011 awaited publication of their material!

It's been a long time coming and we are happy to present in this, the 2012 edition of *The Double Dealer* all of their work. This edition also includes a lot of other feature material, which we hope you will enjoy.

With this edition we are almost back on track!

We are working on the 2013 edition now and we plan for it to go live just before Thanksgiving as a preview for **Words & Music, 2013**, which will open on December 4. In the 2013 edition we will publish manuscripts of winners and runners-up for 2012 and 2013, along with papers presented in 2012 at **Words & Music**. Much of the featured material for the 2013 edition will be contributed by authors and scholars who will be appearing at **Words & Music**.

It gives us great pleasure to introduce our new associate editors for *The Double Dealer*, **Caroline Rash**,

Geoff Munsterman, and **Shari Stauch**.

Caroline Rash comes to New Orleans by way of Clemson, SC; Dalian, China; and Conway, AR. Currently a copy editor at Peter Mayer Advertising, she has contributed as a freelance writer to regional newspapers and interned at *Oxford American* magazine.

Geoff Munsterman's poems have been featured in *Poets for Living Waters*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *story|south*, *The New Laurel Review*, and *Margie* to name a few. His debut collection **Because the Stars Shine Through It** will come out Winter, 2013 from Lavender Ink and he is hard at work on the follow-up, the book-length poem **Where Scars Wake**. His shingle hangs in New Orleans.

Shari Stauch has been in publishing, marketing and PR for 33 years. She is a frequent presenter at **Words & Music** and five-time finalist in the Faulkner-Widom Competition, with first-runner-up finishes in both Novel-in-Progress and Essay. Her firm, **Where Writers Win**, works with emerging authors to provide marketing, websites, training and tools to set authors apart in a crowded marketplace.

We are actively soliciting advertising for our next issue and future issues so that we can continue *The Double Dealer* well into the future. If you are interested in becoming a guarantor or advertiser, we'd love to hear from you. We'd also like to get your comments and suggestions for improvements in the future. And, finally, for those of you interested in submitting work of your own, we'd be happy to hear from you, too! One e-mail will reach us all,

Faulkhouse@aol.com

—*Rosemary James*
Co-Founder, Faulkner Society; Supervising Editor, *The Double Dealer*



Caroline Rash

Photograph by Louis Maistros



Geoff Mnsterman



Shari Stauch

Icons of the Apocalypse

In today's 24-hour news world which presents us hour by hour with new horrors, it is natural to become preoccupied with events of the past and their impact on the present, contemporary events and their impact



on the future—and natural, even, to fall prey to more or less daily depression.

Who can fail to be preoccupied, really, what with wars on many fronts, TV declarations of impending doom, and street prophets preaching *Revelations* regularly on busy city corners; NRA empowered thugs and psychos daily shooting down innocent children; and fundamentalist terrorists of multiple religions intent on destroying everyone who is not like them. Who can fail to be disgusted with our deliberately dysfunctional,

untalented, unheroic Congress, which refuses to do its job and represent the people properly on any issue, doing nothing rather than anything that might anger a fringe group with some power at the polls, thereby giving the fringe more power than it deserves.

They don't have time to do their jobs apparently. A recent national poll revealed that consumption of pornography and wine are higher in the nation's Capital than in any other place.

On the cultural front, sleazy reality shows have taken the place of legitimate drama on television, followed closely by equally sleazy tell-it-all true confession hours. Great performance art is being overshadowed by young women taking off more and more of their clothing on stage, no less salacious in their performances than the tawdriest Bourbon Street

strippers, e.g. **Miley Cyrus** in her 2013 MTV VMA award show appearance recently. Ms. Cyrus performed sexually explicit twerking replete with phallic symbols, stripping to her nude bra and thong panties to strut, her tongue hanging out. The entire act, featuring teddy bear clothes and props, was, simply put, child pornography, no doubt sending pedophiles watching into sexual frenzies. In fact, the legitimate singing talents of musical performers gets lost in their shuffle to "shake that booty." Madonna laid the foundation for selling musical sex on stage and pop singers generally have adopted her S&M-dominatrix get-ups as a favored on-stage looks.

Fashion has followed, slavishly promoting heavy metal, studded leather, and corsets as the new best thing. In fact, it's hard to find an accessory or garment free of "rock star studs." The famously eccentric designer **Marc Jacobs** is promoting slinky satin and lace slips—exactly like those we used to wear as underclothes—as expensive out-on-the-town evening wear. And young women, even those whose figures would best be covered by burkas, are wearing flimsy too-short-shorts and breast revealing halters to the altar to take Communion.

It's the era of the "Super Model." With all the hype, it's understandable if every woman wants to be one and if football lion **Tom Brady** is not the only man who wants a **Giselle** for his own. Like singers and actresses, models, waxed within an inch of their lives, are literally showing their asses and much more in magazines and on the runways. And in another form of child pornography, the high fashion magazines are using younger and younger models, e.g. **Dakota and Elle Fanning**, dressing teenyboppers in sophisticated clothes and making them up to



look like vampire bait. It's gotten so bad internationally that the French are putting into effect a law prohibiting under-age models.

Pop music stars, silver screen stars, and self-made celebrities such as **Kim Kardashian** and sisters, who have no discernible talents except for self-promotion, have developed cult followings that defy any rational explanation.

Hundreds of thousands of people are tuning in to the now nightly entertainment news shows, visiting celebrity-watch websites, and dipping into gossip rags daily to get the latest on celebrity relationships and hookups. Some stars and their playmates have much steamier



tales to tell than what others are saying about them and so many of them are sharing their own stories about what goes on when the lights go off behind their closed doors in best-selling sex books.

In **The Art of Men (I Prefer Mine al Dente)**, for instance, Hollywood Historian funny woman **Kirstie Alley**, who has seen her share of tabloid headlines, attempts to

set the record straight about her romantic life, from her tumultuous marriage to Parker Stevenson to her on-set romances with **John Travolta** and **Patrick Swayze**. **Jane Fonda** who has spent most of her life in the spotlight as a political activist, actress, and exercise ghuru is, now that she's entered her "third act," offering emotional insight into how partners can connect physically as their bodies change in her latest book, **Prime Time**.

On the educational front, children are dropping out in middle school or leaving high school without being able to read properly or write a coherent paragraph, while corrupt politicians cut education and arts budgets to the bone rather than tax their wealthy contributors, such as big oil.

nd high profile Wall Street bankers, who used to be considered upstanding members of society, held up as important role models, are now, we know, nothing more than sophisticated crooks, who continue to enrich themselves at outrageous levels while destroying the economic structure of the country and the lives of millions of hard-working Americans.

How did we manage to get to such a state of affairs that we would elect an exorbitant narcissist, in reality a truly ugly man, **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, with

no credentials but body-building as Governor of a large state and elevate him to the status of pop icon. How has it transpired that our **Madonna** is an androgynous sex merchant devoid of moral fiber and pedophiles are lurking in the priesthood? Why is it that so many high school and college graduates know nothing, read nothing, get all of their "facts" and "history" from cynically distorted films made by paranoiacs like Oliver Stone?

Why have we allowed our city's to be taken over by pitiful

punks with nothing better to do than paint their hair purple and deface our property with graffiti, while popping laughing gas ampoules, or drunks who vomit and defecate all over historic landmarks they have commandeered as their bathrooms.

"Do you need better proof that ours is a degenerating society? If so, take a look at current bestseller lists."

Do you need better proof that ours is a

degenerating society? If so, take a look at current bestseller lists. Bestselling books are as likely to be badly written political diatribes such as Mark Levin's **The Liberty Amendments** or mushy memoirs ghosted for celebrities who can only think for themselves in 140-word tweets. Look at the bestseller list this week and it will be immediately obvious that with a very few marvelous exceptions, great literary art is definitely riding at the back of the bus. Compare the list to that of the icons of the 19th century, characterized by authors who made exceptional contributions to literature while plowing the ground for social change by holding up a mirror in which to better see ourselves. **Mark Twain**, a man of the people who possessed great common sense comes to mind immediately, along with **Edith Wharton** and **Henry James**, both of who were famous in their day, as well as ours. Or compare today's bestsellers to the literary luminaries of the 20th Century, **William Faulkner**, **Ernest Hemingway**, **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, **Margaret Mitchell**, **Tennessee Williams**, **Eudora Welty**, **Elizabeth Spencer**, **William Styron**, **Phillip Roth**, **Saul Bellows**, **Walker Percy**, **Shelby Foote**, **Toni Morrison**, and **Ernest Gaines**, for instance.

Art is neither romantic drivel nor a condemning social science. And it certainly is not self-help sex books!

There are plenty of good writers producing plenty of exceptional books today. The depressing sign of our times is that most of them never reach the mass market and truly extraordinary artists, therefore, rarely achieve the financial rewards they deserve. It helps to remember that Henry James never made any money either. He borrowed money from Edith Wharton, who married money. Faulkner struggled to support his family by writing screenplays in Hollywood. Many of today's best writers, however, don't even become famous. The

publishing establishment has its burden of sin, too: letting fine works go out of print, while making tons of money on trash. We don't condemn purely mindless entertainment. Some of it can be fun! But, really, some of that easy money could be set aside not only to propagate art in literature but to promote it to the masses. These days, most good authors, if they want any marketing of their work, have to do it themselves.

Long story short, we have a lot going on today that warrants a look back in time for answers to what went wrong and where we are heading. So much is wrong that it is no wonder if people are afraid of where we are heading.

Beginning in the last Century, fringe groups serious about their concepts of religion have multiplied and many have begun to isolate themselves, following the direction of self-ordained, monomaniacal, holier-than-thou, latter-day prophets, predicting apocalyptic changes. The mass suicide in Guyana by the **Jim Jones** sect and the Branch Davidian tragedy, were early sagas of separatists who found the mainstream unacceptable in the extreme. Today, who knows just how many such sects there are out there. Because of celebrity watchers we are aware of the Scientologists, famously represented by **Tom Cruise**, who as a young man entered a Franciscan monastery to become a priest but later renounced the Catholic faith



practicing what they describe as "new, less destructive lifestyles closer to nature, closer to God."

*Closer to nature, maybe.
Closer to God? You decide.*

Many of these cults, are held together by self-styled messiahs preying on deep-seated fears and demanding that their faithful relinquish all aspects of personal freedom. They thrive, for instance, on keeping women, as they used to say in the South, "barefoot and pregnant," and ignorant, victims of arranged, sometimes forced marriages, sex slaves to polygamous men, some of them old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers. (Some cult women have seen the light, have had enough, and are making successful runs for freedom and, once

free, have begun shedding public light on the inner-workings of some of these cults. Escapees include former wife of Tom Cruise, **Katie Holmes**, hand selected by



Cruise to bear his child.) It is pretty clear that in most instances, the cult leader is a parasite, pumping up his own delusions of grandeur by feeding on the fears of lost souls looking for a better way. The *Revelations* craze is not always manifested by an organized cult. Some times it's simply a mass, lemming-like fear of doom. Legions of men and

women, for instance, believed that the world would come to an end on December 21, 2012, based on the cycles of the ancient Mayan calendar. One can only wonder what they are believing today!

*Somehow, the messages of the **New Testament**, messages of love and redemption, have been lost in this cosmos of gloom and doom.*

Some psychoanalysts have explained the *Revelations* phenomenon as a deep psychic desire to wipe the slate clean, a longing for a fresh start born of guilt and fear, an urge as old as the myth of the Phoenix. As they see it, when a culture degenerates, the desire for cleansing becomes stronger.

History has demonstrated that the urge can get out of hand very quickly in the most evil ways when the around-the-bend fringe gains ascendancy, as in pre-World War II Germany. The hand-writing foretelling the Holocaust was already on the proverbial wall, with ethnic discrimination rampant throughout Europe in the early years of the 20th century.

Now, we are seeing the handwriting once again, as the early haters—men and women who get up in the morning hating—seek ascendancy. Their p. r. men, such notorious loudmouths as radio talk show host **Rush Limbaugh** and TV personality **Bill O'Reilly**, formerly of **Fox News**, keep the hate fires burning daily while female counterparts such as Anne Coulter try to glamorize the politics of hate. And millions of Americans are making millions for the notorious big mouths, these lightning rods for resentment, by buying their badly written books. Who in their right mind really wants O'Reilly interpreting the





word of God for them? Meantime, their left leaning counterparts MSNBC's **Chris Matthews** and **Rachel Maddow**, frequent talk show guest comedian **Stephen Colbert** and radio's man of the notorious dirty mouth, **Howard Stern**, up the noise level by many decibels.

The 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's non-violent march to Washington and "I have a dream" speech was celebrated on August 28, 2013 and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is coming up in a few months.

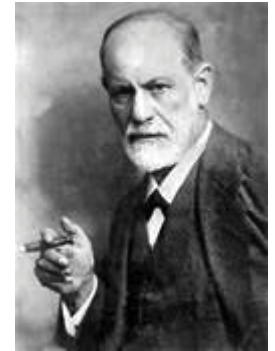
Against this historic backdrop there is strong evidence of a new wave of prejudice rising on the right, threatening to destroy the progress made toward the goal of equal rights for all. In the political realm, Tea Party cult advocates, for instance, preach that their way is the only way to national salvation. In their book of books, compromise is a dirty word. Never mind the fact that their way is one which throws the poor, the physically and mentally disadvantaged, minorities, universal education and literacy, voting rights, the arts, and women's rights under the bus. A close reading of their manifestos discloses that they bear a striking resemblance to what was being said in pre-Hitler Germany when, like now, the economy was in a shambles and the haters were seeking scapegoats to blame for their woes. And many of today's hater face cards are frighteningly reminiscent of the young Hitler, who seemed very attractive to many Europeans and Americans when he first began his climb to power.

Recommended Reading:

During the 12 years of the Third Reich, few Germans took the risk of actively opposing Hitler's tyranny and terror, and fewer still did so to protect the sanctity of law and faith. In **No Ordinary Men**, authors Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern focus on two remarkable, courageous men who did—the pastor and theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** and his close friend and brother-in-law **Hans von Dohnanyi**—and offer new insights into the fearsome difficulties that resistance entailed. They are great role models for these times in which resistance to the hate-filled few is once again imperative.

Some contemporary critics of today's mores blame Sigmund Freud, a pop cult figure of the early 20th century and the father of modern psychiatry, for many of our current societal problems.

Since the beginning of the 21st Century multiple tomes on Freud have appeared, including the first important translation of his works in 30 years, edited by the well-known British psychologist and author Adam Phillips and published by Penguin. **The Phillips Freud Reader** makes the man accessible to the ordinary reader and is highly recommended to those who would try to figure out for themselves if Freud was a messiah or magician, scientist or simply a compelling storyteller. Then there is: **Freud, Race and Gender** and **The Case of Sigmund Freud**, in which Sander L Gilman proposes that the Oedipus complex was Freud's response to racist theories prevalent in his Vienna: namely that Jews were prone to incest, parricide and venereal disease. A prevailing theory then, stated outright by **Carl Jung**, was that Jewish men were feminized by circumcision. It's Gilman's thesis that Freud dealt with his anxieties about being a Jew by projecting these ideas onto other "inferior minorities", including women.



Is it possible that one man's neuroses led us into a century of unhealthy introspection, me-myself-and-I obsessions, and a coarse excuse for a culture? That's a lot to put on one disturbed man's back, even Freud's.

Certainly, however, Freud did his part to relieve us of responsibility for our own actions, paving the way for a century of greed and selfishness, leaving us with no society at all, only a fractionated mess of unproductive isms.

And, if we can't blame the psychotic sexist Dr. Freud or his psychotic sexist colleague Dr. Jung for our loss of national togetherness, who can we blame, other than ourselves—and that's too depressing, of course.

Everyday life today could, in fact, be totally depressing if you fail to realize that the intense self-examination underway is merely history repeating itself. One of the best written, most imaginative new novels of the last ten years is one that did not make the author wealthy, the Simon and Schuster release of **Henry James' Midnight Song**, a fictional romp through fin de siècle Vienna by Carol de Chellis Hill. Hill's characters are Dr. Freud, his wife and his mistress/sister-in-law; his colleagues, Dr. Jung and Dr. Fliess, and Jung's patient-lover Sabrina Spielrein; Edith Wharton and her lover Morton Fullertan; Henry James and the artist Gustav Klimt, all intertwined with a compelling cast of fictional Viennese movers and shakers and a family of resident Americans. (The torrid love affair between Jung and

Spierein, his patient, who later became a psychiatrist herself, was made famous to the masses recently in the film, **A Dangerous Method** starring Keira Knightley, Viggo Mortensen, and Michael Fassbender.) Hill portrays a glittering society spawning remarkable movements in the arts, science, letters but teetering on the edge of chaos—divided by racism, feminism, and sexism. Sound familiar? The book is an intellectually audacious blend of fact and fiction provoking a vision of the future at once hilarious and scary as Hell. A fine, entertaining read, a brilliant reminder that humanity has been through this before and a warning of where we might be heading, again, if we're not very, very careful.

It's easy to wallow in depression if you forget that the massive political, social and cultural revolutions which characterized the end of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are ongoing. The upheavals today are but a continuation of the long march from the amoebic ooze of pre-history toward paradise. Our self-examination is a necessary fuel for forward motion.

Lest you doubt there is forward motion, consider that environmentalists are no longer the lunatic fringe. Most thinking individuals are working to save the planet today, even though insensitive asses like Limbaugh have been known to make such lewd comments as "...if the spotted owl can't adjust, screw it." Slavery has been abolished and the political coalitions which embrace all are the ones which usually succeed. Women are now free to earn the living, go to war, and have early heart attacks, while men enjoy even more freedom from responsibility. As for preachers locked into the *Revelations* syndrome and lunatic fringe groups, they are like cancer: eternal.

Rather than be depressed about the quality of the best-sellers lists, be happy that the vast middle is still buying books of some kind instead of burning them.

Kck back, turn off the TV blah, blah, blah..put in your ear plugs, put on some Mozart, and read good books. You'll never have enough time in your life to read all of the good stuff, even if you could dedicate 24 hours a day to it. Treat yourself to a visit to the past or an exploration of the future via the magic carpet of time travel—good literature.

Thanks be to heaven we need not rely solely on big mouths or sex peddlers for something to read. In addition to the many fine, relatively unrewarded writers producing brilliant, entertaining and inspiring literature today, we can always fall back on the icons of other eras. In today's longing for a return to manners, the work of 19th century authors is enjoying a revival of interest, reaching the mass market through cinematic epics based on novels such as **Jane Eyre** by the English writer Charlotte Brontë; and Edith Wharton's **The Age of Innocence**. Why not read the originals, now that you've seen the films? *The New York Times*, commenting on the two-volume **Henry James: Collected Travel Writing** described the work this way: "Mr. James In Motion" is

"dense and resplendent" prose by a "traveler who does not gad about the world with his mind shut." This splendid collection of prose is an excellent lesson in what travel can be: intellectually broadening. Travel writing today is more likely to promote "Five-Star Restaurants in France," anatomically broadening.

For a look into the future, we highly recommend **Moira Crone's** 2012 speculative novel **The Not Yet**, which was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award for Best Science Fiction paperback original of the year. The novel, based on the directions in which society is headed today, predicts what New Orleans will be like in the not too distant future, a city state of feudal control by the haves over the vast majority, the have-nots.

Or read anything by **Octavia Butler**, whose novels likewise are set in the not too distant future and paint excellently crafted word pictures of what could come.

To become rich and famous, as they deserve, good writers need good audiences. Today, unfortunately, we have more good writers than good readers.

A very good writer, **Flannery O'Connor**, had this to say: "I don't think the nation's teachers of English have any right to be complacent about their service to literature as long as the appearances of a really fine work of fiction is so rare on the best-seller lists..." Ms. O'Connor said the English teacher should set a minimum goal of helping to improve the quality of the bestseller lists and advised that they might achieve this goal by teaching literature instead of sociology and psychology in the guise of literature.

As good readers, we have a duty, now, to ensure that the great books of our own century and centuries past make it into the time capsules for the nucleus of humanity to fall back on while they are waiting to go forth from their caves and rebuild the world.

Like Thomas Cahill's Irish monks who saved civilization, we need to treasure fine works of literature and squirrel them away for the long, cold post-apocalyptic winter.

Think about it. Would you want to spend seven years with only books by the likes of Levin, Limbaugh, Stern, O'Reilly, Coulter, Colbert, Maddow, or Alley to read?

Rosemary James has had a dual career in writing/communications and interior design. She has two non fiction books—**Plot or Politics?** and **My New Orleans: Ballads to the Big Easy by Her Sons, Daughters, and Lovers**. With Joseph DeSalvo and Kenneth Holditch, she is co-founder of the **Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and of Words & Music**.



Noel Polk: 1943 – 2012

On August 21, 2012, **Noel Polk, Ph.D.**, noted scholar in the work of Southern authors—including especially that of Nobel laureate William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, and Walker Percy—died in Jackson, MS.

Author, poet, editor, and teacher, Noel Polk was For 27 years Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi and editor of *The Southern Quarterly*. In the fall of 2004, Noel joined the English Department at Mississippi State University

in Starkville and became the editor of the *Mississippi Quarterly*, a scholarly journal of Southern culture, past and present, which is published by MSU's College of Arts and Sciences. He had recently edited a new edition of Robert Penn Warren's **All the King's Men** for Harcourt Brace and a new edition of Willa Cather's **The Song of the Lark**. Best known for his editorial and critical work on William Faulkner and his critical work on Eudora Welty, Polk's more than 25 book publications include **Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner**; **Eudora Welty: A Bibliography of Her Work** and **Outside the Southern Myth**.

The five volumes of Faulkner's novels he co-edited with Faulkner biographer Joseph Blotner for The Library of America involved painstaking research to reconstruct the most authoritative text for each novel, a process he described in the *Notes on the Texts* for each volume. The Polk texts attempt to reproduce Faulkner's original typescripts as he presented them to his publishers before editorial intervention. Reconstructing Faulkner's novels as he originally intended them posed numerous problems for Polk as he recounted in his introduction to his collection of essays, **Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner**:

Faulkner took almost no interest in the printed forms of his books: he occasionally fought losing battles with editors over their alterations, but he never restored his original intentions back to what had been editorially altered. And he never revised a novel after it was published; for all we know, he never even re-read his novels (except, of course, those passages he read in public). For all intents and purposes, when he gave a typescript to his publishers he lost interest in it and proceeded immediately to the next blank page; what proofing he did he did with some obeisance to his professional duty, but he took no pleasure or interest in these more mechanical stages of literary production.

Polk's opens his essay *Where the Comma Goes: Editing William Faulkner* with an eloquent brief for the role of the scholarly editor:

Scholarly editing is the ultimate act of criticism, because it involves a wider range of issues than interpretation alone does, from macrocosmic ones like the author's meaning, to more mundane and microcosmic ones like where does the comma go? Dealing with all these issues re-



sponsibly requires extensive knowledge of publishing history and of publishing techniques and procedures, of standard usage in the author's period, of the author's preferences at any period of his or her career, of the author's relationship to commercial editors, to financial considerations, and to the political and cultural times, and of the author's practices in composing, revising, and proof-reading. The editor must be sensitive to an author's most subtle nuances of style, punctuation, and spelling, as well as to larger issues in the work, but also constantly aware of the complex interaction between his or her own aesthetic sense and the author's, because in order to determine where the comma goes the editor must constantly differentiate between

authorial error and authorial intention. Finally, the editorial act is central to the critical enterprise because editorial decisions impinge directly upon questions of canon and literary history.

Polk's essays detail the seriousness and care with which he tackled his research—"untold hours trying to parse out fine Faulknerian distinctions between dining-room, dining room, and dining-room. "It's not all fun." However, his essays also include transporting passages about his delight in discovery:

*Few things in my scholarly life have given me the kind of personal pleasure that I got from showing the manuscripts of **The Sound and the Fury** to a friend late one cluttered Friday afternoon at the Alderman Library. You who have held it know that it is, simply, gorgeous. It and the manuscripts of **Sanctuary**, **As I Lay Dying**, and **Absalom, Absalom!**, are almost objets d'arts, each individual page a canvas sensual to the fingers and pleasing to the eye: rule-straight lines of highly stylized handwriting forming a visual counterpoint to the scope and power, the psychological chaos, of the world the handwriting is creating. The pages thus speak eloquently of a shoring up against that chaos, of compression, of control.*

Noel would never have resorted to reading on an I-Pad or Kindle or Nook!

He had long wished to realize Faulkner's dream of publishing a version of *The Sound and the Fury* which used colored ink to represent the time shifts in the sometimes bewildering opening Benjy section. That dream came true when the Folio Society published a limited edition of **The Sound and the Fury** that Polk co-edited with Stephen Ross and which uses 14 different inks to mark each time period.

Noel Polk was born in Picayune, MS, on February 23, 1943. He received his B.A. in 1965 and his M.A. in 1966 from Mississippi College. In 1970 he earned his Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina.

Throughout his career he traveled and lectured widely, including numerous appearances at the Faulkner Society's festival, **Words & Music**. He was among keynote speakers for the first festival, which opened on the 100th anniversary of Mr. Faulkner's birthday in 1997. Frequently, he participated panel discussions about Faulkner and his work, including one memorable session when he and the noted music writer Stanley Crouch, a great fan of Faulkner's work, nearly came to physical blows over the question of whether Faulkner's style was influenced by the experimental jazz he heard while living in New Orleans and writing his first novel, back in 1925. Crouch insisted that was the case. Polk insisted that Faulkner was more likely to have been influenced by the German Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer than jazz riffs. During 2004, Dr. Polk was the featured speaker at an international conference on William Faulkner, sponsored by the Japanese William Faulkner Society in Tokyo. He

also taught a seminar on William Faulkner and Southern Culture at Hokusei Gakuen University in Sapporo, Japan. Polk was named a 2005 Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Lodz, Poland, where he lectured for five weeks on the works of Faulkner and Welty.

His last work, **Walking Safari or, The Hippo Highway and Other Poems**, was based on a walking tour he took in Africa and was published in January of 2012 by the Texas Review Press and was the 2011 winner of TRP Southern Poetry Breakthrough Series: Mississippi. He was a board member of Starkville Reads and a founding member of Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters.

Noel Polk's literary legacy is a treasure trove of information about great men and women of letters, as well as his own work as an accomplished poet and essayist.

We mourn his passing and lift a toast in memory of this icon of the literary arts.



Recommended Reading: Faulkner

Soldiers' Pay by William Faulkner

Soldiers' Pay, Nobel Laureate William Faulkner's first novel, was written while he lived on Pirate's Alley in 1925, a story about a condition of modern warfare, post-traumatic stress syndrome and alienation among returning warriors. The central character has returned home unable to resume his former life because of both mental wounds and the physical wounds he suffered in an air battle. He is Lieutenant Donald Mahon, a fighter pilot who was shot down in Europe and is believed dead, but who mysteriously resurfaces on a train bound for home. He has suffered a tremendous head wound, leaving a horrible, disfiguring scar and he cannot remember anyone or anything from his previous life in his hometown.

Other characters gravitate toward Donald. On the train he meets Joe Gilligan, an Army private who never got to fight in the war, and Mrs. Margaret Powers, whose husband was killed in the war by one of his own troops, both of whom decide to accompany him home and to take care of him because of his sorry condition.

Donald's father, the Reverend Joseph Mahon, an Episcopal minister, for instance, is surprised to learn he is still alive, as is Cecily Saunders, his former fiancée, a flapper-type who has begun dating a young man in town, George Farr. The novel follows Donald's slow degradation as spring slowly advances from April into May. All who see Donald, except his father, agree he is about to die. Cecily, who is stunned to learn her husband-to-be is still alive, agrees to see him, but she is shocked by his disfigurement. Eventually, as Donald's condition worsens—he becomes blind—he receives his bit of disability, his "soldiers' pay." (Originally conceived in the Civil War, so there would be money to bury a soldier wounded, so that he would not have to dig his own grave. Cecily marries George Farr, while Margaret Powers, out of a sense of sacrifice and perhaps guilt over her own feelings toward her husband (whom she had intended to leave before she discovered he had been killed), marries Donald. Shortly thereafter, Donald dies.

Although not one of Faulkner's masterworks, **Soldiers' Pay** deals with an issue important today.

Literary Role Model: Emily Meier (1944-2013)

By Caroline Rash

The first thing you should know about **Emily Meier** is that she published six books in six months. I noticed this oddity while looking for her most recent work, per a friend's recommendation. There they were—four novels and two collections of short stories published in the latter half of 2011.

As it turns out, Emily had been diagnosed with incurable cancer, which recurred in 2009, and by August of 2011, she had set up her own publishing house, Sky Spinner Press, through which she organized her life's work. I began this article wanting to describe the voracious work she put in after her terminal diagnosis—which is, of course, a great feat—but after reading more about her and speaking with her husband, **Robert Meier**, it is clear that her quiet, unflagging work ethic, the writing during her toddler's nap time and before any awards, is the more important story. That is Emily the writer, the literary role model. That is Emily the mother and wife.

Of course, Emily did earn awards and critical acclaim, but I was reflecting on her life story and wondering, "What exactly is it that is so compelling about the story of a woman writing her entire life, then working even harder to complete her life work in the face of a terminal illness?" Then, "What did she gain from that?" And finally, "What can we learn from such a story?"

This reflection led me to **Alan Shapiro's** classic essay *Why Do I Write*, originally published in *Cincinnati Re* and and reprinted in **Best American Essays 2007**. In his essay, Shapiro describes why he initially *thought* he wrote versus the truth of why he writes. He came to this understanding through knowing the poet **Timothy Dekin**, who wrote his greatest book on his deathbed, editing through an oxygen mask. Shapiro makes sense of why writers continue to write when they can ostensibly gain no more earthly accolades:

I remember thinking in my teens and early twenties that if I could only publish a poem in a magazine, any magazine, I'd feel fulfilled and validated and wildly happy. And then I got my first publication. And I was happy for a day or so, until the bill arrived for the printing cost, and then I thought if I could only get a poem into a real journal, into a magazine that pays, I'd feel validated and happy, and when that happened, I began to feel the need to publish in the Atlantic Monthly or the New Yorker, magazines that someone other than my fellow writers may have heard of, and eventually when that happened I believed that only publishing a book with a reputable press would make me feel as if I'd earned the right to call myself a poet. And then I published a book, and the resounding silence and inattention of the world (it's my books



Emily Meier. Photograph by Robert Meier.

that suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder, not me), made me feel that the only measure of my poetic worth would be to get a book reviewed somewhere by someone I didn't know, someone who wasn't related to me, and when that occurred, and pleased me and the pleasure passed, I thought that only winning a big book award could quell this anxiety about my literary worth. I didn't realize how preoccupied I was with literary recognition till one day I overheard my seven year old son negotiating with my five year old daughter over who got to hold the TV's remote control. He said, Izzy, if you give me the controller I'll give you a Pulitzer Prize. I've been at this long enough to know that even if god himself, the lord almighty, hallowed be his name, came down from heaven and gave me a big fat kiss on the back of the brain, I'd probably shrug it off: "What? That's it? For years you don't write, you don't call, and now all I get is a lousy kiss?" Don't get me wrong. Acclaim of any kind is wonderful, except when it goes to someone else. But even at its best, that sort of "reward" or "recognition" is like cotton candy: it looks ample enough until you put it in your mouth, then it evaporates. All taste, and no nourishment.

Simply put, writers write because they have to. Maybe that is *too* simply put. Writers like Emily, and Timothy, and the countless others writing in the face of death are writing for the same internal reasons a person writes who never submits to publication. For the same reason as **Henry Darger**, the reclusive custodian writer and artist who became famous for his posthumously-discovered 15,145-page, single-spaced fantasy manuscript, **The Story of the Vivian Girls**, generally accepted as one of the world's most celebrated examples of "outsider art." It is an internal necessity—that they interact with and

enrich and clarify their worlds through the written word. Shapiro, finally, offers **Elizabeth Bishop's** answer to the question of why writers write (from her famous letter to **Anne Stevenson**.)

Bishop writes that what we want from great art is the same thing necessary for its creation, and that is, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. We write, Bishop implies, for the same reason we read or look at paintings or listen to music: for the total immersion of the experience, the narrowing and intensification of focus to the right here right now, the deep joy of bringing the entire soul to bear upon a single act of concentration.

That sounds about right. After all, writing is an essentially solitary occupation. The all-consuming process necessitates it be its own reward.

Emily Meier was a writer in this serious sense her entire life, not just when facing an existential crisis, or just when she had free time. She put in the work. She attended master classes, including one with noted poet Jorie Graham. She also got a creative writing degree in 1992 after she had been writing for decades, which can only be seen as proof that she worked tirelessly on improving her craft. She raised two children as a writer.

In fact, Emily wrote extensively in her interviews about motherhood, which, along with writing, was her primary occupation. Motherhood clearly influenced her writing—a devoted reader can see Emily scrawling a new question or insight inspired by her own daughter crawling on the blanket in her office. Likewise, writing influenced how she would raise her children. Her interviews reveal her to be a devoted mother who recognized, one, how boundaries work to help both parent and child and, two, how the instincts of a writer—observing and questioning—are also excellent tools for raising children. As she put it:

I remember reading an article by a psychologist who'd observed children and their mothers and said that a lot of teaching comes from a mother just glancing over at an exploring child and making a small remark such as oh, it rolls, when the child is pushing something across the floor. It's like a wheel. I was that kind of mom when my kids were little.

Emily also described certain boundaries she set for herself and her children which were ahead of their time and reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's **A Room of One's Own**, which she specifically references in an interview question on motherhood. As a young mother, Emily set a specific goal of writing 20 hours a week and walled off her own office, in which she would write as her children napped or went to nursery school. As they grew older, she established her office as a space in which she had private time. And, as she explained on her website, her

“But as a writer who has had the epiphany, obvious though it may be, that a writing life is a finite thing but that work does not have to share whatever the writer's personal fate might be, I've had a real feeling of liberation.”
—Emily Meier

children easily caught on to the concept and made her signs for the office door.

So, that is *how* she wrote—with great discipline and heart. What about the content? At the center of Emily's work is her insatiable curiosity and dedication to exploring issues from more than one side. Aside from her fiction writing, she posted under the handle “All But Certain” on *The Washington Post's Plum Line* community, a forum for political discussion. The subjects of her fiction are similarly observed through a skeptical eye. In **Clare, Loving**, her novel in three novellas, Emily's protagonist struggles through such issues as loss of faith, suicide, abortion, and intergenerational conflict.

These issues—which regularly show up on “banned topics” lists for argumentative essays in college—are so often viewed from trite angles that it is ambitious merely to try to write about them in an interesting new way, a way that will be in conversation with great literature, because, one, your audience has a heightened sense of self-righteousness regarding any description of the matter and, two, the topics are so heavy and large that the writer must truly excel in her craft to convey their depth. Emily knew what she was getting into. She read Tolstoy, Proust. She knew the weight of what she wrote and those who came before. She was not afraid. I am reminded of what noted literary agent **Deborah Grosvenor** writes about another fantastic woman writer, **Kim McLarin**:

It's too often the case of a writer with a great story but not the skills to tell it, or a skilled writer in search of a remarkable story...this successfully combines both.

None of this is to say that her illness did not inform her writing. In response to a question about how a sense of vulnerability and mortality effects her writing, she answered:

To make this a little more personal (which I know you want me to do), my mental sense of myself is of a person about to swim laps or run flights of

steps in my neighborhood with people who'd be as excited in New Orleans at the scent of the hotel gym as they'd be at the aroma of Cajun food. That's me. Yet there are times, including now, when I'm not that person and serious illness has made me feel vulnerable. The honest answer is that it has affected how I write more than what. When I feel a sense of urgency about getting the work done—getting everything downloaded from my brain while it's a living and functioning organ—it makes me a highly focused and driven writer who works on an unforgiving schedule, or as unforgiving as illness allows... But as a writer who has had the epiphany, obvious though it may be, that a writing life is a finite thing but that work does not have to share whatever the writer's personal fate might be, I've had a real feeling of liberation.

The important message here is that she allowed her struggle to open and expand her work. She did so with nuance and great dignity. In one of her most striking poems, "Living in Water", we sense Emily's struggle with mortality, with the long battle she endured. We feel her human tiredness, her desire to simply go peacefully:

*I have stolen his best story. Here is Al's:
Annie at five in a South Seas fisherman's boat
and the enormous wave that flashed her
overboard and, while Al dove deep
into a lifetime of bad dreams, she biked
the warm descent, floated eye-wide past beautiful
fish. At forty, she said it was how to die.*

When she went, Emily went among family and friends, and knowing that her work lived on. I never met her, but she comes through so clearly, so sincerely, in her writing that I can see her loved ones reading the excerpts and interviews on her website to spend a moment with her when they miss her. I can see her imparting to her six grandchildren that life is only worth living in wide-eyed motion.

In reading Emily Meier, I am reminded of another great writer who passed recently, **Seamus Heaney**. In his poem *Postscript*, he wrote:

*Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things
pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.*

In other words, there is no stopping. Beauty is motion. Only one word on the page, then another.



Emily Meier. Photograph by Robert Meier.

Further Reading:

**Suite Harmonic: A Civil War Novel of Rediscovery
Time Stamp**

Clare, Loving: A Novel in Three Novellas

The Second Magician's Tale

Watching Oksana and Other Stories

In the Land of the Dinosaur: Ten Stories and a Novella

~ emilymeier.com ~

Awards & Distinctions

NEA Literature Fellowship

Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship in Prose

Finalist, Bush Foundation Fellowship

Loft McKnight Award in Fiction

Finalist, Loft-McKnight Award of Distinction

Winner, Loft Mentor Series in Fiction

First Place, The Florida Review Fiction Prize

First Prize, Passages North National Fiction Competition

Pushcart Prize Nomination

Runner-Up, Faulkner-Wisdom Novella Competition

Finalist, Willa Cather Prize, Helicon Nine

Finalist, Glimmer Train Poetry Open

Winner, Lake Superior Contemporary Writers Series in

Fiction

Editor's Choice 4: Essays from the U.S. Small Press.

Selected Publications

The Second Penguin Book of Modern Women's Short Stories, The House on Via Gombito, North American Review, Prairie Schooner, The Threepenny Review, The Florida Review, The Greensboro Review, Third Coast, Puerto Del Sol, Stand, American Fiction, Snake Nation Review, Passages North, Wisconsin Academy Review, Great River Review, The Rockford Review, Pikestaff Forum

Excerpt from *Clare, Loving: A Novel in Three Novellas*

Excerpts from emilymeier.com

From: Sylvie

Sylvie touched Clare's sleeve. "It's Roman Catholic?" she whispered, and Clare nodded. "And what are those pictures on the walls with the little roofs on top?"

"Stations. Stations of the Cross. They're about episodes on the road of Jesus to be crucified. They've inspired a lot of art," Clare said.

Then she was quiet. For all the gaps in knowledge that a lapse of twenty years had meant for her, she knew it was nothing like the chasm she'd insisted on for her daughter.

She watched Sylvie walk down the aisle, looking at the statues and tabernacle, at the windows and ceiling. Then she came back and slipped into a pew and knelt as the other visitors in the church had done. She looked up at Clare.

"I'm going to pray that my mother will stop treating me like a child," she said. "So tell me how to pray, Mom."

From: *The Beautiful Ships*

Clare walked to a table by the wall and sat down, aware there was no hurdy-gurdy sound of carnival music, but only the murmur of the bar crowd. She checked her bag for her billfold. She flexed a sandaled foot against the table leg. A waiter paused with his tray of drinks to put down a napkin, and Clare ordered a bourbon and water, thinking the choice seemed very New Orleans, that the idea must have popped up in her mind from the street name. "Make it a Jack Daniels," she said, looking up at the waiter. She smiled at him.

She tapped her toe and waited for her drink, her eyes on the bar. It was an odd way to watch the world go by, people in their summer clothes, alone or in pairs, drifting past in a slow rotation, backs to her but faces caught for a long moment in the tilted mirrors beneath the cherubs. The intimacy of her position amazed her. The people never looked up, never caught her studying them. She'd already scanned the room. There was no Truman Capote, which didn't surprise her, though it left her feeling slightly deflated. But the portraits in the mirrors were

entirely intriguing as people made their languid progression in and out of the frame. Her drink came and she was gazing at an Indian with a turquoise pendant who might have posed for the nickel. She was halfway through the drink and a half dozen other faces of varying types when she realized she was looking at someone she knew.

She froze, staring at a nose thin at the bridge, at close cropped black hair. The skin was tanned darker than it had been a week and a half ago. Two weeks ago. Twelve days ago, to be exact. But it was the same face that had hovered on the edge of her consciousness for every one of those days.

From: *The Nuns on the Roof of St. Peter's*

Sister Mary Andrew turned from the list of pHs she had written on the blackboard and came straight down the aisle toward Clare.

"There are numbers of spiritual value, of mystical wonder," Sister said. "We must always seek them out." She was rubbing the chalk dust from her hands, and Clare could see her darty-eyed smile, smell a scent that was almost but not quite powder.

"We are studying the ocean in geography, and we may all consider it God's work that Clare McHenry has moved here from the seacoast to tell us about it in person."

"About the ocean?" Clare asked, surprised.

"Yes. The ocean and the coast."

"Tell us the pU," somebody whispered behind her. Clare wasn't sure if Sister had heard.

"I don't know the numbers," she said and the class, who had all been snickering, laughed out loud.

Sister Mary Andrew thumped her hand on Clare's desk. She was puffy behind her glasses. "I didn't ask you for numbers. I didn't think you were a child to make fun. Is this something to do with your background? With your mother being Protestant?"

"No, Sister." Clare didn't want them to, but her knees had started shaking under her dress so the lines of the plaid jumped. "About the ocean?" she repeated.

"Yes, of course the ocean."

Sister Mary Andrew motioned for her to stand up and Clare did, her hands gripping the wooden lip of her desk, one twitchy knee on the seat.



Emily Meier on Writing:

Writing, good and indifferent, occurs under just about any kind of circumstances.

But in terms of some general dictums I think I've honored in my writing life without being particularly aware of them, I have three: don't be thorough, don't panic, and don't guard your ideas too closely. They apply to all fiction writing, not just writing a novel, though a novel is unique in that you start with a bigger blank page, which can be both comforting and more intimidating. Basically, I would say the dictums, if that's what they are, simply get pumped up with longer work. I'll take a look at each one.

The point about thoroughness is something I've occasionally told writing classes. It's a variation on the well-known idea that nothing should be included in writing fiction that doesn't directly serve the story. Writers are often told not to fall too in love with their most skilled sentences or wonderful observations, that a story has to keep integrating various elements rather than showcasing something that's good in itself but pushes the reader off the story's track. Sometimes writers who are feeling their way into a story—even floundering in to it—will follow every tangent, every thought that comes into their heads, partly to make sure they're actually getting something onto the page and building up the word count or paper heft. I know I was guilty of that when I was first attempting to write novels. That's actually fine, but it means there's going to be a lot of work for the writing scalpel, and some of it painful.

But I want to go a little beyond the idea of just having everything fit well into the story. One of the main things a writer has to do is to decide how much weight to give to different story ingredients. Not everything should be rendered as scene—even some important events. Not every conversation should be given as direct dialogue. Not every step in a process needs to be spelled out. A lot of writing is summarizing deftly and deciding what things should be emphasized, what things alluded to, what things excluded so that the work develops a natural ebb and flow and peak without everything being presented on the same flat plane. This is particularly true when it comes to exposition, which can become dull and talky pretty easily. It's actually a very good idea for novelists to pay attention to the way playwrights and screenwriters work to condense information so that dialogue—which is all they have to work with except for a few stage directions—stays alive and doesn't feel like deadening explanation. If there's a rule here, it's this: know as much as you can about your subject, but only give the reader what's truly germane to the reading experience.

My favorite writing prohibition—don't panic—is one I became aware of pretty late in the game, really when I was working on *Time Stamp*. Over my writing life, I've had the experience most writers have of occasionally just hitting a wall. I've actually sat at my desk feeling miserable for a couple of days before having a brilliant inspiration: the word I was waiting for is and! Once the right word arrives or the scrap of an idea that it links to, the log jam clears and I've made the transition that opens the door to the next scene. But that two days of misery is real and it's the time when writers can despair that they're actually going to be able to create this thing they want to create. Writing, at that point, feels like an impossible and painful struggle.

What I finally realized in writing *Time Stamp* is that it's counterproductive to keep staring at an empty page or a blank com-

puter screen with a fear that nothing is going to show up that belongs on it. A writer needs to have a little trust, to believe that physically walking away from the work doesn't mean that a part of the mind isn't still whirling around the dilemma. My sister-in-law, who's a nurse, gave me an analogy that works really quite well here: "The brain is like a computer and when you let it rest (or turn it off) it starts searching the rest of your brain—the way a computer would do a hunt—and brings the answer up out of your subconscious. That is why when we can't remember something we say, 'It'll come back to me in a minute or in the middle of the night.' When you stop thinking about that specific thing it frees part of your brain to start the search. That is the way it always worked for me in the hospital. I would notice something odd or different that I couldn't put my finger on and when I walked away and started doing something else, the answer would just pop up in my mind."

As a writer friend put it, with writing there's rarely a direct path in. I was absolutely aware of that in writing *Time Stamp*. Basically, I had my whole mind set on receive. It was a period when I was dealing with insomnia because of a medical situation, and I simply let that work for me. Wherever I wandered in my house during the night, I made sure I had a grocery-list pad or a notebook or something handy to write on and as my mind raced

over all sorts of things, I kept finding new ideas that belonged in the story. It meant that when I went back to my desk, I always knew where I was going. I didn't enjoy the insomnia, but the surfacing-ideas part of it was great. It was actually one of my headier experiences as a writer, and it gave me a particular confidence in writing the book. I had the sense that I wasn't tapping into a source that might run dry but one that seemed to have an almost infinite wellspring. So

here it is again: don't panic. Let your mind have the space to give you the ideas you need.

The last point is a smaller one but still useful. Writers can sometimes feel as if they have to protect any ideas they have for fear that someone else is going to steal their original inspiration. I doubt this is something to really worry about. To me, it's like the shopping center theory that Joan Didion has written about it. The center works better if there are sets of stores with a similar purpose since shoppers know they'll have more chances to find what they want with a density of choices. If you have a good idea that appeals to people, a similar idea out there is more apt to increase interest in the general area than to knock yours out of the arena. And, in any case, everyone executes ideas in different ways. Even identical twins become quite distinct people. More than that, your original ideas need to be fleshed out. Bouncing them off other people may well stimulate that process or give you leads. This is not to say that you don't need a certain zone of privacy for work. If nothing else, it's needed to avoid distraction or the addition of voices that can cause a writer to lose the direction of the inspiring idea.

Now that I've said what not to do, I want to back away from it a little. In general, I think there are too many rules floating around out there for writers in terms of how to write and how to present their work. At times, they can be very inhibiting and even destructive to good writing. So if these three attempts at dictum-making don't fit a given writer, that writer should simply ignore them. Rules of what to do or not to do don't make writers. Time, discipline, and an open mind do.

***Don't be thorough,
don't panic, and
don't guard your
ideas too closely.***

Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society

Presents

2012's **BIG READ**



As Lay Dying
By
Ernest J. Gaines



2012 BIG READ: A Lesson Before Dying

About The Big Read



The Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts, designed to revitalize the role of literature in American culture and to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with Arts Midwest and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The Big Read answers a big need. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, found that not only is literary reading in America declining rapidly among all groups, but that the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young.

The Big Read addresses this crisis squarely and effectively by funding projects which encourage literacy by demonstrating the joys of reading. The Big Read supports organizations across the country in developing community-wide reading programs which encourage reading and participation by diverse audiences. Organizations selected to participate in The Big Read receive a grant, access to online training resources and opportunities, and educational and promotional materials designed to support widespread community involvement.

The NEA inaugurated The Big Read as a pilot project in 2006 with ten communities featuring four books. The Big Read continues to expand to include more communities and additional books. To date, more than 1,000 grants have been awarded to communities in the U.S. to host Big Reads since the program's 2007 national launch. The Faulkner Society has been fortunate to receive NEA BIG READ funding for projects in 2008 (*The Great Gatsby*), 2009 (*The Maltese Falcon*), and 2012.

For its 2012 BIG READ project, the Faulkner Society presented six weeks worth of programming, including major events during the Society's annual **Words & Music** festival.

Highlights included an orientation for the public, a special orientation for teachers, distribution of 1,200 free copies of *A Lesson Before Dying* to New Orleans area middle and high school students, a master class for participating students featuring an interview with Mr. Gaines by famed New Orleans jazz musician and composer **Irvin Mayfield**; a free event at the New Orleans Public Library featuring a reading from the book and interview with Mr. Gaines, a gala concert featuring new music by Mayfield

The Big Read answers a big need. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, found that not only is literary reading in America declining rapidly among all groups, but that the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young.

based on the fiction of Mr. Gaines with celebrity appearances; a staged reading by famous actress **Cicely Tyson** and a full schedule of discussions about the book before, during, and after **Words & Music**.

A Lesson Before Dying: The Story

In his 1994 bestseller *A Lesson Before Dying*, **Ernest Gaines**, the highly acclaimed author of the best-selling *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, brought us a wrenching story of death and identity in a small Cajun Louisiana community in the late 1940s, the Jim Crow era. A young black man named Jefferson is a reluctant party in a shoot-out in a liquor store in which the three other men involved are all killed, including the white store owner. Jefferson, the only survivor, is accused of murder. At the trial, the essence of the defense is that the accused, a lowly form of existence lacking even a modicum of intelligence, is incapable of premeditated murder.

His lawyer argues: "Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." But Jefferson is condemned to death. Grant Wiggins, who left his small rural black community to go to university, has returned to the plantation school to teach children whose lives promise to be not much better than Jefferson's. All the while, he wonders whether he has the will to take off north or west like so many before him who knew it was the only way to climb out of a centuries-old rut. He is grappling with his own situation when Jefferson's godmother and Grant's aunt persuade Grant to impart something of himself, of his learning and pride, to Jefferson before his death — to prove the lawyer wrong.

A Lesson Before Dying tells the story of these two men who, through no choice of their own, come together and form a bond in the realization that sometimes simply choosing to resist the expected is an act of heroism. **Ernest Gaines** brings to the novel the same rich sense of place, the same deep understanding of the human psyche, and the same compassion for a people and their struggle that have informed his previous, widely praised novels.

Interview with Ernest Gaines by Claire Beth Pierson

In his famous Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1950, William Faulkner gave advice to young writers. He told them that they must write of “the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” There is no writer living in America today whose work exemplifies those truths better than Louisiana’s own Ernest J. Gaines. Faulkner said that for writing to be truly great it must be of the heart, not merely of the glands. In Ernest Gaines, the writing is not only of the heart but also of the soul.

When I asked Mr. Gaines if he could recall the reason he first became interested in writing, he laughed softly and said, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s because I was beat up.” The connection between fighting and writing was difficult for me to make (although as a high school English teacher, I wish there were an obvious one). He explained his transformation from fighter to writer, however, with amusing anecdotes about his youth. When Gaines was 16, he was living in “a navy town,” Vallejo, CA..

“I was just like any other teenager; I wanted to ‘hang out.’”

His step-father, a merchant mariner who was also a strict disciplinarian, had other plans for him. “Hanging out” was not an option. This led him to the YMCA, which was not only accessible, it was free, an important condition in those days. At the Y he was introduced to the sport of boxing which inadvertently led him to that California town’s library. In his very early career as a boxer, Gaines was beaten badly enough that he felt foolish, ashamed. This would have been an emotional hardship at any age, but for a teenage boy, it was a travesty. Alternate plan B was the library, also accessible and free.

Reading suddenly became an avenue which was both available and acceptable. Back in his home town of New Roads, La., the library was not open to Negroes of any age in 1948. Now he could not only indulge his imagination and his curiosity in a positive way, he could also stay out of the arena. Discovering the library, Gaines said, he was amazed that there were “so many books to

read.” Even today an appealing sense of wonder is a part of this great American novelist’s considerable charm.

Recalling his early days as a student of life, Gaines says he took the advice that he himself gives to young aspiring writers today. When asked for words of encouragement, he said, “There are only six words that I would say to young writers: Read, Read, Read and Write, Write, Write.” After discovering the library, he fulfilled half of the formula by reading as much as he could, although he readily admits, “I didn’t find myself in the white Southern and European writers.” He stop reading, however. He seemed to understand instinctively that literature would be the arena in which he would make his own way, using works of others as model to accept

or reject. Later, he began to appreciate the works of the literary establishment, especially Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant. “They wrote of simple people, of the peasants and their lives.” About the great American writers, Gaines said, “I read them: Hemmingway and Steinbeck and Twain.” In his openly honest way, Gaines admits, “I just didn’t connect with O’Henry, and I did not like Faulkner.” It’s ironic that it is Faulkner to whom Gaines is so often compared, especially in the creation of strong female characters.

Although he applied himself to the second half of the formula—writing—later, still in school, where he

wrote skits for students to perform. As a student, too, he tried his wings as a novelist for the first time. He wanted to learn about blacks in the south, especially rural blacks, but he found there was nothing positive available in the library for him to read. This motivated him to write of the Southern black experience. Gaines was 16 years old and knew little about fiction writing. The book was not accepted for publication.

He spent the next years in junior college in San Francisco “because it was free.” Then in 1953, he was drafted into the Army. Two years in the Army earned him the G.I. Bill and allowed him to finish San Francisco State College in 1957. There he wrote a short story called *The Turtles*, which was printed in the college publication.

I asked Gaines about the process that a piece of his fiction goes through from idea to completion (not finish, since good writing is “never finished”). Today’s young writers are resistant to making even minimal changes, so I asked him to talk about the changes he makes. He started with a point of view. “I began with The



Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman with multiple points of view. It was originally called **A Short Biography Of Miss Jane Pittman** and the story was told by different narrators. The writing wasn't going the way I wanted it to, so I changed the multiple narrators to just one permanent one." In *The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines chose a narrative technique that is not used very often in literature. The technique is sometimes called the third person objective or "reporting" point of view. The narrator is a peripheral character, an outsider who reports the facts as they are told to him. This point of view I sometimes called the first person removed because the person telling the story is actually a character in the story and tells it from his perspective, using "I" rather than "he." This technique has been used by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, by William Styron in *Sophie's Choice*, and more recently by Anne Rice in *Interview With A Vampire*. In all three cases the narrator in *The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman* is a history teacher.

Ernest Gaines's latest novel is **A Lesson Before Dying**, a heart and soul wrenching story of a young black man condemned to die because he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and inadvertently became involved in a murder. I asked Gaines about the idea for the novel. "I've always been haunted by the idea of knowing when you will die. When I was in school, I lived near San Quentin, and I would look across the bay at the prison and wonder about death. The executions were on Tuesday morning at ten o'clock. Ever since then I wanted to write about dying."

Writing is so much more than inspiration. Before he could put his idea into print, Gaines did extensive, thoughtful research to make sure that he wrote the truth. He questioned anyone and everyone who had anything to do with the prison system, including the warden at Angola, who was "not much help." Help came from a colleague at USL, who told Gaines a story of an actual execution. There were also interviews with lawyers, ministers, and men on death row. *A Lesson Before Dying* is authentic and rings with Gaines's compassion and understanding of the struggle for identity, even under such dire circumstances as a death sentence.

Two of the most interesting characters in the novel are the two black women, Tante Lou, the aunt of the narrator, and Miss Emma (Glenn), the aunt of the condemned man. These two women make the novel happen; they force the action and motivate the plot. Without them, there might have been a story, but not a novel. Knowing that as a young boy Ernest Gaines spent much of his free time with his own aunt, Miss Augusteen Jefferson, I asked him if his strong black women were modeled after anyone in particular. He replied that "after rewriting so many times, the characters change. It's like a piece of fabric," he said. "After it's washed so many times, the original dye is gone." The dye might be gone but the underlying strength of the structure of the material is still very evident.

At the end of our talk, he returned to his personal lessons for all young writers of all races:

"Keep your antenna out. Sit down and listen to people. About prejudices, be as objective as you can, although it's impossible to be totally objective. And don't forget those six words—Read, Read, Read and Write, Write, Write."

Ernest Gaines is a gentle man with enormous depth of soul matched by an enormous heart and intellect. He richly deserves each and every literary award and the accompanying praise can never be too lavish because he has enriched all of our lives by allowing us to understand, as though they were our own, the joys and sorrows of a proud people.

Clare Beth Pierson, who has a Master of Arts in English Teaching from the University of New Orleans, teaches creative writing as Riverdale High School, conducts writing seminars for professional educators and gives special classes on the literature of New Orleans. This Article is part of an ongoing series designed specifically for developing writers and teachers. Formal lesson plans are available by e-mailing The Double Dealer at Faulkhouse@aol.com.

Excerpt: **A Lesson Before Dying**

Editor's Note:

The following selection was chosen by the editor from the master work of 2012 Words & Music special guest of honor and 2012 ALIHOT winner Ernest J. Gaines.

Jefferson," I said. We had started walking. "Do you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do. He is different from other men. No matter who those men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them." I lowered my voice again until we had passed the table. "I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don't like it; I hate it. I don't even like living here. I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else.

"That is not to be a hero. A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better. I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying that you don't have it—that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are.

"Those out there are no better than we are, Jefferson. They are worse. That's why they are always looking for a scapegoat, someone else to blame. I want

you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you're nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do. I have always done what they wanted me to do, teach reading, writing and arithmetic. Nothing else—nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring. They never thought we were capable of learning these things. "Teach those niggers how to print their names and how to figure on their fingers." And I went along, but hating myself all along for doing so.

"Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?" I asked him. "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth—and that's a myth. The last thing they want is to see a black man stand and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me. They're safe with reverend Ambrose. I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore.

"I want you to chip way at that myth by standing. I want you—yes, you—to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man—more a man than they can ever be. That jury? You call them men? That judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better. They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human—and they believe it to this day. Sheriff Guidry does too. He calls me a professor, but he doesn't mean it. He calls Reverend Ambrose Reverend, but he doesn't respect him. When I showed him the notebook and pencil I brought you, he grinned. Do you know why? He believes it was just a waste of time and money. What can a hog do with a pencil and paper?"

We stopped. His head was down.

"Look at me, Jefferson, please," I said.

He raised his head. He had been crying. He raised his cuffed hands and wiped one eye, then the other.

"I need you," I told him. "I need you much more than you could ever need me. I need to know what to do with my life. I want to run away, but go where and do what? I'm needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I'm doing here is choking myself. I need someone to tell me what to do. I need you to tell me, to show me. I'm no hero; I can just give something small. That's all I have to offer. It is the only way that we can chip away at that myth. You—you can be bigger than anyone you have ever met.

"Please listen to me, because I would not lie to you now. I speak from the heart. You have the chance of being bigger than anyone who has ever lived on that plantation or come from this little town. You can do it if you try. You have seen how Mr. Ferrell makes a slingshot handle. He starts with just a little piece of rough wood—any little piece of scrap wood—then he starts cutting. Cutting and cutting and cutting, then shaving. Shaves it down clean and smooth till it's not what it was before,

but something new and pretty. You know what I'm talking about, because you have seen him do it. You had one that he made from a piece of scrap wood. Yes, yes—I saw you with it. And it came from a piece of wood that he found in the yard somewhere. And that's all we are, Jefferson, all of us on this earth, a piece of drifting wood, and those out there are no better. But you can be better. Because we need you to be and want you to be. Me, your grandmother, the children, and the rest of them in the quarter. Do you understand what I'm saying to you Jefferson? Do you?"

He looked at me in great pain. He may not have understood, but something was touched, something deep down in him—because he was still crying.

Published 1993, Alfred A. Knopf
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Hal Clark, WYLD's popular journalist and host of Sunday Morning Journal, interviewed Ernest Gaines and showcased events of Words & Music on September 30, 2012.

To hear the show, [CLICK HERE!](#)

Other Great Books by Ernest J. Gaines

A Gathering of Old Men
By Ernest Gaines, Vintage

In My Father's House
By Ernest Gaines, Vintage

A Long Day in November
By Ernest Gaines, Out of Print

The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman
By Ernest Gaines, Bantam, \$4.99

Bloodline
By Ernest Gaines, Norton, \$8.95

Of Love and Dust
By Ernest Gaines, Vintage, \$11.00

Catherine Carmier
By Ernest Gaines, Vintage, \$11.00

For Greener Pastures: Escape and Entrapment in *A Lesson Before Dying*

By Isabel Balée

How often do we meditate on what it means to be unable to escape our history? We might distract ourselves with stacks of busywork, engulfing our minds with our social life, cafés or smoky bars. We disassociate by not listening to the person we're talking to, instead peering past that person's face out the window behind.

How easy is it to confront our geographical location, its brutal past which still leaves its traces today? We might enable strategies, ways for the mind to escape this reality. Though every place inevitably hauls history that we might be ashamed of or fearful to think about, the South is especially discomfiting. The remnants of the Civil War spans our culture. The Jim Crowe era happened more recently than we might want to believe.

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines takes place in a fictional Acadian town in South Louisiana called Bayonne, whose nearest big city is Baton Rouge. The immediate events in the novel take place between World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, though Gaines offers windows in his narrative for us to experience events from before the Civil War. The events occur chronologically, but memories of the Southern past are non-linear, embedded in the trains-of-thought and dialogue of the characters, especially the narrator, Grant Wiggins. The main characters in the novel are African-Americans who each struggle in some form with not only oppressive Jim Crowe laws, but psychological strife from wanting to escape either geographically or mentally.

The novel provides a means for us to sympathize with those who, despite having been liberated after the Civil War, literally freed from shackles, are still enslaved, barred from basic human rights, trapped in their desire to leave somehow, some way, faced with the reality that it is nearly impossible. They are publicly ridiculed for their dreams of escaping to a better life by who those who deem their dreams unrealistic and, yes, even unreasonable.

The novel revolves around the fate of Jefferson, a black man unfairly convicted of murder because of his skin color. His lawyer "defends" him by assuring the jury that he is like a hog and a hog is incapable of performing such an act. Throughout the novel, Jefferson is consumed by this word "hog." He is unable to see past this dehumanization. Jefferson is incarcerated for most of the novel, and has the tendency to look toward the barred window in his cell, an act which is a psychological form of escape. Grant, a school teacher with a college degree, is called upon by Jefferson's Godmother, Miss Emma to turn Jefferson into a man before he dies. She cannot stand the thought of Jefferson going to his death as nothing more than an animal. She understands that her beloved godson will die regardless but wants him to walk the last mile with his head held high. Grant hesitantly agrees to do so, and routinely

visits Jefferson in an attempt to get through to him.

Grant is one of the few characters in the novel who has had the privilege to escape geographically. He left for college, with the ambition to become educated, then returns to teach, though he admittedly despises Bayonne and wants to leave again. He explains to Vivian, his love: "I need to go someplace where I can feel I'm living...I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here. I know we can do better somewhere else." Grant is faced with a double standard: he is an educated black man, which would seem to carry benefits in the South, placing him at the top of the privilege ladder among the other blacks in Bayonne, perhaps granting him the opportunity to somewhat "fit in" with the whites, or at least see the results of upward mobility. But he is shunned by other blacks, especially Reverend Ambrose, for abandoning his own culture, seeking perhaps a too-easy way to live comfortably. In a scene at the bar, "Guidry drank from his cup and looked over the rim at me. He did not like me; I was one of the smart ones." Grant is conflicted by the prospect of staying in Bayonne because he feels he isn't getting anywhere, that he is "running in place here."

But Grant is in denial about why he stays in Bayonne. He tells his auntie he stays for Vivian, but Vivian makes Grant face reality when he pleads with her to leave with him. Grant once travelled to California to visit his parents and Vivian reminds him of that. "You did it once, but you came back." She puts it bluntly: "...this is all we have....you love them more than you hate this place," referring to his aunt and Miss Emma.

As often as Grant tells us he is miserable in Bayonne, he does love his town. He ambles along the railroad tracks and the swamps, walking in ankle-deep water, seeing the pecans he used to gather, recalling how Miss Emma's house used to look, how some things have changed and others haven't...the big black iron pots still hung on the wall...."

His memories are banked in Bayonne.

Though he doesn't address this feeling directly, the town haunts him, facts of the past from which he wishes to escape. During one of his walks he observes, "left of the weighing scales and the derrick was the plantation cemetery, where my ancestors had been buried for the past century...." His enslaved ancestors are in the ground beneath his feet. Not only does he relive this history daily, but he is trapped in the Jim Crowe South where he is not even considered a person, only as three-fifths of one.

The town is segregated. Though it seems at first quite beautiful when Grant walks through town, the symbols of injustice are ever present. "There were houses and big live oaks and pecan trees on either side of the road, but not as many on the riverbank side....There, instead of houses and trees, there were fishing wharves, boat docks, nightclubs, and restaurants for whites. There were one of two nightclubs for colored, but they were not very good..." What Grant wants is a sort of paradise. He tells us, "I wanted to see nothing but miles and miles of clear, blue water, then, and an island where I could be alone" This pastoral desire is unreasonable for anybody, perhaps, a thing for dreamers, but for Grant, there is no prospect whatsoever of realizing his dream. This desire for escape is selfish, according to Vivian. How

could he possibly help those he cares about if he is so far away from them? How can he incite change? Grant has instilled some change in his own identity of a black man by seeking education, or what he considers to be a change for black men at the time, but until he realizes the significance of reaching out to Jefferson, he has done little to improve the lives of his people, emotionally and physically shackled by society. By escaping, Grant would only be repeating his family cycle. His parents left Bayonne “for greener pastures” along the idyllic shores California.

Grant is conflicted, knowing he should want to stay and work for change. He is the most conflicted character in the book, constantly frustrated by the lack of change in the South. When his Aunt Thelma places a crinkled ten dollar bill on the table and says “here,” Grant is immediately troubled by the word *here*:

“When will all this end? When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs here?... When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man here?” Grant is struggling with the meaning of “here,” though it is used as a preposition in this context, it spirals out to mean “here” as a geographical location, “here” as an inevitable state of being, “here” as a permanent oppression from which Grant and his loved ones and other blacks in the South could not escape.

Before a Christmas program at Grant’s school, Vivian lightheartedly mentions that not much has changed about the play and, again, Grant considers a word out of context and becomes analytical, this time, by the word “change”, especially in Bayonne, which is symbolic of all Southern towns. Gaines chose a fictional town over a real town so that we do not imbue the place with our own ideas. “Vivian said things were changing. But were they changing?”

After visiting Jefferson countless times and failing to make what he deems a difference, he explains to Vivian why his task is so difficult. While talking about his mission from Miss Emma to turn a “hog” into a “human,” her beloved Jefferson, and save her the terrible heartbreak of seeing Jefferson go to his death in dishonor, he states:

“We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change the vicious cycle—but he never does. Even though he wants to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own”

Gaines shines a light into the past and allows the reader to see the cycle of the African American plight—from the time whites forced Africans upon a boat

and dumped them onto lands of the United States to till and contribute, with raw hands and beaten backs, to the American economy—to the Jim Crowe era south, where not much has changed besides superficial laws that are supposed to prevent blacks from being mistreated, but only in very few ways, if at all. The only thing that has changed from the slave era to the Jim Crowe era is a lessening of the physical manifestations of oppression: beatings, shackles, forced sweat dripping from brows, forced labor.

The social and symbolic oppression has not changed at all. Thus, the instinct to run away and the terrible results. Families fall apart if he leaves, and if he stays, he is faced with the burdens of his enslaved ancestors in the ground below him.

And in the weighing of the decision of to run or not to run, he loses sanity, Grant believes. He feels; Miss Emma wants him to “change everything that has been going on for 300 years.” It is easy, then, to understand, then, his burden and we can now empathize with his desires and conflicts. He is burdened with the responsibility to change history. He feels he is sacrificing his dreams and his well-being to do so.

Gaines treats Jefferson as a symbol. He presents Jefferson as how we might instinctively envision a slave: shackled, and unable to walk because of it. “Jefferson had not been chained before, and he took long steps that caused him to trip.” Not only is his appearance symbolic, but so is his trial, his incarceration, and his execution. He is someone who is not only socially enslaved because of his skin color, but also literally enslaved. Grant urges Jefferson to consider his life, to reflect, which Jefferson is able to do when Grant encourages him to keep a journal.

In this way he sets himself free before he dies. Though he cannot escape his actual circumstances, his mind liberates his soul. This is supposed to be Jefferson’s lesson, but it ends up being more of a lesson for Grant, who ends up making a change, the very change that he wished for the whole time—a kind of freedom. He escapes his passivity, his fears. By helping someone else become a man, he is able to understand his own life.

We are allowed to experience intensely the psychological and social realities of Southern African Americans during the Jim Crowe era. Gaines gives us the whole perspective of how little has changed and how individuals must work to find their own means of escape.

Isabel Balée is a poet and writer born and raised in New Orleans. She is currently working on her MFA in Literary Arts at Brown University. She has poetry forthcoming in Thunderclap Press and Dose Rate Zine. Ms. Balée was an intern with the Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society while she was a senior at Tulane University, where she majored in English.





The Roots of Music

A highlight of the 2012 **A Lesson Before Dying** BIG READ was participation by the non-profit organization, **The Roots of Music**. The organization is a model after-school program which zeroes in on middle and junior high school students having difficulties with reading and their studies. Students spend three hours Monday through Friday after school and most of Saturday each week with Roots of Music, where mentors tutor them in reading and help them with their homework for the first half of each session. Then, well known musicians teach them music and traditional New Orleans Brass Band routines. At the end of each day's program they are given a hot meal. The sessions are held in the historic Cabildo at Jackson Square, the site of the signing of the Louisiana Purchase in the old armory.

Shown above, left, Roots of Music students play in an early evening concert to kick-off the public programming the the 2012 BIG Read. At right, members of a famous Mardi Gras Indian tribe, the Guardians of the Flame, perform with the students. The tribe is dedicated to universal literacy and members, who make stunning new costumes for Carnival each year, regularly present reading programs in public schools of New Orleans.

In photos below, Roots of Music students, who were provided with free copies the 2012 BIG Read focus book, get a lesson in **A Lesson Before Dying**, the masterwork of author Ernest J. Gaines.

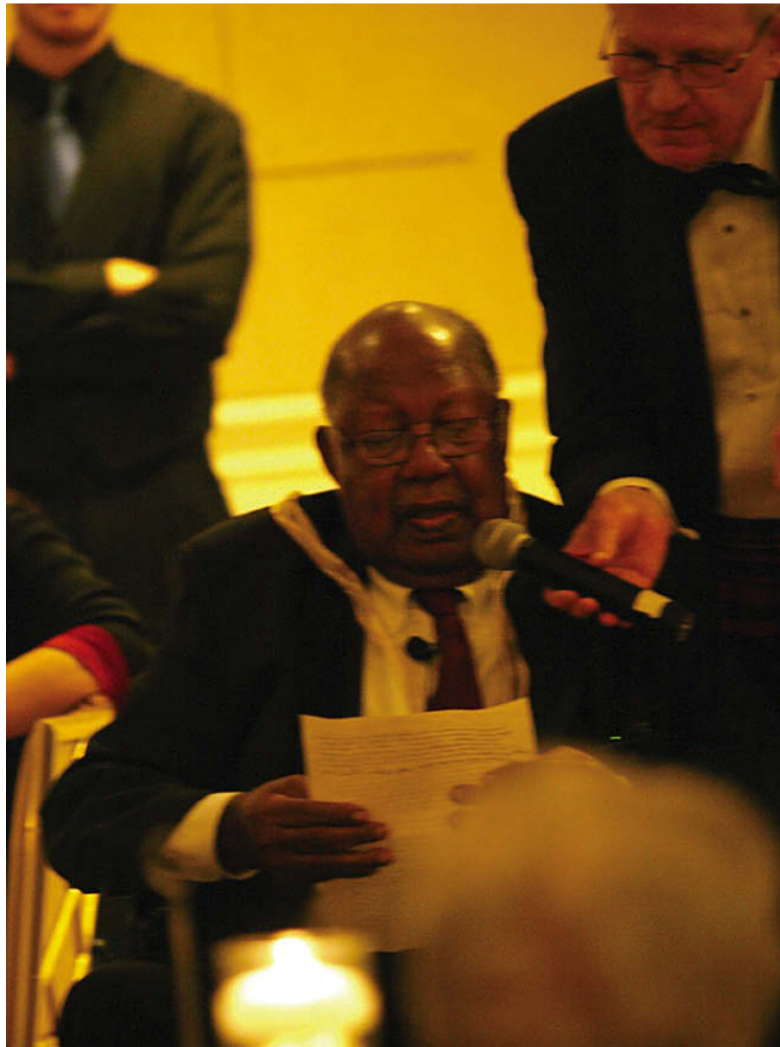


*Roots of Music students get a lesson in **A Lesson Before Dying***

Ernest J. Gaines

Ernest J. Gaines was born in 1933 on River Lake Plantation in Pointe Coupe Parish, LA. Like **William Faulkner**, Mr. Gaines has chosen to go home and use what he knows best as the setting for most of his fiction, drawing on the people of his small community for his inspiration for characters. He was the fifth generation in his family to be born there. At the age of nine he was picking cotton in the plantation fields; the black quarter's school held classes only five or six months a year.

When he was 15, Gaines moved to California to join his parents, who had left Louisiana during World War II. There he attended San Francisco State University and later won a writing fellowship to Stanford University. Gaines published his first short story in 1956. Since then he has written eight books of fiction, including **Catherine Carmier**, **Of Love and Dust**, **Bloodline**, **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman**, **A Long Day in November**, **In My Father's House**, and **A Gathering of Old Men**, most of which are available in Vintage paperback editions. **A Lesson Before Dying**, his most recent novel, won the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award. He has also been awarded a MacArthur Foundation grant, for writings of "rare historical resonance."



*Ernest J. Gaines, author of **A Lesson Before Dying**, accepts the Faulkner Society's ALIHOT Award for Literature at Faulkner for All, during **Words & Music**, 2012.*

This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: The Legacy of Ernest J. Gaines

Published by UL Lafayette Press in 2009, this title is a book in pictures and words that includes an introduction by Mr. Gaines, an original poem by **Wendell Berry**, and short essays by **Reggie Scott Young**, **Marcia Gaudet**, and **Wiley Cash**. The book uses photographs and quotations from Gaines's fiction and essays to create a narrative of the land and people who inspired him, the literature he produced, and his legacy. All royalties from the book go to the Ernest J. Gaines Center. In addition, there is to be special limited edition of the book for Founding Patrons of the Gaines Center.

Other Honors

Ernest Gaines was awarded the 2011 Cleanth Brooks Medal for Lifetime Achievement by the Fellowship of Southern Writers. The medal was presented to Gaines at the Conference on Southern Literature in Chattanooga, TN, on April 16. The Cleanth Brooks Medal is awarded biennially. He was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of North Carolina at the Spring Commencement ceremonies on May 8, 2011, in Chapel Hill. The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill website refers to Gaines as

"one of the premier American writers of the second half of the 20th century."

Ernest Gaines and his wife **Dianne** now live year-round in Oscar, LA. They built a house on land that was part of the plantation where he grew up. He is now Writer-in-Residence Emeritus at University of Louisiana at Lafayette (formerly University of Southwestern Louisiana).

Ernest Gaines is truly a legend in his own time.

Irvin Mayfield

At only 34 years old, **Irvin Mayfield** represents the continuity of the unfolding Jazz legacy of New Orleans. Winning both a Grammy Award and a Billboard Award, this versatile trumpeter, bandleader, composer, arranger, professor, cultural ambassador and recording artist is on a path to position Jazz at the center of American culture. His virtuosity and devotion to the music has made Mayfield one of the most recorded and decorated Jazz musicians of his generation.

In 2002, Mayfield created the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra (NOJO), a performing arts institution dedicated to presenting engaging and transformative Jazz experiences. Under his artistic direction, NOJO won the 2010 Grammy Award for Best Large Jazz Ensemble for its critically acclaimed CD *Book One* on the World Village/Harmonia Mundi label. The 18-piece orchestra, which is one of the most sought after touring Jazz orchestras in the country, includes such respected musicians as Victor Atkins on piano, Ed “Sweetbread” Petersen on saxophone and Evan Christopher on clarinet, to name a few.

Mayfield continues as Artistic Director of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra and currently serves as Artistic Director of Jazz at the Minnesota Orchestra. He is a professor at the University of New Orleans, where he also serves as Director of the New Orleans Jazz Institute. Mayfield was nominated to the National Council on the Arts by President George W. Bush and was subsequently appointed to the post by President Barack Obama in 2010. Mayfield also received The Chancellor’s Award from the University of New Orleans (the highest ranking award given to a professor) in 2010 and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Dillard University in 2011. A passionate advocate for New Orleans and for the arts, Mayfield is President of the New Orleans Public Library Foundation and Chairman of the Board for the Soledad O’Brien & Brad Raymond Foundation. He also serves on the boards of The African American Museum, Citizens United for Economic Equity, Louisiana State University’s Department of Psychiatry and

Health Science, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, the New Orleans Police and Justice Foundation, Tulane University’s School of Architecture, Unity of Greater New Orleans, the University of New Orleans College of Education and Human Development, and the Youth Rescue Initiative.



Irvin Mayfield accepts ALIHOT at 2012 Faulkner for All festivities.

Irvin Mayfield will tell you “Jazz is to New Orleans what oil is to Saudi Arabia,” when he explains the prolific jazz history of New Orleans. Underlying this response is Mayfield’s belief that his immense musical talent comes from being a child, not just from, but of New Orleans—a place where preservation meets passion and diversity creates culture, a place of souls and senses.

In his recent memoir, **A Love Letter to New Orleans**, a richly illustrated book and accompanying CD, Mayfield reflects on his music, unveiling the many influences that transformed him from just another talented New Orleans kid to one of the most promising young trumpeters of his generation. In this rare glimpse into the evolution of a jazz artist, Mayfield shares the inspirations that led him to create the songs on his ten albums, released by Basin Street Records. And the songs, in turn, cemented his career and life in jazz.

In this very personal book, Mayfield writes of many who shaped his life, from the quiet influence of his father Irvin Mayfield Sr., a postal worker and former trumpet player who harbored dreams of a musical career, to the lasting impact of his teacher Ellis Marsalis, the patriarch of the Marsalis family. Mayfield shares the profound impact that the Mardi Gras Indian culture, George Porter Jr. of the Funky Meters, and James Booker had on his music. He writes of the creative genius and sheer integrity demonstrated by musicians like Bill Summers, Kermit Ruffins, Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews, Rebirth Brass Band, Horacio “El Negro” Hernandez, and Cyril Neville.

Irvin Mayfield represents the best of today’s young performing artists. He is a legend in his own time.

Judith "Jude" Swenson

While still in high school, Jude Swenson relocated with her family to New Orleans—a home Jude has never left! After graduating from high school with a business background Jude immediately went to work as an administrative assistant for the vice president of a steamship company. After a few years she attended Holy Cross College and then Loyola University majoring in English and journalism with a minor in art and photography.



Those pursuits led her to a career as editor of a corporate magazine where she honed her journalism skills traveling the state of Louisiana conducting personal profile interviews and writing editorial content for a major Louisiana energy corporation. Her writing was later credited to her monthly social columns in *Southern woman* and *New Orleans living* magazines. In the late 1970s she met and married James W. Swenson, a New York securities analyst and CEO from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

After raising their two daughters, Jude went back to college to pursue a degree in interior design and began her own design firm which has been very successful for many years. Her keen sense of color and design composition has been featured in several publications and she earned a Silver Alpha Award for her design of a commercial space in the Mercedes Benz Superdome.

The Faulkner Society has been one of Jude's pet projects for many years. Since her husband was such a wit and a wordsmith and he loved to dance (he was an Arthur Murray dance instructor in college) she decided a few years ago to become a devoted sponsor of words and

music in memory of her late husband.

After his retirement in 1991, Jim Swenson was a pro-bono professor of finance at the University of New Orleans until his death in 2000. He also taught in the 1980s at Tulane University School of Business in the MBA program. He was an outstanding leader of the utmost integrity. An astute chronicler of his own time and life, he was a voracious reader of history, valuing its ultimate contribution to the understanding of future perils and progress in human relations. Jude says, "His devotion to his life of words and music just seemed so appropriate, you see."

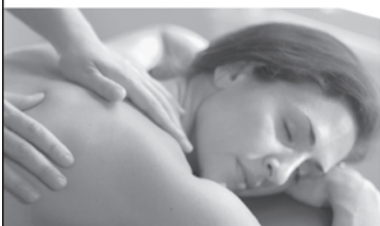
Jude is currently on the board of the New Orleans Opera Association, the New Orleans Museum of Art Statewide Advisory Board, the Faulkner Society Executive Board, the Louisiana Governor's Mansion Foundation Board, and the Women of Fashion Executive Board. She is a member of the Wyes Capital Campaign for the Channel 12 Center for Public Media, the Wyes Producers Circle, the New Orleans Opera Master Signers, the Capital Campaign Committee for La Fete du Jardin, the Fellows of the New Orleans Museum of Art, and a member of the Steering Committee of the New Orleans Ballet Resource and Volunteer Organization, as well as a founding member of the New Orleans AIDS task force.



Jude Swenson with Society Patron Samuel L. Steele, III at Faulkner for All after she received the ALIHOT Award.



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Literature & Life in the Global Village



Joséphine Sacabo's collection of dreamily beautiful photographs *Óyeme con los Ojos (Hear Me With Your Eyes)*, inspired by the life and work of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, a 17th century Mexican nun who was one of the greatest poets and intellectuals of the American continent, was right on point for the theme of **Words & Music, 2011**, which was *Literature & Life in the Global Village*. The collection focused on human rights, specifically the rights of women. For more on Joséphine and her work, see ALIHOT Awards in this issue.

William Faulkner for most of his life declined to seek the public limelight and, in fact, declined to give speeches. That was not, most assuredly, because he was not a good speechwriter.

His acceptance speech upon being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature is a model for speechwriters for years to come.

Short, eloquent, directed to a specific audience, in this case developing writers, and with a message for the ages.

Unlike the doom and gloomers continually preaching the end of man and the world we live in, Faulkner, instead delivered a powerful message of hope for mankind even in an uncertain world.

He found precisely the right words to lift the hearts of poets everywhere—and let us remember that he began his writing career as a poet—and to encourage them to prop us up in the days of war and global terror.

His words delivered on that memorable occasion in Stockholm on December 10, 1950, will live forever.

I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work--a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before. So this award is only mine in trust. It will not be difficult to find a dedication for the money part of it commensurate with the purpose and significance of its origin. But I would like to do the same with the acclaim too, by using this moment as a pinnacle from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand where I am standing.

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of



the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat. He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid: and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed--

love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, and victories without hope and worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

Until he learns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It

is easy enough to say that man is immortal because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things.

It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

—William Faulkner

Dean Faulkner Wells 1936 - 2011

On July 27, 2011, a warm Mississippi Wednesday, the literary world lost the last surviving member of the children of **William Faulkner** and his siblings. On that same balmy Wednesday, the world lost a lovely woman and writer, **Dean Faulkner Wells**. When discussing her memoir, **Every Day By the Sun**, Wells said, "It isn't easy to write an autobiography when one grew up feeling like a tadpole in a pond with a bull frog named William Faulkner perched on the biggest lily pad." Indeed, to ever step out from that paradoxically luminous shadow, cast by one of history's literary giants would seem unlikely.

However, Dean Faulkner Wells with her memoir published in March of this year, leapt out of that pond and landed on a lily pad all her own. Prior to her memoir, Dean Wells had collected the ghost stories told by her uncle and published them as *The Ghosts of Rowan Oaks*. Co-founder of the Faux Faulkner parody contest, a writing competition to emulate the master, Wells hoped to inspire writers by challenging them to write as one of the most distinctive voices in literature. She selected many of the entries in a volume titled, *The Best of Bad Faulkner*, in 1991. In addition to honoring her uncle with these books, Dean Faulkner Wells published many articles and stories in nationally acclaimed journals as well as editing and authoring several books including: *The Great American Writers' Cookbook* and *Belle-Duck at the Peabody*.

Wells was the daughter of **Louise Hale** and **Dean Swift Faulkner**, William's youngest brother, who died in a plane crash just months before his daughter was born. Her uncle became her legal guardian and her surrogate father for the rest of his life, giving her away at her first wedding and funding her underground civil rights newspaper.

Every Day By the Sun tells the story of the Faulkner family with all its oddity, tragedy, and beauty. With her intimate and tender handling of William Faulkner, Dean Wells illuminates him first as a person and second as one of the most famous literary figures of



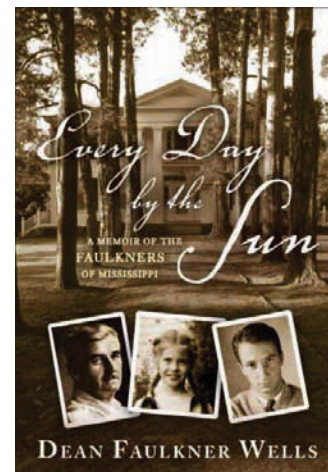
Dean Faulkner Wells with her uncle, William Faulkner

the 20th century. The result is a very human and moving portrait of a man known to the world but understood by his niece.

Her writing and storytelling talent and her warm, even disposition, and generous spirit will be missed. We will be ever grateful to have gotten to know her uncle a little better through her careful stewardship and to have had a chance to be charmed by Dean Faulkner Wells.

It isn't easy to write an autobiography when one grew up feeling like a tadpole in a pond with a bull frog named William Faulkner perched on the biggest lily pad.

—Dean Faulkner Wells



Arthur L. Davis 1920 - 2011

Selected by his peers as one of the 100 most important architects of the 20th Century, the story of **Arthur Q. Davis, AIA**, is that rare tale where such an illustrious career falls second to his many other civic contributions.



Arthur & Mary Davis

Through out his life, Mr. Davis added greatly to the culture and history of New Orleans as a major player in the arts community; his contributions are unparalleled.

A long-time supporter of the historic music created in his city, Mr. Davis was among those who felt that New Orleans deserved a showcase as big as the music itself, one that would nurture music's significance to New Orleans and the world for generations to come. And in 1970 Arthur got his chance to give back to New Orleans in a way that has spanned decades allowing glimpses into the life of the city's music as one musician passes the torch to another captured in such iconic images like that of Bo Diddley handing off his trombone to tiny Troy Andrews, not even as tall as the instrument he played, who would return to the stage as Trombone Shorty. One need only peruse the photographs of Michael P. Smith to see how many other beautiful classic New Orleans moments were made possible by the Jazz and Heritage Foundation.

As one of the principal individuals, with his son Quint Davis, behind the birth of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, Davis secured its creation by providing an escrow fund and was the first chairman of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation. The festival saw roughly 350 attendees that first year. Those who were there say the performers out numbered the spectators

2 to 1, but the significance of the legacy formed is unrivaled. Considered the most important music festival in America, Jazz Fest now annually brings more than 500,000 visitors to the city providing an unprecedented 300 million dollars for the local economy funneled back into local educational programs as well as to local musicians. However, it is not the monetary value of this event alone that sets it apart from other festivals, but also the cultural significance that has been manifested itself since the very first year when Mahalia Jackson took the microphone from George Wein and sang along with the Eureka Brass Band in what is now Congo Square. Spontaneity and authenticity remain key ingredients of Jazz Fest sparking musicians and visitors alike into the exuberance of life and culture that defines the city of New Orleans.

More recently, Arthur co-founded the World War II Museum, with such instrumental people as the late historian Stephen Ambrose and the late Navy hero and philanthropist Thomas J. Lupo, with Arthur serving as the first president of the board. The founders believed that the city where Andrew Higgins designed the landing crafts used in the Normandy invasion would be an ideal place to house a museum of such national importance. Beginning as the D-day Museum, it was due to the vision and dedication of its founders that it quickly rose in stature becoming the National World War II museum in 2003.

While president, it was the committee's duty to determine the location for the museum. Originally, the museum was to be set in Lakeview, but after much consideration the board determined the CBD was better suited for the museum's potential. Since opening in 2000, the museum has had over 2.1 million visitors of which 80% were from outside New Orleans and 30% sited the Museum as their top reason for visiting the city. The museum estimates that it will have had a 107 million dollar annual economic impact by 2015. The museum serves the City of New Orleans as well as the rest of the world by providing an engaging "story of the American Experience in the war that changed the world – why it was fought, how it was won, and what it means today – so that all generations will understand the price of freedom and be inspired by what they learn."

In the realm of visual arts, Mr. Davis has served as past president and on the Board of Trustees for the New Orleans Museum of Art. Known for their impressive permanent collection of American and French art, NOMA also has one of the most important sculpture gardens in the country. The art museum is celebrating its 100th year of bringing fine art and art education to New Orleanians as well as attracting many outside visitors to her city.

In 2009, The Ogden Museum of Southern

Memorial: *Arthur Q. Davis*

Art honored Arthur Davis with an exhibition of his architectural contributions as well as presenting him with the OPUS award in 2008. The OPUS award was founded in 2007 and recognizes a member of the arts community whose life's work has been a monumental contribution to the cultural landscape of the South.

Equally as substantial as those to the arts, have been Mr. Davis' educational endowments. A current member of the Tulane President's Council and the Newcomb College Art Advisory Council, Davis has funded, for several years, the annual Davis Visiting Critic at the School of Architecture. He also gave prizes to Newcomb art students judged by a panel to be the most talented. Mr. Davis has also been on the Board of Trustees for Loyola University and received the Alumnus of the Year from Tulane. His firm designed the George Washington Carver Elementary, Junior and Senior High schools, the Thomy Lafon Elementary School as well as the New Orleans Public Library. At a time when the South was under particular scrutiny for segregation, the Thomy Lafon School became a national symbol for a more balanced and equal future for all social and racial backgrounds. The project brought the firm many awards as well as being documented in Life Magazine as a more promising future in education.

Over the years, Arthur sat on many boards and was the recipient of many awards. He has served on the board for the Preservation Resource Center, the Boards of Trustees for the Downtown Development District. He has received the Role Model award from the Young Leadership Council in 1990 and the WYES Presidents award in 1986. He was also given the Medal of Honor from the City of New Orleans in 2000. In addition to Mr. Davis' philanthropic contributions, his profession has quite literally changed the cityscape of New Orleans.

With his firm's most famous designs, the iconic Superdome, Davis created the largest enclosed single room. Opening in 1975, the dome has been home to the beloved Super Bowl Champions, the New Orleans Saints, who won their NFC Championship game under Mr. Davis's Superdome. After receiving considerable damage not to mention attention after Katrina, the dome has since become a symbol for the city and its own resurrection since the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Although best known for designing the Superdome, the firm also was building such modernist landmarks as The Rivergate Exhibition Center, later torn down over the protests of all those who value the

city's architectural heritage to make way for Harrah's Casino. The firm's important projects also included the University of New Orleans Events Center, the New Orleans Public Library, Oakwood Shopping Center, Angola Penitentiary, and the Hyatt Regency and Marriott hotels as well as the Crescent City Connection.

The firm received more than 50 awards for design excellence and, at age 38, Davis was made the youngest Fellow of the



Arthur, Pam and Quint Davis

American Institute of Architects.

Considering all that the man has accomplished for his hometown alone, it could seem like he had never set foot outside of his city. But in fact, Arthur has traveled widely for both business and pleasure and has impacted the global community almost as much as his hometown.

He designed a new town project in Indonesia as well as the Free University of Berlin Medical Center, which was the most advanced hospital in Europe at that time, and the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. And just as his designs made it around the world, so did his recognition. He has been made an honorary citizen of Berlin by Chancellor Willy Brandt, is a part of the Royal Order of the Crown of the Kingdom of Thailand and received the Community Excellence Award from the Asian Pacific American Society. While Arthur's achievements and contributions can be seen worldwide, it is here at home in New Orleans that they are felt most.

His 91-year love affair with his city is evident everywhere and can be felt through the myriad of good deeds done on our behalf, on behalf of his city.

We join his son Quint Davis and daughter Pam Freidler, as well as members of his extended family, in mourning the loss of this great friend to New Orleans.

For more information on Arthur Q. Davis, visit: [www.wordsandmusic.org/Arthur Davis.html](http://www.wordsandmusic.org/Arthur%20Davis.html)

Armando Valladares

Ambassador Armando Valladares is a best selling author, poet, painter, and renowned diplomat. His public story begins in 1960 when a student at the School for Visual Arts in his hometown of Pinar del Rio, Cuba, and while working in the Office of the Ministry of Communications for the Revolutionary Government of Fidel Castro. It was at the latter that he was arrested for openly expressing his disapproval of the seemingly impending communism. Without any evidence of wrongdoing against him or witnesses to accuse him of any misdeeds, in less than a week of being arrested, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison. His crime? Having a different point of view and strong moral conviction about freedom and self-determination regarding government. While in prison, Valladares refused to succumb to the propaganda and indoctrination of the prison's political rehabilitation program and was subjected to torture, humiliation, kept in isolation and solitary confinement cells for long periods of time, years, in fact.

The political prisoners in Castro's jails were given an opportunity to at rehabilitation and release from the torment they endured simply by saying, "I have been wrong. All my life has been a mistake. God does not exist. I want you to give me this opportunity to join a communist society." Of Cuba's 80,000 political prisoners, 70,000 took this path of rehabilitation. Armando Valladares was not one of them. To have taken the path of rehabilitation would have been spiritual suicide for Valladares, who valued his intellectual and spiritual freedom more than the freedom of movement, that is, he valued the space inside his mind and heart, more than the space outside of his cell.

Without access to pens and pencils Valladares wrote poetry on cigarette papers, often in his own blood. Eventually, he was able to smuggle out his collection of poems and first book, *From My Wheelchair*, for publication outside of Cuba. As a consequence of eventually becoming known by intellectuals worldwide, the PEN Club of France honored him with the Freedom Prize awarded to writers in prison for peaceful and political causes. In several European countries, Valladares Committees were established to work on achieving his freedom. Amnesty International adopted him as one of their first prisoners of conscience. In time, the global awareness campaign spearheaded by his wife Martha resulted in French president François Mitterrand's personal petition to Fidel Castro for his release which

would finally come in October 1982; 22 years after first being incarcerated.

After his release, he wrote his memoir based on the time in prison; the international best seller translated into 18 languages, *Against All Hope*. After reading the book, President Ronald Reagan named him our U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission where he demonstrated that in Cuba, as in all dictatorships, there exists torture and human rights violations. At long last, Cuba was condemned as a systematic violator of human rights. After successfully fighting for respect for human rights world over, President Reagan also honored him with the Presidential "Citizens" Medal, the second highest award given to a civilian in the United States. He was also bestowed the Superior Award by the U.S. Department of State.

Ambassador Valladares is the author of several other books including, *The Heart with Which I Live* and *Caverns of Silence*. He is a frequent contributing writer for several international news publications and has been honored with the Italian Prize for International Journalism, the ISCHIA, and the Order of José Cecilio del Valle, the highest distinction granted to a foreigner by the government of Honduras. His paintings grace private collections in the United States, Central and South America, and Europe. He continues to travel the world mediating and giving talks on diplomatic issues, and is a tireless advocate for human rights.

Armando Valladares is a legend in his own time.



Oscar Hijuelos

Oscar Hijuelos became the first Latino writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1990 with his second novel, **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**. Hijuelos became a national icon overnight, as the novel struck a chord with Americans of all ethnic backgrounds and the book also excited Hollywood moguls with the result a major motion picture two years later. The novel addresses the struggles of immigrants as they reconcile the contrast between the culture of their past and the culture of their future, a struggle Hijuelos knew only too well. Born in New York to Cuban parents, Hijuelos grew up in a neighborhood of transplants on their way to a better life. His own cultural experience was confounded by his light skin and blonde hair due to his Irish great-great-great grandfather. His identity as a Cuban American was then splintered by his lack of a more traditional Cuban complexion; he didn't look like the other Latinos with whom he was supposed to identify with. Simply put, he just didn't look the part and, as it turns out, he never would—a reality which would plague him long into his adult life.



Hijuelos addresses these experiences and other in his newest book, **Thoughts Without Cigarettes**. In this universally acclaimed memoir, Hijuelos tells how winning the Pulitzer was both wonderful and terrible and how the sudden celebrity reintroduced him to his conflicted images of himself, as a Cuban-American writer put on stage for examination and criticism. He said, however, that the Pulitzer also provided encouragement and a reason to for every other Latino writer to dream of following in his footsteps. The prestige of the Pulitzer would be shared with no other Latinos for 18 years, and even now only **Junot Diaz** shares the acclaim.

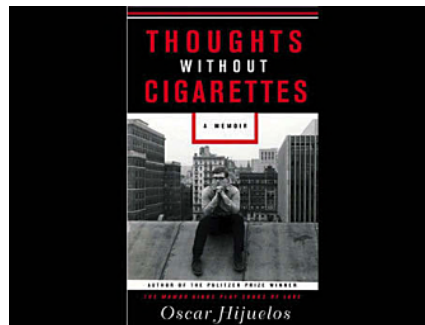
As a first-generation Cuban American, Hijuelos often explores what it means to be Hispanic in the United States, and his memoir continues this narrative but also does something more. Like the Castillo brothers of his fiction, Oscar came of age in New York, not in Miami's Little Havana. His father worked at a hotel, and his mother did odd jobs to bring in extra money. Unlike growing up in Miami, being Cuban in New York sometimes required explaining. His memoir provides a bookmark for a New York neighborhood in the 50s and its eclectic blend of colorful residents, including the many popular musicians of that era, who occupied the nooks and corners of the neighborhood. Indeed, his be-bop style likely grew directly out of his neighborhood. He comes to grips with his often un-

easy, wrenching experiences as a hyphenated-American which were aggravated by a long bout with nephritis, a potentially fatal inflammation of the kidneys, when he was five and losing his father, who was only 55 when he died, only three years after Oscar's own life and death struggle, so traumatic that he lost his ability to speak his first language, Spanish, for a while.

While examining the life of one writer in particular, his own life, Oscar Hijuelos illuminates the trials and tribulations in every striving writer's life, the small triumphs, chance encounters, and influences of senior writers. He also gives the reader highly personal insight into the particular difficulties facing those of Latino heritage writing for the diverse American audiences.

Hijuelos has written nine major works and in 2000 won the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature. His memoir, **Thoughts Without Cigarettes**, is, as one reviewer put it, far from a maudlin effort. But his tale, which covers the time of his parents' courtship to the immediate aftermath of his Pulitzer, would be impossible to tell honestly without touching on his battles with self-doubt, cultural identity, anxiety and melancholia. Every reader has "favorite" books, but a word often used to describe Hijuelos and his novels is "beloved." More than one critic has noted that readers fall easily in love with his fictional characters, a testament to both his enormous talent and his determination to treat his characters with tenderness, respect and forgiveness for their all-too-human faults. In his debut narrative non-fiction work he is careful to do the same with the real people, including himself.

His astonishing prose and major influence in the literary canon have made Oscar Hijuelos... a legend in his own time.



*We were shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Oscar Hijuelos on October 12. We learned of his death as **The Double Dealer** was just about to go live. We will be doing a long feature on*

*this marvelous writer and long-time good friend of the Faulkner Society in our next edition of **The Double Dealer**. For more on Oscar now, [CLICK HERE](#).*

Justin Torres

Justin Torres's debut novel, *We The Animals* (released in September, 2011), has released a firestorm of critical praise from the people one wants most to hear it including Pulitzer prize winning authors Michael Cunningham and Paul Hardy while capturing the hearts of America's most important journals: The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Washington Post, NPR, Vanity Fair,



Esquire among countless others.

It's the kind of success most writers dream of achieving one day, down the road, sometime in the distant future. It's the kind of success one scarcely dabbles in entertaining or even thinks possible as was the case for Torres, who didn't even know he was writing his stunning first novel as he was writing

it, but soon enough the connection was made for his short, poetically intense fragments that have been put together in such a way that "will make you rethink what it means to hurt and to love."

Though only 31, Torres has been writing for several years earning his MFA from Iowa, the Rolón United States Artist Fellowship in Literature, and is now a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford. While young, particularly from a writer's standpoint, Torres has already racked up some very prestigious honors and publication in some of the country's finest literary showcases: The New Yorker, Harper's, Granta, Tin House, Glimmer Train, as well as other publications.

And while *We the Animals* is a debut semi autobiographical novel, it is lean, compact, brave and neither sentimental nor maudlin. Told in 19 vignettes, *We the Animals* story of poverty and violence told so compassionately that one roots for the drunks and the abusers not because it's the hip thing to do, but rather, because it's the only human thing left to be done.

While some will say why write fiction if you just want to write about yourself, Torres has demonstrated

that when the heart is in the story and a writer is skilled enough to distance himself, preventing overly emotional drivel, the result can be terrifyingly authentic and powerful.

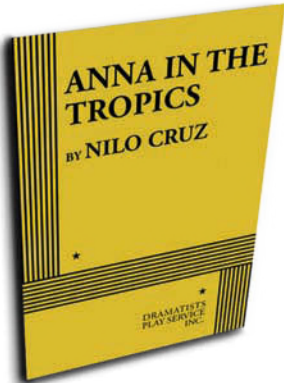
Torres uses highly charged material with so much confidence and poise as to make it look effortless. He showcases the kind of betrayal only possible by those closest to us. . Torres is writer that cannot be refused and we hope we will get to read much more of his clean terse, prose that punches with the emotional equivalent of first love.

Unforgettable and real, Torres is a legend in his own time.



*Graham Plomb & Justin Torres dance at **Words & Music***

Nilo Cruz



Nilo Cruz won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play **Anna in the Tropics**. Cruz is the first Latino to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Anna in the Tropics also won the Steinberg Award for Best New Play. A year later it received its Broadway premiere with Jimmy Smitts in the lead role.

He was born to Tina and Nilo Cruz, Sr. in Matanzas, Cuba. The family immigrated to "Little Havana" in Miami, FL in 1970 on a Freedom Flight, and eventually became citizens of the United States. His sister Clara Cruz works as a Spanish teacher in Hialeah Gardens Elementary School in Hialeah, FL. His interest in theater began with acting and directing in the early 1980s. He studied theater first at Miami-Dade Community College, later moving to New York City, where Cruz studied under fellow Cuban María Irene Fornés. Fornes recommended Cruz to Paula Vogel who was teaching at Brown University where he would later receive his M.F.A. in 1994.

ABOUT HIS WORK

In 2001, he served as the playwright-in-residence for the New Theatre in Coral Gables, FL, where he wrote **Anna in the Tropics**, and Some of the theatres that have developed and performed his works include New York's Public Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop,



Nilo Cruz with Faulkner Society Co-founder Rosemary James at **Words & Music**

Pasadena Playhouse, McCarter Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, South Coast Repertory Theatre, The Alliance, New Theatre, Florida Stage, and the Coconut Grove Playhouse.

Cruz wrote the book of the Frank Wildhorn/Jack Murphy musical **Havana**. Its scheduled world premiere at the Pasadena Playhouse was delayed by the theatre's declaration of bankruptcy in 2010. Cruz has received numerous awards and fellowships, including two NEA/TCG National Theatre Artist Residency grants, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, San Francisco's W. Alton Jones award, a Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays award and a USA Artist Fellowship.



In April of 2011 Cruz received the Downtown Urban Theater Festival's first-ever Playwright Master's Award on the opening night of the festival, at the Manhattan Movement & Arts Center..

Cruz is a frequent collaborator with Peruvian-American Latin Grammy composer Gabriela Lena Frank, collaborating on several operas. They recently completed a set of orchestral songs, "La centinela y la paloma" (The Keeper and the Dove), for Dawn Upshaw and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra which premiered under the baton of Joana Carneiro in February of 2011.

Cruz is an alumnus of New Dramatists and has taught playwriting at Brown University, Yale University, and the University of Iowa. Currently, he divides his time between New York and Miami.

At **Words & Music, 2011**, Cruz read from a brand new play with subject matter which resonates deeply with New Orleanians. The title? **Hurricane**.

Nilo Cruz is a legend in his own time.

Randy Fertel

Randy Fertel has taught English at the university level at Harvard, Tulane, LeMoyne College, the University of New Orleans, and most recently with the Graduate Faculty of the New School University. He holds a Ph.D. from Harvard where he received a teaching award bestowed by student vote.

A specialist in the literature of the Vietnam War, he organized a major conference called *My Lai 25 Years After: Facing the Darkness, Healing the Wounds*, at Tulane University in 1994. The initiative received both a Special Humanities Award from the Louisiana Endowment for Humanities and an Addy Award for a direct-mail promotion piece he designed. Randy has served as a faculty member for Words & Music on many occasions, including last year when he delivered a moving introduction to the literature of war and to National Book Award Winner Tim O'Brien, who gave the keynote address at the National World War II Museum. This year with Vietnamese - American author

Andrew Lam, Randy will address *The Literature of Exile in the Global Village*. He will also participate in a memoir discussion.

Randy is President of both the Fertel Foundation and the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation. The Fertel Foundation has a special interest in initiatives from which new communities and new insights may emerge and initiatives which challenge entrenched communities of power. One such project, the Ron Ridenhour Prizes for Courageous Truth Telling, is co-sponsored by the Nation Institute. Award ceremonies are held every spring at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. The New Orleans-based foundation, established in 1999, also supports projects to rebuild a better New Orleans – and create national models – in a post-Katrina world. The Ruth U. Fertel Foundation, named for his late mother, is devoted to education in the New Orleans area and has long been a patron of Words & Music, a Literary Feast in New Orleans, which offers continuing education in the literary arts for developing writers of all ages. Randy—a member of the New Orleans Food Policy Advisory Committee, which has made many recommendations to improve the local food system—leads the task force that brought the Edible Schoolyard, founded by Alice Water, to the Samuel J. Green School in New Orleans. The First “Edible Evening” was a smashing success with more than 600 supporters turning out to enjoy a mid-March garden party under the stars at the Edible Schoolyard New Orleans. The proceeds help ensure the sustainability of this nationally acclaimed garden and

kitchen model program at Green Charter School. Special guest at the event was Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse Restaurant, international food activist and creator of the original Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley. Among the highlights: live music by New Orleans Musician Corps

Fellows and seasonal delicacies from great local restaurants including Bacchanal, Bayona, Beaucoup NOLA, Boucherie, Bourbon House, Chef April of ESYNOLA, Cochon, Commander's Palace, Domenica, Emeril's, La Divina Gelateria, MiLa, Mimi's in the Marigny, Patois, Swiss Bakery, White Oak Plantation (Chef John Folse), Whole Foods. Randy also chairs a task force for Artist Corps, which is putting musicians back in the schools of New Orleans.



About His New Book

The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak is the story of two larger-than-life characters and the son their lives helped to shape. Ruth Fertel was a petite, smart, tough-as-

nails blonde with a weakness for rogues, who founded the Ruth's Chris Steak House empire almost by accident. Rodney Fertel was a gold-plated, one-of-a-kind personality, a railbird-heir to wealth from a pawnshop of dubious repute just around the corner from where the teenage Louis Armstrong and his trumpet were discovered. Rodney traveled all over the world frittering away time and money, meeting and enjoying the company of other madcaps, such as Salvador Dali, in Spain, but was a less than responsible husband and father. In 1965, after her divorce from her eccentric husband, Ruth was a single mother figuring out how she was going to support herself and her children. A risk taker, she mortgaged her house for \$22,000 to buy a small steak house in New Orleans. Then grew it into one of the city's greatest restaurants – Ruth's Chris Steak House. Today, it's a huge chain with more than 130 locations worldwide. This is the story we know. As with all things, however, the truth can be stranger than fiction. In *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* (University Press of Mississippi; hardcover; October 2011), Ruth's son, Randy Fertel, offers a poignant and bittersweet portrait of a legendary New Orleans family, and the famous steak house that bears their name. A masterful storyteller, Fertel weaves the captivating stories of his parents—Ruth, founder of Ruth's Chris, and Rodney, known as The Gorilla Man for his quixotic 1969 run for mayor when he pledged a gorilla for the Audubon Zoon—with the sights, sounds, and tastes of New Orleans.

Randy Fertel is a legend in his own time.

The Hotel Monteleone: A Literary Treasure

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The year 2009 was the ten-year anniversary of the ceremony in which the Hotel Monteleone was named a literary landmark by the American Library Association.

The Big Easy's Fabulous Destination for the Literati

The Hotel Monteleone is designated a National Literary Landmark because of its history of welcoming countless authors, many of whom have written about the Monteleone, using it as settings for their stories or novels. The designation was awarded by the American Library Association in 1999 in a ceremony featuring Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Ford.

Sherwood Anderson stayed at the Monteleone in 1921, before he and his wife Elizabeth took up residence in the upper Pontalba apartments at Jackson Square a couple of years later.

In 1951, two of the greatest American authors, both Mississippians—William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams—were guests of the Monteleone at different times. Faulkner with his mother, his wife, and other members of his family; Williams with his grandfather, the Rev. Walter Dakin.

Faulkner was in New Orleans to receive the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest award for extraordinary achievements, and was interviewed at the hotel by New Orleans newspaper columnist, **Albert Goldstein**, one of the founders of the 1920s literary journal, *The Double Dealer*, which was the first publisher of Faulkner's work. Faulkner biographer **Joseph Blotner** has written that the Monteleone was Faulkner's favorite hotel.

When Tennessee and his grandfather checked out after two weeks, they discovered that Mr. Monteleone had taken care of their bill, no doubt as a tribute to the glory the playwright had bestowed on New Orleans four years before when **A Streetcar Named Desire** debuted. Williams mentioned the Monteleone in another play, *The Rose Tattoo*.

Truman Capote often jokingly claimed that he was born in the Monteleone. In fact his parents were living in the hotel when his mother went to Touro Infirmary (hospital) for his birth.

Other authors, **Ben Lucien Burmah**, **Eudora Welty**, **Winston Groom (Forrest Gump)** and **Richard Ford** among them, have found a congenial place in which to rest their heads during their visits to the city. Several of them have memorialized the hotel in their writings, none more effectively than Ford, who has lived in New Orleans in the past and plans to make the city his permanent residence again soon. Ford's first novel, **A Piece of My Heart**, includes a passage set at Hotel Monteleone.

Williams and Ford won Pulitzer Prizes for their work. Ford won the Pen/Faulkner Prize as well.

In addition to the Legion d'Honneur, William Faulkner, our namesake, who wrote his first novel *Soldiers' Pay* while living on Pirate's Alley, went on to win not only

the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, he went on to win the world's most prestigious award for writing, the Nobel Prize for Literature for his impressive body of work.

The Hotel Monteleone has been the headquarters for **Words & Music, a Literary Feast in New Orleans** since 1997, when **Words & Music** was added to the calendar of events of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society in celebration of William Faulkner's 100th birthday. That

In 2013, Hotel Montelone will host 2013 Words & Music headliners including the noted biographer of Walker Percy, Patrick Samway, SJ and Horacio Castellanos Moya, a leading Latin American author.

year, our opening night event included entertainment at St. Louis Cathedral featuring staged readings and a classical music concert centered around the debut of pianist **Quinn Peeper**. The Cathedral event was followed by a celebratory dinner, chaired by **Anne Simms Pincus**, at the Hotel Monteleone. Before 1997, the Society, which was founded in 1990 on Mr. Faulkner's birthday, had a Faulkner weekend every year, which included readings and music at Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre and luncheons or dinners at the Hotel Monteleone. During those years, the Hotel Monteleone also catered several events for us at the Beauregard – Keyes House, former residence of Frances Parkinson Keyes, author of **Dinner at Antoine's** and other novels set in Louisiana.

In the years since the Society was founded, the Monteleone has been the home away from home for probably 500 different well-known authors, journalists, scholars, and internationally acclaimed musical artists, who have who traveled to New Orleans to participate in Society programs, including **Words & Music, My New Orleans**, and **Meet the Author**. The hotel offered hospitality to Iranian-American religious studies and Middle East scholar and national TV commentator, Reza Aslan. Aslan, author of two international bestsellers of non-fiction, **No God but God** and **How to Win a Cosmic War**, was guest lecturer for the Society in 2009 and will be coming back to the hotel for **Words & Music, 2013** to discuss his new book, **Zealot**.

Some of the best-known names beloved by the Faulkner Society for their unswerving loyalty to our goals to present high quality literary programming for the general public and realistic assistance to aspiring authors, have been **Roy Blount, Jr.**, author of 22 books of non-fiction, including his latest, **Alphabetter Juice**, and hundreds of national magazine and newspaper articles,

Hotel Monteleone: *A Literary Treasure*

with many of his books and articles featuring passages or entire essays about New Orleans; Pulitzer Prize winner **Robert Olen Butler**, author of the beautiful collection, **Good Scent from a Strange Mountain**, stories about Vietnamese families who settled in Louisiana after the fall of Saigon; the late **Matthew Bruccoli** famous biographer of **F. Scott Fitzgerald** and **Ernest Hemingway**; **Michael Malone**, author of the classic novel of southern humor, **Handling Sin**, an engaging twist on the picaresque **Don Quixote**, and many other novels; and **Elizabeth Spencer**, novelist and playwright (*The Light from the Piazza* produced on Broadway recently), whose novel **The Snare** is must reading for those who would understand the compelling underlife of New Orleans. All are recipients of the Society's ALIHOT (A Legend in His/Her Own Time) gold medal.

Among the national and international literary headliners who have sunk down in the luxurious mattresses of the hotel for a snooze or just enjoyed a glass or two in the Carousel Bar, are **Thomas Cahill**, author of **How the Irish Saved Civilization**, **Why the Greeks Matter**, and other bestselling histories; the late **Robert Fagles** and **Stanley Lombard**, celebrated poets and translators of the classics, such as **The Iliad** and **The Odyssey**, from the original Greek; Russian dissident poet **Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Yevtushenko**; media mogul, founder of CNN, and philanthropist **Ted Turner**, author of **Call Me Ted**; celebrated Fitzgerald scholar and biographer **Scott Donaldson**, author of **Fool for Love**; the legendary beat generation poet, **Lawrence Ferlinghetti**, author of many collections of his own and the beloved publisher of other poets through *City Lights*; **Stewart O'Nan**, author of 14 books of fiction, including his first novel, **Snow Angels**, which won the Society's first gold medal for novel; **Julia Glass**, who won the National Book Award for **Three Junes**, her debut work of fiction composed of three linked novella, one of which, **Collies**, won the Faulkner Society's gold medal for Best Novella in 2000; and internationally noted Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren scholar, the late **Noel Polk**.

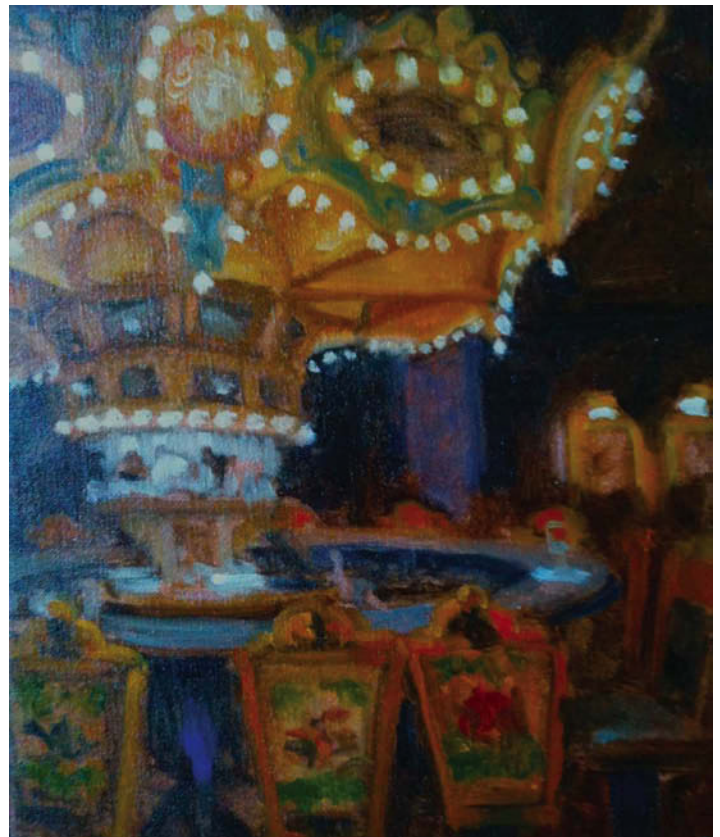
And the hotel has charmed a couple of hundred of the men and women who make it possible for us to have something good to read before we turn our lights off at night, the unsung heroes and heroines of the publishing world: literary agents and editors, who have traveled to New Orleans to critique and consult with aspiring authors participating in **Words & Music**. With their help and ours, the work of more than 100 of these aspiring authors has been published.

The hotel also has been groovy place to hang out for music world notables providing entertainment for guests of **Words & Music**—such as **Odetta**, jazz historians and band leaders **Michael White** and **Thomas Sancton**; author and band leader **Frederick Starr**; various members of the **Neville and Marsalis families**; jazz singer **Leah Chase**; composer, pianist, jazz singer, and recording artist **Judith Owen** and her husband **Harry Shearer**, author, actor and bass player; composer, trumpet star, and band leader **Irvin Mayfield** and one of

his protégés **Trombone Shorty**; and famed music writers **Peter Guralnik** and **Stanley Crouch**; and **Michael Lang**, the man who created the over-the-top famous music festival, **Woodstock**, where the hip generation let it all hang out.

And the beat goes on!

In 2009 we welcomed to **Words & Music** and to the Hotel Monteleone newcomers to the festival. Wes and Eugene's **Cabinet of Wonders**, a national touring group of writers who also are highly accomplished musical artists and comedians. Created by English novelist **Wesley Stace**, author of the international fiction hits, **Misfortunes** and **By George**, who also is a folk rock star, performing and recording under the name of **John Wesley Harding**. Stace's sidekick is **Eugene Mirman**, non-fiction author and popular comedian on late night



*The famous Carousel Bar at the Hotel Monteleone, a National Literary Landmark. Artwork by noted artist Joan Griswold, a frequent participant in **Words & Music**.*

TV and the cabaret circuit. The other “wonders” with them were bestselling mystery writer **Laurie Rippman**, winner of all the important awards for thrilling fiction—the Agatha, the Anthony, the Edgar, the Barry, the Shamus, the Quill, and the Macavity; **Laurie Lindeen**, author of **Petal Pusher**, a widely acclaimed memoir about her life in rock band; **Rick Moody**, author of four critically acclaimed novels, a collection of short stories, and a memoir; and **Tom Piazza**, not only a prize winning fiction writer but a Grammy winning music authority. They held forth on how music informs their writing and then gave a special edition performance of the **Cabinet of Wonders** at **Faulkner for All!**

Joining us for the first time was **Dennis Lehane**, author of eight international bestselling novels, including **Mystic River**, adapted for the hit film of the same name which included a brilliant performance by Sean Penn; **Shutter Island**, adapted for a film by Martin Scorsese, since released to critical acclaim; and his latest, **The Given Day**, described by the most important reviewers as "...the new Great American Novel..."

He was interviewed by a man who is a legend in his own time in the literary world, **Otto Penzlar**, author, editor, and publisher and proprietor of Manhattan's Mysterious Bookshop, a mecca for all who love whodunnits. Penzlar interviewed Lehane and introduced **Richard Layman**, the noted biographer of **Dashiell Hammett**, who created the American tradition of noir detectives and their stories with Sam Spade and his exploits in **The Maltese Falcon**, which was the focus of the Society's 2009 BIG READ project made possible by the National Endowment for The Arts and its partners, Arts Midwest, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Since 2009, literary luminaries who have been introduced to the Hotel Monteleone by **Words & Music**, include National Book Award winner **Tim O'Brien**, author of the memorable novel of the Vietnam War, **The Things They Carried**; one of Louisiana's bestselling native daughters, Rebecca Wells of **Ya-Ya Sisterhood** fame; Pulitzer Prize winner Oscar Hijuelos; debut novelist **Justin Torres**, author of the hit novel **We the Animals**; former U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations for Human Rights **Armando Valladares**; Pulitzer Prize winner **Adam Johnson**, author of **The Orphan Master's Son**; actress **Cicely Tyson**, and **Ernest J. Gaines**, author of **A Lesson Before Dying**, **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman**, and other novels.

In 2013, Hotel Monteleone will host 2013 Words & Music headliners including the noted biographer of Walker Percy, **Patrick Samway, SJ** and **Horacio Castellanos Moya**, a leading Latin American author.

The history of the hotel and the Faulkner Society have been closely intertwined now for a generation in the creation of high quality literary entertainment for the public in a charming environment and it is our distinct pleasure to be in partnership with the hotel once again this year.

The Monteleone Hotel was a literary landmark well before it was recognized as such by the American Library Association and we fully expect that it will continue to be a place of sanctuary—whether for a good night's sleep, a good meal, a great literary event, or a meeting with friends in the Carousel Bar—for all great writers, now and for generations yet to come.

So, join us in saluting a fabulous hotel, its remarkable owners, management, and staff!

—Joseph J. DeSalvo, Jr., W. Kenneth Holditch, and Rosemary James, Co-Founders, Faulkner Society

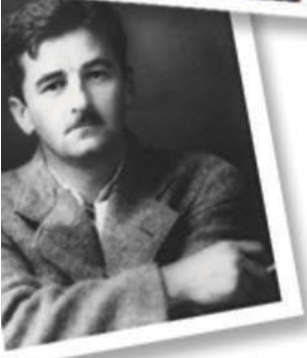


Recycling Romance

There is no better way to conserve the resources of the planet than to reuse the houses, furnishings and treasures of yesterday, instead of opting for everything new. Houses of other centuries were built to last, as the residences of New Orleans and Charleston, for instance, bear witness. Their furnishings were intended to be handed down and reused, generation after generation, with these old dwellings and antiques acquiring a lovely, antique patina that cannot be duplicated overnight. Our ancestors understood the wisdom of building with the environment in mind, and their old ways are now the best new ways. Let us help you recycle the romance of the past for a glorious and responsible future.

*Rosemary James,
Faulkner House Designs*

2009'S The Maltese Falcon BIG READ



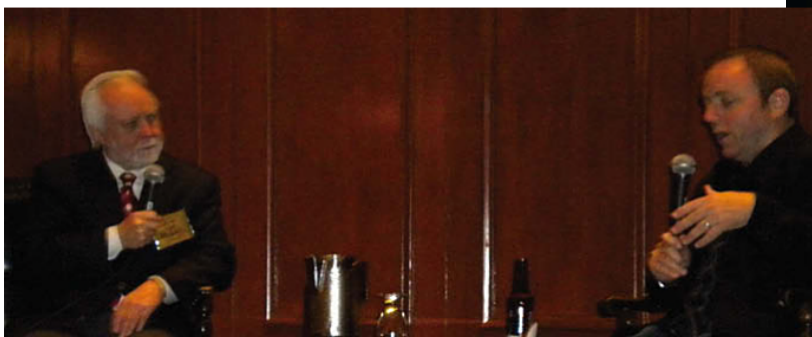
Dashing Dashiell Hammett



To celebrate the work of the late Dashiell Hammett during **The Maltese Falcon BIG READ**, the **Faulkner Society** invited noted Hammett biographer **Richard Layman** and two celebrated icons of contemporary noir mysteries to present during **Words & Music, 2009**. Layman was keynote speaker, while novelist **Dennis Lehane** of **Mystic River** fame was interviewed by **Otto Penzler**, well-known editor and publisher of mystery fiction in the United States and proprietor of **The Mysterious Bookshop** in New York City, a must destination for all serious mystery buffs.



Hammettbiographer Richard Layman delivering the keynote address of BIG READ, 2009



Otto Penzler, left, and Dennis Lehane talk about Lehane's work in the context of the noir mystery tradition initiated by Dashiell Hammett

**2009 Big Read:
The Maltese Falcon**

**Dashiell Hammett:
The Man Who Invented
the Modern American
Detective Novel**

**Notes from the BIG Read Keynote
address by Dashiell Hammett's
distinguished biographer, Richard
Layman.**

*...we were all having such a good time together on Falcon that at night, after shooting, Bogie, Peter Lorre, Ward Bond, Mary Astor and I would go over to the Lakeside Country Club. We'd have a few drinks, then a buffet supper, and stay on till midnight. We all thought we were doing something good, but no one had any idea that **The Maltese Falcon** would be a great success and eventually take its place as a film classic.*

—John Huston in **An Open Book**, 1981

Dashiell Hammett, the American novelist, who also worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood, is best known for his 1930 novel, **The Maltese Falcon**, adapted for the screen not once but three times, including notably a version starring Humphrey Bogart. This classic story of hard-boiled realism introduced detective Sam Spade as he is investigating the murder of his colleague, detective Archer. Spade finds himself involved with an odd assortment of characters, all searching for a black statue of a bird. Among them are the gorgeous redhead Brigid O'Shaughnessy, her employer, Fat Man Casper Gutman, Joel Cairo, an agent of Gutman, Wilmer Cook, a nervous, trigger-happy bodyguard, and Effie, Sam Spade's secretary and possibly the most important character besides Spade in the book.

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting V under the more flexible V of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another smaller V. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The V motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down - from high flat temples - in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan
—**The Maltese Falcon**

With Raymond Chandler Hammett represented the early realistic vein in detective stories. His tough heroes confront violence with full knowledge of its corrupting potential. In his novels Hammett painted a mean picture of the American society, where greed, brutality, and treachery are the major driving forces behind human actions. He reads well in today's society, which displays similar attributes.

Dashiell Hammett was born in St. Mary's County, MD, the son of Richard Hammett, a farmer and politician. Hammett's mother, Annie Bond Dashiell, was trained as a nurse, but was at home most of the time looking after her three children. The family moved to Philadelphia and then to Baltimore. Hammett studied at the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute but left school at the age of 14 to help support the family. He worked as a newsboy, freight clerk, laborer, messenger, stevedore, and advertising manager before joining the Baltimore office of the Pinkerton Detective Agency as an operator. In Butte, MT, he was offered (and he refused) money to kill the IWWWW labor organizer Frank Little, who was later lynched. After the murder, Hammett's political views became more radical and he resigned from Pinkerton's first time.



**Dashiell Hammett, author of
The Maltese Falcon**

During World War I Hammett was a sergeant in an ambulance corps. At that time the worldwide Spanish influenza epidemic spread fast, and especially in military installations. Hammett contracted, first, the flu, then tuberculosis. "I have always had good health until I contracted influenza, complicated by bronchial pneumonia treatment," Hammett told his doctor in 1919. He spent the rest of the war in hospitals, and for much of his life suffered from ill health. He rejoined the Pinkerton Agency and worked then intermittently to earn extra money. Hammett's pension was small and he now had his own family to support. Most of Hammett's income during 1922-1926 came from writing advertising copy for a San Francisco jewelry store. At this time the investigator known as Continental Op made his appearance in the author's stories.

Hammett's first short story appeared in the magazine *Black Mask* in 1923, and his fiction-writing career as novelist ended in 1934. In *Black Mask* Hammett became, along with Erle Stanley Gardner, one of America's most popular writers. Under the pseudonym Peter Collinson, Hammett introduced a short, overweight, unnamed detective employed by the San Francisco branch of the Continental Detective Agency, who became known as The Continental Op. In the three dozen stories between 1929 and 1930, featuring the tough and dedicated Op, Hammett gave shape to the first believable detective hero in American fiction. Drawing on his Pinkerton experiences, Hammett created a private eye, whose methods of detection are completely convincing, and whose personality has more than one dimension.

Op stories also appeared in hardcover form. **Red Harvest** (1929) was a loosely constructed story about corruption and gangsters, set in *Poisonville*, and in **The Dain Curse** (1929) Op unravels a mystery involving jewel theft, religious cults, a family curse, a bombing, and a ghost.

However, in 1929 Hammett turned his attention to a new private eye, Sam Spade, who made his initial appearance in *Black Mask* in September 1929. In 1930 the work appeared in book form. Hammett's language was unsentimental, journalistic. Moral judgments were left to the reader. The first-person narration of the Op stories is left behind and Hammett views the detective protagonist in the book from the outside. A beautiful woman, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, comes to the office of Spade and his partner Miles Archer. She asks them to trail a Floyd Thursby. Archer is murdered. His wife was seeking a divorce to marry Spade. Joel Cairo offers Spade a reward for the recovery of a statuette, the "Maltese Falcon." Also Casper Gutman, a fat man, seeks it, with the help of Wilmer, an evil young man. An imitation in lead is found and Spade calls for the police to arrest Gutman, Cairo, and Wilmer. Brigid, who has been involved in the quest for the falcon, confesses that she killed Archer. Spade doesn't protect her from the consequences, but turns her in. "Listen. When a man's partner's killed, he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it." (Bogart in **The Maltese Falcon**). This philosophy of loyalty also marked Hammett's attitudes when he was questioned about his Communist friends - he did not reveal their names.

In **The Maltese Falcon** Spade became the personification of the American private eye, thanks in no small degree to Humphrey Bogart's portrayal of him in the 1941 film version of the novel. Although Hollywood had already found Hammett's work earlier—**Roadhouse Nights**, directed by Hobart Henley, was based on Hammett's **Red Harvest**, and released by Paramount in 1930—it is **The Maltese Falcon** that would stand the test of time not only as a novel but as a film. It was filmed for the first time in 1931 and then in 1936 under the title **Satan Met a Lady**, directed by William Dieterle and starring Bette Davis. The falcon was changed into a gem-filled ram's horn. John Huston's adaptation from 1941 is the most famous.

In 1943 Hammett had screenplay credits for the adaptation of **Watch on the Rhine** by Lillian Hellman. She had become Hammett's companion in the 1930s. The love



affair is the stuff which brings literary history to life.

Hammett was first married to nurse Josephine Dolan, whom he met in the Cushman Institute in the early 1920s. Hammett was transferred to the hospital at Camp Kearney near San Diego and he began to writing to her regularly, saying in one letter from from **Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett 1921-1960**, edited by Hammett biographer Richard Layman with Julie M. Rivett, 2001:

This is the first time I ever felt that way about a woman; perhaps it's the first time I have ever really loved a woman. That sounds funny but it may be the truth.

Hammett and Josephine were married in 1921. After the birth of his second daughter, Hammett's illness partly ended his family life - doctors warned Josephine of the risk of

infection, and she took a house north of San Francisco, where Hammett visited during weekends. Formally they divorced in 1937. Josephine left her work as a nurse and Hammett sent his family money, more or less regularly. Reciprocally Josephine sent him her picture, in which she did not smile.

The Glass Key (1930) was apparently Hammett's favorite among his novels. The central character, Ned Beaumont, was partly a self-portrait: a tall, thin, tuberculosis-ridden gambler and heavy drinker.

The Thin Man (1934), Hammett's last novel, presented Nick Charles, a former detective who had married a rich woman, Nora Charles. Her character was based on **Lillian Hellman**.

The book gained a commercial success and inspired a series of adaptations for film, radio, and TV. In 1934 Hammett began working as a scriptwriter for the comic strip **Secret Agent X-9**. Hammett's earnings from his books and their spin-offs allowed him to continue living the life of a wastrel.

In the 1930s Hammett became politically active. He joined the Communist Party and was a fierce opponent of Nazism. When Hemingway and a number of other writers went to Spain to help the Republicans in the Civil War (1936-39), for health reasons Hammett remained in the U.S., but helped veterans after their return from the war. At that time Hellman's star was rising. Hammett himself was drinking heavily and had problems with his writing, but his support was crucial for Hellman's own career. She had success as a playwright, traveled in Spain, and had an affair with John Melby, a diplomat.

During World War II, in spite of his poor health due to tuberculosis Hammett served three years in the U.S. Army, editing a newspaper for the troops in the



Effie gets her marching orders from her boss, Sam Spade, in The Maltese Falcon.

Aleutian Islands. This was perhaps the last, relatively happy period in his life. In 1948 he was vice-chairman of the Civil Rights Congress, an organization that the Attorney General and F.B.I. deemed subversive. He tried to start writing again, hired a secretary, but managed only to produce notes. For his political beliefs Hammett became a target during McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade. In 1951 he went to prison for five months rather than testify at the trial of four communists accused of conspiracy. He was blacklisted and, when IRS claimed he owed a huge amount in tax deficiencies, the federal government took his income and the State Department banned his books in American libraries overseas. The rest of his life Hammett lived in and around New York, teaching creative writing in Jefferson School of Social Science from 1946 to 1956. Lillian Hellman cared for him in her Park Avenue apartment from 1956 until he died, penniless, of lung cancer on January 10, 1961.

Considering that the man was suffering for from various lung disorders, including tuberculosis, and a heavy addiction to alcohol and considering the persecution he endured at the hands of government heavies, Hammett's contributions to the modern American literary, cinema, and radio heritage are nothing short of miraculous.

His works of fiction are a treasure to be read again and again.

This story was prepared from notes from Richard Layman's keynote and additional research.

-The Editors

Winners: The Maltese Falcon BIG READ Writing Competition

Editor's Note:

Catherine Cole, was a student of Deborah Unger, who teaches English at Hahnville High School in Hahnville, LA. She participated in the **2009 Maltese Falcon BIG READ**. Participating students competed in a writing competition. Miss Cole's essay was selected for publication in *The Double Dealer* by the Faulkner Society's BIG READ Committee. Bridget, author of the letter is a central character in **The Maltese Falcon**. Ms. Cole's essay is followed by others selected for publication.)

A Letter to Sam Spade By Catherine Cole

Dearest Sam:

As I sit here in the prison where you put me, I have more and more time to reflect on you. I hate you, Sam Spade. Why, you may ask? Well, frankly, you manipulated me, used me, and abandoned me. But what is worst of all, is you made me love you. You manipulated and used me only for your own good. You used me at my time of need and then when I needed you most, you abandoned me and sent me to this horrible prison cell. But Sam, I will never forget you. You are the most memorable character I have met in my entire life.

You are so memorable because, wonderfully, Sam, you are the slyest and smoothest person I know. Somehow, you got out of that entire Falcon deal scar-free. Why, I have no idea of what to tell you. I guess in the end it's just all part of your pizzazz. The police had no idea what

you were up to! You fooled them up until the very last minute I was with you, and I have no doubts that you will do it again and again.

Everyone loves you; you have this universal appeal. The truth is that your smooth talking and talent for persuasion give you the key to anyone's heart. Everyone is easily fooled by your clever disguises, your two-faced nature. You can be a demon one moment, a handsome, truehearted man the next. Can't you see, Spade? I still love you, even both sides of you. Doesn't that tell you something about us, or at the least about me?

The worst thing about you is how horribly manipulative you are. You don't care about anyone else besides you, and I just don't understand it.



Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade

I guess you just you just want to come out on top and are willing to do anything to get there, even if it means putting those that love you aside.

That's so horrible, my love.

Let me tell you, love, eventually, people will catch on to your act. Word will get around. Your lies and your antics will catch up with you, and, unlike me, people will start throwing you to the wolves, too. In the meanwhile, I just sit here thinking of you.

Until I can find my way out of jail, I bid you adieu.

I wish you luck with your journeys, wherever they lead you.

I know you will have no problem getting out of trouble, if you continue to be the smooth-talking, sly Sam Spade that I have come to know and love.

Keep your promises to me, Sam. Wait for me until I am on the outside again.

Finally, just be aware of the fact that every minute I am in the slammer is another minute that I am pondering the mystery of Sam Spade and why I love him

Farewell,

Brigid O'Shaughnessy

Editor's Note:

When this essay was written Joshua Jackson was a New Orleans area high school student taught by Jefferson Parish high school English and writing teacher Peggy Tickle.

Will the Real Sam Spade Please Stand Up?

By Joshua Jackson

Dashiell Hammett's main character Sam Spade, the "blonde Satan," is a man with many faces. In **The Maltese Falcon**, Spade is a smooth-talking, hardboiled detective who plays by his own rules. As the story progresses, Spade remains somewhat of a mystery. As the protagonist, Spade often shows antagonistic tendencies which make him an anti-hero. Spade walks the fine line between good and evil, never quite showing his true intentions, thus making him a memorable character. Just like the mysterious falcon at the center of the story, the true identity of Spade is very vague. None of the characters can describe exactly what the bird is, and the same applies to Sam Spade. The true identity of Sam Spade isn't clearly defined for us all at once, but over time the facets of Sam's true character are gradually revealed. Another connection between the falcon and Spade is that the other characters desire to possess the falcon and concurrent they desire an alliance with Spade. Brigid, Cairo, Gutman, and Spade all fight for the ownership of the falcon, as Brigid, Iva, and Effie fight for Spade's attention and affection. This relationship between protagonist and object of desire makes Sam Spade a more universal character.

Through a variety of incidents, it is revealed that Spade is most interested in what benefits him. The money, the lust, and the fact that other people want the falcon drive the story. It's never exactly clear which side Spade is actually on. Spade quarrels with the police while at the same time fighting against the story's antagonist, Gutman. This contradiction forces the reader to pass his/her own judgment on Spade's actual character.

Spade's relationships with the women of the story also give the reader hints about Sam's true character. He has an affair with his ex-partner's wife, Iva, he seems to be falling in love with Brigid, and he uses poor Effie as he pleases. These facts bring up the question: just how loyal is Sam Spade? Can a man who steps so low as to have an affair with his ex-partner's wife really be trusted.

However, Spade proves that he understand loyalty by doing what he says he'll do to retrieve the falcon.

Sam Spade is a man who believes history is destined to repeat itself. When Sam tells Brigid the parable of Flitcraft, he observes, "I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma." Despite the lesson of this parable, Spade follows the same road Flitcraft did, falling into a natural groove, and he knows he's doing it. So why does he do it?

Strangely, even though Spade knows the outcome of a situation, he continues to walk down that path. For example, if Sam continues his relationship with Brigid, even though he knows she murdered his partner and, therefore, knows where that relationship is headed. Spade seems a fatalist, believing that there's no changing the outcome of a situation, so why try? At the same time, he does try to change the potential outcome of the game in pursuing his obsession with locating the falcon.

Spade refuses to be ordered around and speaks his mind. Spade even makes the police feel like imbeciles and refuses to cooperate with them:

"I dare you to take us in, Dundy, we'll laugh at you in every newspaper in San Francisco."

Spade represents that part of every person, the part which fights against conformity, which desires to go against the socially acceptable, to play by his/her own rules. He epitomizes the human fantasy of telling authorities: "I'm not going to follow your rules," and being able to get away with it. Sam Spade is a memorable character. He's the side of our human nature that people choose to conceal. Spade is the manifestation of the rebel. In fact, Sam Spade is what could be called a rebel with a cause: defying the law to do what is right.

Spade is intuitive with a certain way of processing things that aids in his quest for the falcon. For example, Spade's reasoning behind why Gutman, Cairo, Brigid and he need a fall guy to blame for the unsolved murders is flawless. And he figures out that Brigid murdered his ex-partner, Miles Archer. Spade says, "You wanted to be sure the shadower was somebody you knew and who knew you, so they'd go with you. You got the gun from Thursby that day-that night."

He is witty and capable of speaking the harsh, unvarnished truth, letting the chips fall where they may. In fact, Spade is himself the harsh, cold reality that lurks in every mind. Spade represents one of life's truths: that some people, that all people some of the time, only do things for personal gain.

Spade also a symbol of another universal truth: Life isn't always going to be bright, filled with sunny days; sometimes life can be brutal. And there is no way to avoid the hand life deals you, good or bad.

Although Sam Spade may not seem like the ideal image of a hero, in reality Spade is a straight forward protagonist, honoring his own rules of doing, what in his mind, is the right thing, pursuing justice, even if justice

comes down on hard on those he loves or at least comes close to loving.

Despite his strong feelings for Brigid, Spade turns her in to the police for Archer's murder. As Spade says:

"When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it!"

In the end, Spade upholds his moral code.

Dashiell Hammett succeeded in achieving the fondest desire of every real writer desires: to create a character who rings true, to create a universally appealing character, a character full of all the contrary emotions and motives, actions and inaction, charm and brutality, love and lies of a human being.

Editor's Note:

Elise deBruler's short fiction piece was submitted by Deborah Unger, who teaches English III, Hahnville High School, and whose students participated in the 2009 Maltese Falcon BIG READ writing competition

A Blast from the Past

By Elise deBruler

I was 39 years old cruising down the Lumbar Street in San Francisco. At the time, I was a college professor at the University of Southern California teaching literature. Conversations of various and sundry topics ran through the air. As I passed a couple, I heard them whispering about the novel **The Maltese Falcon**, mentioning the character Sam Spade.

Suddenly, a mental image appeared in my head of this sly character. My curiosity soared, giving me the urge to speak to the couple. I excitedly told the couple, "That Sam Spade is an enigma to me! He is a memorable character, universally known, and overall portrayed as a rough acting but basicall good guy trying to do the right thing."

The couple and I began to chat. They had just recently read the book and were seeking to find more information about the novel. Although I had not read the book for a while, I still had a vivid memory of Sam Spade to be able to describe him to them. I began to tell them why he was such a memorable character. What differentiates him from other characters is his leadership. He leads the case of the killing of Miles, Thursby, and Jacobi. He also is one of the leaders in the discovery of the Maltese Falcon. As an effective leader, he communicates with the others and thus is able to handle difficult situations. I tell the couple that the portrayal of Sam Spade is indelible.

"Not only is he memorable," I said, "Spade is also universally recognized as a great character of America's unique genre of fiction, the noir detective story. He is a true detective. He is fit for and skilled in detecting crime, able to put clues together with seeming ease. He has the

"bad guy" attitude. Spade takes no advice from anyone and dishes out what he wishes. Sam Spade's character is a detective legend.

What I also told the couple how Spade is able to dodge the police and ends up looking like a good person. Spade may be considered the hero of the story, but he is really more of an anti-hero. He plays the game with his own rules. He does not seem to be upset about his partner's death and plays the "tough guy" role. Because he had an affair with his partner's wife, he shows that he does not have any morals. He proclaims that he loves Brigid, but still he tells the police that she shot Thursby. Spade is represented as the champion who solves cases, but underneath it all, he is really an uncaring person. The couple then asked me personal questions about



Bogart; The quintessential Sam Spade

myself. I told them my profession and my passion for literature. Thinking that I had read *The Maltese Falcon* recently with my students because of my deep understanding of the topic, they asked if my students enjoyed reading the novel as much as I did. I admitted to them that the only time I had read the novel was when I was in high school. Their facial expressions were in shock, finding it hard to believe that I had such a vivid memory of the novel. Suddenly, their phone rang and they had to leave.

They thanked me for my time and went on their way. What I really wanted to do was thank them for their time. They brought back memories of an unforgettable, well known and "good guy" character.

The Maltese Falcon BIG READ Writing Competition

Editor's Note: In 2009 Toni Carlone was the English Class of Eugenia Field, a teacher at East Jefferson High School in Metairie, LA

Who is Sam Spade? By Toni Carlone

What stands out to you? When you're at a social gathering who is going to be the one that you like and remember? It's not going to be the greasy little guy in the corner who is giving the death stare to everyone or the curvaceous woman standing by the bar who ignores anyone who attempts to engage her in conversation. Mostly you'd want to forget those fails. This memorable person will be the person with whom everyone can relate, the one whose actions are not necessarily according to the rules but are totally understandable. It'll be the person who is sleek and interesting, the smooth guy; the one that looks like he knows what he's doing. **Sam Spade.**

Sam Spade was suave and a lively conversationalist. His obsessive drive for justice in the case of his partner's death demonstrated a sense of loyalty. He was never without a strategy and he always made you put on your thinking cap to interpret his rather vague explanations. His confidence and smooth aura, as well as his sly remarks and commanding stature appealed to all the characters in the book. No one was truly malicious towards Spade himself, more of his position.

The humanness of Sam Spade's character, as a detective, shows through in his choices when dealing with these predicaments. The conflicts, both internal and external, that he faces are truth, justice, good and evil, love and hate, and the central question of identity.

Throughout the book, the small questions whose answers evade you, keep you on your toes. Does the Maltese Falcon really exist? Is Bridget lying again? You never know. There is always a maybe in the mix. Sam can't really know what the truth is unless he knows what Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid know. The issue of truth lies at the heart of the novel, the pursuit of truth bringing most of the small climactic rushes. Everyone lies, but how do we know who is telling the truth? Even Sam has moments of dishonesty, his sins, such as his affair with Iva, his partner's wife, and these moments, these sins make the character human, believable.

Truth interlocks with something we fight everyday through police forces, strikes, and protests. Injustice. Whether it is through discrimination or just pure unfairness, it is everywhere. The injustices at the core of this novel are a corrupt police force and sexism.

The police are brutal and determined in their accusations toward Spade. They invade his home without warrant, for instance, and their venality is demonstrated over and over again. Add to that are chauvinistic attitudes about women by the men. Constantly, Brigid is ignored and put down because she is a woman. Though Spade is generally kind to everyone, he partakes in the discriminatory remarks about women, including his long-suffering secretary, Effie.

In every book of fiction worth its salt there is this inevitable conflict between good and evil. Who was the good guy? Even though Sam is being tracked by the police, is having an affair with his best friend's partner, and Brigid, we still depict him as the hero.

Why? Because it's all about position of the characters and the quest for justice. He's the detective and his partner was murdered. Who did it? Well, no matter what he has to do, Sam is going to find out who killed Archer. Restoring his best friend's honor is a noble thing to do and that nobility makes him the good force. "When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it." That's part of the rebel Sam's personal code of honor.

The relationship Sam Spade develops with Ms. O'Shaughnessy creates a conflict within the basic conflict of seeing justice done. Sam says to her prior to her arrest, "Next, I've no reason in God's world to think I can trust you and if I did this and got away with it you'd have something on me you could use whenever you happened to want to." He believes that if he let her go and they ran away together, they would create a love-hate relationship. Even if they "maybe" loved each other, it wouldn't matter because they'd turn on each other in the end.

Who is Sam Spade?

Well, we know he's a detective, but what do we really know about him? His vagueness shows how reserved, how very private, he is and the fact that he's very knowledgeable in his field, demonstrates his keen powers of observation.

He satisfies his own personal needs and in doing so he inflicts emotional pain upon Iva and Brigid. Sam is far perfect. He's intimidating and intelligent and flawed. Seeing that he fails to do everything right makes us feel better in our own flawed humanity. He becomes an agreeable fellow. Who is Samuel Spade?

In the end he is human...and that is why we are all still reading about him.



Setting the Stage for the American Detective Genre: The Maltese Falcon

by Julie Smith

Here's what the Big Read's very own reader's guide has to say about *The Maltese Falcon*: "Some people were surprised when **The Maltese Falcon**, a detective novel, appeared on The **Big Read** list."

As a writer of detective novels, I can't help noticing that we're dealing with a little prejudice here. Here's something an early critic had to say about its author **Dashiell Hammett**: "I think Mr. Hammett has something quite as definite to say, quite as decided an impetus to give the course of newness in the development of the American tongue, as any man now writing. Of course, he's gone about it the wrong way to attract respectful attention from the proper sources.... He has not been picked up by any of the foghorn columnists. He's only a writer of murder mystery stories." At the same time, another reviewer called him "Better than Hemingway," which, I'm sure some of you will agree, he is.

The next thing the Big Read guide does is to try to deal with the prejudice: "It's also a brilliant literary work, as well as a thriller, a love story, and a dark, dry comedy. The only criticism one could offer is that it's so much fun to read it might be hard to realize how deeply observed and morally serious it is."

Well, a good mystery—and **The Maltese Falcon** certainly isn't the only one in the world—can be all that. So why don't mysteries get their proper respect? That's something I'd like to explore with you, along with why they should. Above all, I want to encourage you to read and appreciate mysteries, because no other reading you may ever undertake can give you so much in one package and also be so readily available in any airport and also be more fun than anything this side of Harry Potter.

First, a little history. The first detective story was not, as generally believed, Edgar Allan's short story, **The Murders in the Rue Morgue**, written in 1841. It was actually made up by a woman, or so legend would have it. It's a story purportedly narrated by **Scheherazade** in the Arabian nights. After that, the Chinese tried their hand, as well as various Europeans, including the great French satirist, Voltaire, but Poe really did beat out the Brits with the first detective story in English. He only wrote three stories starring the great detective C. Auguste Dupin, the others being **The Mystery of Marie Roget** and **The Purloined Letter**, which has something important in common with **The Maltese Falcon**. I'll get back to that, but first let me mention the elements of the detective

story that Poe introduced: a few of those are the brilliant, eccentric detective, an admiring, often somewhat dense sidekick—think Watson here—the wrongly suspected person, and the surprise solution.

After American ingenuity gave birth to the detective story, the Brits got their gloved mitts on it. They added such elements as an inside job; a celebrity investigator; lots of false suspects; and that perennial favorite, dumb cops.

Wilkie Collins was one successor to Poe, followed by Arthur Conan Doyle, who introduced the most famous detective of all, Sherlock Holmes.

(It's worth noting here that Sherlock Holmes is timeless as an appealing character. Masterpiece Theatre produced a long-running series for public television. A 2009 feature film, **Sherlock Holmes**, was a huge box office success. And in 2012, Sherlock Holmes was updated for a successful new TV series, **Elementary**, with a new twist, a female Watson.)

It was almost 40 years between Poe and Holmes. However, with Holmes, wrote the great mystery writer **Dorothy L. Sayers**, "the ball was at last set rolling. As it went, it swelled into a vast mass—it set off others—it became a spate—a torrent—an avalanche of mystery fiction. In fact, the form thrived so well in England that the 20s and 30s came to be known as the

Golden Age of Detective fiction." Note that **The Maltese Falcon** was written in 1929, smack in the middle of that.

We, serious detective writers, consider this an extremely serious and nuanced work. Soon after that came Raymond Chandler, Ross McDonald, and James M. Cain, who also brought new depth and new ideas to the American version.

But, ladies and gentlemen, I am here to tell you that what happened in England during the Golden Age, as much fun as it was, is the main reason detective fiction has a bad name today. Because while it was becoming increasingly serious in this country, it got just plain silly in Merrie Olde England, so much so that eventually someone made up a set of instructions to keep the unruly writers in line. Listen to this:

Knox's "Ten Commandments" (or "Decalogue") are as follows:

- The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to know.
- All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
- No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- No Chinaman must figure in the story.–No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an



unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
–The detective himself must not commit the crime.
–The detective is bound to declare any clues which he may discover.
–The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind: his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
–Twin brothers...must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

The man who wrote the rules, Ronald Knox, decreed that, a detective story

...must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery with elements clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end.

That gives a very English meaning to the term “formula,” doesn’t it? The novels of the Golden Age were considered games.

These English mysteries were the original whodunits, because the puzzle took center stage, while such literary conventions as rich and believable character development took a back seat. Those rules were written in 1929, the exact year that, across the pond, **The Maltese Falcon** ushered in an entirely different way of approaching detective fiction.

Also in 1928—one year before **The Maltese Falcon**—Dorothy Sayers wrote in a famous essay, that the mystery could never “attain the loftiest levels of literary achievement...” why? Because it looks on human passion from a distance, because it does not show the inner workings of the murderer’s mind. “It must not,” she wrote, “a too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective story jars the movement by disturbing its delicate balance.”

What do you think about that? I think Professor Sayers would have benefited by knocking back a few in John’s Grill with Dashiell Hammett. Dorothy Sayers was a great writer, and I’m an ardent admirer of hers, but clearly, she had no idea of what we were up to in this country.

I don’t want to bore you too much with all the classics you have not read, but there once was a writer called James Fenimore Cooper, who’s barely read at all any more, except we do know his name because of a classic novel called **The Last of the Mohicans**. But what’s considered distinctly American about Cooper is that his best-known hero was a frontiersman called Hawkeye, who was a fearless outcast and a fantastic shot.

In other words, a cowboy pre-cursor. And most critics agree that the cowboy is in turn the pre-cursor of the American detective. Think about it. Both guys are strong, silent, act alone and live by their own code. They’re similar, but in making my case, I can do better than that: the detective story came directly out of the dime novel. Now, this was a form of popular fiction of the

19th century about a young male up against tremendous odds, whether at sea, in the woods, in a war, or the wild west. Cowboys were big favorites and indeed two cowboy sleuths developed as dime novel heroes—Old Cap and Old Sleuth. And from those, when the frontier closed, came the first hard-boiled heroes. There were was no frontier any more, only cities. The scholar Leslie Fiedler called the detective “a cowboy adapted to life on the city streets, the embodiment of innocence moving untouched through universal guilt.”

Well, of course, you’re now familiar enough with Sam Spade to know he’s certainly not the embodiment of innocence—he didn’t commit the crimes in the book, but he knows all about fall guys and his partner’s wife. He’s street-smart.

And he has to be because he’s living in California. When the frontier went as far as it could go, well, that was the Pacific Ocean. One critic (George Grella) wrote, “in search of the City of the angels and the Holy Wood, he finds, instead, Los Angeles and Hollywood.” There’s a rude awakening.

And because American writers, certainly Hammett, were interested in portraying reality, not playing parlor games with their form of literature, they can never achieve that satisfaction that Knox said a murder mystery ought to give.

Sam Spade doesn’t get the bad guy—the fat man goes down, but only after he walks out of Spade’s office; he doesn’t get the Maltese Falcon—it turns out to be a fake; he doesn’t get the girl—instead, he sends her over, in his words, It’s a very bittersweet ending.

Some people see the detective story as a classic romance, with the detective as the knight—of course they also tend to see the western in the same terms, with the cowboy as the knight. They both work. And in those terms, Spade just can’t slay the dragon! Because the dragon is all of society, and the crime and guilt are too huge—he can’t locate a single source—evil is everywhere and he can deal only with a small part of it.

Hammett’s successor, Raymond Chandler, said this about the detective: “Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero. He is the hero, he is everything...he must be the best person in his world and a good enough man for any world.”

So, does Sam Spade measure up? Is he the best person in his world? Well, no. Effie probably is, but Effie doesn’t count. One problem with these early detective writers—they were only slightly less sexist than your present-day rapper. I’m sure there must be girls out there who are squirming at all this talk of men and cowboys and knights, but here is the wonderful thing about the detective story, it is endlessly flexible and evolving.

As women gained independence in the real world, as the feminism of the ‘60s took root and flourished, and we began to think of women as the sort of people who could be President or at least Secretary

of State or Governor, the detective story adjusted. In the 1980s the female private eye was introduced in a new way, in a much tougher form than ever before, as a woman who wouldn't hesitate to blow you away, and indeed that's what she did to the competition. For a decade, the most popular private eyes of all were women and in fact, still are. Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, and Laura Lippman's Tess Monaghan, to name a couple of bestselling characters.

Ronald Knox's rules and even Dorothy Sayers' 1928 pronouncements about what a mystery "should" and "must" be seem quaint today. In fact, the mystery has become, in one form or another, everything Sayers said it couldn't. And it has become much more. No other art form more accurately reflects our regional cultures.

It is able to do this because a detective hero comes back in book after book, year after year, and the best mystery writers are really chronicling life in a particular city at a particular time, over a particular number of years. A couple of years ago I ran into a woman I'd worked with on the San Francisco Chronicle when we were both in our early 20s. I'd been able to follow her career because she'd become a very famous reporter for the *L.A. Times*, but I was surprised to hear her say she'd followed mine as well, and she was a fan of my mysteries. She'd read them when she was in New Orleans covering Hurricane Katrina. "I always do that when I'm in on assignment in a new city, she said. "If I want to understand a town, I read the mysteries set there."

What else can mysteries do? They can tell you how people really talk in that town. Hammett and his successor, Chandler, taught us to use language in a way that was very different from other writers of their times—they incorporated slang and the rhythms of the street. Along with Hemingway, these two writers probably shaped the way most contemporary writers 'hear' their environment—they made it okay for writers to really listen, to get it down like it really is rather than the way your English teacher said you should hear it. Excuse me, English teachers—I meant, of course, the generation before you!

So let's not be surprised that the Big Read picked a detective story—the detective story is the quintessential American literary form and is practiced today by some of the finest writers in the land, notably Dennis Lehane. You may know Dennis Lehane as the author of **Mystic River**, one of the best books of our time. Really? Could it be that good? It wasn't assigned by your English teacher, so how could that be? Well, maybe it should have been. Try it and judge for yourself. Maybe she didn't assign it because she knows nothing about mysteries and didn't see the box office hit adapted from the novel. I'll bet she's heard of Michael Chabon, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for 2001. Maybe she could assign you to read Chabon's mystery, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Or maybe that could be classified as a fantasy rather than a mystery. Chabon has written in almost all popular genres and has said he seeks to "annihilate" the bias against genre fiction. A good man to read. When we mystery writers speak of our roots, the pioneers of the private eye novel, the finest American

mystery writers, we usually mention three: Dashiell Hammett, author, as you know, of **The Maltese Falcon**, Raymond Chandler, who came along about ten years later, in the 40s; and Ross Macdonald, who died in 1983. Here's Macdonald on the subject:

Popular fiction, popular art in general, is the air civilization breathes. Popular art is the form in which a culture comes to be known by its members. It is the carrier and guardian of the spoken language. A book which can be read by everyone, a convention which is widely used and understood in all its variations, holds a civilization together as nothing else can. It reaffirms our values as they change, and dramatizes the conflicts of those values. It absorbs and domesticates the spoken language, placing it in meaningful context with traditional language, forming new linguistic synapses in the brain and body of the culture. It describes new modes of behavior, new versions of human character, new shades and varieties of good and evil ... It holds us still and contemplative for a moment, caught like potential shoplifters who see their own furtive images in a scanning mirror, and wonder if the story detective is looking.

I love that. That's what a good mystery can do for us. It can show us ourselves as we really are, at our best and our potential worst. Warts and all, as a less original writer might say. It holds us up to that mirror.

So go forth and read mysteries without guilt. And write them, too!

Julie Smith—the well-known creator of the detectives Skip Langdon and Talba Wallace in her mystery series which includes the Edgar-winning **New Orleans Mourning**—recently turned her hand to a new type of character, an engaging one at that, a cat. He's named *A.B.*, advisor to budding psychic Reeno, ace teen burglar, tough and wily like Julie's other female protagonists, just younger. Taking a cue from the research for her long series of mystery novels for adults, Reeno is a well-drawn crime figure who describes her friend *A. B.* as the "mutant cat from Hell." The book, *Cursebusters*, is a YA paranormal adventure. After editing a successful anthology by New Orleans authors, **New Orleans Noir**, she decided to create an e-publishing company, which launched in 2010 with a book by Patty Friedmann and has published numerous books since then. Julie, who also has been a writing coach, is author of *Writing Your Way*, a no-nonsense, jam-packed book on writing fiction. The book came directly out of the author's belief that most writing teachers need to cut their students a little slack. Her approach is to help you find your own writing method. And she also has a blog dealing with *The Secret i-Book Strategy*. Find out more about Julie and her work at her three, yes, three web sites: www.booksbnimble.com, cursebustersbook.com, and www.casamysterioso.com. She also blogs, Facebooks, and she, we assume, tweets up a storm, a totally modern Millie of a writer!

Recommended Reading: *Lillian & Dash*

Sam Toperoff's marvelous new novel about Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman brings to center stage once again the larger-than-life personalities of these literary legends and the vicissitudes of their affair that spanned three decades. Toperoff reimagines the highs and lows of a fast-living, hard-drinking literary couple, and their individual



New Orleans-born playwright and screenwriter **Lillian Hellman**, author of *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes* and *Toys in the Attic*, with her long time par-amour **Dashiell Hammett**, author of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*.

passions, projects, and literarcreations. Hammett and Hellman's relationship evolves during major artistic and political epochs—Hollywood's heyday, the

New York literary scene, the Spanish Civil War, McCarthyism, and both world wars—and each movement is captured with subjectivity and credible insight. Populated with writers, drinkers, filmmakers, and revolutionaries, **Lillian & Dash** chronicles the unusual affair of two prominent and headstrong figures.

Over the years Toperoff has proven himself a master of mixing fiction and non-fiction and **Lillian & Dash** is one more example of his talent in this regard.

As Tracy Kidder, author of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, put it:

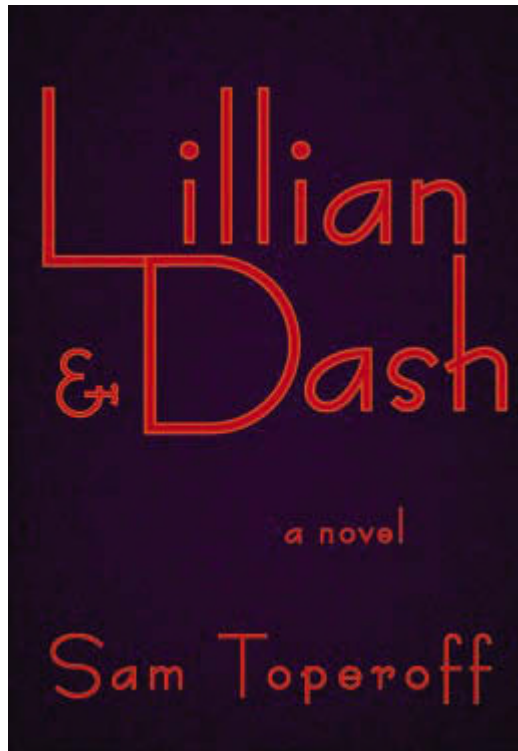
I have been reading Sam Toperoff's fiction for decades. He is a wonderful writer, shamefully under-appreciated.... Fascinating and engrossing, one of those rare books that would help you through an airplane flight without insulting your intelligence. In a word, it's literature.

If that doesn't send you out to your favorite independent bookstore to purchase a copy, then, perhaps this praise from Pulitzer Prize winning poet Stephen Dunn will do the trick:

...his handling of the Hammett/Hellman relationship and the Hollywood of their time is exemplary and brilliant. He has a great ear for their speech, and Toperoff delivers the historical period with not only credibility, but insight as well. And of course it's a book about writers and writing, and thus the relationships between ego and talent, success and the lure of self-destruction...

The novel has appeal to multiple audiences. The only personality traits required to enjoy *Lillian & Dash* are love of literature and curiosity about America's literary heritage and those who created. Gary Smith, who writes for *Sports Illustrated*, found the book fascinating:

I never knew how love like this worked, the kind that jumps the tracks but just keeps barreling onward... 'til Sam Toperoff yanked me aboard, sat me next to Dash and Lill and took us hurtling through Hollywood, down Broadway, across two wars, a political witch hunt, and mid-20th-century America, spellbound and hell-bound for human truth.



Much has been written about these two writers, playwrights, political activists, drunks and lovers, but nothing better than this novel, Toperoff does not pretend to be an earwitness to every private conversation, bit of pillow talk or fight; instead, he weaves a compelling story out of the public evidence that swirled around Lillian and Dash during their lives and makes them live in vivid color once again.



Sam Toperoff has published 12 books of fiction and nonfiction including *Jimmy Dean Prepares* (Granta, 1998) and *Queen of Desire* (Harper Collins, 1992), and his stories and articles have appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers's*, *Granta*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Town & Country*, and *Sports Illustrated*. He lives in France, in a house he built.

Dennis Lehane: Contemporary Torch Bearer for American Noir Fiction

Dennis Lehane is among the very best when it comes to telling it like it really is in fiction. Like Dashiell Hammett and his famous character Sam Spade, Lehane's characters do not mince words when speaking the truths of the dark underbelly of American life. And, like Hammett, Lehane's work is universally appealing and usually wins not only awards from literary critics but also finds its way into films, which like **The Maltese Falcon**, are the new cinema noir classics of the American film heritage.

A native of the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, his award-winning noir novels are set largely in his hometown, where he continues to live today.

His first book, **A Drink Before the War** was released in 1994 and introduced a series with the recurring characters Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro. It won the 1995 Shamus Award for Best First P.I. Novel. The fourth book in this series, **Gone, Baby, Gone**, was adapted for a film of the same title in 2007 directed by Ben Affleck and starring Casey Affleck and Michelle Monaghan as Kenzie and Gennaro. Commenting on the movie after receiving a sneak peak, Lehane said, "I saw the movie and it's terrific. I wasn't gonna say anything if I didn't like it but it's really terrific."

During a live interview by Otto Penzler at **Words & Music: BIG READ, 2009**, Lehane was asked if he would be doing the screen play for his novel **Shutter Island**, a film which was in the works at the time, and said he has never wanted to write the screenplays for the films based on his own books, "because," he said, "I have no desire to operate on my own child."

He went on to say, "They give me a lot of money to adapt my work for the screen. If I like the final results, I say so. If I don't like, I just don't say anything. But I don't interfere!"

His *New York Times* bestseller **Mystic River** was adapted for an Academy Award-winning film of the same name directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, and Kevin Bacon. And, like Alfred Hitchcock, Lehane makes a minute cameo appearance, seen waving from a car in the parade scene at the end of the film. The novel itself was a finalist for the PEN/Winship Award and won the Anthony Award and the

Barry Award for Best Novel, the Massachusetts Book Award in Fiction, and France's Prix Mystère de la Critique.

Gone, Baby, Gone was adapted into an Academy Award-nominated film and **Shutter Island** was turned into another box office hit film by Martin Scorsese, released in 2010. That film starred Leonardo DiCaprio playing U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels, "who is investigating the disappearance of a murderess who escaped from a hospital for the criminally insane and is presumed to be hiding on the remote Shutter Island." Mark Ruffalo played opposite DiCaprio as U.S. Marshal Chuck Aule. Although, once again, the screenplay adaptation was by a third party—Laeta Kalogridis in this case—Lehane did sign on as an executive producer for **Shutter Island**.

Although still dealing with the brutality of the

American experience in poor neighborhoods of major cities like Boston, his *magnum opus*, **The Given Day**, described as the new great American novel, when released in 2008, was a departure. It is a generations-spanning epic rather than a mystery thriller.

During his interview with Penzler at **Words & Music**, Lehane described his richly dense saga in a reference to *Moby Dick* as his own "great white whale." He said it had taken him nearly six years to come to grips

with the material and write it. The novel centers on the 1919 Boston police strike but it has a national sweep. "The strike changed everything....it had a big effect on the unionization movement, and Prohibition came on the heels of that, followed by Calvin Coolidge promising to break the unions. And all of that is directly linked to what's going on now..." **The Given Day** could be the first of a trilogy, Lehane said during the **Words & Music** interview. He said then that he would either write a sequel "or take a break from the cops and return to Patrick and Angie." In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* a few months later, Lehane revealed that he was working on a sixth book in the popular Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro series which enjoys something of a cult following. His first addition to the series in 11 years, the book, titled **Moonlight Mile**, is a lot less ambitious in scope than **The Given Day**. It was released in 2010 and of this latest in the Angie, Patrick series, *Kirkus Reviews* had this to say:

...its wise-cracking dialogue, page-turning plot and protagonists who are all the more likable for their flaws extend the addictive spirit of the series. "When your



daughter asks what you stand for, don't you want to be able to answer her?" Angie challenges her husband. To do so, he becomes enmeshed with the Russian Mob, shifting allegiances and a wise-beyond-her-years, 16-year-old Amanda, who rubs his nose in the aftereffects of his earlier involvement with her. By the breathless climax, it may appear that this book is the last in the series. But Lehane has fooled us before.

Lehane's first play, **Coronado**, which debuted in New York in 2005, is based on his acclaimed short story *Until Gwen*, which was originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* and was selected for both **The Best American Short Stories** and **The Best Mystery Short Stories of 2005**. He wrote and directed an independent film called **Neighborhoods** similar to **Good Will Hunting**, given its setting in Boston's working class areas like Southie and Dorchester, but completed and screened, more than a year before **Good Will Hunting**.

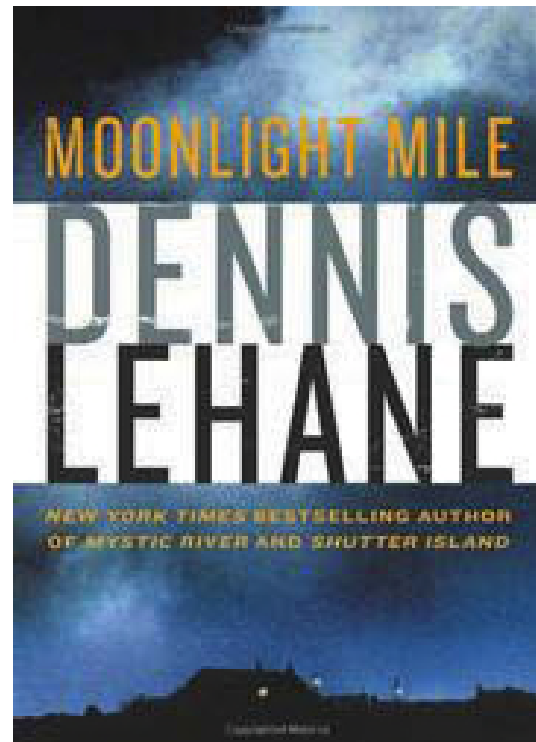
Lehane joined the writing staff of the HBO drama series **The Wire** for its third season in 2004 and wrote the teleplay for the episode *Dead Soldiers* from a story by series creator and executive producer **David Simon**. (David Simon produced and directed the popular HBO series **Treme**, set in post-Katrina New Orleans, too.) Lehane made a cameo appearance in the third season episode, *Middle Ground*, as Sullivan, an officer in charge of special equipment. Lehane has commented that he was

This world can only give me reminders of what I don't have, can never have, didn't have for long enough.

—Dennis Lehane, *Shutter Island*

impressed by the show's creators David Simon and Ed Burns, especially with their ear for authentic street slang. Lehane returned as a writer for the fourth season in 2006 and wrote the teleplay for the episode *Refugees* from a story he co-wrote with producer Ed Burns. Lehane and the writing staff won the Writers Guild of America (WGA) Award for Best Dramatic Series at the February 2008 ceremony and the 2007 Edgar Award for Best Television Feature/Mini-Series Teleplay for their work on the fourth season. Lehane remained a writer for the fifth and final season in 2008 and wrote the episode *Clarifications*. Lehane and the writing staff were nominated for the WGA Award award for Best Dramatic Series again at the February 2009 ceremony but **Mad Men** beat them that year.

Previously married to Sheila Lawn, an advocate for the elderly for the city of Boston, currently, he is



married to Dr. Angela Bernardo, with whom he has one daughter. He is a graduate of Boston College High School (a Boston Jesuit prep school), Eckerd College, where he says he found his passion for writing; and the graduate program in creative writing at Florida International University in Miami.

Since achieving literary and cinematic success, Lehane has turned to teaching. He taught fiction writing and serves as a member of the board of directors for a low-residency MFA program sponsored by Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, MA. He also has been involved with the Solstice Summer Writers' Conference at Boston's Pine Manor College and has taught advanced fiction writing at Harvard University, where his classes quickly filled up. In May 2005, Lehane was presented with an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Eckerd College and was appointed to Eckerd's Board of Trustees later that year. As of June 2006, he was living temporarily in St. Petersburg, Florida, and teaching as writer-in-residence at Eckerd (usually during the spring semester), where he also co-directs the Writers in Paradise conference each January. In Spring 2009 Lehane became a Joseph E. Connor Award recipient and honorary brother of Phi Alpha Tau professional fraternity at Emerson College in Boston, MA. Phi Alpha Tau is the nation's first professional fraternity in the communicative arts. Other brothers and Connor Award recipients include Robert Frost, Elia Kazan, Jack Lemmon, Red Skelton, Edward R. Murrow, Yul Brynner, and Walter Cronkite. Lehane presented the commencement speech at Emmanuel College in Boston Massachusetts and was awarded an honorary degree by that institution in 2009.

—The Editors

Barbara Robinette Moss 1954 - 2009

One of the most successful of the Faulkner Society's gold medal winners was Barbara Robinette Moss, who won the Gold Medal for Best Essay in 1996. Jack Davis, former Vice President and troubleshooter for the Tribune Corporation and publisher of various of the company's newspapers, judged the competition that year and saw in her work star potential.

With Davis in her corner, as well as an agent, she found a publisher for her work, after her winning essay, *Near the Center of the Earth*, was expanded to full-length memoir. Jack's appraisal was right on target. The memoir, **Change Me into Zeus's Daughter**, was an overnight hit when it was released by Scribner and became a bestseller.

It is the story of Barbara's transformation from a child marred by an alcoholic father's abuse to a woman of character and artistic achievement. Barbara grew up in chaotic, poverty stricken circumstances in the red clay hills of Alabama with a wild-eyed, alcoholic, and horribly abusive father, a humble, long-suffering mother, along with a shanty full of rambunctious brothers and sisters. Moss became fascinated with art, a fascination which coincided with her desire to transform her "twisted mummy face," which grew askew due to abuse, malnutrition, and lack of medical and dental care. Gazing at the stars on a clear Alabama night, she wished to be the "goddess of beauty, much-loved daughter of Zeus."

She was able by sheer force of will to overcome the dreadful stumbling blocks of poverty, abuse, and disfigurement to achieve the education and artistic training that allowed her to gain national stature as a visual artist and to become a gifted, writer, a bestselling author. Concurrently, with the assistance of talented doctors and medical and dental procedures, Barbara's disfigurement was erased, her physical beauty restored.

Barbara, who was only 54, died October 9, 2009, of cancer. We mourn her passing and offer her family our sincere condolences. She was a member of the faculty of **Words & Music** on several occasions after her book was published, always working to help other women find themselves through writing as she did. She is buried at Anniston Memorial Gardens in Alabama.

Barbara was a widely acclaimed artist as well as a writer. Her art has been displayed in numerous galleries across the US. She received an MFA from Drake

University, Des Moines, Iowa, and a BFA from Ringling School of Art & Design, Sarasota, FL. She has participated in over one hundred juried art exhibitions, including the Los Angeles Printmaking Society, Contemporary American Printmakers, and the Museum of American Art Drawing, Midwest. She began writing while in graduate school at Drake University. She lived in New York City and Iowa City, Iowa.



After publication **Change Me into Zeus's Daughter**, Barbara won the 2002 Alabama Author Award for Nonfiction, sponsored by the Alabama Library Association, and the Iowa Authors Award 2000, sponsored by the Library Association of Des Moines Foundation. Scribner also published Barbara's second book, **Fierce**, released in October, 2004.

Change Me into Zeus's Daughter was been reviewed by many newspapers, including *The New York Times Book Review*, *The London Daily Telegraph*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, *Birmingham News*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Times Picayune*, and *USA Today*. Articles Barbara and her work appeared in *People Magazine*, *Elle*, *Allure*, *BiBA*, a French magazine, and *Biography Magazine*. She was a guest on *All Things Considered*, *Jackie Lyden*, the *Gary Robertson Show*, *BBC Radio, Scotland*, *The David Rothenburg Show*, *WBAI Radio New York*, and many others.

Barbara was born on December 16, 1954, in Pell City, AL, to Stewart Karl Moss and Doris Robinette Moss. Commenting on her life, Barbara said:

I was born and grew up in the rural south, moving from small town to small town in northern Alabama. My mother drew pictures to entertain her eight children. I declared myself an artist when I was in the second grade. Looking back, I realize it was a way to connect with my mother, a small part of her that one of my brothers and sisters hadn't already claimed. My interest in art and art making lasted long past the drawings Mother made of paper dolls and landscapes on scrap cardboard. I've always believed there was an angel watching over me. As a child of an abusive alcoholic, this belief was a great comfort. Houses that should have fallen down, waited patiently until after we had moved away. Fires that should have burned our tinderbox house to the ground, charred only one wall. My brothers and sisters and I walked through our perilous childhood unscathed. Oh, yes, there were angels present. Several, I imagine.

We imagine they are with her yet.

Ron Pincus

The 2009 ALIHOT for Community Service is awarded to **Ronald Pincus**, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of the Hotel Monteleone Corporation for his broadbased service in support of improving the business and cultural life of New Orleans.

Ron Pincus, is a native of St. Augustine, FL, where he excelled in all sports, learning the important principles of teamwork which he would later apply successfully in his career. He was All Conference on the football team and lettered on the baseball team, which won the 1954 Florida State Championship. In 2004, he was inducted into the St. John County Baseball Hall of Fame. Graduated from the University of Florida in 1959 with a BS in business administration; he completed a strategic management program conducted by Harvard Business School faculty in England; and served three years of active military duty as a Commissioned Army Officer. During part of his service he was stationed in New Orleans. After the Army, he practiced accounting in Washington, DC, then joined the management of the Grande Dame of Washington Hotels, The Mayflower, and began his career in the hotel industry, quickly moving through the ranks to become Assistant General Manager of the Hotel America in Washington.

His Army experience gave him a taste of New Orleans that he savored with pleasure and, when the opportunity arose, he accepted the position of Assistant General Manager with the Royal Orleans Hotel and was quickly promoted to Vice President and General Manager, a position he held for 21 years, during which he was host to the President and Vice President of the United States, assorted English and Continental royalty and countless celebrities. He also guided the hotel through many owner changes. While ownership changes usually result in dismissal of top management, Ron was General Manager for Hotel Corporation of America, Sonesta Hotels, Lex Service Group, Dunfy Hotels, Wharf Holdings, Ltd. of Hong Kong, and Omni Hotels. With Omni, he was promoted to Managing Director and Regional Vice President. During his tenure, the Royal Orleans consistently received the Mobil Four Star and AAA Four Diamond ratings and he received the prestigious Ivy Award from Institutions Magazine, given to restaurateurs who achieve high quality in cuisine and service, and in 1985 he received the Prix d' Elégance Award. In 1990, the late Billy Monteleone, Sr. enticed Ron to join the Hotel Monteleone as Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. Upon taking over the Monteleone's management, he embarked on an ambitious renovation program to upgrade the accommodations, while preserving the charm and historic significance of this National Historic Landmark. His management style has resulted in the the prestigious AAA Four Diamond rating, acceptance of the hotel as a member of Preferred Hotels, and the designation of the hotel as an American Literary Landmark. While restructuring the hotel's management and renovating the Monteleone with admirable taste, enough to keep

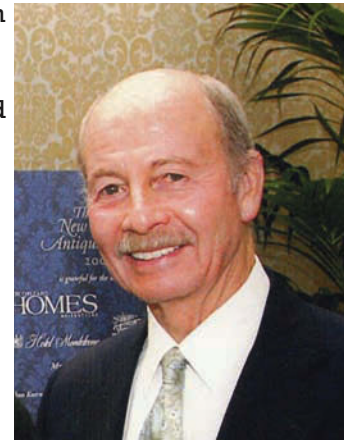
any six men busy, he has been a force in the hotel industry, New Orleans/Louisiana politics, education, health, and the arts, with special attention to the literary arts. In fact, it's not a stretch to say that the Faulkner Society would have folded after Katrina without his support.

His volunteer posts have included Twice President of the Louisiana Hotel & Lodging Association, Chairman of the Human Relations Committee of the American Hotel & Lodging Association, Commissioner of the New Orleans Morial Exhibition Hall and later President during the expansion phase, Vice Chairman of the New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation, Executive Committee of the Greater New Orleans Tourist and Convention Commission, Board of the Chamber of Commerce, Touro Infirmiry Board, Tulane Medical School Advisory Board, Advisory Board to establish the University of New Orleans School of Hotels, Restaurants & Tourism, Vieux Carre Alliance Board, College of Charleston Parent Advisory Council, Mayoral appointee to two Superbowl Task Force Committees. An active member of the Faulkner Society, regularly attending its programs and assisting us with rooms for visiting lecturers, Ron was reigned as Libris III, King of the Carnival Krewe of Libris, in 2008 with his wife, **Anne Simms Pincus**, current Chair of the Faulkner Society's Executive Board, as his consort, Thalia III.

Ron's courage, his fortitude, his concern for his guests and his staff were abundantly in evidence in the immediate aftermath of Katrina when he had the responsibility for the safety and welfare of his staff and hotel guests who weathered the storm there because they were unable to leave New Orleans in advance. Keep in mind that widespread looting and other acts of violence, including setting buildings like Canal Place on fire, were the rule of the day, the water had been cut off and sanitation was a major problem at the hotel, food and drinking water were running out. Ron paid for buses to come and pick up his guests to get them out of town to safety and the buses were commandeered and he had to start from scratch, using his wits to get the job done.

Ron is the epitome of the conscientious and, thus successful, businessman who understands the needs of his employees and treats them like members of his family; the civic and cultural leader who applies sound business judgment to community projects; and the devoted family man. He is a man who always rises to the occasion, no matter the difficulties he faces.

Ron Pincus is a legend in his own time.



John Biguenet



The 2009 ALIHOT for Literature is awarded to John Biguenet, for his contributions to all aspects of the literary arts—as a novelist and short story writer, a poet, playwright, translator, scholar, and teacher.

John Biguenet, a native New Orleanian, is a literary man for all seasons. He has written successfully in every important format of

literature. He is the author of **Oyster**, a novel, and **The Torturer's Apprentice: Stories**, a collection published by Ecco/HarperCollins in the U.S. and by Orion Books in the U.K. His fiction is published in Hebrew translation by Matar Publishing Company in Tel Aviv, in French translation by Éditions Albin Michel in Paris, and in Dutch translation by Uitgeverij Ailantus in Amsterdam. His work has been translated into many languages, including German.

Among his non-fiction books are **Foreign Fictions** (Random House), two volumes on literary translation (The University of Chicago Press), and **Strange Harbors**, an anthology of international literature in translation (Center for the Art of Translation). He has written for the radio, here and abroad. John's radio play **Wundmale**, which premiered on **Westdeutscher Rundfunk**, Germany's largest radio network, was rebroadcast by **Österreichischer Rundfunk**, the Austrian national radio and television network.

Two of his stories have been featured in Selected Shorts at Symphony Space on Broadway. *The Vulgar Soul* won the 2004 Southern New Plays Festival prize and was a featured production in 2005 at Southern Rep Theatre; he and the play were profiled in American Theatre magazine. His cycle of post-Katrina plays includes **Rising Water**, which was the winner of the 2006 National New Play Network Commission Award, a 2006 National Showcase of New Plays selection, and a 2007 recipient of an Access to Artistic Excellence development and production grant from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as the 2008 Big Easy Theatre Award for Best Original Play. The play has had seven productions around the country. **Shotgun**, the second play in his **Rising Water** cycle, premiered in 2009 at Southern Rep Theatre and it has won a 2009 National New Play Network Continued Life of New Plays Fund Award and is a 2009 recipient of an Access to Artistic Excellence development and production grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Productions

were mounted in 2010 at the Orlando Shakespeare Theater and Florida Studio Theatre. He was awarded a 2007 Marquette Fellowship for the writing of **Night Train**, which he then developed on a Studio Attachment at the National Theatre in London.

John was named 2008 Theatre Person of the Year at the Big Easy Theatre Awards. His work has received an O. Henry Award and a Harper's Magazine Writing Award among other distinctions, and his stories and essays have been reprinted or cited in **The Best American Mystery Stories**, **Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards**, **The Best American Short Stories**, and **Best Music Writing**.

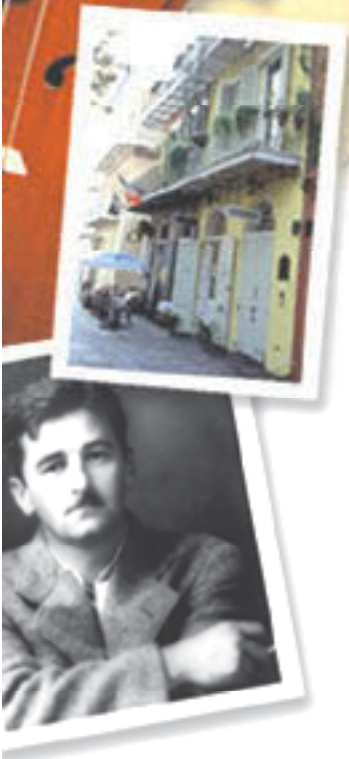
Named its first guest columnist by The New York Times, Biguenet has chronicled in both columns and videos his return to New Orleans after its catastrophic flooding and the efforts to rebuild the city. John and his wife Martha, a teacher at Metairie Country Day School, live in Lakeview and their home was inundated when the 17th Street Canal levee failed during Katrina. The flood destroyed everything, including their family memorabilia, all of his personal papers and, "the thing that broke my heart," his collection of signed first editions and other books in his library. Like many New Orleanians, the Biguenets were forced to make mortgage payments on homes they couldn't live in and rent a house to live in while their own home was being gutted and rebuilt. To say it was a difficult time for them is a gross understatement.

Through it all, John retained his sense of humor, his charming demeanor, and forged ahead to new levels of creativity. When he spoke at the **My New Orleans** event sponsored by the Society on the first anniversary of Katrina at St. Louis Cathedral, 750 people attended and gave him a well-deserved standing ovation. An exceptional translator and teacher, having served twice as president of the American Literary Translators Association and as writer-in-residence at various universities, he currently is the Robert Hunter Distinguished University Professor at Loyola University in New Orleans. During the life of the Faulkner Society and Words & Music, John has been among those men and women who have given much to the organization in order to lend realistic assistance to aspiring authors. He has judged several categories of the William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition, most recently the Short Story by a High School Category for 2009, and has been a member of numerous round table discussions, always offering intelligent advice to new authors or an intellectually interesting idea to readers in the audience.

He is a Renaissance man, a good man to all he encounters.

John Biguenet is, indeed, a legend in his own time!

The American Dream



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*Media mogul and philanthropist **Ted Turner**, the contemporary entrepreneur who most clearly symbolizes the American Dream realized, was the Faulkner Society's special guest of honor for **Words & Music, 2008***

The American Dream:

Keynote Address by Jack Fuller,
Former Publisher of the Chicago Tribune and
CEO of the Tribune Corporation.

Words & Music, Nov. 21, 2008

In 2008 our democracy made a special distribution, a renewal of that right, electing In November, 2008, our Democracy made a choice for President who embodies the essence of the American dream: that in this place you can be whoever you want to be.

In America you learn that you need not feel that you were born to an identity; you get to choose one if you want to. History and personal experience offer up examples that reinforce this lesson, at least if you are white and male: The destitute immigrant who teaches himself English, builds a thriving business, and sends his sons and daughters to F. Scott Fitzgerald's Princeton, where the rich may be different than you and me, but not in kind. The farmer's child educated in a one-room schoolhouse who goes on to win a Nobel Prize. The boy born in a log cabin, who receives only 18 months of formal education, and becomes the greatest American President and one of its greatest writers. Or for that matter, the country kid with slicked back hair and wiggling hips who hooks into the power of a white man singing black and rides it to unimaginable fame and riches.

Jay Gatsby took in the lesson whole. The son of "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" from North Dakota, at the age of 17 he saw a yacht anchor in Lake Superior and decided to change his name from Gatz to Gatsby and transform himself into a teenaged "Platonic conception of himself." Madonna must have had such a moment.

Perhaps Barack Obama did, too. And the first act of his drama has ended very well, indeed. Unlike Gatsby, he buttressed the identity he imagined himself into with real and hard-won achievements. A person does not become president of the Harvard Law Review through the manipulation of images, after all, though as we know, a person can become president of the United States that way.

With Obama's extraordinary election this nation—a larger proportion of it, in fact, than the majority he won—was lifted up. That night in Grant Park just down the road from where I live, so close I could hear Obama's amplified voice through my windows as I watched him on television, he greeted a throng of people weeping with joy and hope, and acknowledged that he and they had reshaped, even redeemed, American history.

He spoke explicitly of the American dream at his victory celebration in Grant Park, as he had so often during the campaign. "If there is anyone out there," he began, "who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our



Jack Fuller, author of *Abbeville* (and an accomplished jazz musician), served as President of Tribune Publishing Co., Inc., from May 1997 to January 1, 2005. Mr. Fuller also served as President of the Inter-American Press Association. Previously, he was Publisher, Editor, and CEO of the Chicago Tribune from 1989 until becoming corporate president. He won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1986. He has been a Director of Torstar Corporation and a Director of BrassRing LLC. He serves as a Director

of Cantigny Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and McCormick Tribune Foundation. He has served as trustee for both the University of Chicago and the Field Museum and a Member of the Inter-American Dialog. A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he holds a Bachelor's degree in journalism from Northwestern University and he earned his law degree at Yale Law School.

founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

He—and we—proved that the American dream can come to life even if your father is a black Muslim from Kenya. For many people that night America actually began to awaken from the awful part of its history, the part that even in its cradle had made a mockery of the promise of its birth as a free nation—that all are born equal here.

And yet, and yet. There is Gatsby. We must remember that he, too, embodies the American dream. Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths does, too, as does Graham Greene's **Quiet American**, Robert Penn Warren's Willie Stark, and if you'll permit me to say so, Karl Schumpeter in my novel, **Abbeville**.

In our mortal human days a dream's transcendence of reality can only be temporary. As in literature, so too in life there are forces always working to turn dreams into their opposite. There is war. There is sheer randomness—which is one of the underrated horrors of war. There are the great waves of history—famine and pestilence, inflation and Depression. The world resists dreams. And so does human nature. Let us start there.

One of the great mysteries of **The Great Gatsby** is that before surrendering completely to illusion in order to win the heart of a woman whose "voice is full of money," Gatsby actually did something extraordinary and very real. During World War I, where he fought in the battle of the Argonne Forest, which left almost a quarter of a million men dead or wounded, he rose to the rank of major in charge of a division's machineguns. His Boswell, Nick Carraway, served in a machinegun battalion there, too. In fact, the very night the two first meet at Gatsby's dream of a home, Gatsby recognizes Nick from that nightmare time. But by Nick's account they barely speak of it, and what they say refers only to some "wet, gray little villages in France."

One might conclude that this element is just a grace note in Fitzgerald's masterpiece, nothing worth dwelling on. And yet, since wars often arise because of the attempt to universalize the American dream and then often, as after the war to end all wars, turn the dreamers bitter, the very paucity of reference in **The Great Gatsby** merits attention.

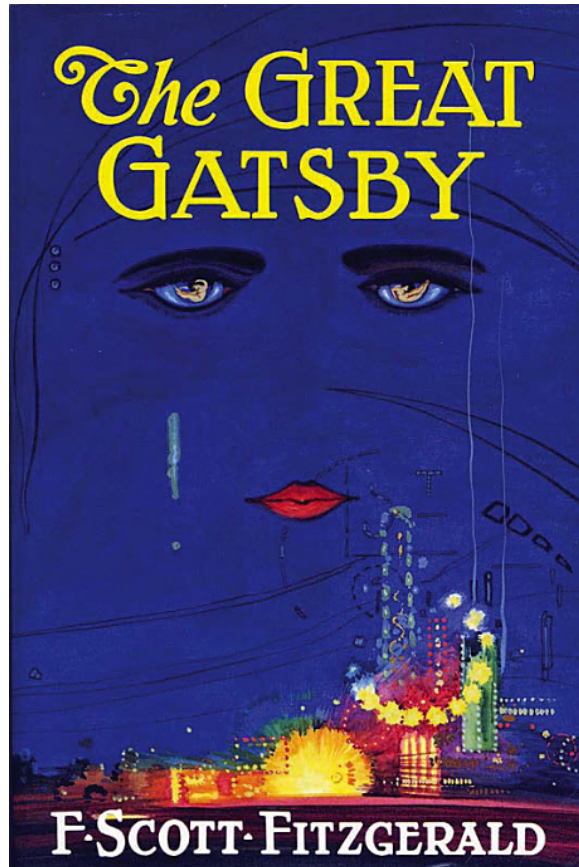
It is passing strange, isn't it, that two men who were there when 250,000 other men were butchered, barely refer to this shared horror? Or what it did to their dreams? For myself, I somehow just know without being told whenever I am speaking with someone who has tasted the blood of combat, maybe because before saying a word to him, we are already intimate enough that I know some of what visits him in sleep. So I am drawn to speak to him differently than I do to anyone else. How far the fields of battle must have seemed from New Haven, where Nick went to college before the war. In my own personal experience it was an awful, long way back to New Haven from Vietnam when I made the journey to pick up with a law school career interrupted by the draft. But I was more Gatsby than Nick, nobody from nowhere, and more Obama than either of them, I suppose, though I didn't even try to write my way onto the *Yale Law Journal*, concentrating instead on writing a war novel. The first Fuller to graduate from college, let alone go to New Haven, I was, like Obama, frantically inventing and reinventing myself all the way. I remember thinking, during my first weeks in class there, among the Rhodes scholars and graduates of Fitzgerald's alma mater, people prepared for New Haven at Exeter and Choate, prepared from birth, that this was a club that would not have me as a member. In contrast, Nick was to the manor born, even though it was a manor nestled in the Midwest, not Boston or New York which, I first learned in New Haven, do not believe Copernicus was really referring to them.

Given the cushioned embrace of Nick's childhood and the rude, jarring disruption that military service must have made in Gatsby's Platonic conception of himself, you might have thought that the war had moved into the very center of the moral and psychological universe for both of them. I know that for quite a while it did for me. But all Fitzgerald allows Nick to admit is that the experience

left him "restless" to leave the Midwest, which he says "now seemed the ragged edge of the universe." He is not the first Wall Street bond salesman who got there after having this thought. And as for Gatsby, one can only guess what the war meant to him. We know he yearned to return to Daisy and her money voice. Perhaps he learned a trade in the Army that was useful in the criminal career which provided him the capital to establish the persona he hoped would win her. But despite having shared the horribly vivid experience of the Argonne Forest, Nick

Carraway somehow has no insight into how it shaped either of them.

Contrast Fitzgerald's portrayal of the hidden, abiding traces of battle with Hemingway's depiction of the Great War's unbloodied casualties, Harold Krebs in the story *Soldier's Home*, for example. Krebs doesn't talk to others about his experience in the Great War any more than Nick and Gatsby do. But Hemingway, unlike Fitzgerald, tells us why. In order to be listened to, Krebs finds, he has to lie. By the time he comes home, everyone already thinks he knows exactly what the war was like, and they expect his accounts to accord with their second-hand knowledge. I know this cultural phenomenon. By the time I returned to New Haven in 1971, everyone knew everything about Vietnam. Most thought my first-hand experience probably meant I really understood less than they did from their purity of it. A classmate who had been a machine-gunner in the infantry once advised me that if I joined the Vietnam Veterans Against



the War it would help me reacclimate. But I'm not a joiner, so I shut up and wrote what I hoped would be the truth of what I knew, whatever others thought they did. For Hemingway's Krebs the lies he is expected to tell sour the truth he carries within him from the battlefield, truth about "times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought about them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else...." This is one of war's most powerful constraints on dreams: what it teaches you about yourself when in the abyss you discover just what and how much you are capable of feeling cool and clear about. Clarity about human nature, your own nature, is a great puncturer of illusion, American or otherwise.

Krebs's silence not only guards the clear, dark truth of his wartime experience, but also nestles within it his utter lack of belief that after war doing anything else really matters, his certainty that no God worth believing in would have created the horror he had seen, his loss

of hope that there is anything in the world—the world without illusion—that he might truly love. Krebs has no ambition to make himself into anyone, even back into who he used to be. So he is very different from Gatsby and Carraway. To my ear it is Krebs who expresses what is genuine about how fallen mortal humans, who know they are fallen, fail to fit the American dream. But then again, Hemingway had actually experienced war; Fitzgerald had only experienced men who had experienced it.

In my novel, **Abbeville**, the central character, Karl Schumpeter, also takes his American dream up against the guns of the Great War. He volunteers to serve in a private American ambulance corps (as Hemingway and John Dos Passos did). And in short order he finds himself in the trenches with the French Army at the Battle of Verdun.

Until that war, Karl's life had been full of material success. A large man in a small place, he had taken it as his personal dream to transform his hometown of Abbeville, a tiny farm community in Central Illinois, into a place worthy of the wondrous 20th Century. He had introduced the latest in communications and financial techniques, allowing the farmers in and around Abbeville to hold their own against the impersonal forces of the Chicago grain market. He had installed next to his grain elevator a dynamo, a small version of the one that had amazed him (as it had amazed Henry Adams) powering

Fortune in fact promises nothing except to be a test, a test the outcome of which man's fragility makes anything but preordained. Obviously this is not what Barack Obama meant when he said that America is a place where anything is possible. When it comes to pure chance, everywhere is a place like that.

the White City at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. With this dynamo in Abbeville he let there be light.

But for multiple reasons, including his intense desire to prove that he is pure American, that he does not hold an allegiance his German name might suggest, he feels the need to join the great cause in France. So he puts his thriving business in trusted hands and goes to war.

But having volunteered in order to help the living, Karl soon finds that because of the unspeakable scale of the carnage at Verdun, he is tending more to the dead. In the course of trying during a flood to find somewhere decently to bury the French soldiers in his care, he comes upon a Catholic Church. After interring the dead

soldiers in the church's catacombs he asks the curé to hear his confession, even though he is a Protestant. Once in the darkness of the confessional he tells the curé his shameful secret: though he has taken a French *nom de guerre*, he is actually as German as the brutes who killed the men he and the curé had just buried.

You are guilty of nothing, son, the curé said through the confessional screen. We were all born something. French. German. American. Not one of us had any say. Go home. Be with your lovely wife and your new child. And only remember that God's grace is nothing you need to repay, nor is punishment the proof of sin. This is the first great mystery, my son, and it is only made bearable by the second, which is love.

You see, the curé said, fortune is not the outcome of a test. Good or bad, it is the test.

But wait. God does not play dice with the American dream. Karl had been raised to believe that worldly success was God smiling, that making dreams come true in America's 20th Century only required the faith to dare. But the curé's words drive home to him the heedless indifference of chance to the diaphanous aspirations of men. No amount of creating your own identity can save it from the bullet that ruffles the hair of the man next to you and then hits you in the temple. And no matter who you decide to be, the grinding, impersonal cycles of nature and history will have their way with you. Fortune in fact promises nothing except to be a test, a test the outcome of which man's fragility makes anything but preordained. Obviously this is not what Barack Obama meant when he said that America is a place where anything is possible. When it comes to pure chance, everywhere is a place like that.

I will come back to this theme of randomness and other realities colliding with the dream a little later. But first I want to pursue the idea of the dream as a trial.

American literature, notably **The Great Gatsby**, throbs with examples of how Americans can fail the test. A hearty perennial among American narratives involves the sad consequences of people's decision about what material to use to forge their identities. The ore is often money, which requires tempering by the bitch goddess, success, which when it is its own object leads to an emptiness at the core of the identity created—like a sword imperfectly annealed. Such an instrument inevitably breaks when its strength is most severely tested. And this leads to American tragedy. Dreiser focused on the material flaw in the dream, whether he was dealing with business titans or flyspecks like Clyde Griffiths. He is hardly alone in this literary focus, because possessions always whisper to us that they are an end, and they turn out never, ever to be enough.

But in **The Great Gatsby** F. Scott Fitzgerald managed to see something more profound than materialism's threat to the American dream. After all, by the time the book begins Gatsby already has great wealth. The way in which he fails the test is not in wanting things. His downfall is illusion, that is, what he wants things for. His illusion is that he can create the thing that

wealth once was, but create it not out of bloodlines and inheritance but rather through the distracting luster of stars of stage and screen, movie people, celebrities, create it out of a celluloid version of Platonism. And Daisy sees right through it.

"She was appalled by West Egg," Nick tells us at the end of *Gatsby's* last party, "this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing."

The old euphemisms hid the fact that you were wealthy because you didn't earn it. Because you didn't make yourself. You simply were. This wasn't the American dream. This was what the American dream dreamed of refuting.

The way *Gatsby* failed the test was the very same way Brittany Spears did, the way Donald Trump does. The path they and countless other Americans since *Gatsby* have chosen has been to turn themselves into people who are known for being known. That strategy is doomed. It takes pure American individualism and self-reliance, it takes the opportunity to become anything you want to be, and turns it over to the crowd. Who shall I make myself into? Well, whoever will attract attention right now. Tomorrow? Don't worry. That's the second act.

This is the identity of no identity, the identity of who do I need to be to have you look at me, of being mentioned rather than being respected, the identity of any publicity is better than no publicity.

You see, this dream is in reality a vacuum. And when it draws the dreamer and those around him catastrophically into its vortex, as it does in Fitzgerald's classic, not even light escapes. When folks stop looking, the man self-made of illusion simply no longer exists. You could go blind reading all the scholarly discussion of the metaphor of vision in **The Great Gatsby**. So I won't dwell on it for long. But remember what the one-yard high, disembodied eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on a fading billboard on the road between West Egg and New York look upon: a valley of ashes. In this valley lies everyone who failed the test by believing that in America the only way they can be is to be perceived.

Now back to the intractable stuff of reality. This part of my remarks takes as its epigraph the words of President Obama. "America is a place where all things are possible."

The very conception of an independent America, the "Platonic self-conception" of the Founders of the American Republic, was that they were creating something utterly new in human history. Well, read in the political discourse of the Greeks and Romans and the upsurging humanism of the Enlightenment, they truly believed that they could take these ideas, or better said, take pieces from among them, and alloy from them a living, durable new reality here. In America anything was possible, even if it had ultimately failed everywhere else

in human history that it had been tried.

The miracle is the extent to which these extraordinary men succeeded. Asked what the Constitutional Convention had wrought, wry old Ben Franklin said, "A Republic, if you can keep it." And so far, incredibly, we have kept it, though for much of its history to date it was a Republic only for propertied white men. But still at least something of a Republic. Is it any wonder that thenceforth we Americans have had such a grandiose belief in ourselves?

Of course, as Franklin's remark suggests, there were skeptics from the very start. One of my favorite quotations comes from a letter written by George Washington, reflecting upon the way the directly democratic state legislatures of the Articles of Confederation period had made a botch of things by following every popular whim, running headlong over individual rights. "We have, probably," Gen. Washington wrote to John Jay, "had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation."

Not much chance that Washington had, not after Valley Forge. But others did lean toward the idea that humans were more perfectible than the barbarous weight of human history might otherwise suggest. Thomas Jefferson is usually the example given of one who held the Rousseauian view that in human institutions, not in human nature, is to be found the flaw. But even in Jefferson there must have been doubt. Otherwise he would not have insisted that the fundamental law of the Constitution enumerate the human rights that no legislature, no matter how much it reflected the majority will of the time, would be permitted to violate. Perfectible, but not entirely to be trusted.

Despite this tension in its origins, the American idea that it had started afresh and has become the nation those ingenious Founders wanted it to be has had great consequence. We have believed it so deeply that we have repeatedly gone to war professing to promote the American dream's universality. To Europeans this has looked like pathetic innocence. To others who did not share in the Enlightenment, it has more often seemed like imperialism.

American literature has drawn deeply from this element of our national culture. Henry James made a career of examining it in microscopic detail. Mark Twain had his jingoistic Connecticut Yankee romp through King Arthur's Court satirizing it. But it was British writer Graham Greene who gave American innocence its fiercest drubbing.

One night home from war in New Haven, I was poking around in the stacks of the law library when I came across a bound volume of old numbers of *Newsweek* from the mid-1950s. In it was a bitter review of Greene's prescient novel, **The Quiet American**, about what was to become of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. "Innocence," Graham Greene famously wrote of the novel's title character, "is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm." The review, which called the book anti-American, complained that the

The American Dream Novel: *The Great Gatsby*

time had come for Europeans to wake up to the fact that the United States had matured in its role as leader of the Free World. Well, it hadn't. **The Quiet American** wasn't anti-American. But it was anti-American dream.

Greene was going after the part of the dream that tells us not only that we can remake ourselves into some Platonic conception but that we can remake material reality as well. In the 19th Century the practical, tinkerer genius of American inventors and the businessmen who exploited their gizmos reinforced this national idea of itself. Though World War I disillusioned those who engaged in it and the Depression shook the country's confidence, the victory in World War Two made it seem that reality writ large—the future, history, all of it—could be made to yield to the audacious American ability to take big chances and do great, universal things that nobody had ever been able to do before. Karl Schumpeter in **Abbeville**, learned to believe in a version of this from his Uncle John, to whose logging camp he was sent by his cautious father to learn something of business beyond the fields of Central Illinois.

"Without risk, there is no business," said Uncle John, wiping his lips on a handkerchief. "You borrow money to buy rights to a territory, hire a skeleton crew in the summer to scout it. Then you wait for the freeze. If it comes late, you lose precious days. If the snow doesn't fall, the rivers don't rise in the spring to float the logs. These things are variable, but the interest on that borrowed money is as relentless as the current. Many have drowned."

"It seems a shame to have to borrow," said Karl, his father's son. "The need for capital is what has kept every lumberjack out here from going into business against me," said Uncle John. "That and the memory of 1857 and 1873, when everything collapsed and the less you had the less you lost."

"On the farm it's different," said Karl. "We have the land."

Uncle John looked at him.

"Look around you. Land is everywhere," he said. "No, I'm afraid that to make money, you have to play with fire. And the closer you get to it, the bigger the payoff." After the season concludes, Karl leaves the denuded hills of Michigan to pursue his business studies further in his uncle's commodities firm in Chicago. His uncle puts him to work trading grain futures on the Board of Trade. Karl earns a lot of money, borrows more, then returns to Abbeville where investing when everyone else is retreating pays off grandly for him at first. He even starts a bank. But the fire that had served him turns out to be more than he can control. Comes the Depression and he loses everything, including his freedom. Whatever American innocence in him that had survived the Great War finally yields. "The Depression," Karl now understands, "was the sum of millions of individual flaws. History was as relentless as a force of nature, but in this case what man suffered, he made."

What is an American to do when he has lost the dream? That is the question at the heart of **Abbeville**. The

man who asks it is Karl's grandson, but only after he loses everything when the dot.com bubble bursts. He asks it because Karl Schumpeter, despite everything he had gone through, was the happiest man his grandson had ever known.

I won't try to sum up what Karl discovered on the other side of the American dream. But I will read one more passage that may suggest part of it. On a trip with his grandson and son-in-law to his favorite river, Karl has one last chance to practice the art he had first learned there—casting to trout with a fly.

He stood in the current, thinking about all that had been swept away and all that had drifted to him unearned. He took several steps until the force of the water was about as much as he dared. When he was younger, he had liked to wade in after dark, lusting for the big fish that only then came out to feed. In truth he was also attracted by the black pull of the current. It had been at this place, surrounded by the wasteland left by logging, that he had first felt the darkness at the center of things. He had felt it again in France. Then in prison. . . . Now it came to him once more as he stood up to his fragile old knees in the black, flowing water. He closed his eyes and felt a great, perpetual movement drawing him. He barely had strength to resist. Nor did he want to. Eyes closed, he knew this would be his last time in the river. But he did not feel the least sense of loss. He accepted darkness as a part of the cycle of light, and he was ready. The recognition of this came to him mysteriously from the depths, like the grace of a fish to a well-presented fly.

We are all going to need to recognize some of that grace in the days ahead. Despite having as our President-elect a man with as formidable an intellect as any president since Lincoln, a man who seems to have his legs firmly under him, to have found an identity that is secure, almost serene, who is in fact the embodiment of the very best of the American dream, the reality he will face in office will test him and us severely. We seem sure to undergo over the next year or more the worst economic times since the Great Depression. Our adventures abroad have not gone well, and war is again a seemingly endless national curse. The "end of history," proclaimed upon the fall of Soviet communism by Francis Fukuyama in one of the most fatuous phrases the American dream ever coughed up, turned out to be barely a pause.

The very hope that Barak Obama personifies leads to grand expectations of him that he will surely be wise enough to disappoint. How will he lead us through this grim reality? By summoning our very best angels to improve the tolerance and equality of opportunity throughout this country, yes. With confidence that we can get through it because we have before, yes. Exemplifying an indomitable spirit, yes. Being decisive about tough choices, yes.

Demanding sacrifice, yes. But, please God, let him beware of American dreams.

Why Gatsby Still Rocks By Shari Jean Stauch

Some time ago, I'm working furiously on the website for the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, typing in endless news about their participation in the **BIG READ** featuring **The Great Gatsby**. And then it happens. After about the 80th time I type "Gatsby" it occurs to me that I haven't read this classic myself since... yikes... high school? Seems like a damned good time to pick up my son's dog-eared copy and see if I could refresh my memory.

I mean, what was all the fuss about?

Well, they say youth is wasted on the young. Let me amend that; so are the classics. Seriously. Who pays proper homage to the Brontes and Faulkner and Fitzgerald when you're a high school senior battling SATs and college admissions forms and carving out time for Friday night lights? I sure didn't take **Gatsby** very seriously back then, though I liked the story well enough. Of course we all liked it a little more when our English class got to watch the Redford rendition (especially the girls). Twenty-some years later and to my utter shame, about all I remember of the story is that Jay Gatsby was hot.

I finally get around to opening the book late one night, figuring I'll knock off the first obligatory chapter, then maybe squeeze in a few here and there between an ever-hectic schedule. I turn the first few pages ever so gingerly, as if the paper might crumble to dust in my hands, handling it like my treasured 1715 copy of Milton's **Paradise Lost**. I forget this is a 2007 reprint, one of so many reprints, not the coveted original. I begin to read in earnest then, turning the pages with increasing speed, immersing myself back in that pre-depression era, that crystalline recording of the American Dream. Two hours later I look up at the clock and say, "Oh, crap."

It's that good.

Two days later I'm watching a favorite movie, *Up Close and Personal*, and I get a Gatsby jab in the ribs. Twenty years after Robert Redford's appearance in the film version of **Gatsby**, his appearance in this

film as Warren Justice quotes a famed Gatsby line; "Her voice is full of money... that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it..." I'm jazzed to know where the line came from before he explains it.

But beyond the cheap thrill of feeling well read, I'm reveling in the rediscovery of Gatsby's treasure trove of strong characters, solid storytelling, and enduring lines. A true classic is one that stands the test of time, and as I read it through again – this time for pure enjoyment and not homework – I can't help but think of Rod Stewart crooning, "You're ageless, timeless, lace and fineness; You're beauty and elegance."

I mean, Rod *must* have been singing about

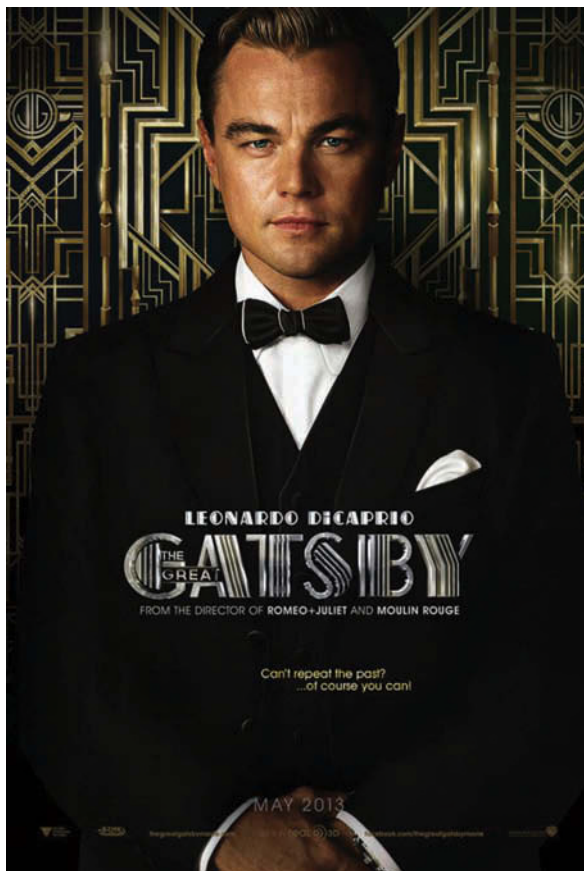
Daisy Buchanan. Pluck her out of 1924 from whence she came and the archetype still resonates. In fact, the Redford film version of *The Great Gatsby* released an entire fifty years after the book, in 1974, the third film rendition after less successful attempts in 1926 and 1949. And, 25 years later, a fourth rendition was born, this one featuring Mia Sorvino in Daisy's famed role. At the rate of a Gatsby film every 25 or so years, my sound prediction is that there'll be another before the great book celebrates its 100th birthday.

At its core **The Great Gatsby** is a love story, the attempt of Jay Gatsby to "... recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy." But it's so much more, and all of it relevant to today. After all, is the slice of life given us in *Gatsby*, "symbolic and manifest of all the pre-crash hubris and

prosperity that engulfed America at the time" not unlike today's threshold of uncertain economic times? We drink champagne and resurrect cocktails and jazz as we seek to thwart off our own fears and desperation and find meaning where there may be none. Or as Nick puts it so eloquently, "I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound."

Need more proof of Gatsby's 21st century relevance? How about Tom Buchanan's take on world affairs? "Civilization's going to pieces... I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things."

Or take this classic line; "I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything... Sophisticated — God, I'm sophisticated!" Daisy





Shari Stauch in Florence with her children,
Megan and Jake

Who's to say he's not peering over your shoulder now as you read these words about him.

Authors, regardless of which realm or reality they are in at the moment, love nothing better than to be remembered.

Shari Stauch has been involved in publishing, marketing and PR for 33 years. She is a frequent contributor to *Words & Music* and five-time finalist, with first-runner-up finishes in both *Novel-in-Progress* and *Essay*. Her firm, *Where Writers Win*, works with emerging authors to provide marketing, websites, training and vetted resources to set authors apart in a crowded marketplace. Shari works with both authors and indie publishers/agents to expand their clients' platforms before, during and after publication.

Quotes To Live By

I'm inclined to reserve my judgments. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone ... just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.

**—F. Scott Fitzgerald,
The Great Gatsby**

Buchanan says... or is that Paris Hilton?

Or, as those on Wall Street can attest, "Can't repeat the past? ... Why of course you can!" — That's the great Jay Gatsby himself waxing prophetic.

Think of those financial company CEOs with the golden parachutes as you read on:

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..."

Hmmm... F. Scott Fitzgerald may have penned the words, but surely Bill O'Reilly or Anderson Cooper has said something similar in the past few months?

Yes, that's the inherent joy (or inexhaustible charm) of revisiting *Gatsby*, or picking it up for the first time — even if it's homework. You'll find, as I have, a voice that resonates with such power today, it's hard to believe it was written — dare I say it — nearly a century ago.

My own favorite line? Ah, that's easy:

"There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired."

And so I'll leave you with this strong recommendation to settle in with your own copy of *The Great Gatsby*, and a fond wish; that ole Fitz could join us in New Orleans to celebrate with us, the genius of his master work.

Then again, who's to say he won't be with us...

The Intersection

By Christine Murphey

At the crossroads of Washington and Prytania a traffic light flips from one color to the next presiding over its empty corner. After school lets out cars begin to stack up and wait their turn for the green. New Orleans' reds and yellows break their sail; only a system error would signal an unwavering go-ahead such as Gatsby defined the light on the other side, a constant green at the end of Daisy's pier. I've sat with chicory and cream in the shaded coffeehouse on the corner to write in notebooks and edit manuscripts over the years before walking home through the cemetery across the street, if it was open.

When I was 22 I found refuge in another graveyard next door to a century-old rowhouse I lived in that summer with 11 other young women on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown. I had already read most of Fitzgerald's novels by then and canonized him into my private communion of saints. The Georgetown headstones saved me when periodically levels of estrogen built up and blew me out of the house over to their sacred grounds to write.

It wasn't till ten years later that I happened on F. Scott and Zelda's tombstone in the St. Mary's Catholic Church graveyard in Rockville, MD, home also of a weekly 12-step meeting held at noon, which I attended. I'd sit and eat lunch beside the headstone. No one was ever there. My audience was always private. I'd contemplate how my life had veered away from theirs, became concerned with sobriety and jobs I had trouble holding. But then, I liked to hold them too those early days and would forget how they too, spiraled, landed, survived for a while.

Fitzgerald rented a room on Prytania beside Lafayette Cemetery #1 in New Orleans for less than a month in January of 1920. Perhaps the cemetery and the stillness of its marble houses, the same one I'm fond of walking through, sealed the deal. But life was taking off for him then. He and Zelda were engaged, his first novel had been accepted for publication, and his short stories were appearing in print. Some 50 years later New Orleans poet and Alabama transplant Everette Maddox would rent the same apartment, seeking inspiration. The house is still there on Prytania, the second story overlooking mausoleums and oaks.

I supposed it dawned on me over time that by reading all of a writer's works and perhaps even visiting their gravesite might constitute an attempt to contact a spirit. I didn't know why I inhaled the

books one big gulp at a time and **Milford's Zelda: A Biography** as well. No one told me to. Fitzgerald was never assigned to me by teachers yet he was, perhaps, my payoff for reading all that was assigned. By stumbling upon him on my own, I also stumbled upon a deeper passion as a reader. After finishing **The Great Gatsby** during the summer after my sophomore year, I copied out Fitzgerald's last sentence, written while still in his 20s: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." I'd learned the habit of taking

notes in lectures and while reading required texts. Now I applied it on my own simply because the sentence was the most beautiful I'd ever read. About 30 years later I would echo his words in the first chapter of a novel of my own, the same way a sax player might quote another song while improvising jazz. It was still there, serving as a reference point, a place from which to start, etched into granite at the foot of his grave I continued to visit over the years.

My father died when I was still young enough to grow up with his ghost, yet old enough to have thoroughly attached to him with memory upon memory sustaining the connection. I came to accept

that it is more than memories that hold my attention, it's an ongoing presence. So too, with writers I have learned to love, such as I did with Fitzgerald that summer I was 20. A passion for them leads me through books, to haunt places they've lived, to eat lunch beside their remains. For to invoke the spirits is to allow that another reality hides inside our mundane one, and by so doing expand the one I know. It's an overflow of life, the natural tribute, an act of gratitude which rushes out freely as I look forward to meeting pleasure again and again. And, every once in awhile, on a truly lucky day, the spirits surprise me with a word, a feeling of direction, or a thank-you, an acknowledgement of their own, that takes my breath away as surely as a beautiful sentence or a saxophone ode to life.

Thank you, Scott and Zelda, for being there all along.

Christine Murphey's poems have appeared in *Negative Capability*, *The Maple Leaf Rag*, *New Orleans Review*, *Sistersong*, *Earth Daughters*, *Louisiana English Journal*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Tulane Review* and *Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Culture in the City of Angels* (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History). Her short story, *She Lingers*, appeared in *New Laurel Review*. She lives in New Orleans.



Daisy Dreams Too

by Alex Cassara

School: Brother Martin High School

Teacher: Thomas Mavor

The *Great Gatsby* is the story of the rise and fall of a man who is looking for his love. This man, Jay Gatsby, comes from humble beginnings in the Midwest and, with what seems to be hard work, rises to the top of New York society. It would seem that this is what Gatsby wants for his life: the huge house, the lavish parties, the nice cars, the enormous popularity.

However, he does this all for the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan. The American dream for Jay Gatsby is to win over Daisy after he has lost her once, but there is a catch. Although Gatsby acquired this wealth to acquire her, this is not necessarily what she wants. We see that Daisy makes decisions that are inconsistent with the notion that she is searching for money. In her choices, Daisy is not primarily searching for superficialities like wealth and popularity; she is yearning simply for stability and security in her life.

This yearning for stability is first evident when she leaves Gatsby for the first time. Before the events of the novel begin, Gatsby and Daisy are young lovers who are mad for each other. They spend their days sitting on the porch in comfortable silence, watching the world go by. However, Gatsby was sent to Europe for World War II and was sent to Oxford afterwards. It is here, then, when Daisy shows her insecurity. While at Oxford it was said that he received letters that had “a quality of nervous despair.” and showed that “she wanted to see him and feel his presence beside her and be assured that she was doing the right thing at all.” Daisy just wants to be positive of what he’s going to do and wants him to be there so she can feel safe and secure. When she doesn’t have him, she turns to Tom.

Tom also has an extra security Gatsby doesn’t have: wealth. He’s popular, was well educated at Yale, was a star defensive end, and has the powerful body to show it. All of these things represent what Gatsby is not. The driving force in acquiring his wealth is to match that of Tom’s so he can win her back, and it seems to be working. When Gatsby invites her over after five years, they instantly reconnect. As he shows her his house, he shows her the abundance of clothes that he owns, and Daisy replies with, “‘They’re such beautiful shirts [...]. It makes me sad that I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before’” (92). This can be taken as shallow, but it can also be said that Daisy was sad because Gatsby didn’t have the wealth to buy these shirts earlier, when she was

looking for someone to support her. As she sees that Gatsby can support her, she begins to fall back in love.

However, the stability Gatsby can bring is compromised in the climax of the novel, when Tom and he are arguing over the love of Daisy. Gatsby successfully gets her to admit that she has loved him all along and never loved Tom, but when Tom accuses Gatsby of being a bootlegger, she changes her mind.

“She’s not leaving me,” Tom says, “‘Certainly not for a common swindler who’d have to steal the ring he put on her finger.’” As he continues, Daisy drifts from Gatsby, “and only the dead dream fought on ... toward that lost voice across the room.” Daisy finally sees that Gatsby cannot provide a stable life for her, for his money was made by illegal means. He still cannot give her the stability she needs, and his dream dies.

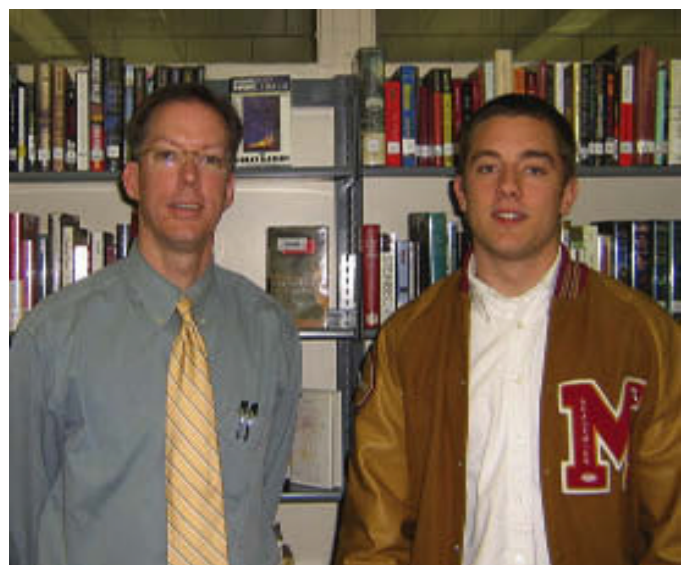
The stability and security that Tom provides, and that Gatsby never could, is the American dream for Daisy. Although she truly loved Gatsby for what he was when he was humble, he tried to win her over with beautiful things,

and it back fired. From the beginning, “He had certainly taken her under false pretenses.... He had deliberately given a Daisy a sense of security. As a matter of fact, he had no such facilities.”

Even when he was first courting her, he could not be a security blanket for her, which is why she was drawn to him. This false security can be seen in our lives. We all have our own security blankets, but do these things really stabilize us, or set us up for disaster?

Disaster certainly resulted from this endeavor for Jay Gatsby.

*...and only the dead dream fought on...
toward the lost voice across the room...
—The Great Gatsby*



Thomas Mavor, English teacher at Brother Martin High School, with his student, **Alex Cassara**, winner of the 2008 BIG READ essay competition.

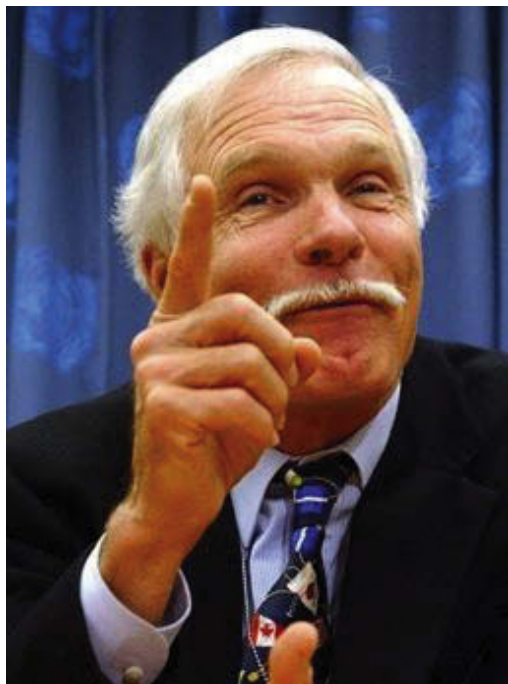
Ted Turner

The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society created an annual award in recognition of individuals for significant achievement in literature, music, philanthropy, film or communications. The award is known as The ALIHOT, A Legend in His or Her Own Time. The origin lies in the practice of a legendary New Orleans newsman, Jack Dempsey, who signed his dispatches from police headquarters to the old New Orleans States-Item news room: "ALIHOT."

The 2008 ALIHOT recipient was the incomparable **Ted Turner**, the legendary entrepreneur who changed the way we watch television, with his creation of **CNN** and its around the clock news coverage and who brought significant film entertainment within the reach of every American. We presented the award to Ted Turner for the extraordinary revolution he brought about in communications. In fact, however, he is a legend in his own time for philanthropy, most especially in his ongoing mission to save the planet and its species. Recently, he added literature to his accomplishments with his memoir, **Call Me Ted**, which is just out and already a bestseller. And, when it comes to music, his friends know that he's no slouch as singer. You should hear him lead a crowd of 500 in *Home on he Range!*

Throughout his career, Ted Turner has won recognition for his entrepreneurial acumen, sharp business skills, leadership qualities, and his unprecedented philanthropy.

Over the past four decades, Turner stepped into the international spotlight with one accomplishment after another. Whether in billboard advertisement,



Just Call Me Ted



Ted Turner and pal!

cable television, sports team ownership, sailing, environmental initiatives or philanthropy – Turner's vision, determination, generosity and forthrightness have consistently given the world reason to take notice.

Turner is chairman of the Turner Foundation, Inc., which supports efforts for improving air and water quality, developing a sustainable energy future to protect our climate, safeguarding environmental health, maintaining wildlife habitat protection, and developing practices and policies to curb population growth rates; co-chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, which works to close the growing and increasingly dangerous gap between the threat from nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. He is chairman of the United Nations Foundation, which promotes a more peaceful, prosperous and just world.

Turner is also chairman of Turner Enterprises, Inc., a private company, which manages his business interests, land holdings, and investments—including the oversight of two million acres in 12 states and in Argentina, and more than 50,000 bison head. His business interests include his partnership in the Ted's Montana Grill restaurant chain, which operates some 55 locations nationwide.

The Faulkner Society is proud to honor this remarkable man, Ted Turner, truly...

...A Legend In His Own Time.

The media is too concentrated, too few people own too much. There's really five companies that control 90 percent of what we read, see and hear.

It's not healthy.

—Ted Turner

Michael Malone



Handling Sin, a grits and gravy, picaresque re-telling of Don Quixote is a southern classic. Among his prizes for his novels and short stories are Among his prizes are the Edgar, the O. Henry, and the Writers Guild Award.

Educated at the University of North Carolina and at Harvard College, he previously taught at Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Swarthmore. Currently, Michael teaches theatre studies, creative writing, and literature at Duke University. He is married to Maureen Quilligan, a profession of English at Duke. They divide their time between a residence in Connecticut and a restored plantation in Hillsborough, NC.

He has been among the core faculty of Words & Music, a Literary Feast in New Orleans on and off since the festival was crested and frequently serves as toastmaster for **Faulkner for All**, the Society's gala annual meeting during **Words & Music**, captivating audiences with his leprechaun looks and sly humor.

*Michael Malone is, most assuredly ..
A Legend In His Own Time!*

Michael Malone, a native of Durham, NC, is an Emmy and Golden Globe Award-winning television writer and highly acclaimed novelist, and humorist..

He is best known for his work on the ABC Daytime drama **One Life to Live**, as well as for his best-selling novels, including **Handling Sin, Dingley Falls, Foolscap, The Delectable Mountains, or Entertaining Strangers, The Four Corners of the Sky, The Last Noel**, and a trilogy of murder mysteries set in North Carolina, including: **Uncivil Seasons, Time's Witness, First Lady**.

For **One Life to Live**, he was the serial's head writer from 1991 to 1996 and garnered critical acclaim for his storylines, which included a tale involving the tight bond between an ostracized homosexual teenager and a preacher, the creation of villain/rapist Todd Manning and the character's gang rape of Marty Saybrooke, as well as the subsequent rape trial episodes. While writing **One Life to Live**, Malone wrote a novel called **The Killing Club**, which was tied into the show. In its first week of publication **The Killing Club** went to number 16 on the *New York Times* bestseller list for Hardback Fiction. It later rose to number 11.



Michael Malone as Toastmaster for Faulkner for All.

For more information on Michael Malone and his work, see *Literary Role Models: Michael Malone*, beginning on Page: 76.

Roy Blount, Jr.



The Mississippi River flows right down the middle of the country. Maybe along this great liquid divide, I can discover what holds this wildly diverse country together.

—Roy Blount, Jr.

Roy Blount Jr. is the author of 22 books, about a wide range of things, from the first woman president of the

United States to what barnyard animals are thinking.

His recent books, **Alphabet Juice** followed by **Alphabetter Juice** (Farrar, Straus), are now out in paperback and as audiobooks. **Long Time Leaving: Dispatches From Up South** (Knopf), won the 2007 nonfiction award from the New England Independent Booksellers Association; and **AudioFile** chose the audio version (HighBridge) as one of the year's top five books read by their authors. **Feet on the Street: Rambles Around New Orleans**, "delivers the goods," according to the *New York Times*: "a wild, unpredictable ramble through a wild, unpredictable town." Another hilarious ride is **Hail, Hail, Euphoria! -- The Marx Brothers in Duck Soup**. He is a panelist on **NPR's Wait, Wait... Don't Tell Me**, the president of the Authors Guild, a member of PEN and the Fellowship of Southern Authors, a New York Public Library Literary Lion, a Boston Public Library Literary Light, a usage consultant to the American Heritage Dictionary, and an original member of the *Rock Bottom Remainers*. He comes from Decatur, GA and lives in western Massachusetts. He has received the Thomas Wolfe Award from the University of North Carolina (see citation at <http://englishcomplit.unc.edu/wolfe/2009>).

His first book, about hanging out with the Pittsburgh Steelers, **About Three Bricks Shy...And the Load Filled Up**, now available from the University of Pittsburgh Press, was named one of the ten best sports books ever by Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* --and just recently called, by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, "the best of all books about pro football."

Norman Mailer said of his second book, **Crackers**, "Page for page, Roy Blount is as funny as anyone I've read in a long time," and *Time* placed Blount "in the tradition

of the great curmudgeons like H.L. Mencken and W.C. Fields." Garrison Keillor said in *The Paris Review*, "Blount is the best. He can be literate, uncouth and soulful all in one sentence." *Playboy* said he was "known to the critics as our next Mark Twain." Whether, on the one hand, it is his place to quote these plaudits and whether, on the other hand, he feels that they are adequate, are questions not for him to answer at this time.

His one-man show at the American Place Theatre was described by *The New Yorker* as "the most humorous and engaging 50 minutes in town"--which, when you stop to think how many 50 minutes there are in New York at any given time, is something. In 1988 he expanded that show into **Roy Blount's Happy Hour and a Half**. He has performed for Folk Tree Concerts and at Chet Atkins' Celebrity Golf Tournament, and introduced Chet in Carnegie Hall. He has appeared on **A Prairie Home Companion** frequently and on **CBS Morning Show**, **Tonight Show**, **David Letterman Show**, **Good Morning America**, **Today Show**, **Larry King**, **Politically Incorrect**, and in a series of TV spots for the NBA starring Bill Murray, which he helped Murray create.

*If a cat spoke, it would say things like
"Hey, I don't see the problem here."*

—Roy Blount, Jr.

A contributing writer of *The Oxford American*, he writes a regular column for *Garden and Gun*, and has done so in the past for *Esquire*, *The New York Times*, *Atlanta Magazine*, *Inside Sports*, *The Soho News*, *Men's Journal*, *Conde Nast Traveller*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *Spy* and *The Atlanta Journal*. His essays, articles, stories, verses and even drawings have appeared in 166 different periodicals including *The New Yorker*, *Gourmet*, *Playboy*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Life*, *TV Guide*, *Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*, *National Geographic*, *Antaeus*, *Smithsonian* and *Organic Gardening*; and in 174 books, including **The Best of Modern Humor**, **The Oxford Book of American Light Verse**, **The Norton Book of Light Verse**, **The Ultimate Baseball Book**, **Classic Southern Humor**, **Sudden Fiction**, **The Elvis Reader**, **Russell Baker's Book of American Humor**, **Baseball: A Literary Anthology**, **The Sophisticated Cat**, **The F-Word**, and **Best American Essays 1997**. This work has taken him to China, Uganda, Iceland and all but two states. He has written introductions to books by Erskine Caldwell, A.J.Liebling, Ernie Bushmiller Jr., and

Phil Rizzuto, and to four different books by Mark Twain—in particular an extensive foreword and afterword accompanying first book-form publication of Twain's story **A Murder, a Mystery and a Marriage** (2001).

For *Sports Illustrated*, where he was a staff writer and editor 1968-75, he has rafted the Amazon (attacked by piranha), played baseball with the 1969 Chicago Cubs (hit a ball 350 feet), become all but athletically a virtual member of the dynasty-years Pittsburgh Steelers, and hung out with Wilt Chamberlain, Yogi Berra, Reggie Jackson and the world's oldest then-living lifeguard. (Though not all at once.)

He has written the screenplay of **Larger Than Life** starring Bill Murray, the lyrics of a song Andie MacDowell sings in **Michael**, and an HBO fairy tale, **The Frog Princess**. Of his two one-act plays produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, one became part of an Off-Broadway review. In films he has portrayed a reporter, an outraged grocery shopper and a partygoer dressed as Truman Capote; on TV, a dim-witted talk-show caller and a Cuban soldier; on radio, the Prodigal Son, Orpheus, a ship's captain named Blauggh, a foolish virgin, Millard Fillmore and Thoreau. He has read or lectured at colleges from Harvard to Clemson to Washington State; at the 92nd Street Y, Symphony Space, Manhattan Theatre Club, Theatre for a New Audience, San Francisco's City Arts and Lecture Series, the San Diego Forum and the Mark Twain House. Journeyed down the Mississippi River for the documentary **The Main Stream**, aired by PBS in December '02.

He covered the 1992 Democratic and Republican conventions and Presidential election night by commenting, live and instantaneously, from a Barcalounger, on **Comedy Central**. Via various media he has reported on the Civil Rights Movement, the Ku Klux Klan, **Saturday Night Live** in its prime, Elvis's funeral, an Olympics and several World Series and Super Bowls, and interviewed Martin Luther King, Willie Nelson, Ray Charles, Satchell Paige, Joe Dimaggio, Willie Mays, Loretta Lynn, Eudora Welty, Billy Carter, Gilda Radner, Casey Stengel, Jonathan Demme, Rep. Dick Arney, Cool Papa Bell and Sally Rand. He has publicly expressed his misgivings about every president since John F. Kennedy, with the exception, for some reason, of Gerald Ford.

He has jumped out of a plane, graduated (conditionally) from race-car driving school, scuba-dived with sharks, sung on stage (as a member of the authors' rock band Rock Bottom Remainers) with Bruce Springsteen and Stephen King, hit a game-winning Texas Leaguer (and had limes thrown at him) in Venezuela, caught catfish with his bare hands in Illinois; and ridden a camel in Kenya, a dolphin in the Florida Keys, an elephant in L.A.



Born 1941 to Southern parents in Indianapolis. Grew up in Decatur, Georgia. Vanderbilt B.A. '63, Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude; Harvard M.A. '64. U.S. Army 1964-66. Reporter and columnist for Atlanta Journal and part-time English instructor at Georgia State College, 1966-68. Freelance since leaving SI in 1975. Husband of painter **Joan Griswold**, father of social worker daughter **Ennis** and director-writer-actor-songwriter son **Kirven** (with whom he wrote and appeared in a five-minute film on extreme sports for ESPN), grandfather of Jesse, Noah and Elsie. No pets at present, but previously dogs, cats, horse, rooster, snake, turtle, hamster, monitor lizard, parakeet and hens.

*Roy Blount, Jr., no question about it, is an original...
A Legend In His Own Time.*

“Even intellectuals should have learned by now that objective rationality is not the default position of the human mind, much less the bedrock of human affairs.”
—Roy Blount, Jr.

Louisiana...

...the dream state!



Photo By Josephine Sacabo

**Welcome to the Land of Dreamy Dreams:
A Cultural Collision Which Works!**

My formative years of childhood were spent in Panama, in and around its old *Criolle* cities and, because my mother was sick much of the time there, my brothers and I were consigned to two nannies, sisters: Francesca and Iñez, who put the lovely lilt of Spanish in my ears then. And I hear it still.

Traveling to Panama to take up residence and then some years later, traveling home to the United States, my family broke our journeys with visits to Havana, one of the world's urban jewels, set as it is on the sea—waves crashing against the seawall of the Malecón—with its lush, paradisaical, stagey backdrop. We also had occasion to visit Cartagena, Colombia, the oldest city in the Western Hemisphere, another walled city on the sea filled with Spanish colonial architectural gems, tree-shaded squares, music in the streets.

My strongest visual memories of childhood are of Spanish Colonial Panama, Cartagena, and Havana. And I am never happier than when I discover a way to make these memories come alive again.

The rhythm and sounds and dreamy movements and the refined sense of style of New Orleans and its people captured me on my first visit and have held me close for more time than I care to admit. I felt at home immediately in this most Latin of all American cities because of its sounds, its ethnic diversity, the Spanish face of its architecture, its pace, and a cosmopolitan tolerance of those who are different, the way that New Orleans, like many other *Criolle* capitals, not only accepts but embraces eccentricity.

The works of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Cristina Garcia's book, **Dreaming in Cuban**, the misty lyricism and vivid word pictures of it, were the first to get me hooked Latin American and Caribbean fiction in much the same way that New Orleans captured me and, when I find a new novel by a Caribbean, Latin American, or Latina author living on the hyphen, I set it aside for down time with the right music, so that I can synchronize my own beat with that of the story.

As in the culture of New Orleans, an enthralling juxtaposition of death and sensuality are never far from the core of life in the Caribbean. New Orleans has often been described, in fact, by leading experts in the Carib-

bean culture—Jessica Harris, for instance—as the northern-most city of the Caribbean.

The connections between New Orleans and Caribbean and South American nations—once the colonies of France and Spain and peopled with indigenous tribes and Africans imported as slaves by the European invaders—are the stuff that the city's history is made of and these connections influence every aspect of life in The Big Easy. The acceptance of death as a part of life is never more evident than during the ritual picnics that New Orleanians have at the tombs of their ancestors on feast days, when they clean the houses of the dead and converse with the dead as if they were sitting right beside them, fussing at them for leaving them behind in many cases. The jazz funeral is another ritual which symbolizes the celebration of death as a natural part of life. Serious readers of New Orleans heritage, therefore, will feel at home immediately when they immerse themselves in the art of cutting edge contemporary fiction writers of the Caribbean. Writers like Cuban-born Mayra Montero who has lived most of her life in Puerto Rico. Myra Montero is an acknowledged high priestess of Latin American literature. Death is at the center of much of her work, such as her novel, **Captain of the Sleepers**.

Ms. Montero wastes no time in getting straight to the point in her book, as the first few paragraphs of the first chapter demonstrate definitively:

Christmas Eve of 1949 was the last one we spent together. And I often think the corpse of that man was a sign. There was a corpse in the house with us that night: the remains of a desperate man who took his own life on St. Croix, but before that he'd asked to be buried on Vieques.

By then I knew that the dead were dead people who would never wake up. But there was a time, when I was four or five years old, when they had me believe that the corpses transported by the Captain in his small plane were travelers who had fallen asleep.

This is a stylistically elegant novel of carnal love and lust co-mingled with love of family and patriotic ardor. It is set on the small island of Vieques off the coast



of mainland Puerto Rico, which became the focus of renewed nationalism in the recent controversy over bombing of the island in training exercises by the American military. The novel begins, however, during the nationalist movement of the 1950s and concludes half a century later when the protagonist, Andrés Yasín, and the small plane captain of the novel's title, J. T. Bunker, who ferried corpses to their final resting places, confront each other as old men. The Captain had an affair with Estela, mother of the 12-year-old Andrés. At the time, in the 50s, Estela was married to a Vieques hotel owner and in love with a rogue nationalist, Roberto. Her passion for Roberto overtakes her as the political movement reaches an explosive head. The family is torn asunder by Estela's infidelities but, thereafter, it is the Captain who Andrés blames for his family's fate. In her book **In the Palm of Darkness** her confrontation with death is again immediate.



Mayra Montero

A Tibetan astrologer told Martha I would die by fire...I thought of it as soon as Thierry began talking about the feasts of his childhood...that forced me to think of death, my death, and what Martha had been told in Dharmasala. "He said my husband would be burned to death"—I could hear her voice, furious because I had suggested there must have been some misunderstanding—"and as far as I know, you're the only husband I have."

In her novels **The Messenger** and **Deep Purple**, the sound and sensuality of music is intermingled with her ongoing duet between sex and death. Set in Cuba, **The Messenger** tells the story of Enrico Caruso and his Chinese-Cuban mulatta mistress, a doomed affair. In June 1920 a bomb exploded at the Teatro Nacional in Havana just as Enrico Caruso was singing Radamès in **Aïda**. In a panic, he fled the theater and disappeared into the streets of Havana. In **The Messenger**, Montero imagines what happened to him. As Caruso tries to escape death by the Black Hand, he is drawn into a passionate entanglement with Aida Cheng, goddaughter of the powerful Afro-Cuban *santero* José de Calazán. Told by Enriqueta, the daughter born of the love affair, and by Aida herself as she lies dying many years later, it is a brooding ballad of love and death, which compels the reader to play it to the end. Possibly the most appealing of her novels is **Deep Purple**, a short, succulently erotic novel in which a music critic for a San Juan newspaper has retired and is musing over his life. When he decides he still has a lot to say and that he can't stay put at home with his long-suffering wife, he returns to his desk and begins composing an erotic memoir, cataloguing his sexual conquests of various virtuoso artists during a libido-driven life. Music is the kindling that stokes Agustin Cabán's sexual fire and he cannot understand how he could possibly criticize music without an intimate relationship with the musicians playing it:

...I know how to gauge musicians from the first moment I see them. With a woman, I look at how she raises her shoulders, or the manner in which she purses her mouth. With a man, I always notice his crotch, and in particular how he moves his thumbs...Besides listening to their music, I smelled them, I heard them speak, I listened to the rumble of their intestines. It may sound prosaic, but one's musical soul lies in their guts:...

At the center of **Deep Purple**, once again, is death. It is, finally, about an old man bidding a fond farewell to his life. Memories of all these affairs are floating about the newspaper and he realizes he must take charge of his own stories before it is too late. Although **Deep Purple** was written some years ago, it did not come to my attention until I had read that jewel of a novelette by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, **Memories of My Melancholy Whores**, constructed of precisely the same underlying cloth. Coming to grips with approaching death is a newspaper columnist reviewing his life through his sexual exploits.

Montero is the author of a collection of short fiction and nine published novels, including **Dancing to Almendra** (which one more time tosses death, love, lust, and humor into a delicious tropical *pousse cafe* set in Havana). She works in Spanish, of course, but this presents no stumbling blocks for U.S. readers who have no Spanish of their own because Montero has one of the best translators in the business, **Edith Grossman**. Grossman translates for such Latin American fiction artists as Márquez, another bit of literary serendipity, since she was the translator of **Memories of My Melancholy Whores**.

Mayra Montero has the magical powers of a Santeria conjure woman when it comes to putting erotica on paper and turning it into the finest literary fiction. Montero's fiction literally sizzles on the page, jumps up and zings you like bacon grease dancing out of a hot iron pan. In an interview, Ms. Grossman, discussing her relationship with Montero and translating Montero's eroticism, said: "I kid Mayra that smoke comes out of my computer or that my office gets steamed up....far from being pornographic there's eroticism in everything she writes." There is a single sensibility and sexuality is a part of it, Grossman emphasizes. "At the heart of her work," the translator notes, as in all literature of worth, there is a highly defined sense of morality. "She's a bit like Graham Green with his entertainments. She creates a sense of a moral universe. No matter what the characters do there's a cosmic morality that's being betrayed or adhered to."

You will love getting to know her work.

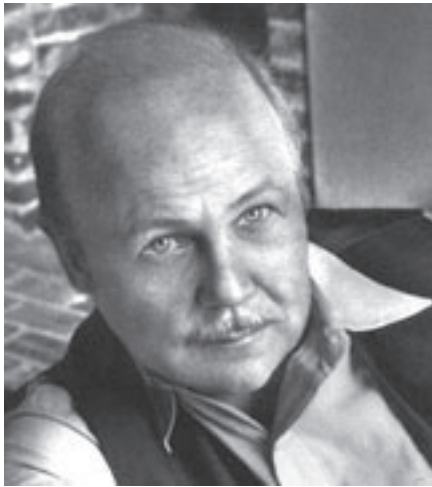
A good thing to keep in mind, incidentally, if you are pursuing literature written originally in Spanish, is that if Grossman translates it, she gets it right!

—Rosemary James

An Interview with Michael Malone by Clare Beth Pierson

Readers of all ages can use a regular dose of Michael Malone. To say his characters are endearing is an understatement, to say his plots are a maze of intrigue heavily accented with comic hysteria is too subtle.

He's been favorably compared to the authors



he most admires, Charles Dickens, Miguel de Cervantes, Henry Fielding, and New Orleans' own John Kennedy Toole. Although each of these authors is separated from the others by at least a century, all share a common thread, and extraordinary sense of humor. "There are several kinds of stories,"

says Mark Twain, "but only one difficult kind—the humorous."

Michael Malone's stories are like well choreographed ballets; they are written with such grace that almost impossible leaps and twists and turns are executed with ease by his characters. This North Carolinian writes with a Southern back porch storyteller's cadence and rhythm. His prose and dialect flow so naturally that the ridiculous seems normal, the preposterous appears traditional. To dance on that very fine line where comic humor could easily turn to burlesque is not just difficult, it's dangerous. One slip and the reader is gone, falling just before the author does. There seems no chance of such a careless move in Michael Malone's skillfully orchestrated plots and subplots. His characters know who they are, what they are about, and what they need to do to make us laugh at their foibles as well as our own.

Michael Malone's attitudes about writing generally and his own writing are strong, demanding, highly professional. This successful author's advice should be heeded by developing writers. He practices what he preaches. A perfectionist, he does not hide his talent under a bushel. In the true Biblical sense he works continuously at increasing the value of his God-given talent and at sharing it with others.

As this series focuses on advice to young writers, I asked the students in my creative writing class at Riverdale High School what questions they would ask of Malone if they were conducting the interview. Here are their questions and his answers.

Question:

What part of your family background has helped you with your writing?

Answer:

Well, most of the people in my family are psychiatrists: my sister, my brother, my father. We all do the same thing; we listen to people talk. The only difference is the people I'm listening to aren't there. I come from a Southern family, an Irish family. Regionally and genetically, my family are great talkers, great listeners and great observers of people. There is a difference between the way a Southerner tells a story and the language/methods of writers from other regions. For instance, a Southern writer, when asked if he would like a sip of Coca-Cola is likely to say something like: "Yes, I haven't had anything to drink since the age of Pericles." We have a language of our own. One point I will be making in the Master Class will be that writers must find their natural rhythm.

Question:

What is the easiest thing about writing?

Answer:

I've never been a person who suffered from writer's block. (A pause for disturbance in the background.) Those are some of the difficult things: interruptions and noise. For that reason I write in the middle of the night. I hear everything so clearly. My wife often says I work nine to five, nine at night 'till five in the morning. The process of writing includes listening to and hearing the voices, then paying attention to what the characters say. For me that's always been a joy. Writer's block seems so foreign that I sometimes wonder if those people who think writing is so hard and who suffer from it are natural writers. What really is hard is getting started again after I've been interrupted; starting over is very hard. Sometimes I lose the discipline of it. For that reason, once I put something aside, it's sometimes two months before I pick that piece of work up again.

Question:

What is the hardest part about writing?

Answer:

It's hard to create out of nothing, much harder than the routine of an office. It's so difficult because it's self-generated; it's like being in school for the rest of your life with a term paper due. With all the freedom that you have it's hard to create an external deadline. Journalism is good training. I think of people like Hemingway, who created a writing habit of working so many hours a day. Or writing so many pages a day, even if they don't make any sense. Faulkner, on the other hand, said to stop when you're hot; make yourself stop and then you'll know where you'll start the next day. Writing must become a habit like brushing your teeth. You do it even if you don't want to.

Question:

How many revisions do you make before you finish a piece of writing?

Answer:

It varies. There are some parts of a novel, particularly the opening of a novel that I might revise and revise and even just chop off. Then there are other parts that stay in their first draft form. Sometimes I go back over and over; it just depends. In my case, when I hear dialect, I hear it very clearly. The dialect rarely changes.

Question:

When did you know for certain that you would be a writer?

Answer:

I've always written stories. My poor mother! I'd come home from the third grade with all these stories and my mother would say, "He's not a liar; he's a writer." I used to write plays my brother and sister and the neighbors to be in them or to watch them. I've always been very interested in the theater, in creating and directing a world of imaginary creatures. It's always been a part of my life, although I didn't come to publish my first novel until I was in graduate school. I was trying to avoid working on my dissertation. I was in Cambridge at Harvard and I was going to be movies all the time. Then I fell in love and started writing a novel, and when I finished it I sent it to Random House, and they published it.

Question:

Did you ever finish your dissertation?

Answer:

I was working on a topic about the Renaissance, but I wound up doing a dissertation on film.

Question:

What kind of a student were you in high school?

Answer:

I did well in high school and I actually liked school, but I've known of wonderful writers who weren't such good students. (William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad are two prime examples.) They really didn't care much for the structure of school. I liked school because we were always putting on plays. I was more interested in people than in math and chemistry. When I was in college, I was a philosophy major. One day they called me in and told me that they really wanted to hear more about Descartes's philosophy and weren't so interested in his personality. So I changed my major to literature.

Question:

Do you ever find writing a chore instead of a joy?

Answer:

I hate doing book reviews. (Malone is not unusual in this attitude. Many writers hate the task of analyzing another writer's work.) I really think it's hard to do those. Finally, I just have to force myself. I put it off and put it off. I keep counting the pages and counting the words. I never criticize any book because I know how much hard work goes into any piece of fiction. I can't always say my reviews are always great examples of the art of criticism, but I do try

to say something constructive. Book reviews are a chore and, as far as possible, I avoid them. When I was working at ABC, I had very little time, so I would write the book reviews on the train on the way to New York. They were just as good as the ones I labored over for two months.

(Malone's advice to developing writers faced with unpleasant writing tasks is to establish finite time frames with deadlines, e.g., his train rides, that make the tackling the task easier.)

Question:

Where do you get your ideas?

Answer:

All fiction comes from everything you've ever read yourself, everything you've ever experienced, everything you've ever heard. I try to construct a scaffolding. **Handling Sin** was conceived as a picturesque, a journey, a quest. It was in the tradition of **Tom Jones** and **Don Quixote** and **Pickwick Papers**. With that set-up, I took this hero from this place to this place to that. Then I started writing to see where he would go. If you've got good characters, they will do what they want to do and you can just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Question:

Do you ever get bored when you write?

Answer:

If you ever get bored with your writing, you should stop, go to another place and see where it goes from there. Try to pick it up again later.

Question:

What about setting? How important is it?

Answer:

Very! One of the wisest things ever said to me was advice from one of my heroines, Eudora Welty. She was recalling advice Willa Cather had given her, so we're talking about a long tradition. Willa Cather told Eudora Welty, Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet. That land



Michael Malone with *Faulkner Society*
Co-founder, *Joseph DeSalvo*

under Cather's feet was Red Cloud, NE from the age of nine to 16. The land under Welty's feet always has been Jackson, MS. In their home towns, they found that fertile ground from which their fiction could grow. The South is my fertile ground. Although I have lived much of my life in New York and Connecticut, all my fiction is set in the red clay country of North Carolina. It's my fictional home.

Question:

Do you think that's why Sherwood Anderson advised the young William Faulkner, "Go back to that little postage stamp of native soil and write about what you know?"

Answer:

Definitely! Home is where the world makes sense to you consciously and subconsciously. You know where the road turns, and how the clay feels in your hands, how people talk and how they relate to each other. All of that gives a reality to your fiction. I don't mean that you should write only fact. Fact is no excuse for fiction. Don't tell me, "Well, it really happened." So what? That doesn't mean it makes a good story. But on the other hand, to feel in your bones the reality of the place and be able to convey the local habituation is to avoid a dull ray background.

Question:

Do you worry about having an appreciative audience?

Answer:

I agree with Milton when he said, "I hate a cloistered virtue." A virtue, like a story, must get out into the real world and have an audience. You're writing for readers, maybe a few or maybe millions. Readers are crucial to completing the fictional journey that you initiate. If the reader goes, "Yuck!" then it's painful. In the end, however, what a young reader must learn is to depend on his or her vision, that you cannot sacrifice your vision to suit a reader. You can't change to suit others. You must find that place that lies somewhere between arrogance and the folly of refusing to take advice. Confusion starts when you start taking everyone's advice.

Question:

If you did not write what would you be doing?

Answer:

One of the reasons that I'm a writer is that I always wanted to be everything, a doctor, a lawyer, an Indian Chief, a baseball player and a surgeon, etc., etc. By creating fiction, you get to do it all. There's nothing you can't be. There's a lot of music in my novels. I love jazz. I'd love to be able to play jazz, especially the clarinet. At least my characters get to play. I remind myself of Walter Mitty, who could be anything or anybody he daydreamed of being.

Question:

Have you ever been compelled to write about the tragic or an especially sad subject?

Answer:

There is tragic sadness, as well as joy, in all of my novels. To be a writer is to embrace all of human life, the great Yes of comedy and the great No of tragedy. There are

some things in life that you can never say yes to, tragic things, cruel things, evil things, unforgivable things. Those things have their place, but it's laughter that is at the center of my work. The ability to laugh is a release that in the final analysis makes all of those ills of human existence bearable.

Question:

What's your favorite book?

Answer:

That's very hard, almost impossible. It's like asking a father of four "Who is your favorite child?" I am a great, great admirer of Dickens, the master of all possibilities. And because I find much to admire in the work of many authors of widely varying styles, writing in many circumstances in many different eras, I cannot say, finally, this is the one.

Question:

Well, the name of three books you like?

Answer:

Bleak House would certainly be one of my favorites. Fielding's **Tom Jones** would be another. One of my special favorites is Faulkner's **The Hamlet**.

Question:

What about *Great Expectations*?

Answer:

I love **Great Expectations**; in a way it's a perfect novel. But Dickens doesn't experiment as much in this novel as in some of his other work.

Question:

When do you select or create your title?

Answer:

At different points in the novel. Sometimes I will get the title at the start. **Handling Sin** is from a medieval poem. I chose this name at the outset because I wanted the story to be about a man who thought he had all the virtues, a man who needed to learn that you need to be a part of life, to get your hands into life, you have to handle sin to be fully human. **Uncivil Seasons** initially was titled **Bottom's Dream** from the character in **A Midsummer Night's Dream** for a long time until finally the publisher said to change that title, that is sounded like something about a river boat pilot. **Uncivil Seasons** is also a phrase from **A Midsummer Night's Dream**. Titles come in different ways. The title of the first novel I wrote, **Painting the Roses Red**, is a title I never really liked. You don't always find the perfect title, which is too bad when it happens, because the title becomes the book for so many readers.

Question:

Do you recommend writing as a career?

Answer:

I certainly wouldn't recommend it to anyone who said, "What I want to do is make a lot of money." I actually think it is best to discourage people from writing because the

only people who should be doing it are the people who say, "I don't care, I've got to do it." And then there's nothing you can do to stop them.

Question:

What modern writers do you read?

Answer:

I read in various ways. I do so much reading for competitions, like the National Book Award and the Edgar for mystery writers, that I tend to get "all read out." I read a lot of mystery fiction, and sometimes a friend will bring a fabulous writer to my attention, like the Irishman William Trevor. I've read with great pleasure the work of the late Barry Hannah, author of **Geronimo Rex**, another Southern author, who taught at the University of Mississippi.

*(Trevor is a brilliant craftsman incapable of authoring a bad sentence. We especially recommend **Two Lives: Reading Turgenev And My House in Umbria**, Hannah's work was widely published and appeared in such anthologies as **The Best Of The South**.)*

Question:

Do you have someone, a companion, who helps you write?

Answer:

No one helps me write, but my wife Maureen, who is a professor of literature at Duke University, is a superb reader and an excellent critic. I think people always write for a particular reader, the imaginary person that Virginia Wolf refers to as the "common reader." Whenever I finish a chapter, I give it to Maureen. She reads it aloud to me so I can hear how it sounds. There is no reason why a novel can't sound like poetry. (Faulkner, who was first a poet, would agree.) I pay attention to Maureen's response. In a sense, she's my editor.

Question:

Do you ever want to quit?

Answer:

Sometimes, yes. You get a burst of energy when you start a novel, and that burst of energy carries you until you reach the middle. There you wonder if you'll ever get to the end of the thing. That's when you have to be careful that you don't just give up. Towards the end it picks up again and, like a stable mount, you start galloping toward home.

Question:

When did you know you were successful?

Answer:

I've been very fortunate in getting really good reviews for my books. In the beginning you feel you're a success if you get a book published. Then, again, when you get positive criticism of your work. And, finally, when you begin to make a living with your work!

Question:

In a nutshell, what advice do you offer young writers?

Answer:

Well, I don't think you can stop real writers of any age. My advice would be to listen to the voice inside you, have the

courage to hold to it, have the humility to be open to wise suggestions, have the discipline to keep going, and have the faith to never give up.

Question:

How do you like New Orleans?

Answer: I love New Orleans! There are only two cities, big cities, in America that really know who they are, and New Orleans is one of them.

Claire Beth Pierson, a creative writing and literature teacher, conducts writing seminars for professional educators and gives classes on the literary heritage of New Orleans.

Handling Sin

We are pleased to present for you this excerpt from **Michael Malone's** classic southern novel, **Handling Sin**:

On the Ides of march in his forty-fifth year the neutral if not cooperative world turned on Mr. Raleigh W. Hayes as sharply as if it had stabbed him with a knife. Like Caesar, Mr. Hayes was surprised by the blow, and responded sarcastically. Within a week his eyes were saying narrowly to everything he saw, Et tu, Brute? The world looked right back at the life insurance salesman; either blinked or winked, and spun backward on an antipodean whim, flinging him off with a shrug. This outrage happened first in his little hometown, which was Thermopylae, North Carolina, and, soon thereafter, all over the South, where Mr. Hayes was forced to wander to save his inheritance from a father who'd, again, run ostentaciously berserk.

Of course, there were warnings. Like Caesar, Hayes ignored them. A lunatic had gotten into the fortune cookies at Lotus House, the only Oriental restaurant in town. Suddenly, along with their checks, patrons began receiving, coiled like paper snakes, harsh predictions or dreadful instructions: "You will die of cancer." "Someone close will betray you." "Sell all your stocks at once!" Either the manufacturer had unwittingly hired a sadistic sloganeer, or here in the Lotus House kitchen the Shionos themselves (ingrates despite decades of Thermopylae's hospitality) were tweezering out the old bland fortunes and slipping inside the cookies these warped prognostications. The Japanese restaurants were already suspected of holding a grudge about the war, of catching stray cats and serving them to unknowledgeable palate as Cantonese chicken, of meaning by "C. Chow Mein" on their menus, "Cat."

The Thermopylae Civitans met at the Lotus House anyhow, because it served liquor without resembling a bar, and the Civitans didn't think of themselves as the

sort of people who would eat lunch in a bar. As Raleigh Hayes did not drink, and as he found disturbing the mingling of foods customary in Oriental cuisine—so many vegetables, meats, and noodles heaped communally together violated his sense of privacy—he never would have eaten a meal in the Lotus House had he not been a member of the Civitans Fund Drive Committee. Had he not reached for a fortune cookie to give his hand something to do other than twitch to choke to death the committee chairman for wasting his time, Hayes never would have pulled from shell of stale pastry the strip of fortune that read, “You will go completely to pieces by the end of the month.” Obviously, nothing could be more preposterous. Mr. Hayes knew himself to be an irrevocably sane man; nor was this conclusion reached in a vacuum: He had a great many blood relations who were not in one piece, and he could see the difference. Folding the nonsensical strip, he put it absentmindedly in his pocket.

Next to Hayes, less imperturbable, fat Mingo Sheffield curled up his paper fortune and set it on fire with his cigarette without telling the other Civitans what it said. It said, “Your spouse is having an affair with your best friend. Solly.”

“Who’s uh . . . Solly?” asked Sheffield as nonchalantly as he could.

Nemours Kettell, the chairman and a veteran, took it on himself to explain. “It’s Jap for sorry.” He picked at a sharp fragment of cookie stuck in his receding gums, a public display of his mouth that irritated Hayes, who also dislike Kettell for abbreviating words, although he’d never been able to decide why this verbal habit so incensed him. Kettell shook his own fortune. “Somebody’s pulling our you-knows here. You may think it’s funny, Wayne.” Wayne Sparks was Kettell’s son-in-law across the table, now giggling because he’d just read his slip, “See a doctor. You have the clap,” and he was thinking about making a joke in mimicry of his wife’s father, by saying “clap” was Oriental for “crap.” On the other hand, it was quite possible that he did have a venereal disease, so he rolled the paper into a spitball and stuck it under his plate like gum. Kettell was still nodding. “But I don’t happen to think there’s a lot to ha-ha about when I see this kind of anti-American blasphemy.” He passed his fortune around the table. It said, “Jesus is a bag lad. He saves trash.” Nobody thought it was funny but Wayne.

Nemours Kettell now banged his fork on the cymbal-shaped cover over the last of the pepper steak. “I want some info on this cookie business. This could be like pins in the Snickers bars, remember that? I hate to believe the way the world’s turning to dirt, poisoning aspirins and shooting at the President over some girl you never even met.”

“What the hell did we drop the bomb for, really, you know, if we have to put up with this kind of Jap back-talk?” threw in Wayne facetiously. A neo-hippie who’d had the bad luck not to be born until 1962, he was in line to inherit Kettell Concrete Company, and liked to take these risks with his future.

Raleigh Hayes kept calm by polishing his unused

knife with his napkin while Kettell rapped on the dish cover until finally the tiny Shiono grandmother looked up from her Japanese newspaper. Like a pigeon through snow, he shuffled across the empty room of white tablecloths toward them. When the Civitans waved their fortunes at her, she bowed with a smile; when they pointed at the messages, she smiled and pointed at her newspaper.

“Doesn’t speak the lingo,” suggested Kettell’s son-in-law.

Mrs. Shiono smiled. “Check? Quit it, Claude.”

“Credit card,” Kettell translated. “Look here, Miz Showno, you want our business, you wont ask us to come in here and read this kind of garbage.” He snapped cookie in two; nothing was in it.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Hayes who had two prospective clients to see on the way back to his office. But not until Nemours Kettell was satisfied personally by the Shiono grandson. But until Nemours Kettell was satisfied personally by the Shiono grandson, Butch, that they would complain to their fortune-cookie supplier in Newport News, would he let the Civitans adjourn. They had already voted to host a fish fry in June and donate the proceeds to diabetes research. That’s what they’d voted to do for the last ten years. Kettell’s wife had diabetes. So did most of Raleigh Hayes’s relatives; if it weren’t for his sensible diet, no doubt he’d have it himself.

Outside their restaurant, the Shionos had grown a dogwood tree in a box on the sidewalk. Raleigh Hayes, preoccupied, started to snap off a blossom. He was stopped by a sweat coming all the way back from Sunday school, where he’d been taught it was against the law to mutilate a dogwood because Christ had died on a dogwood cross and the rust on the petal tips was his blood. The flower dangled bent, and Hayes propped it up on a neighboring branch. “Back to work, Mingo,” he told his next-door neighbor.

Quote To Live By

To be a writer is to embrace all of human life, the great Yes of comedy and the great No of tragedy. There are some things in life that you can never say yes to, tragic things, cruel things, evil things, unforgivable things. Those things have their place, but it’s laughter that is at the center of my work.

—Michael Malone

Matthew Bruccoli

When Matthew J. Bruccoli told us that one of the greatest benefits of a recently acquired archive of F. Scott Fitzgerald's writings would be to dispel the myths about Fitzgerald's Hollywood years, he immediately laughed and said it would take days and days to put us in the loop of the myths and understand what he was talking about.

Fitzgerald's 18 months in Hollywood, according to Bruccoli, "are probably the most distorted of his life."

Bruccoli was the pre-eminent Fitzgerald scholar. He has built an extensive literary archive at the University of South Carolina, where in addition to being the Emily Brown Jeffries Professor of English, he was also curator of American literature. He developed the library's Fitzgerald special collection, and increased holdings of Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, James Ellroy, to name a few. He began collecting as an undergraduate at Yale, not quite certain why he was doing it, but knowing that it was important to gather every copy of *The Great Gatsby* he could find. It was as a student there that he first purchased a first edition hardback. At Yale, he studied under Charles Fenton, who wrote "the first good book" on Hemingway, and who encouraged Bruccoli to seriously pursue his research of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. "He encouraged me at a time when neither was regarded as a major writer," says Bruccoli. "Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton—yes. But Fitzgerald and Hemingway—we were actively discouraged from even reading them." His studies continued, and today Bruccoli's vitae is impressive with scholarly papers and the more than 80 books he has written and edited on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and others.

"Matthew Bruccoli's done so much in terms of textual criticism, bibliographies, and archiving—a bit of everything," proclaimed Dale Edmonds, an associate professor in the English Department at Tulane University. "I taught a Fitzgerald and Hemingway course on a number of occasions, and his book **Fitzgerald and Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship** was my bible for that class. He's very balanced in his view of the two writers and their relationship. I trust him more than just about anybody in terms of accuracy and good sense about what the writers were like individually and as friends and literary associates."

Given that Bruccoli's an authority on both, one can't resist asking which he most admires. "If you're asking me which would I rather spend eternity with?" he responds, "Fitzgerald. He was, when sober, a very nice, generous man, particularly generous to other writers."

At a time when his own career was in high-gear, Fitzgerald was helpful to Hemingway. He even provided Hemingway his introduction to Scribner as a publisher. But Hemingway, as Bruccoli says, could be "mean and ungrateful"—even if he was a great writer. He was selfish, and prone to exaggerated self-creation. As Bruccoli wrote in an introduction to the Hemingway special collection, Hemingway's most enduring character was Hemingway. Fitzgerald was a far more gifted writer in terms of style, language, and rhythm of his prose," Bruccoli concludes.

Bruccoli also was an aficionado of good spy novels with particular attention to John Le Carre, Alan Furst, Charles McCarry, Ross Macdonald, and George V. Higgins. Le Carre's work, like that of Fitzgerald's, Bruccoli

told us, reflects an acute awareness of class and a careful study of human character. "All of Le Carre's work is about British class. Fitzgerald's America in the 1920s was not nearly as vicious," says Bruccoli, remarking that both writers portray the barriers of class and class exclusion. Other similarities, not as obvious at the surface, could be drawn. But what all of these writers—Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Le Carre and others—have in common is that they passed Bruccoli's Holy Christ test.

"What's a Holy Christ test?"

"If you don't say Holy Christ when you're reading it," he says, "go on to something else."

Bruccoli, interviewed when he was 73, revealed. "I'm not going to be reading many years more. To my surprise, I find myself gravitating to sure things."

When interviewed he was carrying an "emergency bag"—"you learn to carry an emergency reading bag"—containing books by Furst and McCarry. "They will get me through 24 hours," he said. **The Great Gatsby** is another one of those books. "It's one of those novels," says Bruccoli, "that good writers never recover from."

"I haven't recovered from **The Great Gatsby**," said New Orleans author Christine Wiltz, whose books include **The Last Madam** and **Glass House**. "For a long time, whenever I got stuck or needed inspiration I would turn to it, like a masochist, because it usually convinced me I couldn't write very well at all. That Fitzgerald could really turn a sentence. I love it for its being a short, intense, powerful read. The very last sentence has been for me the standard as to how one should end a book—"and so we beat on, boats against the current"—a sentence which sums it up and does it with such a memorable image."

Bruccoli believed that **The Great Gatsby** is a book all good writers return to again and again. And he was pleased in each instance of new evidence of the ongoing impact of Fitzgerald and his creation, which he studied and loved for so long. He saw the premiere of *Gatsby* as a ballet, for example, in Pittsburgh.

"I don't know anything about ballet," he says, "and I don't pretend to. But it's another example of the enduring power of *Gatsby*." And Matthew Bruccoli had a lot to do with ensuring the ongoing interest in the book!

Matthew Bruccoli was a legend in his own time.

Sadly Dr. Bruccoli passed away several months after he was awarded the ALIHOT for Biography.



Michael Dirda

Michael Dirda, a weekly book columnist for *The Washington Post*, received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the author of the memoir **An Open Book** and of four collections of essays: **Readings, Bound to Please, Book by Book, and Classics for Pleasure**. His most recent book, **On Conan Doyle**, received a 2012 Edgar Award for best critical/biographical work of the year.

Dirda was graduated with Highest Honors in English from Oberlin College and earned a Ph.D. in comparative literature (medieval studies and European romanticism) from Cornell University. In addition to his columns on books and readers for the *Washington Post*, Dirda has been a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, the online *Barnes & Noble Review*, and several other periodicals. A highly regarded critic among critics, Dirda's reviews of literary artists also are literary works of art. One of the best read men of any age, he educates us by making it clear right off the bat what we need to have read previously in order to get the most out of the book he is reviewing, gently urging us to go back and complete our literary educations. To wit, his 2007 review of Milan Kundera's **The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts** begins with:

Joseph Conrad once wrote that his purpose as a novelist was simply "to make you see." According to Viktor Shklovsky -- the influential Russian formalist critic of the 1920s and '30s -- our daily, automatic routines leach all the freshness from existence, so that we no longer experience the wonder of the people and life around us. Art's purpose, consequently, is to "defamiliarize" the familiar, to shake up our dulled perceptions, to reinvest the dingy, gray and arthritic universe with richness, color, vitality.

According to Milan Kundera's similar literary theory of "the curtain," we grow up with cultural preconceptions that "pre-interpret" the world and close off various aspects of experience. He writes that "a magic curtain, woven of legends, hung before the world. Cervantes sent Don Quixote journeying and tore through the curtain. The world opened before the knight errant in all the comical nakedness of its prose." Ever since, the true novelist's ambition "is not to do something better than his predecessors but to see what they did not see, say what they did not say."

In 2013, he has reviewed **Bleeding Edge** released in 2013 by National Book Award winner Thomas Pynchon,

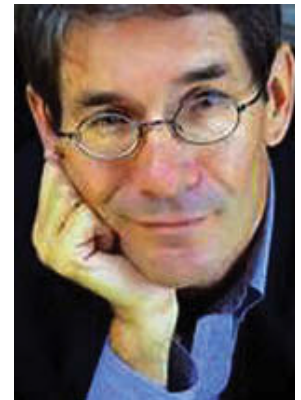
an American novelist who is regarded by many as a contender for the Nobel Prize for literature, whose books are both dense and complex. Dirda cuts straight to the chase, through all of the complexities of the book to provide us with the kind of insight that makes you want to forget about a book or go straight out and buy it.

No screaming comes across the sky, as it did in Gravity's Rainbow, yet Thomas Pynchon's latest novel begins just as ominously: "It's the first day of spring 2001." What could be more ordinary, sound more peaceful? But Bleeding Edge is set in New York City, and the looming shadow of 9/11 touches every page. Nonetheless, many of those pages are outrageously funny, others are sexy, touchingly domestic, satirical or deeply mysterious. All are brilliantly written in Pynchon's characteristically revved-up, even slightly over-revved style — a joy to read, though the techno-babble of various computer geeks can take SOME getting used to. Still, as spring passes into summer and summer approaches fall, our anxiety grows and intensifies.

For much of his career, too, Dirda also has been the go-to writer and critic to introduce the work of other extraordinary authors. For instance, in 2007, he wrote the introduction to Eric Auerbach's inspiring primer on one of world's great poets and a brilliantly argued essay in the history of ideas: **Dante: Poet of the Secular World**. In his introduction, Dirda informs us that Auerbach's book "is arguably the best, if not the easiest, short introduction to Dante and his artistry." More recently, in 2013, he wrote the introduction to a *New York Review of Books* edition of **The Green Man** by the late Kingsley Amis, the popular and prolific British novelist, poet, and critic, widely regarded as one of the greatest satirical writers of the 20th century.

Dirda, a frequent lecturer and an occasional college teacher, has brought his intellectual prowess to many discussions of literature at the Faulkner Society's festival, **Words & Music**, and we are pleased to honor him for what he is to the American literary heritage...

A legend in his own time!



Nancy Moss



Nancy Moss,
Arts Activist

Each year the Faulkner Society selects men and women who have enriched our cultural lives in an arena of the arts. ALIHOT is an acronym for A Legend in His or Her Own Time. Among the ALIHOT Awards we present each year is a medal for distinguished service to the arts generally. We are pleased to present to you the 2007 ALIHOT for the Arts: **Nancy Robinson Moss**.

Nancy Robinson Moss, a native of Lowell, MA, and graduate of Simmons College in Boston, has been a fixture in the arts of New Orleans since she arrived in 1969 as the bride of New Orleanian **Hartwig Moss, III**. She and her husband became patrons of the Faulkner Society in 1993, creating the prize for Short Story by a High School Student in the Society's William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. The prize has been given each year in honor of his mother, legendary preservationist and architect, Betty Moss.

Promoting the arts, including literary arts, has been a mission at which Nancy has excelled. A past member of the Faulkner Society's Board, she has served in numerous capacities for such important organizations as the Arts Council of New Orleans and as a member of the Board of Directors of KidSmart, which has as primary goals an arts curriculum for schools taught by professional artists and programs to train other teachers how to integrate the arts into their teaching agendas.

A recent project she and her husband initiated involved taking youngsters to study Gulf Coast artist

Walter Anderson at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the end product of which was a series of drawings by these students, their impressions of Anderson and his work.

She has worked tirelessly, too, on behalf of art in public places and to promote the work of New Orleans artists such as the late **John Scott**. She was co-owner for a time of a popular art gallery, specializing in local work, located in a Royal Street coffee shop, Café & Concierges.

Her own passionate, personal interest have been

photography and preserving the photographic art of such master photographers as **Clarence John Laughlin**, noted for his surreal photos of his native Deep South. Nancy was his agent and assembled an important collection of his images for the Historic New Orleans Collection. Her own photograph of Laughlin is a classic, preserved in the Collection. Nancy also unearthed **The Land of the Poppies**, the only work of Laughlin's short fiction ever to be published; this from a world renowned photographer who considered himself a writer first and foremost, then a book collector, and only third, a photographer.

Nancy has been a staunch supporter of such institutions as Touro Infirmary, the only not-for-profit hospital in New Orleans, and she serves on the Board of Directors of her husband's firm, the Hartwig Moss Insurance Agency.

Nancy and Hartwig have three children—**Marcie, Hartwig, IV, and Stefanie**—and four grandchildren: **Sophie, Drew, Robby, and Leigh**.

Nancy Moss is, indeed, a Legend in Her Own Time!



Nancy Moss at Words & Music with Tulane historian and author Lawrence Powell



Nancy and Hartwig Moss with his mother, the late Betty Moss, at Faulkner For All!

Quote to Live By

*I am the poet of the woman the same as
the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to
be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the
mother of men.*

—Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

Marie Arana

Marie Arana was born in Peru, moved to the United States at the age of nine. She received her BA in Russian Language and Literature at Northwestern University, her MA in Linguistics and Sociolinguistics at Hong Kong University, and a certificate of scholarship (Mandarin language) at Yale University in China. She began her career in book publishing, where she was Vice President and Senior Editor at both Harcourt Brace and Simon & Schuster publishers in New York. In 1993, she started work at *The Washington Post* as Deputy Editor of the book review section, "Book World." She was promoted to Editor in Chief of that section, a position she held for ten years. Currently, she is a Writer at Large for *The Washington Post* and a Senior Consultant at the Library of Congress. In 2008, *The Washingtonian* magazine called her one of the Most Powerful People in Washington. In 2009, she was Northwestern University's Alumna of the Year.

Arana is the author of a memoir about her bicultural childhood, **American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood**, which was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award as well as the PEN/Memoir Award, and won the Books for a Better Life Award. She is the editor of a collection of *Washington Post* essays about the writer's craft, *The Writing Life: How Writers Think and Work* (2002), which is used as a textbook for writing courses in universities across the country. Her novel **Cellophane**, set in the Peruvian Amazon, was published in 2006 and selected as a finalist for the John Sargent Prize. Her most recent novel, also set in Peru, is **Lima Nights**. She has written the introductions for many books on Latin America, Hispanicity and biculturalism. She is the scriptwriter for the South American portion of **10 x 10**, a full-length feature film on the importance of girls' education, released in Spring, 2013. Her latest book, a biography of Simón Bolívar, was published by Simon & Schuster in April, 2013.

Arana has served on the board of directors of the National Book Critics Circle and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. For many years, she has directed literary events for the Americartes Festivals at the Kennedy Center and has served as an organizer for the Library of Congress's National



Book Festival. She has been a judge for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and for the National Book Critics Circle.

Her commentary has been published in *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Week*, *Civilization*, *Smithsonian* magazine, *The National Geographic*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *El Comercio*, *El País*, and numerous other publications throughout the Americas.

Without doubt, Maria Arana is a legend in her own time.

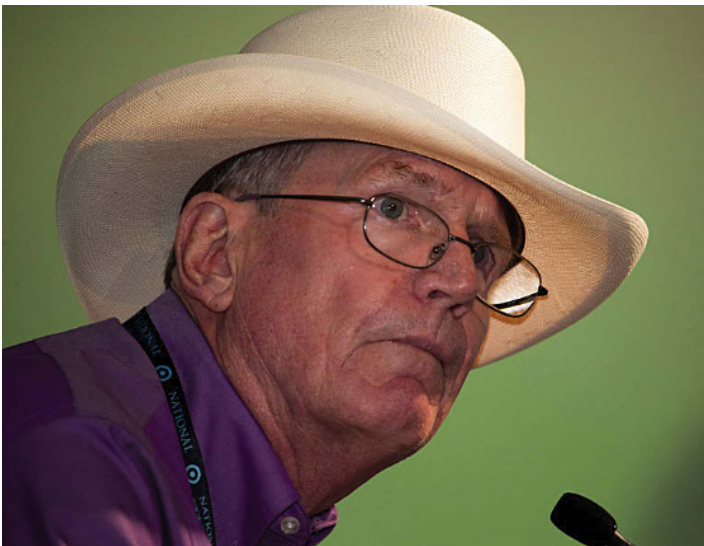
Quote to Live By

Literature is a vast forest and the masterpieces are the lakes, the towering trees or strange trees, the lovely, eloquent flowers, the hidden caves, but a forest is also made up of ordinary trees, patches of grass, puddles, clinging vines, mushrooms, and little wildflowers.

2666 Roberto Bolaño

Jonathan Yardley

Jonathan Yardley, a Pulitzer Prize winning book critic for *The Washington Post* and author of several books, was born in Pittsburgh in 1939. His father was a teacher of English and the classics, as well as an Episcopal minister and a headmaster at two East Coast private schools. Yardley is married to the novelist **Marie Arana**, the former editor of *Washington Post Book World*. His sons, **Jim Yardley**



and **William Yardley**, by a previous marriage, are *New York Times* reporters. He and his son Jim are one of two father-son recipients of the Pulitzer Prize. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was the editor of the student newspaper, *The Daily Tar Heel*, in 1961. After leaving Chapel Hill, Yardley interned at *The New York Times* as assistant to James Reston, the columnist and Washington Bureau chief.

From 1964 to 1974, Yardley worked as an editorial writer and book reviewer at the *Greensboro Daily News* and, during this time, he was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, academic year 1968-1969, where he studied American literature and literary biography.

From 1974 to 1978, Yardley served as book editor of the *Miami Herald*. From 1978 to 1981, he was the book critic at the *Washington Star*, receiving a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism in 1981 and then moving to the *Washington Post* as book critic and columnist.

Yardley's books include biographies of Frederick Exley and Ring Lardner. His memoir about his family, *Our Kind of People*, describes his parents' 50-year marriage and casts a wry eye on the American WASP experience. He edited H.L. Mencken's posthumous literary and journalistic memoir, **My Life as Author and Editor**. He also has written introductions to books by Graham Greene, A.L. Liebling, Booth Tarkington and others. Yardley is known simultaneously as a scathingly frank critic and a star-maker. Among the talents he has brought to public light and championed are **Michael Chabon, Edward P. Jones, Anne Tyler, William Boyd, Olga Grushin** and **John Berendt**. He wrote a famously savage review of Joe McGinniss' book **The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy**, saying "Not merely is it a textbook example of shoddy journalistic and publishing ethics; it is also a genuinely, unrelievedly rotten book..."

In early 2003, Yardley began a series called **Second Reading**, described as "An occasional series in which the Post's book critic reconsiders notable and/or neglected books from the past." Every month or so, for the next seven years, he published essays about notable books from the past, many of which had gone out of print or were in some way seen as neglected.

It was in this series that he gained attention for his highly critical look at **The Catcher in the Rye**. His latest book, *Second Reading*, is a collection from the series. It was published by Europa Editions recently.

Jonathan Yardley is truly a legend in his own time.

Quote to Live By

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

—Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest

Josephine Sacabo

*"I believe in Art as the means of transcendence and connection. My images are simply what I've made from what I have been given. I hope they have done justice to their sources and that they will, for a moment, stay "the shadows of contentment too short lived." * —Josephine Sacabo*

*Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

Josephine Sacabo, one of America's leading art photographers, lives and works primarily in New Orleans, where she has been strongly influenced by the unique ambience of the city, and in San Miguel Allende, Mexico. She is a native of Laredo, TX, and was educated at Bard College in New York. Before moving to New Orleans, she lived and worked extensively in France and England.

Her earlier work was in the photo-journalistic tradition, influenced by **Robert Frank**, **Josef Koudelka**, and **Henri Cartier-Bresson**. She now works in a very subjective, introspective style. She uses poetry as the genesis of her work and lists poets as her most important influences, among them **Rilke**, **Baudelaire**, **Pedro Salinas**, **Vincente Huiobro**, **Juan Rulfo**, **Mallarmé**, and **Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz**.

Sacabo, has published four books of her work including **Une Femme Habitée** in Paris in 1991 by Editions Marval; award winning **Pedro Paramo** in 2002 by the University of Texas Press; **Cante Jondo** in 2002 and **Duino Elegie** in 2005 both by 21st Publishing.

She has had solo shows in Paris, London, Madrid, Toulouse, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other major U.S. cities. Her work has also been widely published in magazines in the United States and Europe and is in numerous permanent collections, both public and private, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Library of Congress and The Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington D.C.; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Bibliothèque Nationale,

Maison Européenne de la Photographie, and Paris Audio-Visual, Paris, France; Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, Rochester, NY; Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Wittliff Collection of Southwestern and Mexican Art, San Marcos, TX; Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA; New Orleans Museum of Art, Historic New Orleans Collection, and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, LA. Her work also is represented in the corporate collections, including those of Lykes Brothers Steamship Company and the ARCO Corporation.

Much in demand as a teacher of photography, Josephine has taught privately and at highly acclaimed classes such as those of the Center for Photography at Woodstock, the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles – France, and the Santa Fe Workshops.

While in college at Bard, she met her husband Richard Cohen,

whose pen name is **Dalt Wonk**, where they both studied theatre and acting, as well as literature. Sacabo and Wonk moved to New Orleans, after living in Europe for a number years, performing in a wide variety of theatrical productions. During this period of acting, Sacabo also embarked upon her career as a photographer. Wonk, a poet and artist, as well as an actor and playwright, and Sacabo produced and acted in numerous stage productions during their early years in New Orleans. They are founding members of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and have participated as faculty members for the Society's Words & Music festival on many occasions. Sacabo's images have been an elegant hallmark for various Society invitations, broadsides, and editions of *The Double Dealer* since 1990. Josephine and Dalt divide their time between their residences in the French Quarter of New Orleans and San Miguel Allende. They have one daughter, Iris, and two grandchildren, Oliver and Violet Octavia.

Josephine Sacabo is without doubt

A Legend In Her Own Time!





New Poetry

Featuring Emily Meier (1944-2013)



Emily Meier.
Photograph by Robert Meier.

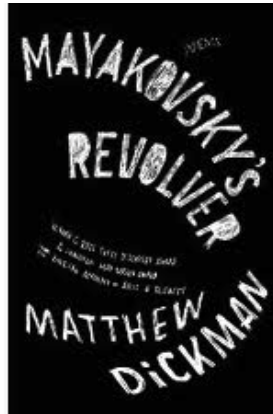
*...and perhaps you are there
reading these lines
bemused,
malancholy, just as I find them.*

*Still.
Not rolling an inch in this chair until I
finish the last word—*

*An excerpt from **Unedited**, a poem originally
written as an email to the poet Jim Moore and as a
companion piece to the essay:
Of Friends We Don't Know.*

~ See emilymeier.com for full text. ~

Poetry: Emily Meier



Editor's note: **Emily Meier** was a finalist in the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition several times. In our New Fiction section, you can read an excerpt from her novella "**The Beautiful Ships**", which was published as a section in her 2011 novel **Clare, Loving**. Emily's poetry has been published in *The Mississippi Review: Prize Stories and Poems*.

Arrival

From *The China Album*

I

Beyond the wing, mountains
etched with lightning.
For fifteen hours, we've flown
over people's days,
seeing little but gangs of clouds,
the inky calligraphy of rivers,
the wind-carved dunes
of Siberian snow.
Now, in the recent dark,
we descend toward China,
hearts edgy,
as electric as the sky.

II

The first words I have of this ancient language,
the first I form with my own mouth mean
refusal: Bu yao. No. I do not want.

They are both lie and the truth. In the harbor,
slipping on muddy, sewage-damp rocks,
I ache to give up each thing I have carried with me.

But the stick men, swarming their Chinese in my ears
—so insistent to hoist what is mine across their backs—
have made me fierce and protective.
Bu yao, I say. I stumble under the weight.

III

The last fast boat
has already left,
the Russian mosquito
that buzzes down the Yangtze
with clear Chinese priorities:
no heat source
but a Hong Kong movie.

On the wooden ferry,

Recommended Reading: 2012 Poetry

Dorothea Lasky
Thunderbird

Matthew Dickman
Mayakovsky's Revolver

John Ashbery
Quick Question

Ben Kopel
Victory

Eduardo Corral
Slow Lightening

Hannah Gamble
Your Invitation to a Modest Breakfast

David Ferry
Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations

Brenda Shaughnessy
Our Andromeda

D.A. Powell
Useless Landscape or A Guide for Boys

that slow boat in China,
passengers in fifth class
huddle on floors,
all their worldly clothes
a sealed odor on their skin
denser than the smell
of working man's noodles,
the convenient, floating supper.

A woman, joining her sisters
to hold up half the sky,
vows by loudspeaker
that the East is red.
In the karaoke bar,
singers break on high notes.

Men on patrol, absurdly young,
wear uniforms bought off the rack
to acquire authority, rank
for saying what is to be done,
though not about the unclean river
or the rats waiting for dark
to move in.

A rain of styrofoam
hits the Yangtze, supper dishes
sailed from railings
like white bowlers on descent
from the toss in the air
of some distant,
pristine
celebration.

IV

This Chinese rooster
does not sing.
He sours his morning crow,
quitting it
in a half-hearted glissando,
depressed in the brown air.

And this—this I have put in a story.
This brown scent I gave to a watching,
made up child,
although it was my children
I held to me, finding
the scent of bus exhaust,
manure in their hair.
This is the scent of a country;
it is almost this.

The You of China

Do not wear gloves.
Even if the wind is terrible,
is inside you, do not,



Photo by Robert Meier.

for you need your hands
for all the days' work--
to plant, to carry, to cut
beets into lattices
you dry for winter food,
to hold the cold basin of water
you wash in.

Your hands will tighten
until they are purple
and twisted
into something small,
a woman's deformities.
But do not cover them
in foolish warmth
that hides their claim
of who you are,
what you have been.

Deep, very deep in the countryside,
though not hidden from the fragrant
spring,
there are trains of buildings, factories
of brick and tile that mean once
someone was afraid.

Their red characters announce them:
Prepare for War. Prepare for Famine.
For the People.

This is a hiding place. When
Chairman Mao, astride the country,
thought that China could be rife with war,
that the many sons of Chinese women
would build a living Chinese Wall,
his arsenal went here.

How very different now. No gangs
of ten or four, but groups of three:
mother, father, wonderful child.

It's the slogan after all:
One couple, one child--
everyone is responsible.
And so everywhere--on roads
with firecrackers popping off
to cry a death,
at shiny-littered temples,
at hot pot where birds' eggs and
tripe and chicken fat are boiled in oil
and small girls dream themselves
the leggy women dancing in their
well-slit gowns--everywhere you see
the parents and their solitary child.

You'd never think the child was made
for sacrifice.

Poetry is written in the river.
For centuries on the Yangtze
ships paused for sailors to carve
the characters of dynasties
deep in stone, leaving their mark,
their words
on the White Crane Bridge.

You can touch the stones now,
walk on them.
You can clamber on boards
to a boat that rows you
out to the middle
of the river.

When you get there, when your skin
touches the poems you cannot read,
know that you are feeling
history in its passage,
that the great dam,
when it comes,
will drown all legends
in a sudden rush.

In town there's a grey roller rink
and, on an alley, tea houses
for old men, tables of mah jongg
manned by women, and always
markets, their fleshy, sweet colors
of countless faces and raw food. You
climb mountains on the steps.

Where the alley turns,
there's an outdoor cooking pot
for a room that is home
to all generations and
to jiaozi dumplings for guests.
There's a closeness

in the easy-moving city and,
in the winter dust and summer heat,
a chance for money.
You're quite right to be happy.

You make your own job.
With your back
and homemade baskets
and a length of bamboo,
smooth and tough enough
to lift any burden,
you join the army
of stick men who carry
China to itself.

Pestering gets you the job,
but chance is still part of the game,
as though it were mah jongg
and you needed a chosen tile,
the right image
of lucky sticks
to make your hand.

Friday night is a real dream.
In a week that starts
with morning exercise
and works through college
days and evenings in a chalky
classroom that you learn in
and then clean with a bucket,
it's the only break except
for the odd picnic and
Sunday meeting exhortations
to the communist good life.

But Friday night you dance.
Outside, at the cold water tap,
you wash your hair. Your
dance clothes are the clothes
you've worn since six a.m.
and the charging tunnel rush
to calisthenics. But your hair
shines like the black cloud
of heads afloat the listless,
stretching bodies of the dawn.
Your shoes, in this land of dust
and mud, will also shine.

Turning in a cavernous
building of plain cement,
a disco ball threads rays
of color to the misty dark.
In a perfect fox trot, two boys
glide by to the swing of music
that is never more exotic than
"Moon River." Girls dance,

and then rest, one in the other's
lap. There is nothing gay
about it, but only the fluid line
of the dance, whatever quiet
longing its rhythm brings.

In the old people's croquet court,
their arms stroking the dimming twilight,
women walk backwards
in the graveyard of day.

They are walking off time,
each dusky step erasing
the long step of light.

In the shadows,
eerie as haunts,
they summon night spirits,
but only to cow you, tame you
to a faint piano.

Arrival in Retrospect

It is a child's belief
that if you fall into
the deepest hole in the ground
and keep going, descending
through earth's molten center
as if sliding through
a heatproof pneumatic tube
(the child stops briefly to wonder:
what of gravity's sudden puzzle
when it pulls both ways,
one gravity holding your hands
and the other your feet?)
—sliding in free fall
that hurtles you onward,
then finally,
at long, long last,
reversed magically
to avoid a breach,
you'll push headfirst
through paddies of rice
and rise up
standing in China.

In fact, the transit is this odd.
The child's fancy has got it right.

Living in Water

Hurrying before trips to the chemo zone—
before the sun lips up and over
the freeway—they water plants listening
to the rain cascade from porch to porch below.
Young woman, scarf replacing
her lost hair, older woman, lowered
by gravity, still they test the soil with a finger.

In Dave's house, it is Dave who waters
the plant, the root, the leaf, the live
memory passed on like the pontiff's key:
expired pope to the living one. A moment
of light in the new day. The crosshatch of sun
warming the window sill. The silvered pot
with the one life his lost son has left him.

I have stolen his best story. Here is Al's:
Annie at five in a South Seas fisherman's boat
and the enormous wave that flashed her
overboard and, while Al dove deep
into a lifetime of bad dreams, she biked
the warm descent, floated eye-wide past beautiful
fish. At forty, she said it was how to die.



Emily Meier. Photograph by Robert Meier.



Anne Monteleone Burr

Juleps in June, 2013

*David and Greer Monteleone of the famous New Orleans hotel family, top left, are shown at Juleps in June, 2013 with honorees for the event Josephine Sacabo and Dalt Wonk, authors of the splendid new art book, **Nocturnes**. David and Greer hosted the event at their Old Metairie residence. At right, Denise Monteleone, is pictured at left with Joseph DeSalvo, Co-founder, and Anne Pincus, Faulkner Society Chairman. Juleps in June is the Faulkner Society's annual fundraiser.*



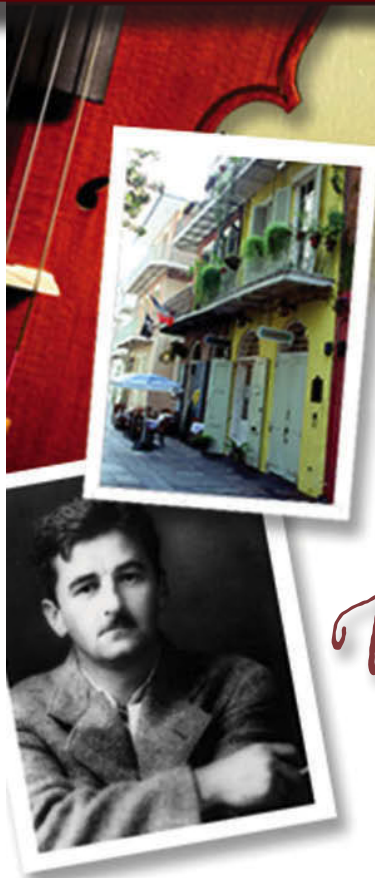
Juleps in June, 2012

Rivie and Cathy Cary, Honorary Chairs, left, are shown with Rosemary James and literary guest of honor Richard Ford at Juleps in June, 2012 at the Cary's Audubon Place residence.

Juleps in June, 2011

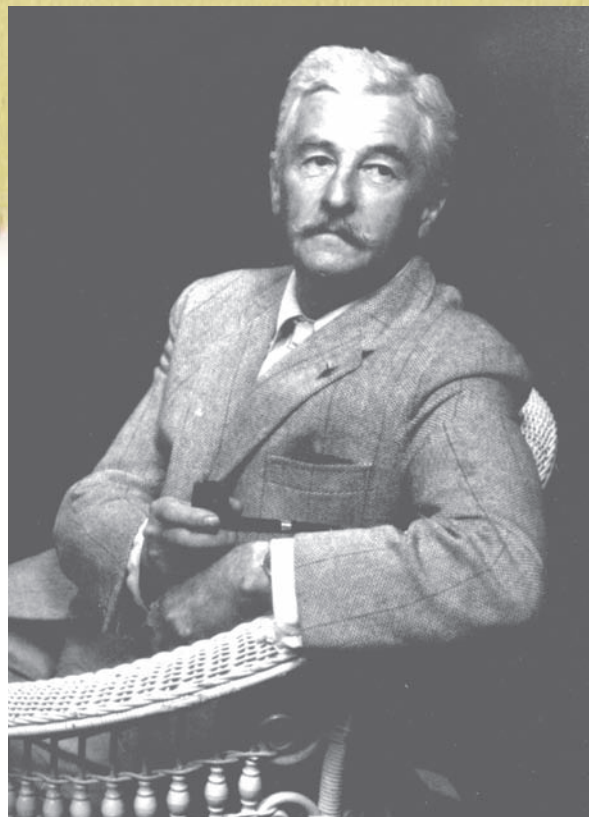
Tia and James Roddy, shown below, were Honorary Chairs for Juleps in June, 2011 and hosted the event at their Audubon Place home.





Winning Words

*William Faulkner, Winner
Nobel Prize for Literature*



The William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition

Guarantors:

Faulkner – William Wisdom Competition

The cash prizes, gold medals, and travel expenses awarded to the winners of the Faulkner – Wisdom Competition from 2007 – 2011 were made possible by grants from generous sustaining members of the Faulkner Society

Novel: Judith “Jude” Swenson

Novella: Bertie Deming Smith

Novel-in- Progress: Rosemary & Joseph DeSalvo

Short Story: Mary Freeman Wisdom Foundation

Essay: Dr. E. Quinn Peeper

High School Story: Nancy & Hartwig Moss, III

Poetry: David Speights

And:

Anonymous gifts from Society patrons



*William B. Wisdom
Faulkner Collector*



Peter Selgin
2011
Novel
Gold Medal
The Water Master



Judge Will Murphy is an Executive Editor at Random House, where he has worked for six years. Previously, he was a senior editor at the University of Minnesota Press, and the literary editor at the University of California Press in Berkeley. Will was recently named one of “50 Under 40,” who matter in publishing by Publishers Weekly. Murphy has become known for editing books that matter, such as the powerful *Finn* by Jon Clinch and the beautiful work by Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*; as well as *The Second World: Enemies and Influence in the New Global Order* by Parag Khanna. Also on his list are *How Success Happens* by David Brooks and *The Battle of the Crater* by Richard Slotkin. Other authors include Jeff Shaara, David Brooks, Bernard-Henri Levy, Philip Zimbardo, and Nassim Taleb, author of *The Black Swan*, which was on the New York Times Bestseller List for 16 weeks.

Plato in Timaeus, Plotinus in Enneads, elaborate the idea that the soul is a stranger on earth, that it has descended from the spaceless and timeless universe, or that it has ‘fallen’ on account of sin into matter.

—J. E. Corlot,

A Dictionary of Symbols

Prologue: Leopold Napoli III, R.I.P.

When I was growing up in Hattertown, Connecticut (“The Town that Crowned America”), my father built me my very own trolley car. He built it out of spare parts in the garage of our house on South Carrot Street. It was yellow with red pinstripes and cane seats that flipped back and forth depending on which way it was going. The trolley was powered by twin Briggs & Stratton lawnmower engines and had a brass bell that I’d ring as we clacked along.

Dad wore a work vest over his striped pajamas, the closest thing he had to a conductor’s uniform. As

we rolled along we sang Clang, Clang, Clang Went the Trolley. And though the trolley only went from the backyard clothesline pole to around a dogwood tree a few dozen yards away and back, I pictured us rolling across vast rectangular states, through towns (the brick barbecue pit) and cities (the cinderblock trash incinerator), across roaring rivers (rain-filled runnels and ruts), through cactus-filled deserts and fields of golden corn and rippling wheat (patches of overgrown, dying grass).

*

Once, Hattertown had over a dozen hat factories, each with a brick chimney pumping smoke into the sky. At their zenith, after the Civil War, they pounded out a million hats per year (including—they say—Lincoln’s famous stove-pipe). But by the time I was born only three hat factories remained. The rest had been sold or simply abandoned. More than a few went up in blazes of glory, set on fire by their bankrupt and desperate owners in a last-ditch grab at insurance money.

*

Dad and I would watch the hat factories burn. He’d seek out the best vantage point on a hill in that town of many hills. We’d sit in his bullet-nosed Studebaker Champion. While taking in flames and fire engines, Dad sipped from his bottle of Rock & Rye, and I munched Cracker Jacks, just like at the drive-in.

One night on a hill overlooking the Crofus & Korbet Hat Works, Dad built us a campfire, a small blaze to mirror the inferno soon to rage in the gulley below. Armed with marshmallows on green twigs we waited for the firemen to arrive and unwind their hoses, carry ladders, and smash windows. When the wind blew our way we clamped damp rags over our mouths to filter out the toxic fumes of chemicals used to process felt.

The hat factories burned gloriously, their tangerine flames licking utility wires, shooting up sparks that formed their own constellations. Once, when the wind blew just the right way, a flurry of burning, half-finished hats whirled up into the air, tiny flying saucers of blazing felt. One nearly landed on my head.

Now that’s something! my father said, slapping his knees first, then mine, his outburst as singular as the event itself. Dad was a man of few words.

*

People used to wonder how it was that my father always seemed to know when a hat factory was about to burn. Some even suggested that he'd been hired to set the fires, a supposition reinforced by the amount of insurance fraud in our town. For sure he could have used the money.

I refused to believe such rumors, as I refused to believe anything bad to do with my father. He was a crude man, uneducated, inarticulate, smelling of hat factory fumes and bristling with bad habits, but still irresistible—at least to me, his son. He loved hot dogs, ice cream, fireworks, Gene Kelly, baseball, bubble gum and bourbon. My mother married him because he made her laugh. “I guess that’s the price I paid,” she confessed to me once, “for having a sense of humor.”

But Dad was no arsonist.

However he came by it, when it came to predicting hat factory fires, Leopold Napoli III was possessed of a Promethean foresight.

*

Not that long before he died, as we watched another hat factory burn, Dad gave me some advice, or tried to.

“I have two bits of wisdom for you,” he said, bobbing a marshmallow over the campfire. “The first is: want everything, need nothing. That may not sound useful, but it’s important. The second bit $\frac{1}{4}$ the second bit $\frac{1}{4}$ ” He paused, chewed his lip, scratched the short hairs behind his neck. “Son,” he said, “I forget the second bit.” He burst out laughing then, his breath a blowtorch of bourbon, until a coughing fit seized him, ending our longest conversation.

*

He died straining and hacking on the bowl. My mother was in town, working for Mr. Stevens, the optometrist. That morning the doctor took his pulse, shook his head, and left. I found him sitting there in a cloud of shit fumes, mouth agape, head thrown back, gazing up at the bathroom ceiling as if waiting for a stalactite to form there. A bluebird tapped at the windowpane. I cried out his name only to be met by his usual reticence.

Dad smoked like a hat factory all his life, but long before his pulmonary cells mutinied he'd suffered from Olympian headaches, drowsiness, irascibility, vertigo, nausea, diarrhea, shortness of breath, sore throat, a ghostly complexion, and tremors so violent at times he couldn't button his shirts, all symptoms of mercury poisoning. All hat factory workers were exposed to some mercury, but none more than the back shop workers, those who processed raw beaver and rabbit pelts into felt. Though they stopped using mercury just before World War II, by then my father had breathed-in decades worth of the stuff, having worked in hat factories since he was old enough to reach the pedal of a blocking machine—as

had his father, Leopoldi di Napoli II, and his grandfather, Leopoldi di Napoli. Like them, and though the official cause of death was lung infection, Dad died of mercury poisoning, better known as Mad Hatter's Disease, or, locally, as the Hattertown Shakes. Hats killed my father.

*

With my father's death all the colors seem to drain out of my world. Trees didn't talk to me; birds didn't fly or sing for me; the sky was a dull gray wall over my head. The bitter taste of a penny filled my mouth and flavored my days.

What little comfort I found wasn't on earth, but among the stars. The year before, Sputnik orbited the earth, launching America into the space age. I gave myself over to daydreams of rocket ships and space travel, and took comfort in amassing useless facts, trivia from poured-over books and encyclopedias: the sun is 330,330 times larger than Earth; Venus is the only planet in the solar system that rotates clockwise; in Nakhla, Egypt, on June 28, 1911, a dog was killed by a meteor—flights of mental frippery designed to propel me as sure as any rocket out of the dull atmosphere of my freshly

fatherless world, one as charred and smoldering as the aftermath of a hat factory fire.



Will Murphy and Peter Selgin goofing off at Words & Music 2011 in New Orleans

Peter Selgin is the author of **Drowning Lessons**, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction (University of Georgia Press, 2008). He is also the author of a previous novel, **Life Goes to the Movies** (Dzanc Books, 2009; second prize, AWP Award for the Novel; second prize James Jones First Novel Award) and two books on the craft of writing, **By Cunning & Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers and 179 Ways to Save a Novel: Matters of Vital Concern to Fiction Writers** (2006, 2010, Writers Digest Books). His memoir, **Landscape with English Teacher**, was a recent finalist for both the Bakeless and the Graywolf Press Prizes for Creative Nonfiction. A painter and illustrator as well as a writer, his art has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Forbes*, *Gourmet*, *Outside*, and many other publications. He has also written several books for children, including *S.S. Gigantic Across the Atlantic* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), winner of the Helen Lemme Award for Best Children's Picture Book of 1999. His memoir in essays, *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, was just published by the University of Iowa Press / Sightline Books. He lives in New York City and in Winter Park, Florida, where he is Distinguished Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Rollins College.



Joyce Miller
2011
Novel
First Runner-Up



Echoes of Love & War

But the real trouble, when it came, looked different. It wasn't Addolorata, nor the Ash Lady with her hunger. It wasn't deep winter, but a day in March, nearly a year to the day of the fire, and a time when spring was on the other side of the cold. The whole house, following the large afternoon meal, became dark in the middle of the afternoon, as it usually did, for repose. Sleepiness lay heavy everywhere as she climbed the stairs and stretched on the bed. She listened to the stillness, felt the vibration of everyone softly breathing, felt the blanket of her own steady breathing sweetly folding her into drowsiness, the arms nearly there when she saw in the large mirror over the fireplace the dimmest outline of a figure. At the foot of the bed the figure stood with arms akimbo. She peered through dark veils at what was there.

"We have a day in front of us as is never happened before," said the voice. A candle was lit. The eye lay along the folds of everything before coming back to her. "It happened in the night and they've left. We're going to go for a walk. We've a lot of work. Get up."

She had never been outside before. She had never seen the streets as far as she could remember. But who was the girl? And what did she mean to say with that watery voice coming from some place wet in her chest? Everyone was asleep, the house night still. What would Donna Liliansa say if she knew? Did she know? Probably not.

Was she dreaming?

She slipped from the bed and followed the presence, struggling to recall the details. She thought she knew the form, the strange voice of the figure working its way down steps and along corridors to the kitchen. Ash Lady was asleep in the kitchen with her head of hair going in a million unruly directions across the table.

It was Ash Lady's daughter, the one who had the fits. She'd seen her have one in the kitchen with Addolorata present. The girl's head had swallowed the eyes, and a current had shot through her body, running her along the ground as if something alive had dropped from the sky and streaked through her.

"It's a strange business," Addolorata had whispered at the time, as if taking her into a confidence while the girl writhed about the floor and everyone watched, including Ash Lady. "Can't feel the flame of a

candle when she has the trances. The mother had her enspitted at birth, owing to she was born feet first. Three times they turned her on the stick but look at the good it did."

The girl had a name, but she couldn't remember what it was. Something to do with the sky. She had come from there and couldn't shake it out. And now in the kitchen she watched her place a finger to her lips before adjusting, about her own shoulders, her mother's heavy cloak. Sky Girl in Ash Lady's cloak took a basket from the table and added the remaining loaves of bread. She motioned her to follow, then tiptoed from the room to the entry corridor. On a hook was Sky Girl's own cloak and she pointed to it.

She pulled the cloak about her, but around her body it hung, long and bulky. Sky Girl covered her mouth and snorted. The cloak was warm and smelled of flour. Static shock from the fabric made her jump. Sky Girl had power.

She followed out the door and down the steps, knobbing the extra fabric, as if she had done it a million times. The steps ended in an interior courtyard that opened onto a piazza. She had seen the piazza from the windows. She had seen children playing and had waved from the windows overhead, but couldn't say anything. Outside, at ground level, it was delicious. The piazza was deserted. It was repose.

Sky Girl walked swiftly, as if fearing she might be seen. Down small alleys she darted. Up sets of steps like a darting bug. She never glanced back at her trying to keep pace. She never saw her running and springing behind with the floury smell springing from her shoulders. The air was cool. The air laughed so hard into her the air powdered. In and out the air went in. And then it didn't come out. Something closed up quickly. Her feet slowed. The knob of cloth chained her hand. A small animal sound came alive inside and then small plops dropped from one ledge to another. She looked up. She looked at her free hand as if there should be rain. But the rain was inside in the small sacs tearing in her lungs. The animal was drowning in the ploppy breakage. A sea sound rose in her ears. The panting turned to gurgling, and far away the wave heaved backwards.

Far away the wave heaved and then began

higher, spreading the debris of her lungs into her blood, branching the fire into the smoked spaces of her memory. Over and into her gathered the variations of voices. The sky kept going. The wave kept rising, subtracting her steps, exposing in the undertow her history. Red pulsing sores beat the sides of the animal moaning in her chest. The drumbeats of her lungs, the splitting beats filled her ears. She opened her mouth, wider and wider, but Sky Girl had disappeared. A small dot on a small map. She heard from far away: "Isn't that the way?" She got tangled in the fabric of the cloak and the excess fell from her hand. She fell with it. On the ground she lay in the puddle of the cloak.

Where the water caved in with the air, the two reproduced the collected sound of long ago. They had never gone away, the voices. They were out there on some atmospheric pressure line waiting to ride in on the right wave. The history of what happened there resurrected in the crashing water. Words spoken long ago never vanished. Those rapid and changing pulsing pressures. She felt their onslaught in the smoked part of her brain. She heard those voices break back in. We think he is. He is. We don't know. They'll know more. By devilish means. He went away. A threat. Old trick. Not far. Father. Not far.

She lifted her head. Who were they?

Sky Girl's face made noises, her neck. Sky Girl said: "Well," the bones inside her cracking as she bent over, as if she were an old lady. "What are you doing down there?" She folded her hands pleasantly.

She was on her haunches staring at Sky Girl's folded hands, giddy at the sky overhead, at the flour clouds. It began with flour.

"I said you have to get up."

Everything seemed familiar and not familiar. She had tripped on the long cape, but that wasn't it. She didn't have a chest anymore. It had exploded under the cape. Her heart had exploded.

"What's wrong?"

She was on the ground. She was on the cold stones. Her head was attached. Her limbs. But what were they attached to? She had no lungs anymore, no chest.

"You have to get up. I have to—" Sky Girl colored. She bit her lightening lips, then bent to gather the basket. Squatting beside her she said: "I have to take this to someone. They want to see you. His mother and father. And I said I would. You never go out. Don't you want to be out? You're not a cripple." She pinched her leg.

Rosalia batted her hand aside and stood. The sudden verticality doubled her over but she managed to stay aloft. She bunched the cape in a ball near her waist. She glanced at Sky Girl, observing her with a face on the edge of tears. A charged face that could go either way. She might have one of her fits and then what would they do? Whatever had crashed around her with the voices was less crashing now. She motioned ahead, forcefully, with her hand. Sky Girl slowed her step.

Up above, the sky was padded with gray. The air

was chilly. They continued to walk in silence among the silent streets and the streets began to smell, the dwellings to grow more miserable. A whistle, lacy and trilling like a chaffinch, transfixed Sky Girl, who stood with legs apart, anticipating the next charged sound. But the next imitation wasn't as pretty as a chaffinch's song, though that didn't stop Sky Girl. She moved toward it and the bird, when it emerged from shadow, was an ugly, beaten bird that eyed Sky Girl like he was starving. He took Sky Girl's hand. He approached her with Sky Girl and his bad skin. He smelled blistery, like his blisters might break.

"Did you have to tell anyone?" he asked, leering over at her.

Sky Girl shook her head. "I got her out of bed. Where's your dad? Did you tell?"

This time the boy with the bad skin shook his head. "He's sleeping," he said, slyly, releasing her hand, pointing ahead to a small hovel in the middle of the other hovels.

Rosalia moved closer. Everything smelled like the ugly bird, as if the surface had burst apart the festering in the dwellings. She clutched the excess fabric of the cloak, pinched her nose with the other hand. The two, when they turned around, began to laugh.

"Oh, Miss doesn't like it here. She has forgotten where she lived."

Sky Girl recoiled in alarm. She made a shushing sound, but the boy wasn't so nice about listening.

"I was here when it happened," he said. We all was." He pointed to another hovel. He pointed with his fingerpost finger and everyone turned. A black place with open spaces stood to the side of his family's, the insides debrided and fragile. He focused again on her. He put his face next to hers to keep going. "What do you think of that?"

The pustules leaked. She could see that up close, the streaks of their leavings, the lumps like maggots feeding on him each night.

"You shouldn't say," Sky Girl pleaded, trying to silence him from behind.

She saw Sky Girl's hand on his neck. She tried not to smell his breath but his breath came in. A few of his teeth were already missing and some were black. His mouth must have hurt. He must have been pushing the hurt on to her, but what about?

"Didn't no one ever tell you what happened?"

He waited but she didn't move, didn't give him anything.

"You was here one night and then the whole thing—" His fingers opened and he raised them over her head, pushed Sky Girl when she tried to stop him. "My dad saved you. You wouldn't be here except for him. So I say you should give me something." He held open his free hand.

She tried not to spit in it. And when she didn't move, he yanked one of the loaves from the basket and ripped a hunk of bread the size of a bunny. He stuffed the bunny whole in his mouth, lobbed it with his spit

from cheek to cheek. When he swallowed the animal he burped. Sky Girl giggled and when she did, he turned toward her with his hands. He had to do something with his hands and Sky Girl was holding the basket. She only had one free hand and her eyes were dancing. He flattened his palms over her chest, rubbed both of his hands over her front like she was a washing board. Sky Girl giggled and her eyes unfocused. He took her arm and pulled her toward the ruined hovel.

She followed them into what was left of the inside. The two disappeared in the one covered corner. It was dark back there. It was dark everywhere, but less dark where she stood. She regarded the floor, the shell of open stone on one side. She sniffed the air. She stroked the side of a wall and her hand came away black. She kicked stones. She kicked something hard that was wedged in the floor, half melted, and then squatted to dislodge it.

Whatever it was was somehow still whole, a sort of necklace strangely woven. She heard hard noises in the corner. She found a harder stone and dug around the piece till it was free and in her hand. The thing was charred but shiny in places, like the whole piece might be shiny if she rubbed hard. She slipped the piece in her pocket and turned to leave the place when the smell of something caught her nose. It was familiar and distant and she shut her eyes. She opened her palms and breathed deeply. And in the next instant a sort of electric shock surged her body that exploded in a fit of memory.

Sky Girl and her loving and the place and the boy and the necklace. She was having a seizure of memory or doubt or an ecstasy. Her insides were lifting up out of her, rising toward the place Sky Girl was because of this smell, this one thing riveting her nose. Some receptor was receiving the smell of something in that space that was vibrating time, and she was up there with it in this gap, in the something charged, waiting to cross the gap. But what bridge across the gap could she make? She kept inhaling. The noises pitched higher, ledged, hand over hand higher and higher in the climb. She opened her eyes. She pulled the necklace from her pocket and inhaled then bent to inhale the space she'd dug it from, the stones she used to free it. A voltage of time particles connecting to other time particles merged in her nose then broke, shadowy and real. She could see a face like Donna Liliana's but different. She could smell the face into shape and the face took up the whole picture. The eyes and the singing. She remembered the eyes and the singing.

*When the rememberers
come
With their remembering
voices
Silvering the rims of the
trees,
These singers
With their sea hair
Singing sea songs*

*If you ask why?
And I raise my eyes
To that white place,
Song-cut in the black
Frame of trees
And still I have
No answer.*

She followed it like a path back through the gap. The dimensions changed in the hovel, the walls shifting as if someone were pushing them out. Something about the geometry of the place shook her thoroughly and she had to escape. She had to go where the air was open. She turned toward the dark corner. The two looked like one warped stick. They would never notice she was gone. The story about the father had been a lie anyway. It was clear that the bad-faced boy hadn't wanted what he told Sky Girl he wanted.

She moved as quickly as she could toward the burnt circles in her pocket, that smell, that memory of some circle containing the woman with the sad eyes. She walked, clutching the cumbersome cloak till she ended in an open piazza. She walked amid the small and smelly twisted streets and saw first, around the circle at the back, a sort of green perimeter, as if the place inside were green, as if inside she'd find a wood. The door at the back was open. It was repose and all was quiet, but the back door to the round space was unlocked and she went in.

The space was cooler than outside and she pulled Sky Girl's cloak around her. She caught her breath with slow steps, adjusting to the darkness of candles. The smell was sweet. A gauzy smell from the back along a corridor curling her toward the light. Candles were lit in the main circle and around the circle of the space were pillars. She had seen the space before with the woman. She knew the space.

*Fire returning to hearth,
Returning to where it was
born,
Burning inside the
awaiting,
Rising as one, united
Once more.*

She made, without knowing, a sign of the past. She made a turn toward the painted man kneeling. He was looking down at her with the bagged soft eyes she remembered. He had a beard like the king of her dreams, but he wasn't that kind of king. He wasn't the one to lord over the dead swinging things.

She grew tired and near the door that was locked from the outside she found a chair, as if placed there for her nearness to the king. She sat down in the chair and closed her eyes. Someone was snoring. A man in a long robe had his head bent. There were keys in his hand and the hand was near the edge of his knees. If the ring fell

it would make a clanking sound on the pavement and he might wake up.

She rose from the chair. She bent over in the dim light to look at the man. A slim line of drool ran down his chin. She snorted when she saw and he shook in his chair. She knew him. He was the priest and he didn't like her. That she knew. She tiptoed toward the front door. She pushed and found it firm. She tiptoed back and just as the man was shifting in the chair, she yanked the keys and sent them flying.

"Whool . . ." he said, too groggy to make a real word. She stood before him until he saw he was not alone. "What is this?"

In her boldness she forgot to hold fast to the cloak and the material bagged at her feet. Rather than sprinting off as she planned, she tumbled as he lunged forward. She curled in the cocoon of cloth, rolling blindly away.

"Thief," he cried. "Thief! Thief!"

The shambling gait neared. She could smell his feet. She could smell the iron pumping of her own heart, taste her pitiful lungs. Against the side of a pillar she righted, scooped up the excess cloth and sprang into the best run she could manage. He wasn't very fast. Along the corridor toward the back exit she escaped with the priest crying behind her: "The devil. The devil girl!"

Outside, she ran along the side toward Piazza Talleyrand and across the main street. She slipped a few times more, but kept a steady pace, realizing she had no idea where she was going. A few shops had raised their metal shutters. Citizen traffic was beginning to increase, the early commerce of the afternoon. Sky Girl would return without her. Donna Lilibiana would wonder where she was, Doctor Sabbarini too. What should she do?

She tried not to cry. She tried not to look at other people looking at her in her oversized cloak. She was tired and cold and the games were over. She had a treasure in her pocket and her head was clear about some things she knew. But she was lost. The boy with the erupting face, Sky Girl with the currents of magic and strangeness had changed the day. Deeper and deeper into the city she wove as if there was a path, as if she were the path. She paused to catch her breath. The air was completely still, and she was completely lost. She began to cough. She covered her mouth and pulled her hand away, felt the liquid running, saw the blood. She shoved

her hand inside the cloak. She leaned against the corner of a building. And there, on the street was Doctor Murci.

He was walking alongside a woman pushing a high perambulator. He was testing his ideas. For Donna Lilibiana would never have brought Tommaso out till he was baptized, and never in the cooler weather, baptized or not. She had heard them say, Baptize, Baptized, till she knew it meant something Tommaso was not. Yet there was Doctor Murci, earthy and genuine, with a baby in the cool air, and who, when he saw her alone with the sagging cloak, tilted his head as if unsure she were real.

"Little Pink," he said, approaching with the woman and the perambulator. He leaned over.

She waved with the hand that was red.

He touched the woman's hand. He pointed toward her and then began talking. "What are you doing out here?" he asked, like she could answer. "Who is with you?" He examined her hand. "What happened?"

A sort of sadness enveloped her in the canopy of his shadow, and she raised her eyes to explain the inability to explain to him towering overhead, the inability to cut across the gaps, to have people like Sky Girl take advantage as if she were a small animal. He lowered himself to her level. He smelled of pine and she leaned against him as if against the base of a tree. She was tired. She was so very tired, and let go of the cloth she held bunched about her waist. She closed her eyes and felt herself lifted away.

"She tried not to cry. She tried not to look at other people looking at her in her oversized cloak. She was tired and cold and the games were over. She had a treasure in her pocket and her head was clear about some things she knew. But she was lost. The boy with the erupting face, Sky Girl with the currents of magic and strangeness had changed the day. Deeper and deeper into the city she wove as if there was a path, as if she were the path."

And when she awoke she wasn't in her room. She was in a sort of tent, during the Ember Days, watching everyone outside around the flame of a giant fire. There was the woman with the braid she had seen in the burnt building, the woman whose songs she remembered. The woman took her into her lap, she breathed into her lungs as if to make them strong. She felt the air in her lungs swirl. She felt it rise from her stomach into her chest, lifting her up. She heard the sound of pumping air and felt the warm mist of it inside the white tent. She felt the woman's hand on her head.

It was day, the morning light streaming in around the slatted shutters, when the events with Sky Girl returned. She remembered her at the foot of the bed asking her to leave. She recalled the streets, the ugly bird boy. She remembered the hovel and the necklace, the current in her nose, the smell that took her on a journey
The necklace.

She threw back the covers, remembering the necklace, remembering the burnt place. She searched the armadio for the cloak, the necklace inside the pocket. She dressed quickly when she couldn't find it, took the steps down and down again to the kitchen. In the kitchen Sky Girl wouldn't look at her except to see if she would make an accusing sign.

"Well if it isn't the queer queen back from running all over town," Addolorata said. "They thought they was going to part with the likes of you."

"Never saw such a contraption as they brought in," said Ash Lady. "Tubes like snakes and a big tent."

"Been sleeping like a queen for days. That'll teach you to run away," Addolorata said, her hands full of flour. "And stealing other people's clothes." She was making macaroni for lunch. She was a good macaroni maker.

Rosalia glanced at Sky Girl who was kneading dough and turning as pale as one of her mother's clean sheets. Sky Girl eyed the door and Addolorata saw something in the glance.

"There's something, now. What do you know?"

Sky Girl petrified over the dough. "I don't know," she said, stupidly, since she wasn't used to lying so well yet.

In the hall she waited till the door closed, waited to be sure Addolorata wasn't following with her floury hands. On a hook was Sky Girl's cloak, hanging as it had hung that day. It looked forlorn and sunken with its shoulders deflated. It looked like she must have looked in it.

She plunged her hands inside the shell of the pockets, burying her face in the folds. She felt the cloth, smelled the pockets, smelled the cloak. But nothing was as it ought to have been. It was as if she had never made the journey. The tarnished object that had vibrated her back to the past with its smell had vanished. Someone had taken the necklace or thrown it away. It would have been easy to mark it for the garbage. So she looked in the garbage.

Over the course of the next few days she searched during repose through what was tossed out. Most things weren't tossed out. Most things were used for the kitchen garden, if left over food. She looked through the garbage, the places the domestics kept their belongings, through the pockets of the aprons hanging on their hooks, through the cupboards. There were a million cupboards with shiny utensils of all sorts, and she looked through all of them. But the strange circle was gone, and with it, the strange smell under the burnt black. The best she could do was make a drawing, something to keep in her own place to remind her of what she had held.

She used the paper and pencil Doctor Murci had left behind from his forsaken experiments. She kept the drawing in her room in a drawer and would gaze at it for a long time. When the sky was dark, she would sometimes hold the picture against the light to see if any light came out of it, any smell. She sometimes took it to the window and raised her eyes, hoping an answer would come

from the eyes of the woman she had seen. She needed to return to that place, to get Sky Girl to take her there. But Sky Girl wouldn't look at her. Whether from guilt or embarrassment, she didn't know and didn't care. She wanted the burnt necklace back. She wanted to return to the burnt room.

A few days passed and one morning before the household was up and about, Doctor Murci appeared as if he might provide an answer.

"Well, hello there Little Pink," he said, patting her head in the kitchen. He squatted down so that he was actually looking up at her. His face was touched with the light pink of day and his teeth were as white as beads. She wanted to lean into his face. She wanted to tell him about the necklace, but Addolorata interrupted with a tray for coffee.

Doctor Murci followed Addolorata toward the study, and she followed a few steps behind. She didn't want Addolorata to know her whereabouts, to see her trying to communicate with Doctor Murci. She tucked behind the door of the room across from the study, and from across the hall she heard: "Carlo."

"Pier."

"Thank you. On the desk will be fine."

She waited till Addolorata passed with the tray then waited longer after that. Somewhere in the house Tommaso was waking up, but she couldn't hear. Addolorata would be supervising the staff as they arrived while she assisted Donna Liliansa. But it wasn't time yet. The clock was ticking. Soft as a wing, she tiptoed from her place, leaned against the study door and listened. It was at the end of a long corridor and no one ever entered that part of the house unless they meant to use the study. Which was the only room in the palazzo kept under lock when not in use. Conversation was already underway.

"—the girl in like an animal. What are you afraid of? I mean, why not let her accompany you or Liliansa on occasion? Have a cloak made for her, for pity's sake."

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Tadzio Koelb
2011
Novel
Runner-Up
Bad of Country



When May smiles, the scar on her cheek wrinkles. The accident that caused it was the last and least intentional in a long line of provocations. She doesn't talk about it often, but I can sometimes tell from her stance, her eyes, the skittish severity of her movements, that it is on her mind. When May is anxious or excited she bounces the muscles in her legs, her thighs and buttocks shudder with meaty recoil; her joints become tight. This is a silent entreaty, and I have discovered that although she might ask for some part of what she wants, there is always something that she keeps to herself, as if to ponder it – an exercise, perhaps, in hope, or else in self-control, in self-denial – and that although these unspoken things are tributaries to all her other desires, they are still individual, lonely, aloof.

I feel sometimes that I have perhaps divined them, but I will not act on my suspicions: I could be wrong, of course, and anyway, nothing must change. Instead I will hold her, plinth and anchor for her jittering. The ritual must have an altar, the performance a stage.

Her boyfriend, Jim, was in the back, too stoned to drive. "Fucking Jim," as she remembers him, not without some kindness. I have never asked what he looked liked, and there are no photos of him: he is just a name, an angry modifier, a history that I have learned by rote. I could not tell you the colour of his hair. His ghost, as we summon it, is simply true to an unpleasant nature. We accept him, as we accept the fog or the rain. He is a point we use for plotting the past.

What do I know about him? That he was thin but strong, that he liked to walk with his shirt off in the hot summers and argue with the store clerks – "counter jockeys" was his term for them – when they refused to serve him. That May found him funny:

"Fucking Jim, he was the funniest guy," she said. "I mean, he could talk about the wallpaper in his mother's house, about your shoes, about whatever, anything, and you'd be laughing so hard you wouldn't believe it. You'd have liked him. He was fucked up, but you'd have liked him" – a claim I doubt. May certainly liked him, though.

He lived a life of extended adolescence, the kind that some people we knew would have believed exempted the true American dream, in which accountability was endlessly deferred and the purpose of adulthood was

to pursue with adult ability and focus the thrilling, pointless, terrible desires of children. From this stone he occupied between two banks, "Fucking Jim" would extend a welcoming hand. "Fucking Jim" owned a car, and did odd jobs, sometimes sold pot; he engaged in petty theft, more for the sport, it seems, than for the proceeds. He displayed as well a certain seedy largesse, spending his money without the subtlest sign of worry or thrift or care, was irregular in his hours, and unpredictable in his moods.

He was, in other words, the opposite of May's careful and preoccupied father – and yet somehow, perhaps, not all that different.

I also know that Jim, like May, believed in God, and deduced through his belief in (a phenomenon that is strange but, I have discovered, not all that uncommon) a freedom from every other rule of religion, as if those were for people with doubt in their hearts, hangers-on who had something to prove. Jim was singularly untroubled by doubts, and thus assured of God's infinite understanding. He compiled instead a comprehensive list of cardinal sins and broken commandments in keeping with his self-image.

He did not, on the other hand, presume the forgiveness of the police, so in a rough attempt to purchase it he gave enough to the Benevolent Association every year to get a new sticker for his bumper, played basketball with them at the parks they frequented, and drank with them at their favourite bars. He told them he hoped one day to be a state trooper. It may even have been true.

Jim's other established belief was in an amorphous but distinct class of information called "book learning" for which he had, could have, no use, something completely separate from the real but ultimately unrewarding skills he had obtained for himself.

He was in his early 20s then, and had a girlfriend called Beth. May was in her own way thrilled, I think, to be the other woman, although she maintained a pretence of disapproval.

"The crazy thing is, his girlfriend liked me. We got along really well. I mean, we both knew he was an asshole. When he was too trashed he would make me drive him home to her place. I didn't even have a license. That shit's fucked up."

This is the tone in which she invoked him in those days. The memory of Jim was then always fresh, ever renewed. I sometimes had trouble accepting this threatening figure from her past.

"Why did you want to be with a guy like that?" I asked her.

"Fucking Jim?" He was fun when he wasn't being a jerk. We had a lot of fun."

Jim was the first time May knowingly tried to attract the sexual attention of someone so much older, someone who was not a boy, who sat irrevocably outside the world of childhood. She saw him, accidentally and often, around town, at the food court, in the convenience store parking lot where teenagers drank beer out of paper bags.

"He would make up these stories about people. Like when we first met, a bunch of us were sitting in the parking lot, just fucking around, you know, being kids and whatever, and he walks by. He kept looking at me funny, giving me this really hairy eyeball over his shoulder as he walks up to the door of the place, walking really fast like he was scared of something. I noticed him doing it, like it was really obvious. I tried to ignore him, but it's hard not to look when you know someone is watching you, right? Then a few minutes later I could see him through the store window, staring at me over the top of a magazine. It was this wedding magazine, and he's holding it upside-down, and staring at me, and that's when I knew for sure he was fucking with me, and I started to laugh. He pretended to be all shocked when I noticed him, hiding his face and trying to walk with the magazine over his eyes until he bumped into something. Then he comes out with a six-pack and some other stuff, and he walks up to me and says, 'Hey, I didn't recognise you at first, but now I know you all right. I know you, I know all about you,' like I was famous or something. I was like, 'Oh, yeah?'"

She smiles to remember it.

"And Jim says, 'Yeah, you're that wild child, right? Your parents found you in a field. You were like Tarzan, kind of half-wild, only instead of being raised by monkeys, you were being raised by moes.'"

"Moes?" she asked him.

"Yeah, moes. What mohair comes from? About this big, has, I don't know, legs? You didn't know that? Well. It doesn't surprise me, really. Adopted kids often lose their heritage."

"Oh, we do, do we?"

"That's what I hear, anyway. Oh, man, I remember the pictures of you, all wild and savage. And woolly, too. They had to shear you. You don't remember any of this? You could only speak mo, and you would try to be, like, a human sweater for anyone that came near you. They had to keep you chained for a while. Right there on the front page, sister. I'm surprised your parents never told you. They really should've told you by now. They called you 'The Mo Girl' back then."

"Right."

"Oh, yeah. They still call you that?"

"No, they stopped."

"Did they? I understand that. I mean, if they were trying to hide shit from you." He waited and looked around before asking, "What do they call you now, then?"

"May."

"That makes a lot of sense: that's Ethiopian for mo. Bet you didn't know that, either."

"I guess I'm just ignorant."

"Subtle hints, subtle hints. There's no moes left in Ethiopia though. They ate them all when that famine shit started last year or whatever. You should go home and talk to your folks. Tell them I'm sorry I had to break it to you, but they should've told you themselves by now. I bet they have a scrapbook they can show you. Look around. It's probably in a sock drawer. You can find anything but socks in a sock drawer. People hide that much stuff in them. It's the truth, you know. A lot of people have to keep their socks in some other place. Like the fridge, man. That's where I keep mine. It's good, though: I like a cold sock. You know what I'm talking about. Anyway, I've got to go, but I read that moes like beer, is that true? Because I got you some."

He gave them the six-pack. "And this." It was the wedding magazine. "You'll know what to do with it. The mo in you will emerge. Trust me, sister."

When she saw him again at the mall he walked past as if they had never spoken, seemingly indifferent, but from something about the way he slowed, how straight he stood, maybe how he held his head, she felt certain he would turn to watch her, if only she could hold his attention, and she became aware suddenly of an ability, as a bird might become aware suddenly of flight. She waited there, then, in a strange silence built of this knowledge, hanging back from her friends until their distance hid them, standing alone until she knew Jim was looking, wondering in panic what to do now that she had decided something was to be done, how to unleash her capabilities, until with his eyes on her and hers almost, quite nearly, on something else, she dropped her bag to the floor and with hooked thumbs and a wriggling motion carefully slipped her underpants from under her skirt, letting them fall past her thin legs to the ground. She stepped out of them. Then: squatting carefully, wadding the cloth into her pocket, picking up her bag, walking back to the others as if nothing were different, as if she weren't incredibly aware of her own nakedness, of the availability this both was and represented: as if it had been only for her own benefit. She turned and walked back to the others dark and hot with blushing and the dawning recognition of power, and knew for sure when he had not moved that she had caught him.

Jim and May first had sex in the back of his car. From the outside it appeared a tremendous lodging of glass and metal, surprisingly cramped and uncomfortable on the inside, May says, when put to unintended uses; but it was his pride and joy. Beth had a car, too, a compact foreign-made thing that Jim derided as unfit for use. Each

Bad of Country: *Tadzio Koelb*

of them mobile, each capable of instant and agile departure: this was May's idea of freedom.

May and Jim walked to a bar afterwards, and he impressed her with his easy relationship to money, buying drinks, picking songs from the jukebox. He danced with her, called her Mother May I, or Mayday! Mayday!, made her the centre of every conversation, decorated her with brightly-coloured drinks and a sweeping train of talk.

The attention flattered and excited her, but she couldn't always expect it. "I wouldn't see him for weeks. Then when I did, sometimes he'd act like this completely different person, he'd say 'What the fuck do you want?' or whatever. It drove me crazy."

She grew to obsess over when she would see him, to seek in the imprecise clockwork of her day some sign of how he would behave. She admits it bashfully: if the school bus came late or she saw a car that looked like his, then he would show up that day, be relaxed and cool, build an elaborate comic fantasy with her at its centre, and everyone would see her in the aura he imparted; but if certain stoplights were red when she opened her eyes, she would expect not to see him or, if she did, to suffer a belittling disdain.

On the worst days she found herself painfully confused: the more forgiving she was, the harder she worked to appease him, the rougher his treatment grew, bringing her sometimes to tears.

"Oh, just some crazy chick," she heard Jim tell someone as she once pushed her way into the toilets at the back of the convenience store and waited desperately for the closing door to muffle their voices. She stayed there, lingering, hoping he would come after her, until some time later a woman with a mop and limited English drove her into the now empty aisles of food and magazines.

"Out," the woman said, pushing a wheeled bucket into a corner and pulling the wet mop blindly from its grey water.

"I'm sorry," said May, hesitating.

"Sorry: out," the woman with the mop ordered without looking up from her work.

"Okay."

"Okay: out."

The day of the accident was that kind of day. Perhaps she might have known it then, foreseen it, had she thought to test her augurs: the bus that should have been on time, and the all stoplights red. I know that it rained hard and steadily that day, and that Jim, "fucking Jim," drunken Jim, Jim the hub of all momentum and inertia, lay stoned and yelling in the back, and that May sat in front with one bare foot tucked beneath her. At the bar, Jim had been cruel, danced with other girls, been nasty in his drunkenness. Then the pot made his head spin, and he wanted May, pained now and defensive, to drive him home; but she refused.

May has never told me who called Beth, who dragged her from bed into the thunder and the rain so the three of them could meet one last time in the bar's half-light. Jim insisted they take his car.

"I'm not riding in that piece of shit," he said of Beth's. "Little turd-mobile." He smiled, but no one laughed, and he reverted to his anger.

As they lurched forward and the suspension rocked them, Jim began to yell. He cursed Beth's driving, and said that she was trying purposefully to make him feel sick.

"You know I hate driving this fucking thing," Beth screamed back at the half-figure in the mirror; May tried to avoid her liquid eyes in the round, unvarnished face. At the bar, May had at least been the object of Jim's aggression, the focus of his angry detachment; in the car, she was nothing but a device, a cog in the unpleasant but mindlessly progressing machinery of someone else's relationship, superfluous for herself, reduced instead to the role she played for them – and yet, she must somehow have known, even before it was so precisely set forth, that this was the shape of the space she had found and chosen and furnished for herself.

I can picture them: they are floating serenely in the familiarity of their aggression and excitement, content with its rightness and suitability, distant from the world itself, though in the world they have created, they fill the space with their voices and indignations.

Then there is a shudder and a noise, they cannot tell from where, and the car begins to slip and spin. There comes now, unstopably, the moment, brief, inevitable, thoughtless and unthinkable, and it will not yield: when their world falls from the edge of the highway off ramp, is disassembled with an egressive thump; it leaks away through the breakage and is absorbed into the ether.

The huge, out-dated American car ends its short flight nose-down, stands on its crumpled front end. It is left leaning against the raised roadway, its wheels turning as if the leviathan, now still, hoist and deprived of the contact from which it attains its one power, believes in its mechanical heart, perhaps, that it is nonetheless moving; as if they aren't as unmoving as they practically ever could be.

In the buzzing silence and the stillness and the unnatural clarity of their fear they see – or rather, dizzied by their suddenly broken dream of immortality, by a reckoning huge for so small a space, they sense without the focus of sight – that the guardrail has entered the car and the windows all are broken, and that something, the twisted and shuddering metal sheet or the glass it has dislodged, has cut May's face, and that Beth, hanging limply in her seatbelt, is slowly pooling blood.

All of this is reconstructed, a fluid mix of archaeology and divination: there are stories of one thing and another; the chronologies are uncertain and the precise actions sometimes diffuse, unclear, but the stories themselves exist and are told and may be pieced together. I know this: that May's face was cut and her cheek flowered

red and had to be sewn shut with 18 fine stitches, beneath them an intradermal suture weaving continuously back and forth.

"He did that job damn well," the family doctor, a short, balding, red-faced man named McCune, told her father in a tone that suggested not all jobs were as damn well done. "Yes. It's a damn good job," he said.

He showed May how to change the dressing.

Holding her, her body pressed hard against mine, I think of something else she told me once, something about the night of the accident that she has never mentioned to any other person: that her sense and certainty of a warranted condemnation, of a just punishment for her crimes, had been lifted only for the briefest of moments when, the pain killers riding wild through her blood, she had stood and danced through the medicated haze with a shy hospital orderly, setting her bare disobedient feet on his own as a child does to dance with her father, and asking that she be spun once, twice, her hospital gown fluttering open behind her, until the turning room made her dizzy and left her tense and frightened in his arms, and the world rushed back in, and he returned her to bed.

Tadzio Koelb is a graduate of the University of East Anglia's prestigious Master's program in creative writing. His fiction has appeared in *The Madison Review* and *Ozone Park Journal*, among others, and he has been awarded writing residencies at Yaddo, Caldera Arts, Jentel, and NY Mills. For three years was Artist-in-Residence at the City of Brussels' *Maison D'Art Actuel des Chartreux*. Tadzio regularly reviews art and fiction for a number of publications on both sides of the Atlantic, including *The New York Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian*, *Art in America*, *The Literary Review*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Jewish Quarterly*. Over the last 15 years, Tadzio has lived in Rwanda, Madagascar, Tunisia, Belgium, Spain, France, the UK, the US, and Uzbekistan. This is his second appearance as a Faulkner/Wisdom award finalist.

Quote To Live By

Mystery and disappointment are not absolutely indispensable to the growth of love, but they are, very often, its powerful auxiliaries.

Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

Recommended Reading: Novels & Novellas Published in 2011

1Q84 by Haruki Murakami

Cain by José Saramago

Luminarium by Alex Shakar

Open City by Teju Cole

Say Her Name by Francisco Goldman

State of Wonder by Ann Patchett

Swamplandia by Karen Russell

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harback

The Hottest Dishes of Tartar Cuisine
by Alina Bronsky, Translated by Tim Mohr

The Illumination by Kevin Brockmeier

The Leftovers by Tom Perrotta

The Marriage Plot by Jeffrey Eugenides

The Pale King, An Unfinished Novel,
By the late David Foster Wallace

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick DeWitt

The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst

The Submission by Amy Waldman

The Wandering Falcon by Jamil Ahmad

Train Dreams, a Novella, by Denis Johnson

We the Animals by Justin Torres



Chris Waddington
2011
Best Novella
After Freddie Left



Judge Elise Blackwell is the author of the novels *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish*, *Hunger*, and *Grub*. Her newest novel, published in 2010, is *An Unfinished Score*, which revolves around classical music and performing artists. Her books have been selected for numerous “best of the year” lists, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *Kirkus*. Her short stories and criticism have appeared in *Witness*, *Topic*, *Seed*, *Global City Review*, and *Quick Fiction*. A native of Louisiana and a graduate of LSU, Elise lives in Columbia, S. C., where she is director of the MFA/Creative Writing Program at the University of South Carolina, one of the best MFA programs in the country.



After Freddie left, Carla must have swept the apartment a hundred times, and still, she found his hair in the dustpan — long strands of black that he had always gathered into a ponytail.

“You’re pulling it out,” she had warned him. If she felt frisky, she’d trace her index finger along his hairline, and Freddie would wave her away, too deep in his work for distraction. If she laughed at him, he’d slump in his desk chair, his high forehead folding like a brown paper accordion file packed with mathematical models of tropical storms.

“Convection currents,” he called them, explaining the season’s named hurricanes as a heat transfer model, like the noonday shimmer rising from an asphalt parking lot, like bubbles in a boiling pot — so simple.

“Of course,” he continued. “One can only go so far with metaphors — or with math.” He gestured at the sheaf of equations under his desk lamp. “You can’t persuade a million people to board their windows and head north because of statistics. It’s all too capricious: the

numbers, the weather, and all those potential victims. The longer I work, the more I understand why they name these storms after people.”

As it turned out, even Carla wouldn’t go when Freddie insisted.

*

They had bickered for months, sitting side-by-side on the creaking wicker loveseat that previous tenants had left on the balcony.

“Can’t you listen?”

“I hear you.”

“That’s not the same thing, Freddie!”

And yet, Freddie persisted, talking about his upcoming fellowship, the climate in Berkley, the promise of California, and the many promises they had made to each other. He grumbled about New Orleans: Its pleasures had paled; its problems had come to the fore. By the end, even the view from the balcony no longer charmed him, although it had been the apartment’s chief attraction when the couple had moved downriver, out of the Quarter, looking for cheaper rent. If she spotted a tree in flower, he’d cock an ear and mention approaching sirens. If she shouted excitedly, calling him from his desk to see a three-masted sailing ship on the river, he’d direct her attention to the upended shopping cart in the middle of Royal Street, remarking how every driver circled the obstacle without ever stopping to move it.

“I’m done with New Orleans,” he’d say, and his long, pleasant face would pinch in a mask, as though someone had placed a toad on his tongue. Then he’d spit it out in a rush: “The weather, the crime, the mindless boogie approach to everything. If we stay here, we’ll end up like that poor, lesbian singer —”

“Leave Junie Ray out of it, Freddie.”

“From what you tell me, she’s already out of it.”

“She was drunk.”

“Is that why she took those sleeping pills and locked herself in Linda’s apartment?”

“It was a gesture. Linda betrayed her — and Linda’s back in New Jersey.”

“Lucky for Linda,” he said.

On one such occasion, Freddie lit a joint, puffed silently, and presented it to Carla. She shifted away, chopping her brisk refusal with one hand while the

other dispersed the perfumed smoke of bud shake from Humboldt County.

"Okay, I can see that you're mad at me," he announced.

Carla closed her eyes and sighed. "Don't tell me what I'm thinking, please. That's your most annoying habit — and you know that's saying a lot."

She held her arms close, expecting Freddie to elbow her ribs — another habit that once had seemed charming, a token of his boyishness, like his chatter and his mad gaze as he peered beyond the slate roofs of neighboring houses, his eyes fixed on the steeples and gilded treetops of sunset, way out past the river which already lay in shadow.

In such moods, Freddie often launched conversations with sweeping statements, a style acquired in dorm rooms, during the wee hours, and honed in a thousand seminars. Even he joked about it: how his colleagues had so much trouble keeping shirttails tucked into pants, how dandruff rimed their well-thumbed spectacles, how every excited utterance brought forth a mist of spittle. Carla had complained about that, making an elaborate show of wiping her face whenever Freddie spoke wildly. Of course, she also had warned him not to interrupt when she was reading, not to call through the bathroom door, not to keep her on the phone with nonsense, and to please brush the chalk from his trousers before coming home — a whole list of things that Freddie could never remember.

She looked at him now as he drew deeply on the joint.

"Are you going to smoke that whole damned thing by yourself?"

Freddie coughed out a cloud and giggled: "I knew you were mad at me!"

*

After Freddie left, Carla cocktailed to cover the rent. She dug out her black dress and outlined her eyes in kohl. She went back to the Catbird Club, the cozy, wood-paneled jazz joint where she had first found work in New Orleans. They knew Carla there. The club hadn't changed. Junie Ray still headlined on Friday and Saturday nights.

"It's temporary," she said to those who would listen, and that made it okay, although she had sworn not to wait on tables again, not in New Orleans, not anywhere if she could help it — a silent vow, taken drunkenly, as she'd pursed her lips and blown out 28 birthday candles. In Freddie's photographs, she had seemed quite determined: her face aglow and her eyes bright, lit from below by the flames.

"It's the blessed Saint Carla," he'd said. "Can't you give me a smile?"

Carla had shaken her head, spilling a wave of blond curls into her eyes.

"That's it!" Freddie howled. "That's so sexy!"

A year had passed, and she had gone back on her vow. Perhaps she had only been wishing. Isn't that what people did with birthday candles? In any case, Carla's wishes had not come true — not with work, and not with

Freddie, who had packed up and left for Berkley.

Carla didn't plan to stick around either. She was leaving New Orleans as soon as she could. She told herself that. She told everybody — her former boss from the failed magazine, the club manager, her sister in Boston, her co-workers and her downstairs neighbor, the jazz historian, whose tiny, flat-faced dog looked a little like Freddie Hito. She even told Junie Ray, expecting a bit of sympathy from a girl who had wept on her shoulder after one of those fights with her lover.

Nobody believed her. Junie Ray just offered her sad, mysterious smile. The club owner asked her out on a date. The neighbor wondered if she could walk his little dog when he went in for elective surgery. It had been six weeks since Freddie had left, three years since Carla Swan had arrived in the city.

"I used to talk about leaving," the bartender said. "And I've been here since the World's Fair. That's 20 years — a lot of Bloody Marys under the bridge." He leaned forward and wheezed a little, pressing his big belly into the drain board as he loaded clinking beer bottles into the well. "Pass me the Heineken, Carla."

She slid the case down the copper-topped bar. The place was dead — filled with afternoon sunshine and a single plume of blue cigarette smoke rising from the bartender's ashtray.

"You just don't get it," she said. She rested her hand on the case and stayed in the tight spot behind the bar, awaiting an answer.

"Oh, but I do, little girl." He looked at her with pity, rolling his eyes. Then he lifted a hand in front of her face and made jawing motions. "I know you've been complaining forever. You need to let it go — or do something. And I don't see a whole lot of action."

*

After Freddie packed the U-haul and headed to Berkley, Carla sang in the half-empty apartment — songs she had learned from her mother before it was clear that she had been learning at all. She snapped her fingers and swayed. She discovered that certain spots yielded echoes, and that others amplified her voice — in the claw-foot bathtub, for instance, accompanied by the scratch and tap of palm fronds against the window; in the entrance hall, where her words stopped short at the scarred oak door with its deadbolt and chain.

Closing her eyes, Carla could have been on stage again, or singing for tips with her mother. When she held a note, it carried her to the locked ward at St. Andrews Regional. It stirred her stage fright. It wafted her to the Catbird Club, at mid-afternoon, as Junie Ray picked out chords on an upright piano.

If I cried a little bit,

When I first learned the truth,

Don't blame it on my heart,

Blame it on my youth. . .

But the smells brought Carla back to her apartment: spilled garbage cans and diesel exhaust and sweet olive drifting over the high garden fence as if a hundred grandmas had died in the street. It was 6

p.m. — the bells still rang at St. Vincent's then — and her neighbor clomped upstairs from the building's dark foyer, as fixed in his schedule as the priest who officiated at Mass. She heard the neighbor pause on his climb. Sometimes his little dog yipped impatiently, but the man always took his time, even on these cool winter days when the blue sky rolled down from Canada and the city looked different: full of hard shadows and long vistas that opened where summer's greenery had once hidden everything. Carla listened to his wheezing, and guessed that he was listening, too: an audience for her songs.

Freddie had told her about the neighbor — “the fat guy,” he called him, wrinkling his nose as he detailed their encounter on the stair landing. “I couldn't get past him without backing into the corner and then he had me — one of those conversations like you're trapped in the window seat on a plane. He kept wiping his face with a handkerchief. He was sweating, Carla — and it's not even summer. I thought he was going to drop dead right there on the landing.”

“You're looking kind of sweaty, too.”

“These people pursue me!”

“He lives downstairs?” Carla asked.

“Of course, he does. We'd hear him if he was upstairs. Like a one-man elephant herd on these hardwood floors.”

Faced with Freddie's distress, Carla stood on her toes and lifted her arms like a dancer. “I wonder what he hears down there? How much of our witty chit-chat?”

As Carla spun, close to six feet tall in her slippers, Freddie stared at her in wonder, admiring the long limbs that wrapped him at night, the pale face framed by a mop of blond hair, the wide blue eyes and teasing smile that he had kept in his wallet for two years, expecting some revelation.

“The fat guy told me that he liked your singing. Your voice reminds him of Junie Ray,” Freddie said. And then he laughed nervously. “What's that about? I didn't know that you sang.”

“He must be hearing the radio.”

Freddie cocked his head and studied her face for some hint of mockery. “What radio?” he asked. “We don't have a radio.”

*

Like everyone else, Carla Swan had her secrets — a subject that had gripped poor Freddie from the moment they'd moved in together. He wanted clarity. He expected completion. He sought something more profound than the mild relief shown by Carla whenever he mentioned the financial benefits of splitting household expenses. They were moving forward, he argued, although their new address, on a rough stretch of Royal Street, left something to be desired. Who scattered all those chicken bones on the sidewalk? Whose crying children were getting slapped as the neighbors sat in the humid dark, talking on front steps and porches?

Freddie and Carla talked on their balcony, surrounded by crumbling 19th century splendor. They talked in the rust-stained bathtub, and Freddie graciously

took the end with the faucets. If Carla picked up the paper, Freddie would press her for details. If she closed her eyes, he woke her to ask one more question. He kept it up on the hottest nights. He did it when they sprawled on the bed and she prayed for a breeze from the river.

At that point, Freddie had not yet explained that he would return to Berkley — with or without her. His accusations were still in the future. He hadn't yet provided her with pad and pencil and urged her to split their possessions.

“I know you'll be fair,” he had said, making her cry because he really believed it, really trusted her, really wanted to do the right thing and couldn't shut up about it.

He said that he loved her — too much, perhaps. And that was why he couldn't leave it alone. Why he pushed her to move to Berkley. Why he had to know so much about her ex-boyfriends.

“Did the cat poop in the photographer's bag when you got to the redwoods?” he asked. “Or was it when you moved to the city to run the cheese shop?”

“The cheese shop was the guy who owned a pet rat.”

“How come I can't remember that?” Freddie asked. “Cat or rat — that ought to be easy. I guess the rhyme trips me up.”

Freddie seemed hypnotized by the ceiling fan. It stirred his long black hair and wispy goatee as he stretched on the bed beside her. She was waiting for the 10 o'clock news, wondering if New Orleans would outpace last year's record-setting number of murders. He balanced a bottle of Budweiser on his bare chest. The bedroom shutters were open, and if either one of them had walked to the balcony, they might have seen a remarkable sight: a rudderless ship drifting under the bridge with its lights out, eclipsing the far shore and bound for a near-miss with a paddle-wheeler loaded with drunken tourists.

She touched him, spreading a hand on his ribs. She felt his slow, steady heartbeat.

“Count your blessings, Freddie. Memory is selective. My Mom used to say —”

“I know what she said and I don't care. You're always telling me that the woman was crazy.”

“My Mom always said ‘what you can't remember won't hurt you.’”

That shut him up for a minute.

Carla listened to the night where a million frogs, newly awakened, were peeping in the soggy gardens and vacant lots of the Faubourg Marigny. Ship whistles howled on the river.

“So, tell, me, did you get hurt?” Freddie asked.

Chris Waddington writes about general arts and entertainment features for The Times-Picayune, including classical music, jazz and dance.



Paul Negri
2011
Best Novella
First Runner-Up
O Fortuna



Editor's Note: O Fortuna is the tragicomic story of the Bright family—Betty, Barney and their grown children Sandy and Claude—as they are simultaneously and independently besieged by a run of misfortunes, but rise again, as the Wheel of Fortune turns, temporarily, to better times. In this excerpt, Claude Bright, a hapless law student, has a disastrous night in a Milwaukee bar.

The day after Claude Bright failed the bar exam for the third time in Milwaukee he was fired from his job at the International Clown Hall of Fame for gross insubordination.

"I don't understand," said his girlfriend Victoria, sitting opposite him in their regular booth at Old Crone's Tavern. The waitress brought Claude his dinner order of hopple popple, an old German dish of eggs, potatoes, salami, peppers and cheese that was Claude's favorite comfort meal whenever things went wrong. He had eaten a lot of hopple popple. "You hit a clown?"

"I didn't hit him," said Claude. "I just kind of pushed him."

"And they fired you for pushing a clown?"

Claude gave the mustard bottle a savage squeeze. "That clown was my boss," he said. "He manages the gift shop. Except he's never actually there. He's always cruising around the place looking for a crowd of kids to wow. I do the real managing. Christ, Vic, since I've been running that place we sell more clown noses and squirt flowers in a week than they used to sell in a month. And the 'Clowning Around Fun Kit'—whose idea was that? That's my doing, not fuckin' Lulubell's."

"Please watch your language," Victoria admonished him. "And you're sure you failed the bar again?"

"Well, unless they're just teasing me, waiting to see me break down and cry before calling me in and telling me it was all in good fun, that I actually passed, welcome to the Law, the gatekeeper will let you in now, you've waited long enough, congratulations—"

"Calm down, please. This isn't helping."

Victoria at 24 was an up and coming model, a natural redhead with impossible green eyes, high cheekbones, flawless skin, a face of such perfect proportions that she seemed to have been fashioned by an Old Master

plastic surgeon, although she had never been touched by a scalpel. She was trim yet shapely and had already modeled high end lingerie in the best known, most thumbed, highest paying catalog in the business. Claude could never quite believe she was his girlfriend and got home from work each day expecting to find a message from her on the answering machine that began, "Claude, I've been thinking about our relationship..."

"Claude," Victoria said with a sigh and downcast eyes, "I've been thinking about our relationship."

Claude dropped a forkful of hopple popple back into the steaming plate. "Oh no, Vic. Don't do this to me. Not now."

"I should have said something sooner. I know that. I'm sorry. You're a great guy. Honestly. I just think—well, maybe we've outgrown each other."

"I haven't grown," Claude assured her.

"You have such great potential. You're just not living up to it." Victoria's eyes filled with tears.

"You're right, I know that," said Claude, scrambling to find the right thing to say to at least put off the inevitable for one night longer. "Look, I'll go back. I'll apologize to Lulubell and get my job back. I'll bone up for the next bar. I'll pass it this time. Just give me a chance." He reached across the table to take her hands and brushed his plate, staining his sleeves with bright yellow mustard, egg and cheese. Victoria did not take his hands. She was crying.

"It's time for a change," she said, "for both of us." She got up and kissed him on the forehead. "Take care of yourself. I think you have a fever. And please don't call. It's better this way." She walked quickly down the aisle between the crowded booths, turning heads as she went, turned a corner and was gone from Claude's life.

"Oh fuckabilly," said Claude.

"Excuse me?" said the waitress, who had come up behind him.

Claude looked up at her. She smiled at him. She was remarkably homely and had really bad teeth. "How you doing, champ?"

"Can I have a beer?"

"Sure you can. What do you want?"

"Anything. I don't care."

"You got it," said the waitress and winked at him. Claude shuddered.

Despite the hopple popple and three big beers, Claude

felt empty. But as he sat in the booth staring at the vacant place which once upon a time had been so beautifully occupied by Victoria, he began to be filled with dread. He knew a call from his mother Betty would be on the answering machine when he got home and the message would start with the usual innocuous motherly rambling but end with a hesitant question about the results of his latest bar exam. He checked his wallet to see how much cash he had left—his credit card was maxed out—and began picking out Funny Money that he sold in the gift shop, thousand dollar bills with the famously sad face of Emmet Kelly on them, that had somehow got mixed up with the cash in his wallet. He left a twenty dollar bill on the table—peering hard at it to make sure Andrew Jackson was the one peering back at him—left the booth and made his unsteady way to the nearly empty bar. He sat down and ordered a beer. The bartender took a look at him and didn't even ask what he wanted, just pulled the first tap and placed the foaming glass and a nearly empty bowl of peanuts in front of him. The TV behind the bar was on but the sound was so low only the bar tender could hear it. The picture was black-and-white, a friendly smiling man in a funny hat leading a band from long ago. "I think I know him," said Claude to no one in particular.

"That's Guy Lombardo," said a well-dressed elderly man sitting two stools away, "and his Royal Canadians. I saw them once at the Waldorf Astoria in New York on New Year's Eve."

"This is his life story," said the bartender. "I could turn it off if it's bothering you."

"I don't care," said Claude. The elderly man said nothing. He sat staring down at an untouched martini, a lovely and solitary drink in the classic long-stemmed V-shaped glass, a bright yellow lemon peel luminously suspended in the placid crystal pond of gin with its breath of dry vermouth.

"That's a really pretty drink," said Claude. "No, not pretty. Beautiful. That's a beautiful drink. Beautiful like a beautiful girl, like a fashion model, you know what I mean?"

The elderly man looked at Claude, then looked at the drink. "She's an old friend who I haven't seen in a long time," he said. He was a distinguished looking man in a quietly elegant and plainly expensive suit, white shirt and blue tie, and black shoes with a mirror shine. His ample hair was wavy and gray and he had a finely manicured gray mustache. He had a ruddy, healthy look about him and sad eyes.

"You shouldn't keep the lady waiting," said Claude, who looked with sudden disdain at his foamy beer with its gaudy bubbles.

"She's a succubus," said the elderly man.

"A what?"

"A demon woman. She almost killed me when I was a younger and stronger man. I've stayed away from her for 40 years."

"I'm Claude. I've known a few demon women myself."

"McConnell."

Claude took a hard swallow of beer. "Succubus. I thought that was a legal term. I think it was on the bar exam I just failed."

McConnell looked at him. "You failed the bar?"

"Third strike," said Claude. "Would you believe it? After slowly dragging my ass through Marquette for four and a half years I can't pass the bar."

"Sure you can," said McConnell. "Everyone I know has passed the bar. You just need some coaching." He took a card from his wallet and handed it to Claude. Claude read it aloud: "Lawrence G. McConnell. McConnell Colditz McCord Kubin & Croce." Claude whistled. "You're that McConnell?"

"I'm Lawrence M and I'm a—" He broke off and laughed a laugh that was more a cough. "Oh, never mind."

Oh Christ, thought Claude. I'm sitting here with the man who has the best law firm in Milwaukee and I'm about to throw up on his five hundred dollar shoes. He could feel the hopple popple and beer churning into a nasty sludge in the pit of his stomach.

"What do you do? Are you with a law firm in some capacity?" asked McConnell.

"I'm in retail at the moment. Just for the interim." He could feel a presentiment of acid reflux. He looked at McConnell's sleek and expensive business card. Claude took a napkin from the bar and a pen from his pocket, scribbled on it and handed the napkin to McConnell.

"What's this?"

"My card."

McConnell glanced at it: Claude Benjamin Bright, Fuck Up. McConnell laughed. "I'll keep that in mind," he said and absently stuffed the napkin in his pocket. He took a deep breath and reached for the martini.

Claude stopped his hand. "Why now? If it's been 40 years."

"My wife," said McConnell. "She's gone."

"Left you?" said Claude, his head swimming.

"No," said McConnell and reached for the drink again. Claude stopped his hand again. "Come on, lay off," said McConnell.

"You don't need it. I'm the one who needs it."

"Don't tell me what I need," said McConnell, his voice breaking.

"Oh, sorry. Who am I to tell you? You must think I'm some sort of clown."

"I think you're drunk."

"Not a pretty sight, is it?" said Claude, looking at his yellow mustard stained sleeves.

"Why don't you go get some air and change your shirt?" said McConnell. Claude took the martini and moved it in front of him. "What the hell are you doing?" said McConnell.

"You don't really want this."

"Give me my drink," McConnell growled, "and beat it."

"You really want it?" said Claude. "Really, really—really?"

"Fucking right I do," said McConnell, almost in tears.

Claude picked up the drink and threw it in McConnell's

face. "Son of a bitch," McConnell screamed, his hands to his eyes. The bartender was around in a flash and grabbed Claude just as he fell off the bar stool. Claude got up clumsily, doing his best to preserve what he imagined was his last shred of dignity, although almost no one seemed to take any notice, and stumbled his way outside to the Riverwalk. He walked along the river shivering and feverish in the strangely chilly April night and wondered what he was going to do without Victoria, without a job, and without a license to practice law after years of sluggish progress, false starts and sudden stops, and taking money from his mother who was having problems at her own job and his father who was suddenly blacking out on a regular basis. He felt a sudden profound rumbling deep in his gut, lurched over to the waist high decorative iron fence and threw up long and hard into the Milwaukee River.

Paul Negri is the former president and publisher of Dover Publications, Inc. and is a 40-year veteran of the book publishing business. He is the editor of more than a dozen literary anthologies of short stories and poetry published by Dover, including *Great American Short Stories*, *Great Short Short Stories*, *Civil War Poetry* and *English Victorian Poetry*. Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, he is a graduate of Long Island University with an M.A. in English. His novellas *The Virginal Grip* and *The Waiter's Tale* were short-listed for the finals in the 2011 and 2010 competitions. He is currently completing his second collection of short stories.

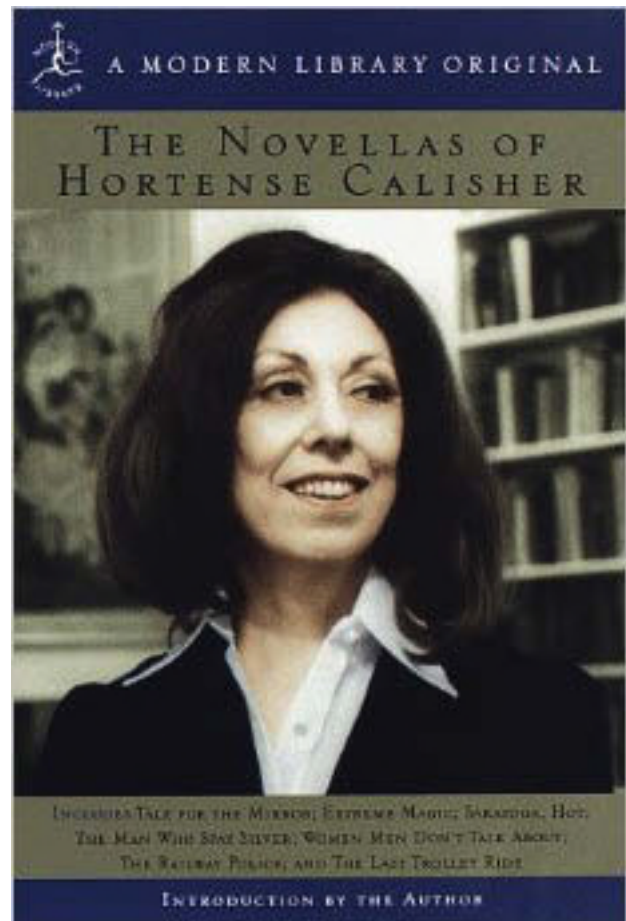
Recommended Reading: Novellas Published in 2011

The Novellas of Hortense Calisher by Hortense Calisher

During a long, applauded career (her first book was published in 1951), Calisher has produced a number of novels, several story collections, and a significant number of novellas. Seven have been assembled for this volume (including the previously unpublished **Women Men Don't Talk About**).

And they demonstrate how deftly Calisher has made use of the form, which she describes as being "not merely a shorter novel, of less wordage than commonly," but a more focused version of the novel, "tenaciously complete." The tales gathered here demonstrate many of Calisher's virtues as a writer: her ability to capture odd, disturbing characters (Dr. Bhatta, in **Tale for the Mirror**); her sensitive and often quite original exploration of the struggle of modern women for an independent identity (**The Railway Police**); her bemused exploration of the half-submerged American ideas of class (**Extreme Magic**); and her rather harsh but convincing portraits of marriage (**Saratoga, Hot**).

Varied, precise work by a writer deserving more attention.





Chris Waddington
2011
Best Novella Second
Runner-Up
Newcomers



After the oil bust, management needed someone to pick up the pieces, so they transferred Ron Ludwig a thousand miles south to New Orleans, a corporate move that came with a hefty shipping allowance, a raise, responsibilities, a free-flowing expense account, and membership in the Palmetto Club— things that should have brought joy to a mid-career executive and his wife.

Hadn't Paula always said change leads to growth? She had made it her mantra in the early years of their marriage, repeating the phrase at dinner parties and weddings, in the privacy of their bedroom and with every panting breath of her daily run. Her cheeriness trumped Ron's objections as subtly as the hand she sometimes pressed to the front of his trousers. In those days, she smiled for the camera. She topped their glasses and ate her steaks rare and sang louder than anyone when he slipped into the rear aisles at choir practice and heard her conjure bliss from old Lutheran hymns. For her, even God preached a gospel of change and growth: words to the wise, words to live by, words that went unquestioned unless one counted Ron's teasing observation that growth also leads to change, uttered with a wink as he patted her behind or slapped his own thickening waist.

In fact, neither change nor growth insured happiness for the Ludwigs— especially in New Orleans — and when everything finally changed for them, happiness remained as elusive as ever, more a temptation than a thing to be grasped. Perhaps they should have focused on smaller pleasures. They liked their new condominium, for example, a four-bedroom upper duplex with cathedral ceilings and enough space for Paula to set up a darkroom. Nestled in the green-dappled undercarriage of live oaks — trees planted by GIs home from Japan— the condo felt like a tree house.

"No, no, it's a tree fort," Paula corrected, shaking her head in amazement as the realtor ticked off surprising amenities: a touchpad security system, burglar bars, deadbolt locks, and floodlights tied to a motion sensor and cameras.

Quiet reigned up there, although Paula would soon be complaining about the midnight honking of over-sensitive car alarms and the dribbling of a ball-crazed neighbor who bit his lip and tried to perfect his set shot on Sunday mornings. The quiet would magnify everything: Ron's snoring, which he always denied,

and Paula's sighs, and the calls of creatures whose restlessness matched her own: nesting birds in the live oaks, a teething child, a guard dog who howled long after a suspect pedestrian had tossed a block of rat bait over the fence. One night their gurgling fridge would rouse her; the next it would be the cold, north wind roaring off Lake Pontchartrain, a wind from home that rattled the condo's French doors and tall casement windows and made Paula think of cat burglars in the night.

Nonetheless, it suited Ron and Paula to live near the lake — and not just because they were homesick Minnesotans. Their dog had a fenced yard. Ron's commute was a snap. Paula loved the graveled running paths on the levee. Besides, this was one of the safe neighborhoods that everyone told them about, a haven where the big issues were covenants mandating tiny white holiday lights and the looming threat of increased property taxes.

The Ludwigs closed on a rainy November morning — the day after the city's most prominent neurosurgeon was shot in the eye outside Antoine's. Locals will remember the headlines and how much everyone talked. Ron and Paula heard the details from the realtor's secretary and noticed that the seller slid deeper into his seat with every word. The realtor pawed through her brief case — the contract was missing — and said how strange that everything could change in a minute, that the Quarter "wasn't the same anymore," that her best-friend's brother had just installed a granite counter top in the doctor's apartment, and that payment would now be an issue. When the contract surfaced, she waved it over her head, accompanied by the tinkling of two-dozen silver bracelets. Ron looked at his watch. Paula peered out the window. The radio buzzed with call-ins as Ron drove to work. At the office, Ron's new staff assured him that the crime was "just a domestic."

"You're a newcomer, so you'll have to take this on trust," said the team attorney. He was smiling, relaxed, lightly gripping Ron's elbow as he walked the new boss into a conference room. "A killing like this is nothing to worry about — unless, of course, you plan to get into a love triangle with a Haitian masseuse and a dog groomer from Chalmette."

The Ludwigs could have stayed at their hotel and waited for Allied Van Lines, but Paula wanted to live in

the apartment before any furniture came — a Feng shui deal that she explained while pacing the side porch and entryway in her sneakers. With a fluttering hand and glowing eyes, she planned where the family heirlooms would go. She tracked the angle of the late autumn sun, sniffed the closed air of the staircase for mildew, and like a one-woman basketball team, she stayed in perpetual motion, pivoting on the polished hardwood floors with a rubbery squeak.

At the time, Ron thought it easiest to nod and agree, even if it meant a week of nights on the bedroom floor. Ron took pride in his power to sleep anywhere — an executive skill that mastered every storm, kept him clear-eyed, kept his chin up like the oak prow on a schooner. But the floor defeated him. His back ached immediately. Paula pulled at the blankets and crazy shadows danced on the walls. The wind blew, scraping branches over the windows, and just as Ron drifted off, some detail from work would rouse him. When he finally slept, their ancient basset hound wandered the echoing rooms. Charlie's untrimmed nails clicked restlessly on hardwood and tile and terrazzo. He scratched himself and sniffed unfamiliar corners, a half-blind companion who had always been the family's most prodigious sleeper — 16 hours a day on a ratty pillow that would have been replaced years ago if Ron had permitted it. Now the dog nudged the bedroom door with his nose and circled the fallen couple. Paula curled in a patch of moonlight. Ron sprawled in the dumfounded posture of a golfer struck by lightning. Drool trailed from Ron's gaping mouth. He snored and his full lips fluttered with each exhalation.

When the dog licked Ron's cheek, he bolted awake, his heart pounding as though he'd just committed a murder. In his dream, he'd been free. He'd been happy. The mood was all he recalled — an unanchored feeling that stayed with him as he shooed the dog from the bedroom and closed the door.

The next day, Ron bought earplugs, but Paula shook him awake at 2 a.m. No dream this time, just her troubled, moon-pale face coming into focus. Charlie had clawed the door, she said. He had chewed hair from the base of his tail. There was a trail of blood on the stairs.

"I can't have him in the house," she concluded.

"Could you suggest an alternative?"

Paula shook her head and stared at her hands.

"I would put him outside, but I'm worried that he'll tangle with something. Whatever it was that got in the trash last night."

"Raccoons," she muttered.

Paula looked like a raccoon herself, crouched on her hams in the moonlit bedroom, her eyes and cheekbones blackened with tear-streaked mascara. They had shared a bottle of wine after dinner. She had fallen asleep without scrubbing her face.

"Everything is new, a big adjustment," Ron said. He held her shoulders and chucked her chin with the awkward, professional tenderness of a nurse — a style he'd gleaned from the stacks of self-help books and relationship guides that usually teetered on Paula's side

of the bed. "Just try to remember how hard this kind of move is for a dog — any dog — and Charlie is so darned old. Put yourself in his shoes for a minute."

"He doesn't wear shoes — and I'm not a dog," Paula said. "If I was a dog you wouldn't treat me this way."

Chris Waddington writes about general arts and entertainment features for The Times-Picayune, including classical music, jazz and dance.

Quote to Live By

"To encapsulate the notion of Mardi Gras as nothing more than a big drunk is to take the simple and stupid way out, and I, for one, am getting tired of staying stuck on simple and stupid.

Mardi Gras is not a parade. Mardi Gras is not girls flashing on French Quarter balconies. Mardi Gras is not an alcoholic binge.

Mardi Gras is bars and restaurants changing out all the CD's in their jukeboxes to Professor Longhair and the Neville Brothers, and it is annual front-porch crawfish boils hours before the parades so your stomach and attitude reach a state of grace, and it is returning to the same street corner, year after year, and standing next to the same people, year after year—people whose names you may or may not even know but you've watched their kids grow up in this public tableau and when they're not there, you wonder: Where are those guys this year?

It is dressing your dog in a stupid costume and cheering when the marching bands go crazy and clapping and saluting the military bands when they crisply snap to.

Now that part, more than ever.

It's mad piano professors converging on our city from all over the world and banging the 88's until dawn and laughing at the hairy-shouldered men in dresses too tight and stalking the Indians under Claiborne overpass and thrilling the years you find them and lamenting the years you don't and promising yourself you will next year.

It's wearing frightful color combination in public and rolling your eyes at the guy in your office who—like clockwork, year after year—denies that he got the baby in the king cake and now someone else has to pony up the ten bucks for the next one.

Mardi Gras is the love of life. It is the harmonic convergence of our food, our music, our creativity, our eccentricity, our neighborhoods, and our joy of living. All at once."

—Chris Rose, Former *Times-Picayune* columnist, author of *1 Dead in the Attic*



M.C. Walsh
2011
Novel In Progress
Gold Medal
Whiteflies



Judge Jeff Kleinman is a literary agent, intellectual property attorney, and founding partner of Folio Literary Management, LLC, a New York literary agency which works with all of the major U.S. publishers (and, through subagents) with most international publishers. He's a graduate of Case Western Reserve University (J.D.), the University of Chicago (M.A., Italian), and the University of Virginia (B.A. with High Distinction in English). As an agent, Jeff feels privileged to have the chance to learn an incredibly variety of new subjects, meet an extraordinary range of people, and feel, at the end of the day, that he's helped to build something – a wonderful book, perhaps, or an author's career. His authors include Garth Stein, Robert Hicks, Charles Shields, Bruce Watson, Dean Faulkner Wells, Neil White, and Philip Gerard. Nonfiction: especially narrative nonfiction with a historical bent, but also memoir, health, parenting, aging, nature, pets, how-to, nature, science, politics, military, espionage, equestrian, biography. Fiction: very well-written, character-driven novels; some suspense, thrillers; otherwise mainstream commercial and literary fiction. No: children's, romance, mysteries, westerns, poetry, or screenplays, novels about serial killers, suicide, or children in peril (kidnapped, killed, raped, etc.).



1.

There were four suspects in the rape of the Simpson girl, a crime that occurred directly on top of the sidewalk of Piney Creek Road; the same sidewalk our parents had once hopefully carved their initials into, years before, as residents of the first street in the Woodland Hills subdivision to have houses on each lot. It was a crime impossible during the daylight, when neighborhood kids would have been tearing around in their go-karts, coloring chalk figures on their driveways, or chasing snakes down into the storm gutters. But, at night, the streets of Woodland Hills sat empty; quiet but

for the pleasure of frogs, greeting mosquitoes that rose in squadrons from the swamps behind their properties.

On this particular evening, however, in the dark turn beneath the first busted street light in the history of Piney Creek Road, a man, or perhaps a boy, crawled into the azalea bushes beside Old Man Casemore's house. Unseen, he proceeded to tie a length of rope from his wrist to the broken light pole next to the street where perhaps he practiced, once or twice, pulling the rope taut and high across the sidewalk. And then this man, or this boy, knowing the routine of the Simpson girl, waited to hear the rattle of her banana seated Schwinn coming around the curve.

You should know:

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is a hot place. Even the fall of night offers no comfort. There are no breezes sweeping off of the dark servitudes and marshes, no cooling rains. Instead, the rain that falls here survives only to boil on the pavement, to steam up your glasses, to burden you. So this man, or this boy, was undoubtedly sweating as he crouched in the bushes, undoubtedly eaten alive by insects. They gnash you here. They cover you. And so it is not a mistake to wonder if he might have been dissuaded from this violence if he lived in a more merciful place.

Listen.

It is important, when you think back about a man or a boy in the bushes, to wonder if maybe one soothing breeze would have calmed him, would have softened his mood, would have eased his pain. It is important, I believe, to wonder about the world itself being different. What if only the world itself?

But it is not.

So the act took place in darkness, in silence, in heat, and Lindy Simpson remembered little other than the sudden appearance of a rope in front of her bicycle, the sharp pull of its braid across her chest. Months later, and through much therapy, she would also recall how the bicycle rode on without her after she fell. She would remember how she never even saw it tip over before a sock was stuffed into her mouth and her face pushed into the lawn. The scrape of asphalt against her knees. She remembered that, too. The crush of weight on her back.

She was 15 years old.

This was the summer of 1989 and there was no

evidence. Don't believe what you see on the crime shows today. The police never canvassed the boulevard. No single hairs were tweezed out of Old Man Casemore's lawn. The crime scene itself began to fade the moment Lindy Simpson regained consciousness and pushed her bicycle back home, a place only four doors away, to lay it down in its usual spot. It faded even further as she walked through the back door of her house and climbed upstairs to her bathroom, where she showered in water of an unknown temperature. There are times in my life when I imagine this water scalding. Other times, frozen. Regardless, Lindy never came down for dinner.

She was thought likely yapping to friends on the telephone, twirling the cord around her young fingers, until her mother, a woman named Peggy, made her evening rounds with the laundry basket. It was then she saw a pair of underpants in the bathroom, dotted with bright red blood, lying next to a single tennis shoe. The other shoe, a blue Reebok, was missing.

By this time, her daughter Lindy was curled in her bed and concussed.

A bed that just that morning was a child's. I should tell you now that, briefly, I was one of the suspects.

Hear me out.

Let me explain.

2.

One and one half miles from the Woodland Hills Subdivision sat The Perkins School, Grades 4-12. It was a private and well funded place. Great white columns stood in front of the main school building and the rolling lawn was shaded by Oaks. Brick walkways scrolled throughout the open quadrangle, imbedded with copper plaques to memorialize past accolades. It was a prideful place, and deservedly. Behind the main campus, adjacent to the parking lot, was a football field and track that Lindy Simpson travelled to at precisely four o'clock every summer afternoon.

She had piano lessons before this, as did I.

So at four o'clock each day I'd lie on my stomach in the family room of my home and watch beneath the blinds as her lesson ended. Across the street and two doors down from me, the dowdy figure of Mrs. Morrison would appear first from the Simpson house. She was a teacher at The Perkins School, my school, who taught private lessons during the summer, a lady so polite it is hard to imagine her having even a cameo here. She wore bright floral blouses with built in shoulder pads. She carried folders crammed with photocopied scales and sheet music. She often wore hats. She is the innocent stuff in the background of time. Pin her up in the sky of this place. And though I often complained to my neighborhood friends that I hated these lessons, that I hated her, this was a lie. Before Mrs. Morrison could reach the sidewalk at 3:59, Lindy Simpson would hustle up the driveway with the bike at her hip. Children, and we were all children then, never wore helmets in

those days. So Lindy would stop at the edge of the lawn to pull back her hair. She would knot a loose pony tail, tuck a few wayward strands behind her ears, and be off.

Due to the bend in our street, and the fact that my house sat right on the corner, right in the crook of the elbow, I could watch Lindy Simpson pedal toward me beneath the blinds. And then, after coming up with a host of scenarios in which she might dismount from her bike and trek more permanently into my life, I'd watch her pedal away. Each day at four. This ritual was my pleasure. She wore tank tops and thin cotton shorts, and she was a track star.

A memory:

There was once a race at my school, one conjured up by your typical eighth grade boys during lunch hour. We all wore uniforms at Perkins, white Oxford shirts and blue slacks, and the boys who wanted to race were often those who pulled up the collars on their shirts, rolled their pants legs in a fashionable way. These were boys who already had girlfriends, boys who played in summer sports leagues and had blond hair. Our school was small, and for this reason alone, I often found myself among them. Pencil thin and curly headed.

The goal on this day was to get to the central oak tree, standing some fifty yards away in the common area. The unspoken prize was a half hour of glory, maybe the bud of some reputation, and this was everything. Kids tightened up their laces and stretched out their hamstrings. I remember taking a pair of pens out of my pocket and setting them in the grass.

A miracle next.

Behind us, Lindy Simpson stepped out of the red brick library. She was fifteen, like I said, one year older than me, and therefore in high school. This was in the school year before it all happened, before we all knew, so I was undoubtedly not alone in wondering about every inch of her. She wore the same plaid jumper that all the high school girls wore, bearing their golden collarbones and slender calves, but Lindy wore it with her blue Reebok running shoes while the other girls donned sandals and Keds. Yet she was no goddess, you should know. There were other girls whose names were more hotly bandied, other more beautiful girls my friends and I evoked in the dark. But as Lindy was a female, and as she was older, and as the small of her hairless ankles peeked above her white cotton socks, she held dominion over us all on the playground.

"I want in," she told us, and so I picked up my pens off the grass.

I would never race her.

I had seen Lindy run my entire life, outpacing even the older boys in my neighborhood, and this was a privilege not shared by the other dolts on the lawn. So I watched them take off toward the tree, the lot of them, and the sight of Lindy's skirt flipping up and down as she ran, the sight of the pink boxer shorts beneath her jumper, the flex of her thighs, it still comes to me in dreams, the youthful vision of it, in surprise moments alone in my car. Before it all happened:

Lindy was not a tom boy, not thick-waisted or dusty like they often are, but she snuck into the woods with us behind our houses. She played football with us in the front yard. She was fast. She was nimble. We didn't know if she was tough because she never got caught. So, she also beat my schoolmates to the tree that day and placed her ringless fingers on top of her head. She caught her breath and teased them. I looked around the playground for someone to say, "I told you so," to, to prove that Lindy and I were connected in some small way, but I was the only one who didn't run after her. I then watched Lindy wave at me from the tree, as if we were back on Piney Creek Road, and jog toward the high school building. I don't remember waving back. I only remember staring at the building she entered, the high school building, and feeling one year away from some brand of paradise.

I tell you all this because I was not there yet, not in high school, when I used to lie on the living room floor and watch her pedal. I was young, just a boy. And though a boy in summer is like a man on parole, I didn't mind the structure of Mrs. Morrison waddling up my driveway at four o'clock each afternoon. I was prepared to play scales if she wanted me to, to smell the coffee on her breath, to feel her cold hands on top of mine. I was prepared to follow instruction for hours if need be. What did it matter? When Lindy rode by, my thoughts scuttled after her. I was mindless to all else in my crush.

With Mrs. Morrison, I was only fingers.

So it is true that I thought of possessing Lindy Simpson as furiously and as constantly as any 14-year-old boy could that hot summer. The summer of her rape. It is true that I cast us no separate futures.

I opened the door for Mrs. Morrison.

"Look at you," she said. "Every day. The front of your shirt is so wrinkled."

3.

A fact:

The crepe myrtle tree is a tree that sheds. Gluttons for the heat, they line the major roads and neighborhoods of East Baton Rouge Parish. You can cut them down to nothing each year if you like. They are unbothered. This is their home, and our Junes are filled with pink, red, and purple because of it. During this time, however, when they are in full bloom, long shards of bark peel off their trunks. They lie in circles upon the roots like skins

It was my job to do yard work in the summertime.

Where I'm from, this is how children help out.

So once a week I raked up the spiky gumballs that had fallen from the oaks. I pulled the weeds that crept over our sidewalks like tentacles. Other boys were out there too, in their own yards, doing the same. A few doors down, the Kern boys; Bo and Duke. Nineteen and seventeen years old respectively, these were guys who worked on old cars, guys with useful knowledge I had no clue how to gather. Bo Kern, the oldest, had a hair lip and

a fierce crew cut. He was cruel to his younger brother, Duke, who was the type of guy who did well with girls.

A little about him:

Duke Kern, 17, was rarely seen with his shirt on. His body was hairless and trim, muscled and lean, and he was vain. Looking back now, I realize that I idolized him. Whenever I glanced over to watch him laboring shirtless in the lawn and pictured myself at his age, our bodies were indistinguishable. Yet it never turned out that way. He and his brother worked with heavy equipment, weed eaters and push mowers, and I raked. They stopped often to argue and have fistfights. They cleaned out carburetors and replaced sparkplugs. There was a great distance between us. We lived in the same neighborhood, sure, we saw each other often, but we inhabited different worlds.

I had two sisters, way older than me, off at college. I had never been punched.

On these days of chores I would also see Mr. Landry, a man who needs mentioning later, riding a lawn mower through the large acreage behind his lot. An enormous person, some six foot five and near three hundred pounds, he wore dark glasses and high cotton socks and would sometimes stop the mower for no apparent reason and walk into the woods. I'd then see him, often hours later, return. He and his wife had a foster child named Jason, a troubling character who is also on our docket.

But across from me and two doors down; the show.

Lindy Simpson worked like the boys, plucking weeds from the flower beds and sweeping off the sidewalk. She bent over, stretched out her muscles, and gave me ample reason to sit beneath the crepe myrtle trees and cool off. Her parents, still a beautiful couple at that time, would place cold pitchers of water and red Kool Aid on the railing of their porch. They would then stand in the lawn with their hands on their hips and watch carefully, as I did, as Lindy climbed the ladder to pick leaves out of the storm gutters. She wore homecoming t-shirts, sports bras, and pink running shorts. She had a green friendship bracelet around her ankle, tied for her by a Christian pen pal in Jamaica. She was a sight.

One particular day, while trying not look conspicuous, I fiddled with the shedding bark of the crepe myrtle trees as I sat in the grass and watched her. I saw a golden shade of brown in the bark that resembled her hair, so I shredded it into fine strands. I saw a strip as lean and small as the curve of her nose and laid it there on the lawn before me. I found a knotted shard, a likeness of her eyes, and put it in place as well. A curly wooden ribbon, her chin.

I searched the surrounding area to find shavings to match her breasts, a soft W shape, as well as her proud body and raised arms, a capital Y. I found an upside down V to signify her legs and put it to my nose, inhaling what I thought would be the scent of her knee (a band aid), her inner thighs (a vanilla candle), and finally the part of her anatomy that seemed to me the greatest mystery, and was mortified to see my mother standing behind me.

She looked down at what I'd done. I felt discovered. I felt exposed.

"Oh, honey," my mother said. "Is that me?" She underestimated the distance already between us.

4.

Summers before this, a group of us kids spent the day gathering moss. We were back in the unkempt part of our properties, where we often played soccer and shot garden snakes with our BB guns. There were five of us; Randy Stiller, my next door neighbor and best friend, a girl named Artsy Julie, Duke Kern, Lindy Simpson, and me. None of us were in high school then, and so tribes like this weren't unusual. The idea on this day was to make the biggest pile of moss we could and we did this by taking running leaps at the long beards hanging off the trees. We pulled down handfuls at a time.

I later heard that these lots of land were eventually developed for residential use, that there is now a Woodland Hills East, and I wonder about those trees. These were oaks that likely stood when Jean Lafitte was around, exploring territory along the Mississippi River. These were oaks that hid dark skinned Coushatta Indians, stalking meals of rabbit and deer.

For us they were a jungle gym.

Duke Kern, always tall, could climb any of them he pleased by grabbing the lowest branch and swinging his legs over his head like some gymnast. He had access to moss that we didn't, so he sent down scores of the stuff. Randy and I collected it all in a pile as Lindy handled and shaped it. Meanwhile, Artsy Julie sat in the grass and made necklaces out of clovers, as if we weren't even there.

When we had stripped every tree in sight, we had a pile about six feet long, maybe five inches deep. We stood around it, confused and breathing heavy, not having considered what to do once it was made. After a moment, Lindy suggested we jump over it.

Randy agreed.

"Let's say that whatever part of your body touches it," he said, "get's eaten by alligators." He tapped the moss with his toe and limped around in pained circles. "So, if you put your foot on it, you have to walk around like this."

Artsy Julie laughed. We all did.

Duke Kern told us it looked like a bed.

This idea struck me as so unimaginative, so uninteresting, that I was disappointed to see him and Lindy lie in it. The story now was that this was The Royal Bed, fit only for the King and Queen of the yard. There had been no election to this effect, no discussion among the rest of us, but there had also been no argument. If we were to couple up at this age, this would be the only thing to make sense. We understood that. And so Randy, always a sidekick, took up his station as an imperial guard.

"Be careful, your Highness," he said. "If you step out of bed you'll get eaten by sharks."

Artsy Julie soon fell into the scene, as well, tossing clovers at the feet of the royal couple and strumming an invisible

harp. Duke and Lindy smiled. They pretended to drink from jeweled goblets, orchestrate the world with their scepters, and feed each other grapes.

"We must have an heir," Duke said.

Randy stood at attention.

"Intruder alert!" he said, and cast an invisible sword toward the edge of the woods.

I looked over to see Mr. Landry lumbering toward us. He wore a green t-shirt and blue shorts, both drenched in sweat, and had a long walking stick in his hand. I was terrified of this man. We all were.

A reason:

On rare occasions, back when my father lived with us, or when my sisters would come into town, my family would sit on the back patio longer than originally intended. Night would fall and there might be a piece of meat on the charcoal grill, a solo light glowing from the deep end of our swimming pool, all made comfortable by the lilt of my mother's laugh in family conversation.

Rarer still, but too often, these moments were disenchanting by the booming and indecipherable fights of Mr. Landry and his wife, Louise, two doors down. And though kids don't know, I could tell by the concern on my family's up-lit faces that adult business was going on over there, and I was lucky to have no part of it. I remember once the sound of a bottle breaking in their driveway, another time a car engine being revved without purpose. I remember the force in his voice. And it was here I that I first heard a phrase I'd never heard before, that I didn't understand the literal meaning of, uttered by my mother, I believe, when she said, "I shudder to think."

So I was glad Mr. Landry kept his distance.

He called to us out in the lawn.

"Have you kids seen a dog running around here?"

"No, sir."

He looked as if he didn't believe us.

"Well, if you see it," he said, "don't go near it. If you see it, you come and tell me."

"Yes, sir."

I watched Mr. Landry walk back into the woods and cross a small creek. He stabbed at the water with his stick. He had a mop of black hair and was, by profession, a psychiatrist.

When I turned back to my friends, Lindy and Duke were again lying in the bed of moss, the conversation with Mr. Landry already forgotten. They giggled and whispered to one another and I watched Lindy rest her hand on Duke's stomach where she fiddled, playfully, with his belly button.

Not the whole story.

After we had gone back to our houses, phones began ringing. My mother pulled me into the bathroom and rifled through my hair with her fingers, a small flashlight between her teeth. Wiry and gray, she told me, Spanish Moss is a living thing, and among the many creatures that reside in its wig are lice. So, by making a bed of it, Lindy and Duke were infested. My mother explained to me how they had them all over, nearly microscopic, and feasting on every inch of their bodies. I replayed the scene in my

head, the way they had eventually helped each other up off the bed, as if some new allegiance had been formed between them, and tried to recall swarms of tiny bugs on their skin.

"But I didn't see anything," I told her.

"That's why you have me to look for you," she said. Still.

The whole story, I suppose, is the shared history that this event established between them, Duke and Lindy. From there out they often stood to the side in times the rest of us played. Duke, with his head shaven the next day, took to call calling her Queenie. He let her wear his baseball cap. He even chose her first for his side in tackle football, as if there she could never be hurt.

A few years later, when Lindy and I stayed up late on the phone, she confessed to me that she often snuck out of her parents' house in the weeks that followed the bed of moss and met Duke Kern in his driveway. She told me they kissed on the hood of his father's '57 Chevy and that she let him put his hands beneath her shirt. Oddly, I was neither jealous nor angry.

They were young. They were both beautiful. Duke Kern was never a suspect.

5.

Bo Kern, on the other hand, was.

He had graduated from The Perkins School, but just barely, the year before the crime. He was well known around town and, with his unsettling hair lip and crew cut, immediately recognizable. Teenagers and school friends knew him as the guy always willing to go one step beyond what any of them dared to do and, as such, he was the wildcard of every social event. House parties screeched to a halt when Bo Kern knocked over some antique table in a fit of dancing. Young hostesses cried when he dented a parent's car hood while wrestling and drunk. He was the guy who would publicly accept any challenge volleyed forth, trying desperately to impress girls the world knew had no interest in him.

The coaches at The Perkins School knew Bo Kern as the slow witted boy who had ballooned into a formidable blocking back in the summer before his senior year. This was the only position he could play, fullback, or blocking back, as it requires zero agility. The sole purpose of this position is for the athlete to turn himself into a missile, a battering ram, and destroy whatever obstacle steps in his way. His sacrifice makes room for the more skilled running back to show his stuff and light up the scoreboard. It is a position of little reward, fullback, yet Bo Kern had so distinguished himself in the first few games of his senior year that he drew the attention of scouts from Millsaps and Belhaven College, a pair of Division III rivals in Mississippi. This was big news. Banners that read Bo Knows Blocking and Geaux Bo were written by pep squads and taped up around the chain link fencing of the football field for the game the scouts were attending. It was October and still warm.

Before this game was finished, Bo Kern had committed two illegal procedure penalties, three personal fouls, and had been ejected for fighting with a player from Dutchtown Catholic, the school we were playing. Parents and fans alike looked over to explain to the well dressed scouts that this was surely the product of nerves, some unfortunate anomaly, but they were already gone. It took us a full year to find out the reason, leaked down from the coaches at a school assembly about the dangers of drugs, when they told us that Bo Kern had also tested positive for anabolic steroids that day, and that the scouts knew about this before kickoff. They had only stuck around to watch a player for Dutchtown Catholic, they said, who also didn't impress.

So, kids my age thought about Bo Kern whenever we flirted with failure. The notion was that if he could graduate, there was hope for us all, and he was a legend in this capacity. He was therefore a guy that many people pretended to know all about, as people do, if only to nod gravely at his name.

In legal terms, he was a person of interest.

The fact that abnormalities were so rare at The Perkins School, so rare in Woodland Hills, didn't help. There were no crippled children that I remember. There were no wheelchairs or deformities. We were all middle to upper class white kids, all the products of our parents' success, and when we played with one another at school we played in the mirror.

In this environment, Bo Kern's hair lip rattled you.

He was a stocky guy, impossibly so that senior year, and the jagged turn of his lip bared constantly the gums above his front teeth. He rarely smiled, and even when he did you couldn't be sure. So, I have to wonder about people like him, about children perhaps doomed from birth by circumstances beyond their control. What chance did he have among us? How early is the future defined?

There are others like him.

The true story of a boy named Chester McCready:

Thin and pale and a classmate of mine, Chester did not shave the dark hairs that appeared on his upper lip in high school. He wore shirts with stains on them, sneakers that stank up the classroom, and had the look of some apprenticing con man, a boy who would rather be left alone in the dark. During our sophomore year, a girl named Missy Boyce claimed that Chester tried to feel her up at the concession stand during a football game that previous Friday. Desperate to be desired as well, other girls soon pretended the same, and the name Chester the Molester followed.

When we originally asked him about this incident, Chester told us, "Some guy pushed me. It's not my fault the Queen Bitch was there."

He was emphatic about this and, I believe, honest.

Regardless, many of us who knew him began to pretend that we didn't and he was known only as Chester the Molester throughout the rest of high school, a time that must seem to him like excruciating string of years. Even

at our ten year reunion, his name was still on our tongues, as he had recently been accused of sexual harassment at a local sandwich shop where he worked. This didn't strike me as irony, as it did some of the other people at the reunion, but rather as the inevitable end we had sent him to in our youth. Even as children, you understand, we set our paper boats on a stream. We watch them go. After hearing about this, I went to the public library to look up the newspaper article about this event. I stared at Chester's picture when I saw it, pasted among the other criminals' photos in the Metro section, and I barely recognized him. He had a goatee now, sharp and trimmed, and his hair was thin and brushed forward. His mouth was small. The article said the girl was sixteen at the time of the incident and it struck me that this was likely Missy's age when this whole thing began, as if his troubles had never matured.

If I were a bigger man, a better man when I saw this, I would have cried at his fate.

Still, it was hard to cry for Bo Kern, despite the hand he was dealt. Unapologetic and mean, Bo took his anger out into the streets beyond Woodland Hills, even in high school, and had a reputation for violence. One time, Bo was brought home by the police for assaulting a boy at Highland Road Park with a Stop sign he had pulled from the ground. He was let off with a warning. Another time I saw him put his fist through the window of a car in the school parking lot for no discernible reason. Also, after gym class one day, all the talk at school was about a brawl that had taken place in the Taco Bell parking lot the night before, where Bo Kern had beaten a boy from across town so badly that he had to be hospitalized. My friend Randy told me that, after this fight, he heard that Bo Kern had tried putting the unconscious boy in the back of a friend's pick-up truck before the cops showed up and he fled. This was only a rumor, he admitted, but it stuck with us.

"Where was he taking him?" Randy asked me. "Where the hell was he taking him?"

We shuddered to think.

Yet in the year after he graduated from Perkins, Bo grew even wilder.

He had not been accepted to any colleges, had no athletic scholarship offers, and instead worked nights as a bouncer at Sportz, a local eighteen-and-up club near the LSU campus. He still lived at home in these months and would drunkenly return down Piney Creek Road at three and four a.m., squealing around the curve in his father's '57 Chevy. After only two months of employment at this place, Bo had a restraining order issued against him by a college girl, an English major, who was a regular at the bar. She won the case and he was fired.

In the court document, a public record, she described Bo Kern as "a menacing figure". She complained of having nightmares about his face.

She summed it up for all of us.

The evidence mounted.

In the months immediately before the rape, Bo Kern totaled his father's '57 Chevy in broad daylight. He broke

the finger of a boy in the next neighborhood who pointed at him, and accused him of cheating at basketball. He gave his brother a black eye in the front lawn. He told stories to us about breaking into unlocked cars at football games and stealing credit cards. When anyone else in the neighborhood spoke, Bo Kern asked them, "What the fuck are you looking at?"

Where were the consequences? Where was it all leading? Where was he taking him?

I imagine this must have been the worry of our parents, as well, when the news spread about Lindy's rape. So, recently, when I began dealing with all of this, I asked my mother if she had originally suspected Bo.

She told me that the Simpsons had gone from house to house in the week that followed Lindy's rape. She said they were teary eyed and supportive of one another. She said they looked tired and old. The story went that when they finally visited the Kern house, Betty Kern, Bo's mother, sat down with them in the kitchen. She said they drank iced tea and chatted pleasantly without even broaching the subject. Then, without provocation, Betty Kern burst into tears.

She was inconsolable.

"Please don't hate me," she begged them. "I can't believe he came out of my body!"

So, "Yes," my mother told me. "We all did."

6.

It is important when I learned the word.

For a long time, this was how my mother pled my case about Lindy.

In the school year before the crime, Randy Stiller and I were sitting on his kitchen floor. It was a wide and open space with yellow linoleum tiles. We sat with our backs to the refrigerator and faced the wall some twenty feet away. We had caches of action figures in these days, primarily G.I Joe's and Star Wars characters, and I lugged mine around in large plastic tackle boxes my father had left at our house while Randy kept his in see through Tupperware containers. On that day, we'd spread the characters out on the floor before us; Bubba Fet, Cobra Khan, and the like.

At this age, the only people who knew we still played with these toys were each other.

We shared many secrets like this.

Examples:

Randy's parents, sweet hearted people, never got the courage to tell him about Santa Claus, and so his fantasy lasted well past the norm. When my oldest sister Hannah told me, I was around ten, and I rushed over to Randy's house to commiserate. It was the week before Christmas and, when I got there, Randy was lounging in a swing outside, chewing the end of a pencil and working on his list. The document was three pages long, complete with simple sketches of the most coveted items, and I couldn't bring myself to tell him. So I spent years like this, changing the subject every time he brought it up. It

was no easy task. Randy eventually gathered the facts on his own, of course, and one day in high school, at a classmate's house party, he drunkenly asked me why I'd let him carry on like that.

"I don't know," I told him. "I guess I just didn't want to spoil it."

Randy shook his head and smiled. He put his arm around my shoulder.

"There's just one thing I still don't get," he said. "I mailed off all those letters. Where the hell did they go?"

"That's a good question," I said.

But Randy also had the goods on me.

The night my father left us, I snuck over to his house and cried like a baby. We were up in the middle of the night during a school week and, I thought, the only two people awake in the world. I can't recall what I blubbered to him.

What does a boy say? I only remember lying face down on his bed, my head sopping up the pillow, and hearing a short knock on the door. I scrambled around to hide, thinking we'd been caught, and crawled underneath his bed. Randy opened the door and rubbed his eyes, pretending to have been asleep. On the floor outside of his room was a plate of warm cookies. Two cups of milk. We heard footsteps going back down the stairs. We were friends.

We had decided enough was enough with the our toys, however, and so that day in the kitchen we made a game out of slinging them violently across the linoleum floor to crash against the opposite wall. Points were scored if you broke a head or a limb off the figure and we kept tally by drawing in erasable pen on the fridge. The toys made red and blue marks along the baseboards, I remember, and his dog Ruby swallowed the decapitated heads.

After several rounds of this, Randy's older sister Alexi came in.

In college but living at home, Alexi was thin, blonde, and followed constantly by boys. One particular boy I remember was named Robert, and he slunk around Randy's house for a year. He looked perpetually wrinkled, as if he had slept in his clothes, and wore baseball caps even at night. He worked as a cook in a short order restaurant near campus, where he and Alexi had met, and always smelled to us like fried onion rings. When Alexi saw the mess we'd made she said, "What are you two idiots doing?" but didn't wait around for an answer. She walked directly to the telephone instead, attached to a wall near the den, and dialed a number. She told Robert to make her a glass of lemonade, so he did. "Jenn," Alexi said in to the phone, "What's this bullshit I hear about you not coming to Robert's party?"

Robert stood over us and grabbed ice cubes out of the freezer.

He asked Randy, "Did you know your sister's insane?"

"You don't have to tell me," Randy said.

We liked Robert, as he described nearly everything he saw as "insane" and made us wonder what type of revelations awaited us in college. We followed him outside to the patio while Alexi talked on the phone. We

watched him smoke cigarettes and ash into a Dr. Pepper bottle. Their dog Ruby followed us outside through the dog door and trotted into the lawn, where she defecated the brightly colored heads of our action figures.

Robert said, "That dog is insane."

We laughed, and slapped at the mosquitoes biting our ankles.

Robert then asked Randy a number of questions about his sister, like what type of flowers she liked, what her favorite place to eat was, and if she had ever been to New Orleans. Randy, of course, had no idea. After a few minutes, Alexi stepped out of the door, the telephone at her neck still attached by its chord.

"Robert," she said. "Jenn wants to know what the score was."

The subject was LSU football, as it often is in Baton Rouge, and this was a time of depression. "It was thirty five to three," Robert told her. "We got raped."

So, there it was, burning for me.

There have been other words like this in my lifetime, words so mysterious that I had to possess them, even if I didn't understand their meaning. Diaphragm.

Prophylactic. Swoon. I remember a day in the fifth grade when a boy named Chuck Beard, a red headed kid, called me a dildo at recess. We had been playing four-square along the brick walkways of Perkins and I'd sent him out of the competition with a lob that careened off the boundary line. He was furious. After school that day, my mother picked me up in the parking lot. She asked me how I had done on a project I had due for my teacher, Mrs. Williams, a woman who wore massive amounts of blue eye shadow. "I got a B," I told her. "I think Mrs. Williams might be a dildo."

My mother pulled to the side of the road.

"What did you say?" she asked me. "Do you even know what that means?"

She was beautiful and still young, my mother. She had a new haircut since the divorce.

"Of course I do," I told her. "That lady is a pain in my butt." Cars passed as she composed herself.

The situation was more serious, however, when my mother called me out from my room in the weeks following the crime. I saw Mr. and Mrs. Simpson standing beside her in the den and it looked as though my mother had been crying. The three of them directed me to a chair that had been pulled out from the table and stood in a semi-circle around me.

"Honey," my mother told me. "I don't know how to tell you this. I can't believe I'm even telling you this, but Lindy Simpson was raped."

"If you know anything," Mrs. Simpson said.

"We're not accusing anyone," Mr. Simpson said. "But, please, if you know anything."

"She was raped?" I asked.

"Yes," they told me.

"That's terrible," I said.

"Yes," they said. "It is."

I thought about it a long time.

"Who was she playing?" I asked. My mother put her head on Mrs. Simpson's shoulder. "Thank you, God," she said. "Thank you, Jesus." Later that week I walked into my room to find a pamphlet about sex on my bed. There was no note attached to it, and when I opened the pamphlet a loose roll of condoms fell out. We have never spoken to one another about this, my mother and I, but I can remember her lavishing praise on me in this time. She made macaroni and cheese with every meal. She brought oranges to my soccer games. Things were remarkably good between us for a while, until she found reason to suspect me again. It was hard for her, I suppose, to realize that the act does not depend on the word.

7.

Still, there is one thing that all of us know. In the wash of time, particular moments stick with you. It is often inexplicable stuff; colors, a scrap of conversation, the sweep of trees flying past a car window. Why those trees? Where were you going? There is mystery in our patchwork memory. Less often in this wash, an entire day that never left you. A theme in the quilt, you could say. It does not take a psychologist to explain this one. It was January 28th, 1986, and it was the day I fell in love with Lindy Simpson. This was also the day the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded, and seven courageous astronauts died. I was in the fifth grade. Along with nearly every other school in America, The Perkins School had structured their entire science curriculum around this event. We focused on stars and galaxies and made crude Styrofoam mobiles of the Milky Way that we hung with fishing line from the ceilings of our classrooms. In preparation for the Challenger's liftoff, to be broadcast live on CNN, twin grades had been paired together, 5th and 6th, 7th and 8th, etc., and ushered into rooms with televisions. This was exotic to us then, watching cable at school, and the TV's stood on carts in front of the blackboards. They had knobs and push buttons beneath the screens. To make additional space in the classrooms, our wooden desks had been stacked and moved out into the hallways and we were seated in long rows along the carpeted floor, organized by home room. As a class project, the 6th grade, Lindy's grade, had written a letter to Christa McAuliffe. She was the elementary school teacher chosen from over twenty thousand applicants to accompany the astronauts into space, and she was a national hero. Their letter to her was simple, written in pencil on lined paper, and it thanked her for her bravery. In the weeks before take-off, Mrs. McAuliffe had returned to the sixth grade class an American Flag and signed publicity photo of the entire crew, both of which were now hung on a large bulletin board lined in red, white, and blue crepe paper. Our teachers gathered in front of it and chatted energetically. The whole place

had the buzz of a holiday. We drank fruit punch and ate cookies shaped like stars. We wore flag pins and sang the national anthem. We felt good, all of us did, and I had no way of knowing that the image of Mrs. Knight, my homeroom teacher, singing along in front of that flag would never leave me. She was a young woman at the time with a bob haircut, although all teachers looked immensely old to me then, and she was a brunette. This was her first year teaching at The Perkins School, at any school, and would be her last. It was cold and dry that morning, oddly enough, as even January offers no promise in Louisiana. I've spent Christmases in t-shirts, Thanksgivings in shorts and sneakers. On this day, however, we all wore pants and long sleeve button downs and two rows across from me, sitting Indian Style on the carpet, Lindy Simpson wore a navy blue sweatshirt over her jumper. I paid her no attention. I wanted to see the rocket. When it came time for the countdown, our teachers turned up the volume on the television and asked us to pay attention. We stared like tourists at the shuttle in its launch position, filmed at long distance by a hand held camera. I remember the Kennedy Space Center looking completely deserted but for the craft; a white shuttle perched atop three cylindrical rocket boosters, the middle one some fifteen stories high and blood red. This was a good time in America. We were dreamers, teachers and students alike, all aboard that mission by patriot's proxy. So, as the countdown began, we joined along. Our chorus swelled at T minus eight, with the appearance of smoke releasing beneath the rocket in purposeful plumes, looking like the birthing of clouds. We bellowed out the final "one" and watched the vessel take off, heavy and miraculous, breaking away from the launch pad and burning everything beneath it. Our teachers applauded. The announcer said "Liftoff! We have liftoff!" and told us we were witnessing history. We believed him, and watched the shuttle rise atop a column of fire. Seventy three seconds later, it ended. Due to a massive amount of wind shear, along with the failure of the right rocket booster's O-rings, a flare breached the external fuel tank of the Challenger and destroyed the integrity of the ship. From the ground, all systems looked normal. We could hear the joyous cheers of people standing behind the camera, the excitement in the announcer's polished voice. We had no clue. Even Mission Control was unaware of the problem until the very end, it turned out, as was evidenced by the last transmission made by NASA to the crew. It came ten seconds before the explosion and said, "Roger, Challenger, go at throttle up," which means everything's ok, you guys, give it all you've got. After a federal investigation into the event, and public disclosure of every detail, we learned that there was a bit more to this story. The disaster was not a complete surprise to everyone. It turned out that an additional

transmission had been made, one second before the explosion, from the crew of the Challenger back to the ground, when Pilot Michael J. Smith, while either reading something on the gauges or feeling something in his heart, said, "Uh oh."

Often, in times of tragedy, there is a delay period, a moment of collective disbelief.

Not this time.

I immediately heard shouts from the halls.

Our teachers reacted first, clutching their chests and screaming as the shuttle burst into flames, and so chaos had us before the first piece of debris splashed into the Atlantic. Taking their cues from the adults, my classmates became distraught and disorganized. Mrs. Knight scrambled to turn off the television and Mrs. McElroy, a parental volunteer, tripped over a boy curled up on the floor and fell hard against the snack table. When the punch bowl broke, and spilled red juice all over the carpet, we hit maximum hysteria. I heard high heels running up and down the hallways. I heard the deep murmurs of eighth graders in the adjacent classroom. I heard the squealing of pig tailed girls. And, although I know it's not possible, I swear I saw our mobiles swinging by their strings from the ceiling.

I sat on the carpet and watched this. I tried not get stepped on.

Across from me, Lindy Simpson sat on the carpet as well. And when a space cleared between us, I saw that her sweatshirt was covered in vomit.

She looked over at me and pressed her lips together, not out of any form of embarrassment, I don't believe, but rather as if she were merely glad to see someone she knew. She did not smile, necessarily, and she did not cry. Instead she had a look on her face that still haunts me. It was as if Lindy had unplugged herself completely from the event, and we were now just passing one another on Piney Creek Road, a place where she would have been just as surprised as I was to see what she had done all over her sweatshirt.

This was a look of hers I would see later in life.

Mrs. Knight noticed her too and rushed over. In one expert move, she quickly pulled the soiled sweatshirt over Lindy's head and balled it up so that no one would see. Then Lindy, coming to, began crying. Mrs. Knight helped her off of the floor and ushered her out of the room, stroking her hair. As they passed in front of me, I heard Mrs. Knight say, "I know, honey. I know."

I'm not sure why this ignited my heart. I suppose it was the fact that I, myself, was not crying, that I hadn't even had time to react. Or perhaps it was the sight of Lindy's bright pink vomit that did it, strangely enough, so full of candy and sweet punch. Was she so sensitive that this was always inside of her? When I saw her running carefree through my neighborhood, or eating an Icee on the curb of Piney Creek Road, was it possible she was this tender and vulnerable? How deeply did she feel what she saw? How intensely can one experience life? Were all girls like this? The idea broke over me. These were separate

creatures all together, I realized, these girls. If not, then how could Lindy have felt so immediately the panic in the classroom, the concern over the death of our heroes? How could it make her sick before I even got off of the floor? So, say what you will about Men, our massive failures on Earth, but some understanding flickered inside me at that moment, something hard-wired came alive. I was just a boy, not even a man, and yet I suddenly felt it my warrant to defend this particular girl from here on out, against any vague threat that may arise. And I did it. In the days that followed this event I got into arguments with other kids my age, boys who said they too had seen Lindy throw up, and tried to gain audience to laugh at her expense. I threw fits. I denied it vehemently. I raged against an unchangeable history, something that would later become a habit of mine.

In a curious turn of events, many years after this, I ran into Mrs. Knight at a local restaurant. I was in college then, and she still looked young and lovely. She now worked as an assistant at a contracting firm, she told me, and had given up teaching completely. But she remembered me well, she said, from the day the Challenger exploded. She introduced me to her husband and explained to him the nightmare it was, having charge of all those shell shocked children, and how she still revisits the day in her head. Then she told me a story I didn't remember.

After Mrs. Knight had taken Lindy to the restroom and rinsed out her sweatshirt in the sink, she led her back into the hall. Apparently, I was standing there waiting for them, she said, and had taken off my long sleeve shirt to give Lindy. Embarrassed and upset, Lindy ran off in the crowd without acknowledging me. Mrs. Knight said that she still remembers the lump in her throat at that moment, how ill prepared she was for pandemonium, and what I told her as Lindy ran away.

"Do you remember what you said?" she asked me. I didn't.

"You came up and took my hand," she said. "You told me, 'I guess it's true what they say, Mrs. Knight. When it rains, it pours.'"

I smiled at this small memory, as did she.

"I never forgot that," she said. "You seemed so mature. I don't know. You were like an old wise man in a little kid's body. It stuck with me. I always wondered how you'd grown up."

"Well," I said. "Here I am."

"And the Simpson girl," she said. "I felt so sorry for her, too. Are you still in touch with her?"

"No," I told her. "Not anymore."

So, on the day I fell for Lindy, school was cancelled by noon.

There was a line of traffic in the carpool lane and even our parents were distraught about the shuttle, thankful to have been let out of work to come get us. Randy and I rode the short distance home in my mother's car and he kept making crashing noises with his mouth. My mother begged him to stop. We saw Lindy walking home alone on the sidewalk with her sweatshirt in her hand. She looked

freezing and sad and my mother pulled to the side of the road. I hopped out of the car and let Lindy sit in the front. She didn't say a word to me. I was crushed.

Later that night, my mother called me into the living room where Ronald Reagan was on TV.

"Honey," she said. "It's the president."

I remember it clearly.

Reagan sat in the oval office, his face placid and genuine.

He wore a dark blue suit and fiddled with a paper clip in his hand. The desk behind him, barely visible, was covered in family photos. And instead of delivering the State of the Union address, which he was scheduled to do, President Reagan mourned our nation's tragedy instead and mentioned each of the fallen astronauts by name.

My mother broke out in quiet tears as he spoke of them, something she did with regularity in these years. She then put her arm around me and pulled me close to her on the couch. We sat in the darkness and listened.

The president said, "I now want to say something to the schoolchildren of America, who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's take off."

My mother looked down at me. She ran her fingers through my hair.

"I know it's hard to understand," he told us, "but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to the faint hearted," he reminded us. "It belongs to the brave."

I looked up at my mother. She was already broken, I realize now, and had yet to even face the greatest tragedies of her life. She dabbed a soft handkerchief at my eyes and held my head in her hands.

"Were you listening, honey?" she asked me. "Do you understand what he's saying?"

This was my first day in love. I didn't understand anything. I put my head on her shoulder.

She covered my eyes with her hand.

"God," my mother said, as if she were asking Him. "Why do they have to grow up?"

8.

Louisiana gets a bad rap.

Weather. Ignorance. Muck.

I don't want this story to add to it, though I know it will, because people often discount what we say here. We are relegated to a different human standard in the South, it seems, lower than the majority of this great nation, as if all our current tragedies are somehow due us from our past. You may hear, for instance, something like, "Yes, it is a shame those folks in New Orleans drowned. But what were they doing living under sea level anyway?" Or, "It is terrible about that boy in being shot, but I'm sure you've heard about the race problems there."

Another catastrophe? they may say. Another injustice? Forgive me if I don't look surprised.

This bothers me. It bothers everyone in the South.

So, let's get this out of the way.

It's hot here, yes. It rains and it floods.

If you say, "It's not the heat, it's the humidity" it's because you're from some other sunny place where you thought it was hot. It's both the heat and humidity. It's okay. You'll survive. There are ways to get along.

One thing you do is amplify the pleasure of meals. Three times a day you sit down with friends or family who, if you're lucky, are often the same. You take a break from the heat. You set a napkin over your lap. You can't believe the utter joy. This tomato might just save your life, the cool fruit of it, that cold beer or iced tea your salvation. This is not gluttony.

You eat this way for a reason.

When everything else is burning, sweating, beaten down by a torturous sun, only your tongue can be fooled. So you tease it with flavors like promises, small escapes from a blatantly burdensome land. You offer it up sharp spices, dark stews, iced cocktails. Anything you can think of to do. To this point:

I once heard that the food in Colorado is so bland because the Rocky Mountains are so beautiful. This made sense to me, as it did to the person who said it.

Who needs flavor in God's valley? they asked me.

Well, we do.

Not because it isn't beautiful here. It is. So much so that it pains you to hide from it.

So, to assuage this guilt, you carry bits of godliness indoors in the summer, perhaps from your own verdant garden or your neighbor's backyard crop, and you spread it over oil in a cast iron pot. You cook it down until it changes its form. You make your own miracle here. You put legitimate life in your roux. Every local understands why you do this.

There is a saying in south Louisiana that 'when we eat one meal we talk about the next' and this is true.

Who wouldn't? In this imagined menu lies a future, a forecasted life, a community, perhaps even a weekend full of cheer and good food. What should we cook on Saturday? you wonder. Yes, honey, yes darling, believe me when I say that sounds good. And, at the house across the street, a similar family is doing the same. Perhaps a Sunday spent over a pot of beans. A lunch of hot po-boys wrapped in butcher paper. So, it is also an unwritten rule that we don't talk politics at the table. This is not because we're dumb or old fashioned or just too polite, but rather because we see right through it.

Middling stuff, the world. Nothing worth mucking up a fine meal.

And so the soul of this place lives in the parties that grow here, not just Mardi Gras, no, but rather the kind that start with a simple phone call to a neighbor, a friend.

And after the heat is discussed and your troubles shared you say man it'd be nice to see you, your kids, your smile. And from this grows a spread several tables long, covered in newspaper, with long rows of crawfish spilled steaming from aluminum pots; a bright splash of red in the blanketing green of your yard. Food so big it must be

stirred with a paddle. You gather around this. You worship it. There is nothing strange about that.

Only the unfortunate don't see it this way.

When I was in my twenties, I had a short lived friendship with a fellow from Michigan. He had moved here for school and so I bragged to him the way that all of us down here do, about our food, our hospitality, those mantles we cling to. I invited him to a friend's party in the Garden District of Baton Rouge, a neighborhood full of old majesty and wrap around porches. Our host, one of the cavalry of great unknown cooks in this state, slaved all day over a steaming pot of crawfish. He offered my friend local beer and iced watermelon, anything to ease the day's obvious scorch. Then, when the table was piled high with boiled corn and potatoes, spicy crawfish from a pond not too far away, my friend backed away from the crowd. Dig in, we all said, we'll show you how to peel. He was polite but did not budge, insisting that he just wasn't hungry.

"Your loss," we said, and we meant it.

Later, in the car, he told me that he couldn't believe I had eaten that.

"They're mud bugs," he said. "You guys were just eating a pile of insects. It's more disgusting than I thought it would be."

I did not begrudge him his idiocy. Instead I explained to him that the crawfish is technically crustacean, no different biologically than the lobster he'd likely ordered at the finest restaurant in Ann Arbor, the term "mud bug" a misnomer. What he'd witnessed, I told him, was great luxury on a miniature scale.

"All I saw were bugs," he said. "All I saw were drunk and sweaty people, sucking on the heads of dead insects."

This is no small point.

It is this type of wrong ended telescoping that gets Louisiana in trouble.

Examples:

When I was a boy, I played football with Randy behind his house. We set up end zones between twin oak trees in the back lot and used rows of bright yellow rag weeds as our boundary lines. We drew up plays by tracing our fingers through the thick grass and imagined scores of rabid fans there watching. We hiked, spun, and dodged, and threw tight spirals to one another through the hot and heavy air. We dove and we caught. We scored and we celebrated. On one particular day Randy punted the ball and it careened off his foot. It hit a tree and bounced into a small swamp behind our properties, covered at the time by a thin layer of green algae. Together we stood at the banks of this swamp, a place our parents told us not to go, and we were wary of snakes. We watched the football float in the still water, a child's size football, mind you, for we were children, and we knelt in the mud to catch our breath. We tried to think. Before we could devise a way to retrieve it, we saw a Nutria rat, a large swamp pest that looks like an otter, swim up to our ball through the muck. It nosed the thing, watched it spin around in the dark water, and it ate it.

Now, go into the world and tell this story.

No one will ask you the rodent's history, how it was transplanted here from Argentina by the McIlheny family, the founders of Tabasco, to be bred for its fur on Avery Island. So you will not get a chance to tell the epic tale of the hurricane that followed this event, allowing two of these rats to escape their cages like some brave and famous lovers, to start a family in an unfamiliar land. The listeners are not interested in that. They do not see these strange animals setting off into the wetlands like pilgrims, like our own ancestors to which we owe a great debt. Nor will they see two happy boys in this story, with bright glowing eyes and big hearts, witnessing a spectacle as bizarre to them as it would be to you.

Instead, your listeners will only reaffirm to themselves what they previously thought about Louisiana; that it is a backwoods place with huge rats in the algae, some wild nightmare they're glad not to face.

So again, the truth:

It once rained so hard in my youth that the swamps behind Woodland Hills backed up. It looked like we lived on a lake. Piney Creek Road itself also flooded, and our proud houses stood like chalets on some muddy gulf. For two days we watched snakes cruise the water. We watched our family dogs splash about like children. We threw fishing lines from the tops of our driveways and we waded with our poles out into the lawn when the hooks got stuck on the concrete. We ate canned foods and drank warm cokes. When the rain stopped, Old Man Casemore launched his aluminum boat right from his carport and trolled up and down the street like our own private coast guard, waving at people out on their porches. Then, the water receded and normalcy returned. I imagine that many children in South Louisiana have stories very similar to this one, and when they grow up, they move out into the world and tell them. This is not the problem. It is the way these stories return that dogs us, they way they are altered by the outsiders who hear them. A man from California once asked me, for instance, if I rode to school in a boat. A woman from Des Moines said, "What was it like? Growing up chasing gators off your porch?"

It isn't like that. I promise.

My testament:

Even in the summer of Lindy's rape, there was joy. We played baseball in the street. We chased the Ice Cream Man from two blocks away.

Lindy was a part of this, too.

In fact, if you hadn't have been told what happened to her you wouldn't have been able to tell.

In the weeks immediately following her rape, that strange delay period we've already mentioned, the only difference in Lindy was a change in her schedule. No more piano lessons, to my dismay. Lindy went to therapy instead. No more bicycle ride out to the track at four o'clock, but rather a ride to and from the track with her parents. Small stuff. She looked the same to us then as she always had, bright and smiling, although all of this

would soon change.

And so, terrible as it was, the summer of her rape carried on, bright and blue skied, and full of immense pleasure. Even our parents, who had taken the news of this crime and the lack of a subsequent arrest the hardest, eventually came back into the fold, bonded together by the appearance of late summer whiteflies in the neighborhood.

Let me explain.

Tiny and prodigious creatures; whiteflies look like lint. Alone they are easily squashed, nothing more than a bit of dust on your fingers. In great numbers, however, they are disastrous, and feed indiscriminately on anything green. They colonize beneath the leaves of the flora available to them and work their tiny jaws to extract a sap from the plant. This is not the trouble. The waste they subsequently excrete attracts a type of mold called "black sooty", and this name speaks for itself. A dark color grows over the plant life, eventually growing so thick that it divorces the plant from the sun and a botanical sadness takes over. Irises lay down in their clumps. Trees drop their leaves out of season.

So, when Piney Creek Road came under siege that late summer, the neighborhood formed an alliance. Kids sprayed soapy water all over the gardens and felt useful, while parents called one another to talk about their successes and failures, progress and setbacks, any subject other than Lindy, the possible suspects in her rape, and were happy to focus on the more manageable problem at hand.

That Labor Day, when the infestation seemed under control, there was a party at the Stillers' house, Randy's house, and everyone there was in good spirits. Parents drank margaritas and iced beer as their kids ran around like lunatics in swim trunks. Lindy Simpson was there, too, without her parents, who had since withdrawn from these types of affairs. She wore a blue one piece bathing suit and I followed her around the yard with a water gun. It was all laughter and cheer until around five o'clock, when we heard a chainsaw revving up in the distance and a group of us went out to see.

In the farthest bend of Piney Creek Road stood a common area, a spot of land that was not technically on anyone's lot. It was obvious now that, despite their best intentions, no one had taken it upon themselves to treat the large live oak that stood there, and so this tree remained the last bastion of whiteflies. As such, the oak had apparently just given up, dropping all of its leaves on that Labor Day like some defeated sigh. So, while everyone else was at the party, saying goodbye to a summer they'd like to forget, Lindy's father had sprung into action. He wore goggles, shorts, and a tee shirt, and laid into the ancient tree with his chainsaw; an act so strangely violent that none of us knew what to say.

Two of the neighborhood men left the party at full trot to try and stop him, to explain to him that the tree was not dead, that it would come back next year, and that he had no right to do what he was doing. Then, when they got

halfway up the street, they halted dead in their tracks. It turned out that, upon closer inspection, these men could see something that we hadn't seen from the party, something that only Mr. Simpson had seen, after the tree dropped its leaves and went bare.

On the third highest branch of the live oak, slung around a tangle of sticks, a blue Reebok hung from its laces. So the men returned up the street to us, solemn, and let Mr. Simpson continue his work with the chainsaw. When we asked them what they'd seen up there, why they hadn't stopped him, the men put their large hands on our heads as if we were their own sons, their own daughters. "Let's all go back to the party," they said. "Let's all get something to eat."

So we did, and this is the last day I remember seeing Lindy happy.

Yet it had nothing to do with the sight of that shoe.

No.

I admit it. This time, I was to blame.

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Quote To Live By

*Time as he grows old
teaches us all things.*

—Aeschylus,

Prometheus Bound



Cindy Willis
2011
Novel In Progress
First Runner-Up
Falling



FALLING

Introduction

A plane has come apart at 34,000 feet. Thirty-seven-year-old Saroya Saul is the only survivor. She is found wandering, dazed, down a gravel road, ravaged, her bones bearing the spider web tracings of myriad fractures.

But how could she have survived?

It's not possible to survive such a fall.

Saroya has no memory of the event. People have come to her hospital room to question her. She is swarmed with journalists, investigators, the curious and the faithful. Some believe it's an impossible hoax—she could not have been on the plane—even though insurmountable evidence says she was. Others have come to co-opt her miracle, believing she was saved by God himself.

Saroya's father died when she was twelve; her mother is a maladjusted, emotionally absent Indian immigrant, and it seems her ex-husband Jackson is her only friend. Marisol of Rome, known for her sightings of the Virgin Mary and her miracles, has arrived, determined to declare the event miraculous. André Camus, the French new-age author and guru, former child psychologist, who survived a near death experience in the collapse of the Twin Towers, has also come, and Saroya begins to feel this man could be her ally.

But when the investigators determine a bomb brought down the plane, a fear of the unknown takes over, and a current grows to implicate Saroya. At the same time she learns that Camus is a part of the crash investigation team, and she is no longer sure she can trust him.

Saroya doesn't know which way to turn until an unexpected visitor from Peru, Raul Altazar, arrives and tells her of his twelve-year-old daughter, Julia, who survived after being sucked out of a plane over the Andes, the only other known person to have lived through such a thing. Without telling anyone, Saroya flees Seattle and the increasingly adversarial investigation and sets out to learn more about the mystery of Julia in hopes that the girl, along with her own slowly returning memory, can unlock the reason for their survival.

Were she and the girl chosen, or just lucky?
Falling is a story of life and death, of the fine line that separates the two, and of how one moment can change a life forever.

Chapter 1

"She's awake... "

A brown, bald head, black-rimmed glasses.

"Good Lord—she's awake!—put her back... put her back DOWN!"

* * *

The light is everywhere. Saroya realizes it could be a problem and she gathers it up. She gathers it up and streams it around and around into an electrified barbed wire basketball. Someone stands waiting. He/she/it wants her to throw the ball. Instead, she clutches it tightly to her chest.

* * *

Saroya Saul!

The person from the dream.

Saroya Saul!

Yes, okay, what?

That was the voice that caused her to jolt up in bed, bouncing from the effort, to paddle her arms as if swimming through a turbulent murk to reach the surface of some deep and unknown sea. She crested the water into a hospital bed and gasped back into this world.

Not expecting to be here at all.

For a brief moment, Saroya thought she was dead—dead at thirty-seven: laid out on the coroner's table. Then the two she would come to know as her doctor, Dr. Navil, and Sarah Parker, the liaison for Cormorant Airlines, rushed upon her.

"Ms. Saul?"

"Saroya Saul?"

As if she could have been someone else.

Later she would wonder: what if I'd said, No, you have the wrong person?

Dr. Navil gushed, "Ms. Saul, yes, we are so pleased to see you. Yes, it is a miracle. A miracle, indeed!"

"Welcome back, Ms. Saul!"

Back?

* * *

Everything faded; everything returned.

With some effort, Saroya Saul raised a hand, then cast an examining eye on the strange, digit-laced appendage. It seemed she could peer right through that hand, poke a stick through its flesh as if it were composed of air. It was then that Dr. Navil's coffee skin, bald head and black-rimmed glasses, and Sarah Parker's blonde-bobbed head poked back into focus and hovered, interrupting the spell, then that she wondered if she was supposed to know them, then that she tried to sit up and found she couldn't, then that she realized she wasn't sure where she was or why—then that she experienced the first inkling that something was terribly, terribly wrong. In that moment, Saroya Saul knew that life, such as it was for her now, would forever be divided into the time before and the time after.

* * *

Saroya Saul!

She raised a fist to punch at the voice, shot her eyes open, and saw no one, only her body stretched out in the bed before her—a lump beneath sheets—the white and metal objects of her room. On the tray that swung across her body and was now pushed to the side, perched the familiar sealed glass of water, in it the bendable straw. She blinked hard.

As if the blink could bring another shift.

But, nothing.

A week had gone by and there it still was: the same white room, the same filtered light, the same metallic taste at the back of her mouth that no matter how hard she scraped at with her tongue she could not remove, the same curtains, billowy, white, still fluttered in, after a full week of doing just that.

She had requested her window remain cracked open, despite the late season, for the sake of ruffling her curtains, cracked open for that very breeze that blew up from the city, the city that sloped downward like a slab of concrete tipped to meet the cold waters of Puget Sound below.

Like the city, her world had taken on a surreal quality. Ensnared in that room, flapping about in her bed high above the city on Hospital Hill, Saroya felt she had been washed up on a tall girder and glass mountaintop, a mountaintop where she now lay stranded like a post-tsunami, left-behind fish.

Earlier, down low in the corner, she had spotted a spider the size of a pinhead. Wadded up in its web hung a tiny gnat. Saroya watched that spider, immobile in its web, imagining it hinged in some moral deliberation. Today the gnat, she thought, tomorrow the spider. Outside, it was past the season for spiders; inside, it was only a matter of time before someone saw the whole thing and felt compelled, even indignant, to reach down and destroy it all with the swipe of a rag.

This is what Saroya was contemplating when the short man she did not recognize but guessed to be Hispanic entered her room. He took two strides in and turned an examining eye on her. With chagrin, she thought, of course, another journalist, more questions.

Ms. Saul what did it feel like to fall 34,000 feet?

Surely, you must remember something, however small.

Were you afraid?

When she first awoke in the hospital, Saroya remembered nothing at all. Then small bits and snatches had begun to return, out of order, like disjointed scenes in a time-scrambled movie: her walk through the airport, her evening in Boston the night before, tumbling through bottomless space... boarding the plane.

These items were received with little fanfare.

She had some memory of her hours on the plane, too: what she had to drink, what the man seated next to her was wearing. But these, also, were the sorts of things that held little interest for those who questioned her. What they wanted to know was this: Why a perfectly healthy plane dropped from the sky without apparent provocation, and why she, a woman who by all rights should be dead—and really did not stand out as a notable human being in any way—found herself lying there before them speaking of blue suits and club soda beverages.

Why did you live, Ms. Saul—when everyone else did not?

Why, indeed.

Each time she rose above consciousness they were there, lining the corridors, waiting, hovering. And all the while she was forced to endure the smugness, as if the whole world were catching her in a lie. And a lie to accomplish what exactly—to be a spectacle: The Great Woman Who Lived? Was it her fault if one day she went off to a perfectly normal flight and awoke to an entirely new reality? Saroya had wanted none of this. She wouldn't take it. Enough was enough.

Or, she thought, perhaps this man was another investigator.

Did anyone seem out of the ordinary that day—sweaty, agitated?

Did someone make a pronouncement or shout something just before the, ah... incident?

Do you recall, Ms. Saul, a loud noise—a noise that precipitated the rest?

Well, this new man could ask his questions of any one of the dozens of interviewers who had already asked

the questions for their own notes.

She, for one, was finished.

Her apparent lack of knowledge was universally broadcast. Even a recluse in a remote cave would have heard some measure of the small details of what she knew: Everything came apart; there was a fall; she walked.

Even so, the prevailing opinion was that any information, even from a bogus source, even an empty source, was better than no information at all. They had a need to know the whys and hows. At some point, the questioning had taken on an antagonistic edge. And they came back, again and again, like tall-hatted men ready to poke and prod, looking for a weak spot in her foundation, determined there was something traitorous to be uncovered—harkening back, Saroya thought, to the days of witch hunts, when inexplicable things evoked fear and indignant reaction.

She eyed this new man suspiciously.

Again, she no longer cared. She displayed her defiance by crossing her arms over her chest.

The man continued his stealthy approach. He moved in starts and stops, as if this were not the sort of place he was accustomed to entering, as if he wasn't sure he belonged in this room, in this building even. His manner was not what she had expected. There was none of the boldness, none of the entitlement of some of her former visitors who had strode in with clipboards, microphones, and creased brows, causing her to recoil in her bed. This man ran an inquiring gaze over her too, but in his eyes was a sense of apology, as if he was sorry, so very sorry, that he must come and bother her. He seemed to have no choice but to search her for something unnamable. Yes, deep apologies. He hoped she would understand. He cleared his throat to speak.

"Ms. Saul." He bowed his slight torso briefly as if addressing a lady of means. "I am Raul Altazar."

Clearly he thought his name should cue something for her, but it only brought a blank. Saroya felt a pit of fear that this man might reveal another black hole to her memory.

He had a bit of a stutter. His English was stilted and formal. Central American? Farther South? When they were newly married, Saroya and her ex-husband, Jackson, had spent two months backpacking around Guatemala, one in Ecuador. This caused her to scrutinize the man before her more carefully. His diminutive, barrel-chested build could place him as a native of one of the Andean countries, which piqued her curiosity. Even so, she determined to give him nothing.

So far her memory gaps only comprised the time of the crash. But Saroya lived in fear that more holes would come to light. Doctor Navil had termed her case hysterical memory loss; she had assured him she was not the hysterical sort. "No, I can see that Ms. Saul," he'd said. "It seems that few things touch you." His sharp remark held a hint of accusation that she had chosen to ignore. She felt this opinion represented the whole of his staff. What was she supposed to do—sob inconsolably day and night?

That would no doubt suit him better. Maybe he should try being flung out of a plane mid-air and live when he should have died and see if his reactions lived up to par. Bastard.

The stranger reshuffled his feet. He wore a cheap suit Saroya guessed he might have purchased specially for this occasion. She could not fathom what had brought this man to her bedside.

He came forward with his hand out, his palm cool and scratchy.

"Ms. Saul, you will excuse me, please, for not introducing myself properly... Again, Raul Altazar. I am a professor at the Universidad Nacional in Cusco." He shrugged, turned the hat he held in his hands. "I am also a taxi driver." This bit could have been added to keep him from sounding too proud. But Saroya knew what he meant. In his zone of the world it was incumbent on a professor to supplement his income. She and Jackson had hired a driver in Quito to take them to some village festivals. That driver was also a college professor. He spoke three languages with fluency and gave them a delineated lecture on the history of Incan architecture and the local language that still reflected the ancient Quechua dialect. Now all of these thoughts irritated Saroya. She couldn't fathom what any of it had to do with her.

"Of course, all of this is not important," the man said, as if reading her mind. He seemed to not know how to proceed. He turned the hat some more. He squinted and released his face as if having rapid-fire migraines.

"Ms. Saul, I am sorry for your loss," he finally blurted.

She wasn't sure what he meant.

He forged ahead. "You see, I heard about your case. First in the newspaper nacional, then I followed the story carefully. I searched for any information I could get: talk in Huacaypatu, the main square, on the internet at the university—it was big news there, in my city... and I think everywhere," he paused. "When I understood the story, when I understood it was what I'd thought, I knew I had to do what was necessary to come to you, Ms. Saul."

The man looked at his feet as if his purpose lay there below. His brow furrowed. His expression compelled Saroya to look, too. When he brought his head back up there was a fierceness in his eyes that said I have something to accomplish and I won't leave until it's done.

No, Saroya thought. This man was definitely not at all what she had first imagined. She swallowed dryly and took a sip of water from the sippy cup regularly refilled by the nurses. She stared at the straw then back up.

He cleared his throat with great import.

When he continued, he annunciated each word with care to keep his stutter at bay—and to make sure she didn't miss a thing.

"Ms. Saul, I am here to tell you that I am the father of Julia Altazar..."

* * *

Raul Altazar found himself thrown off as well. He studied the woman before him in discreet and respectful glances. The hospital staff had explained to him that it was useless: the Saul woman had ceased to speak two days ago—to anyone, let alone a stranger. She had refused guests; she had become quite unpleasant. He had seen what had been going on in the news here with this woman. It was true she had not yet spoken a word in his

“Yes, pieces of wreckage were still being found, pieces of DNA still being sorted out.

Yes, Saroya Saul was on the plane.

No, they could not explain why she was not in pieces also.”

presence. But it was his belief that she had simply lost the desire to speak. She was also not what he had expected: prettier, tall by his standards, with dark hair, and skin not as white as he'd imagined.

He'd stepped in closer and raised his eyes up the length of the bump of a body to the face of the woman in the highly situated bed. Her features made her lineage impossible to guess, like her eyes, for example: They were blue and incongruous with her darker attributes. He found it difficult to look directly into them. They had the intensity you would normally only find in the dog breed of husky, or perhaps in a Northern Spaniard.

He cleared his throat again, still scratchy from the long and cramped airplane ride. The curtains flapped, though the weather outside was cold: the woman must like fresh air. He gratefully took a deep breath and looked at his hands, working their way around the derby hat he held, his fingers white from the pressure of their industry.

“Julia Altazar,” he repeated. “My daughter...” And he straightened his back, as if this action were necessary for what he must now say. He'd hoped he wouldn't have to say it. But it was best to forge ahead.

“November 9, 2009,” he continued. “AeroPeru flight #87. One year ago—do you know of it?” He looked to the woman and saw nothing change on her face. He returned his gaze to his hands where they gripped the hat. “Of course, you may not have heard of it. There were no Americans involved.”

From her bed, the woman checked his face for signs of sarcasm or bitterness, but found none.

He went on: “Yes, you see, exactly one year ago. Cusco to Lima. A 737-400—Boeing, I believe?—retired from the airlines of the First World and bought by our own airline nacional, AeroPeru. They say the cargo door gave

way. A piece of the aircraft peeled back like the top of a sardine can. Seven passengers were sucked out into the sky. My 12-year-old daughter, Julia, who sat right next to me, who wore her seatbelt loosely—who held my hand—was one of them... You can imagine my horror.”

Now he had her full attention. She raised slightly forward off her pillows.

Altazar wasn't sure why he mentioned the airplane maker's name. But the woman's face changed when he did. She probably suspected he was after her help with a lawsuit. She stacked her pillows higher against the wall behind her head and pulled herself up into the closest thing resembling a sitting position she had mustered since he entered the room. The expression on her face challenged him to make this type of plea. Raul Altazar pitied the man who would broach such a subject.

Saroya had no “major” injuries, no complete breaks. Nothing that appeared in textbooks. Just bones with the spider web tracings of a thousand shadows. A body that had received such a shocking jolt that it hadn't even registered yet just what it should do about it.

Of course, there were those who still did not believe she had actually been in the plane. “It's not possible,” they exclaimed, and they had come to visit her as well—to explain this to her, the impossibility of it all. To prove that they understood there was some sort of hoax at work. As if she herself, the involved party, would be unaware of the impossibility of such an occurrence. But, oh no, they would not be tricked.

Saroya had remained unmoved.

Fools

The results of the airline investigation had confirmed: Her car still sat in the secured Master Park parking lot at SeaTac International Airport. Saroya Saul had checked in for her flight. She had presented identification along with all of the other passengers and crew. She had flown the first section east on November 8, flight #371, Seattle to Boston, arriving in Boston at 4:20 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. She had taken a Yellow Cab from the airport. She had attended her meeting with Juan Goddard, head of local air cargo, and the chefs of 13 of Boston's finest restaurants. Before the evening was out they had arrived at a plan for the next season's arrival of Copper River Salmon, to be delivered exclusively by Cormorant Airlines. She had checked both in and out of The Seaport Hotel, a swanky accommodation on Boston Harbor famous for the unearthly tall curtain panels that draped and swayed throughout its lobby, a hotel booked by the travel department of Cormorant Airlines by one Doreen Swenson, senior agent. On November 9, at 1:58 p.m. an airport security camera in Boston's Logan Airport captured her approaching the departure gate of C-16 accompanied by the Cormorant flight crew, two pilots

and four flight attendants. The crew wore uniforms; Ms. Saul wore a gray suit, fitted skirt and jacket, and a white blouse. The gate agent, one Lynn Morrow, verified her official company I.D.—of this Miss Morrow was explicit. She remembered the woman's eyes, which she described as nearly lavender in color. The agent personally escorted Ms. Saul and the crew onto the aircraft. She stood at the top of the Jetway during the entire boarding process. The remaining passengers embarked; no one exited the plane. With the help of the lead flight attendant, Lynn Morrow closed the aircraft door. The flight proceeded without incident. At 4:42 p.m. Pacific Standard Time air traffic control contacted aircraft #774 and instructed the pilots to remain at their cruise altitude of 34,000 feet, due to air traffic caused by an air show over Lake Washington. The pilots were instructed to make a heading over Seattle before banking back for a northern approach. Yes, the Boeing 737-800, Cormorant Airlines flight #372 from Boston to Seattle, 148 souls on board, did disappear from the air traffic control radar screens at 4:59 p.m. on November 9, just shy of its destination of Seattle, Washington and its scheduled arrival of 5:20 p.m. Witnesses in the town of North Bend, Washington reported hearing a loud sound they described uniformly as a "boom". Yes, pieces of wreckage were found from just north of the town of North Bend for eleven miles all along the corridor of Highway 90, up rural route #202, through farmland and forest, all the way to the horrified town of Preston where a substantial pile dropped from the sky.

Yes, pieces of wreckage were still being found, pieces of DNA still being sorted out.

Yes, Saroya Saul was on the plane.

No, they could not explain why she was not in pieces also. Saroya's own mother had flown in from San Jose, CA to identify her daughter while she still lay unconscious, and apparently to get her own picture in the paper as well; she returned home even before Saroya awoke.

The newspapers went over the grisly details in sickening repetition, as did the radio and TV stations—KUOW, KVI, KEXP, channel 5, channel 7, channel 13, even CNN, MSNBC, and FOX until the story was broadcast the world over.

No, the black box had not yet been recovered. In fact, few large pieces of anything had shown up on the earth below. Reverends, rabbis, and priests all spoke of the intervention of God. New Age gurus called for meditations on this fresh proof of "other possibilities".

Conspiracy theorists talked of conspiracy. Even Marisol, Marisol of Rome, Marisol of the miracles, Marisol the de-facto rock star of the Catholic Church, whom many believed was a living saint or an incarnation of The Virgin herself was reported to be arriving on the scene, all the way from Rome, her miracle spotting team and personal radar kicked into high gear. She postulated on national television that perhaps the Saul woman had been sent back with a message. Varying opinions came in. Tom Blackhorse, the outspoken host of the local AM talk radio

station, had opinions. He always had opinions. He took calls. Apparently lots of other people had opinions, too. They had questions.

Why you?

Why you, Ms. Saul? Came the resounding cry.

Saroya did not know. The effort of contemplating such questions brought jolting, electrified headaches.

It is not possible! They cried.

Saroya could only agree and nod doggedly, deep, dark circles forming beneath her eyes.

Yet it didn't change the fact that here she was, shattered bones and all, lumped in a hospital bed.

* * *

Since his disturbing proclamation, the eyes of the man called Raul Altazar had not left hers.

For a week, Saroya's gaze had been wandering from item to item, face to face, ricocheting, not catching long on anything. Now her eyes held on his. She felt her breath eking out of her.

"Yes, Ms. Saul," he said. "My daughter was sucked out of an aircraft—launched like a cloth doll into the air at some unknown, but I assure you, high, altitude." He paused and licked at his lips that were framed by a neatly trimmed and peppered shadow of a mustache. He began to shake as if cold. But just as suddenly as it came, the shaking ceased. Sweat stood on his forehead in elongated beads. The man's visage became solid and immobile as stone.

Saroya felt the cold clamminess he displayed transferring to her and sending a shiver to her core. She awaited the accusation of her existence.

Why did you live Saroya Saul and not my daughter?

Mr. Altazar raised his eyes again to hers—eyes as dark and deep as twin caves. "Only, you see, Ms. Saul," he said. "I am here to tell you that my Julia is not dead. No, like you... she is alive."

C.A. (Cindy) Willis was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest and currently lives near Seattle. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including *Seattle, Aboard, Northwest Travel, The Rozella Review, Transitions Abroad, Mature Living, Northwest Ink, The Ark, and Best New Poems*. Her first novel, *The Long Thirst*, takes place in India and won the prestigious Zola Award, Jean M. Auel Mainstream Novel, at the Pacific Northwest Conference. Her second, *A Fictional Life*, is based in remote Alaska and was, along with her first novel, a semi-finalist for the William Faulkner - William Wisdom Award. Her work has also received second place in the Kay Snow Awards for overall fiction. *Falling* is her third novel, spawned by her job as a flight attendant: It is the story of a woman who literally falls from the sky.



*Elizabeth Garrett
Audrey
2011
Novel In Progress
Second Runner-Up*
Hannah Delivered



Prologue:

Here is the secret to being a good midwife: Seek out the two compelling and contrary forces at work in a woman. The first resists life. For the sake of safety or familiarity or pride, it yanks us away from the wellspring of our power. The second is the creative impulse; it's the source of our resilience and spark, and it wants to be born. In childbirth these forces push and pull at a woman; they threaten to tear her apart. A midwife can help turn the drive toward life inward, downward, until it is concentrated on labor. Only when a woman stops resisting—only when she surrenders to her own tremendous power—does the baby emerge, and something more: A new woman, howling with humanity's suffering lodged in her groin, astonished that life begins regardless.

Push & Pull The Lit Match

Mom was collating the Chester Prairie First Lutheran newsletter when she died. On the 15th of each month she and her Elsie Circle friends walked around a Sunday school table piled with multicolored pages, stacking one sheet of mundane church happenings beneath the next and smacking them with the stapler, all the while effusing about Evelyn's canned tart cherries and how kids these days can't read clocks with hands. Over the years those women had worn a path into the Berber carpet. Such was the circumference of their lives. When Mom collapsed, her body hit the floor, followed by pastel green, peach and blue pages floating down like feathers from angels' wings. At least that's how her friend Maggie described it at Mom's funeral. I imagine Mom in a gray wool skirt and cotton blouse, her hair elegantly pinned, her laugh easy in this company until she stops, eyes suddenly bright and troubled. Her mouth opens. Her fingers release the paper. Her compact body folds.

She died so quickly. She was 57, and I was 32. Every time I realize she's gone I see those unstapled pages drifting downward.

A week and a half after her funeral, there was a

rush on the maternity ward. I had admitted five women since my 8 p.m. coffee break and was having trouble filing—the alphabet got jumbled in my mind; I misplaced folders. I couldn't wait to get out from behind the reception desk, to get home to Leif for our Friday night ritual. Steady Leif! He would have Chinese take-out warming in a 200-degree oven; we'd crawl into bed, eat egg rolls, not say a word about Mom, and watch a movie we'd forget by morning.

Maryann steamed down the hall, muttering darkly and shooting nasty looks into the full rooms. She leaned her huge elbows on the counter and pointed. "Give me that."

I spun my chair and lifted the pharmaceutical wall calendar from its hook. Back then everyone intimidated me—the doctors with their breezy certainty, the nurses who smiled as they gave condescending orders, even the night janitor who left typed notes reprimanding me for not shredding my paper waste. I'd been at the hospital seven years and still felt like an imposter. Sure, I'd earned a business administration degree at the community college, done an accounting certificate, landed a decent job and worked my way up to the plush maternity ward, the best desk in the hospital. But I was too shy and small-town to ever make a decent health unit coordinator. Someday my boss would realize I belonged back behind the cash register at the Chester Prairie Red Owl, ringing up broccoli and baking soda. Maryann, I suspected, was already onto me. The first nurse midwife to work in the St. Paul hospital, there was little she didn't notice.

She removed her reading glasses from her hair and perched them on her nose. "Ha!" she said and harrumphed back to the nurses' station.

I let out my breath and noted the full black circle marking the day's date. At our last staff meeting Maryann had argued for increasing the number of doctors on call during full moons. Two of the younger OBs made a stink, saying she was superstitious and that was no way to determine a schedule. I'd been surprised; we'd always made adjustments for the full moon down in ER. I suspected the docs were wet behind the ears. Maryann had muttered, "Lazy schmucks."

The elevator bell rang and another patient came

in, this time off the street—no insurance, no pre-natal care. I took her paperwork and rang for a nurse.

Maryann and the single doc on call were frantically crisscrossing the hallway an hour later when I moved my magnet from the IN to the OUT slot and slipped into my jacket. “You!” Maryann shouted, mid-stride. “I need another pair of hands.”

I froze in stupid incomprehension. In my seven years of hospital work, I’d never set foot in a patient’s room.

“Now!”

I rehung my jacket and locked the cupboard. Raised voices from 146B reached the front desk.

Behind the ward’s closed doors I’d always imagined TV births, the woman modestly covered with a paper sheet laboring on her back, the husband sweating and holding her hand. As I hovered in the doorway I instead saw an older Hmong woman and two teenagers chatting cross-legged on the bed, another woman wringing out a washcloth in the open bathroom, and, on the far side of the bed where there was barely enough floor space, Maryann crouched beside a naked woman. The laboring mother was on hands and knees on the linoleum; her brows were contorted, her eyes strained, but otherwise she seemed under no more duress than a bowel movement might require. Maryann’s left hand was spread across the woman’s tiny back. Her right hand hovered between the woman’s spread legs. There was a pool of yellow liquid on the floor.

My muscles went slack.

“Get me a stack of chux pads and close that door,” Maryann ordered.

The nurses must not have resupplied the room. Adrenaline surged and my limbs swung into action. From the hall supply closet I pulled a stack of pads and raced back. “Here,” I said, even though Maryann’s hands were full with a wet, black-haired head. The mother gasped.

“One down-side and one up. Gloves!”

Avoiding the sight of the young woman’s naked body, I found the tissue box of latex gloves and took an inordinate time fumbling on a pair. The cotton pads were lined on one side with blue plastic; I opened two and side-stepped between the bed and birth huddle to get to the puddle of urine. “You’re doing great,” Maryann cooed to the mother, ignoring my intrusion. “Okay, push now.” The sister translated, unnecessarily. Shaking, I reached around the woman’s legs and Maryann’s big arms to lay down the first pad. I didn’t know how to get it under her knees, so I placed it and the second on top of her calves just as she grunted, jerked her body back, and the baby somersaulted out in a burst of blood.

One human being emerged from another! There he was, glistening, brown, a breathing creature cupped in Maryann’s palms. He thrashed his arms and, finding no uterine walls to push against, snapped open his eyes. They were black pools rimmed with long, sticky lashes. He looked at me first. We might have been alone, drowning in an enormity of recognition. Maryann

ordered me to hand her the bulb syringe and receiving blanket from the sterile tray, and I groped my way into awareness. The baby began to wail. His grief at the harsh air could have come from me, it felt so close. Finally a nurse arrived, chiding, “Hannah! Why are you here?” to which Maryann snapped, “Doing your job,” and I was shooed out.

On the winter street, tears freezing on my face, I reached into my jacket pocket for my bus pass and finally saw the latex gloves, blood-splattered, like an extra layer of skin on my hands. I peeled them into a trash can. The baby, that stunningly aware, miniscule body, had eased everything—my embarrassment at the woman’s nakedness, my aversion to blood and urine, the awkwardness of squatting so close. My fear of Maryann. The strangeness of being the only white woman in the room. The weight of my mother’s death.

Surely that baby had emerged from the same place my mother had gone. I didn’t believe in heaven but how else could I explain my profound sense of continuity? He filled a hollow place in me, forcefully, suddenly.

As Maryann later said, I caught the birth bug. Her story’s not so different from mine, only she was stuck in a traffic jam outside of Chicago. As she tells it, the combination of a Cubs game and a tractor-trailer accident had the freeway stalled for fifteen miles. The July heat was unrelenting. Most cars had their windows up and air conditioners blasting. Maryann’s station wagon was a clunker; her kids hung out the windows “panting like dogs.” Her husband had turned off the ignition. The next lane over, “within spitting distance,” another car with open windows held a couple in obvious distress.

“The lady was moaning like a ghoul,” Maryann told me, “and her husband kept saying, ‘No! Don’t!’” When she realized what was happening, Maryann jumped out and offered her help despite having no medical training. Knowing Maryann I imagine she just took over, setting the woman up in the back of their station wagon and sending her kids running down the line of cars looking for a doctor. “When that sweetpea popped her little head out,” Maryann said, “I got high. Been a birth junkie ever since.”

Maryann calls it an addiction. For me it was more like I’d been living in murky darkness, the basement of my life, and a match was struck. Birth flared my world with light. Dad would call the synchronicity—a death followed by a birth, releasing me from all I’d known—God’s grace. Grace may be the right word although I refuse to concede it to God. It felt like falling in love, irrevocable, fearsome, and blazing.

At work my attention began to drift. Admittance forms now bored me although I pretended otherwise. I studied Maryann as she bustled about the ward in a silk blouse and white nursing sneakers. Her births took twice as long as the doctors’; she joked with the dads and shared smiles with the moms while they paced the

hallways, and she almost never wheeled anyone into surgery. Now that I'd seen how calmly she squatted in urine to catch a baby, I felt awe toward her, even envy. When Maryann was on duty, I hand-delivered forms to the nurses' station so I could peek into rooms. And for the first time I saw the moms, every-day women, often my age, sometimes teenagers, sometimes older, Hmong, white, Latina, black, all brave, burnished with sweat, riveting participants in this activity I'd never fully considered but for which my body was made. They were magnetic and daunting; they were powerful. I revered them. I wanted to serve them.

Maryann was too sharp not to notice. She leaned into the reception counter, pushing her nose close to mine. "Are you spying on me?" I looked at the pen in my hand and shuffled some paper. "Have you got the bug?"

Her full, meticulously made-up face was without judgment and yet a patch of flush tingled at my hair roots. I shrugged.

"Listen. If you want more, I'll show you more. Just ask." She swung away, then added, "On your own time, mind."

A week later, amid stutterings and profuse disclaimers that Maryann slashed with her big, jabbing finger, I asked. This, I discovered, was Maryann's gift: she ferreted out cracks in peoples' hard shells, inserted her confidence, and did her best to pry them open. The doctors used pitocin or prostaglandin gel; Maryann used her wily, fearless heart.

Thus began my year of shadowing, at first once a week during Maryann's night shift, later in my every spare moment despite Leif's protests and my own guilt because I didn't much miss him, using even my two-weeks' vacation so I could observe Maryann's day-time clinic appointments. Maryann treated me like a puppy, telling me to sit, to hand her the blood pressure cuff or wait in the hall. Banished, I'd lean against the wall and imagine the prenatal exam, Maryann attending the emergent drama inside the woman's womb, their touch and talk more intimate than anything I'd known. I wanted to be there. When she'd let me, I bought Maryann cafeteria spaghetti and meatballs. I couldn't articulate the jumbled ache in my chest and instead asked her for technical information—how long was it appropriate for women to labor naturally, how she knew when to tell a mother to push, why she removed the baby monitor after the first hour when the doctors never did. Maryann would transfer her glasses to the bridge of her nose; she'd pause, sigh, and answer.

Finally one Tuesday night, I was washing up at the nurse's station when Maryann grasped either side of the doorframe and blocked my exit. I'd just watched my fifteenth birth. It was midnight, and I had to be back behind the desk at 8:00 a.m. I pulled out a paper towel and wiped my hands very dry.

"How long are you planning on being a passerby?"

Maryann's questions always felt like accusations. "I'm sorry?"

"When are you going to get behind the wheel? Admit it. You want to catch a baby?"

It was too preposterous to admit out loud. "I don't think..."

"Try making a decision using some part of your body other than your brain."

"I'm 32, Maryann. I can't afford six more years of school. Can't I just watch? For fun?"

She crossed her arms. I looked at my feet, cramped in their low-heeled secretarial pumps, and felt anger heat my body. I hated Maryann for luring me out from behind the reception desk.

"Forget nursing school and go the direct entry route. You can manage it in two years."

"Direct entry?"

"Lay midwifery. Home birth. The real deal."

"I don't know. I'm not really cut out for it."

"Bullcrap. Change your shape."

That night, unable to sleep, I pictured my cookie-cutter self conforming to the safe mold of my parents. While I hadn't a clue how to change my shape, I knew my mother's death had dented me, that first birth had stretched me, and all my other borders were shifting to compensate. Leif wanted marriage and kids, and until now I'd gone along—isn't that what every woman wanted? Leif was tall, soft-spoken, Danish, a 3M engineer and fellow recovering Lutheran, a safe cave I could curl up in. And yet I'd begun to suspect that a future with Leif would happen by default rather than choice. Having a baby seemed perfunctory and self-serving, but catching one—welcoming life, touching skin so new it smelled like the spring thaw—was the most joyous act I could imagine. I longed to get on my knees like Maryann, right at the axis of activity. I didn't want to die holding an unstapled newsletter in the back room of a church.

Lay midwifery was an outrageous idea, impractical and not even legal in Minnesota. Yet I could think of nothing else. A year after my mother collapsed, a month after Maryann's confrontation, I yielded and called the Birth House.

My decision to pursue midwifery was no decision at all but rather an undertow. The pull was there from the start—a birth memory, a sense of a strong-willed second self. But fear dragged me the other way. As a child I'd always stood one step behind and to the right of my mother as she shook hands in church, a wad of her dress balled in my fist and a tangle of desires in my stomach. Mom was the good pastor's wife and I supposedly the good pastor's daughter. All through my young adult years I made decisions as though peering around my mother's body, trying to do what she'd consider proper. Only after she was gone did I see I'd been clutching not her propriety but her fear.

The Birth House

I set my bags beside the reception desk and pretended to examine the floor-to-ceiling bookcases. My

favorites were there: *Spiritual Midwifery*, *A Midwife's Story*, *Birth Reborn*, books Maryann had slipped into my hospital mail slot over the previous year. I had paged through them reverently while riding the bus across St. Paul. Their covers opened onto dream worlds where women had intuition and squatted like Neolithic goddesses to birth their babies, where midwives coached and coaxed and caught slippery new life in a seamless continuity between the unborn realm and this one.

I pulled a ragged copy of Michel Odent's book from a shelf and flipped through softened pages to a sequence of black and white photographs, facial portraits of a woman in labor. The Frenchwoman's head was thrown back, her neck arched so fiercely that her esophagus bulged and her muscles extended. The black gape of her mouth shifted from photo to photo, here turned left, here lifted to heaven. Dark curls cascaded to her shoulders, until in the final pictures they were wet and clung to her skin. Her expressions of pain and ecstasy were indistinguishable. I imagined witnessing her in labor, perhaps holding her hand. She knew something essential and intensely human, a love stretched into every cell of her body. Even under Maryann's care, I'd never seen such passion. A woman like her might be laboring on the other side of this waiting room wall. The thought

was electrifying. She had unstoppable, elemental power.

Beside the bookshelves hung a framed bit of needlework that read, "A mother is not a person to lean on but a person to make leaning unnecessary." Had I not been so nervous I would have laughed. The irony quickly faded into an intangible dread: Did other people not need to lean on their mothers? I still clung to memories—how she gripped my small fist when crossing the street; her care in dressing me as a child, homemade frocks in subdued colors with just enough ribbon to delight me. I remembered how she smoothed wrinkles from tablecloths, from my father's robes, from altar linens, her fingers, fine and young-seeming, always passing over fabric. I remembered her silken hair. She used to pin it back in a droopy bun that in her last years showed silver amid the fading blond.

I missed her terribly.

Scrapbook, Words & Music



Top left, the hot Latin band, *Ashe San*, plays at *Jazz After Hours*; bottom left, Faculty members *George Bishop*, *John Oates*, and *Helen Atwan* at *Jazz After Hours*.

Top right, *Judith "Jude" Swenson*, who sponsored the 2010 Novel Prize with the winner, *Sean Chadwell*, at *Faulkner for All*.



Lyn Di Loria
2011
Novel In Progress
Second Runner-Up
**Sound of Falling
Darkness**



“**A**n efficient serial killer...is like a good hair transplant. You should never notice it. That’s why the best serial killers are women.”

By day, Lucy Storer wears her hair in a tight bun, her skirts long, and her blouses high-necked, as she jots down notes for her mystery novels and waits for Spanish speaking defendants who will need her translation services in the court rooms of New York State Supreme Court. But at night Lucy dons dark jeans and tee shirts so she can blend into the shadows as she follows her victims-to-be, the murderers of innocence, as Lucy likes to think of them. Lucy dispatches her victims with undetectable methods such as alcohol poisoning, car accidents, and the occasional push off a tall building.

Even the grisly murder of her sister Emilia in the past in Puerto Rico couldn’t change sweet and obedient Lucía. After the murder, young Lucía and her mother Marina moved to Manhattan; Marina married rich and Lucía became Lucy. One day, however, Marina came home, told teenaged Lucy that she now knew who killed Emilia, and asked Lucy to kill the man. A good daughter, Lucy obeyed her mother dispassionately, only to discover to her shock that she loved killing.

The Dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but first it is necessary to pass by the Dragon.

—St. Cyril of Jerusalem

CHAPTER ONE:

I TAKE AWAY THEIR DARKNESS TO FEED MY OWN

The darkness is singing to me, its fingers brushing my forehead petal soft as I skitter up the street at midnight. I’m wearing an outfit of black jeans, black tee, a heavy black knapsack, long black hair (really a wig), black nails, black Nikes, and purple lipstick.

The Dominican boys at the corner of Broadway and Dyckman see me coming and start to whistle and talk their smutty talk.

“SSSSst, SSSSt.”

“Babyhun, can I taste your sweet mango?” says

the biggest, in a sleeveless white tank with black crosses tagged all up one muscled arm.

“I put a razor in my sweet mango. It’s still in there and I like the way it feels. Hate it too, know what I mean? But I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“Damn.” The boys all of a sudden quiet down, and the leader steps back. “Thass fucked up.”

But the sweet low soothing song of the darkness carries me with it and past the scribbly chatter of the homeboys; it tells me that the darkness and I are one. I am the dark shadow in the deepest part of the night, the thing against which you keep the door locked tight, the thing that rustles in the closet that is neither rat nor relative, the last dark thing the murderer sees before seeing final darkness. I’m part of the dark world, I’m in the daylight world, too.

And you know what? It’s ultimately no big deal. I’m a serial killer, and I accept it. An efficient serial killer, in my mind, is like a good hair transplant. You should never notice it.

That’s why the best serial killers are women.

The males tend to be sociopathic, maladjusted, and, let’s face it, usually gross and disgusting, hacking out organs, body parts, making a big mess.

We girls, on the other hand, tend toward the clean and neat. And we have emotions, maybe not like normals, but better than the males.

I know what the media says: there aren’t that many of us. Well, I’m here to tell you that we are here; we exist. We’re just not noticed because we’re way more successful than our male counterparts.

Plus, we don’t eat people.

We’re workaholics. I myself have two jobs—more about that later. Two jobs and serial killing at night and on the weekends means I never have a moment free.

I have no romantic life. And it’s not because I’m not pretty. I am, or I can be when I want to. I have green eyes, wavy brown hair, pulpy lips, and high cheekbones. I can dress my face down to nondescript or up to beautiful.

You might have heard that male serial killers aren’t capable of real love. Well, I could do with a little romance. Not just sex; I’d like romance. But that’s impossible. What man would understand my need to be

out and about, well, all the time, and especially, my love, my need, my craving for the dark?

At Seaman on a row of brick monoliths, I take a right, then another, into an alley. I smell garbage, and wall-piss, and hear a swish of raccoon, cat, or bum. At the bottom of the fire escape I jumpy-jump (I was a gymnast in high school). I do this all the time, but tonight the bottles in my knapsack mash into my back each time I jump.

After a few jumps, I grab on to the first rung, pull up my legs, then I crouch there catching my breath and then start balancing the knapsack like it's my tortoise shell. I swivel my neck. Nobody. Not that the eye can see. But I can feel those other eyes on me.

I can feel Him watching me. Call it my crazy, that textbook shit about the compartmentalization of serial killers, but in my case it's not the sense of something coming out of me that I need to keep in check all the time. It's not in my head. I mean I have one of those, sometimes, but this one with the heavy steps and the silken tiger moves, this one is real. It's been happening since I turned. He follows me at night, sometimes I can hear Him walking behind me, then He'll stop, and then I won't hear him again, but I can feel his eyes on the back of my neck. He stops and watches and waits.

Or maybe it's a Her. But I think if it were a Woman I wouldn't hear her. The way nobody hears me.

The window and window gate of the apartment are ajar. I left them that way the last time I came.

There's a futon on the painted cracked wooden floor, and hole-ridden underwear scattered around and—even though nobody's cooked here for months—a smell of rancid cooking oil.

I pull off my black wig, and take a bobbed brown one out of the knapsack and pull it over my own short brown ponytail.

The closet is deep and piled willy nilly with boxes, tools like pliers and screwdrivers, and a hammer on the floor, boots, broken umbrellas and other junk, so it's been easy for me to find a place to crouch in there at the end. I'm 5'4 and 107 lbs of limber, easily foldable gristle—there's plenty of room for me.

From my knapsack, I take out the two bottles of J. Wray and Nephew overproof, a legal form of something close to pure ethanol. And the Glock, always cool and pleasant in my hand, almost as friendly as the darkness.

And then, tonight, I wait, just like all the other nights. Serial killing is not all bloody fun and games, a lot of it is just waiting; watching, waiting, watching—that's what you do if you want to make sure you'll have enough time to finish the kill, to take what you need, and to get away without being caught.

Tonight should be easy. Wade takes uppers in the day but at night he's usually had ten drinks before he even gets home and collapses right away.

Watching and waiting is hard on your body even though the kill itself is a relief. The goal and the release. You have to bear the stiffening ache of your neck and shoulders, the throbbing caused by clotting blood in you

calves and back, and hardest of all: the utter embalming loneliness of silence, sibilant at first, and then pure and still...

Sleep. I'm woken from it abruptly by the door clattering open and Wade—I know his high reedy voice—lurching into the house, all happy, singing:

We're the new face of failure
Prettier and younger but not any better off
Bulletproof and loneliness
At best at best...

Last year's wishes
Are this year's apologies...
I only keep myself this sick in the head
Cause I know how the words get to you...

Well, he may be young and a failure, but hangdog faced Wade Carter—an import from Spokane, Washington—with his limp blonde hair, nicotine stained nails, and watery eyes, is not pretty by a long shot.

Wade is my prey of the night, lovely only in that he is my prey. He was acquitted today for the killing of Alicia Reyes's baby; Alicia's trial is still in progress, and she's in custody, but her family have changed the locks on the apartment he shared with her. I know, I was at her apartment in the Heights right before I came here tonight. Ditto for last night. And the trial's were severed because Alicia's lawyer argued that it was prejudicial for Alicia, who wasn't even in the same room with the baby and Wade, to be tried with him. But Wade's big shot private attorney got him off.

And Wade has finally come home to roost in his Inwood hide-a-hole, which neither Alicia nor the police know about.

Only I know about it.

I hear a low mewling noise, rustling, and then something like a squeal.

I step gingerly to the front of the closet, and peer out.

Wade is wearing low-slung jeans and an oversized tee on his wasted junkie frame. I can't quite see what it is, but he is carrying something.

And it starts crying.

Santa María, María santísima, like Mama would say. He's got a baby with him! Hot wires of adrenalin shoot into my arms and legs. My hands feel icy and sweaty at the same time.

Fuck me—now I can't wait until he's asleep. My plan's gone. I hate that.

I love it, too.

Wade rubs his sweating face against the baby's bare stomach.

The baby is a girl wearing just a little white crocheted top. I almost gag when I notice she has nothing covering her bottom half where she's all pink and exposed.

Wade sings in his cracked voice:

I only keep myself this sick in the head

'cause I know how the words get to you.

He takes the baby and throws her in the air. She screams, and he catches her by the torso on one side and the thigh on the other, but her little body twists weirdly, her downy head bounces up and then down, and I won't have it.

I sling the rope over my shoulder, pick up the hammer so it's in my left hand and the gun is in my right along with nylon line. An old shoe crunches under my heel as I come out of the closet.

Wade's too wrapped up in activity to hear me.

He lifts the baby up close to his face again:

"Ahgaga. Ahgaga..."

I come up behind him and slip the nylon noose around his neck with one hand, and quickly tighten it. With the other hand, I put my gun against his head.

"Put the baby down, Wade. Don't turn your head, or I'll hurt you."

He makes a choking sound.

"Be gentle," but I kick him hard with the hard nose of my boot in the small of the back. His back arches, his arms spiral out and he curses incoherently and staggers toward the futon where he puts down the baby. I keep my hand on the rope like a leash around his neck.

The baby, now on the futon, bobs her head, her eyes floating on it like pieces of onyx. She lets out a rich long gurgle. There are yellow stains on her crocheted white top.

My hand tightens around the gun, and I try not to think about whether he's touched her already. I had no fucking idea he was molesting them too. And I read a lot of reports. No evidence of molestation.

I look at her black eyes. This is not Alicia's older toddler. Half-Chinese?

Wade turns his head and looks straight at my gun, and I twist the nylon rope against his neck until his face is purple.

"The chair," I drag him to the only chair in the apartment which is next to the linoleum table, and he trips. I push down on him again. "Sit."

In the chair, Wade does that clownish type of lurching that tells me he's pretty drunk already, and almost falls out of the chair.

I take the hemp rope I've slung on my shoulder and I truss his arms behind his torso, and then tightly tie his ankles. And then I take a length of the rope and loop it around his torso and the chair, and knot it, tight but not too tight, because ultimately it's going to come off again.

Finally when he's trussed all tight and ready like a turkey for the basting, I loosen the nylon line around his neck.

"Who the hell...?" A racking cough shakes his frame and his bloodshot eyes water. "Don't I know you?" He stares at me with paranoid certainty, and I'm sure he's been doing meth tonight. That's not a bad thing. It just adds to the mix, the nice thick mix I get to feed him, the nice thick mix that will make up our little dance together.

"You don't ask the questions, here, Wade. I ask

the questions."

I keep the gun leveled at his head and I put the hammer on the floor as I reach for one of the J. Wray and Nephew bottles.

I twist the top off with my teeth and I flinch because the 126-proof smells like a mix of gasoline and rotting meat.

"Have some rum." I press the bottle against his mouth, and he moves his head and makes biting motions with his mouth.

Not one to be discouraged, I push the bottle hard against his mouth until he opens his lips and the top of the bottle clinks against his teeth.

"Fuck, okay," he says, and I hold the bottle for him. He takes a draught of it and makes a face, but drinks it down anyway.

"Damn," he clears his throat. "This'll get me where I want to go."

"You're thirsty, aren't you Wade?"

He blinks and one of the eyelids drooping over his pale watery eyes twitches violently. "I don't want no more."

"I want you to drink more. I want to relieve your thirst."

"I fucking told you no?" His face flushes, and the skin all around the one eye is jumping.

I put the against his head. "Fuck you," he hisses, but when I twirl the top of the bottle further into his mouth, he drinks more, and stops and drinks more.

"Doesn't that taste good?" My voice is syrupy, almost a coo. But I do want it to be good. At first, I always want it to be good. I want them to feel the sweet juice of the overproof filling up their bodies and swelling up their brains like floats sent off on a long river of dreams. This is the first of the points of no return.

The baby on the bed starts to make noises and move her little arms and legs around helplessly like an insect.

Wade laughs, an ehehehehe broken sound like the one Mama's cat makes when he sees a bird he can't reach on the other side of a window.

"Whose baby is it, Wade?" I pull the top of the bottle out of his mouth.

"I ain't telling you anything, bitch."

I smack him with the butt of the gun on the side of the head.

"Oww, my head. Feels like it's falling! Bitchfuckbitch!" he howls.

"You be respectful, Wade," With a turn of my wrist, I tighten the line around his neck, and the tendons in his neck strain against it, and his face and neck flush blackish red.

I let go of the nylon line, and then I go to the back of the closet, and I take out the loosened bricks and put them on top of a few old shoes.

The hole in the closet wall has crumbled in on itself. A gray mass of dirt, pieces of plaster, and other garbage, covers what looks like an ancient mess of dirty laundry.

The smell from the old clothes is sharp: the sting of moldiness mixed with a deep sweet rot, and the stench snakes up my nose and starts to cause a little throb in my head.

From behind the closet door, I can hear him singing again this time in a thick tongued voice, dead-drunk voice:

If I woke up next to you, if I woke up next to you...

I walk out of the closet balancing the gun in one hand and the stained clothes between the crook of my other arm and my chest.

"What the fuck?" he says thickly. "You put that away, bitch. You leave them alone!"

He starts to rock back and forth in the chair, back and forth, making the chair clatter like horse hooves.

I stride over and put the gun into his open mouth. "Stop."

He stops the rocking and his eyes widen; even the twitching eye freezes.

"Lick it," I say. The flesh around the one eye undulates. He makes a low, mournful noise, closes his eyes and licks the gun.

"Good boy," I smile. "Licking it is better than eating it."

He looks up at me, his skin slick with cooling sweat, head lolling back and forth, his eyelids closing a little. "How—how? You..." He smiles, a little and drools down one side of his mouth. Then suddenly the lolling motion of his head brings his eyes back open, and with his open eyes, the thought. "You a cop? You're too hot to be a cop." I shrug, and he giggles. "Except on TV. We on TV yet?"

I ignore him. Instead I get down on the floor and place the three bundles carefully in a row. I unroll the dirty tee shirts wrapping the first two bundles, and the torn sheet in the third, and I let the bones settle where they may.

"Let's talk about them. What did you do to them before you killed them? Did you take their clothes off and touch them?"

He cranes his head this way and then that way against the slack in the nylon, and then stares at the bones on the floor, pushing out his lower lip a little.

The empty sockets of the little skulls—one of them just crumbled pieces of yellow bone—face upward, gazing at the ceiling of Wade's apartment where the stucco pattern looks a sea of tiny flames.

Inexplicably, Wade bursts into passionate sobbing. "My babies, my babies." Tears melt down his face and snot runs into his mouth.

Maybe it's not so inexplicable. Wade has been on a celebratory bender since he got off, and the Wray and Nephews is clearly forcing him into new territory. Alcohol can be a powerful truth serum.

I hold out the first bottle and make him drink, and this time he drinks without my holding a gun to his head.

These are the bones of three little babies that

Wade fathered with one of his girlfriends a long time ago in northern Idaho. They disappeared and then Wade disappeared. He went to Spokane, later Michigan and Pennsylvania, where other women's babies disappeared. Then Wade resurfaced in New York, and wandered from rehab center to center, dealt meth, and then got arrested and accused of killing somebody else's baby.

"Why were you bad to your babies, Wade? Why did you kill Corey and Wayne—"

Wade bawls louder.

"—and Tricia? Did you like killing her, Wade, your own little baby girl?"

He howls: "No!"

"I think you did."

"I didn't!"

"Did you touch Tricia on her privates?"

"I would never do that to my daughter!"

"But you killed her."

A guttural sob.

"Why'd you do it, then?"

"They had a life that weren't no life. Out there in them woods. Father a farmer started starving. Turned dealer. Mother's a whore."

Who was Wade describing? Yeah, his father was a farmer. As far as I knew his mother was just a woman, just a plain, poor, girl from Idaho.

"I didn't want them to suffer no more," he blubbers. "No more beatings, no more life of crime, no more failure..."

"Beatings, Wade? Who beat them?"

He looks at me uncomprehendingly.

"Did you cook parts of 'em up too? Or was that just for Alicia's baby?"

He lifts his head and his eyes look suddenly clear, even though his face keeps getting redder. "I know your face. You the girl with the necklace of hands and hearts."

"I'm here to help you out, Wade," I say quietly.

"You didn't cook up your own babies, did you? You can tell me. I want to know how you feel."

"You do?" He scrunches and squeezes his features up, trying to force himself to cry this time, but the tears won't come. "Didn't have to. I just hid them under the floorboards out in the hunting cabin. I brought them with me to this shithole and put 'em there." He jerks his head towards the closet.

"Have some more rum, Wade," and I push the bottle into his mouth again. But he grunts and then doubles over and retches, and breathes in air, and then retches again. When he stops, I shove the top of the bottle into his mouth, and he sucks up what's left.

I sit on the futon next to the Chinese baby. I turn her over and she crawls to the edge of the futon. "Careful, kiddie," I say.

Then I get up and I open the open the second bottle of Wray and Nephews. I shove the bottle head into Wade's mouth, and at first he won't have it, his head turning as far away from me as he can get it, and he starts up again with the hick-hack retching sounds.

"I want you to drink up, Wade. I want you to

feel good. It feels good to make you feel this way.” The soft sweet sound of my voice—I have the most lady-like voice—has a soporific effect, and he fits his mouth on the top of the bottle and starts sucking up the liquor again.

Then he stops, his eyes water, and he spits up a milky mouthful of stomach foam. “I don’t know if I can.” Tears roll down his cheeks leaving sticky tracks.

“Yes, you can. I know you can. It feels good. And you know what? I like feeding you this way.”

His shoulders slump and his mouth is open, his eyes glazed. “Okay.”

And I slide the coolness of the bottle into his mouth, feeding him the 150-proof, feeding him, yes. Each time he swallows now, he grunts deep like it’s so good, so good in fact that it aches as it goes down. I think it has to ache, and I know that I am feeding him, and that this fiery fluid is eating the lining of his esophagus, and burning holes through his intestines, and I stare into his faded blue eyes, and his skin that is now starting to cool down to a tinge the color of his eyes, and I feel that rush of overpowering tenderness that makes me want to keep on feeding him until he can’t take it anymore. And he sees that tenderness in my eyes, that confusing love, and he keeps on drinking.

And finally there is a point when he stops, and I push the bottle into his mouth and, when, beginning to go into spasm, he refuses.

“No is not an option.” I cock the gun against his head again.

He sucks in liquor, babbling bububhuhbub.

Now his lips are too swollen, and he whimpers when the bottle head goes into his mouth again.

“Drink it,” I hiss. “Drink it, little baby.”

He looks up at me.

Midway through the second bottle, Wade passes out. I slap him and he wakes and I make him drink a bit more. “Bitch!” He spits. A long unintelligible sound. Then: “...what I did to them...”

“What, Wade?”

His eyes close. I slap him lightly on the cheek.

“What you did to them?”

Big blue balls with red spiders all around them.

“What I’m gonna do to you...”

“What is it that you did to them?”

His mouth opens wide and his eyes look at me without seeing me. He grunts like he can’t remember what it was he did enough to know what he’s going to do.

And then that buzzing bubhuhbubhuh starts up again like a last ditch tug at a worn out motor.

I hit him hard upside the head to jog his memory.

“What did you do to them, Wade?”

His head falls to one side, and his shoulder slumps and both arms beat involuntarily against the rope, flap-a-flap-flap, this way and that.

The second Wray and Nephews has less than a fourth of liquor in it. I take the bottle and push it into his mouth one last time.

“I just want to mommy you, Wade,” I say slowly. “Come on, now, be a good boy, and drink it all up. I NEED you to drink it all up.” There is a brittle edge to my voice now. “I NEED it now!”

Even as he drinks, he raises his weary head to look into my eyes. A look of slow recognition. He knows now. What I need isn’t so different from what he needs.

In a quick and final move, he tries to bite me. I snatch my hand away from his mouth, then I slap him.

“Jack Cassidy,” he says. “He...like...you.”

“What?”

He laughs again, and then he passes out.

I slap him some more, because I’d like to know what he means about Jack Cassidy. Jack Cassidy is Wade’s big shot lawyer, the one who got him off.

I sit there a while. I’ve seen this before. Now it’s not just the arms, but the whole body that convulses, shaking like he’s being rattled by an invisible giant.

Wade’s skin starts to go gray, and his eyes open, but this time they don’t see me.

And then finally he is completely still. His breathing slows down. I wait some more and then touch his bony wrist. He is cold, and there’s no pulse.

I look over at the baby. She’s fallen asleep, thumb in mouth all curled up like she was safe in her bed, and not in some maniac’s den.

With another maniac on the prowl, but one that’s trying to protect her.

After a while, I untie him and he falls to the floor. Even though I thought he was despicable in life, a watery eyed demented criminal, death is washing some of this away. His eyes are closed, his skin shimmers silver and his hair glints gold and in death he is mine. He is beautiful. He is perfect.

Lyn Di Loria is half-Puerto Rican, was born in Brooklyn and grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Some of the island’s issues—such as its quasi-colonial status and its relationship to Afro-Caribbean culture—lie at the core of her current work, which on its surface presents as satirical mystery fiction. Her first novel Outside the Bones, is a 2011 release from Arte Público Press (University of Houston). A review in Mystery Scene says: “Lyn Di Loria’s first novel is a weirdly compelling, funny, sexy and deeply strange tale of a Nuyorican practitioner of Palo Monte, a Caribbean form of magic with African roots. [Lyn Di Loria] has taken the crime story to a strange and mysterious new place.” Prior to Outside the Bones, Lyn published scholarly work on Latino literature, notably a book called Killing Spanish, and wrote short stories. Lyn is a professor in the English departments of The City College of New York and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, an M.A. in Creative Writing from Stanford University, and a bachelor of arts from Harvard University.



Terri Stoor
2011
Best Short Story
A Bellyful of Sparrow



Judge Michael Signorelli has been at HarperCollins Publishers since 2005. His list ranges widely from poetry and stories to novels and memoirs to graphic novels and design. He edits *New York Times* bestselling authors Kenneth C. Davis and Thomas C. Foster; internationally acclaimed novelists Dennis Cooper, Richard Milward, and Tony O'Neill; memoirists Dan White, Kevin Sampson, and Gerry Hadden, and Barnes & Noble Discover Finalist (and New Orleans' own) Barb Johnson, among others. Recent books of note include *Three Delays* by Charlie Smith; *Everything Here Is the Best Thing Ever* by Justin Taylor, and *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry* edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Susan Harris. He created and wrote HarperCollins's poetry blog www.cruellestmonth.com and helps manage HarperPerennial's blog www.olivereader.com. Michael's keen for fearless yet disciplined debut fiction and for culturally significant non-fiction by experts in their field. He graduated from Hamilton College and lives in New York City.



The damnedest thing about the cancer, other than the smothering pain, was that Larson still wanted to smoke. Having that oxygen tube clipped to his nose all the time, his lungs moth-eaten and brittle, unable to speak, ought to have made him curse the cigarettes but he just didn't. He lay in the middle of the living room in his used hospital bed and dozed, off and on, imagining the bitter taste of a Marlboro, the feel of the filter between his lips and fingers like a dream of love with a soft-bellied woman.

The pain woke him. Sometimes it was a snake of misery, twisting through his guts like it wanted to pop its head out of his chest and say howdy, and sometimes, like this morning, it was a color. Even with his eyes open, everything glowed shiny red and fierce. He heard Steven on the porch, and felt the trailer shake with his boot steps

when he slammed in the front door.

Steven leaned over and squeezed his father's shoulders in a rough hug. "Hey, Daddy, how you doing this morning?"

It was excruciating, but the boy meant well, if you can call a thirty-five year old man a boy, and Larson thought, in Steven's case, you probably could. Still, Steven loved him, even if the boy was selling his morphine pills down at Beebo's bar for five dollars apiece. That money added up, and Larson could hardly blame him.

"You hurting bad?"

Larson swore at him as hard as he could for asking such a question, but the bad lungs had his voice, and what came out sounded even to his own ears like nothing more than a grunt. Steven went to the cabinet and came back with three pills in his hand, one of the peach-colored morphine tablets and two Advil. Larson was supposed to have two of the blessed morphine every four hours, but his son had put him on a pain-killer diet. Instead of the dose he was supposed to have, during the hours that Steven was in charge of things, his meds had been cut in half, supplemented with the Advil. Larson figured he was lucky. The boy could have cut him off completely.

He crushed the pills, and offered them to his father on a spoon. "Here you go, Daddy." Larson opened his mouth with more effort than it should take, and the boy dumped them onto his tongue, offering him water from a cup with a flexi-straw. The pills were acrid, noxious, but he was grateful nonetheless and told Steven so, though he could only hear the words echo inside his own head.

The pain and the pills were part of the show. He supposed that if it ever got desperate, if the pain ever struck so deeply it was unbearable, he could work up the gumption to pull away the oxygen feed and slowly end it all that way. Knowing he had at least a little say in how it might go was a comfort to him, though he couldn't imagine ending it early. This was the lung cancer his doctor had been promising him for most of his life, and now that it was here, he was taking the full ride.

Steven brought him strawberry Jello in a plastic cup and spooned it into his mouth. Larson figured he must look like a baby bird, his trap wide open, dentures missing, sucking up that Jello. Man, but it was good, cold

and sweet. When it was gone - and it took a good twenty minutes for him to eat a cup of Jello, since swallowing was such a bastard these days - he was exhausted. The tag-team of morphine and Advil took away the teeth of the pain, softened the red to a more bearable rose, and he slept again.

When he slept, he nearly always dreamed. Some of them were side-winders, pure devilish nonsense, like the one where Clement Lee, the friend feeding his horses, turned into a winged gray wolf who flew over his pasture in great, dizzying circles. Those were the morphine dreams, all sinuous shapes and mystery. But once in awhile he'd have a good one, where he was still strong, full of piss and vinegar, and in his hand, a freshly-lit cigarette, the smoke a halo around his head. In these good dreams his Carlene was still alive, her clear blue eyes and pointed little chin turned up to face him, and there was a good hell-raising country band playing the soundtrack. He wasn't sure about heaven. It sounded nice, and he'd like to think his wife was there waiting for him on streets of gold, but it didn't seem likely and he was in no rush to find out.

When he woke, Margaret, the girl from the home health service, was sitting by the side of his bed. The bed was a wonder in itself. When he'd told the folks at the hospital that he was going by-damn home to die, they told Steven he'd need this bed, and they'd found one second-hand from the wife of a fellow in Marquand who'd died from a stroke, so that was all right. Problem was that the floor of the trailer wouldn't hold it. Steven got a truck load of cinder blocks and blocked up the living room floor of that trailer, working from the ground up, pounding the top row tight in place with a mallet, making the whole trailer house shake. They had to just about take the damned bed apart to get it inside the house, the same way they'd near had to take him apart to keep him in it, at first.

Margaret was nineteen, with wide hips and hair the color of a kitchen mouse, but big blue eyes and freckles, which reminded him of his wife, Lord rest her. His favorite thing about Margaret, though, was that she smoked. When she came back into the house from smoking on the front steps, she brought the smell of the cigarettes with her, on her clothes and hair, and when she leaned across him to give him the hourly breathing treatments he took during the day, he tried to force his shredded lungs to take in as much of the scent as they could, while still enjoying the unwitting press of her formidable bust across his chest. Yes, indeed, Margaret had many charms, but what he lusted after was a cigarette.

"You all settled?" she asked, without waiting for an answer.

That was a thing half good and half bad about not being able to talk, he thought. You didn't have to

worry yourself over what to say. Larson had never noticed before how much time and effort a man put into talking, especially to women, until he didn't have to do it anymore. The annoying thing about it, though, was that nobody seemed to miss your side of things much. He wondered how many of the conversations he'd had in his life were like that, people giving you the kindness of waiting for you to talk back, but not listening to what you had to say, anyway. Margaret leaned in close to the bed, though they were alone in the house.

"I know we don't know each other too good, but I've got some trouble, and you're a real good listener," she said, as though he had a choice. "I don't know what I'm going to do. You know old Mr. Wilson Clifford, over in Ironton?"

Larson knew Wilson Clifford plenty, and both of his can't-tell-shit-from-shinola sons.

"Well, I was going with his boy Marcus for a little while, but he's nothing to hoot over, kind of an asshole, if you'll pardon my French, and I broke it off."

She prepared his breathing treatment as she spoke, inserting the disposable medication cartridge and flipping a switch on the machine that turned it into mist.

"So now," she said, holding the plastic mouthpiece to his lips, "I find out I'm pregnant." She paused, holding the attachment against his mouth, her eyes wide. "Pregnant! What

the hell do I do about that?"

Larson had several ideas about what she should do about that, the main one being to strap on her Mama-hat and learn to keep her knees together, but no way to express it. He looked into her eyes, and thought it at her real hard.

The breathing treatments were flavored. This one might be bubblegum, he wasn't sure. But the scent was a lot like spraying perfume on a pile of horseshit, and they tasted about as good, too. He kept looking at Margaret, and thinking that if he was her daddy he'd have been hard-pressed to decide whether he should cut a hickory switch and whip the Clifford boy or whip her, or maybe whip the get-all out of them both. When she packed up to leave for the day, Margaret patted his arm and smiled at him, a real smile, with her eyes all crinkled up at the corners, and he couldn't help thinking she would make pretty babies, bastards or not.

Larson wasn't sure if it was more about dying or not being able to talk, but people had started telling him things. They told him private things, things that were none of his business. Things, to be honest, he'd just as soon not know. Carl Davis, who got his left arm blown off in Korea and had delivered Larson's mail for nigh on fifteen years, told him he read every single postcard that came through his hands at the post office. Larson allowed that he would

Larson wasn't sure if it was more about dying or not being able to talk, but people had started telling him things. They told him private things, things that were none of his business.

have done the same, but the confession seemed to do Carl a world of good. Maybe they figured that since he was going to meet his maker and right soon, they might as well get in a good word.

Last week, his brother Avery had come by to sit with him. Avery was ten years younger and wore a middling bad toupee and zip-up ankle boots without a hint of embarrassment. In the middle of talking about the idiots he managed at the savings and loan and how he needed to replace the gutters on his house, he suddenly announced he was sleeping with the wife of his Bible teacher.

"I don't know how it started," Avery told him. "My heart to God, I swear I was just walking the damned dog on the sidewalk by her house, and she pulled in the driveway from the grocery. I wasn't even thinking anything! She's not very pretty. She's got these big legs and a mole up in her eyebrow that always kind of scared me. So I asked if she needed some help in with the bags, just being friendly, you know? And when I brought the second load into the kitchen, things got all confused. Next thing I know there's milk spilled all over the tile and the dog is barking and jumping and she's got those tree-trunk legs wrapped around me. We did it right there on her kitchen table!" He shook his head in wonder, and then added, "Did you know she doesn't wear any underpants?" For once, Larson's tattered lungs were not a hindrance. He didn't think he would have known what to say even if he could have forced the words out.

"That doesn't seem right to me, you know, walking around with no panties when your husband teaches the Bible study. She's in the bell choir, for heaven's sake!"

Avery hung his head, and fresh pain stole over Larson's body, winding its way up from his stomach to his chest. It took a moment for him to realize he was laughing, shaking, in fact, with laughter, but without air it had nowhere to go. Visions of a panti-less Mrs. Bible Study (whose name, Avery told him, was Bitsy Jean) danced in his head like Christian sugar-plums, but Avery didn't notice.

This afternoon Steven came in with a mess of squirrels. He'd been hunting down by Kettle Creek, probably drunk, and shot enough squirrels to make a good-sized supper, if he got them cleaned right away and didn't just let them rot. Larson thought if there were only one food he could eat for the rest of his life, it would be squirrel gravy, hot and peppery, over fresh buttermilk biscuits, although unless Steven put them in a blender and fed them to him through a straw, he knew his squirrel gravy and biscuit days were over.

After washing up, Steven checked Larson's oxygen feed, emptied his catheter bag, and then washed his father's face and hands carefully with a baby wipe.

"Everything looks right," Steven said, and smiled. "You're going to outlive us all."

He pulled out the sheet at the bottom of the bed and folded it away from his father's swollen lower legs. He rubbed his hands together briskly to warm them, and then began to massage Larson's feet. He used the pads

of his thumbs, working the muscles between the delicate bones. Larson found the sensation painful and pleasing all at the same time.

"You should have been out there with me," Steven said. "I saw a four-point buck and a doe getting a drink from the creek. I stayed there, real quiet, and watched them for almost a half hour. I almost got me that buck, out of season or no. I had my 30-30 on my shoulder, but there was something, oh, I don't know."

He pulled on Larson's long, white toes, rotating and tugging gently on each one.

"They were so danged pretty, and kind of peaceful, you know?"

Not plugging that buck must have given Steven a fit of conscience, because Larson's evening meal of Jello and pharmaceuticals contained not one but two of the magical morphine tablets, and by the time Steven kissed his cheek and went off to Beebo's with the rest of Larson's meds, the pain was not just coiled up in the brush, but had slithered way down in its hidey-hole, napping, maybe,

***Yes, Lord, deliver me
from the Good-for-nothing
Samaritan, he said silently.***

with a bellyful of sparrow. Earlier, when Clement Lee Sutter - who'd lived across the road from him for forty years, a man he saw and spoke to nearly every day of his life - told him he had something to talk to him about, Larson was curious, but not surprised.

Clement Lee was feeding Larson's horses for him, and in fact Larson had arranged to leave the horses to him when he died, though Clement Lee didn't know it yet. Steven was shit around horses, and he didn't have the patience for them. Clement Lee would take good care of them and enjoy it, too. It would give him a good excuse to get a little time away from his wife. May had been a sweet girl who'd grown into a mean woman, with a tongue like a rusty axe. Larson thanked God that his Carlene had been as soft and gentle as May was hard.

He wondered how Clement Lee put up with it, some days. He didn't think the man was simple-minded, not even plain-old ignorant, like his Steven, but he wondered from time to time if he might not be one goat short of a rodeo. Still, he was the best friend Larson had ever had, and awful good with animals. After the horses were fed of an evening and after his own supper, since the cancer Clement Lee was in the habit of slipping across the road for a visit, and tonight it was all Larson could do to wait.

When his friend came in he smelled of cold air and horse, good smells, it seemed to Larson. Clement

Lee shrugged off his barn coat and gloves, and pulled a kitchen chair up close to the rails of the bed.

"Hey there, old man," he said. His voice was husky, and his mustache hid his top lip, even when he spoke. "Your eyes are all fired up. It looks like you're doing pretty good this evening."

With great effort, Larson raised a corner of his mouth in something resembling a smile, and Clement Lee grinned in return.

"There you are. You got a lot more going on in there than folks think."

It was banter, just stuff you said to a fellow when he was down and all-but finished, but Larson liked the talk and the company. Clement Lee chatted for a while then, about the same things they always talked about, the weather, the odd folks who came into his used furniture store and what they bought or didn't buy, and how the deer were running.

"You don't look comfortable," he said, and slid one big hand behind Larson's head, gently lifting it to push the pillow in closer to support his neck.

"Is that any better?" he asked.

Larson blinked at him.

"You're a tough old rooster. I wouldn't be surprised if I wandered over tomorrow night and you were up waiting for me with your hip-waders on and your frog gig ready." Clement Lee squinted at him. "Or maybe not. This is a hell of a thing, Larson, a hell of a thing."

He picked up Larson's hand and held it awkwardly for a moment, then put it back down on the quilt.

"I can't stand to see you hurting, is all," he said.

"If I hurt the way you do, the way they say you're hurting, morning to night the clock around, I'd lose my ever-loving mind. I swear I would."

Larson wanted to pat his shoulder, comfort him in some way. He imagined if it were the other way around, he'd be sad as hell to be losing Clement Lee, and he truly felt bad for the big man, who had pulled a wrinkled bandana from his hip pocket and, it appeared, was about to cry into it.

"You remember when we were kids, and that dog of mine got snake-bit? Tammy, I called her. A pretty little beagle bitch with three white paws. You remember?"

Larson did remember, and as he recollected, this story did not turn out well.

"We were turkey hunting out past Shanley's pond, and a great big rattler got her just above the eye."

Larson opened and closed his mouth just a little, and Clement Lee nodded and continued

"I was damn-near heartsick. She swole all up, and the skin on her head started to split."

Larson remembered it like it was yesterday, the dog feverish and swollen when they found her, convulsing with poison, and Clement Lee kneeling next to her with his knife at the ready.

"I was going to cut a little x, like you do with people, and suck the venom out. And you stopped me."

Larson remembered that, too. He'd told Clement Lee that it was too late, that at best he'd make himself sick and would just prolong the dog's suffering anyway.

"You remember what you did?" He looked at Larson expectantly.

Larson pulled up as much breath as he could hold, and Lord almighty, did it hurt. He lifted his heavy tongue and said, "I shot her."

It came out as an abbreviated sigh, but their shorthand was established, and Clement Lee smiled at him.

"That's right, buddy. You shot her. And it was the kindest thing anyone ever did for me. It was God's own mercy, Larson. I don't know if I ever thanked you for it, but I've been thinking about it a lot lately, since all this." He spread his hands to indicate the hospital bed and Larson in it.

"Thank you for shooting my dog. And I want you to know," Clement Lee said, taking in a deep breath of his own, "that I'd be willing to do it for you."

Larson tried to frown. His hunting dogs had been gone for months, sent off with friends who still hunted and could get the use of them. Why would he need to have a dog shot, not that it wasn't a neighborly offer. He lifted his head slightly from his pillow, and managed to make a noise that sounded to him like a bad attempt at a whistle, but Clement Lee seemed to understand.

"Not a dog, Larson," he said, swallowing hard. "I mean you."

It still took him a moment to realize what Clement Lee meant. He was offering to shoot him? If he could have laughed, he would have. As it was, he managed a weak and excruciating cough, which Clement Lee took as an answer in the affirmative.

"I can't actually shoot you," he said to Larson.

"I was thinking I could hold a pillow over your face, you know, just until you stopped breathing."

Larson tried to shake his head, but didn't have much luck. I'm in no hurry to die, he tried to say. Anything's got to be better than dead. If nothing else, they re-run Gunsmoke and Dukes of Hazard back-to-back on the local cable at three-thirty, and even that's worth hanging out for a little longer. But what came out was a small sigh.

"Do you want to do anything first?" Clement Lee asked. "Should we pray or something?" He looked around the room, and not seeing a bible, said, "Well, I don't know much scripture by heart. All I know is the Lord's Prayer. I can say that, I guess."

He picked up Larson's swollen hand again, and held it in his.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."

Holy shit, Larson thought, beginning to panic. He's going to do it now? He wished to hell he'd just had him suck the damned poison out of that dog and let him croak. Or let the thing swell on up 'til it exploded. On the upside, though, he didn't think he was hurting quite as bad

as he had been. Just his luck, he started feeling better just in time for this do-gooding son-of-a-bitch to pounce on him with his own pillow.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," Clement Lee went on.

Yes, Lord, deliver me from the Good-for-nothing Samaritan, he said silently. Larson looked over at the TV set. It was just at the end of *Murder, She Wrote*. Steven almost always came back from the bar by Matlock, which was on next, for a fistful of Twinkies and to check in on him. I forgive you, Steven, he shouted in silence. If I ever blamed you for taking my pills, or for not keeping a job, or for just being an all-around jackass, I forgive you. Just come on home, son, he intoned inside his head. Daddy needs a little help from somebody who knows how to swing a baseball bat.

"For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen."

Clement Lee had tears flowing freely down his face now, and he squeezed Larson's hand tightly.

"You've been a good friend to me all my life," he said to Larson. "Soon you'll be beyond the hurting, buddy. I'm proud to be able to do this for you."

He lifted Larson's head as gently as he had the first time, and slipped the pillow from beneath it.

Larson tried to fill his lungs but couldn't.

Stop, Clement Lee! he tried to shout. I want to see how it all turns out! But no sound came out at all, just a little spit that ran in a small stream from the corner of his mouth onto his shoulder.

Clement Lee leaned across and kissed Larson clumsily on the forehead, and pulled the oxygen clip from his nose. Larson smelled again the good scents of horse and dirt. Now that Clement Lee was going to murder him, the idiot, he wished to hell he could take back his horses.

In the cushioned dark, there was no air coming in at all, and it quickly became hard for Larson to think straight. Everything came in pictures, his father handing him the 12-gauge on his birthday, and then the doe lying broken in the leaves and his father rubbing her blood on his face. His horses running full out in front of a hot summer storm, looking like they'd catch air off into the dark clouds any moment. Steven toddling across the carpet toward a big orange cat, fat legs bowing out beneath his diaper, the cat leaping away just in time, and the boy laughing, laughing. And Carlene, the first time he saw her bare, white breasts, her eyes lowered, her sidelong smile, slipping her cool hand around the back of his neck as they kissed. He could see everything that mattered, and it was fine, and he was full. As the visions tunneled down nearly to darkness, Larson was comforted.

Muffled steps jogged up the front stairs, and then the bang of the door swinging open. There was a shout, a heavy thud and cool air as the pillow was lifted from his face. Steven pounded his chest with both fists, and Larson's eyes flew open, his lungs blazing and shuddering as he struggled to get his breath. Steven replaced his oxygen tube, and leaned against the bed rail, chest

heaving, looking at his father with eyes as big as tractor tires.

"Daddy, you alright?" The worried face above him was his boy, his middle-aged, morphine-stealing boy, and Larson looked into his face with wonder.

"It ain't what you think!" Clement Lee yelled at Steven. Clement Lee was on his hind end on the floor, hugging the pillow to his chest.

"You don't want to know what I think!" Steven said. "I think I just come in the front door in time to keep you from killing my daddy, you crazy old son-of-a-bitch!"

Clement Lee tried to stand up, and Steven planted a mud-caked boot in his stomach, pushing him back down to the floor.

"Stay down!" Steven said.

"Steven, man, it wasn't like I was murdering him or nothing. It was euthanasia! I was putting him down for his own good!"

Steven glared at Clement Lee. "God damn," he said indignantly, "he's not a dog, for crying out loud!"

Larson felt the brutal fangs in his gut, twisting hot and slippery through his chest and up into his throat as laughter rattled there without release. There was funny, he thought, and then there was funny.

"You stay put, you nutso bastard. I'm calling your wife!"

Steven grabbed the portable phone and scurried into the back bedroom, no doubt checking on his pill stash and making good on his threat to squeal to old May Sutter. Clement Lee lay back on the floor with a sigh and closed his eyes.

Larson lay still in his bed, the bed he would die in, one day. Tears began to trail from his eyes in stuttered streams until they wet the sheet beneath his head. Lord, but he was worn out. He'd been thinking he'd like to find out what happened between his brother and the bible study Jezebel, and maybe hang on long enough to see Margaret's little baby, though that was a long shot. But now he was filled up with tired. It wasn't the ferocity of the pain - he was pretty sure he could charm that serpent right up until the end, and he wasn't afraid - but the moments under his pillow, the hush and lull, were deep and peaceable and like the cigarettes, just might be worth dying for.

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*Marylee MacDonald
2011 Short Story
Runner-Up*

The Pancho Villa Coin



With their thin arms and caved-in stomachs, barefoot Indian farmers advanced across the cane fields, hacking left and right with their machetes. My father gestured with his cigarette. "That's where your sugar comes from, Janet. The sweat and tears of those poor sons-of-bitches. The world's a tug-of-war between the oppressed and the oppressors!"

I picked up my journal, a spiral notebook with a brown, water-stained cover.

On the way to Vera Cruz we saw exploited Indians.

This was Mexico, 1958, and even before the trip, I knew a great deal about these Indians. In eighth grade, we had studied the Aztec and Mayan civilizations. I even made a papier-mâché pyramid like the one my father had just taken my mom and me to see in Cholula, but I worked on my project before he came home from the waterfront. The moment I heard him open the door, I slid the pyramid under my bed. If I'd shown it to him, he'd think I was trying to get an "A," and that would have made him feel bad. When Father was my age—thirteen—he'd been kicked out of Roswell Military Academy in New Mexico, and he was sensitive about his lack of education.

Father drove one-handed down the centerline of the asphalt road. Insects splatted against the windshield. Then, there was a scrape and a sound like a smashed can.

"Son. Of. A. Bitch!" my father said. "I hope that's not the oil pan." In the rearview mirror, his blue, washed-out eyes sought mine. "If the oil pan blows, I'm putting you in charge. You and your mother stay in the car with the doors locked. I'll hitch a ride to the next Pemex. Use the lead pipe if anyone tries to break in."

"Fine," I said. Nothing bad would happen. The Mexican people were nice, especially the boys. My mom and me would be stuck in the car, and I would be bored out of my mind. It was hot, and I wanted to jump in a pool.

My mom had been leaning against the window, her arms tightly folded. Her hair—matted, curly, and gray—reminded me of her winter lambskin coat. She looked over at the speedometer, and then, frowning through her glasses, stared at my father.

"What?" he said.

"Is the car okay?" she said.

"We hit another wash-out," he said.

"Are you going to stop?"
"No," he said.
"You could stop," she said.
"As long as the oil pan's not punctured," he said,
"I think we'll make it."
"Rex, I'm in quite a bit of pain."
That meant she had to pee.
"Hold it," he said.
"If you see a gas station..."
"There won't be one till we get to Vera Cruz."

I had huevos revueltos for lunch and a Nehi orange

Although my father was unpredictable, I could absolutely count on one thing: We would never, ever stop between lunch and the place we were going to spend the night. We had taken a lunch break at a roadside stand where two boys charged five centavos to let me touch an iguana suspended by a rope around its neck. The heat made my mom thirsty, and she washed down her eggs with two entire Cokes. I had a sip of Nehi orange and poured the rest on the ground so I wouldn't be tempted. Father never let us stop if we had to use the bathroom, and as I had foreseen, once we hit the road again, he blew past every gas station. My tongue felt cottony and my throat burned, but at least I wasn't in pain. I leaned forward and rested my chin on my crossed arms.

"Can we get a hotel with a swimming pool?" I asked.

"I need to stop at a bank and cash a traveler's check," my father said.

My mother lifted her head. "It's Sunday, isn't it?"
My father turned and blew out a stream of smoke in her direction. He tossed me his empty Camel's wrapper. "Here's a camel for your scrapbook."

"Actually, I think it might be a dromedary," I said.
"Then why does it say 'Camel' on the pack?" he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Then listen to your old man," he said. "It's a camel."

My mother's shoulders shifted, and she cleared her throat.

She didn't have to tell me. I could think what I wanted. Just don't set him off.

I sniffed the pack, tore off the cellophane, and pulled apart the seam so that I could lay the wrapper flat. The sweet smell of raw tobacco reminded me of gingerbread, and I loved the picture of the exhausted, cranky dromedary. Its knees looked like they were about to buckle in the desert's relentless heat. The big pyramid right by the dromedary's tail reminded me of the one Cheops built. But that was Egypt, and all the pyramids in Giza had smooth sides. The Mexican pyramids had steps that led up to a sacrificial altar where priests performed their sacrifices, tearing the hearts out of young girls.

"How's it going back there?" my father said.

"Fine," I said. Fine, fine, and more fine. Everything had to be fine.

The back seat looked like the inside of my desk back in junior high: colored pencils, a Strathmore drawing pad, scissors, and the red, leather scrapbook where I pasted in postcards, matchbook covers, and ticket stubs. The scrapbook was different from my journal. My dad didn't check it. I smeared on mucilage from the angled, rubber top, and pasted the wrapper next to a postcard of a church in Orizaba where we'd stopped the night before.

I liked Orizaba. I wished we could have stayed there longer than one night.

The Pico de Orizaba is covered with snow. At 18,490 feet, it is the tallest mountain in Mexico.

When we pulled into Orizaba, my mother got busy unpacking her suitcase, and she told me to go out to the hotel pool by myself. It was cool, and at first, I thought the water might be too cold, but my father would have gotten angry if I didn't get in, so I did. Backstroking, I could see the volcano. Girl-twins who did not look alike came running out when they heard me splashing around. One year older than me, the twins had just emerged from the jungles of the Yucatan. Their father, an archeologist, had discovered a new pyramid at Mayapan, and they had held string and helped him take measurements. The red spots on their legs came from leeches.

Karen, the oldest twin by six minutes, noticed the way my breasts were pooching out of my swim top. "Your mom should buy you a larger suit."

"She will," I said, "but they don't sell suits here in the local markets."

In the markets, Indian women sit on the ground and black pottery, flowered blouses, and rebozos.

"I'll be relieved to get back to civilization," Karen said. "My suit's all mildewy." She snapped her bikini top.

"I prefer the jungle." The other twin, Marion, slipped down into the water and said "brrrgh!" She had on a one-piece like me, but she wasn't spilling out of it. Her wavy, permed hair looked like the mom on Father Knows Best.

"I'm going to be an archeologist," Marion said.

"I want to be one, too." I had wanted to study

archeology ever since I was eleven and read *The March of Archeology*. The author, C.W. Ceram, had a lot of stuff about Heinrich Schliemann and the discovery of King Tut's tomb in the Valley of the Kings. There was a curse on the tomb, and two of the three archeologists had bad luck, like dying. I wanted to stay in Orizaba--These were the only two girls my age I'd seen in five weeks!--but my father said it was a dump town with no action.

In Orizaba twins who didn't look alike were staying in our same hotel.

At dinner, they put our parents at one table and us girls at another. Two weeks ago, I came down with Montezuma's revenge, and ever since then, the only thing my mom had let me eat was scrambled eggs. Tonight, she thought I was over it and said I could have tamales. I made up my mind to eat in a hurry so I could have another swim. The pool had a diving board, and maybe there'd be some cute Mexican boys. I wanted to practice my jackknife and see if the twins could do flips. At the grownups' table, their father said, "I'm Dr. Arnold Brinkerman, a lowly professor in the Department of Archeology at the University of New Mexico."

"My name's Rex Elmo Stone," my father said. "Don't know if you're aware of this, but in Latin, 'Rex' means King."

"Does he always introduce himself like that?" Karen whispered. She had painted her nails before dinner and changed into a three-tiered, ruffled fiesta skirt.

"Not always," I said. Just most of the time. Feeling my face grow hot, I tucked my chin and took a forkful of enchilada. Thank goodness my mother wasn't insisting on huevos revueltos. That would have been embarrassing, too.

My mother twisted the hem of her napkin. A rooster piñata with curly red-and-blue feathers hung from the ceiling, and she kept looking up at it as if she wanted to take a stick and give it a good whack. My father was getting on her nerves.

"Your mother's kind of quiet," Marion said.

"She's shy." I put a hand to my cheek, wanting to protect her and hoping they wouldn't examine her face and comment on that, too.

"Our mother didn't come on this trip," Marion said. "We think our parents are getting a divorce."

"Why?" I said.

"She's tired of pulling off leeches." Karen looked at her nails. "Besides, she has a rich boyfriend."

"But she's married," I said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Karen said.

Marion shrugged. "Grownups. They think they can hide stuff."

"Our mother thought it was a big secret," Karen said.

"He still loves her." Marion looked pityingly at her father.

Wearing khaki shorts and holding the ankle of a leg he'd pulled onto his knee, their father, whose big ears made it seem like he was hanging on my father's every word, rocked back in his chair. My father was a good head taller and fifteen years older, with broad shoulders and a stomach he liked me to punch to see if he could "take it." His hair had turned white during the war, and he told Dr. Brinkerman he'd been a Marine. Actually, he'd served in the Merchant Marine, loading and unloading cargo. He shifted to another topic: the longshoreman's union, the I.L.W.U. My father had met my mother, an elementary school teacher who'd moved out to California from Colorado, at Playland at the Beach. They'd been put in the same car for the ride through the "Tunnel of Love." Sometimes, my mom would get a wistful look and tell that story, but in Orizaba, my mother sat with her shoulders drawn in, dabbing her weepy eye with a handkerchief. A scar on the right side of her face pulled like the elastic neckline of her flowered dress. Before she met my father, she had been married to a different man, whom she'd had to move out west to escape. She was lucky to have met my father, she said, because, otherwise, she wouldn't have had me. The scar came from right after I was born. She ran into a door, or so she said.

"Mom!" I raised my hand.

Marion and Karen looked at each other. Karen whispered, "Do you have to raise your hand if you want to ask a question?"

"It's polite," I said.

My father shook his finger. "You're interrupting an adult conversation."

"Yes, Sir," I said. My father had been born with water on the brain, and his mother died when he was two. Most of his life he'd lived in El Paso with his Aunt Mamie, but she sent him to Roswell Military Academy because she couldn't control him. He'd been raised without a father figure, my mother said. That was why he was the way he was, and we had to be patient.

My mother smiled lopsidedly in my direction, then folded her napkin and put it on the table. "That was a tasty dinner."

I raised my hand again.

"Yes, Janet?" she said.

"Is my forty-five minutes up yet?"

She checked her watch. "I think it's safe to go in the water."

The twins looked at each other, and Karen whispered, "Do they always treat you like a baby?" I shrugged. "My mother does."

My father slapped Dr. Brinkerman on the shoulder, almost knocking him from his chair. "Let me buy you a drink, Doc. Pick your poison. Tequila or mescal."

The archeologist relaxed the squint of his forced smile, picked up his Dos Equis, and took one last swig. He looked at his daughters. "I think I'd better call it a night."

"Oh, come on," my father said. "My wife can go out to the pool with the girls."

"Sure," my mother said. "Janet will sleep better with a swim."

"The twins have been in the water enough today," Dr. Brinkerman said. "If they swim anymore, they'll turn into fishes."

My father said, "I never met a man I didn't like and who didn't like me, and I won't take offense, even though I normally do when a man won't let me buy him a drink."

Dr. Brinkerman blanched. "It's just that I've had a long day."

"Rex," my mother said, "you've had a long day, too."

"Party poopers," he said. "All right, Lorrie. You go to bed. I'll be along in a minute."

My mother looked at me. We knew what that meant.

The twins and Dr. Brinkerman were staying in another wing of the hotel, but while Karen ran back to their room to get something to write their address on—so I could send them a postcard—my mother told Dr. Brinkerman we'd just come from Mexico City.

"Oh, really?" he said. "Did you drive down the west coast, then?"

We went to a goat ranch near Hermosillo and I got to pet the baby goats. They were very cute.

My father had been coming to Mexico on his own for years, and this was the first time he'd brought us. We'd driven down through the Sonoran desert and stopped in Hermosillo to visit one of my dad's friends, a Yaqui Indian who lived on a goat ranch and who'd fought with Pancho Villa. Then, we'd gone to Acapulco, "where Rex had some business," my mother told Dr. Brinkerman. After that, we'd driven up to the capitol, then dropped down to the east coast. Vera Cruz was our last stop before heading home.

"It's a triangle trip," she said.

"Sounds like you've covered a lot of ground." Dr. Brinkerman looked back in the direction my father had gone. "Your husband's quite the character."

"He is that." My mother dabbed her eye. "Rex is one of a kind."

The political system in Mexico is controlled by wealthy families. Elections are rigged by the P.R.I.

My father's letters-to-the-editor appeared frequently in the San Francisco Chronicle. My mother typed them and checked for spelling errors. The year before, he had taken us to Washington, D.C. for a lesson in democracy so I would appreciate the many freedoms most Americans took for granted. He showed me the Bill of Rights in the Library of Congress, and said any citizen of the United States had just as much right to speak his mind as Joseph McCarthy. The place he wanted to show me the most was the F.B.I. headquarters. The F.B.I. was tapping the phones of his union's leadership. Maybe even ours, he thought. "J. Edgar Hoover thinks he's such a big shot," my father said. "Let him come out on the sidewalk, and I'll show him who's boss." My father had spent the

entire time we were in Washington being mad.

But this year was different. This year, he wanted to enjoy himself, and he wanted the vacation to give me an “international perspective.” Besides, thirteen was an impressionable age, he said, and a trip to Mexico would help me with my accent. My father wanted me to speak Spanish like a native. Before his Aunt Mamie sent him to Roswell, he had picked up Spanish on the streets of El Paso and Juarez. As I fell asleep, I heard him over in the cantina, singing his version of “La Cucaracha” with some Mexican men.

When I’d first started learning Spanish back in seventh grade, he’d translated the lyrics, so I sang along silently, the words and the catchy melody ringing in my ears.

La Cucaracha, la Cucaracha
Ya no puede caminar
Porque le falta, porque le falta,
Marijuana que fumar.

When he explained what the words meant, Father had staggered around, clutching his chest and acting silly. The cockroach smoked so much marijuana, he made himself all relaxed and couldn’t walk to save his life. Watching him act like a clown in the circus, I laughed the way I did when he tickle-tortured me, except the laughing felt better because I could stop before I wet my pants.

He had been a better father when I was young. When I was five or six, he’d take me down to the waterfront to fish, and we’d sit on the wharf’s creosoted timbers and let our feet swing above the water. He praised me for baiting my own hook, and he showed me how to tie on the red-and-white bob. Sometimes, my mom and I would meet him for dinner and he’d take us to Alioto’s on Fisherman’s Wharf. If we came early, he’d zip me around Pier 44 in his jitney, and once, he took me down in a ship’s cargo hold.

The other thing I liked about my father was that he told me things most grownups wouldn’t, things my mother certainly wouldn’t have told me, and that made me feel like an adult. Trusted. When I asked him what marijuana was, he said poor Negroes smoked it. “Did you ever smoke it?” I asked. “Yes,” he’d said. During the war, he’d smoked “reefer,” which was a kind of cigarette, only stronger. After the war, he’d switched to Camel’s. That night in Orizaba, my father’s smoke-deepened voice snarled softly along the corridors and through my open windows, and the next morning, my mother lamented that his singing had made it hard for her to sleep.

“I slept fine,” I said.

Mother had come in my room too keep from waking him, and she was folding my clothes and putting them in my suitcase. “He started acting up in Acapulco,” she said. “I’m just so tired of it, I could scream.”

Acapulco was one corner of the triangle. We caught a sea turtle,

Father had taken me out deep-sea fishing, and just as we were about to cross the blue-water line, I looked down and saw a giant sea turtle swimming near the boat. The captain and two crew members used gaffs to haul the turtle onboard, and my father brought it back to the hotel in the Impala’s big trunk. First, he threw it in the cashew-shaped pool, and when it began swimming, he took off his watch and jumped in fully clothed, straddling the poor creature and whooping like a cowboy. The bus boys at the restaurant helped him drag it out. The turtle was still alive, its arms and legs and head retracted in its shell, but Father said it wouldn’t live long because it had swum in a chlorinated pool, and he convinced the restaurant’s chef to kill it and make soup.

Turtle soup was a great delicacy, he said, and I guess he was right because the guests in the hotel thanked him. To me, the turtle meat tasted as chewy as a gum eraser. When his cold blue eyes bored into me and asked me if that wasn’t about the best thing I’d ever tasted, I had to say, “It’s fine. A lot better than scrambled eggs.” Which was partly the truth.

“When we get over to Vera Cruz,” my father had promised, “I’ll be done with meetings, and we’ll catch a sailfish.” My mother reminded him she got seasick. “You don’t have to go,” he said.

I actually liked it better when it was just my father and me.

It was dusk by the time we pulled into Vera Cruz. Father went into three or four American hotels and looked at the rooms. Finally, a block from the main drag, on a street named for Christopher Columbus, he found a Mexican tourist hotel, which was the kind of place he liked to stay. He went to the oficina to ask the room price, and my mother and I waited in the hot car.

“What’s taking him so long?” I said.

“You know.” She tipped a thumb to her lips and made a gulping sound.

My father’s bitten nails hooked over the Impala’s window. He opened my door. “Vámonos!”

“Does this place have a pool?” I said.

“That’s the second time you’ve asked me that.” My father cupped his hand to keep the breeze from blowing out his match. His eyes turned a hard, electric blue. “Don’t make me have to teach you a lesson.”

He didn’t like repetitive questions from my mother or me.

“Is there a diving board?” I said.

“I don’t know.”

The hotel was a white, stucco building with a tile roof. I gathered up my art things and put them in my train case. My father opened the trunk and placed our suitcases on the pavement.

"Did you lock your door?" he said.

"Yes." I had an Indian burn on my wrist to remind me not to be forgetful.

I tested all four locks. Although dusty and dinged from the gravel that spit out from the wheels of trucks, our Impala was the only new car in the parking lot. My father had bet on a horse named Round Table in the Santa Anita Derby, and with the money he made off the race, he bought this special model, which he called firecracker red. My mother thought he should have driven her '52 Chevy down, but he said, no, he wanted to show the Impala off to his friends. The car was evidence of what union organizing could do for the average working stiff. Without the union behind him, the working man was nothing but a tool and dupe of the capitalists.

Just before the trip to Mexico, we'd had his union boss, Harry Bridges, over to our house for dinner. He was the Australian labor organizer who headed the International Longshoremen's and Warehouseman's Union. J. Edgar Hoover was trying to have him deported. Soon after that, two men in gray suits paid a call. I had let them in the house, and when they asked to look around, I took them to the garage and showed them my new, three-speed Schwinn. My father said I had handled "the situation" well.

In Acapulco, I overheard my father tell my mom that Harry Bridges was trying to close down ports from Seattle to Acapulco. Because the FBI had tapped Bridges' phone, my father had volunteered to carry a message to the Mexican labor organizers. No one would suspect because my father was down there showing his family a good time.

In Acapulco, Fernando Lluch, a thin, suave thirtyish man with tasseled Italian moccasins and an annoying habit of pinching my cheek, met up with my father and took him around to meet other Communists. Señor Lluch thought he'd been followed, and he warned my father to avoid the federales. But my father wasn't afraid of the feds, theirs or ours. From under the front seat, he took the lead pipe he'd told me to use if the oil pan blew, and he held it like a walking stick, tapping hollowly on the red tile floor as he led the way to our rooms.

As we passed the hotel's counter, where a man with his back to us sorted mail into letter-sized cubbyholes, my mother saw a restroom. "I'll join you in a minute," she said, putting down her suitcase and opening a door that said, "Damas." Just beyond the restroom, I saw a restaurant and cantina. It was getting dark. Several Mexican workers in straw hats were sitting around wooden tables, and one had started shuffling cards. When the cards slapped down on the table, my stomach skipped. If my mom and me were lucky, the card players would go home before my father joined them. My father was in some kind of hurry, though, because he'd gone off toward our room. Luckily, I heard the tapping of his steel pipe.

I turned a corner and found myself in a completely different world, a magical garden with birds-of-paradise and red hibiscus and a gurgling fountain. In

the fading sunlight, I saw a boy on the hotel's clay tennis court practicing his serve. His white shirt glowed. With high cheekbones and a sculpted jaw, he looked like a figure in an Orozco mural.

My father stood at the door of his room. "See that kid?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess." Of course, I saw him. He was the best-looking boy I'd seen on the whole trip.

"He's rich," Father said. "Otherwise a kid his age would have a job."

"How old do you think he is?" I said.

"Fourteen or 15," my father said. "That kid's living on Easy Street."

That's what my dad said about my mother and me. We lived on Easy Street. Actually, we lived on Haight, across from Golden Gate Park.

The tennis court at the hotel in Vera Cruz is clay, Father says.

I wanted to talk to the boy, or just stand and watch that ball fly from his hand and his racket arc back and his arm extend to reach the sweet spot in the sky, and then connect--twhack! The sound sent an electric thrill through my body. I wondered if he swam. The boy dropped his racket and stared at me.

"Here's your room key," my father said, nodding to the room next door. "Change into your suit."

My mother, a suitcase in one hand, train case in the other, clip-clopped toward us, her skirt swaying around her calves. "Will we eat here, Rex?"

"Yes." He handed me the key. "After she swims."

The key, like the one in Treasure Island—brass, with a big round end--sank into my palm.

I stood by the pool's ladder, too shocked to move. Acacia blossoms floated on the black water. The ladder into the deep end was all rusty, and there wasn't any shallow end. I had never seen a swimming pool that wasn't blue, and I was scared because the water looked thick and smelled like decaying leaves. It reminded me of The Creature From the Black Lagoon. In the eerie pink sunset, bubbles rose to the water's surface. The oily sheen looked like a Spirograph.

The hotel in Vera Cruz had a salt water pool.

With his long pipe, my father pushed away the leaves and blossoms. "There," he said. "Jump in."

"The water looks yucky," I said.

"They take the water straight from the ocean," my father said. "It's cleaner than it looks."

"Rex," my mother said. "That water hasn't been changed in a year."

"No, Lorrie!" he said. "She wanted a place with a pool. She asked twice, which is against the rules. So, against my better judgment, I got her a pool." He turned, his jaw thrusting out. "Get in."

My mother looked at the sky, then over at the boy playing

tennis. He was watching us and had his fingers hooked through the court's cyclone fence.

"Go on," Mother said. "It won't kill you."

I turned around and backed down the ladder. Inky water swallowed my legs.

My father put his big hand on my head and pushed. "All the way in."

Gulping tears, I felt my feet slip on the ladder's steps. Salt stung my eyes, and when I surfaced, my hair was all full of yellow blossoms. I dogpaddled to the ladder and looked up. My father had disappeared.

"Honestly! This just slays me. He can wipe his feet on me all he wants, but..." My mother held out a towel. "Take your shower before he comes back."

Flipping my hair over my face, I clawed to get the flowers out, and when I looked up, I saw a quick skitter through the bushes. I pointed. "What's that?"

"Oh, my god, it's a rat as big as a dog!" My mother shivered and hugged herself. "But, of course. It's a port, so they would be here." She draped the towel around my shoulders.

The first rule when we arrived at a hotel was that I was supposed to put my clothes away, but my closet didn't have hangers. With the towel over my shoulders, I ran past the tennis court to the office. My father was there, leaning on the counter and smoking a cigarette. He was asking about a fishing boat. At a pause in the conversation, I raised my hand. My father asked what I wanted, and I told him.

"I'm sorry." The manager, a thin, balding man with a quivering mustache, turned up his palms. "No hay."

"Porque?" my father said.

"Ladrones," the manager said. "People take hanger home."

My father asked if it was safe to leave his car in the parking lot, and the manager said, yes, but it would be better to have someone guard it. While they negotiated a price, I walked back to my room.

The boy on the tennis court spun his racket and smiled. "Hola."

"Hola." I waved my fingers. "Cómo está usted?"

"Bien, y tú?" He was using the familiar form. He dropped his racket, emptied his pockets of tennis balls, and came toward me, each step a little hop. His eyes, the black of the pool, had double lashes, and he blinked them slowly, melting the chocolate of his eyes.

"Cuántos años tienes?" I said.

"Quince," he said.

Fifteen. Not that much older than me.

"Y que edad tiene tú?"

The familiar form again. I wasn't good at it.

Fourteen, I told him, fudging a year.

He plucked leaves from my hair, and then bent, took my hand, and raised it to his lips.

My heart thumped in my throat. I looked down the corridor to my room and said I had to go.

"Hasta luego," he said.

He was planning on seeing me later. After it got dark, maybe he would come to my window and kiss me through the screen. If there was a screen. Otherwise, I would just lean out, like Juliet on her balcony.

I opened the door of my room. My mother was there.

"This isn't your room," I said.

"I'm going to stay with you tonight." She was folding her gross pink undies and putting them in a drawer.

"Do you have to?" I said.

"We'll discuss it after dinner." She turned down the cover on one of the twin beds, lay on her back with her hands tucked under her head, and looked up at the ceiling. Silently, she pointed. A small lizard hung upside down. Its tongue flicked out, and I heard a sound like pop beads coming apart. Then she swung her legs off the bed and looked as if she'd made up her mind about something. "Hurry up! We need to eat right now."

My hair felt like taffy. That Mexican boy wouldn't kiss a girl this hideous. "I'm never going to get these leaves out."

"Take a shower and be quick about it."

I went in the bathroom. The shower was tile, with no shower curtain, so I kept my suit on. The shower stall had mold in the corners. "I hate this hotel," I said.

My mother opened the bathroom door and stood there.

I turned on the water. Cold water trickled out. I scrubbed with my fingertips, the way Seventeen said you should do, but the shampoo turned to mucilage. If I could just get the saltwater out of my hair, I could tape my bangs to my forehead, and maybe later, put my hair up in a bun so I'd look older.

My mother stood in the doorway watching me. "You've got more hair in your armpits."

I clamped my elbows to my sides. "This stupid shampoo isn't working."

"They're probably on well water," Mother said.

"Here, give me your suit. I'll rinse it."

"Get out of here," I screamed.

She backed away, and I leapt out of the shower and slammed the door. Then, I took off my suit and lifted my arm. How completely gross. By the end of the summer, I was going to look like those Mexican girls on the beach, dark hairy underarms and legs like the Missing Link.

Propped against the headboard of the other twin bed in my room, Mother leafed through a Life magazine she'd brought from home. The room was stuffy. A window opened on to the veranda, but it was closed. "Don't open that." Mother checked her watch. "I don't want your father looking in."

The black phone between our two beds rang. Mother picked up the receiver. "What do you want?" She motioned for me to turn off the room's only light, and then she turned her back to me. In her pleading voice, said, "I

haven't slept for a week, Rex, and it's ruining my health. Last night was the final straw! I can't take this anymore."

I didn't see what was so bad about last night.

Orizaba was not much different from any other night, and at least I'd met some kids my age. It had been cooler. We were close to the volcano. There had been hangers. The room here in Vera Cruz felt like a closet, airless and dank. My mother raised a hand to shield her face, the way people did in confession, not wanting strangers to hear.

I slipped my hand under the curtain, turning the handle and inviting an inch of forbidden air into the room. My mother didn't know that before we went to the goat ranch in Hermosillo, through the rusty screen of our hotel, I had stayed up half the night kissing a boy who'd been diving in the pool. It was a high dive, too. And all the time I had been bobbing in the surf in Acapulco, with my mother napping in the shade of a giant umbrella, I had been kissing a boy underwater. On the lips. Before I got scared, I had let him put his fingers inside my suit and touch me.

The curtain fluttered. The boy on the tennis court towed off, picked up the bucket of serving balls, and walked on tiptoe toward the veranda. Turned away from me, my mother sat on the bed, her forehead in her hand, her back hunched. There was no light in the room. I slipped my hand through the open window, crooking my finger for the boy to come closer. He crouched down, crept under the window, and turned his palm upside down against mine. His skin felt warm and soft. Then he let go of my hand and his mouth surrounded my middle finger, sucking. A wet delicious ripeness flowed through me, a peach squeezing juice, and the sharp edges of his teeth bit my knuckle.

Someone shouted, "Carlos!" Then he was gone, the bucket of balls left behind. Oh, if I could just get my mother out of the room. Tonight, he would come with mariachis--like those I had seen strolling in Ajijic--with their small guitars. I wondered if he sang. It would be romantic if he could. The phone receiver clacked down. Mother's head dropped back, and she screamed silently at the ceiling. A nearby door creaked open and a fist thumped the wall. Quickly, I pulled the window closed, locked it, and let the curtain drop.

"Get away from that window in case he breaks the glass," Mother said.

Outside, Father kicked over the bucket of balls and cursed. I jumped back. While I was in the shower, he must have gone to the cantina for a pick-me-up. He beat the door. "Lorrie! Lorrie! Open up! I'll be good." When no one answered, he said, "You stupid broad. If you don't open now, I'm going to have to teach you a lesson."

I crouched in the corner over my train case, pretending, in the dark, to want my colored pencils, but I brought the back of my hand to my nose. Nutmeg and toast: That's what Carlos smelled like. I would never wash my finger again.

Mother sat on the sagging bed, leaning forward and running her fingers through her hair. In the heat, her

curls had gone limp and the ends straggled over the nape of her neck. She clicked on a lamp by her bed. The bare bulb drew bugs that circled with atomic fury. "He'll be back," she said, batting the bugs from her lopsided face. "He's just going to get some liquid courage." She punched the pillow with her fist. "This is ridiculous. That pool stunt was the final straw."

I pulled back the curtain and saw my father stumbling toward the office. The cantina was down there.

"Do you think you could skip a meal?" Mother said.

"If it's scrambled eggs, sure," I said.

"Then put your clothes in your suitcase."

"Are we moving to another room?"

"No, we're going home."

"Do you have the car keys?"

"We're not taking the car." Mother's mouth was set in a firm line, the line that always crumpled when Father taught her a lesson. "We're going to fly."

For a minute, I thought of a magic carpet, and then I realized she was talking about a plane.

Never before had I seen my mother win. Oh, she tried, but she always gave up. Father would say in a patient, teacherly voice, the same voice he used when he was telling me what to write down in my journal, "Why do you always have to learn the hard way?" To be fair, I had never seen him hit her. They rarely argued. To teach my mother a lesson, Father took her hand as if she were a little child and led her to their bedroom. Whatever he did to her was probably worse than what he did to me. Once he had gotten mad at me, lunged, grabbed my hair, and snapped it back until my neck cracked. I was down on my knees between his legs, begging him to stop. It was the first time I got all A's, and he claimed I was too big for my britches. Getting one B satisfied him. I was smarter than my mother. It never took more than one lesson.

Mother beckoned me over to the bed and pulled down the elastic front of her dress. "A woman should always have mad money in her bosom," she said. From the top of her corset, where two giant cones pushed her flesh together, Mother withdrew a tiny cotton sack, cinched with pink embroidery thread and held in place by a small, gold safety pin.

"Undo this for me," she said.

Touching her sweaty flesh, my fingers shook. The pin snapped sideways. I lifted out the little sack and handed it to her. Inside was a roll of bills, American money.

"The only problem I foresee is that the banks are closed. We won't be able to change money, but I'm sure they'll sell us a ticket at the airport."

"How do you know where the airport is?" I said.

"I don't, but the cab driver will. Last night, after your father went off to the bar, I went out and sat by the pool. The archeologist came out to see the stars. That's how I know there's an airport in Vera Cruz. We can fly to Mexico City."

"Do you have enough money?"

"I think so." She reached up and squeezed my chin. "As long as we're away from here, we'll be safe." Looking me in the eyes as if she wanted to tell me something important, and with the ruined half of her face gathered by the scar's bad stitching, she finally settled on, "You're a beautiful young woman. It killed me today to watch him push you underwater."

"It wasn't so bad." My voice came out in a squeak.

She gave my chin a shake. "No, Janet. It was bad."

Then, she strode across the room, opened the window, climbed on a chair, and swung her legs over the sill. I handed the suitcases over and boosted myself across. Mother threw the room key back on the table and pushed the window shut.

Elbowed roots lay in our path and spiky fronds cut my hands as I tried to maneuver my luggage. Mother was ahead of me, flattening herself against the side of the building and walking toward Avenida Christopher Colon. When we turned the corner, I saw the curved, concrete roof of the cantina. It projected out like the deck of a ship, and below it, a half wall encircled a table where five men sat playing cards. Above their heads flashed a strip of pink neon: "Cabeza de Vaca." Head of cow. A pink glow reflected off the white of my father's shirt. I expected him to feel my eyes on his back, but he didn't, and I felt sad because I was leaving, and he didn't have a chance to say goodbye. Then, we were on the avenue, where traffic and taxis whizzed past. My mother stepped forward and waved her white handkerchief. A taxi stopped and we got in. "Tell the driver to take us to the airport," Mother said.

"Al aeropuerto," I said. That was easy. Soon my Spanish would be as good as Father's. Meanwhile, this was like being in the middle of a Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys' mystery, with my mother and me threatened by dangerous bandidos. The lights of the occasional passing car threw a momentary glow across the road, illuminating a campesino pedaling home late on a rickety bike or pulling a cart loaded with sticks of firewood. Men, old and drunk, stumbled along, trying to keep to the road. When the road turned to gravel, I didn't see any other cars. Maybe the taxi driver was going to kidnap us and take my mother's money. Maybe we'd be stranded and hope my father would figure out where we'd gone. Maybe he'd miss us. I felt a flutter of hunger and a confusing twist in my stomach. I would never see Carlos again.

At last, far from the city, the taxi pulled into a parking lot, and we unloaded our luggage. My eyes could barely make out the single-engine crop-dusters along the edges of a narrow runway. The planes looked like toys. From the double doors of a brightly lit Quonset hut, half a dozen Mexican cowboys reeled out, bellowing blurry songs into the night's hazy dome.

Mother stood there, a suitcase in each hand. She squared her shoulders. "Tell the driver to wait."

"I don't know how to conjugate that," I said. Was "wait" quedar or quitar? I didn't want to tell him to leave by mistake.

"I speak English." The stocky young man with

a silver crucifix around his neck closed the taxi's trunk. "Better I come with you."

The moment we stepped into the metal building, the drunk men outside acted like sugar ants, seeking a way indoors. The Quonset hut smelled of oil and diesel fuel, and in the back of it, four dimly lit work-bays held pieces of disassembled engines. Propellers leaned against the walls. Toward the front was the snack bar's long counter and men sitting on wooden stools. When I looked their way, they shifted their hips and spread their knees. I moved closer to my mother. The taxi driver asked the bartender when the next flight left.

The man, who smiled, exposing a silver tooth, turned to a calendar. He pointed at the day. "Mañana."

"Aren't there any flights tonight?" my mother said.

"Runway no have lights," the driver said. "If you want, buy ticket now, go tomorrow."

"Okay, okay, let me think." Mother looked up in her head for a moment, and then her eyes made a circle of the room. Like bookends, a Coke machine and a cigarette machine stood at either end of a grease-stained leather couch. "What time is the first flight?"

The driver asked the bartender, and the man said noon. If the plane didn't break down, the driver translated.

"All right." She started to take money from her purse. She looked at the couch. "We can sit over there."

"You wait?" the taxi driver said incredulously. He looked at me.

Mother looked at me, too. "I guess you're right. It would be better to go back."

"Maybe we should stay here," I said. "It might be better to."

"Lady..." The taxi driver folded his arms. "I no can wait all night."

I grabbed my mother's arm. "Mom! We'll be fine here."

Mother shook her head. "Don't worry. We can come back in the morning if he's still bad."

I couldn't form a picture of tomorrow in my mind. The plan, speeding fast in one direction, toward safety, was now rewinding back towards Father. I began to pray for one thing: That he hadn't discovered we'd ever left.

The driver loaded our suitcases in the trunk. "I sorry," he said. "I not know." I slumped down on my seat, and when the driver pulled into the circle drive and a pink slash of neon cut across the back seat, I ducked down onto the floor and buried my head, the nuclear attack drill.

"Get up from there," Mother said. "Act like a big girl."

Mother dragged the suitcases to the protection of the undergrowth and waited to keep them from being stolen, while I crept through the vines and tangle. The moon threw a wash of blue, the color of the bottom of the sea, across the stucco wall. Twenty identical windows were evenly spaced out. All but one was dark. My father was humming, and I could hear the sound of his unhurried pee. Our room was next door. I pried our window

open. My mother thrashed through the brush with the suitcases. I put my finger to my lips. The bathroom light went out.

Mother whispered, "Boost me up."

I laced my fingers, but her foot burst through.

"Kneel down, then."

I dropped to my knees and let her stand on my back. A piece of glass embedded itself in the heel of my hand. I didn't stop to take it out. Now Mother was half way through, legs outside kicking, head and arms inside, trying to reach a chair.

"Put your hands down on the floor," I whispered.

"Do a somersault."

"I'm too old," Mother said.

I pushed. Something ripped. Then she was in. I heaved the suitcases inside, then pulled myself through the window.

In Vera Cruz, mother and I took long naps and slept through dinner. Father thought we had gone out to eat by ourselves.

A knock came at the door. Mother looked at me.

"Yes?" she said.

"Señora Stone," a man said. "Open the door."

Mother's dress was hiked up. She smoothed it down. "Turn on a light," she whispered, and I did. Mother opened the door. It was the manager, his narrow mustache twitching, his bow-tie askew.

"Todo la noche, your husband drink," the man said. "He say friend of Pancho Villa. You know what? Pancho Villa die in 1917."

"I didn't know that," Mother said.

"I not want your husband make trouble." The manager wiped his brow and looked over his shoulder. "I must close office. Go home."

I came to the door. "Sometimes I can calm him down."

The room threw a triangle of light onto the veranda. Coming toward us was Father, shambling drunkenly, his white hair flying back, shirttail out, belt unbuckled. Metal clinked in his pockets. "It's my lucky night." Grinning, he held a circle of silver, like a moon, between his thumb and forefinger. "I see you've met my old lady, Raul." He slapped the manager's shoulder. "But if she won't sleep with you, don't blame me. She's harder to fuck than a knot-hole, and drier too."

Mother never cried—Father liked it too much, and she didn't like to give him the satisfaction—but she was crying now. The left side of her mouth twisted like her handkerchief, while the right side remained frozen.

"Hey, honey," Father called from the darkness, "give your old man a hand with his key."

By his tone, I knew he meant me. His words didn't slur, so I couldn't tell how far gone he was. I prayed this was a beer drunk. Mescal made him mean. Any delay and he would start acting up. Pushing past the manager, I took the key, and with my father propped on one stiff arm against the wall, his hot, sour breath in my face, I used my

nail to find the tiny crescent where the key went in. Then, I stepped into the room and let my father pass. He tossed coins on his bed and went into the bathroom. The faucets squeaked. His belt buckle dropped on the floor. "Turn the light on," he called. "I don't want to bark my shins."

I turned on the light.

"Try to get him to bed," Mother whispered from the doorway. She took the key to our room from her pocket, placing it urgently in my hand. "Let yourself in when you're done, but whatever happens, don't give him your room key. I don't think he'll harm you, but be cautious."

I put the key in my pocket. I didn't want the manager looking in. My father's key was still in the lock. I took it out and closed the door softly, so Father wouldn't think about going back to the cantina. Then, I turned on the night light by the bed. The coins were larger and heavier than silver dollars. I scooped them up and put them on the dresser. Counting his winnings, I stood with my back half turned, catching the open slice of the bathroom door in my side vision. My father had taught me how to approach a mean dog, keeping calm inside, giving the dog time to growl or challenge, but never taking a step back. I put the coins in stacks of five.

In the dribble of water from shower, my father sang.

*La Cucaracha, la cucaracha
Ya no quiere caminar
Porque le falta, porque le falta
Marijuana que fumar.*

He'd told me the lyrics were no puede caminar, not no quiere caminar. There was a big difference between the cockroach not being able to walk and not wanting to. I remembered the first time he sang me that song, how he'd staggered around, clutching his chest and making a big joke of it, how fun he could sometimes be. Maybe the shower would sober him up.

When the water shut off, I heard a towel sandpaper bare skin. He came out with a towel tucked around his waist, a pack of Camels in his hand, one lit and dragging down the corner of his mouth. His legs straddled the corner of the bed, and where the towel spread, I could see that thing in the middle like a pink, rolled-up sock. "Pe-nis." The word made me cringe, thinking of Mrs. Roberts, my seventh grade teacher, with a flip chart and her long pointer, saying "penis" and "vagina" and "testes" and "uterus." I could not so much as think the word "pe-nis." It sounded foreign, ugly, but the way he was sitting, I could not help looking at his.

"How many coins are there?" my father said.

"Fifty eight." I picked up one of the coins and looked at the close grooves on the thin edge.

"You know what they are?"

"Silver pesos?"

"Nope. Guess again."

He liked to play this game of superior knowledge. That he was playing it now showed he was getting himself

back in a good mood. Still, it seemed as if I had stepped into a battle my parents were fighting, and nobody had ever bothered to explain the rules.

"You're not scared to be in here with your old man, are you?"

"I'm not scared." Twisting a chair around to that my back was to him, I sat near the dresser and arranged the coins by the year they were minted.

"What kind of coins are these?" I asked.

"Mexican silver dollars," he said. "Navaho Indians use them for jewelry. The last time I saw any, I was in Ciudad Juarez, 13, your age, and a friend took me to see Pancho Villa. He gave me one. I'll show you when we get home."

He was still drunk.

"Okay," I said.

"Count out thirty and take them to your mother."

He was still sitting, catching the ash in his cupped hand. I counted out loud. One, two, three.

Father has a coin that Pancho Villa gave him.

I counted the coins all over again by twos and then by threes. Sitting on the corner of the bed, he was an arm's reach from me, and if I tried to run, he'd grab my arm and jerk it up behind my back, the way he did when we watched wrestling on TV.

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the nightstand and brushed off his hands. "You remember last year's vacation when I took you to the FBI headquarters?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Can you name the Top Ten violent crimes?"

My mind could not make these sudden leaps--following him would lead to some trick—but the picture of a yellow poster board came into my mind.

"Murder. Arson. Armed robbery. Assault and battery. Felony theft. Kidnapping. Blackmail. Um, killing a police officer. No. That's murder. Uh, interstate flight. Narcotics."

"You've got nine," he said, holding up nine fingers. "What's the tenth?"

"I don't remember."

"Here's a clue." He stuck up his middle finger, the wave he made to women drivers when they braked on curves.

I got up from my chair. "I think I'd better be going. Are we going fishing tomorrow?"

"Give up?" he said.

I was tired of this game.

"Need another clue?" he said.

"No." I put my hands in my pockets, trying to remember which key was his and which was mine.

"Come over and give your old dad a night-night kiss."

I looked at the door. Like the cockroach, I wanted to run, but couldn't. He half-stood, grabbed my shoulders and pulled my lips toward his. His towel fell on the floor.

In the shadowed light, his face reminded me of last summer's trip, how we'd been on our way back from

the nation's Capitol and stopped at his cousin's place in Sioux City, and how, after a rain, Father had taken me out at midnight, on a secret mission, creeping through unmowed grass in the dark, and in the slanted beams of flashlights, how I had seen nightcrawlers arch from the earth, their segmented bodies thick with damp; how they had been undulating and waving in the blades of grass, and how some had crushed beneath my knees as I reached in front, in the flashlight beam, grabbing and tugging them out of the ground.

I made a fist and socked his stomach as hard as I could. "Daddy! Let me go!"

Father grunted and fell back in bed. I staggered and groped behind me for the chair. I leaned on it. Sweat had formed in the small of my back, and I knew if I sat, my body would stick to the chair and be stuck there forever.

"Fair enough." Father pulled up the sheet and his sunburned arm reached for the light. "Don't forget the silver for your mother, and if she asks, tell her I didn't lay a hand on you."

Breathing hard and wiping my lips with the back of my arm, I scooped the coins from the dresser.

Inside my room, the lights were out. The moon, coming through the window, cut checkerboard squares on the floor. My mother had left my pajamas on my pillow. I went into the bathroom, stacked the coins on the sink, and scrubbed my face. With tweezers, I tried to pick out the piece of glass, but it had burrowed in deep, and I couldn't get it.

Mother had left her train case on the back of the toilet. I found the first-aid kit under her brush rollers. With the mercurochrome's wand, I treated my wounds, and then I went to bed.

The cool sheets made me shiver.

Mother rolled over and said softly to the dark, "Did he go to sleep?"

"Yes," I said.

"What did you say to him?"

"I listened to him talk about his Pancho Villa coin."

"He always gets the last word, doesn't he?" She reached across the divide between our beds. I turned my back and curled up. My shoulders shook and my knees jerked. To control myself, I hugged my pillow. Mother asked if I had a fever.

"No," I said.

"He didn't touch you, did he?" Mother asked.

"He didn't lay a hand on me." This time. My palms smarted from the leaf cuts. The glass was still in there. My body ached.

In the night, while Mother snored and tossed fitfully in her sleep, Carlos crept to the window. His breath, like the breath of the Gulf, heaving and sighing gently on the sand, came to me in murmurs. "Psst. Psst. Psst." And as for the rest, Mother would not leave Veracruz, there would be no airplane ride, and Father would sulk until we gave him back the silver.

One coin he let me keep. Cold and hard and heavy, it covers my palm, a reminder of what was real.

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The Sanctuary

A narrow Greek Revival building at 624 Pirate's Alley is where Nobel laureate William Faulkner wrote his first novel, **Soldiers' Pay**, and managed to have a rip roaring good time with pals like Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling finding his narrative voice. The building is now the home of Faulkner House Books, America's most charming independent book store. The book shop, of course, carries both reading and collecting copies of Mr. Faulkner's work. It is, in fact, however, a sanctuary for the work of all great writers—past, present, and yet to come—and for writers themselves, those who live in New Orleans and for our visiting authors.

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Will Thrift
2011 Short Story
Runner-Up
**The Summer of
My Faith**



At the end of my sophomore year, when Southaven Christian School let out for the summer, I didn't feel the blissful relief that seemed to infect everyone else who had been released from the crammed, makeshift halls tacked onto the back of Southaven Baptist's main sanctuary. For me, the few months' reprieve from the rigors of disciplined learning weren't ripe with possibility. Instead, I felt hot and uneasy, and it wasn't just the Carolina Piedmont weather. Should I have bothered to confide in them, my peers would have said that the heat I was feeling was the Devil - he and I having grown too close. Indeed I had provided them ample evidence of the loss of my cool one April day after school when the confines of the hallway allowed me only one short punch to a certain upperclassman's jaw. Regardless of my pleas of justification to the vice principal, I was punished and thereafter marked. In the few weeks that remained of the school year, it was perceived that my professed faith was in jeopardy. But the incident served as a pivot for me as I discovered that a new faith had been emerging that year, and it had no omniscient, menacing spirits, no holy book, no likeminded pastors guiding a flock. It was inside me and I didn't feel like sharing it, whatever it may be. So on that last school day, I stepped away from my "fellows-in-Christ," with the sensation that my gait was quickening toward something unknown.

Casey, who had become my closest friend that year, had little enthusiasm for Southaven's fundamental values but he hadn't been judgmental about my faith (what little of it remained), and he didn't buck the system like some of the others who our peers had dubbed "reprobates." Getting to know him, I once remarked that he had no conviction, and he quipped that he "hadn't been convicted." I was intrigued by his play on words and drawn to his reserved independence, a respite from the conformists around me. As summer grew near, spending time with him was the only thing I had anticipated with any relish because I yearned to discover the unknown and thought Casey might help in that effort. But he flew to Florida the day after we got out. He spoke little about it except to say that he would be working in his Uncle Ed's nursery near Kissimmee. Any glimpses I may have had of the short future called summer were now obscured. I attended his departure with his mom and

older sister, Missy, who had been one among Southaven's first hundred-percent graduating class.

As I watched Casey's plane rise and arc across the sky, I felt a hot void expanding inside me. At school they might have said that it was a hint of hell I was feeling, as though the Devil was tangibly close and would overtake me if I didn't straighten up. I wanted to expel that bias, and resolved to endure the summer alone. The impending June turned out to be a blur. I slept late and piddled away the rest of the time. I wore out the television dial switching among all twenty-three cable channels. We had a pool in our complex, but it never occurred to me to go swimming. It wasn't the outside of me that needed cooling. I eventually sought refuge from the tedium on my ten-speed, pedaling aimlessly around Greenville. I pumped frantically up steep inclines, gasping for breath at the apex and sucking in more air as I coasted down the other side. I went through unfamiliar places - streets shrouded from the harsh sun by thousands of green hands - the spread leaf of white oak.

Neighborhoods hid their old-money houses like misers behind sculpted hedges. I sniffed earthy mountain laurel growing wild on the steep hillsides as I careened near Cleveland Park. After days, a mental map emerged of all the streets I'd traversed and I began to wonder if I could visit them all, hoping to abate that feeling inside with speed and wind until school started up again. One day in late June, I coasted down Casey's street and as I passed his house, I let go of the handlebars and sat straight in the saddle, a private salute to the summer that could have been.

Missy's Plymouth Duster sat in the driveway. The basketball goal (where Casey and I usually ended up) stood like a beefeater between a high stone retaining wall and the garage. I didn't think anyone would mind if I shot a few baskets. The ball sat where Casey always left it just inside the bay door. I picked some familiar landmarks in the cement and began a shooting routine that he and I had made up as a little competition. My back was mostly to the house, so I didn't notice Missy standing on the back porch with her keys and purse in hand until I spun around for a jumper.

"Looks like a one-man game," she remarked.
"Your little teammate is probably lying on the beach

getting a tan right now.”

She used that older-sister-sassy tone that I'd heard before, but it was the first time she'd directed it at me without Casey being around. Even though she was his sister, I can't say that I hadn't begun to notice her in the uncomfortable yet pleasant way that had come upon me lately. The way I was now noticing all girls. The sentiment at Southaven would have been that the Devil had indeed visited me. I was barely conscious of my eyes drifting across new curves creating gaps where shirts were buttoned, or catching a flash of flesh beneath a billowing skirt. These carnal temptations were made all the more tantalizing by the vehement admonitions of the school's faculty to abstain, refrain, and walk with the Lord. Yet I had very secretly wondered what it would be like to entertain rather than suppress some of these Devil's gems.

But any feelings of that sort regarding Missy were countered and then squelched by the realization that she was out of my league. She had been older than me even when she had been my age. Although I'd never seen them, I believed she'd had boyfriends who were already in college. I just stood there with my ball and the sun beating down.

Instead of driving off, she walked closer, “Actually Casey's been slaving it in Uncle Ed's greenhouses, even on the weekends. It's hardly been his idea of fun. When he gets back, I bet he'll even appreciate doing homework.”

I hadn't a clue what she could possibly want to talk to me about as she approached. I was half-expecting more sarcasm, so her casual demeanor took me by surprise. I'd had my suspicions about Casey's summer-long sentence in Florida, so I said, “So that's what he's down there for.”

She told me about their mom's idea that Casey needed to spend some time with Ed since their dad was effectively a non-dad (remarried and living somewhere in Nevada). I nodded and noticed for the first time that Missy had caramel-colored flecks amid the darker brown of her eyes. I muttered some acknowledgement, and maybe asked her what she'd been up to because she went on about how she was getting ready for Furman and working part time over at Truett's Drug Store on Augusta Road. My mental bike map had a check mark there. I had ridden by the place recently.

Then she said, “So what are you up to this summer?”

This summer? It hadn't seemed like summer at all, not remotely resembling anything I'd imagined. And what had I been doing? So far, nothing, but I couldn't tell her that. My present idle state suddenly seemed embarrassing. I surprised myself when I took a step back, shuffled side to side, hooked the ball behind my head in the general direction of the goal and said, “Getting ready for next season.”

She laughed, “Does that include riding your bike all over town?”

“Well sure. That's part of my conditioning training.” The ball rolled back into the garage like it was trying to sneak away. I thought about going after it, but I was frozen and couldn't move. She had apparently seen me riding, employing the only diversion I had at my disposal to keep the unknown, absent hours at bay. It was like she knew a secret about me, and her discovery held me.

A breeze played wisps of her hair like stringy puppets. She seemed to study me for a moment and then said, “You know, things would have been a lot different with Casey around. He's never been away this long, and I didn't think I'd miss him so much.”

It sounded like confession time so I agreed with her. Things would have been different, and I missed him too. Four weeks into a twelve-week summer and I had nothing to show for it except slightly bigger quads (which, I noted, had improved my jump shot). I hadn't given a thought to the remaining eight weeks other than to imagine a nameless street speeding past and out of my peripheral vision.

She stood there, seeming to relish in the common ground the two of us had found with Casey, and maybe reflecting on her beloved, gangly sibling with whom she had little more physical similarity than sandy hair color. She jangled a ring of keys, “Well, I'm off to the mall.” She said, “mall” with a touch of humor and dread.

I nodded like I caught her drift. I never set foot in the place except for an occasional visit to the video arcade near the northeast entrance. She turned away and walked toward the car. My eyes did their thing.

“Come by anytime,” she indicated toward the goal. “Casey wouldn't mind at all.”

A pair of big brown plastic sunglasses now made her look more like the Missy I knew. I said, “Will do,” as she backed out.

The ball had indeed tried to slip away, and it proved it by resisting every further attempt I made at putting it through the net. Eventually I rolled it back in place and rolled myself back out to the street. My head seemed to be orbiting my body like a moon, and my legs churned, sending the bike and me hurtling through space. I abandoned the map. I had no recollection of where I went that afternoon. That night, sleep came easy and I dreamed I was weightless and that I taught Casey how to put his arms back and fly.

I didn't revisit the goal. Instead, the next few days found me back in my old routine of waking late, mindless television (particularly the new music video channel), and then restless biking. I went in new directions, but the map in my head always seemed to show me the old neighborhood near Southaven, which happened to be about a quarter mile down Augusta Road from Truett's.

So one day I found myself on a latticework of

*She turned away and
walked toward the car.
My eyes did their thing.*

narrow streets amid the small bungalows up behind the Truett Shopping Center. I coasted down the parking lot toward Augusta Road and passed the Duster angled into a slot near the entrance.

I found Missy sitting at the chrome and Formica lunch counter in the back of the store. She was halfway through both the grilled cheese plate and a copy of Aaron's Rod by D.H. Lawrence. I paused in the greeting card aisle only for a second before scooting onto the vinyl-padded stool beside her.

She dog-eared the paperback. Her eyes seemed to beam at me. Who knew brown could be so bright? Without the slightest consideration of why I happened to have plopped down beside her in the middle of the day, she launched into an amateurish explanation of Lawrence's use of the flute as a symbol of the power to float independently through life, or something.

I listened, rapt.

After a few minutes, she asked, "Is that making any sense?" Referring to her last thought string. She wondered if her explanation would be good enough for the English class she'd be taking at Furman in a few months.

"Sounds well-thought-out to me," I managed in an effort to encourage her. I began to wonder what I'd gotten myself into, but then remembered that I'd walked in without a plan. How could I know the outcome of allowing myself to be drawn to her? Sitting side-by-side at the counter kept my eyes mostly in check, and I realized that this was the closest she and I had ever been. What seemed to energize me was the fact that it had been so easy, and was so easy just to sit there with her. There were people all around us – it was lunchtime on a weekday after all – and yet it seemed like we were the only two people on earth.

She told me about the long-distance call she and her mom had made to Casey over the weekend. He was doing well and had settled in at Ed's - even been to the beach a few times with their cousin, Chris. We laughed as we both speculated how many times he'd probably slipped and crashed as Chris tried to teach him how to surf. It was a relief to know that life was proceeding normally for Casey, that he hadn't disappeared into the distance, the void that was my summer. In the same way that we tried to mimic each other on the basketball court, I envisioned that maybe my summer could be more normal like his. Although normal remained a vague notion that I determined at that moment to figure out, yet I detected Missy lingering behind it's veil.

She sounded apologetic when she said she had to get back to work. It may have been a consolation when she added, "I'm not going to finish this. Do you want it?" She pushed her plate in my direction.

I glanced at the stiff wedge of grilled cheese sandwich and small pile of cool fries. The offering was accepted and I dug into it.

In the moment she stood by her stool, half of the food disappeared. She watched me and said, "You should come over for dinner. I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind."

I forced the remaining fries down my throat. "Yeah, that'd be cool. When?"

Missy thought about it. "How about this Thursday? Mom's usually home around five so a little after will be fine."

I'd eaten at Casey's before, but it was a new thing entirely to be eating at Missy's. I didn't think to ask if I could bring anything, which would have been the courteous thing. I just nodded, and chewed, and managed, "Okay, sure," as I swallowed. I watched her leave. She smiled at me as she walked around the end of the counter and disappeared down the hall to the time clock.

Slowly, as if someone had turned up the volume, the bustle of the lunch counter came to me. A man a few stools away flipped his newspaper in half. The waitress punched keys on the register as she was ringing up someone's check. The griddle in the back hissed as the cook slapped something on it. I felt a lump in my throat. But instead of being choked with emotion, I realized that I had engulfed Missy's remainder without anything to wash it down. I sucked up the last of her iced tea, realizing as I did so that my lips were touching the straw that her lips had touched. As the cool tea eased everything down, I thought that there was something intimate, maybe ritual about it – me eating her food and drinking her drink. The fact that she had shared it with me made it even more satisfying. I wished it were already Thursday.

At just after five o'clock on Thursday, I leaned my bike next to Casey's in the garage and waved through the backdoor glass to catch Missy's attention in the kitchen on the other side.

She'd been busy and seemed to be all business as she greeted me, "Hey, Mom's not home yet, so you get to help. We need a salad. Just cut this stuff up and put it in the big bowl there." She pointed to a space on the counter with a pile of vegetables and a cutting board.

I sniffed at the herbed sauce that Missy had started. My dad and I usually just ate TV dinners or sandwiches or something. We never cooked anything like the sauce I saw popping on the stove like a lava pool. It hinted at distant, comforting memories.

Missy put a large knife on the board in front of me – no small hint for me to get started. I tried to get a mental picture of the task at hand: vegetables, cut up in the bowl.

So I started in on them.

Missy glanced my way occasionally, but didn't say much even when she answered the phone on the wall. She hung up, but kept her hand on the receiver, "Mom said not to wait on her. She's got something to finish at work. So I guess it's just you and me."

She inspected the progress in my bowl and declared, "That'll do." Then she put me to work setting three places at the dining room table; again, something at which I had zero experience. But I managed to surround the plates with silver and get the serving dishes onto the middle of the table as she handed them to me. Through the door, I took in the sight of her, one arm aloft dangling a spaghetti noodle into her mouth to check if it was ready.

As naïve as I was at the time, I knew it would be an image that would go with me all my days.

We both sat and began loading our plates and eating. Although our school days had been filled with prayer, including lunchtime blessings of the meal, neither of us paused before this one. I figured that she and Casey shared similar religious views, and exploited Southaven's private school setting for all it was academically worth while leaving the fundamentalism to the fundamentalists. I was pleased at this revelation.

China and silver clinked together. We caught each other's eyes occasionally and then looked away. Spaghetti is one of those foods that most diners adopt some technique for eating. You can cut it in small pieces and load it onto the fork, you can use a spoon as an axis to spin the noodles onto the fork, you can shove tangles of noodles onto the fork with a piece of bread, or you can just get some noodles into your mouth and suck them up while hovering over your plate. I noticed that Missy was employing a conservative spoon and fork method, so I decided to spice things up by sucking. I got a few into my mouth and then sucked as my lips scraped sauce off them. It ended with a loud kissing sound. Still hovering, I looked up at Missy and gave her a silly smirk while I lapped up the sauce around my mouth.

I had caught her in mid-swallow, like all good dining room cut ups, and it was all she could do to finish before bursting out in laughter. Without a word, and still giggling, she tried to imitate my feat, but the laughs surged and she had to bite off the dangling noodles. I was now leaning my chair back on two legs. The lights blurred as tears came to my eyes. I convulsed and bellowed. Missy covered her mouth with a napkin. Her face reddened as she tried to chew without choking. I could hear muted laughter while she struggled to keep her mouth shut.

The hilarity that had erupted and broken the tension in the room had also completely masked the shift in gravity that I would have otherwise felt. My body jerked in desperation even my chair was giving in to the inevitable. I had tipped too far and was going down. Missy's mouth flew open despite whether or not she had managed to swallow, and she roared.

My legs flailed as I tumbled. I kicked the table. The startled dishes rang like a jester's bells just before I ended the act with a thud on the carpet. Missy came around the table and I looked up at her. We both burst into another round of laughter until it died out in spurts.

I righted my chair and Missy sat back down. We surveyed the table, happy that nothing was spilled or broken. We straightened everything up. Eyes were wiped. Hair was adjusted. We listened as a car pulled into the driveway outside. Missy went serious, gesturing with her hands, "We don't need to tell Mom about all this, ok?"

I made a zipper motion across my lips, and then gulped down some tea.

Missy's mom apologized for being late and sat

down to eat right away. She caught up to us as we finished and remarked to Missy how good the sauce was. Then I saw a little bit of where Missy got her ability to switch subjects and get down to the point. "Casey's having fun in Florida, but he misses you, Brian."

I was comfortable so far, "Yeah, he's lucky to get a chance to go live somewhere else for the summer." She didn't say anything. Missy got up and began taking empty dishes back to the kitchen. I decided to backpedal a little on that last comment. "I mean, not that it's bad here or anything. It just sounds exciting learning to surf and everything."

She continued, "Well, I don't know if Missy's told you, but he's been working in Ed's nursery. He's putting away his earnings for college. I'm sure it hasn't been all fun and games."

Missy retrieved her mom's plate and then stayed in the kitchen. The dining room was open on two sides, but it began to feel small. I could have sworn that the light brightened.

Missy's mom sipped her tea and said, "I suppose you'll be taking the SAT this fall?" SAT. I had not given it a thought since the last time my guidance counselor mentioned it a few months back. I said, "Yes ma'am, I plan to."

She had me engaged, "Are you enrolled in a prep class for it?"

I had swigged a mouthful of tea and just shook my head no.

"Well, Casey will be going to a six-week class for a few hours after school up until the test in October. I'll call your father and tell him about it. I'm sure he'll want to get you in. I hope it's not full yet."

I didn't know what else to say. "Thanks." I drank the last of my tea and looked into the kitchen trying to catch Missy's attention. I'm sure my dad would want me to take the prep class, but I already knew that he didn't have the extra money for it. Maybe that was another way I could have followed Casey's lead and taken advantage of the summer. I could have gotten a job doing something and earning some money. But that was a whole separate, big unknown – entering the workforce. It seemed so much more pragmatic than speculating whether heaven and hell existed, which is what had been on my mind prior to school letting out. It seemed that there indeed was something real out on the horizon for me, the real world lay beyond my sequestered high school, and with the help of Missy and Casey's mom, and I had glimpsed it.

Missy brought out three small bowls of ice cream and a larger bowl of sliced peaches. I ate mostly in silence while Missy and her mom talked about their day's events. My thoughts were swirled with regret that my vast and empty summer would now be squandered in idleness and maybe a sporadic, vain attempt to earn money doing something.

As we finished dessert, I noticed that their banter had subsided. They were regarding me.

Missy said, "Mom and I were talking, and you know that balloon festival that's coming up?"

The Summer of My Faith: Will Thrift

She must have been referring to some past conversation because even though I had been preoccupied, I hadn't heard either of them mention a festival. I said, "Yeah, I heard about it. A balloon race or something?"

"It's called Freedom Weekend Aloft. It's on July fourth up at Donaldson Center. Anyway, do you want to go with me?"

I looked from her to her mom and back again.

Her mom seemed to guess what I might be thinking and chimed in, "It's on me, Brian. Casey would have gone anyway. I'll give Missy enough money for both of you to have a good time."

How could I turn this down? I said yes and told Missy I'd ride over to her house on the Saturday morning of the festival. We talked a little about it: the bands, and the greasy food, and the balloons. It was a major new event for the Upstate. I told Missy I'd see her Saturday. As the two women stood at the backdoor, I thanked them again and made my exit.

A hint of orange tinted the western sky. In a few minutes it would all be deep blue, but right now it was still charged with the power of the sun. I thought maybe it wasn't too late to make something of my summer. I raised a pedal and in one motion mounted and thrust my bike into the warm evening.

Saturday morning I found myself riding in the Duster - the first of several firsts that were to happen that day. Missy wore purple shorts that revealed pale thighs long-hidden by the knee-length skirts requisite at Southaven. It took about two seconds for me to decide that there was nothing at all wrong with seeing a girl's legs. In fact there was something enchanting about it, as if I had seen the magician's trick, but then I hadn't really seen the trick because I had no idea how it happened. Last summer, I would have judged her for wearing something that didn't conform to the school's Christian standards. Now, I was enjoying the sight! Presto! Nevertheless, some modesty remained and I forced myself to look away when I could.

We talked about the festival. Neither of us had heard of Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs. But Missy's mom had explained to her that they were famous for shag dancing (whatever that was). Neither of us had ever seen hot air balloons in person either. We looked forward to the fireworks show that was to happen after dark.

The former Air Force base that was Donaldson Center offered plenty of open space for the festival. A half-mile or so from the parking area, it looked like somebody had splashed a hundred colors of paint over a collection of undulating hills. It was too far away to see the race teams working to prepare their balloons, but I didn't think we'd have to actually see them to know when the race was to begin. It would be obvious as the balloons bulged ever upward.

Missy had suggested that we start out on the side of the festival where the bands were playing. It was a flat grass field and people were already packing in, staking claim to swaths of ground with coolers, folding chairs, and blankets. More people cantered through the ad hoc lanes in random directions. At first it looked impenetrable, but after a few moments paths began to emerge. I let Missy take the lead into the fray. We weaved among and between until the available open spaces for us to spread out had grown to a minimum. I would have picked a more remote spot, so I got the impression that this was a place Missy would want to be seen. Whenever she stopped, she seemed to be looking around for familiar faces and then moving on because she hadn't found any. We were now close enough that the opening act, a local country music band that had been playing since we arrived, was louder than the surrounding crowd. Most people in this area were sitting or reclining in the general direction of the stage. I checked on the balloons. The

We looked toward the sound. A giant wall of colors now filled the opposite side of the festival. The crowd hushed and then grew noisy again like a car revving at the starting line. Some of them drifted toward the food trailers to get a better view. At first it didn't seem like anything was happening. Then the balloons began to lift slowly into the sky, their baskets dangling below like stems on ripe fruit.

colors were still percolating. We had finally reached a place that suited her, so Missy flipped out the old blanket she'd been carrying and smoothed it into our square spot.

We sat back for a few minutes and I took in everything while Missy craned around scanning the crowd. There may have been ten guys on the stage and most of them wore cowboy hats. I had no taste for country music, but the song had a catchy beat. Then I realized that the low-frequency thump of the bass was the only thing I could distinguish other than an occasional high note from the singer. The din of the crowd pressed us from behind and it gave me the feeling that we were caught between two forces. I closed my eyes and imagined I was at the forefront of an invading horde laying siege to a fortress full of desperate citizens all stomping on the battlements in unison. There was something Biblical about it.

"Hey, sleepy."

I opened my eyes and Missy was looking at me. She pointed toward an avenue of food trailers

lined along a taxiway dividing the crowd and stage area from the balloon paddock. She said, "Save this spot. I'm gonna go grab a Coke. You want one?"

"Sure."

As Missy faded back into the crowd, I glanced around, catching no one's eye. Although I was surrounded by hundreds of people, I felt more alone now than I had during the entire month of June. I wondered if Missy would find her friends and leave me stranded on the blanket. Then it occurred to me that she might not run into just her girl friends.

I closed my eyes again and tried to resurrect the invasion, but I couldn't keep them closed. I looked beyond the food trailers. Some of the nylon envelopes had begun to stand erect, like the simmering landscape was nearing its boiling point. I looked on for several minutes as more of them billowed upward. I wondered what it would be like to fly in one of them. I wanted Missy to share the sight, but I was left to watch it with the strangers around me. The din of the crowd seemed louder, like I was falling back in the ranks, but it was just that the music had stopped. The cowboys were coiling up cords and packing up instruments.

I leaned back around toward the balloons. I wondered if this was how the day would be: looking forward and then looking back, forward and back. The nylons tightened with hot air. The wall of colors grew over the trailers. Just then Missy appeared, as though she had been squeezed out of the crowd and propelled toward me on the little grass lanes.

She handed me a large sweating cup. "Sorry it took me so long. I ran into Dana and she's here with her grandparents." She made a face. "I don't know if anybody else is here, so I guess it's just you and me for now."

I knew Dana - one of her friends from school. And as far as seeing anyone else, it suited me just fine that we were alone in the growing crowd. She sipped at her drink and I did the same. I was glad she was back, but there was no way I was going to tell her that. She had taken off her sunglasses and I noticed that her eyelashes floated down each time her lips pursed around the straw. She made the sipping of a fountain Coke look like the most pleasurable thing in the world. My eyes wandered other places too as we sipped, and watched, and talked.

We shared a laugh when Missy pointed out a couple, up close to the stage, still embraced and swaying as if the music had never stopped. Then she told me about Dana's parents, that they had waited to separate until after Dana had graduated. She related this not so much as gossip, but in a commiserating way, as if she and Dana now shared a similar fate. I never talked much about my feelings, so I asked about how Casey really felt with his dad living so far away. She said she thought he missed him, but their dad wasn't a prominent topic of conversation at the house. She said that honestly their mom's fear was that, without a man's guidance, Casey might lose sight of his goals like doing well in school and going to college. She didn't want him to end up like their

dad.

I thought I knew enough about Casey to know that he had his head screwed on straight. I thought I was in more danger of falling by the wayside on the teenage path to greatness than he was. Again, my empty summer had opened its black maw in front of Missy. I tried to think of something else to talk about when an air horn blared in the distance behind us.

We looked toward the sound. A giant wall of colors now filled the opposite side of the festival. The crowd hushed and then grew noisy again like a car revving at the starting line. Some of them drifted toward the food trailers to get a better view. At first it didn't seem like anything was happening. Then the balloons began to lift slowly into the sky, their baskets dangling below like stems on ripe fruit. We were one with the crowd in awe as the blue sky over the paddock filled with color. Soon, the highest ones began to catch a current and drift like they were being plucked away from the rest by a giant, invisible hand. Intermittent sounds came from gas burners above the baskets. One would flare and then its blast would arrive, having traveled the distance to the crowd.

The wind picked up the racers in small groups and propelled them up and away from the festival. It was more like a dramatic exit than a race. Soon, a trail of colored bubbles extended into the sky. The crowd noise eventually picked back up. Missy and I weren't the only ones speculating on which balloons were on the move and where the finish line might be.

After a while, we sat back on the blanket. Maurice and his Zodiacs began cranking out the shag music causing people to flock forward and start dancing. Some couples just held hands and danced on their blankets. Eventually the balloons were a mass of hazy colors on the horizon. Missy had been swaying to the rhythm and when she stood I was afraid that she might want to dance. I had no idea what that might be like and fear of yet another unknown began to well up in me. But I wasn't going to let it come between us, so I stood with her and followed her gaze. A lone red balloon stood erect on the far side of the paddock.

Missy took my hand, "Let's go check it out." I was relieved that she wasn't thinking of dancing. She tugged me along through the grass lanes and away from the music. We cut through the food trailers and crossed the now-accessible paddock. As we neared the lone balloon, a man engulfed in a dirty white jumpsuit had just propped up a sign offering balloon rides for ten dollars a person. She pulled me close and looked up at me, "Let's do it!" Her eyes sparkled. I caught her energy.

There was no way I wasn't going to do this - another first for the day.

The pilot appeared over the rim of the basket. The points of his handlebar moustache went straight up beside his cheeks like a cat's whiskers when it's cornered something interesting. "Hel-low! You are the first of the afternoon. You two want a ride, no?"

The Summer of My Faith: Will Thrift

Missy bounced, "We sure do!"

He tried out his pitch on us, "Well. My name is Franz and I have been ballooning for twenty-two years. Very experienced now. My associate, Dieter," he gestured to the man in the jumpsuit, "will take your money."

Missy was looking up at the patch of colors receding on the horizon, "How far will we go?"

Franz pointed to a large coil of thick rope beside the basket, "This is a tethered ride, my dear. We go up fifty meters. You see the festival. You see the people, the city, and then we descend."

He leaned over, close to Missy. "Have you ever been up in a balloon, my...what is your name, my dear?"

Missy shook her head and said her name. I mimicked her and noted that he didn't ask me my name.

"I tell you, it will be very exciting for you. You will never forget it." The whiskers were taut.

Missy fished two tens out of her pocket. The bills disappeared into Dieter's jumpsuit. Franz spat out some German instructions and Dieter propped a wooden stepladder against the basket. Franz held out his hand to help Missy climb aboard. I followed without his assistance.

Franz pulled on a cord releasing a blast of blue flame high inside the envelope. The heat was surprising and Missy pressed against me in the corner. Franz laughed and tried to reassure us, "Everything is ok. Here we go!"

With a sway and a bounce, the basket left the ground. The sensation was something like being in an elevator, but it didn't feel as much like we were moving as it felt like the earth was dropping away from under us. We rose above the heads of a small crowd that had now gathered near Dieter. He seemed to be assessing them; maybe counting heads to see how much money was waiting to ride. We could see the tops of the food trailers at the edge of the paddock. Then we could see over the tree line surrounding the festival grounds. Steeples spiked out of the trees. Roads peeked through like gray arteries pumping cars. The buildings of downtown Greenville stood like monuments at the edge of our view.

Franz' radio crackled - Dieter's frantic German. Franz leaned over the side of the basket. His eyes were wide and he spattered unknown words lost on the breeze. He spun back to us and I could have sworn I saw flames in his eyes like the gas burner above. He breathed deeply before apologizing and explaining to us that the tether was not secure, but not to worry since he was a very experienced pilot.

Missy pressed harder against me. We peered over the edge and saw Dieter like an ant scrambling toward a red pickup in the parking area. It now felt completely like we were holding still as the earth rotated under us. Franz hauled in the tether - chuckling about what good would it do now - and coiled it on the floor of the basket. We drifted over the smoking food trailers. People pointed up at us. Even the Zodiacs seemed to notice as we flew past the stage and over a wide swath of trees.

Franz tugged the cord releasing another burst of intense heat. He spit over the side of the basket, watched the gob, and then scanned the horizon in the direction that it drifted.

The radio crackled German again. Franz and Dieter conversed. Then he smiled at us, "Relax. You are getting more than your money's worth. Dieter will pick us up, so enjoy the ride!"

From our new angle, we saw that the racing balloons had separated and were strung across the horizon like tiny Christmas bulbs. They seemed to stretch out into the future. It occurred to me that we were one of them, on our way. I felt Missy's hand in mine again. Maybe it had been there the whole time. I looked over at her and she turned to me. The afternoon sun made a halo in her hair.

I asked Franz, "Where do you think we'll land?" He shrugged and smiled, "Wherever the wind takes us, my boy. Don't worry, have some faith."

I didn't know whether he meant for me to have some faith in his skill as a "very experienced" pilot, or just to have some faith in general, in the hope that this ride would turn out okay.

The distant balloons were now just a smear on an artist's palette. Missy curled her arm around my back and I did the same to her. We took Franz' advice and relaxed into each other, but I didn't need him to tell me about having faith. I had found it all on my own dangling there with Missy between heaven and earth. I was no longer concerned about where the balloon was going. I knew that it would eventually land somewhere. In fact, there were no balloons now. There was no roaring burner. There was no Franz. The steeples and buildings cast shadows like sundials as Missy and I floated on the breeze, into the summer afternoon.

William Thrift, a graduate of the University of South Carolina, has traveled extensively in the United States abroad. After serving many years as a corporate regional manager, his creative side has emerged. In addition to writing a novel, he placed 2nd Runner-up in the 2011 Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society's Faulkner - Wisdom Creative Writing Competition for his short story, *The Summer of My Faith*. The story since has been published in the South Carolina Writer's Workshop collection, *The Petigru Review*. He is the editor and a contributing writer for *Columbia Home & Garden* magazine. In his spare time, he serves as Secretary for the historic Cottontown neighborhood in Columbia.



Jacob Appel
2011
Best Essay
**The Man Who Was Not
My Grandfather**



Rosemary Daniell's book *Secrets of the Zona Rosa: How Writing (and Sisterhood) Can Change Women's Lives*, was published by Henry Holt and Company, 2006 to great acclaim. Known as one of the best writing coaches in the country, Rosemary is the founder of Zona Rosa, the series of creative writing workshops she has led for 25 years in Savannah, Atlanta, Charleston, and other cities (including New Orleans), as well as in Europe. Her first book on Zona Rosa, *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself: Writing and Living the Zona Rosa Way*, was published by Faber & Faber in 1997. Daniell's revolutionary memoir, *Fatal Flowers: On Sin, Sex and Suicide in the Deep South* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980; Henry Holt & Company, 1989; Hill Street Press, 1999) won the 1999 Palimpsest Prize for a most-requested out-of-print book, and was re-issued that year. Along with her second memoir, *Sleeping with Soldiers* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), *Fatal Flowers* was a forerunner of the current memoir trend. She is the author of four other books of poetry and prose. Among her many awards are two N.E.A. Fellowships in creative writing, one in poetry, another in fiction.



In his early eighties, my grandfather—happily married for six decades and rendered impotent by prostate cancer—received a desperate letter from a woman he had dated while on military leave from the United States Army in 1943. All I knew of Blanche was that she'd once been trapped with Grandpa Leo for many hours atop an amusement park ride at Coney Island, that she'd been substantially overweight in her twenties, and that my grandparents exchanged cards with her and her husband every Jewish New Year. In short, she wasn't even a supporting actress in our family's saga, but a mere extra, a woman who had strolled across the background of our past and vanished into the ether of time and memory. All of that changed—at least momentarily—when her Rosh Hashanah missive arrived, penned in a caregiver's

hand, announcing that the unfortunate lady was recently widowed, and newly blind, and consigned to nursing home in a distant outer borough of New York City. Will you please come visit me? she asked. Her invitation pointedly included Grandma Lillian as well.

My grandfather shared the contents of the letter with our family over our holiday dinner that weekend. He seemed surprised by the request, and saddened at Blanche's condition, but nothing in his tone or manner revealed even the remotest inkling of affection for a woman whom he hadn't seen in sixty-one years. His greatest concern appeared to be the length of the bus trip to her facility.

"I suppose we have to visit her, now that she's asked," said Grandpa Leo—his voice utterly devoid of romance. He turned to my young cousin and added: "Visiting the sick is a true mitzvah, but never stay with them too long."

That prompted my aunt to recount—for my cousin's benefit—the comedic tale of my grandfather's sojourn with Blanche atop the amusement park ride during a lightning storm. Then my father and my aunt each offered to drive my grandparents to the widow's nursing home. "We can even go next weekend," suggested my aunt. "Whatever works best for you."

My grandmother had remained silent during this conversation. She'd always been an extraordinarily easygoing person, I should emphasize, certainly not one prone to jealousy or spite. She'd also never met Blanche, as far as I knew, and she had no reason to dislike the blind widow other than that the woman had once dated my grandfather. So we were all dumbfounded to see my grandmother in tears.

"If you visit that woman, Leo," she warned between sobs, "I'm not going to let you back in our house. Am I making myself clear?"

Grandma Lillian could not have been clearer. Nor, when pressed by my father, was she willing explain herself. "I'm his wife and she's not," said my grandmother. "That's the only explanation anyone needs." So neither of them visited Blanche, and they received no more New Years cards. My grandparents' marriage continued happily for another four years, until my grandfather succumbed to his cancer, and during that time, none of us ever again dared to raise the subject of

Blanche's request.

My aunt—maybe because her own marriage had been such an unhappy one—has always taken an interest in our family's past. Her interest magnified after my grandfather's death, and it was through her efforts to chart my grandmother's genealogy that I first learned of the man who was not my grandfather. That is the best way I have to describe the handsome young Latvian Jew who my grandmother didn't marry—because, even today, I still do not know his name. My grandmother insists that she no longer remembers it, and although I do not believe her, I have stopped asking.

We were seated in my grandmother's kitchen, several months after my grandfather's funeral, and my aunt spread across the tabletop a pair of faded photographs that she had acquired from our cousins. One was a group portrait: Here frowned the portly, double-chinned sisters of Grandma Lillian's father, and their phalanx of stone-faced adult children, three rows of Litman cousins decked out for a long forgotten wedding. In the foreground stood a brigade of sepia toddlers, boys and girls who would now have been in their late seventies. The other photograph depicted one of my grandmother's aunts and her offspring: five daughters endowed with zaftig peasant beauty, and a dashing, mustached son who might have passed for an Italian film star.

"He looks like Rudolf Valentino," I said, admiring my grandmother's cousin. "It's hard to believe that he's actually related to us." Nobody else in our short, round-faced family, to phrase matters delicately, displays similar Hollywood potential. "Are you sure he wasn't a changeling?"

"You never met him, Mom, did you?" asked my aunt.

"How could I meet him? He was in Europe and I was here." My grandmother dipped a donut into her coffee mug. "I was supposed to marry him, you know, but I wouldn't go through with it. Why should I marry a man I'd never met?"

"You were supposed to marry him?" my aunt asked incredulously.

"To get them out of Europe. Before the war," said Grandma Lillian. "The plan was for us to get married... and then his parents and all of his sisters would come over with him. Maybe his nieces and nephews too. It was my father's idea." I could sense a strain of irritation rising in my grandmother's voice, as though the wedding proposal had just been pitched to her anew. "Who was he to tell me who to marry?"

"You couldn't have married your cousin on paper?" I asked. "And then divorced him as soon as he arrived in the United States?"

"Whoever thought of such craziness back then? It wasn't like things are now. If you got married, you got

married and stayed married. Nobody got divorced."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Nothing happened," she answered. "I married your grandfather."

"But what happened to your cousin and his family?"

My grandmother looked at me as though I'd asked her if the earth were flat. "I imagine they all died in the war," she said, matter-of-fact. "My father never mentioned them again. It wasn't something we talked about in those days."

"So we don't know for sure," I offered. "They could have survived. Maybe we can find them..."

"They died in the war," Grandma said firmly. "Can't you leave it at that?"

"Do you remember their names?" I inquired—thinking that I might search for them or their children on the internet. "Do you know what town they came from?" "Why do you ask so many questions?" My grandmother sighed. "That's all I remember," she said. "Now let's talk about something else."

~

I would like to report that there is more to this story—that I tracked down the man who was not my grandfather, or his children, and discovered that my cousins had passed the war hiding out in a gentile's attic or had survived the selection at Auschwitz. The brutal reality is that all of the Litmans who remained in Latvia were likely shot by German Einsatzgruppen in late 1941 or starved to death in the Daugavpils Ghetto in early 1942. According to survivor-turned-historian Sidney Iwens, of the roughly 16,000 Jewish inhabitants of the region where my grandmother's family lived, fewer than one hundred escaped the Nazi death machine. So if there is any story still to be told, it is not of how my cousins survived the war, but of how my otherwise caring and gold-hearted grandmother allowed her father's family to be massacred. That is the Holocaust narrative we rarely tell, the opposite of Ann Frank and "Schindler's List," the tale of those who did not make the sacrifices necessary to save the lives of others. Or maybe it is not a story at all, but the human condition, so unexceptional as not to be noteworthy. For there are many strangers whom I could likely save at this very moment—via sham marriage—from starvation or malaria or subjugation, only these women are not my cousins, and nobody has overtly asked me to marry them, so I give very little thought to my role in their plight. The bottom line is that heroism and altruism make better literary themes than self-interest. The histories of the man who does not visit his blind ex-girlfriend and of the woman who does not save the life of her cousin are tales that we do not like to hear.

My grandmother is now ninety years old. She lives alone in the same garden apartment where she raised her three children—two physicians and a teacher—watching black-and-white films and painting landscapes and churches copied from picture postcards. I visit her every week, knowing that each time I walk

up her front stairs may be the last. I have no desire to cause her any stress or anxiety. But several months ago, I ventured one final salvo at learning more about her relationship with the man who was not my grandfather. My aunt had recently dropped in to display another set of family photos, so the moment seemed opportune.

"I've been meaning to ask you something," I ventured. "That cousin you were supposed to marry. Do you ever feel bad that you didn't marry him?"

A puzzled expression panned across my grandmother's face—and, at first, I feared she might not remember the cousin at all. But quickly, she found that isolated compartment in her memory.

"Why should I feel bad?" she demanded.

"Because if you'd married him," I said, "he wouldn't have died in the war."

I confined the death toll to one. I did not have the courage to mention his sisters.

"I suppose not," my grandmother agreed—as though this possibility has never before entered her mind. She gazed thoughtfully at her coffee mug. "But if I'd married him, I wouldn't have married your grandfather. You wouldn't exist."

That was true, of course, but my grandmother and her dashing cousin would have had other cousins, and my grandfather would have married someone else—possibly Blanche—and it is not clear that the world would have been any worse off, merely different. A generation of moral philosophers has grappled with how to place value upon the lives of people who do not yet exist, and how to compare their worth with the lives of those who already do exist, but such a conversation is well beyond my grandmother's inclinations or her twelfth grade education. To her, it's not even a tradeoff—that she let her cousin die so that my father and his siblings might live. The decision transcends cost-benefit analysis. It simply is what it is. She married my grandfather, and not the man who was not my grandfather, and there is nothing more to discuss.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" I asked.

"You and your questions."

"Do you remember when Grandpa received that letter from his ex-girlfriend, Blanche, when she was in the hospital?" I asked. "Why didn't you want to visit her?"

"Why should I want to visit her?"

"I'm just surprised it mattered so much to you after sixty years."

"Sixty years is like yesterday. You'll realize that sixty years from now," said Grandma Lillian. Then she laughed without warning. "What are you going to do when I'm not here anymore? Who is going to answer all of your questions?"

I told her that I was counting on her being around for a long time yet—at least another thirty years—although I knew that this was wishful thinking. Soon enough, the slaughter of the Latvian Jews will be only a second-hand memory, as unlikely to draw an emotional response from anyone as a visit to Blanche at

the nursing home. That is the horror of the past: that it is so expansive, and remote, and each day it expands exponentially, tearing through the emotional threads that bind it to the present. Already, Blanche is not Blanche, but merely somebody's mother, grandmother, ex-girlfriend. Already, the man who was not my grandfather is only that, and nothing more. When I am gone, he will be nothing at all.

Jacob M. Appel has published short fiction in some 200 literary journals including *Agni*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Conjunctions*, *Confrontation*, *Colorado Review*, *Columbia*, *Florida Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Iowa Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nebraska Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Raritan*, *Seattle Review*, *Shenandoah*, *South Dakota Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Subtropics*, *Threepenny Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *West Branch*, and *Xavier Review*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *Ploughshares*. Jacob's short story, *Shell Game with Organs*, won the Boston Review Short Fiction Contest in 1998. Another story, *Enoch Arden's One Night Stands*, won first prize in the New Millennium Writings competition in 2004. A third story, *The Ataturk of the Outer Boroughs*, won the William Faulkner-William Wisdom short story competition. Jacob has also won competitions sponsored by a variety of journals. His story about two census takers, *Counting*, was short listed for the O. Henry Award in 2001. Other stories received "special mention" for the Pushcart Prize in 2006, 2007 and 2009. His plays have been performed at the Manhattan Repertory Theatre, Adrienne Theatre (Philadelphia), Detroit Repertory Theatre, Heller Theater (Tulsa), Curtain Players (Columbus), Epilogue Players (Indianapolis), and Intentional Theatre (New London), and have received more than one hundred public readings. Jacob holds a B.A. and an M.A. from Brown University, an M.A. and an M.Phil. from Columbia University, an M.D. from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, an M.F.A. in creative writing from New York University, and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. He has most recently taught at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where he was honored with the Undergraduate Council of Students Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2003, and at the Gotham Writers Workshop in New York City. He also publishes in the field of bioethics and contributes to such publications as the *Journal of Clinical Ethics*, the *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, the *Hastings Center Report*, and the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. His essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Washington Times*, *The Providence Journal*, *The New Haven Register*, *The Albany Times-Union*, *Orlando Sentinel* and many regional newspapers. He currently practices psychiatry in New York City.



Ellen Ann Fentress
2011 Essay
First Runner-Up
In Apartment 102



I write in an 1832 plum-painted, brick four-story on Julia Street with all the requisite karma, mildew, mortar dust and reproduction naked-man statuary in its courtyard that you'd imagine a New Orleans place to have. I write--not live--here, if living means more than a Mac laptop, a tomato sandwich, a 4.1-mile jog to Jackson Square and a passable amount of upkeep of myself and my two rooms. For a part of each week, I drive 192 miles to coop myself up in a city that also offers 600-odd music venues and 1,110 restaurants. Why?

The unflattering truth is that I have the same urge that motivates all hangers on, flunkies and panty-sniffers, my fellow second-hand breathers of life. I've set up at the sideline. A quiet spot in an extroverted town--New Orleans in particular-- fits better for me than holing up in a pine patch. Given that my I-55 route bisects the Piney Woods of Mississippi and Louisiana for almost the entire three-hour length of the drive between my Jackson, Mississippi home base and Julia Street, it's a thought.

Yet for me, knowing that New Orleans is outside the dead bolt staves off my need to be out in it. I crave distance between the parade and myself, both actual processions in New Orleans -- a parade is going by lots of the time--and the infinite line of disruptions back in Jackson involving two young-adult daughters, a teaching schedule and a nervous eight-pound dog. I compartmentalize through real estate. I deal with outer life in Mississippi for half the week, my writing life in New Orleans for the remainder. The split creates two sets of yin/yangs: the Jackson/New Orleans time divide and the push-pull of New Orleans's presence outside the door once I'm here.

For a New Orleans obsessive, I'm an easily satisfied one, like a low-stakes gawker who's pleased to sight Craig T. Nelson or Nancy Grace in a car window as they pass by--B-list stuff that strike normal people as pretty minimal. I need the city's exuberance, but in careful dropper-sized doses. I've always loved New Orleans-- for any Mississippian who had a few family visits as a child, the beignets and transvestites glimpsed through a French Quarter bar doorway became eyewitness corroboration that a wider world exists. To a tender Bible Belt visitor, the child's-menu shrimp and overlapping club music on Bourbon Street were chump change compared to the

revelation of how offhand New Orleans is about what is sin a few hours north. It makes an upstate Mississippi child's consciousness roil like a fleet of Baptist church busses.

My ex-husband felt the draw of New Orleans, too. He courted work to maximize his time here. We rented a garage apartment in a fancy somebody's backyard near Audubon Park, and a New Orleans part-time base became a component of our marriage and of our two daughters' childhoods.

I came to see that loving the city doesn't mean you can't be satisfied by oddly small doses of it. Every year, my low threshold revealed itself before Mardi Gras was through. Our family quartet always seemed to wind up wedged along the parade route by cute college students from Ohio or Texas, otherwise good people intent on having one lost weekend as I stood alongside. I'd stop our sidewalk-mates from sizzling cigarette holes in my little girls or stamping the daughters' fingers in the race for beads. My spouse, meanwhile, celebrated parade days with Bloody Marys. Our biggest fight was after a parade--in some ways, I don't think I ever moved on from that argument for the marriage's duration-- when we clashed over how his Carnival intake left me with solo child-care call. We repeated that fight a lot, in New Orleans and in Mississippi, Mardi Gras or not. When it came to New Orleans barhopping, anything above token participation didn't work for me any better either. Ultimately, maybe I never could shed my strain of disapproving, tut-tutting Mississippi DNA. Maybe it sunk our marriage. Maybe there was more involved. Who's to say?

When a marriage ends in mid-life, some women go looking for a stubbled, studly man boy, others a floor job at Stein Mart. I wanted a New Orleans apartment, after my ex kept ours. A complete move to New Orleans wasn't my plan. In Jackson, my daughters were not quite grown, and I liked my teaching job and house. My idea for New Orleans was as a retreat in the spirit of *A Room of One's Own* or at least an Oprah-ish act of self-expansion. Tourist-issue New Orleans rowdiness ices me. Instead, I draw from the city's sense of itself. I feel a slow syrup of calm start moving through me whenever my Ford enters the tree tunnel of South Carrollton Avenue, lined with palm-fronted stout Eastlake two-stories, yellow light poking out the front windows at night. Even more than the

manicured grace of the glossy homes, however, I love the town's careless beauty. It's in the perfect proportion of the peeling shotgun cottage or the gingerbread confection on a dirty, decrepit Queen Anne. The yards of proud and hard-luck houses alike gush up with banana trees and fecund philodendrons, nine-foot square specimens that anywhere else are sentenced to live as sad mousy houseplants.

There's something about that easy outrageous capacity to thrive that is a crucial trace element to me. I realize it's missing every time I get back here and realize it went missing between residencies.

Post-divorce, I heard about a two-room apartment near Lafayette Square. I couldn't afford it, but decided to take it and worry about finding someone to split the rent with me later. I'd been in enough therapy to know I was entitled to do something outlandish, to not outsource swashbuckling to the man in my life. I watched my hand write out the pale-blue check for the first month's rent. I spread word to anyone who would listen that I had half a New Orleans apartment to split.

Soon I was seeking tables-for-one at Herbsaint and stools at Felix's oyster bar. I took myself to Tipitina's and d.b.a., where I would sip club soda and mildly and happily nod along with the set. The rowdier the other patrons, the more I unnerved them. Upbeat drunks edged away from me, fearful that someone as quiet as I was the kind of loner who plants a bomb or shoots up a club.

There are only so many times tables-for-one are entertaining. Heading out solo slipped on my agenda. I had another reason to cool on going out—I was finishing a master's, and my thesis deadline loomed. The page count mounted faster on Julia Street than in Jackson. Why? Losing interest in the House of Blues wasn't the whole answer. Concentration improves when you aren't half expecting a knock on the door, or an opportunity to eavesdrop on your daughter's telephone conversation.

I'm not opposed to loved ones, but my lack of them in New Orleans makes working simple. The truth is that I write better in New Orleans because no one I love is here, and no one here cares anything much about me. With just the concrete courtyard David for company—added by the third-floor tenant in my building who came to New Orleans and a decision to be openly gay simultaneously—I focus. When my New Orleans writing productivity first hit me, I wrote from morning until bedtime for five days straight. I only left the building to run. I'd write, eat my favorite too-salty tomato sandwich and remain in my funky acrid limp running clothes. I was manic. Schizophrenics off their meds blow bathing and smell as I did.

In a similiar meds-free way, while in residence, I realized I had swapped street exchanges for actual companionship. It's the counterintuitive truth that a rowdy place like New Orleans compliments solitary living. My silent apartment is a counterweight to the instant-gratification of eavesdropping street dialogs and the free-floating energy of Jazz Fest and Saints home game

weekends. To get a human fix, I go outside. I have a voyeur ritual on my daily run along the river at Woldenberg Park. I spy on the sax player—not that I've ever spoken to him—who stakes out the tourists. Perched on his regular bench, his tip box on the sidewalk, the guy keeps a lookout for a target family. I know his voice and his upcoming two syllables. He takes a trademark one-second pause between syllables when he calls out "Hey, kids!" with the fake brightness of a TV host. The family will return his smile, and—I've run past by now, but I'm still listening as I go—he blows the Sesame Street theme for a thousandth round, because no other song is in his repertoire. I like his M.O. because my life here has limits too. Just because a routine's simple doesn't mean it's not right.

I've been renting my place for three years now, and I've never turned up anyone to share the rent. After just a few months, I quit looking, to tell the truth. I need the apartment to myself too much to get my writing done.

Eight decades ago, Virginia Woolf said that for women to write, they need—along with a minimal independent income—a room of their own. She meant it as symbolism for the say-so to write without perpetual interruption. In 1928, she predicted, based on the pace of historical change, support to write would equalize for men and women in about one hundred years. Women's own acquired mindsets, that guilt-prone desire to be available to others, is part of the obstacle, as well as the barricades in the wider culture. It's no coincidence that aspiring Mississippi writers William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams both moved to New Orleans to write for a season, but not fellow Mississippi author Eudora Welty. She remained in Jackson and took care of her high-maintenance elderly mother, and it cost Welty years of lost writing time. It was Faulkner who famously said, "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate: The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is worth any number of old ladies." It was also Faulkner who wrote his first novel *Soldier's Pay* in a Quarter apartment.

In 2011, we are seventeen years short of Woolf's predicted date for equality of writing freedom. What about my strategy to drive three hours to New Orleans to write? I can allow myself to work only if I put 192 miles between myself and my known world. Otherwise, my distractibility gets the best of me. I collaborate against myself. I telephone the pharmacy for my college daughter, capable of handling it herself. I think about a student's essay when I should be thinking about my own writing. Maybe this apartment is less an exercise in self-expansion than remediation.

There's been renewed conversation recently about the sexual gap in publishing, particularly due to documentation by Vida: *Women in Literary Arts*. "The Count" presents 2010 statistics on the male- to-female writer ratios of the nation's most prestigious publications and in how male authors' books are more often chosen for

review and male writers as reviewers. (<http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010>)

Yet U.S. women routinely outnumber men in creative-writing MFA programs and at literary workshops around the country. Woolf would hardly be surprised, nor would she be surprised by women's disproportionate numbers in structured writing programs. Women are drawn to them, sensing that they are 21st century versions of rooms of one's own, a validating reason to go write. After all, an institution says the woman should. It was in writing my own MFA thesis when I first realized how much better I could write here on Julia Street. It doesn't speak well of my ability to fuel my ambition that I backed into the discovery of what this apartment could do for me as a writer. Apparently, writing programs serve a good in simply providing women transitional permission to treat their writing with respect until. Until what?

I could rent a cheaper writing place in a closer town than New Orleans, a destination just a quarter tank of gas from Jackson instead of the half tank that Julia Street is. New Orleans, however, is where I need to come to lock myself up and forego what's outside. New Orleans somehow lets me be more than I know how to be on my own, like unleashed college road trippers at Mardi Gras and the happily de-closeted gay upstairs neighbor in my building, draping his concrete David in Mardi Gras beads like a New Orleans altar god. An ineffable place like New Orleans give you permission to ponder your own mysterious possibilities too.

Carl Jung would have a field day. I divide my time and myself between Jackson and New Orleans. I've been drawn to divide myself between two states.

Back in Mississippi, fellow New Orleans lovers sometimes ask me to alert them to nearby vacancies, so they can rent a place in the city too. I cheerfully lie and say I will, but I don't want to start texting supper invitations and half-hoping someone will knock. And I would. True, my apartment's still a financial stretch, but I now have a Plan B to subsidize it. I rent it out a few weekends a month. Come those Friday evenings, I hand visiting friends my key, take their 250-dollar check and drive back to Mississippi.

It's sweet, I think, that I finance my New Orleans place on the checks of families who blow out the town in the way I can't and won't. Dislodged back in Jackson, I spy at my apartment visitors' Saturday night Facebook updates from Bourbon Street. Their just-posted iPhone photos tell the story. "The Quarter!" "The Coronas!" "The crawfish!" The couples always look happy and lean on each other, a little glassy-eyed. I stare longer and maybe more wistfully than I mean to at the photo. Then I go back to work.

Ellen Ann Fentress is a journalist and teacher in Jackson, MS, where she teaches writing workshops through Millsaps College. Her essays have appeared in The New York Times,

Oxford American, New Madrid, and Southern Women's Review and on Mississippi public radio. She is an MFA graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars.

Other Work By Ellen Ann Fentress:

**(Links available through
ellenannfentress.com)**

*Welty's Southern Discomfort
The Wilson Quarterly. Autumn 2010.*

*Your Call Is Important to Us
Southern Women's Review, Summer/Fall
2010.*

*Which Shows You What I Know
StorySouth. Fall 2011*

*Master of Crisis
Oxford American. Issue 62.*

*Intimate Strangers
Oxford American, Issue 69.*

*Lessons in the Past Tense
Oxford American, Issue 74. Online content.*

*Foreign Son
Oxford American, Issue 78.*

*Modern Love:
The Rubble of My Marriage,
Hidden by Katrina
The New York Times. August 26, 2007.*



Terri Staan
2011 Essay
Second Runner-Up
Bird Dog



Late in the fall of the year I turned eight, my father used me as his dog. It was dove-hunting season, and I suppose it's what a hunter does when he finds himself with a dearth of good bird dogs, and a surplus of daughters.

We loaded into his truck while it was still dark, the engine running rough in the gravel drive. I didn't have a jacket warm enough for the bite of this October morning, so he wrapped me in one of my mother's coats, belted with rope, the sleeves left long to warm my hands. I was the eldest of his children, so my father called me Sister when I was on his good side. He called me Sister on this morning, and told me we were going to have fun. I believed him.

We drove out past the paved roads, and parked in a field where there were other men with their dogs. They greeted my father, illuminated by a halo of headlights, all of them with rifles and speaking in hushed morning voices. While they talked, I tried to play with the dogs, but they were hunting dogs, not pets, and they jumped and scratched and often knocked me over altogether. Pretty soon, Dad made me stop playing with them, because, he said, we were making too much noise.

He made a blind from downed corn stalks and brush on the edge of the field. I watched him gather the dry stalks and stuff larger openings with weeds. When he was satisfied with the structure, he let me go inside. I could peek out and see a pond. It felt like a play-house, a place where elves would live. Sitting on the ground inside, he took a can of shoe polish from his pack and rubbed some under his eyes. He rubbed it on me, too, and told me I looked like a real hunter, and that I had to stay quiet. The polish tickled on my skin, but I didn't say anything. Quiet, from my dad, meant quiet.

As the sky began to fill with light, Dad loaded his rifle. He whispered to me that this was a good spot for doves because they'd harvested the corn late this season, and the birds came to eat what the combines left on the ground. He rolled the sleeves of my jacket up to free my hands, and we sat for what seemed like a long time. Suddenly, out of nowhere, my father stood up with his gun and began shooting through an opening in the blind. The air was full of the sound of shooting, and I covered my ears with my hands. After a short while, someone shouted

and the shooting stopped. My father pulled my hands away from my ears, and pushed open a hole in the stalks, motioning for me to look.

"There it is, Sister. Do you see it?" He pointed to the edge of the pond, and I thought I saw something on the ground, but I wasn't sure. There were dogs running out into the field from other blinds, trotting back with gray birds in their soft mouths.

"Go on!" he said. "Run get that dove before somebody's dog gets it."

I took off across the field toward the pond. The corn stubble was tough going, and I almost fell, but when I saw the dove, I ran to it. It was hurt, but not dead. It rested on the ground, one wing mangled, making a high-pitched keening. It tried to hop away as I got close, but only managed a small circle, dragging the injured wing beside it.

I had seen my father bring home dead animals, mainly squirrels and deer. But I'd also seen him set a fawn's broken leg and carefully save a small rabbit from a snare. Once he'd found a fox pup that was too young to live on its own, he said, and he kept it in a cage and fed it hamburger and pears from the tree in our yard until it was big enough to set free. I knew that hunting meant killing, and I also knew that if I brought the wounded dove to my father, he would heal it.

I scooped the bird up and held it close to my chest. It was soft gray with speckled wings and bright black eyes. I began running, and had halved the distance to where my father waited when he came out through the opening in the blind and began walking toward me.

"Terri Sue! What the hell are you doing?"

I stopped dead.

"Will you carry that bird right?"

He was angry, and I panicked. Had I hurt it? I raised my voice to tell him that it was hurt. He ignored me and kept coming, boots easily crushing the rough stalk that nearly tripped me.

When he reached me, he spoke through clenched teeth. "Are you trying to make me look bad? Like you don't know how to carry a damned bird?"

He looked quickly around the field before jerking the dove from me and flipping it upside down, holding it by its feet, blood dripping from shoulder to wing onto the

ground. He bent down and pulled my arm toward him, forcing the bird's scratchy feet in between my fingers, so it hung from my hand.

"Now, march that bird back to the blind. That's how you'll do it all day."

He walked away, and I stood there, blood dropping from the dove onto what was left of the corn. I can't remember how long I stood there, just that I was aware of the other men, in their blinds, watching me.

"Terri Sue!" my father yelled. "Don't make me come back out there."

I walked to him just fast enough, I figured, to avoid a spanking. When I ducked through the opening in the blind, one of the other hunters was there, too, squatting inside, his dog sitting beside him. My father took the dove from me, and as I opened my mouth to tell him about the broken wing, he popped off its head, silently, and stuffed the body into a canvas sack. He tossed the small head away into a corner of the blind, and patted me

on the back.

"She'll catch on," my father said to the man beside him. "She's my oldest girl, but I haven't hunted her much."

Terri Stoor, winner of the 2011 William Faulkner-William Wisdom gold medal for the short story, is a founding member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance, the New Orleans Chapter of the Words & Music Writers Alliance. This past summer she was invited to and attended the inaugural Oxford American Summit for Ambitious Writers. Terri was also the second runner-up in the essay category of the 2011 Faulkner-Wisdom awards, and placed a short story on the short list for finalists in the 2010 Faulkner-Wisdom awards. A former actor and comedian, she lives in French Quarter of New Orleans, where she is working on a collection of short stories and teaching her Labrador retriever to smile on command.



Photograph by Tadzio Koelb



Brian Schneider
2011 Essay
Second Runner-Up
Return to Civilization



My first event in Vancouver was the two bikini-clad girls doing yoga in the Rose Garden. Other stuff occurred before that. Like seeing the nature still-lives in the airport and moving into my dorm room on campus. Ordering a Granville Island Pale Ale in a bar, getting a dark beer in return – and being told this was correct. First person saying “dude” and “eh” to me in the same sentence. But the bikini-clad yoga girls were the first thing that happened after I left Afghanistan. This, coming to Vancouver, was it. This was the after.

Orientation lectures were in full bloom. I skipped out on some event or tour to get a jump on my reading. I forget which class it was for, probably telepoetics. Probably trying to figure out what the hell telepoetics meant. But defining things like that was “fun” – part of the reason I was at a university, reclining on a bench, looking at the perfectly manicured grass and the multitudes of roses, reading through poems. I wasn't in Kandahar anymore.

Like any good student I'd quickly put aside reading in favor of staring at the Rockies across English Bay and watching folks saunter through the garden. Behind me loomed the double-layered stone-brick wall shielding the garden from the interior of campus. Steps on either side could lead me over that wall if needed. Beyond those steps stood a flagpole, a Canadian flag drooped at the top. The view through the roses and toward the water was good, but I'd have to head to the beaches to get a real look at the waves. From the garden the ocean resembled sheets of crinkled blue. I wouldn't say the water was hypnotizing but under the circumstances – new to Vancouver, just back from Afghanistan – it was damn nice to look at.

As I continued to not read, thoughts clunked like bumper cars against my skull, electricity sparking with each crash. I'd been doing a lot of this sort of thinking. Trying to retrace my steps. June 6th, 1999, graduated high school in northern Michigan. Ten days later, U.S. Air Force basic training in Texas. On the plane to San Antonio the co-pilot announced over the intercom that the Spurs beat the Knicks in Game 1 of the NBA Finals.

Then the two girls walked into the Rose Garden wearing short shorts and t-shirts with no sleeves. One had blonde hair to her shoulders, the other black hair cut close. Unlike everyone else, who stayed on the sidewalks,

the girls moved onto the grass and made themselves comfortable amongst the flowers. They set down backpacks.

My mind was still bumping and crashing into 1999.

I'm not sure why I left home so quickly after high school. I'd had a perfectly good childhood, a solid American upbringing, but it was time to go. Apparently the excitement I needed required six-year military enlistments and voluntary one-year contracts in Afghanistan. The Air Force took me to Biloxi, Mississippi for technical training in electronics before tossing me on a plane to Aviano Air Base in northern Italy. I traveled the old continent, getting drunk in nearly every major European city and a lot of the minor ones too. Then September 11th. The day the world called my bluff. I signed up before it happened, at age eighteen. War was the furthest thing from my mind. Times were peaceful and I needed the Air Force to pay for college. It did, covering tuition for the night classes I took for my Bachelor's Degree while I was in Italy. And I still had my veteran's GI Bill.

The two girls stretched their arms upward and yanked off their t-shirts, revealing bikini tops and varying levels of tan-ness. The blonde girl moved seamlessly, easily. As I watched their bodies I felt the grip of observation as well. Instinctively, I glanced at the rooftops of nearby buildings.

I took my honorable discharge from the Air Force in June 2005. While I experienced the pleasure of combat training numerous times, I never got sent anywhere “hot.” Soon after the military I found myself in the office of a contracting company in Washington D.C. Or more accurately, the northern Virginia corridor. I wanted to say no. But I didn't. I wanted to be done with my military “career.” I wasn't. Things were rough back home in Michigan so I signed the contract for one year in Kandahar. I traded one uniform for another and deployed to a war zone for the first time in my life. I could throw some patriotism and world peace bullshit around but why bother. The contract offered a lot of money and I didn't have any.

I knew the risks, I wasn't naïve – at least not in that regard – but the danger wasn't any worse than the military. The cost was another matter. In the Air Force I

learned how replaceable my life was. In Afghanistan I learned how little life is worth, period.

In Vancouver I was hoping to find value – or at least something tangible to buy into. I'd convinced myself grad school was some unattainable dream I'd been working toward. A way to test myself that didn't involve getting shot at.

The two bikini girls limbered up, straightened their legs, and placed their palms together in front of their chests. They stretched and they yoga-ed. They bent upwards and forwards, reached arms strenuously to the sky. They squatted and exhaled, balanced and paused. The blonde girl's eyes were a lighter green than the grass. Her face was a wonderful, cheek-lined circle. She had a penetrating focus.

I don't remember exactly how Vancouver entered the post-Kandahar equation. Like contracting it wasn't a long, thought-out process. I had to occupy myself with something after Afghanistan. There was no conscious or political choice for choosing Canada. The University of British Columbia said they'd sponsor my GI Bill scholarship – not all universities do – and give me a paid teaching assistant position. Those were good enough reasons for me.

From a returning-from-war perspective, I can't say Vancouver was any different than an American city. The view was nice, though. Things looked all right. Yet no matter where I went after Afghanistan I felt targeted. And as I sat on that bench in the Rose Garden everything around me shimmered and shook. The yoga girls disappeared, followed by the blue water and the mountains across the bay. The roses vanished. The perfect green grass peeled back, leaving gustfuls of thin, powdery sand.

I was surprised but not shocked. I needed to stay calm and this would pass.

The Rose Garden's brick wall behind me was now the Great Wall of Kandahar. My tent was in the Air Force compound of the base next to this wall. The Great Wall was made of Jersey barriers, cement slabs reaching ten feet high, stacked one on top of the other – like the concrete dividers used during highway construction, only taller. Someone made the political decision to give portions of Kandahar Air Field back to the Afghans, never mind the new security threat. Never mind this freshly returned Afghan section of the base happened to be right next to where I slept. Twenty feet of cement separating my cot from the War on Terrorism.

In Vancouver, the Canadian flagpole turned into the solo minaret of the mosque on the other side of Kandahar's Wall. The mosque was small and desert-faded blue and white – not pretty iznik blue but dusty, dirty, barely-perceptible Afghanistan blue. Its spire was taller than twenty feet. Perfect for a sniper.

To my right the university's performing arts center dissolved into the large, hangar-sized tents of Kandahar's chow hall. Off to the left the student pub washed into the bombed-out building where I worked, pitchers of beer replaced with desert coffee.

I tried to keep my composure. I looked for the Pacific and I searched for the yoga girls, but they were gone.

I found Buchanan Tower, where the English department was located – a giant slate-gray waffle press-looking building that dominated the university skyline. It rotated into the radar I worked on, swiveling in the center of Kandahar's airfield.

Physically, I knew I was still in the Rose Garden. I just had to wait for Kandahar to go away again. Once this feeling passed – scared of everything, fearing nothing – the green-eyed yoga-girl would return. So would the ocean and the flowers.

I deserved my place here. Words I kept repeating to make sure I believed. I deserved to be in Vancouver – back in civilization – because I'd tested myself against the toilet of humanity. Didn't know if I'd won or lost but I was here. And yet I now smelled that world everywhere I went. I'd been flushed through to the other side and learned the hollowness of bravery, patriotism, terrorism, courage, freedom, honor, liberty, good, evil, indifference, hope, intelligence, skill, right, wrong, up, down, duty, and despair.

I deserved to be back.

But now my war was against the exterior bitterness and the guilt inside.

In Vancouver's Rose Garden surrounded by my Kandahar, I tried to sit still. I tried to make everything reappear, the flowers, the green grass, the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains. Maybe if I'd been gawking more at the girls Kandahar wouldn't have invaded my thoughts. Look at those cheekbones and green eyes, taut concentration and smooth confidence. Gawk-worthy girls. If I could just keep focused, maybe they would return and everything would go back to normal. But my Kandahar kept closing in.

*Brian Schneider is a former U.S. Air Force Sergeant, former military contractor, and veteran of the American war in Afghanistan. He grew up in the small town of St. Helen in northern Michigan and has also lived in Italy and Canada. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of Maryland and a Master of Arts Degree in English from the University of British Columbia. He currently is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of British and American Studies at the University of Constance in Germany where he focuses on contemporary American war writing. In addition, he also teaches English courses at U.S. military installations in Europe for the University of Maryland University College. His fiction has appeared in several magazines and he is currently working to publish his first novel, *This is Squalorville*, about his experiences with the war in Afghanistan and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.*



M/Bilia Meekers
2011
Best Poetry
**The Passion of
Louis Congo**



Judge **Rodger Kamenetz**, poet, essayist, non-fiction author, teacher, and popular lecturer, will judge the poetry category of the 2011 William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. For the last several years, Rodger has been deeply involved in research and analysis of what our dreams mean, research which produced the compelling book, *The History of Last Night's Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul. The Importance of Last Night's Dreams in the Global Village*. Kamenetz is the bestselling author of *The Jew in the Lotus*, his journey through Bhuddism to recover his faith as a Jew, including lengthy interview sessions with the Dali Llama, *Stalking Ellijah*, and *Terra Infirma*, a brilliant memoir about the author's relationship with his mother in his dreams after her death. Last year, he published the non-fiction work, *Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman Of Bratslav and Franz Kafka*, the links between two incredible storytellers.



The Passion of Louis Congo

I.
The slaves are keeping secrets from you now,
prophesying into the wrought iron railings
they mold around balconies like cats claw vines.
Louis Congo, walking past, can you hear them
whisper to each other: the Quarter will burn,
the city will flood, you will fall to pieces?

II.
Over your shoulder, the Superior Council members drape
a coil of rope and a length of chain.
Feel their weight

III.
gnawing into your skin.
Let your knee buckle like air beneath crow's wings.

IV.
Louis Congo, the slaves' fists crack
your cheek bone;
the skin around it, yellow and tender,
scabs over, heals...
tears open, scabs, heals...
until the scar tissue,
anchored to the skin in strips,
bleeds sluggishly when sliced,
splits to reveal bits of bone white.

V.
Louis Congo, I've slipped

VI.
your skin over mine:
the rough pads of your palms, the weight of your calves,
the film of sweat spread across your face;
I know the arch of your back
is royal, only the way a tin can can be royal,
glinting in the sunlight.

VII.
Louis Congo, when you ask, stumbling
into the attorney general's office,
your lips cracked
from uneasy breaths,
Help me, Francois—
Oh, Louis, don't you know better?—
Monsieur Fleuriau looks up
and says, I will pass on your request,
but until then, take this stone,
whet your blades.

VIII.
When Louis comes home one night,
his wife peels back

IX.

his shirt,
damp and stained with sweat or blood,
and lets her fingertips

X.

slide across
his shoulder, where the skin rises up,
inflamed, a flush of purple.

XI.

In the steaming water,
you watch your wife's hand
dip down

into the copper tub, and draw
out a white rag the way one would lift up
a hand full of sand, the water running down again.
Her hands cradle

the cloth like a dove,
wiping it beneath your eye, Louis Congo,
and dragging it along your jaw line.

XII.

Louis Congo, bleeding beneath your skin,
ask the attorney general again.

XIII.

Louis Congo, curled on the ground,
reach for what

XIV.

the slaves have forgotten:
a torn blanket and an old coat.

Take them, Louis Congo.
Take them

in your hand, rub the fabric
across your bruised cheeks and whisper:
C'est fini...C'est fini...

I know better.

XV.

In the evening, the air stills.
From the cypress trees,
the cicadas sing like sirens
and Louis Congo dreams
of slaves lit by embers.
Smoke stinging
their eyes, they shift
red coals and temper iron.
Before their faces,
steam rises
like a veil in the black,
where, over coal-dark anvils,
they forge his fate,
the crossbar of a crucifix
they will lower to his grave.

M'Bilia Meekers is currently pursuing a B.A. at Tulane University. Her series of poems on Louis Congo has won an American Voices medal in the 2011 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Ms. Meekers, who entered Tulane this year, is a graduate of Lusher Charter High School and former student of Lusher Creative Writing Director Brad Richard. She was Runner-up in the Society's High School Short Story Category last year.

Recommended Reading: Poetry

Predatory by Glenn Shaheen

Winner of the 2010 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, Shaheen's work explores the silent and often forgotten places in America. Minimalism at its best, *Predatory* chronicles the solitude of what might be considered another lost generation.

A Witness in Exile by Brian Spears

In his semi-autobiographical debut collection, Spears documents his religious upbringing as a Jehovah Witness while intertwining his present life in the landscape of the South. Spears' work shows a deep vulnerability and reminds us that finding peace with our own lives, our own pasts, and our own spirituality is always a struggle – but a struggle that is of great importance.

Wait by Alison Stine

This follow-up to her first book, **Ohio Violence**, follows a young girl who seems to live in a midwestern Gothic fairy tale, plotting an escape with or without the help of those close to her.



Anne Webster
2011
Poetry
Runner-Up
My Women



*...her delicate looks give no hint of how she
machetes herself a new path, sipping danger
as her elders had tea.*

My Women

On a trip to Russia, tourist shops sport shelves
of Matryoshka, each a painted woman, her hair
under a babushka, wearing a smile, a blue
cloak.

A round belly fills my palm as I unhinge
the halves to find another woman nestled inside.
Like peeling an onion, each smaller figure
opens,
until the last, tiny figure emerges, unbroken.
The stair-step figures, their shining faces, would
have us believe a cheery life in primary colors,
not the dreary Soviet stories our guide
spins.

I think of the women from whom I emerged.
They hang in my hall, silver-framed portraits—
a pinched faced great-great grandmother who
begged to be buried away from a cruel
husband,
a scowling great-grandmother by a husband,
four
handsome sons and a daughter who will
become
my father's mother. This grandmother poses
in a boa, a fancy hat, denying her hard country
upbringing, the family's only wealth a horse.

Beside her, my other grandmother wears
a fluff of chiffon, her auburn hair in a bun,

her face too serious for a young girl, as if she
already knows she'd be a widow at thirty.
My mother at sixteen holds an armful of roses,
her face framed by dark curls, her cheeks pink,
still innocent of depression's velvet curtain.
Like the Matryoshka, these women bowed
under cast-iron rules with lives ordered by men
and blood—hog killings monthlies birthing.

In the next row, I'm a ten-year-old with hacked-
off
bangs, a bit of Cherokee in dark thicket brows,
wearing a taffeta Easter dress, a straw bowler,
while my sister, at fifteen, looks a woman in
navy crepe.
We've already a survived a crazy mother, a
drunk father.
In an eight-by-twelve, my daughter walks
barefoot
in a filmy blue dress, her blonde hair a cascade,
her delicate looks give no hint of how she
machetes herself a new path, sipping danger
as her elders had tea. In the last photo my son's
gapped-tooth daughter grins, her body solid as
the smallest Russian doll. She sits the edge of
her seat
under a cloudless future, fearless as a launching
eaglet.

A History of Nursing, Anne Webster's poetry collection
(Kennesaw State University Press, 2009) was a nominee for
the National Book Award. Her work has appeared in such
literary journals as *Southern Poetry Review*, *The New York
Quarterly*, and *Rattle*. Her essays were in the anthologies:
Final Moments, *A Call to Nursing*, and *View from the Bed/
View from the Bedside*. She also contributed a chapter
in *The Poetry of Nursing: Poems and Commentaries by
Leading Nurse Poets*, a text used in *Medicine & Literature
and Creative Writing* curricula. She lives in Atlanta.



Elizabeth Tsubai
2011
Poetry
Runner-Up
No Waterline



No Waterline

1

Miss Clotilde she stays over by North Prieur Street
Live by herself in that half-shotgun goin' on thirty-five
years

House leans a little, look like it shoutin' hallelujah
Bars on the doors and windows
Smells like cookin' and the gas stove it leak a little

Miss Clo' she skinny; she like a little ole bird
Ninety-one now but she don't even look eighty
Hair be hardly gray, she's so proud 'bout that
Just started usin' a cane last year down the steps
Eyes a little bigger every time she gets new glasses

Born 1914 up in Robeline, her papa sharecropped
Young Clo' come to the city lookin' for work
Forty years pressin' in a laundry
Musta been the heat and steam made her face so girl-
smooth
Iron burns on her hands – she know every scar by year

Husband he die young, she raised up two babies
House cleanin' and took-in wash made ends meet
A little help from a man now and then but not much
Her boy Clevon he gone, stepped on a mine in Vietnam
Shirley got the high sugar, on the kidney machine now
and both legs gone

People they look out for Clo' but she do for herself just
fine

Lives on the social security and a little bit of pension
Lady brings foil-covered plates every day 'cept Sunday
Bus comes by to take her to church and after there's lunch
Later a neighbor child might bring a dish of ice cream

Saturday night she lays out her church clothes
There's a big storm comin', they say, maybe this way
Miss Clo' been through hurricanes and floods plenty
Water in the house with Betsy in '65, kinda bad
But she know her prayer circle turned Camille east in '69

Lotsa people partyin' outside
Power might go off so they cookin' everything
Grill and smoke smells, laughin' and bottles rattle
The church bus'll come get her in the mornin'
They'll sing and pray for the turn

Sunday mornin' she ready with her hat on
Bam! Bam! Bam!
Some folks at the door say "Miz Clo' Miz' Clo!
Mayor say we gotta leave, hurricane gonna be bad.
Car's full but you can sit on a lap."

"I ain't goin' nowhere. I'm waitin' for my ride
My church and my Jesus comin' to get me"
They drive off and Miss Clo' goes sit on the porch to wait
All day she waits
Then she go inside.

Elisabeth Tsubai, a native Texan who spent her formative years in New Orleans, in addition to writing poetry, also is a comedy writer/performer and a former member of Houston's Third Coast Comedy troupe. Libby integrates her craft with her work as a palliative care and bioethics specialist: Her one-act play "A Conversation with Tiffany" (a biting satire about an elderly woman's death in an ICU) has been performed to rave reviews at healthcare conferences and venues across the country. In 2006 Libby was honored by the Houston Chronicle for her innovation in end-of-life education. She lives in Bellaire, TX with husband Kenzo and daughter Miko.



Ruth Marie Landry
2011 Best
High School
Short Story
Nerve Endings



Michelle blamed the piano. When people asked, she explained that it was perfectly normal for a the fingers of a pianist who practiced as much as she did to grow a little, and hers had just forgotten to stop. This explanation no longer sufficed by December of her junior year, when her fingers had stretched to two feet long. She still didn't tell anyone the truth though, that her fingers were trying to escape her.



Although it was barely noticeable throughout the day, whenever she played the piano, Michelle could feel the bones of her fingers stretching, could feel them extending out to the keys, a warm, tingly feeling that ran from her finger tips to her wrists as muscles and veins and bones lengthened as if pulled magnetically to the keys... and the sensation she felt after playing those last notes was almost painful, as her fingers threw themselves at the keys in desperation, as they tried to force out just one more cadenza, a few more chords, a little more improvisation and a few less sonatas, please. The ache these last moments brought on was nothing like growing pains, where one's ligaments feel as if they are burning from the inside. This ache felt like her fingers were hollow. Empty. Useless but for the moment they were placed back on the piano.

Michelle found that long fingers were quite impractical for things other than playing the piano, although they weren't bad for roasting marshmallows. Other than that, they mostly seemed to get in the way. By senior year, her fingers were a little bit longer than two feet, almost half of her height. If she tried to close her hands, her fingers curled up into her armpits, making it impossible to hold anything, like pencils and pens or eating utensils. She only ate pomegranates, as she could scoop the seeds out using her fingers like a shovel and then lick the gooey red orbs from her fingertips. She pretended they were caviar and that she was exotic and from a far off place with a hard to pronounce name, where sucking ruby globules off one's fingers was a delicacy reserved for only the most honored and loved of all citizens. She sat on the park bench outside of the

auditorium like Cleopatra.

Michelle began playing the piano when she was six because her aunt was dying. Michelle didn't particularly like her aunt, nor did she care that she would be gone in two months, but her mom would bring Michelle to go sit with Aunt Donna anyway, and in that musty house that smelled like baby powder and puke Michelle discovered the piano. It was in the corner of the living room next to the red armchair. Michelle liked how when she poked the keys they made noise. While her mother sat with Aunt Donna, Michelle knelt on a piano stool, hair so long it skimmed the keys, making a canopy around her face as she pressed notes into the air, one by one. She sounded out the barest tunes of songs she heard before, repeated them over and over and over till she found the exact right notes.

Her mom didn't hear her play until after Aunt Donna's death, and initially, it thrilled her. She was convinced that it was her sister's creative gift filling the child, it was a sign of her sister's love for her. The word 'gift' was used a lot the first year of piano playing. Michelle got a private tutor who practiced with her three times a week in hour long increments. Michelle's mother didn't want to overdo it. She believed in creativity. Michelle's tutor did too, but he believed in learning Mozart and Beethoven and Chopin first. Michelle liked Mozart best. Their names matched and she knew he played piano when he was her age. She thought they could be friends and was very upset when she found out he was dead.

Michelle's mother wished Michelle was more similar to Mozart than just in age and name—she was very disappointed when her child could only play what others created. She would sit Michelle at the piano and tell her to create, to have fun, to explore, and Michelle would begin Tchaikovsky much to her mother's disappointment. Michelle continued to be tutored into piano through lower and middle school, but less frequently. Three times a week became two became one. Her parents did buy her a key board for her twelfth birthday, but it soon became a forgettable part of the Brown family's life. The only reminder was the sonatas that would ease out of the cracks of the closed door on the second floor.

Michelle had a few friends through lower school, and by middle school she had a defined group of them.

Six friends, all of whom had better friends than her. Best friends, she thought in retrospect. But at the time she didn't notice it. Her mom had never let her out of the house much. She thought the family would be stronger if they spent more time together. Michelle only began to notice her lack of real friends in high school. Two of her six friends had moved to a different school, and the other four became friends with other people who Michelle wasn't friends with, and because Michelle already had four friends, she didn't see why she had to make anymore. So she didn't make an effort to know the kids at her school. She found their noise to be disconcerting anyway. Michelle preferred to spend her time at the piano, where she either pressed the right keys or she didn't. Music was simple to her then. It was right, or it was wrong. This changed in time, with the growth of her fingers. But initially, it felt like math. All she had to do was remember the rules and keep a steady pace.

In her freshmen year, as she was walking to history, she passed the park bench outside of the auditorium, the one that she always sat on while she waited for her parents to come, or for break to be over, or for it to be her turn to practice the piano, except now it wasn't empty. Now it had people sitting on it, and those people were together. They were sitting there talking to each other, laughing and smiling and making elaborate hand gestures, and suddenly Michelle realized that she was probably missing out on something. Even more than that, that she was probably missing something—there was probably some defunct part of her in herself somewhere that wasn't good enough for this type of interaction or companionship. Until now, time without her didn't exist at the bench, just like high school wasn't there until she was in ninth grade. All the upper classmen, their tales were fabricated and fake, like extras in movies who come up with stories as for why they are walking in the backdrop. Irrelevant. Until she saw them on her bench.

This was when she stopped eating lunch with her four 'friends'—who by now she realized were not her friends, they were just people whose presence she was often in—and spent her time in the auditorium, playing Mozart's Sonata No. 14, her favorite. She set her lunch along the top of the piano and every time she made a mistake she ate one item from her brown paper bag. If by the end of lunch all her food was left, she would reward herself by skipping her fourth period English class to eat. Which in turn, finally caught up with her. Sitting in between her mother and the principle, she chose her words as best she could, not an easy feat for someone who had been skipping English class.

"I have been playing the piano," she said, folding her then normal sized, two inch long fingers on the side of her chair. "Composing," she added, and her mother beamed. "In the auditorium."

Her mother was thrilled. Her principle was not. "We do not condone skipping classes. If you want to practice, you can schedule an independent study."

Sophomore year her mom made sure of it. She had the auditorium all to herself third period. Kids and

teachers on their way to class would peer in through the doorway to see who was playing. Sometimes they would stay and listen and tell her that she was good, which she already knew, but it was nice of them anyway. Sometimes they would come back. Sometimes they would mention that she was getting better, faster, more confident, which she was. She never tried composing, but sometimes, after the ego boost of a passing thumbs up, she would think she should give it a shot. Maybe she wanted to show off.

That was how she met Jennifer. She was one of those people who stopped by to listen. At first she seemed mildly interesting, except she never shut up about her boyfriend Artur. Artur was Italian, as well as imaginary. She claimed he was real and in college so people wouldn't know she spent most of her time alone in her room. Michelle and Jennifer ate lunch together and talked about the piano. Jennifer also played, but wasn't as good. Once Michelle's fingers started to grow Jennifer was jealous, and to cover it up she talked about Artur even more. Michelle thought she was boring, but couldn't criticize. She knew her fingers really disliked Jennifer though. She could tell by the way that they itched whenever they ate lunch together. They got jittery, and it was even harder to scoop the pomegranate seeds than usual. They didn't think Jennifer was good enough.

That was one of the first signs that her fingers were different, even before their growth. She could tell what they were feeling objectively, like hearing someone's thoughts. But the fingers were too primitive for that. All the fingers felt was that lust for the piano, the feel of slick ivory against their skin, the sense of recklessness that Michelle could not give them, of escape. Michelle knew these feelings weren't coming from her because of how intrusive they were. They began to take over her thoughts, everyday, this desire to flee to the piano overwhelmed her. Michelle tried to keep it at bay by doing math problems in her head.

Michelle's fingers were noticeably longer by April of sophomore year, which along with the fact that her fingers had feelings, frightened her as well as her parents. Her mom took her to the doctor when her fingers were a foot long. The doctor took x-rays and pictures and called it a miracle and asked if he could show his priest. Michelle's mom politely declined. Michelle's family was not religious, besides having a faith that the world would continue to turn whether or not they proclaimed their loyalty to this deity or that. Michelle did not mention the feelings that accompanied the fingers.

Those who didn't think her fingers were a gift from God thought they were weird. Her brother was one of those people. Halfway through junior year, her fingers were too long for her to safely drive. Her car, which she had finally saved enough money for that year, in the hands of her younger brother made her want to puke. That smug smile that he gave her as she carefully situated herself in the passenger seat was unbearable. Michelle hated seeing him in the front seat of her car. He hated seeing her at all. Max thought her fingers were disgusting. "Can't you wash those things?"

The answer was yes, although normally her response was to just show him how clean her middle finger was. He had a point though. Her fingers got very dirty, very fast and could not be washed in a normal sink due to its shallow size.

When Michelle walked down the halls the other students gave her a wide berth. It was easy to step on her fingers, which dragged on the ground. By senior year it was a natural reaction, if you saw Michelle, you moved away instinctively. It was only a problem when Michelle had to open a door, and there was no one there to help. Her fingers could not grasp the door knob, they were not strong enough to open the door without the help of her palm, which was too far away from the door to be of any assistance. Michelle hated closed doors more than she hated red lights.

Her second period calculus class hated her. Formerly her favorite class, it soon became the most dreaded. It was the only class she couldn't use a computer in, and had to use a pen to take the notes. Every time the pen slipped from her grasp, the whole class would cringe, as she scraped her fingers across the floor trying to scoop up it back up. While this was fairly easy, getting it back into a position that she could write with was nearly impossible. She would fumble with it, think she had a good grip, and then drop the pen again. The process was endless. It didn't help that the boy in front of her would turn around and stare at her the whole time. She didn't know who he was, but she had caught glimpses of the notes he wrote, and they were certainly not about math. ... skeletal fins of ancient fossils... held regally like a praying mantis... the framework of wings brushing against... probably good for massages... She didn't think about it because it made her queasy.

Once he tried to help her. He grabbed for the pen as it rolled past his feet, nearly falling from his chair. He scrambled back into his seat and held up the pen triumphantly. Beethoven's fifth played in her mind as she waited. He turned and offered the pen to her, stretching his arm forward, thus forcing her to stretch her arm backwards so their fingers could meet. She tried to get a good grip around the pen, but her fingers kept sliding. Finally, the boy grabbed at her fingers. His hands were warm and sweaty. Michelle tried not to pull away as he fed her fingers the pen.

The fingers were equally repulsed, except they were more vocal about it, shrilly proclaiming their discomfort in Michelle's brain. Michelle simply nodded and retracted her hand as quickly as her pen holding capabilities would permit before her fingers would make a fuss. Her fingers spent the day waiting for her free period in the auditorium. They tingled with excitement, they leapt uncontrollably at the sound of a student humming or a muffled tune heard through a student's too loud earphones. This grew worse the closer it got to college auditions. She tried to control them, tried to force them back to the math problem inches below, but her fingers turned the math problems into piano keys,

the ink of the x's and y's expanding to become sharps and flats, the spaces in between them becoming wider as they became the neutral keys, and Michelle closed her eyes and her fingers took over, and suddenly she was no longer in that second period calculus class where everyone rolled their eyes and a boy with a firm frown scribbled words that made her want to throw up, she was in front of those college professors and her fingers were telling her what to do and the communication between them was perfect, the veins that connected the two of them were pumping with blood and oxygen and a life force that swelled through the fingers and out into the piano till it was pulsing through the whole room, a solid flow that left the professors quaking, that swelled and surged and lifted, until all that was left was a breath, a breath and then math class, and the feeling that she had to stop her fingers before they poisoned the rest of her veins. Lunch was spent on the bench with Jennifer. November, her fingers buzzing with anticipation for the auditions, Michelle found herself making mistakes.

"Artur and I watched Glee last night. Did you?"

"No."

"Oh. It was good. They—"

"Do you and Artur only watch TV?" Michelle knew she was being rude. She licked a slimy aril off her finger.

"No," Jennifer seemed surprised. Normally Michelle only listened. Jennifer continued on irritably, "No, we also read *Pride and Prejudice*."

"Oh really? Together? Does he look over your shoulder, or do you both have your own copies?" Michelle let her voice dip low and said the words smoothly, like what she was saying wasn't impolite in the least.

After that, Jennifer made a point to step on her fingers in the hall. The fingers made a point to try to punch her.

Sometimes, after she Michelle finished practicing for the night and she went to close the fall, her fingers would pull her so violently that they would dislocate themselves. Michelle would run to the kitchen as fast as she could, as far away from the piano as she could get. Like ripping off a band-aid, it hurt, but once she was crouched on the counter, face in the pantry, prying at the seal of a ziplock bag, scooping out the red round little aspirins reserved for her "growing pains," once she had pushed them into her mouth as fast as she could, felt the round red little aspirins cycling through her blood stream, messing up her brain waves, making her numb, once she was numb, she was okay.

It was a week before the college auditions. Michelle practiced daily, but her fingers did not think it was enough. Michelle had nightmares in which her fingers left her in the middle of the night. They walked out of Michelle's room, down the stairs, out the front door. Her fingers found their way to the bus stop, they got off at the right street, they looked both ways before crossing. They crawled through the cracks, they found their way into the school, and peaking back and forth to see if anyone else was there, they crawled onto the piano keys

and amazed the professors, who immediately offered them a scholarship, which the fingers accepted. The next day everyone congratulated the fingers, and Jennifer and the boy from the calculus class were nowhere in sight. The fingers were gracious to all of them, and shook each of their hands, much to their amusement. They all said, "Look at how long those fingers are!" But the fingers never responded, and this was the flaw in the dream that allowed Michelle to wake up.

It was the week of the audition. Michelle saw Jennifer walking down the halls, and this time it was Michelle who turned to get out of the way. She could not afford to have her fingers stepped on. She walked quickly, hopping Jennifer had not seen her, and didn't think when she reached out to open the door of a classroom.

Before she could find the handle, before she could curl her fingers around the metal lever, the door swung open, smashing into Michelle's fingers with startling speed, and at first Michelle thought this was good, she thought the door was open and she could go through and avoid Jennifer and her finger-crushing-feet, she thought she was free and fortunate and had escaped.

She looked up at the open doorway in front of her to see the boy from her calculus class. He was staring at her fingers, and his own fingers were digging in his backpack to pull out that notebook he used in calculus. He reached a hand forward, stretching his fingers as if to grab hers. Michelle avoided his touch, and in doing so, she followed his gaze, she looked down at her hands, she saw her fingers, and she knew. That night, she stared at them. She had hid her fingers from her parents as she ran up the stairs to her room. She had made her brother keep it a secret, and for once he had acted as a brother should and said nothing. Her left hand fingers were still normal, or as normal as they could be, but her right were mangled. Bent at odd angles and caked in dry blood because it hurt to wash them. Broken in so many places that they zigzagged, making them only half the length of the fingers on her left hand. She tried to set them in place, but no matter how many times she pushed the bones back into their spots, they seemed to slide out, as if they wanted to be out of her body.

Michelle thought of the boy in her calculus class who stared at her, she thought of Jennifer who was jealous, she thought of her brother who thought she was disgusting. She thought of all the times people in the hall had stepped on her fingers, how many teachers would not look her in the eye, how many people whispered when she walked by. All the attention she had received, but she was certain the fingers wanted more.

The fingers were not content any longer to sit on her hands. Michelle was holding them back. Michelle was the only one who could free them, only she could sever the ties of veins and muscles and bone that bound the fingers to her insides. She was sure this breaking had been an attempt on their part to escape. Maybe Michelle's insides weren't ready to let go of the fingers, or maybe it was the other way around, the fingers, for all

their talk, were not ready to let go of Michelle. It certainly seemed that way when they wrapped completely around her, curling protectively like an external second ribcage. And yet when the fingers played the piano, she could feel them stretching, see them trying to break out of the bonds of skin and sinews to escape from her and play the melodies and harmonies with more fantastical speed and agility than Michelle could muster. They wanted this.

Michelle stared at her fingers and felt betrayed. Her body was out of control.

So she gave them what they wanted. One by one she bit them off. She started with her right hand, already bleeding. Placing her teeth at the spot where normal fingers would end, as she figured the fingers couldn't be so greedy as to want to steal all her life, she closed her eyes and pressed her teeth firmly and quickly through skin and muscle and bone and muscle and skin. Her finger fell to the floor, and the blood that dripped from it fell to the carpet, and the carpet absorbed the blood, and the stain it left would later be bleached out, but for now Michelle just let herself repeat repeat repeat repeat repeat repeat repeat repeat till all that grew from her hands were stubs bleeding on a carpet.

The fingers tried to get up. Michelle watched them as they attempted to lift up each other, and it was like watching a new born deer try to stand on too thin legs. They tripped over themselves, the blood dripped from their bases and rolled down their sides, making them slide off one another. Michelle watched them as her stomach churned. They fell again and again, and Michelle felt a strong pang for them like the remnants of relationship, an old friend that parted on bad terms, and Michelle scooped the fingers into her palms and stumbled to the keyboard in the corner of the room. But when she placed them on it, they just flopped helplessly, unable to create music. Michelle could not bear to show them to her mother, could not imagine burying them beneath the earth where they might never hear music again. So she folded them gently at the joints and put them in a shoe box which she put on her book shelf next to her radio, a reminder of her once love.

The stubs where the fingers had once sat healed over with time. New skin covered the broken bones and exposed veins, no longer poisoned with the finger's musical fever. Michelle got into a college and left with a business degree. She married and had a son, who she named after her brother. She lived to be 82. And on her shelf sat the fingers next to the radio. Sometimes she could hear them tapping.

Ruthie Landry was 17 and a junior at the Academy of the Sacred Heart and a level two creative writing student at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts when she won the gold medal. She loves writing, but also enjoys programming, embroidery, and listening to loud music. Technology simultaneously scares, intrigues, and inspires her to write. She is the daughter of Michael and Elizabeth Landry of Metairie, LA.



Gordan Vincini
2011 Short Story
by a High School Student
Runner-Up
An Unimportant Occurrence

The Basis:

The young man stepped out onto the sidewalk and breathed the thick air that the storm had left. He nodded to a crossing woman, fixed his tie, and raised his hand to signal passing taxis. Just then, a boy in torn blue jeans tripped onto him. The boy apologized, and the man helped him stand up again. Only when it came time to pay the cab driver did the man realize that he had lost his wallet.

Cast:

Young man
Woman
Teen
Taxi Driver

Point of View:

Young Man, Third Person

The young man stepped out onto the sidewalk, soaking in the heavy air abandoned by the storm. He fixed his tie, watched a woman pass by him and thought of her naked, and raised his hand for a taxi as his thoughts drifted back to his own wife, imagining kissing her in the kitchen. He was brought out of his reverie by a boy who had fallen on him. He helped the apologetic boy up, slightly sour at having been interrupted, but smiling to cover it up. He thought of the boy, who was obviously poor, as he got into his waiting taxi. But before he could take out his wallet to give the boy some money, the taxi driver asked him for an address, and he forgot about the boy. He told the man the address of his home, and closed his eyes, imagining his wife in the fine lingerie he had bought her.

Young Man, First Person

My shoes clacked slightly as I stepped onto the wet, gray concrete. A woman passed by, attractive, but past her prime. I could see the gray hairs interspersed among the blond ones like dead trees tarnishing the fresh beauty

of a burned forest. Her face was only fair, and beginning to wrinkle. Only her breasts were still young.

She looked towards me, so I nodded and smiled while she passed by. I made a pretense to look after her by fixing my tie. From a frontal view, I would've placed her at 35, but from behind she lost ten long years. I raised my hand for a taxi, and my thoughts began to shift back to Laurie at home, her pretty red hair shining through the smoke she inevitably made while cooking, her youthful face turning to me as I came through the door to kiss her.

I started when a hand collided onto my hip, and another on my abdomen. A boy had tripped and fallen onto me, grabbing me for support. He apologized quickly and repeatedly, and I just smiled and helped him stand. The boy apologized again, guiltily, as he walked away, and I watched him trudge away as I stepped to the cab which had pulled up for me. His jeans were torn and faded and his hair was dirty. I wanted to help him. I was reaching for my wallet to give some money to the boy when the driver interrupted.

"Where ya gotta be goin'?" Home. I gave him the address and he turned into the avenue as I closed my eyes.

Woman, Third Person

Her heels tapped on the sidewalk as she walked past a loitering teen. She was late for work and didn't have time to give the boy any money. She looked up from her thin white shoes to see a young man watching her. He flashed a smile and nodded, trying to hide that he had been staring. She returned with a slightly raised lips. He wasn't bad looking, and must have been ten years younger than she was, so, though she told herself that he was disgusting for watching her so impolitely, she glowed from it and hoped that he would watch from behind too as she swayed even more.

Woman, First Person

I picked up my speed a little to get past the little delinquent teenager hanging around the curb. He was a suspicious character. Then I looked up from the new

shoes I had just gotten, fine, white heels that would be sure to impress my boss, and I saw this young man staring at me. He nodded and smiled to cover it up, but I had seen the pervert. He must have been ten years my junior, and he was watching me. He was handsome, actually. He had a long face and light blond hair that complimented his eyes well. They were bright green, not hazel, real green, like a Christmas tree. I felt proud that I was still attractive to someone like him, and I pushed my hair aside, hoping to cover the few grays that had sprouted, but I still sneered at the disgusting man, and walked past him.

Teen, Third Person

The boy had been sitting at that parking meter for two hours, waiting for someone who looked like a pigeon. Then that woman had passed by, and he'd watched her ass. She passed some guy, then started really flaunting it. The boy watched her go, then looked up to see just the kind of guy he was looking for. A nice, young businessman, standing there just like a dumb bird with his hand up, signaling a taxi. The boy liked the look of him, and didn't really want to steal from him, but then he thought of the past few hungry nights. He sauntered up to the man, who was daydreaming, and pretended to trip. He landed his hands on the guy, near the his pants pocket and his jacket pocket. He felt the wallet and lifted it out while pretending to scramble up, apologizing. The man just smiled sweetly and helped him. Suddenly, the boy felt really sorry for stealing from the guy, and he apologized again, this time for real. Then he walked away quickly and almost tripped on his jeans. When he got home and counted the money, he found five hundred dollars and some business cards for a real estate agent. Those, he through away.

Taxi Driver, First Person

The raised hand flew down, so I started looking around for any other signals. There were none, and I put my blinker on to turn onto a side street so that I could get back to the start of the route. It had been a long day, and I'd had three business men in their tight blue or gray suits and raised arrogance curse me out for getting stuck in traffic. They think that they're better than I am, because they've got their jobs and I've got mine. In this seat, my college education doesn't mean a thing to those suits. But they all paid, though sometimes after haggling. I felt nice knowing the money was in that little door under the dashboard, where no one could see it. But my gun was close at hand, especially since it was getting dark and I would have to leave the main streets. I honked at the car ahead of me, but shrugged at the upraised finger that flew out of its window. I turned my head to see a very bird-like man, tall, lanky, and with high shoulders, helping a boy up. The boy slipped a wallet into the pockets of his torn

jeans. I considered calling to the man, but I looked at his gray suit, buttoned up all proper, and held my tongue.

The man looked up at me after the boy had left and started walking forward. I panicked, assuming that he was going to confront me about not telling him anything. But he had not noticed the boy doing it, I thought, since he didn't say anything about it. But maybe it was all a planned thing, to see if anyone would help him, to test my moral fiber. Well, my moral fiber was strong as iron. He opened the door and I opened my mouth to tell him that the boy had stolen his wallet, but all that came out was the question I asked all of my customers. "Where ya gotta be goin'?" I swore inwardly, but he just looked up at me, shocked out of a daydream, and told me his address. My mouth was already wide again to tell him to go get that boy when I realized that it wasn't a trick. He was ignorant of the whole thing. I slumped back in my chair, relieved, and turned off of the street. When I dropped him off, he apologized profusely for not being able to find his wallet. He ran into his house to get some more money while I waited. His face was like a stork's, faded white and remorsefully peaceful, as he came back out with my twenty dollars in crumpled \$1's.

God, All Persons

Theodore Stout walked out of his work at a real estate agency into the air the storm had imbued with moisture. He was a good young man, a bit caught up in lust, but predominantly honest and kind. He was eager to get back to his young and pretty wife. Susanne Addest walked towards him, hoping that he would notice her, and that she could rebuke him. She was a vain, selfish person, often arrogant, and unhappy with her home life and slow relationship with her husband, Jeffrey. She needed more attention than Jeff could give to her, so she wore tight clothes and swung her hips. Theodore watched her as politely as possible, but his faithful mind went back to his wife, Laura, as he motioned for a taxi. The driver, Ezra Prown, came close just in time to see Theodore get robbed by Jacob Threach, who was trying to get some food that night, and thought that he was forced to steal, although that does not excuse his action. Ezra witnessed this and said nothing. He almost did when suffered from one of his common paranoid attacks, but he managed to keep silent, even when Theodore later realized that his wallet, which contained five hundred dollars, was missing, and he had to break the jar in which he had been putting one dollar bills to save to go on a vacation, just to pay the driver. Laura was angry at him for losing the wallet, and they slept on separate sides of the bed that night.



Sarah Reiner
2011 Best Short
Story by a High School
Student Runner-Up
Fourteen

The trouble with people is that they won't just be what age they are and stay like that. Some people anyways. My sister will be fourteen in only half a year, which makes it a bit odd for me to be fourteen, in perspective. Her turning thirteen was a big deal, because of her Bat Mitzvah and a few days later getting her first period and because 13 is my favourite number.

See, twelve and eleven and ten for her were much the same – to how I saw her, and to how she saw everyone else. But fourteen! She can't be fourteen yet, because I'm still fourteen. I'm permanently fourteen, in my mind. Or at least it feels like it, because I've called myself fourteen ever since the summer that looked forward upon eighth grade and now I'm a sophomore in high school.

You see, fifteen is so inconsequential. A number, a lean, average, "teenage" number instead of a whole person in a whole mind and life. Maybe because fifteen is an odd number, too. The calendar says I'm fifteen, but I only really felt fifteen on a few occasions like when my grandma was making the fuss over what I'd asked for my birthday when she said fifteen-year-olds were too old to play with dolls. So in my mind, I've been fourteen this whole time, for almost two years.

Part of the trouble is that my mind seems to have decided my birthday starts with the school year in August, and I keep saying I'm almost the next age and then when my proper birthday finally comes in October, it feels like old news. So this year, I'm trying to stay fourteen until my birthday actually comes, so that Sixteen feels special and new when I really am.

I think I'm sixteen. Sixteen or eighteen, but again, those are special landmarks I'm trying to not reach at until I actually get there. Fourteen, however, is perfect. Me, adult, child, conflicting and full like an orange-cranberry muffin. I think twenty-one will be special too, but I don't have trouble with that because I don't think I'm twenty-one yet. There it is again, an odd number! What is it about them? Braces and sparkly diamonds and French fries for the odd-numbered teens and average, hideaway childhood details for the tot ages of odd numbers. I suppose, in adulthood, odd or even numbers won't matter much anymore. I wouldn't know.

These are the thoughts I walk with as I stroll in a solitary, winding cloud through the mall food court. My name is Andrea, by the way. Andrea Heller. I walk by a mirror, and when I think about my appearance, it makes me

want to introduce myself to someone because I'm now pleased that my black high-heeled boots and black jeans suddenly look fifteen years old. My jacket is winter green and looks much more sophisticated, but despite my train of thought the dark brown eyes reflecting in the mirror all at once look fifteen proper, and I go over to the first person I see to strike up a chat.

He's a reader, by the looks of it, and I recognize the title of his book with an easy smile. "Why hello there," he starts first. "And who would you be?"

"Andrea," I reply. "Would you be so kind as to direct me to the bookstore?"

"Sure. It's out there, past the octagon of display stalls, in the hall after the shoe store, you take a left... Ah, I'll just show you."

I smile again warmly, moving sleek, dark brown hair behind my pixie-point ear. "Oh would you? Thank you so much." The smile I give is trusting, and the leather bag on my shoulder shifts with my posture, but I don't guard myself or anything. I can tell he's not dangerous, so why would I need to?

As we walk, the kind redhead introduces himself as Eli, and from underneath frameless eyeglasses, he explains he's here for a date but arrived early, and of course he has time to walk me to the bookstore, one of which is one of his favourite places. "And yourself?" he asks.

"I'm just wandering through, maybe to pick up some light reading."

Eli nods understandingly, then semi-awkwardly searches for more conversation. "So how old are you, Andrea?"

"I'm eighteen."

"Ah." He pauses again. "You're quite tall, Miss Andrea."

"Do you think so? For where I come from, I am so terribly short. Compared to my father, why, I'm nearly a dwarf."

"Oh. Then I suppose it's.. just me who's a short man..." he trails off, then resumes again. This Eli pronounces words unusually, like he has a speech impediment. Or he's trying to hide a fake Australian accent. "Where do you come from?" he tries again.

"Genovia," I say, and I let my eyes turn misty. I'm remembering a past in a radiant New York suburb, where I lived with my grandparents and mentally challenged brother. They wanted a pet, but I'm allergic to cats, so we always had dogs.

I break from my reverie to look over at my companion. Eli raised an eyebrow, looking a bit confused. "I've..

never heard of the place. Is it nice there? That.. sounds like a fairytale movie."

"Oh no, it was horrible. Genovia is quite a nasty little city in Michigan. I spent my childhood with an old hag of an aunt, and my cat was the only one who ever cared about me," I say.

"I'm so sorry. I grew up right here, with the church."

"I'm an atheist."

Now Eli looks a little more than uncomfortable. "Ah, and here we are at the bookstore!" he says with relief. I thank him, and smile a charmed, sixteen-year-old smile, undaunted by the man's obvious discomfort. The smile coils like cold play-doh around my tongue, thick and false and slimy.

Bored now, I mull over the charade once I'm in the bookstore. Maybe I should have told him my name was Zelda, and I was a lost duchess trying to find my husband. Or perhaps a thirteen-year-old nun at the Church of Body Modification. That would work, because I have a black headband I can put on that shapes my hair like a veil, and there's some fake lip rings in my purse. But now I see a book cover, something about a singer, head thrown back against a paper wind, holding out a long note rising from her white dress. I think that maybe I want to sing like that, but discard the idea when I see a more exciting

I'm walking through the children's section now, and I see a SpongeBob SquarePants poster. I leer at the page. "You should cover SpongeBob in oil," I say to it. "Like all those holes can be blackheads. Then chop him off the page and have him drown in the gulf. It's called realistic fiction."

Now I'm in a sour mood, and I want to save the turtles and the duckies and dolphins. I decide to go find some turtles. So I go into Claire's - that purple-walled place with the glass windows in front and mirrors on the ceiling inside, smothering everyone who goes near in bubbling pop culture. I like the store because whatever else is in there by the day, they have incredibly cute buy-2-get-1-free earrings and this is the best place to get them.

I spin a white earring rack, watching the light purple cards flapping. Aha - A perfect pair of turtle earrings, glittering green, with cute little lighter green heads and arms and legs sticking out. I'm going to buy them, because turtles are cute sea animals and they're green like my favourite coat. String beans are green too, and I'm suddenly reminded of them when I see pea-green, long, nasty hair extensions hanging on one of the annoying lavender walls. I don't like lavender. Never have, I decide now. Not even lavender bits in 72% dark chocolate! But I do like string beans, and I'd eat them but for the little girl whining in the corner waiting to get her ears pierced, ruining my appetite. I want to leave the store altogether—and am blocked by a saleslady.

"Why hello there!" she gives me a perfect white grin, made only more annoying by perfect pink bubble gum.

"How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for Tinkerbelle," I say. The lady squints at me. She's twenty-five, twenty-six maybe. Or she's seventeen. One of those over-plasticked exotic, half-black and half-French-or-Italian-or-something-else girls who

are absolutely beautiful, but no-one really wants to tell them that because they've put so much glitter and greasy products on.

"Ah," she says, thinking she gets it. "The Disney charm bracelets are right over this way," she calls me back into the store. "And while we're passing by, would you like to look at Jonas Brothers headbands? How about some Hello Kitty?" She babbles away, farther and farther off the mark with ever dizzying, perfume-saturated step. I think I'm starting to choke on the ego in here. Or maybe it's this lady's perfume.

Now I really am coughing and sputtering and I can feel the pressure balloons rush to my skull, demanding oxygen, and I suck in a few dry gasps that are sharp and turn my throat raw. She turns around, eyes widening in shock. Or maybe my eyes are widening, as if they can breathe for me, as if eyeballs can somehow magically give my forehead air.

"Are you okay?" she shrieks.

I sputter something else, my lips and tongue trying to eat the air, and in one of the mirrors it occurs to me that I look like I'm having a seizure in the middle of French-kissing an invisible person. I'm seeing funny, like there's a heavy teal cloud in my head. Then I lurch forward, and I'm pretty sure I passed out on the floor.

Carpet.

I awake to carpet against my cheek. My eyes are still closed, but I don't want to open them. I feel alert and surreal, at the same time. My stomach is uncomfortable, pressed against my bag underneath me. I'm still wearing my shoes. For a moment, I'm sure I'm seventeen.

In a minute, I realize that there's shouting. No-one has bothered to stir me from the floor, and people are running around in chaos.

"NOBODY MOVE!" I hear the scream. I don't look up, I don't know where the front of the store is or why I should assume the shout was from the front of the store.

Now I do look up.

Slowly, carefully, tilting my head and feeling my eyes roll back, I see there's a policeman and the store manager freaking out, babbling something about a guy with a gun and a purse or something like that. I scooch back, to the rear exit of the store, out of some nervous, dizzy instinct. I wonder what to do now. It would be stupid to try my luck getting out of the front of the store. So I decide to wait a few minutes and go out the back. I stand, hiding behind accessory racks, then slip out of the door and onto the outdoor sidewalk, breathing a sigh of relief. No-one stopped me, and I'm ready to be done with the mall for tonight. I don't know what happened back there, and I decide I don't want to. Touching the turtle earrings on my lobes, I realize I never paid for them.

I'm not going to now.

It wasn't dangerous, was it? Of course not. Today was perfectly normal. A perfect reality of oddness. I smile, because I know today, I'm too old to be fourteen. When my birthday comes in two months, I can celebrate something different, like Cupcake Day. Because right now, in the sweet night air, I am sixteen years old.



Jeanette deVeer
2011 Best Short
Story by a High School Student
Runner-Up
Purging

It never bothered me that Uncle Fritz didn't call me by my name the whole time I helped him with selling his canaries. He never said, "Jacob, answer the phone for me, will you?" but instead he would always say, "Son, go out and get the paper off the lawn," but I knew he knew my name. I remember asking Mama when I was younger why Uncle Fritz called me "Son" when he wasn't my father and I wasn't his son. She told me that it was just like how she called me "Baby" all the time. I wasn't a baby for as long as she called me that but she still did. It wasn't exactly like a nickname but it was pretty close and nicknames show that we are "familiar" with each other, which means relating to the family. Uncle Fritz and Mama and me was the closest thing I had to a complete family.

Uncle Fritz liked rocking in his rocking chair on his porch, spitting out the shells of sunflower seeds while people would come to buy one of his canaries. He sold them as a hobby in the summertime. You see, he didn't always make a sale if he didn't like the way a person moved his mouth when he talked or if someone wore bright, hippie-looking clothes or something of that sort. But when he did, he sold them for a hundred dollars and sometimes twice as much if the buyers asked too many questions about where he got the canaries in hopes that the buyer would hurry up and leave. The canaries didn't sing because they were just for show.

Uncle Fritz was Mama's brother. Mama said he never was lonely because he had all his canaries even though he never had any kids. But that didn't never make a bit of sense to me because they're birds and birds don't care about Uncle Fritz. Matter of fact he couldn't even tell the difference between the birds; he still called one of them Moses, like the prophet from the Bible, but Moses is long gone. I know this because I named all the birds, good names like Moses and Tweety, and I was acquainted with every one of them. I named Moses because that's who we were studying in Sunday School and it was Uncle Fritz's middle name. Uncle Fritz tried to use all the names I gave the canaries. He really did try but he could never get them right. I think he had trouble getting attached to them.

Uncle Fritz wasn't the most intelligent man but he was smart enough to marry Aunt Alice. I don't say that to be mean because it's the truth. She never yelled at him

and just swept up his sunflower seed shells. If she didn't, who else would?

When Uncle Fritz sneezed, it sounded like he said "Whiskey!" He couldn't help it, it just came out like that. It's just like when I snort while laughing and my face turns red as if Mama forgot to make me put on sunscreen and I went swimming at the watering hole because I'm always so embarrassed when I snort. Mama says it's "endearing" but I think it makes me look stupid and I'm not stupid.

When we visited, Aunt Alice always sent me to check up on Uncle Fritz. I'd never walk down the side of the driveway closest to the house because there was no way of knowing if Uncle Fritz was trying to see how far he could spit his seeds, and those suckers hurt if they got you on your arm. Aunt Alice sent me with a fresh pack of sunflower seeds to give to Uncle Fritz. Good thing she did because he was always in a better mood if he could nibble on something. But you can't ever open his pack before it gets to him because then he'd eye you suspiciously and just assume you swiped some off the top, which I would never do.

One Saturday morning when I was ten years old we were on the porch, him in his red wooden rocking chair and me on the ground. Aunt Alice and Mama were cooking breakfast. Some man named Haywood had called up Uncle Fritz on Wednesday of that week saying he wanted ten canaries. Ten of them! So Mama and Aunt Alice put their heads together and decided it would show our appreciation if they cooked this kind man some breakfast and invited him to come eat with us. So they were cooking away and it smelled really good and I was real close to dying of hunger. Uncle Fritz was eating his sunflower seeds, just content as can be. The only other times I saw him dressed up that nice were Easter Sunday or Christmas dinner. He wore a tie and everything. I remember he reminded me a lot of my daddy, or at least the picture I got of Daddy.

When I was only about six years old, Daddy left me and Mama. I don't know why but I'm sure he had a good explanation. Mama never talks about him, even when I ask questions. Sometimes I get upset because I have the right to know who my daddy was. That's why I still have the picture of Daddy in his suit on his wedding day. Mama threw away everything else. I don't recall

him leaving but I do remember all those black plastic garbage bags that Mama filled with the clothes he left behind and pictures of him. He used to subscribe to The New York Times and he saved a whole bunch of newspapers. Maybe he wanted me to read them one day when I would be old enough. Anyway, Mama threw those in a black garbage bag too, and some of his books. She borrowed the Craytons' pick-up truck from across the street and filled the bed with the bags of Daddy's stuff. I climbed in the front of the truck and buckled up my seatbelt while Mama heaved bags over the side of the truck. I watched her in my side mirror. Her face was turning pink because some of them were real heavy. Then Mama came over and tapped on my window with her knuckle just like this. She motioned with her hands in a circle to roll it down.

"Baby, you gotta scoot over. This bag can't fit on top of the others so it's coming in here with us."

So then I sat in the middle with the garbage bag on my right and Mama on my left. Her eyes were all red and watery and she sniffed a little bit after she slammed the door shut. She never told me where we were going. I got the feeling that it was gonna be a long car ride so I slouched over and before I knew it I fell asleep on top of Daddy's clothes.

When I woke up, the top of the bag unfurled from being all twisted up before. I peeked inside but nothing really caught my eye so I just looked out the window. We were getting closer to the lake which made me remember a joke Mister Henry, who worked at the library, told me one time: "You know, when I was about your age, my dad taught me how to swim. I was really excited about it and I couldn't wait to be able to race the other boys. He took me and my brother out to the watering hole. But I was a little nervous so he gave me a push. Boy, it sure was hard to get out of that gunnysack." I thought it was funny when I first heard it. But after Daddy left us it didn't sit right with me that a person could joke about a daddy trying to get rid of his children, like they were as disposable as stale bread or an empty soda can one might throw in the lake. Anyway my stomach started making noises so I told Mama, "Mama, my stomach's starting to make noises. Are we there yet?"

"Yeah, don't worry, baby, we'll be there before you know it."

"Mama, why we driving so far?"

"That's a very good question, baby, and I ain't real sure how to answer it 'cept that I need to get rid of your daddy's things and get rid of them as far as possible from us. He left us, baby, just took a suitcase of clothes and drove off in the middle of the night and he ain't coming back. Well, we'll show him. We can get rid of him just as fast as he can get rid of his wife and his child."

We just kept on driving and driving and it seemed like the road was never gonna end. But Mama's not a liar and soon we pulled off to the side and stopped at some gas station. I had no idea where we were. We could have been in San Francisco for all I knew. I was only six years old at the time.

Mama parked the truck next to a dumpster. It smelled bad so I said to Mama, "Mama, it smells like something's dying in that dumpster."

That reminds me of once when I was riding home from school on the bus and I saw a dog on the side of the road in a little grassy area. He was lying down on his side and at first I thought he was sunbathing or something like most dogs do. But there was something strange about the way his legs were sticking out; they looked so stiff. I saw him every day in that same position and I didn't want him to be dead. But then his stomach grew thinner and sunk towards the grass. I never saw any of the canaries dead, Uncle Fritz made sure of that. It didn't happen often that one of them would die because he always sold them before they got too old. But when one would die, I hoped that Uncle Fritz buried the bird in his yard because I might have been scarred for life if I ever went to throw something away and saw a dead canary with its stiff, little legs in the garbage can.

But anyway, back to Mama. "Stay in the car, baby," she said. She walked across the parking lot towards a man putting gas into his truck. When Mama walked, she leaned her body forward, shoulders hunched. I crawled across the seat and propped up on the door on Mama's side; I was curious to hear what she was saying to this man. She was pointing at the dumpster.

"...it'll only take a few minutes, I swear. Oh, thank you so much."

That man grabbed two of those black garbage bags, one in each hand, and lifted them out of the truck bed, just like a garbage man would do. And do you know what he did? He threw the bags right into the dumpster like a garbage man! That just about made my blood boil. I pushed the door open and hopped out of the truck, screaming at him to scare him off.

"Mister, what do you think you're doing? You can't just throw away stuff that's not yours! That's against the law and you should go to jail for it! Just because you're an adult doesn't mean I can't call the cops on you, you big bully! Come on, Mama, let's go find a pay phone to use."

"No, baby," Mama said, "I asked this kind man to help me. The dumpster's too tall for me to throw the bags inside. I ain't strong enough."

I leaned up against the truck door, watching them throw away all Daddy's stuff. I mean, once it went in the dumpster, it wasn't coming out. While the man hauled two garbage bags and threw one in right after the other, Mama strained herself to throw just one bag as if she was granny-tossing a basketball. She usually missed but she just turned around and walked right back to the truck. So the man picked up her leftovers too.

Mama hurled one hard enough to make it settle on the ledge of the dumpster. I thought it might stay up there but most of it spilled off the side like Uncle Fritz's stomach overflowing on top of his jeans. The weight of the stuff inside the bag made it stretch and grow thinner until it split. That's when I found the picture of Daddy. I ran up to try to catch the garbage bag but it went right through my hands like sometimes when I try to catch a baseball.

I snatched the picture while Mama was too busy scooping up everything else that fell out of that defective garbage bag. She dumped it all in a garbage can that was next to the gas pump. Then she came back and we hopped into the truck and went on our way, leaving Daddy behind in the dumpster.

But going back to Uncle Fritz and his canaries, on the day of the big sale with the man who wanted to buy ten canaries, I fed some lettuce to the ten who were going on to bigger and better things and I made sure they had enough bathwater. They usually ate seeds so they were a little mellower when they got other food. I wanted them to be just perfect for Mister Haywood because this sale was going to make Uncle Fritz so happy. It was always a good sign when he let me feed them by myself. I couldn't choose the ones to give away, though, because if I could I would choose my least favorite birds. But I had to respect Uncle Fritz's decision on which canaries to sell, even if I did not agree with it. My favorite, Tweety, named after the cartoon, was leaving. He was the friendliest and ate right out of my hand like I was his daddy or something. I didn't really have a daddy because my daddy was only with me for six years. At first I thought I wouldn't mind being apart from my daddy, but then I started getting mad. When I got older and realized what he'd done, I almost wanted to rip that photograph of Daddy. I didn't want to see him all put together when me and Mama were filled with questions and anger and splitting like that garbage bag of Daddy's stuff in the dumpster. The only thing I liked was taking care of the canaries. I guess Mama liked taking care of me, too. It kept our mind off of Daddy. I fed the canaries seeds like I fed Uncle Fritz his sunflower seeds. It made me feel good and gave me a responsibility, even if I had to share the job with Uncle Fritz, kind of like a family business. Maybe everyone's a daddy or a mama to somebody, even if that somebody is a canary or your nephew.

Well, Uncle Fritz was all dressed up and Mama and Aunt Alice were cooking and I was still near-death from hunger and we waited for Mister Haywood to show up. Mama opened the front door every five minutes or so to check and from my spot on the porch, I stood up each time a car drove past the house. I could tell Uncle Fritz was nervous too because he finished his whole bag of sunflower seeds. I should have fed him some lettuce too like I did for the canaries because maybe he would have been mellower.

Finally the big moment came. Mister Haywood pulled up into the driveway and honked his horn at us on the porch. I yelled, "Mama and Aunt Alice, you better come out here quick! He's here!"

Mister Haywood's feet were the first things to exit the car. He struggled to stand up; he pushed his weight forward, hands pressing on his seat, then leaned back, before pushing his weight forward again. The second time he was able to lift his behind from the seat and smiled to us on the porch.

"What a lovely sight! The whole family together!" he exclaimed, his entire body emerging from the car. He

counted "one, two, three, four," pointing to each of us on the porch. He was much older than I had expected. "The old legs don't move as fast as they used to. Now, where are the birds?"

"Right this way, Mister Haywood," Aunt Alice answered once he had reached the porch, "but first you need some breakfast." I sure was glad that Mister Haywood had a head start because otherwise I would have run him down to get to the kitchen. I wolfed down my food so I could check on the canaries just to be sure they were doing okay.

"How you doing, Tweety?" I said, stroking the bird with two of my fingers. Another bird stood next to Tweety, named Clarence. Clarence, not one of the ten that Uncle Fritz had chosen for Mister Haywood, did not look too good. I lifted up his right wing and could see light coming through in little holes.

"That your boy?" I heard Mister Haywood's voice say. They must have finished breakfast. Soon they would be in the garage and find me with Clarence. I panicked, thinking Mister Haywood wouldn't buy the canaries if one was ill or infested with mites.

"No, nephew." Uncle Fritz added, "He's my sister's boy." They were both in the garage now so I could see Uncle Fritz's face. He looked uncomfortable or embarrassed like somebody had suggested that yellow fuzz, like canary feathers, was growing on his chin. Mama said it made him so uneasy because my daddy left me and he didn't always want it to always hang over me. It wasn't the first time someone made this mistake, thinking Uncle Fritz and I were father and son, especially strangers passing through to buy a canary. Even Mister Barnes at the hardware store got confused once. You know, I wanted to tell Uncle Fritz that he shouldn't worry about this whole daddy business because it didn't really bother me that much. I was fine with him not picturing himself as my daddy. Uncle Fritz didn't have to be my daddy because he could just be Uncle Fritz. Get it? What I'm trying to say is that being a daddy don't really mean nothing. If that person you call Daddy leaves you, he's just for show.

But before I could say anything or hide Clarence's wing, Mister Haywood approached the cages. "That one of mine?" he asked, no longer smiling.

"Oh no, indeed not, sir, this one's got an appointment with the vet this afternoon. After that, he's going in complete isolation," I invented.

"Whiskey!" Uncle Fritz sneezed.

"You know, you really shouldn't allow the boy to be around the birds so much. These fellows," Mister Haywood said, tapping on the cage with his fingernail, "probably carry diseases that might make the boy sick. I shouldn't even be around them in my old age. That's why I'm giving them to my son to care for."

"I'm as healthy as a horse, Mister Haywood," I told him. "I'm a big help around here, too." I couldn't lose the canaries.

"If I were you, I'd get rid of them." Right after Mister Haywood said those words I wished I could have

shut his mouth with my own two hands and maybe have a couple canaries help too. Because in a flash, Uncle Fritz had made up his mind. He didn't talk to me first or even make eye contact with me. My face burned and all I could do was let go of Clarence's wing with the tiny holes.

"How?" Uncle Fritz asked quietly, his back facing me.

"You could offer them all to me. For the regular price, of course."

I wasn't that little boy anymore who yelled at the man at the gas station when I saw him throwing Daddy's stuff in the dumpster. I tried to hold my tongue because it would have been rude and all to threaten, let alone actually call the cops on that poor old man. But this was different.

"They've all got mites. All forty of them. They'll all need special care and medication," I lied again.

"Mister Haywood, I promise that besides the one you've just seen—"

"Clarence," I said.

"—Clarence, they are all healthy. Come see for yourself."

"Maybe you ought to keep this one," Mister Haywood said, pointing at Clarence.

I don't remember how we fit the bird cages into the backseat of his car or how the silence moved from out the garage into the house and down the street to my house where I'd fall asleep each night with my ears ringing and no longer filled with little chirps, but I do remember the day I arrived at Uncle Fritz's house to find him digging a grave in the yard for our last canary, Clarence. Soon after the mites, Clarence got sick and died. I remember searching for a shoe box to bury him in and lifting his little body out his cage and into the box. After we lowered the box into the hole, Uncle Fritz handed me the shovel.

"Put your weight on the shovel, son. You can scoop up more that way."

The grave wasn't very deep but I was only ten years old at the time. Never did work before besides feeding the canaries and cleaning their cages. I barely scooped up anything before my arms got real tired. I looked to Uncle Fritz for help, like maybe he had another shovel or something and we were going work together on covering up the hole with dirt again. But I heard the creaking of his rocking chair behind me and I knew he was going at his sunflower seeds again. Soon the grass would grow over Clarence's grave and but until then, Uncle Fritz would have a new place to aim and spit the shells of his sunflower seeds.

Jeanette deVeer, a student of Brad Richard's at Lusher Charter High School in New Orleans, now attends the University of Southern Mississippi.

Recommended Reading 2011 Short Story Collections

American Masculine by Shann Ray
Keep in mind the stories of Hemingway and Jim Harrison in mind while reading those by Ray and you will understand just why his collection won and deserved to win the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize.

The Empty Family by Colm Tóibín
Tóibín, who divides his time between the United States, where he teaches at Princeton, and his native Ireland peoples his stories with characters trying to navigate between different countries, often involving some reconciliation of a past and present. Frequently, his protagonists are homosexuals engaging in sexual relations more explicit in this new collection than in his previous collection, *Brooklyn*. In his stories, sexual identity is practically another country, representing another boundary to straddle or cross. His characters are navigating between different countries and often are in some reconciliation of a past and present. Tóibín developed a much expanded following with *Brooklyn* and he has reconfirmed his mastery of the short story form with **The Empty Family**.

Ladies and Gentlemen by Adam Ross
Ross established a talent for designing architectural narrative in his well-received debut novel, *Mr. Peanuts*. Wringing droplets of bleak humor out of each situation, this is a fierce collection addressing the collective disillusionment of the American middle class whose members are finding everything they wish for to be far less satisfying than they had hoped.



Anthony Otten
2011
High School Story
Runner-Up
**The Wait Before
Paradise**



She anticipated her salvation with the tenderness of someone whose heart had never known the cruelty of an empty highway near dusk.

She wasn't asking for a flaming chariot; she only needed a plain woman, driving alone. A young mother who'd feel a pinch in her Samaritan heart when she noticed the girl dangling her legs over the crumbling wall outside the Ainsley pool club. Reverend Pickering's granddaughter in her borrowed floral-print maillot, pale as seaweed in the maple twilight.

Her fantasy burst into the visual, almost deceiving her. A '68 Volkswagen sweating fumes and clearing its throat of oil. A baby girl's stare from the backseat. The mother's—her mother's—smile, her bright cheeks aglow like a jack-o-lantern. The girl's mind could envision it, could hunger for it, which meant it must exist somewhere. Like Heaven.

Behind her hulked the sandstone club, its windows and dripping locker rooms cave-dark, ready for the hibernation beginning in autumn. Wind waded through the parking lot, shuffling leaves and Eskimo Pie wrappers where earlier dozens of gleaming Chevys had been parked like ivory tusks lined on a hunter's mantel. The wall, a rind of concrete, clasped a hillside where girls—mostly those who'd come to the pool club without their parents' blessing—awaited the generous offer of a ride from a female stranger.

Below her feet the darkness began to char away the shadows of drinking fountains and wire trash bins, crouched like ribcages guarding their strange organs of litter. She didn't fear the night—she would escape this place long before any stars arrived. Her heartbeat stumbled with excitement, and thunderous music and the scent of chlorine still coated her senses. Her trust in luck and providence obscured any thought of what would happen if her grandfather discovered she'd been here, that someone had stolen the new cotton blouse and skirt he'd gotten her with collection-plate money, sweat sipped right from the brows of working people. Or if he found she'd stayed behind to search for her clothes in the changing room's immense hive of lockers, and Joanne, the high-school senior she'd come with, had left without her.

Her hair, released from its ponytail, swished over

her slick neck as if urging her to run. After a half hour the sun's dim pearl had almost slid beneath the hills and the night's serpentine cold began to glide over the crescents of flesh exposed at her thighs.

She pushed off the wall and landed five feet below without dizziness. She was one of those girls gifted with a fickle grace of the body, when she didn't think about it. She padded toward the soot streak of the highway, still barren of hope and headlights. The flesh at her ankles rippled with goosebumps at the cold vegetable tickle of the grass. She stared into the inhumane black a little too long, and something cracked in her nerves. She turned, almost twisting her foot in a rut, and ran along the highway like a spooked gazelle. Her breath seemed to flee ahead of her as a living thing, taunting her to catch it.

Her grandfather would be waiting on the porch, and he had no pangs about checking her room to see if she was in there sleeping or reading an old issue of *Seventeen* she'd slid beneath a loose swatch of carpet near the baseboard. Reverend Pickering, a name like a sour lime peel pressed to your mouth, in her case softened a little by the name Joyce. In her mind she squashed the threat of his anger by pounding out her fear through her running feet, into the pavement at the highway's hem. Soon the speed had strained her mind too much to even recall his face. She felt she'd almost discovered what Heaven must feel like. Running through a warm, sluggish night, all worldly shapes streaking into fantasy. An anesthetic not of Earth.

Where are your parents? Joanne had asked during the drive.

Heaven she said, as she always did. A little defensive, trembly, as if doubting herself before her tongue even molded the words.

She hadn't expected the parsonage's windows to be dark, or the Adirondack chair near the veranda's white railing to be unoccupied. Her grandfather's habit was to sit there for the slow bronze hours of the evening, his hands cupped rigidly on the handrests. His left knuckles tapping, like Morse code on a telegraph, as he stared at

neighbors or Pastor Delaney, the church's librarian, who sometimes offered to clip the Reverend's hedges.

He would look at her too, if she was on the porch swing across from him. He had a pharaoh's burdensome eyebrows and mottled tan, which she suspected was why he damned the ignorant Egyptians a bit harsher in his sermons whenever he'd studied himself in the mirror lately.

Sometimes, though, the knuckles stopped, and his eyes would somehow alter without widening or shifting. Just become like copper rivets, thoughtless, oceanic. You'd think he was tired but know this wasn't the reason; you'd squirm in that raw-fetus part of yourself no one wants to say they have, and you'd know with a chill that he was thinking about you, just like you know when a black widow is lurking behind the dusty paint can you reach for on an old shelf in the garage. You'd know.

Then the knuckles would resume their Morse code, and the dread dreams would leave. If not for those moments of pause in the tapping, she believed she'd never contemplate running away from the old man who helped her with algebra and cooked her pancakes for breakfast, a little burnt on the rim like she loved. But that wasn't what she thought about as she brushed her teeth each night, wary of the glimpse of hallway captured in the bathroom mirror. Alert, for no reason, to see if he might be there.

She found the screen door unlocked. Its rusty chuckle comforted her, but the slam which came after it sent an electric terror through her core, waking her to the possibilities of reprimand, lectures. Or maybe a request to sit on the porch in the darkness for a while, hearing the Morse knuckles, then knowing his eyes had become copper when the plunking stopped.

She damned herself for using the door. The enchantment of chlorine had faded, and her fear now put a taste of rust in her throat. Today was Thursday—he wouldn't be at the church. Maybe he was dozing on his daybed, his chest ballooning and falling like it did, with the rhythm of a fungal bloom in a tropical jungle. She could almost believe he was immortal—at seventy-five he hadn't yet succumbed to arthritis or rheumatism. His age seemed only an aggravation, like a gnat bite, one more vexation to bear down the lane to eternity.

Shadows blued the inside hallway. She reached, groping for a light switch, and her fingers traced the batskin surface of the Reverend's umbrella, dangling from the closet coat hook. Somehow this invisible reminder of him, its brittle wire skeleton and canvas flesh, convinced her to abandon her search, and she continued along the hallway to the parlor, fumbling her palm over the pores in the walnut walls.

She found the entryway to the parlor—an old word like seersucker that made you think of horse carriages and silver candle holders. She didn't realize her thumb had settled on the switch. A single twitch snapped it downward and startled the room into existence.

Amber drapes, faux stained-glass lampshades,

an elephantine oak dresser that smelled of rainstorms a hundred years old. A handmade Indian quilt on the daybed where her grandfather lay like a sheik, apish hands hugged over his heart, his eyes copper-riveted.

She might've yelped, but didn't. Her fright rebounded against her stony outer stillness and provoked her heartbeat into a fury, forcing blood up the ladder of arteries to her head. Her vision splintered with darkness and her nerves twisted like a snapped clothesline. For a moment her vision spun and she saw herself as he would—a dirt-smeared girl awkward as an ostrich, pearly with sweat, in a swimsuit she didn't own.

He didn't move. Maybe he wanted her to turn away, to know the copper stare was screwing itself into her neck. But she didn't.

Finally she spoke from instinct, her voice quivering. "Want some tea?" Immediately her cheeks became firecrackers. He always wanted a glass of Lipton when he woke—he said the sweet brown warmth pedaled his blood back into the spots it had left during sleep. But he still hadn't blinked, like some kind of desert lizard basking on a boulder. She approached him, extending her arms, and unease spread cold petals in her heart. "Grandpa?" Then, thinking the word might revive him, "Reverend?"

The blood had paled from his face, the cheekbones fragile tent-poles beneath hollow skin. The whites around his pupils had grayed to the color of shark gills. She studied him for a second, wondering if she should try to close his eyes with silver dollars, as she'd heard undertakers had done in drabber decades. She straightened the quilt where his rigidness had rumbled it. Then she fixed the collar of his checkered nightshirt, as if he were the centerpiece on their dinner table. Her face stiff with tears too numb to release, a passionless pressure.

Instead of a small decline each day, a sliver more of strength gone each dusk, a spread of arthritis like moss through his limbs, he had simply ceased, as a clock will when the first gear rusts.

The mantelpiece clock still ticked, crouching owlishly over the cool fireplace. The quiet victory call of the ancient cogs which had outlived the Reverend. Still chopping the dry seconds as grain into a bottomless silo, its Roman numerals meshing, in her bleary gaze, to form a black parade of hieroglyphs in neverending orbit.

She retrieved a poker from the fireplace. It had been kept there only for ceremony and dignity. So much devotion to ritual.

The years had thinned the clock's wood. Only three swings were required to shatter it into a brass puddle of springs and levers, still trembling with the inertia of their mockery. She didn't know she'd hated the clock until after she'd done it. Its beat seemed now like a thorn in her flesh she had never found. The distant axe thud echoing even through her dreams. She dropped the poker, watched the springs stop writhing. For it to continue after the Reverend was gone had seemed unnatural, as if the gears

had been driven by her grandfather's heartbeat. Now she would have to call the funeral home. She didn't know the number. Maybe she could find Dr. McCarthy in the Reverend's address book. But he wouldn't be at his office, and no one would be at the church either. And she'd have to clean up the clock's remains, and hide the dented poker. She would seem nervous to them. Her body still clammy with heat, and sticky.

In Joanne's younger sister's swimsuit which she seemed to have stolen.

Plus, her grandfather had been too hearty to disappear from himself like this. She'd once imagined that if he lost a finger to a butcher knife, the stump would be the color of a pencil point. Solid lead in his veins. He'd seemed unbound by the mortal worries of sickness, cholesterol, heart attacks. Concerns too petty for a man whose trade was the business of heaven.

She retreated from the reproach of his unfocused eyes and left the parlor. The anxieties and tasks multiplied with an amoeba's ferocity, melting into each other. Laundry. An empty refrigerator. School, homework. Changing the lightbulb she couldn't reach in the kitchen. Kenya, graves in the heathen dirt of Kenya. Fragments of her life flurrying around her in a blizzard of silver pine needles, each released by this old man's death. The geologic pressure seemed to squash her between two walls of a cavern.

The fuzz fled her vision. She found she'd stumbled onto the veranda, and paused before the steps. In the abyssal dark the purple calls of whippoorwills strummed against her nerves. Hypnotic. The slow cunning night. She cocked her head, as if she'd received a message, and then descended the steps. Around her the needling worries fell to nothing. Some magnetic force inside her had died, and now she moved from the parsonage with the looseness of a boat just unanchored. Leaving behind her the parlor with the open-eyed husk of meat which had once been called Grayson Pickering.

She staggered without awareness or destination down a lane silent but for the misty chatter of lawn sprinklers. At a sagging sewer grate she swung across the street and past a grove of honey locust trees through whose leaves came the newly woken wind. Its aquatic whispers brushed her skin without even raising a goosebump. She realized she couldn't sense her heartbeat, but didn't feel any panic, that sensation of her ribcage parting wide. For the first time she felt her body had no importance or permanence. She ceased cherishing her breath, her self-loving pleasure in the tautness of her calf muscles. Water left her eyes and pressed a flavor of salt onto her lips, and for a moment she couldn't even recognize what this was.

The Reverend's copper gaze had given her a strange truth about what she was—a slippery web of atoms, an animal stitched out of muscle. She couldn't understand this, these words that rose to name the feeling. Her mind only grasped at snowflake because that was her, a frail masterpiece of flesh, poised to plummet into a void and evaporate into nothing. Forever. Running now,

dashing.

Nursery-tale visions filled her memories—picture-book drawings of angels, crayoned harpsichords, archways of pearly watercolor. Painting seemed to soften the rips and tears in the canvas of her real life. Hundreds of drawings starting when she was four, crusty paintings that crackled like bones when you touched. And her grandfather was there, first curious at her frenzy, and then disturbed, the man who himself preached of cherubs and talking serpents.

But the angel paintings had become her anchor, after Kenya. Sometimes she thought of that place with such intensity she was certain she'd been there. Her parents had served in the Mission League, had last been in America in 1962 and last on Earth two years after that. A tribal conflict in Baragoi, the Reverend told her. Then there were influenza and malaria, tetanus and typhus, these grasshopper-bristly words that had become the pillars of her life. The jungle from which heaven had been meant to rescue her, once her body finished its long wait.

You think monkeys can believe in Heaven? the Reverend had raged once at the claims of a science textbook she'd borrowed from the school library.

Her toes' raw pleasure at the cool of ragweed and gravel, soft as talcum from summer heat, led her to church. The belfry's shadow lorded over Thomaston Avenue like an idol of the dark continent, submerging the parking lot in the black gulf of its promises.

The chapel was wedged between Corrigan meats and the intimate white chill of Westenhaver's drugstore. Her reflection glossed the windows as she passed and circled toward the church custodian's unlocked backdoor. Asphalt peppered her feet. She walked alongside a little girl whose eager stride seemed a kind of hunger, her eyes luminous as kerosene just seeing the church's scaly spire. She knew the girl as Joyce and knew herself now as nothing, as though she'd already died back in the parlor, raising the poker and crashing it onto the eternal clock. The faithful keeper of the countdown to heaven.

She was awed dimly at this building which she'd attended each week for ten years but seemed to have never seen before. The sandstone bricks bloodied with a day's dust, with centuries of wasted Sundays. The soft impact of wind on windowpanes where in shards of rainbow glass, the ancients and their sins were frozen like the victims of Pompeii. Eve plucking her harvest, the wicked in Noah's deluge, Pilate scrubbing his hands. The wonder of God now beyond all attempts to grasp it.

She ascended the utility stairwell, her palm skittering over the grimy banister, and pushed into the library. The bookshelves seemed solid curtains hung across the quiet interior. Theological encyclopedias and children's picture Bibles hulked on the study tables around armchairs, which crouched like eagles in the moonlight. No mystery to these shapes now. No

memories of cocoa warmth or caroling parties in the winter.

Breath escaped her in a fluty whisper. She marveled that she'd come here—been led here? Wandered here? The one place that seemed to contain all she'd lost in just a few hours' time. The evenings of Scripture. The laughter with her grandfather, who could only be made to chuckle by the Apostles' bickering.

Her heart pressed against her lips, its beat a pendulum knocking on a glass pane inside her which seemed to obscure everything she should already know. Maybe the church's attraction was only the hollow temptation of comfort—after all, this was her second home. The only native habitat she knew.

The lights snapped on overhead. The brightness pinched her retinas tight together. She gasped and spun away from the study tables, stumbling into a chair that toppled with a hideous bang. The echo seemed to spiral around the room. The meager carpet hissed under her feet as she retreated between two rows of bookshelves, backpedaling up to the sill of the window at the end. Her hands had their own electric life, shuffling tomes and bookends from the shelves to seek a glimpse of who had entered.

A slender man with cheeks stained scarlet. Maybe from climbing the stairs too fast. His blunt, gaunt fingers plucked at his jeans pocket as he scanned the shelves, tense and bobbing on his heels, noting the fallen chair. Her memory finally overtook her eyes—Pastor Delaney. He raised his head as if he'd heard her realization. His voice seemed to arc over the shelves and impale her. "Hello?"

She craned her neck downward to watch. He strode up the aisle nearest her row, righting overturned dictionaries and crumpling used stationery. He seemed to be having a conversation with himself, but she couldn't hear the words. Then he straightened and said, "Anyone home?"

He waited. "Not feeling cordial?" A pause. Then he chuckled.

"Don't think I'm real? 'Come hither and feel my wounds.'" Delaney was the more amiable pastor, but his ease unsettled her. An insult to the midnight possibilities of vagrants, vandals, arsonists. Even now she felt as if he'd lured her out beneath the lights, was standing close to her. He was approaching her shelf now, whistling without tune. And yet it seemed a hymn just beyond her memory's reach.

He halted for a second, and she could hear him listening. "I'll have to turn off the lights when I leave, you know," he called. "The roaches get cranky if you keep them up." He laughed to himself again, and she wondered if he really believed anyone was in the shelves, if he was only muttering for his own peace, here in this tomb of books. But she couldn't make herself believe that—he knew his words were striking a person's ears, somewhere.

Though she had no words to explain why she was huddled on the sill, her wan limbs crusted with sweat, she didn't think Delaney finding her would mean her death.

That would happen if she remained hidden from him and willed herself to lay curled here, dehydrating among the cobwebs until by morning only a cornhusk remained. Staring out from the second-floor window as dawn grayed the sky. She wanted to answer, to cry to him. Maybe he'd recognize her voice, if not her face.

She couldn't imagine how he might save her—he might even think she'd killed her grandfather when he heard about the clock. Like everyone would. Maybe Delaney wasn't even here, maybe he was just a ghost of her thirst, a splinter of memory rising up in her fever. She pushed herself up onto the sill and her fingers meandered over the window's brass fasteners. Her lungs heaved thinly against the flyspecked ice of the windowpanes dewed with her sweat and the sweat of the night. She discovered the lock's mushroom shape and twisted it open, pushing herself back, imagining the relief of night air and concrete, of weedy asphalt.

Delaney passed between the two bookshelves. He stopped and stared. His brow twisted a bit as he discerned her. The light grayed his face with pockets of shadow, little dead spots of uncertainty.

Her body clenched like a catcher's mitt on the sill, and here, at the apex of her plummet, her stomach swooped deep in terror. The pane behind her was kind enough not to squeak as she leaned back and it opened into the empty night. The grace of a rusty window, if there could be any in it.

Anthony J. Otten's work has been published in Blue Lake Review, Funds for Writers, Short Story America, Houston Literary Review, Aletheia magazine, and Poetry Quarterly.

Quote To Live By

The minister gave out his text and droned along monotonously through an argument that was so prosy that many a head by and by began to nod—and yet it was an argument that dealt in limitless fire and brimstone and thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving.

Mark Twain
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer



Greg Bascom
2009 Best Novel
Excerpt:

Lawless Elements



Brandi Bowles has been an agent with Howard Morhaim Literary Agency in Brooklyn, NY, since 2007. Previously an editor at Three Rivers Press, as an agent she represents an eclectic range of non-fiction authors, from burlesque performers to CEO. "I really love big idea books, books about broad sociological phenomena, but will only consider them if written by experts in their fields. I love books that shed new light on pop culture, media culture, and everyday life." For fiction, she likes Southern, experimental fiction, and cross-cultural novels. "Quirky, funny, edgy, or naughty book ideas are always welcome in my inbox, and bonus points go to any authors that can make me laugh."



CHAPTER 1

Davao, Mindanao, Philippines, Sunday afternoon,
February 2, 2003

"Meoow!" Julius' fierce yowl penetrated the kitchen door as Steve Bryce bounded up the outside stairs of his house. The tone of the outcry alarmed Steve. Tingling prickled the scar on his side, foreboding distress as sure as an arthritic toe forecasts foul weather. Julius devoured varmints twice his size. Julius concealed carcasses to frighten the maid. Julius did not cry out without dire cause.

Steve unlocked the kitchen door and found Julius hunched in front of the refrigerator glowering at him like an angry wife. When he bent to scoop up his wiry cat, Julius scampered through the dining room and stopped at the top of the inside stairs. He glared at Steve's lumbering feet with seething impatience.

"What's the matter?"
"Meoow."
"What have I done?"
"Meoow!"

It sounded hazardous. Steve looked over the long dining/family room and across the stairwell at the closed doors to the two spare bedrooms. The place appeared undisturbed. Julius wanted him to go downstairs. Down there, in the odd room appended to the rear of the house, he and Amina had their office. Steve did not want a problem in the office.

The dining room air conditioner kicked on and blew on Steve's damp swim briefs. His testicles shriveled but intuition chilled him more. Things happened upstairs. Pots boiled over. Cooking oil smoked. Lavatories flooded. Human lapses could not happen downstairs, yet something down there required his attention, a creature perhaps, something too big for Julius to handle on his own.

Steve slipped off his flip-flops, pulled the towel from his neck and placed his keys and wallet on the dining room table.

Julius waited until Steve came within arm's length before scurrying down the stairs. At the bottom, he plopped down and stared at the open door to the office. He thumped his tail on the wooden landing, beating, waiting, marking time. As Steve approached him, Julius crept into the room.

Steve stood at the threshold. The office looked normal, yet it was not. Something—sunlight, aroma, humidity, vapors—felt corrupted. Then he saw it. One of the windows peeped open a crack. Neither he nor Amina ever opened the office windows, had never unlocked them. Someone had entered their space. He shifted his weight, prepared for a quick stride, the bold attack, the heel of his hand slamming under the intruder's nose, but not quite all the way. Always snap a few millimeters short, because killing someone upsets tranquility. Prepare, watch, listen and wait, wait for your adversary to reveal his position and then pounce.

The art of waiting is a struggle against the fear that nothing will happen. Disappointment crept up. He had gone for a swim, for a long swim, eighty laps, twice his weekday quota, and afterwards had hung around the hotel pool chatting with some tourists. While he was dilly-dallying, someone had entered their home and left, or perhaps not.

The room had one door, no other way in or out,

but because the builder intended it for a maid, not an office, it had a bathroom where the intruder might be hiding. Steve stepped inside and saw the bathroom door ajar. They kept it closed because with a cracked sewer pipe the toilet sometimes stank. He planted his left foot and kicked the door's upper panel with his right. The wood split. Half the panel fell when the door slammed against the wall and rebounded. Julius scurried under the desk and peered out, but when a ceramic wall tile shattered on the floor, he hunkered against the wall and growled.

Steve flipped on the bathroom light and whipped aside the shower curtain. His improvised darkroom—he still shot film occasionally—appeared undisturbed. “Shit,” he hissed, “my cameras.”

He strode out, yanked open the wardrobe and looked over six thousand dollars worth of photo gear. It seemed untouched, everything in its place, his pistol too, mummified in its oily rag. A greater fear displaced the rush of gratitude. Breaking and entering without looting—a more sinister motive—something worth more than six grand.

Inspecting the windowsill and the floor beneath, Steve flushed with anger—no broken glass. He raised the bamboo blind. A swirl of paint flecks surrounded the unlocked latch. The burglar had had inside help. Only a few people could have unlocked the window. Then he smiled, thinking the window had jammed and foiled the treachery—the reason nothing had been stolen. To be sure, he slipped his fingers into the crack and lifted. The window opened.

He spun around and eyed his desk. The disarray of papers did not alarm him. With Amina out of town, he had labored until late the night before on his Apex job. Afterwards, he had spent an hour or so brainstorming and scribbling ideas on how he might coerce, cajole or trick his wife, Myung-Ja, into filing for divorce. He stared at the yellow legal tablet with his scrawled notes. A translucent stain splotched the top sheet. He felt it. It was dry, not damp, oily, or sticky. He had not done that. Someone had gotten in. He looked through the office door and listened but could hear nothing over the whirl of the room air conditioners.

Steve looked over his desk again and saw that his laptop appeared lopsided. When he grabbed it, the loose access plates and screws underneath it jingled on the desk. He turned it over and cursed. The hard drive was missing.

Sucking air between clenched teeth, he pulled open the desk drawer, inch by inch, first exposing pens, pencils and chopsticks in the tray, then the clutter beyond, his repository of sundries—fallen screws, homeless parts, a 9 mm short cartridge, mementos and leftovers, cute but useless things—the jumble of stuff he rifled through from time to time. It was impossible to determine if someone else had.

He yanked the drawer and smiled at the stacks of diskettes in the rear corner. Fearful that his old laptop

would crash and burn, as Amina's had, he backed it up every Friday night, made it update its last will and testament. The diskettes contained all his work except for the analysis of the fertilizer bids, and they had all of Amina's files, her “homework,” huge databases he could not know about because Apex threatened to terminate him if he got involved in Filipino politics. Even so, he had let Amina use his computer until they got around to buying her a new one, and had procrastinated. What's in your files, Amina? Reaching with his index finger, he tipped over the stacks. Some contained a mixture of Amina's stuff and his. They still had all their files, but someone else did too, and he had to find out why.

Busting doors, breaking tiles and frightening the crap out of the cat would not answer questions, but the thief knew what he had come to steal. Steve feared the son-of-a-bitch had escaped, but he had to make certain.

He went out onto the stairwell. The wood creaked. The sound pinged off the barren tile floor of the huge living room, unfurnished except for the sofa at the rear where they watched CNN, and his black and white photographs hanging on the walls. The room looked bleak, like a photo gallery without customers. He peered across the empty expanse to the sliding-glass front doors. The latch was horizontal. The burglar had not gone out the front in plain view of the guard at the gate, no surprise there.

Racing upstairs, he checked the two unused bedrooms, strode into theirs, glanced in the bathroom and then yanked aside the blind beside the bed. The compound looked empty as far as he could see.

He went outside to search the small compound that Apex leased for its expatriate employees. A twelve-foot high concrete wall with a solid steel gate surrounded them. Steve and Amina lived in the second of four houses in a row, flanked by the Van Der Zees nearest the gate and Brenda Toman on the other side. The fourth house, the guesthouse, had been vacant for a while. An armed guard manned the gate, feminized it perhaps. The Only Ladies Security Agency, a group of thirty-something petite women, had kept thieves out—until now.

Outside the compound, shacks squatted amidst bushes under towering coconut trees, but the plot inside had been bulldozed level—no trees, mounds or gullies, the few shrubs scrawny—no place to hide. Their row of homes with white roofs and outsized eaves to provide shade from the blistering Philippine sun looked like gigantic mushrooms that had spawned on an oasis of grass.

Steve waited at the bottom of the outside stairs to let his senses hunt for something peculiar. Naked but for his swim briefs and flip-flops, the heat felt good after the canned air inside, although without a breeze, the humidity clutched his skin. Except for the room air-conditioners buzzing and groaning, the houses seemed to be dozing between chores, waiting for their occupants to return. That was typical for weekends if the weather was nice. The thief had chosen the perfect time, but he had not

come through the gate. The guards allowed no one into the compound unless a resident approved their visit.

Looking around for anything strange, Steve ambled to the rear of his house. Underneath the office window, he saw gouges in the grass and the impression of a boot heel. Cracked paint around the window sash evidenced the burglar's struggle to pry it open after years of disuse. Looking at it, Steve felt ill with a sour stomach and clammy skin, as if some diseased son-of-a-bitch had given him the flu. He walked towards the rear of the compound, inspecting the wall, shrubbery and grass. In the back corner behind the guesthouse, he found a trampled bush, scuffmarks on the wall and deep scratches near the top where the bastard came over with a grapple.

Steve trudged back to his house under the weight of certain trouble. Apex lawyers "enjoined" its foreign employees from getting involved in Filipino politics, yet he slept with a woman who worked for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. As if that weren't enjoining enough, he had mixed Apex business and Amina's homework for the MILF on his backup. He had to report the theft to Apex Davao. Haradji, chief of security, would come. The bald-headed snoop would take his files for critical executive review because with nothing else taken it appeared the thief had come for Apex data. And when the critical executives discovered an MILF subversive had been using a company computer, there would be no more enjoining. They would evict Amina. They would evict him too, no more job, no more company house, company paid utilities or company truck. That would end his dumb procrastinating. It had been near three months since Amina's computer had crashed. It was not someone's flu. His dilly-dallying had made him sick.

Julius, now content, waited in the kitchen. If Julius had not alarmed him, he would have had a beer and a shower before going to the office and that's what he would do, act as if he had nothing to hide. He needed time. He had to wait for one of his neighbors to come home, wait for Brenda or the Van Der Zees and use their computer to scrub his backup clean of dissidence. And he had to figure out a good reason for someone wanting his files.

As Regional Materials Manager for Apex Fruits International, he had analyzed every Apex process in Southeast Asia that consumed materials, for which he needed production forecasts for all the subsidiaries. That information would interest Apex competitors if they knew he had it, but he doubted they did. His huge fertilizer tender seemed a better excuse. He imagined one of the twenty-some contenders wanted to be certain of submitting the winning bid. If so, the suckers had waited too long. He had closed the bidding Friday night.

No doubt, they had come for Amina's databases. The Moros, the predominately Muslim tribes, had agreed to a cease-fire while they negotiated for autonomy over their ancestral lands. Amina prepared legal documents for the MILF negotiators, all men. But the process had dragged on for years. Amina reckoned Moro women could resolve the impasse. The Moro tribes relied on their women, their time-honored mediators, to arbitrate

the incessant blood feuds between families. Amina campaigned to get Moro women a role in the peace talks, but she did not need databases for that. He considered trying to contact Amina at the conference in Baguio, but knowing what her databases contained would not alter what he had to do. Whatever she had in her files did not concern Apex. He had to extract them before Haradji came around. Gerrit Van Der Zee had an old desktop with a diskette drive. Steve checked the Van Der Zee's carport—still empty.

As he showered, Steve tried to figure the theft. Someone had paid his maid to unlock the window, and if not her, one of the guards or a maintenance man. The burglar had to be a professional, an information thief who had come with blank CDs, and unable to copy the files, took not the laptop but the hard drive, which he could slip into his pocket. Steve knew his files did not contain anything worthy of someone like that. They had come to take his lover's stuff. That pissed him off.

Furious, Steve thrust his fist at the shower wall but snapped back his arm to halt the punch as his knuckles pecked the tile. Know the precise length of your limbs and develop the depth perception of an eagle, crucial skills he had learned after nearly killing a man, after his father shipped his butt off to the Benedictine military school where they had made him pray for his own deliverance and the salvation of assholes.

He had perfected the art of not connecting, celebrated life at arm's length, always stopping a millimeter short of caring—his recipe for serenity. But indifference had not excused him from consequence. At thirty-two, he had an estranged wife he did not want to live with, an uncommitted lover with whom he did, an umbilical cord that tethered him to the company that provided him everything, and now someone had spilled his chicken soup. He feared he might never get the lid back on the pot.

CHAPTER 2

Steve's house, Sunday afternoon, February 2

Steve looked out the window at the Van Der Zee's carport. Gerrit's truck was still not there, but he phoned anyway hoping Isabela might be home.

"Casa Gerrit."

Steve sighed. "Hi, Isabela. Is Gerrit around? I need a favor."

"Gerrit went downtown but he'll be back soon.

Come on over."

"Can I bring Julius?"

"Por supuesto, of course, Steve. He's always welcome."

"See you in a bit."

Steve went down to his office, sorted through the diskettes and slipped several into his pocket along with some blanks. He tore off the first several pages from the yellow legal pad, stuffed them into a manila envelope and filed it with his personal papers. No matter the

mysterious splotch on his notes might be DNA-laden drool, the company gossipers would not be feasting on his scribbled marital problems. Then he called security at Apex Davao. After a frustrating discussion on the difference between theft and espionage, the duty clerk agreed to disturb Haradji on a Sunday afternoon. Then Steve picked up Julius and headed for the Van Der Zee home.

Through the front doors, Steve saw Isabela sprawled on the living room floor reading a book. Margreet, her eighteen-month old daughter, slept on a blanket beside her. Holding Julius, he tapped on the glass. Isabela got up and slid the door open.

"Hola," she whispered. "You want a beer."

"Sure, thanks."

"Come on in." She put her finger to her lips. "Shh, Margreet's napping. I'll get your beer."

Steve admired Isabela's behind as she climbed the stairs.

Before leaving Northern Peru to run Apex's agricultural research center in Davao, 40-something Gerrit, a redheaded Dutchman, had forsworn bachelorhood and married Isabela, a professor of history. She claimed to be pure Moche, a princess, a thoroughbred indigenous Indian with a royal derriere. The Conquistadores, she asserted, had not contaminated her bloodline. Besides her naughty tush, Steve admired her intelligence and pleasant demeanor. But she was apt to throw things when upset, her aim impeccable, no doubt a genetic talent that had once kept the Spaniards at bay.

The Moros had done that too. They defied the Spanish for 350 years. Spain could not colonize them, but the American colonial regime managed to homestead their ancestral domain. Although born an ocean apart, the Moro woman and the pure Moche princess belonged to the indigenous kinship bred by the foreigners who plundered their land.

They had first met while grocery shopping. Amina had slammed her cart into Isabela's at the head of an aisle. Isabela, near full term with Margreet at the time, staggered and fell. Worried that she might have harmed the baby, Amina called Isabela often after that. They became friends. By the time Isabela gave birth, accompanied by an anxious Amina, they had bonded. Margreet was not a month old when the Van Der Zees first invited Amina to dinner. They invited Steve too. By dessert, the improbable seemed inevitable. Several days later, despite the vehement objections of her eldest brother Jiriki, Amina Taiba moved into the compound to sleep with a foreigner. God shrugged. Allah shrugged. Two guardian angels groaned.

The four houses had identical floor plans. Unlike Steve's bleak living room, the Van Der Zee's looked like a library. Steve scanned Gerrit's books—row after row of tomes about bugs and plant diseases. Isabela had scores of books in Spanish and English on the history of most everyplace in the world. She had several volumes on the struggles of indigenous Indians for their ancestral lands, her specialty. Steve flipped through the pages of the book

on the carpet next to Margreet. It recounted the Moro-Spanish wars that lasted more than three centuries. Steve frowned. "From time immemorial, peoples fought for their land," Isabela would say, and her lecture would begin. At times, Steve felt as if he were getting a graduate degree in discontent.

Isabela returned with an ice-cold bottle of San Miguel and a glass of chicha, her homemade Peruvian concoction of fermented corn, a somewhat sour joy-juice. She handed the beer to Steve.

"How is Amina doing at the conference?"

Steve sat on the floor and leaned against the sofa. "She abandoned me. She won't call me until tomorrow night when she gets to Manila."

Isabela sat close by so they could talk without disturbing Margreet. "What's she going to do in Manila? Make the ladies march, I suppose."

Steve chuckled. For a demonstration in Davao, Amina had dressed Isabela in an abaya, the long flowing gown worn by Moro women, and a hijab head cover, and had her carry a placard demanding a place for Moro women in the peace talks. If he were not six foot two and blond, she would have made him march too. Steve thought the mostly Christian metropolis could not care less about the issue. Exasperated, Amina had rapped his head.

"Sweet Steve, that's the point."

"There's no parade this time," Steve said. "On Tuesday, the Islamic Studies Institute has a symposium on women. She's giving a presentation about Moro women as negotiators."

"She's a determined woman."

"Yep. Hey, do you know how to interrogate a cat?"

Isabela smiled. "What's Julius done this time?"

"Someone broke into my house. Julius is the only witness."

"Que!" Isabela straightened and glanced at Margreet. "When? How'd he get in?" Steve shrugged. "Sometime between ten and four while I was swimming at the Insular. He came over the back wall by the guesthouse. Nothing's missing except the hard drive from my computer."

Isabela looked at her daughter again, leaned close to Steve and whispered. "How'd he get in the house?"

"He climbed through one of my office windows. Somebody unlocked it."

Isabela stared at Steve and then she took a sip of chicha. "Do you think Posey unlocked it?"

Steve did not want to accuse his maid but she had been acting strange lately. "Can't tell how long it's been unlocked, could be someone else, a workman maybe or one—"

His cell phone rang. He plucked it from his shirt pocket and answered before the second ring. "Steve here...Hi Haradji...Yeah, came over the back wall and took my hard drive, nothing else. He ignored a fortune in camera equipment." Steve waited. "That's right, just the hard drive....Well, he could have swiped a beer, but I don't think he left my office....Okay, I'll tell the guard to

wait for you and then I'll check the house again. See you soon." Steve clicked off and put the mobile back in his pocket, worrying that he had called security too soon. If Haradji arrived before Gerrit returned, there would be bad problems.

"What's Haradji going to do?"

"He wants me to inventory my worldly possessions to see if anything else is missing. He'll be over to interrogate the guard after he has a chat with Stillwell."

"Stillwell, why involve the general manager?"

Steve frowned. "Stillwell is going to worry that one of the company's competitors is behind the burglary." He shook his head. "I don't think they took it for company information. Maybe they wanted the bids for the fertilizer contract I'm working on."

He frowned and gazed at Isabela.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Haradji will be questioning you and Gerrit. You know Amina uses my computer. I don't want Haradji to know that. Let's keep Amina out of this. Okay?"

"No problem," she whispered. "I know nothing about this. I've nothing to tell Haradji, and neither does Gerrit. Gerrit doesn't like him."

"I don't know of anyone besides Stillwell who does," Steve mumbled.

They sat in silence until Margreet stirred and they heard the guard opening the gate. Isabela picked up her daughter and they went to look out the front door. When a pickup truck pulled inside, Steve exhaled. "Good, it's Gerrit. I need to use his computer."

Isabela and Gerrit watched as Steve transferred files to blank diskettes and deleted the originals. Margreet too, in her mother's arms, regarded the computer screen in somber silence.

"Those are Amina's files, aren't they," Isabela said.

Steve nodded, "Yes, a few of them."

"What's in them?" Gerrit asked.

"I don't know." He turned and looked at Gerrit. "I didn't want to know for fear I'd be getting involved in the insurgency."

Isabela cuddled Margreet. "Now we're all involved."

CHAPTER 3

The compound, Sunday evening, February 2

Gerrit with a Heineken, Steve with a San Miguel, sat on Gerrit's front porch not many yards from the guardhouse and called out reassurances to "Toots," that it was not her fault, that they would support her—men aiding a pretty woman in distress.

"She's cute," Steve said. "She has to be innocent."

"Certainly is. They're our girls. Gave 'em jolly good names, we did."

Filipinos require jovial nicknames. Local news stories featured Rody the mayor discussing thorny issues, Beds, the thief, nabbed by Ting-Ting, the policeman, and orphans coddled by Sin-Sin, the Catholic priest. During an impromptu picnic after Apex hired The Only Ladies Security Agency, the tipsy residents renamed their regular guards Toots, Boots and Oops, who tended to drop things. Their job consisted of opening the gate, relaying messages and being cheerful.

Toots wiped the palms of her hands on her dark blue uniform and tried to smile but it waned before it had a chance. Toot's relief, Boots, the heftiest of the female guards, arrived shortly before six. At a glance, Boots knew the dreaded had happened—a theft—and that before the sun went down Haradji might snap his fingers and fire The Only Ladies Security Agency. Toots and Boots huddled, whispering.

Steve seldom looked at Toots without thinking about their first encounter. He had been in his carport opening a crate of his books, clothes and household things that Apex had shipped from San Francisco. He intended to save the wood and nails, but many were bent. He tossed those into a little pile. Toots watched him. "Sir," she said, "may I have these, the not straight ones?" Steve watched Toots. It hurt to think of her without a job.

A horn blared outside. Her body heaving at a forty-five degree angle, Boots slid open the heavy gate with one hand, the other holding the agency's pistol and holster firm against her thigh, which was too beefy for the rawhide strap to go around. Toots stood stiff beside the little guard shack. A pick-up truck rolled forward and stopped. Both women snapped to attention and saluted. Haradji spoke to Toots. She sagged, recovered, and then saluted again, although with a little wobble. "She's pissin' in her knickers," Gerrit said.

Reputed to be progeny of a near-extinct Moro clan of goliaths, Haradji loomed over Filipinos. Sturdy yet spry, a man who valued exercise and vegetables, he appeared younger than his advanced years. Reportedly fluent in Tagalog, Visayan, English and a dozen or so Moro languages, Haradji spoke with an intimidating, prayer-like monotone. He had ugly sloe-eyes—jet-black pupils set in membranes fractured with red veins—and after decades working for or with or around the NBI, the Philippine FBI, they said he could frighten the crap out of a water buffalo with a level stare.

He opened the passenger door and signaled to Steve to get in. They drove the short distance to the guesthouse's carport.

"Someone took your computer. What else?"

"Not the computer, the hard drive, the memory where files are stored."

"Damn it." Haradji pushed the bridge of his sunglasses up his nose. "I don't need a fuckin' lesson on computers. Tell me what else was taken—liquor, jewelry, electronics, clothes—what's missing?"

"Nothing else is missing."

"What about damage? Things messed up; drawers opened, furniture moved, stuff pushed around."

"No, he didn't disturb anything outside my office." Haradji seemed disappointed. "How do you know he's a he?"

"You'll see. He wears a size ten boot."

"What makes you think this person came over the wall?"

"I'll show you."

As they walked along the back of the compound, Haradji inspected the wall and the ground and checked the windows on the side of the guesthouse. When he saw the marks on the wall and the mangled shrub, he pulled a digital camera from his pocket and took a few pictures. Then he removed his sunglasses and focused on Steve.

"What did you have in your computer besides company information?"

"I had two dozen bids on a fertilizer tender. I suspect that's what the thief wanted."

"Anything else?"

"My financial records and some letters, that's all."

"Does Miss Taiba use your computer?"

Steve shrugged. "She uses it for e-mail sometimes." He tossed his hand. "I think they took it for the fertilizer data, but we need to check my Apex files. I backed up Friday night."

Haradji brightened. "Good, I'll take your backup." Something stirred behind the vile eyes. "Do they contain everything?"

"Sure...I mean the diskettes were in the drawer where I left them. I'll need them returned as soon as possible so I can work."

Haradji nodded and then examined the bushes and wall again. He checked the rear windows of the guesthouse and ambled towards Steve's home, inspecting Brenda's house on the way.

"Where's Miss Toman?"

"She went over to Samal Island yesterday. She should be back soon."

"What about the Van Der Zees?"

"Isabela has been home all day, but she told me she didn't see or hear anything."

When they reached the back of Steve's house, Haradji studied the window and stooped to scrutinize the footprints before taking pictures. Then he stepped back and considered the row of the houses. The builder had set them at an oblique angle to the parallel lines of the driveway and the perimeter wall, as if he were parking them at the mall. Haradji mused aloud that the rear of Steve's home was visible from Brenda's house, but not from Gerrit's.

"Where's Miss Taiba?"

"Up on Luzon for a few days."

Haradji gave Steve a wry look. "Now that's handy. Miss Toman in Samal, your friend up north, you at the Insular and your backside window unlocked."

"Yeah, rotten apple in the barrel."

"Have any of the guards been in your house?"

"No, but when I go to Brenda's or Gerrit's, I don't bother to lock up."

Haradji looked around. "With all the blinds down against

the sun and these noisy air conditioners, a guard could sneak in, especially after dark."

Steve nodded.

"Okay. Mr. Stillwell wants a briefing at noon tomorrow. We'll meet at the guesthouse in the morning, seven sharp. When Miss Toman returns, please tell her to join us. What time does your maid get here?"

"At seven."

"When does Miss Taiba return?"

Steve did not want Haradji interrogating Amina before she knew more than Haradji did. "Friday," he lied, but with a slight hesitation. You beer muddled idiot, he thought. He studied the reflections on Haradji's sunglasses and imagined a crapping carabao. Great picture.

Haradji stared back for a moment and then glanced away. "I'll have a chat with her then."

After inspecting the window again, Haradji pulled out his cell phone, walked a short distance away and made two calls. Steve understood the first conversation; he had learned Tagalog. Haradji asked one of his NBI contacts for the phone number of a fingerprint specialist. For the second call, Haradji spoke Visayan. Steve grasped a few words.

Haradji pocketed his phone. "Mr. Jake Severino will be here in about an hour to dust for prints. Make sure you're here. He'll take your fingerprints for comparison. He can get Miss Taiba's from her personal items. Let's go inside."

Steve saluted. "Yes sir."

Before going to the office, Haradji patrolled the other rooms wearing a surgical glove on his right hand, although he did not touch anything except doorknobs. Aside from the disheveled bed and a pile of dirty dishes, the house appeared tidy and spartan, uncluttered by knick-knacks. Amina decorated with Steve's photographs. Haradji paused to look at each one. He studied the picture of the raging water buffalo hanging in the dining.

"Is that the carabao that gored you?"

Steve nodded.

Haradji removed his sunglasses and examined the photograph up close. "You shook the camera a little."

"Like hell. The camera shook, not me."

Haradji smiled, which surprised Steve. He did not expect a barbarian to smile or know how to look at pictures.

Haradji stepped back, still studying the photograph. "Mr. Bryce, you are a lucky son-of-a-bitch." He pointed. "That bull has murder in his eyes."

Shortly before eight that night, Steve heard the gate open and Brenda's truck pull into her carport. Brenda, a thirty-something blonde, unattached and overweight, emissary of the almighty corporate CFO in San Francisco, had arrived three months earlier to analyze Apex's expansion projects in Southeast Asia. She and Steve had become close friends after an awkward beginning. Soon after she moved in, Brenda showed Steve her exercise room. It had a treadmill, a poster of a bare-assed biker modeling chaps and an old love seat

provided by Apex. When Steve sat on it, a lump under the cushion disturbed him. He reached for the annoyance and pulled out an authentic replica of an eight-inch erection. Unabashed, Brenda gave him a seductive grin. Steve split. If he let Brenda get close enough to play, she could call the shots in a game of Russian roulette, the bullet her report to her almighty boss. But Steve soon got over his fear that she might use her position for sexual favors. Her advances hinted not of authority, but desperation.

Steve went outside to tell Brenda about the theft and their having to meet with Haradji in the morning. She wore a billowing skirt and loose-fitting blouse. Brenda alternated between gluttonous partying and crash dieting in delusive hopes of wearing a bikini. He could not visualize a bikini with size-D cups. She gave him an affectionate grin. He smiled back.

"I see you enjoyed Samal. That's a lovely sunburn." They touched lips. "How do you do it, Steve—blond, blue-eyed and tanned? You look like Brad Pitt toasted to perfection."

He laughed. "Gradually," he said, raising his finger, "by swimming forty laps a day and eighty on weekends." He eased back her blonde forelocks and winced at the crimson below her pallid hairline. "Girl, you cannot bake in the sun. Christ, didn't you use suntan lotion?"

"I slept off a hangover by the pool. I had fun last night." She pressed closer and kissed with open lips. Her tongue fluttered. "I like you worrying about me," she murmured.

"Hmmm, tastes like Chardonnay."

Brenda had slight hope of finding a mate compatible with her career. Like Steve and Gerrit, she considered a job in someone else's country an all-expense paid adventure. Apex obtained work permits for its foreign employees and residency status for their spouses, but unmarried partners did not qualify for residency. Gerrit had to marry Isabela, else leave her behind or send her out of the country every few months to renew her tourist visa. "Not thrifty," he had said.

And unless the foreigner spouse had extraordinary credentials she, or he, could not work for pay. The Philippine government did not want foreigners taking jobs Filipinos could do. So wives stayed home or did volunteer work. Most women accepted those roles, although perhaps reluctantly, but few men of worth would. This reality infuriated Brenda. Short of snagging a starving artist to support, she near despaired of finding a stay-at-home man of comparable intelligence and vigor who would be willing to follow her around the world.

Meantime, she wanted sex. Whenever she and Steve were outside their business relationship she renewed her "You're hot, I'm willing" invitation. She believed men genetically predisposed to cheat on their women, Steve being the living-next-door proof, notwithstanding Myung-Ja's refusal to relocate to the Philippines or give him a divorce. "You chose to leave her behind and sleep with Amina," Brenda had said, not with reproach but with a seductive grin. She was looking

forward to the cheater cheating again.

Steve slung Brenda's tote bag over his shoulder and helped her carry the ice chest up to her kitchen. She wanted to know about the burglary, but said she intended to take a cool bath first. He left to feed Julius and get an armload of beer.

Before returning to Brenda's, Steve locked up his house, the first time he had done so while visiting a neighbor. He found Brenda dressed in a silky, kimono-like robe, her breasts sulking without a bra.

While she sipped wine and he guzzled San Miguels, they talked about the theft, the fertilizer trade, Steve's files, Haradji's attitude and Jake the fingerprint guy dusting everything in the house. The conversation wandered to the abilities of Apex managers and company gossip, about two couples who for sure were swapping partners and the mail clerk caught humping a secretary on the photocopier. It felt nice being tipsy, giddy and naughty, heterosexual, cozy and uncommitted, chummy adventurers off in a foreign land. As natural as reaching for another potato chip, Brenda grasped the nape of Steve's neck and they interchanged the wet residues of chardonnay and beer.

Brenda's breasts were not the sagging monsters Steve had expected but sturdy mounds tipped with excited nipples. Her indulgent, white body, the perfect model for the master painters of plump nudes from centuries past, urged him closer. Her thighs parted to declare her defenseless. But when she hooked her leg around his waist, he arched his back and cried, "No!"

She unhooked him.

Steve flopped against the back of the sofa and looked at her bewildered. "I can't," he uttered, as if he were astounded by his inability to perform a simple task. They sat in silence while Steve finished his beer. By saying nothing about their moment then, they seemed to agree they never would. Steve trudged, hands in pockets, across the short expanse of lawn to the foot of his outside stairs and stopped. He pressed his forehead against the rail.

Why? Amina is temporary and our time is running out. What ails you Bryce?

He labored up the stairs.

CHAPTER 4

The Compound, Monday morning, February 3

Steve was brewing his second mug of espresso when he heard a car pull into his carport and then footfalls on the outside stairs. He opened the door to Bipsy Ressa, information technology manager at Apex Davao, fellow photo enthusiast and good friend. He handed Steve a carton and grinned.

"Whoa," Steve said, stepping backwards. "Good morning, Bipsy. Come in." He put the box on the kitchen counter and opened the flaps. "You're kidding. It's new."

Bipsy pulled at his goatee. "Let's see, you have 512

megabits of RAM, a 60 gig hard drive and a CD burner. There's a couple of CDs in there with your backup."

"Wow! You want some coffee?"

"No thanks, your espresso drain cleaner dissolves intestines. I'll take some juice, whatever you have." After giving Bipsy mango juice, Steve took out the new laptop and placed it on the dining room table. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"Hah, you hired an assassin to brutally dismember that turd of crap you had and left me no choice. We can't get parts for that antique. Besides, I'm in love with your blue eyes and cheerful demeanor. It should have most of the software you need. Let me know if you want anything else."

"Thank you, thank you."

"What happened, Blue Eyes? I want sordid details."

The sound of vehicles coming into the compound interrupted Steve's recount of the burglary. He pulled the bamboo blind aside and looked out.

"Oh, shit! It's an invasion. Haradji has one of his men on the gate and he's herding our three lady guards to the guesthouse. Jake, the fingerprint guy is here, and Haradji's assistant, and Slick Guzman too." Steve's eyes darted from one disgruntled face to another. "They're going to lynch me for disturbing the peace."

As Steve and Bipsy watched, Gerrit, and Isabela cradling Margreet, joined the crowd heading for the guesthouse. The guard opened the door beside the gate. Posey, Steve's maid, stepped inside and froze. She gawked at the commotion and then tried to bolt. The guard grabbed her arm, growled something and pointed to the guesthouse. She struggled to leave but the guard slammed the door shut and pointed again. She did not move. He pushed her. Resigned, she trudged after the others.

"Your noose is loosed, Blue Eyes. The butler did it. She goes to the gallows."

"She unlocked the window, but for whom. I hope Haradji finds out."

"Do not fret, Blue Eyes. This is the Philippines. Posey will spill the beans. Let us haste pronto. Torture excites me"

Steve saw "Slick" Guzman, the controller for Apex Davao, waiting for him on the guesthouse porch. On technical matters, Steve reported to the corporate purchasing manager in San Francisco, but for administrative purposes, Slick was his boss. From several paces away, Steve could smell Slick's palm-oil pomade.

"Mabuhay," Steve said.

Although English was the working language at Apex Davao, Slick had helped Steve learn Tagalog and that's what they spoke when one-on-one.

"Good morning. I understand only your hard drive is missing."

"That is right. My cameras and other things were not disturbed."

Slick scrutinized Steve's face. "Are you okay?"

"I am weary. I was up most of the night trying to

figure this out."

"Okay, let's get to work. Stillwell wants a briefing as soon as possible."

The part-time caretaker for the guesthouse had made coffee and laid out an array of sliced fruit on a table in the living room. Steve walked over to Gerrit, who was filling a plate.

"Where's Posey?"

Gerrit jabbed a fork in the air. "She's upstairs with the guards. I think they're getting fingerprinted."

"Yeah, Haradji's fingerprint guy lifted a clear thumbprint from the window lock. It matches several others he found around the house."

"Posey's?"

"No doubt. Listen," Steve whispered, "Amina's returning Wednesday, but I told Haradji she's coming back Friday."

Gerrit smiled and looked over his shoulder. "Not to worry, my friend. I wouldn't tell Haradji where the loo is. Let him shit his britches, I would."

Brenda pushed open the sliding glass door and greeted them. She spied the fruit and picked up a plate. Haradji came downstairs and ordered everyone to quiet down. Standing with one hand on his hip while giving the floor a condescending stare, he demanded someone tell him who knew the compound would be vacant except for Mrs. Van Der Zee.

"Everyone," Gerrit snapped. "Our friends, the neighborhood, the guards and even you should know. If the sun is out on Sunday, so are we. My wife being home yesterday was unusual."

"Where were the maids?"

"My maid doesn't work Sundays," Steve said, puzzled. He thought Haradji knew that. "None of us has a live-in maid."

"I do." Gerrit raised his hand. "I sleep with her."

Isabela had been feeding Margreet a piece of mango. She flipped it across the room and hit her husband between the eyes. Everyone laughed except Haradji.

"Haradji, please sit down," Slick said in a tone that told him to shut up too.

After an awkward silence, Slick asked how often the guards patrolled the compound. Gerrit told him they walked around at night, but not often during the day. Steve admitted the residents sometimes became irritated if they had to wait for the guard to open the gate, so they did not stray too far.

"We will wait," Isabela said. Her eyes locked on Haradji. "Make them patrol like soldiers." She hefted Margreet, who stared at Haradji's sunglasses. He made a note.

They talked about ways to improve security for the compound and agreed that installing electrified concertina wire on top of the wall would discourage intruders. Slick instructed Haradji to submit a work order for his approval.

Slick excused Gerrit. Isabela and Margreet left

with him.

“Okay,” Slick said, turning to Steve. “What did you have on that hard drive?”

“The bids on the fertilizer tender—prices from every producer and importer in Southeast Asia. That’s my top pick. Anyone in the fertilizer business would love to get their hands on that information.”

Haradji looked up from his notebook. “Who knew the bids were on your computer?”

“Anyone who knows me, including most of the fertilizer guys. I scan everything I need so I don’t have to lug a ton of paper around.”

Slick leaned forward. “What about data on the expansions?”

“I had the requirements data—hectares by growing area by crop—for the next three years.”

“Our competitors would like to have that,” Brenda said.

“No one knew I had it except Gerrit. We use it to check for inconsistencies in the pesticide and fertilizer consumption.”

“Which you download from transaction data,” Bipsy said. “You are expert at querying databases.”

“That’s what worries me,” Slick said. “You do impressive spreadsheets. Some impress me with the confidential information you dig out of boring data. Okay, I understand your point on the fertilizer tender, and it may well be the reason for the theft, but Stillwell is concerned about your other files. You, Brenda, Bipsy and I are going to check them one by one for sensitive data. Then I’ll—”

Haradji’s assistant thundered down the stairs and whispered to his boss. Haradji excused himself and went upstairs with his deputy. Someone was crying; Steve recognized Posey’s screechy sobs. A few minutes later Haradji came back down. He looked at Steve.

“Your maid confessed. She unlocked the window for her new boyfriend. Claims he said he was curious and wanted to look around the house.”

Steve scoffed. “Sure, right, she’s not that stupid. Who is he?”

“He gave her an alias, but from her description of him, ah...her intimate description, I know who he is. He’s an American, an ex-Special Forces soldier supposedly looking for the gold the Japanese hid here during the war. But the NBI suspects that’s a cover. They think he might be a mercenary. They want to talk to him, but they can’t find him. He uses aliases and disguises. They’re not even sure what he looks like.”

“Then how do you know it’s him?” Brenda asked.

“He’s known for a peculiar sexual fetish involving jalapeno peppers, and he’s hung like a mule.” Haradji looked at Steve. “Your maid provided positive identification.”

“Yes, Posey’s been wearing a gratified grin lately,” Brenda said. “I’ve been envious.”

Bipsy and Slick smiled.

Steve frowned. “Who does this guy work for? What’s his name?”

“Could be anyone. He’s for hire. The NBI believes he

works alone. He’s reclusive and antisocial with no known associates. That’s another reason he’s hard to find. His name is Marty Santana, also known as ‘the Jalapeno Popper.’”

CHAPTER 5

Steve’s house, Monday night, February 3

Steve was sitting at the dining room table rebuilding his analysis of the fertilizer bids when his landline rang. He smiled. Amina did not trust the new cell phone service. In four strides, he reached the phone at the far side of the room.

“Steve here.”

“Is this the home for wayward infidels?”

“Yes, chief infidel speaking. Would you like to talk to the lonely, oversexed one?”

“Please.”

“One moment, he is procuring a beverage.”

Steve went to the kitchen and grabbed a cold beer before plopping into his overstuffed reading chair.

“Hi there,” he said. “How’s my favorite subversive doing?”

“I called last night; late last night. Where were you?”

“Whoa, I didn’t expect you to call. I was having a long talk with the lady next door.”

“Which one, Isabela The Tush or Miss Big Butt?”

He chuckled. She had coated “Miss Big Butt” in poisoned spittle and shot the words through a blowgun. He imagined her lustrous black eyes narrowing into a piercing glint as the dart hurled towards Brenda’s size-fourteen bottom. Amina liked Brenda, except when she flirted with Steve. Amina reckoned that whenever Brenda and Steve were alone, Brenda flirted.

“I was with Brenda discussing a problem. We need to talk about it. First, tell me, how did the conference go?”

“Fine. What’s the problem?”

He gulped some beer. “Someone broke into the house yesterday and stole the computer’s hard drive. Nothing else was taken.”

After an interminable pause, she said, “Shit!”

His gut tightened. Amina had picked up the “shit” expression from him. She used it precisely. It meant “grave and foreboding circumstance replete with dire and dread.”

“Listen, I backed up Friday night. I’ve got all your homework.”

He waited, listening to heavy breathing not of the erotic kind.

“Shit.”

He set down his beer and whispered, “Tigress, what do you have in those files?”

“Not over the phone, Steve. Tell me what happened.”

He recounted the burglary and then picked up his beer, took a sip and waited.

"Did you report this to the police?"

"Haradji and his henchmen are handling it internally. This morning they put the squeeze on Posey and the guards. Posey confessed to unlatching the window. Seems some American adventurer by the name of Santana seduced her into unlocking it. You ever hear of Marty Santana? They call him the Jalapeno Popper."

After a few moments of silence, "Who's he working for?"

"No one knows. Haradji says he's a loner for hire. He was up in Luzon for several years doing dirty work for some politicians or maybe the army. He came to Mindanao a while back, supposedly to look for the Japanese gold. When the NBI got interested in him, he dropped out of sight. He's short and dark, speaks Tagalog and can pose as a Filipino. That's all that Haradji would tell me. Maybe some of your friends in the MILF can find him."

"What's Apex doing about this?"

"We spent all morning going through my files in search of sensitive information. I had some, but everyone thinks the thief came for the fertilizer bids. Stillwell wants to be sure of that. He told Haradji to try and find Santana." He sipped his beer and waited with the silent phone.

"Amina..."

"Does Apex have the homework?"

"No, it's all here, on separate diskettes."

"But it's on the hard drive."

"Haradji wants to talk to you. I told him you would be returning Friday, not Wednesday. We won't let the guards know you're back until Apex loses interest in the burglary."

"No, Sweet Steve. I'm not going to play hide and seek. I am not an Apex employee. I have no obligation to speak with Haradji or anyone else from the company. That can be a problem. I understand that. It might cause us difficulties with Stillwell if I do not cooperate. But I will not allow that degenerate Haradji to question me. I will stay here with Nashita until you can assure me Stillwell has lost interest."

"Okay." He tried to hide his disappointment. "You're right. We have to wait until this quiets down. But I'm missing you, Tigress. The bolt needs the nut with the endless thread."

She sighed. "I remember that feeling."

They began a duet of syncopated whines, growls and groans, one working off the other, their encoded phone sex, an orchestrated skit reenacting the night they had met.

The mutual attraction during their first encounter at the Van Der Zees had been obvious, and perhaps anticipated. After dinner, they sat around the table engrossed in reflective conversation. During a pause, Isabela abruptly picked up a few dirty dishes and stood. With a coy smile she said, "Steve, you should take Amina for a stroll and show her your favorite place." Amina looked at Steve, her eyes bright with curiosity, and lifted

her scarf to cover her hair. With polite murmurs, they stepped out into the cool night. Steve took Amina through the gate.

The compound, just north of the city, abuts a dirt road between the highway and the Gulf of Davao. Aside from warehouses along the highway, a tired coconut grove spans the area, the owner awaiting lucrative offers from developers as the city expands. During the day, barefoot men in sap-stained garments shimmy up the trees to tap the flowers for juice to make tuba liquor. Beneath the trees, families at the margin build homes with sticks, fronds, scrap lumber and pre-owned nails. They too await the developers, although with anxiety.

From the time he moved into the compound, Steve had walked along the dirt road, greeting his neighbors, stopping to chat and learning words, although at first he confused Tagalog and Visayan. He took photographs. His pictures became treasured possessions in many of the shacks.

The dirt road dead-ended at a dilapidated fishermen's dock on the Gulf of Davao. In California, they would have condemned the pier, posted dire warning signs and cordoned it off. Angry citizens would have protested, demanded its demolition and sued the city should one of its rusty nails scratch a child of theirs. But for Steve, the dock and its surroundings rivaled Edward Weston's Point Lobos. By slanting, warm evening light, he photographed weathered wood, wrinkled men and people studying books as the sun went down. It seemed his neighbors were always studying something. They made it Steve's favorite place.

As they strolled towards the pier, Steve sensed that he should not touch Amina. She lagged a step or two behind, her head bowed, walking not by his side but not quite following him either. A couple greeted Steve. A little farther on, an old man bid him well in Tagalog.

"These people know you," Amina said. She seemed pleasantly surprised.

Amina let Steve guide her onto the old dock. They sat down. Another couple not far away spotted them and drifted off. Moonlight glanced across the water.

"I like it here," Steve said. "Out here, I feel I'm in the Philippines." He pointed. "See there, that light, it's a banca boat. You don't see outriggers like that in the States. Soon we will hear the put-put of its engine. For you, it is nothing. For me, that sound is a souvenir."

Amina laughed. "You are a silly romantic, Sweet Steve. That is what I will call you, 'Sweet Steve.'"

Amina shifted as if she were uncomfortable. Steve caught his breath. Her spontaneous quip surprised them both, even though it crystallized the apparent—they wanted more of each other. The put-put of the motor grew loud before Steve heard it.

"Okay," he said, "but men are not supposed to be sweet. I will ponder a name for you and extract vengeance."

They giggled. Their shoulders touched. The banca boat drew near and then receded, its wake sloshing against the pier.

"You are wrong," Amina said. "Sounds over the water bring strong feelings to me. I am Maranao, which means people of the lake. I was born in a little village on the shores of Lake Lanao. Do you know where that is?"

"It's a huge lake in Central Mindanao but I've not been there, not yet. I'd like to see your village."

"It's gone. They destroyed it."

He jerked at the fierceness of her words. They reverberated and silenced the night sounds.

"Who?" He asked, almost in a whisper.

"Hypocor, that's the Philippine Hydropower Corporation." She spoke the name with abject bitterness, but then continued as if she were describing the universe. "Lake Lanao empties into the Agus River. They have several hydroelectric plants on the river." Her hands drew a diagram in the air. "They built a regulatory dam at the mouth of the river to stabilize the flow of waters to their plants. When the rains were strong, they flooded our villages. When the rains were weak, they drained our rice paddies and fish farms." Her hand rose and fell. The bitterness returned. "We had to abandon our homes."

"Did they compensate you? Did they help you relocate your village?"

She laughed. "Sweet Steve, this is the Philippines. We are Moros, like your Indians. Imperial Manila has the bigger guns."

Bigger guns in the Philippines did not mean better lawyers. "So what happened? I mean, what did you do? What could you do?" He turned to her. She gazed over the Gulf of Davao, but he sensed her mind looking back at Lake Lanao.

"I was ten. I cried. And then I was hungry." She looked at him. The moonlight caught her face. Her eyes startled him. Bright white light pierced at him through jet-black diaphragms as if he had foolishly held up a lens to look at the sun.

"We moved to Marawi City and gathered strength. I have six older brothers. They all went to the university. I'm the only girl." Her jaw tightened as she smiled. "I went too."

Her eyes were brilliant with victory. But he sensed something else. He guessed.

"And Hypocor?"

He saw in her eyes a quiet, cunning fierceness. He felt lucky, honored maybe, to be sitting with this person. He wanted to kiss her and become part of her, to hell with the consequences.

"They will pay," she said.

"Tigress," he blurted. "I will call you 'Tigress.'"

He grabbed her with both arms as if he could scoop her inside himself.

Their first embrace ignited insatiable desires, a frenzy of kissing, caressing, fondling and groping. They began to sweat and the smell of their heat cut the cool night air. The dilapidated pier creaked.

She stopped it. She said they had to talk it over in the light of day. He too thought that wise. He felt as if he was in a free fall, tumbling into a void, and the lack of oxygen frightened him.

The next day, a Sunday, they had lunch at a family restaurant and sat across the table from one another, out of reach. They discussed the complications of a relationship between a Filipina raised Muslim and a lapsed Catholic American. She lived in a Christian city to fight for Moro rights, but her soul remained by the lake, in Marawi, the Muslim Capital of the Philippines. Her loyalties were with her family, clan and tribe. He too lived in a place that was not his home. Apex would relocate him. He would be moving on. They tried to be objective. They put the issue on the table and talked about it, negotiated it, as if they were parents arranging a marriage. After a couple of hours, Amina offered a blunt but sensible solution.

"We want to share a bed but we are temporary. I propose a carnal interlude for as long as it lasts, but with one condition. If one of us falls in love, the other must not know. We must not burden one another with futile emotions."

Steve felt elated. She had talked him into every man's dream.

On the phone, after several minutes of frustrated growls and groans, she sighed. "Sweet Steve, I need you. Find out when I can go home."

Having slouched in reverie, he straightened up. "Okay, the subsidiary managers are flying in for meetings on Wednesday and Thursday. On Wednesday, I present my proposal for the fertilizer contract. For sure, there'll be some talk about the hard drive. There's a cocktail party and dinner Wednesday night. I'll mingle and measure the level of upset. Call me late Wednesday night if you can."

"I'll call tomorrow night too. I miss you. Think about me and get ready."

He moaned. "Oh, I'm already ready, but I'll be thinking anyway."

"See you soon, Insha Allah."

"God willing," he echoed.

He cradled the phone and slouched in the armchair. His fertilizer analysis could wait until the morning. He had to think.

They had survived eighteen months. "Time to move on," fate would soon say, and their interlude would become memories. Yet despite their carnal pact, these brief separations hurt. They foretold the angst of a lost companion.

He felt her warmth, smelled her scent, saw her. Except for Moro occasions, she wore "Christian clothes"—layers of them, all buttoned up. He smiled, but never underwear, unless she wore jeans. Her face she exposed—wide nose, high cheekbones, smooth unblemished skin—but she always wore a shawl over her head at the ready to cover her face and become inscrutable.

She allowed naked forearms, often rolling up her sleeves when she worked, showing off her only jewelry, single-strands of cheap little-girl beads, one on each wrist. He saw her hands—fingers thickened by toil, clean,

trimmed, unpainted nails. He saw her holding a long pencil. She gripped it up high when she wrote her Arabic squiggles, as if the pencil were a paintbrush. And when she paused, he could discern her mood from its angle.

She walked with her head bowed. She appeared submissive and prudish, subservient and dull, until she looked at you. Her glittering onyx eyes caught light not available to others. They sparkled with a magic potion. He knew why she walked with a tilt. She watched the earth for him. She kept it rotating.

Two things animated the Tigress—a closed bedroom door and the Moro struggle. Before and after sex, her homework consumed her. “Shit,” she had said. Her files harbored secrets, her private things. Santana had gotten his dirty paws underneath the Christian clothes.

He wanted to reminisce sweet memories and fantasize erotic prospects, but he had made that mistake too often. He sprang from the chair and paced, angry at his creed.

Don't get involved in someone else's problems. Issues are emotional. Emotions are abstracts. Abstracts fade if you give them time. Time heals. Spastic stress is undignified—be cool. Life is negotiation. Play it close to the chest. Don't stick your nose in someone else's arse. Don't get involved. Bryce's chicken shit guide for the tranquilized soul.

He stopped pacing and studied his photograph of the carabao, one of his favorites, perhaps most favorite, or most favorable. The water buffalo charging, two bared teeth, bits of drool splaying from his chin and the eyes, beautiful eyes, glazed, crazed, demented eyes. Three hooves firm on the bottom of the frame, the fourth bounding up, perfect angle, decisive moment. The

battle-scarred horns, shoulders heaving, momentum full forward. He had had to crop it a little to correct for the tilt. Not perfectly sharp either, the camera shook a little. Camera had not seen an insane carabao before. But I got the shot, just before the beast gored me.

He gazed at the photograph. He saw the deranged beast trying to tell him, “Get out of my way.”

Sometimes, Bryce, you have to lower the camera to get the picture.

Greg Bascom, who divides his time between Miami, FL and Costa Rica, has worked in foreign countries for most of his career, first with the military and then with a multinational food company. In the mid-70s, during his first night on a plantation in the Philippines, he couldn't sleep for the gunfire in the near distance. In the morning, he thought it prudent to find out about the Moros, the predominately-Muslim tribes of the Southern Philippines, who were then and still are fighting to defend their culture. Decades after that sleepless night, when Greg settled in Costa Rica to write fiction, the Moro conflict would become the central issue in his novel *Lawless Elements*, the first in his series of political thrillers set in various countries. Greg first entered the Faulkner-Wisdom novel competition in 2004 and has submitted manuscripts every year since. Between the River and the Ridge was a semi-finalist in 2005, and *Isabela's Journal* was on the short list for finalists in 2006. His initial attempt at *Lawless Elements* earned semi-finalist in 2007. The first complete revision was on the short list for finalist in 2008.

Recommended Reading: 2009 Novels

Both Ways is the Only Way I Want It

By Maile Meloy

In an exceptionally strong year for short fiction, Meloy's concise yet fine-grained narratives, whether set in Montana, an East Coast boarding school or a 1970s nuclear power plant, shout out with quiet restraint and calm precision. Her flawed characters — ranch hands in love, fathers and daughters — rarely act in their own best interests and often betray those closest to them.

Chronic City

By Jonathan Lethem

Lethem's eighth novel unfolds in an alternative-reality Manhattan. The crowded canvas includes a wantonly destructive escaped tiger (or is it a subway excavator?) prowling the streets, a cruel gray fog engulfing Wall Street, a “war free” edition of *The New York Times*, a character stranded on the dying International Space Station, strange and valuable vasselike objects called chaldrons, colossal cheeseburgers and some extremely potent marijuana.

A Gate At The Stairs

By Lorrie Moore

Moore's captivating novel, her first in more than a decade, is set in 2001 and narrated by a Wisconsin college student who hungers for worldly experience and finds it when she takes a job baby-sitting for a bohemian couple who are trying to adopt a mixed-race child. Meanwhile, she drifts into a love affair with an enigmatic classmate and feels the pressing claims of her own family, above all her affectless younger brother, who enlists in the military after 9/11.



*Paul Takeuchi
2009 Runner-Up
Novel
Excerpt:*



The Hashimoto Complex

*There is no progress in art,
any more than there is progress in making love.*
—Man Ray

*Once, when I was a boy, Papa said to me, "In Japan, one is born Shinto, marries Christian, and dies Buddhist."
"So what will my life be?" I asked.
"You won't know until it's over. But concentrate on the middle because it's the only part you have any control over."*

Something Fishy in Denmark

In her early twenties, my mother was, in my grandmother's words, "a U.N. slut," dating every dark, intelligent man who wasn't a nice Jewish boy from Boston, which is where she's from. Throughout the years I heard about a funny Italian anesthesiologist, a handsome Kenyan lawyer, a Spanish cardiologist who drove a red Karmann Ghia. These worldly men always seemed more dashing than Papa, more chivalrous, more doting; I often wondered why she hadn't married one of them. Of course if she had, I wouldn't be telling this story. A similar story perhaps, but not this one.

My parents met in New York, at a holiday party in 1959. Mother was dressed in a dowdy wildflower-patterned dress because she'd spent the day sitting shiva. She was not in a good mood because, besides the death of her best friend's father, she was sad about Suraj, her Ceylonese boyfriend who'd just broken up with her. Papa arrived after his shift. At the bar, still dressed in a white lab coat, a stethoscope dangling from his neck, he saw her standing on the frosty balcony, lost in thought. Love at first sight, he called it.

After two scotches, he made his move. "Hello," he said, holding a plate of seafood appetizers, "I'm Akira, and you have beautiful blue eyes." As he was offering his hand, the food spilled onto her dress. This accident—serendipitous, if you ask my father; fateful, if you ask my mother—marked the beginning of their relationship and gave Papa an excuse to paw at her breasts and hips as he brushed greasy clams and dulce into napkins.

Seventeen years later, they were through. It was the summer of '76. Papa had flown to Copenhagen to present

a paper called The Future of STDs. As usual, he packed light, bringing only a scuffed leather doctor's bag which contained a Dopp kit, a roll of surgical equipment (stethoscope, forceps, speculum), a sweatsuit, boxers, two carousels of slides, and the text of his lecture, a fifteen-foot vertical torah of Scotch-taped scraps of legal paper.

According to Dr. Kinosuke Suzuki, Papa's friend since their grade-school shitamachi days, the first half of the presentation went well. Papa projected slides of herpes, bacterial vaginosis, a little syphilis here, a bit of gonorrhea there. The trouble started after the chromes of prostitutes in the Congo with symptoms Papa would later claim were the first documentation of AIDS. "The first slide of the second carousel was supposed to be a close-up," Kinosuke explained the night I took him out for a beer to ply him for some of Papa's secret history. "Now please note the severe..." Akira said with a press of the advance button. Then the projector snapped into focus, and what did we see but a nurse spread-eagled on the bed and Akira nude except for a pink condom and a blue cockring—two meters wide on the giant screen!" Kinosuke chuckled, snorting Mild Seven smoke. "The audience was howling while he frantically clicked the remote. Because there was more! Vibrators, dildos, missionary, dog-style! Slide after slide that he'd mistakenly included from his private collection. Poor Akira. The jokes at the smorgasbord that evening were especially cruel."

To escape the ridicule, Papa moved to a sleazy hotel near Tivoli and hired Laila, a mermaidish dominatrix to keep him company for the remainder of the conference. A few days later, he returned home with a shopping bag full of duty-free cigarettes, books (The Happy Hooker, an anthology of Kierkegaard), and a gift-wrapped box of Royal Copenhagen porcelain. But when mother hugged him, she detected another woman's smell in his hair and locked him out. Curiously, Papa didn't protest, pouting on our doormat for a moment—I was watching from an upstairs window—before he turned, farted, and left the family home forever.

Three weeks later, mother was diagnosed with cancer—"another turn of the screwed," she called it. Her left breast removed, the lumpy right one sacrificed for peace of mind. Post-chemo, her mood vacillated

between imperial authority and weepy breakdown. For me, it meant no more allowances, no more cooked meals, no more maternal fawning over my teenage struggles. Life was fucked, I decided, and I rebelled, a sarcastic morbidity in my every remark. I guzzled vodka and smoked pot. Read Camus and devoured Dostoevsky. Became a connoisseur of the concentration camp memoir. Into the woods I escaped to slingshot squirrels and jerk off with a damp cache of Playboys. The story of my joint-custody experience was going to be called Weekdays in Auschwitz, Weekends in Manzanar.

So what had caused the marriage to unravel? Sure, there were cultural and temperamental differences—“Akira’s a dog and I’m a cat,” mother used to say. And of course there was Papa’s Danish dalliance along with the

There’s nothing like grief to kill a marriage.

women in his slideshow. But that was later, after Martin.

Martin was my brother, dead of a rare lung virus at four and a half months. Thirty years on, mother still feels guilty for returning to law school so soon after his birth. I was only seven that turbulent summer. I didn’t understand Papa’s tirades about the hospital’s “goddamn negligence.” Or why he shouted, “That bastard killed my son!” each time Sirhan Sirhan’s face appeared on TV. Martin died June 5, 1968, the night Robert Kennedy was assassinated, an event which, Papa was convinced, distracted the doctors from treating Martin thoroughly. In hindsight, most likely nothing could have saved him, neither a miracle antibiotic nor some magical surgery.

The tragedy weighed heavily on the Hashimoto complex: silent dinners, Papa absent more and more, mother staring out the window like a woman in a Hopper painting. The marriage lasted eight more years, until the summer Jimmy Carter was nominated and mother realized that something fishy had happened in Denmark.

There’s nothing like grief to kill a marriage. This is something I’ve thought a lot about since Marlena left. Nearly six months ago, in March, she sequestered herself in a Buddhist monastery near the top of the highest peak in Maine. When the sun rises over the Atlantic, its rosy rays hit Mt. Katahdin’s bald summit first of all land in North America, “a very zen moment,” she described it on the phone one evening. Dr. Michaels is there, too—Karl, our couple’s therapist.

You’d think mother would have sympathy for my plight, solidarity, because we’re both victims of wayward spouses. But no, she’s prickly as ever, the queen of tough

love. She has little patience for my paralyzing self-pity, my retreat to adolescent wistfulness, the exact things she experienced when Papa left. Her advice? Give Marlena an ultimatum.

“Because what’s the worst that can happen?” she says as we turn onto M Street in her law firm’s chauffeured Lincoln. “So she dumps you for that psycho. Then you pick yourself up and find someone else, someone better, a nice Jewish girl, perhaps.”

It’s a Monday morning in late August and I’m accompanying my mother to a hearing before we catch lunch and I return to New York. Why did I come down to D.C.? To deliver a commission, a kitschy portrait of my ex-dealer’s best client’s poodle. My art career is not doing so well; ergo, I can’t afford to be elitist. Besides, painting rich people’s pets keeps me from obsessing about Marlena.

“But I don’t want anyone else,” I say.

“You want to know what I think?”

“What?”

“Marlena’s crazy.”

“So, she’s a little crazy. We’re both a little crazy. You’re crazy.”

“Whatever,” mother says with all the enthusiasm of Carolina, my stepfather Walter’s 13-year-old granddaughter. “So what are you going to do? You can’t just keep on waiting. I hate to break this to you, but you’re not so young anymore.” Though I feel like it, even if I’m 28. “So,”—she flips down the rear partition mirror and applies a fresh coat of lipstick—“I suppose this means you’re no longer interested in having kids.”

“Did I say that?”

“I thought Marlena didn’t want them.”

“What gave you that idea? I might have once told you she felt ambivalent, but...”

“What? Now she’s willing?”

I drop my eyes and bite my lip.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

It’s surprising how clueless mother is, given all she experienced after Martin. Though it doesn’t really matter, because I’m not ready to discuss the death of my child. In six months, a year perhaps, but not now. The sad thing is that mother mistakes my reticence for indecisiveness. “The worst thing for a man,” she’s reminded me more than once, “is to not know what he wants.”

There was a time when all I wanted was Marlena. I wanted us to be happy. I wanted to make babies and great art. Now I don’t want anything anymore.

Paul Takeuchi grew up in Washington, D.C. and now lives with his family in Brooklyn. An award-winning photographer as well as a writer, Takeuchi has been published in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Word Riot*, *Tokyo Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Cutthroat*, *SpringGun*, and *The Sonora Review*. His first novel, *The Hashimoto Complex*, recently placed in the competition for the Starcherone Prize for Innovative Fiction. For more, visit www.paultakeuchi.com.



Walter McElrosky
2009 Runner-Up
Novel
Excerpt:
After You've Gone



In the spring of their senior year Walker Merrill was so much in love with Lucy Henderson that smelling her neck or just thinking of her could make his heart pound and his knees shake. His ordinary state became one of muted ecstasy, a kind of delirium; he walked around in it. But about the same time, something else happened that unsettled his life and had nothing to do with love, as far as he knew. Ugly, brutal images began to invade his dreams, coercing them toward nightmare with a force as irresistible, in its own way, as that of adolescent desire. He didn't speak of these dreams to anyone, even Lucy, because he couldn't make sense of them. In the morning he couldn't even retrieve what he had dreamed, not exactly, but its anxious tenor tugged at him for hours like a summons from another world. He resisted it by thinking of Lucy.

People say life in New Orleans was simple back then. At least it seemed simple. This was decades ago—before the flood, before the city had divided itself into two warring halves, each eyeing the other down the length of a gun barrel. None of the families Walker knew in the Garden District had an alarm system, least of all one of the complex electronic networks that now afford us our dreams of security. Back then, if you discovered in the morning that you had left the front door unlocked you dismissed it with a shrug; nowadays, guilt would stab you in the gut. Parents put a lot of faith in good manners. Having servants who addressed them as “sir” and “ma'am” steadied their belief in the orderly nature of things. Everyone, black and white alike, had his role parceled out to him at birth, and he either played it or got the hell out of town—heading north, most likely. Grownups, the ones Walker knew, had been trained not to speak in loud voices. As a result, when their children glimpsed ugly and complicated emotions behind the politeness, it was like staring at a double exposure or picking up a bad smell or humming vibration in the air. For the most part, young people took things at face value, just as their parents did or pretended to do. Maybe that was why life seemed simple.

Does that mean it was all lies? Everyone knew ugly things did happen, were happening all along. Of course the same ugly crimes were being committed then as now: rape, murder, even worse than murder. But Walker's life was

circumscribed by school and the well-ordered houses of his parents and friends. The only newspaper he read seriously, when he had time to read it, was the Sunday Times that arrived in the mail each Tuesday. The shadow world of violence was nothing more to him than a presence that disturbed his sleep. Or not until the summer he graduated from high school—the same summer he was so caught up in Lucy Henderson.

Walker had just turned eighteen. He had read a lot of books, lettered in basketball and baseball, and fallen deeply in love without having yet discovered love's limit, if it has one; in the fall he would go East to college. He had also been to three funerals: three more than most of his friends. Each had taken place in Metairie Cemetery, with its oaks and receding vistas, long before images of other cemeteries ever invaded his memory and dreams.

All Walker remembered of his sister's funeral, when he was nine, was the look on his mother's face that

Grownups, the ones Walker knew, had been trained not to speak in loud voices. As a result, when their children glimpsed ugly and complicated emotions behind the politeness, it was like staring at a double exposure or picking up a bad smell or humming ..vibration in the air.

he couldn't do anything about, then or later. He scarcely remembered his grandmother's funeral at all. The one he remembered clearly was Marietta Hammond's the year before, not just because he and Marietta were the same age, or because of what they had once meant to each other, but because of the confused feelings it had left him with. Something had gone wrong during it.

Even people who knew Marietta's father never went to church were surprised that there hadn't been a memorial service. As it was, Walker was late leaving school and by the time he drove to the cemetery and

found his way to the tomb the mourners had already gathered. The light rain falling was little more than mist.

At the head of the coffin a man who must have been the funeral director was speaking words Walker couldn't hear. Fifteen or twenty of Marietta's classmates were there--the school van was parked in the gravel lane five tombs away. Walker saw his mother standing at a little distance in a group of women from the neighborhood. In spite of the director's presence no one seemed to be really in charge--not even elegant, silver-haired Mr. Hammond, who was always in charge. He stood next to his grown son with his hat in his hands, like an ordinary mourner except for the look of furious desolation on his face.

Two girls near Walker were crying silently, their shoulders shaking. Otherwise, maybe in response to what they saw on Mr. Hammond's face, everyone wore masks of suspended emotion. Walker's own blocked feelings held his heart in a tight fist.

The funeral director had stopped talking. He seemed to be waiting for someone to make the next move, and the silence was uneasy as if no one knew what the next move was or might be. Mr. Hammond abruptly stepped forward. From where Walker watched, the man's torso appeared to be mounted on top of the coffin, which itself rested on a dais in front of the tomb. Maybe Walker only imagined a collective intake of breath when Mr. Hammond started to raise the coffin's lid. Mr. Hammond would have been deaf or indifferent to it anyhow.

Exactly what happened next wasn't really clear. But as Mr. Hammond approached the coffin his son had started toward him from behind. His jerky, stiff-legged steps resembled those of a child who has just learned to walk. What Walker and his mother couldn't agree on afterwards was whether he had grabbed his father's shoulder, or said something to him that no one else heard, or both. The older man let the coffin close and turned to face him. For what may have been only a moment--but it was a moment fixed in Walker's memory--father and son glared at each other like irate game cocks. They seemed oblivious of where they were--that was what shocked the onlookers most. An almost visible force field of silent commotion surrounded them. Then the older man turned back to the coffin. He pulled a ring from his left hand, opened the lid again, and slipped the ring inside. That done, he lowered his head and stalked off down the alleyway of tombs.

Walker had to stand aside as he passed. When he did, Mr. Hammond glanced up and their eyes locked. In the gray light Mr. Hammond's eyes were colorless, opaque. "Walker," he said without pausing. He might have been speaking from the bottom of a well but Walker felt something pass between them, a shivery awareness--they went back a long way. Walker hadn't even seen the Yellow Cab pull up between the school bus and where he stood. The rear door opened as Mr. Hammond walked past but he only quickened his step. He dismissed them

all--his son, who charged off to lose himself in the maze of graves, his neighbors and Marietta's schoolmates, the passenger in the cab. He left them to what they could salvage of true feeling from a wrecked occasion.

The mourners drifted away from the grave in silent, ragged clusters. Walker saw his mother to her car, then went back to his. He got in but didn't start the engine. He waited. Presently no one remained except the two uniformed men preparing the coffin for its descent and the passenger in the taxi still parked a short distance away, between two rows of tombs that resembled mansions in miniature.

The passenger got out. Walker had guessed, had just known, that it would be Mrs. Hammond. She had pulled a shawl over her head and the neck brace she wore but even though he hadn't seen her in years he would have picked out her skinny angularity in any crowd. Leaning forward, she tottered slightly, but her sense of purpose was palpable as she moved toward the grave, ignoring the attendants who retreated without protest when she raised the coffin's lid.

That did it. Walker had been pretty close to Mrs. Hammond in the old days, he had wanted to speak to her, but another hand reaching into that coffin was more than he could take. He drove off. He hoped she wouldn't see him. Even if she did, she was probably too locked inside her own head to care much what was going on outside.

Driving home, Walker might have expected grief to descend on him at last, or something like grief. But he had tried to put Marietta Hammond out of mind before she died and what was unfinished between them stood in grief's way; so did his intense

vision of the family pantomime he had just witnessed, now etched for good on the retina of his mind's eye. What he felt was the dead certainty that he had failed Marietta. No, had failed to save her--not from the car that had taken her into a flooded canal but from whatever it was in her life that had pulled them apart before that. She was beyond his help but he could hear her calling to him for it, now more clearly than ever.

Long before Lucy, through so many years of childhood there had been Marietta. It was Lucy who brought him back to her in the end.

Walter Stauffer McCloskey was born in New Orleans, 1938. Educated: Isidore Newman School; Harvard College, B.A.; Tulane University, M.A.; Harvard University, Ph.D. Married: Helen Josephine Grace, also of New Orleans; Children: Walter Robinson and Caroline Grace. Work: English teacher, Milton Academy, Milton, MA. Publication: *Risking Elizabeth*, a novel (Simon and Schuster, 1997). Translated into German and published as *In bester Gesellschaft* (Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 2001).



Diane Daniels Manning
2009
Best Novella
**Yellow Shotgun on
Demeter Street**



Novella Judge James Nolan won the Society's gold medal for Best Novel in 2008 for his manuscript, *Higher Ground*, a novel that has since been published. An excerpt from that winning novel is presented in this edition of *The Double Dealer*. In 2009, his book, *Perpetual Care*, was awarded the 2007 Jefferson Press Prize and the 2009 Next Generation Indie Book Award for Best Short Story Collection. His collections of poetry are *Why I Live*

in the Forest and *What Moves Is Not the Wind*, and his short fiction is represented in the anthology *New Orleans Noir*. He directs the Loyola Writing Institute.

Yellow Shotgun on Demeter Street Excerpt

Darren

I've been lying so long I don't know what's the truth any more. I saw the murder with my own eyes, at least I think I did, but then again it might not be murder because Lucius could still be alive. See what I mean? The truth is slippery. I'll bet anything Lucius was breathing when the paramedics slid him into the ambulance. They wouldn't have bothered to put the siren on full blast like they were in a sweat to get to Charity Hospital if he was dead. Even a twelve year-old boy from Chicago knows that's the best place to get fixed up if a person gets shot in New Orleans even if he's rich like my Dad and can afford someplace fancier which in Lucius' case he probably doesn't. Else, why would he be a handyman for Miss Dorrie when he's plenty smart enough to do other things?

Wait a minute! Hold on! What if the cops decide to question me? Someone, most likely Mrs. Dr. Fortier, might have seen me behind the ginger plants peeking in Miss

Dorrie's bedroom window. She might even have seen me run inside. The police might think that's suspicious. They could decide I pulled the trigger, and before anyone thinks to get me a good criminal lawyer, the cops back home in Chicago will tell them why I was sent here to New Orleans to live with my aunt, and I'll be on my way to juvie or maybe real jail. Who knows? It might've been me. I could've rushed in and tried to stop the real killer—if Lucius is dead. I could have pulled the trigger myself and hit Lucius by mistake. I'm not that used to shooting at people.

Cancel that. I'm pretty sure I didn't do it. I could never hurt Lucius or Miss Dorrie, either. Yes, the more I think about it, the person I think I saw was someone I probably imagined. I might have wished so hard the gun wouldn't go off, I made up something I didn't see.

My imagination is one of my best talents. Ask anyone. Besides, the view through the window wasn't that good. I think I closed my eyes when I heard the shots, three of them—bang, bang, bang! Yes, I'm almost positive I did. For all I know, Lucius could have shot himself by accident. That's how mad he was.

Probably the guilty party was the first one on the scene—I mean besides me. The more I think about it Mrs. Dr. Fortier is the perfect candidate. Someone who wears a hat and white gloves just to cross the street and see who's fixing that loose board on Miss Dorrie's porch is up to no good. She could have been hiding under the bed hoping to find out what Miss Dorrie was up to, and that's how she got there so fast.

And she says I'm a peeping Tom! Like the cops say on TV, the murderer needs motive and opportunity, and Mrs. Dr. Fortier had plenty of both. I know jealousy when I see it, but why would a lady with a huge house and a husband who's a big deal at Seward University be jealous of Miss Dorrie's little house and a dozen cats?

Mr. Dr. Fortier must have heard about Lucius getting shot, too, because he came zooming into his driveway in his brand new, 1974 Lincoln Continental and parked it with the engine running. He came back out of his house a minute later carrying a brown envelope. Something important must have been inside. A person who thinks as much of himself as Mr. Dr. Fortier wouldn't deliver an envelope himself unless he didn't want anyone else to see

it. Probably stuffed with lots of \$100 bills to bribe the cops with, so his precious Seward University won't be in the headlines tomorrow.

The person I wish the police would pin it on is that creep Rene, but he'd finished delivering Miss Dorrie's groceries long before the first shot was fired. That much I'm sure of. Miss Dorrie is the one with the best alibi because she was naked in bed at the time with no place to hide a gun on her, and she wouldn't just happen to have a loaded gun under her pillow, would she?

Thank goodness I made it back here to my aunt's before the cops saw me.

I can hear the crowd outside my bedroom window saying how a black man got shot trying to rape Miss Dorrie. Lucius could never do something like that. Think about it. If Lucius lives, he could be in worse trouble than I ever was in my life! Look at the riots they had at that elementary school here in the sixties. Not that long ago, trust me. It took four feds to get one little girl through the mob. Talk about brave! If I'd been her, the feds would've had to hold me down to keep me from bolting.

My history teacher was there—in person! He told us all about it one day when a fire drill took up half the period, and we didn't have enough time to finish the chapter. For once, he didn't put me to sleep. He was one of the teachers at the little girl's school, and they were scared, too. They didn't get too close to the windows in case someone threw something, like maybe a bomb. I wasn't in New Orleans myself at the time, but if I was, I would've missed the whole thing. My school's private.

Things haven't changed all that much since back then, believe me. That's why I'm so worried about Lucius, and Miss Dorrie, too. No telling what will happen now. All I know is my eyes nearly popped out when I saw Lucius lying across Miss Dorrie's bed with blood all over his chest.

And the really amazing part is only a few minutes earlier I was wondering whether maybe he had a wife back home in the Marigny and even another boy who was his real son with black skin like his that he forgot to mention all those times we sat around Miss Dorrie's kitchen sharing some of her special cookies with the powdered sugar. She piles it on so thick it blows all over if you don't hold your breath when you bite. Could even be that his wife, if he has one, is the one who shot him. Who could blame her, finding her own husband in Miss Dorrie's bedroom and her with no clothes on? My mom would've had a fit for sure if she ever found my dad like that before they got divorced and Lorna married him for his money. Then my mom would've been the one who ended up in jail or maybe the loony bin, like me.

Billie Jean

I can see the headlines now: "Handyman Shot in University Love Nest! Racial Tensions Heat Up!" Right this minute my husband, Provost Dr. Samuel Fortier, is arranging for the university's top lawyer to get over to Professor Talardie's and contain the damage. Not that

Seward bears any responsibility for a crime committed in a professor's private residence. Somehow Professor Talardie's—Dorrie's—black handyman got himself shot. Apparently was naked in bed when it happened, but is that any reason to fault the university? People are always ready to believe the worst when it comes to New Orleans' second largest employer, especially in a situation like this. Only a couple of years ago, a rough-looking bunch picketed the School of Pharmacy for not having any African-Americans in the freshman class. As if Seward did that on purpose! This is the 1970's. The federal government would have stepped in in a New York minute. In fact, they did. Most unpleasant.

Standing here on my wraparound porch, I can see the police cars with their swooping blue lights blocking access to Demeter Street from Napoleon. Not that they've prevented a crowd from gathering in front of Dorrie's. I recognize a reporter from *The Times Picayune*, walking around with a notebook, hoping to find a witness. I can hear the gossip from here. It's like they say: whispers carry further than normal speech. Not that some people aren't shouting their lurid accusations, without a shred of proof I might add.

This is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill crime. No secret stash of money in a numbered account, no Colonel Mustard in the drawing room with the knife. It's a crime of passion, but passion of what kind?

The guilty party will only be caught through a careful analysis of his—or her—character shaped by events long ago. I am peculiarly qualified to undertake this task because I've known Dorrie since we were children, but mostly because of my finely honed powers of deduction. They're what attracted Provost Dr. Fortier to me in the first place, though I haven't been called upon to use that particular talent often in recent years.

Hard as it is to believe, for a few minutes this afternoon I was under suspicion of pulling the trigger myself, just because I was first on the scene and put in the call to 911. The policeman in question called me "Miz Fortier," pronouncing it For-tee-er, letting me know he was from up North, bless his heart, and hadn't been taught any better. Fortunately, the officer in charge had earned a little overtime pay managing the crowds on Napoleon Avenue the Saturday before Fat Tuesday, and he recognized me at once. He agreed I gave a very cogent explanation of my presence at the scene, calling me Mrs. For-shay respectfully.

Here's what I told him. I was sitting on my wraparound porch, enjoying a cool glass of lemonade and writing a letter to my son, Sam, Jr., in Cleveland, Ohio, when I happened to look up and see Dorrie's handyman barge into her kitchen without so much as a knock on the door. I'd seen him do it countless times before, but this time he was half naked and the sweat was gleaming off his black skin like he hadn't the sense to wash up first. It may sound un-Christian, but it's no wonder if she shot him looking like that. I didn't actually see her do it, but isn't it obvious? That's what comes of letting the help get too familiar.

I should have warned her when she let him in by the front door that first day he came. She didn't think anyone noticed, but I did. The boy, too, I wouldn't doubt.

The handyman wasn't Dorrie's only visitor this afternoon. Rene, that dreadful grandson of my maid's, left not twenty minutes before the handyman arrived. How long does it take to deliver a couple bags of Schwegmann's groceries is what I'd like to know?

Not that I believe anything untoward was involved on Dorrie's part. The poor woman's an innocent if ever there was one. Dull as dishwater, whatever people might say now. Well, there's such a thing as being too innocent, and if anyone qualifies, it's Dorrie. Personally, I made different choices in life. She can keep her books and all those scholarly articles. I have Faculty Wives and my wraparound porch, thank you very much, not to mention my dear husband Sammy.

Esther

That white policeman had his nerve, asking me where I was when Lucius got hisself shot. Me, the victim's wife! I already lost one husband, and I'm not about to lose another if I can help it. When Lucius wakes up, I'll give him what for—if he even remembers what happened. The nurse said they don't sometimes. That stuck up policeman should've been bringing me a glass of water to steady my nerves instead of insulting me like that, telling me not leave town just because I been too busy with my new job to get around to changing my old Monroe address on my driver's license.

The way folks race around in this city seems like he'd be glad to have a sensible driver on the street. The man was actually gonna write me up before the other one stopped him. Like I'd be anywhere else with my husband maybe dying right here in Charity Hospital even if he was half naked in a white lady's bedroom. Don't know what that woman did to make him lose his head like that. Someone could accuse him of rape. Things haven't changed that much.

Stop right now, Esther Washington! Don't let your thoughts go there.

The nice officer—the one who let me know in so many words Professor Talardie hadn't said such a thing so far—had the sense to offer me a hanky. A clean one, too. His mama must have brought him up right. Or the wife. I was tempted to go ahead and tell him Rene'd done this to my poor Lucius, but I didn't want to hurt my cousin Clotine after she'd been so nice when we first got to New Orleans. It's not her fault her son turned out like that. The sofa's plenty good enough for trash like him, out all night and up to no good. I never dreamed the boy had a gun. Must have stole it from somewhere.

I might have gone ahead and turned him in anyways, but the nice officer went off some place to do paperwork, and I was left alone with the redneck. I was still Suspect Number One on his list, for true, and he started in questioning me again.

Lucius might have forgotten who he is, but I wasn't about to make the same mistake. I sat up straight like Miss

Jessie taught me and told the redneck in my best "white" voice, "If you want to know where I was, I was sitting at my desk all afternoon in the Provost's office at Seward." I leaned heavy on the Provost and Seward so even a person with cauliflower ears couldn't miss it. Then I flashed him one of my special smiles, and he took in my gold tooth like I meant him to. It didn't hurt I had on my new magenta blouse with the ruffles down the front. His eyes moved away from the spot between my bosoms and narrowed suspiciously.

An idea was trying to get born behind that wrinkled forehead, and he asked me was I acquainted with Mrs. Provost Fortier. At first I thought he was hoping to catch me in a lie, but then he said she lives practically across the street from Professor Talardie and was first on the scene. I was some surprised. Lucius never mentioned that important fact for my career, but I've learned there were quite a few things he never told me about hisself and Professor Talardie.

I told the nasty white policeman I'd seen the provost's wife at the office a couple of times and knew her to say hello, but that was it. I asked if she was a suspect, too, and he gave me a look that would've froze my blood in my veins if I weren't half dead inside already from seeing Lucius with all kinda tubes sticking out him. Well, Mama brought me up a Christian and I forgave him.

A person can't expect an ignorant redneck to recognize that under the skin, both me and Mrs. Provost Fortier are refined, college-educated ladies. I'm even a little bit extra high up because of my experiences at Miss Jessie's, not that I go around with my nose stuck in the air like some folks. Marie Sharold in Physical Plant, for instance, that won't give Lucius a job in Physical Plant like I asked her for a hundred times.

Dorrie

I'm in a state of confusion. Perhaps it's shock. How else could I feel seeing Lucius sprawled across my bed, bleeding into my new mauve sheets? We bought them together at Schwegmann's barely two weeks ago, and now this. Who could have imagined? A man with the best part of his life ahead of him.

The lights flashing across my kitchen walls remind me the police are still outside. I think they beat the ambulance here, but, never mind, Lucius is safely at Charity Hospital now. He's probably finished with the operation, maybe even back in his room. I'm grateful Provost Fortier sent a lawyer to protect my rights and remind them I'm a tenured Classics professor with a specialty in Greek and Roman mythology, no less.

I wonder if Billie Jean asked him to help me for old times' sake? She must be mortified something like this happened kitty corner from her house. Maybe she saw the culprit make his escape and can set the mystery to rest. That would be a blessing.

Before the lawyer arrived, I wasn't sure whether the police were here to arrest me or protect me from the people outside on the street? I hear them now like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, half shouting "She's a nigra-

loving whore,” and the other half accusing a black man of rape. I just hope that reporter from The Times-Picayune doesn't get a hold of the delivery boy. Who knows what story he'd invent to get his name on the front page?

Now why am I thinking of a perfect stranger when poor Lucius is in Charity Hospital fighting for his life? Not that I believe his wound is mortal. I could never sit here calmly if I thought that. Think what it would do to Darren!

I hope at least Esther is there with Lucius. If the police hadn't insisted I remain here at home until further notice, I'd be down at St. Louis Cathedral right now myself lighting a candle. Not that I'm a Roman Catholic, but the Church's ties to pagan cultures have always fascinated me. Thank goodness I remembered to bury some macaroni under the magnolia tree the first night I moved into my little house. Like Mama's maid Rose used to say, imagine how terrible things would be right now if I hadn't.

It's not like Lucius to let something like this happen. He's usually so careful, especially of the boy. I was taking my afternoon nap, dressed as usual in the all together, when something startled me awake. Whatever it was, Lucius must have heard it, too, working outside in the yard, so he rushed into my bedroom to help me.

I think we both saw Darren's little face peeping in the window at the same time. At first, I thought Darren was looking at me, but his eyes were fixated on a spot over the top of my head.

He must have seen someone or something in the doorway. Since I was facing Lucius, I don't know what it was, but Lucius probably saw it, too, unless he was looking at the boy. Darren's eyes were wide as Lake Pontchartrain, and Lucius, kindhearted as he is, would naturally be wondering how to calm him.

I turned my head to discover for myself what danger lurked behind me, and that must have been when Lucius pulled out Daddy's gun. It was safely tucked away under my pillow the last time I saw it. I forgot for a moment that Lucius had spotted someone behind me. I panicked and thought he was aiming at me. I jerked out of the way, and, honestly, I don't know what happened next. Perhaps the gun went off by accident, or maybe the person behind me had a gun, too, and fired.

When I told the police, I didn't mention the boy. I made out it was Lucius who saw the intruder. If they knew about Darren, they'd probably think he was a suspect. As if he could hurt Lucius or me. Besides, I'm sure he couldn't have climbed in the window in time, quick as he is.

My lawyer said my alibi was the worst one he'd ever heard, so it must be the truth. My hands were shaking so badly, he even made a little joke to relax me, saying it might take the Oracle at Delphi to figure out the culprit. “Try to stay calm,” he said, as if I weren't trying already. “You've had a great shock, but it's only the handyman, not someone you're close to. Concentrate on something from your work. A favorite poem, perhaps.”

My lawyer reads me well. I've always used my intellect to stifle my emotions. I've been doing it for twenty-eight years, ever since 1946, the year I was twelve

and my sister Beth jumped to her death at her senior class picnic. Isn't it a fact that Roman Catholics consider taking one's own life practically the worst sin a person can commit? From what I've read, they don't allow suicides to be buried in hallowed ground. Those Papists know what they're talking about, believe me. Maybe not for the poor dead person, but for those left behind. Once the apple of my parents' eyes was gone, there was only me left to pick up the pieces. Nothing in my life has escaped the shadow of that one event, including today's awful tragedy.

Do I appear coldhearted, blaming my poor dead sister for the way my life has turned out? Believe me, I cried buckets when Beth died. Tears for her, not just for myself. How would you feel if your only sister, your childhood idol, jumped off a thirty foot ledge into water so frigid only teenagers with ants in their pants could swim in it?

Not that Beth was hoping to stay afloat. Only an idiot would think she could fall head first into three feet of water without breaking her neck, and Beth was no idiot. If she was thinking, she would have remembered to pull her bikini top down, so that afterwards when she lay lifeless on the river bank, the entire Class of '46 wouldn't need to pretend they weren't staring at her stone cold titties until someone—I heard it was Frank Rivolo—had the kindness to cover them up with a beach towel.

Or maybe that was one of the myths that sprung up afterwards. The Beth I knew would have had the sense to cover herself up even at a time like that.

Diane Daniels Manning was a professor for twenty years in New Orleans, “*The City that Care Forgot*,” which provides the setting for her fictional *Yellow Shotgun on Demeter Street*. She has published numerous professional articles and a full-length book of oral histories, *Hill Country Teacher; Tales from the One-Room Schoolhouse and Beyond*. Currently, she is a child psychoanalyst living in Houston and co-founder/director of a therapeutic school for bright children with social-emotional challenges.

Quote to Live By

It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

—Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest



Rita Ciresi
2009 Novella
Runner-Up



Mating For Life

By 10:30 on Wednesday both Joel and I were in the radiation therapy waiting room--without Kafka and The Wall Street Journal to keep us company.

"Yo, Francie," Joel said, as he pulled in his big feet.
"Yo, Joel."

Joel plucked at his robe. "We've got to stop dressing to match."

I smiled and sat down. We stared at one another for a second. A caricaturist might have drawn us gawking at one another and then written in fanciful letters beneath: Mr. Precious Metals, Speechless in the Face of Little Miss Hockey Stick.

"How do you feel this morning?" Joel finally asked.

"I keep waiting to feel tired," I said. "Or nauseous. Or faint. But I actually feel kind of normal."

"Look out. You'll probably go to bed on Friday night and wake up on Monday morning."

I wouldn't miss much, I almost said. But I held my tongue, because I didn't want Joel to know the only thing I had planned for the weekend was schlepping an eighty-seven-year-old man who had overdosed on Metamucil back to the Walgreens for a digestive aid that would have the opposite effect.

"I'm stuck here almost all day today," Joel said.

"What for?" I asked.

"I have to check in with Dr. God this afternoon."

I looked at him so blankly that God himself might have thought it was me--and not Joel--who suffered from that fuzziness of thought known as "chemo brain."

"You really have a M.D. named God?" I asked.

"My oncologist--who has my life in his hands--is so nicknamed."

"What's his real name?" I asked.

Joel shifted his feet uncomfortably on the carpet.
"Mose."

"Mose," I repeated. The name sounded familiar. After a moment, I realized that I had seen its owner interviewed on News Channel 8. "Isn't he the head of the whole cancer center?"

"He still finds time to torture a few patients," Joel said.

"So you don't like him?"

Just like my Uncle Sol, Joel turned the question

back on me. "You like yours?"

What was to like, I wanted to ask, about a physician who pointed with a tobacco-stained finger to the white starburst on my ultrasound film and told me "Stage 1--consider yourself lucky, young lady"? Dr. Joseph Bladnauer was the kind of physician who told his attending nurse, "Thank you much!" and who left the examination room whistling "This Land is Your Land" after he told me my five-year survival rate was a meager (at least to me) 86 percent.

"My oncologist," I said, "has the bedside manner of a goofy kangaroo."

"He's cheerful?"

"Disgustingly so," I assured Joel. "I mean, he barges into the exam room and his first question is: 'Mind if I take a quick listen to your ticker?' And then, when he takes the stethoscope away from your heart, he announces, 'I have no complaints to make about your thumper.'"

Joel made a face. "Dump him."

"Can't."

"Because of your HMO?"

"Well, that," I said, "but I also think I need a physician who's upbeat. It makes me feel better when he tells me Yes, indeed, I couldn't be any more pleased with these hemoglobins."

"Yes indeed?" Joel asked.

"I know," I said. "It's revolting. But I always feel better after he waxes enthusiastic about my lymphocytes and monocytes. Most of the other doctors are so dour that I can't warm up to them."

"You like the nurses any better?"

Do you? seemed a much more relevant question.

"I never could do what nurses do," I said.

"Phew! Me neither."

I knew Joel meant: empty catheters, administer enemas, clean up vomit, and dispose of amputated body parts. Whereas I meant: hold your hand, fetch you a drink of water, wipe away your tears with a balled-up kleenex, and tell you you were going to be all right even when you knew you'd never be completely all right again.

"I wish I could do what they do," I told Joel. "But I don't have the stomach for that kind of--"

"What?" Joel asked. "Blood and guts?"

"I was going to call it sorrow."

I thought the word would make him nervous--maybe even make him shift, uncomfortably, in his peach-colored chair. But he seemed to swallow sorrow okay. Maybe he liked the sound of it, too--the or and the oh and the way the word didn't seem to disappear, but hung like heavy fog in the air.

"What do you do after you leave here?" he asked.

"Go to work," I said.

"You don't eat lunch?"

"At my desk."

"Skip the desk. Come have lunch with me."

"Okay," I said.

He showed me a mouthful of mischievous teeth.

"You said okay a little too fast, Francie. My appointment with Mose is at one, so lunch will have to be at the hospital cafeteria."

"Yuck," I said.

"Oh, come on," Joel said. "Lots of nice green jello there. And cottage cheese."

"I guess I can handle a ginger ale," I said.

"That's the sick-room spirit."

"But--" I stopped myself just in time from gesturing to his half-bald head. "Can you eat whatever you want to eat?"

"Sure thing," he said. "I also--every now and then--can hurl it."

Before I could say Do I really want to have lunch with you?, Joel's therapist stuck her prominent chest out of the central station and called, "Mr. Goldman!"

Joel stood up.

"Is that a smile on your face?" she asked.

Joel immediately suppressed it. "Ditch the double robe," he said in a complicit whisper, "and meet me out in reception."

* * *

My Uncle Sol was a tailor, my aunt and my mother had been seamstresses, and I myself had stitched and hemmed my way through four years at the University of Connecticut by constructing togas and pantaloons and jerkins and bodkins in the theater department costume shop. Altering clothing was in my blood. Just as a dental hygienist probably couldn't speak to strangers without wanting to scrape tartar off their incisors, I often wanted to grab other people's clothing and fix it so it really fit.

So when I met Joel out in the reception area, I had to curl my fingers into the palms of my hand. Here clearly was a man wearing the wrong shirt size--his former shirt size. Although the light blue crew-neck T-shirt he wore (probably to cover the scar at the base of his neck) helped fill out his silhouette, the denim shirt he wore on top sported too much shoulder and far too much chest. I wanted to place my hands on the back and the front of his body and slowly smooth down the yoke and the placket of his shirt. I wanted to nip and tuck his khakis.

Joel simply didn't look right enough to be anyone's Mr. Right. Yet I was looking pretty wrong, too--in my black stirrup pants faded at the knees and a loose-fitting blue blouse (known in the fashion industry as a

"big shirt") that could accommodate two women just as easily as one and that (I realized only now) probably gave some people the mistaken impression I was six months pregnant.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded, and lowered my purse between my feet on the carpet. We both pulled on our coats--his a tan trench coat with button-out lining, mine a soft, pillly balmacaan three years old and badly in need of a trip to the dry cleaner's. As I wound my mohair scarf around my neck and buttoned my coat from bottom to top, Joel watched with the undisguised amusement of a guy who probably didn't even put on his gloves unless it was a blizzard.

"Think you'll be warm enough?" he asked.

"Without a fur hat?"

"I don't look good in hats."

"Good thing you got off the hook with chemo then." He pointed to my neck. "Your collar's crooked. Here." He reached out and folded down the right side of my collar. Now that I stood directly in front of him, I saw he was a good six feet two or so to my lanky five feet eight inches--and this thought (that we fit) embarrassed me more than the fact that he had touched my collar in a way that seemed intimate.

I picked up my purse and put it on my right shoulder. As we left the radiology center by the automatic doors, I realized I was indeed absurdly bundled up, considering that it was probably close to fifty degrees and everyone coming toward us on the sidewalk--some insultingly chipper medical students, several stout clerical workers, and a pair of gay orderlies--didn't even have on jackets.

Doctors and nurses and technicians were crawling all over the place here. But when Joel spotted two guys in white coats coming toward us on the sidewalk, his already-pale face suddenly went colorless as a Vitamin E capsule after all the oil had been squeezed out. These two doctors seemed heavily into what two doctors always seemed heavily into: earnest consultation. The physician on the left was Asian. The physician on the right--an equally compact, but much older guy with silver shot through his dark hair and beard--was the one who seemed taken aback at the sight of Joel. Either that, or something about my own face offended him, because his eyes went from Joel to me and then back to Joel again.

"Good morning," the doctor said. As he passed I saw the name on the hospital ID clipped onto his breast pocket read GOLDMAN.

I waited until we were at a respectable distance before I whispered, "You have a doctor with the same last name as you?"

"That was my father," Joel said.

"Your father's a doctor?" I asked, then blushed.

Because implicit in the question was another question:

Why didn't he save you? I turned and examined Dr.

Goldman's retreating back. "But he said good morning to you. Like you were a patient."

"Most observant of you," Joel said.

"Why didn't he stop?" I asked.

"He doesn't like to be around sick people."

"I think he went into the wrong profession," I said.

The corner of Joel's eyes crinkled in glee.

"Actually, my dad doesn't have much patient contact. He teaches at the med school."

"What's his specialty?" I asked.

"Giving out Fs."

"Go on."

"I'm couldn't be more serious." But then Joel reached out and gently poked me on the arm. "You don't mind me nudging you?"

"I'm used to being nudged."

"By who?"

"My eighty-seven-year-old great-uncle," I said.

"Would I want to be put in the same category with him?"

"Probably not."

We stood at the light, waiting to cross York Street. As car after mud-splattered car went by, I hesitated--opened my mouth--then hesitated again before I finally said, "You should have stopped me. When I said I didn't like doctors."

"Why should you like the enemy?" Joel asked.

I looked down at the dirty sidewalk curb. I knew the first surgeon who had given me my options (such as they were) wasn't truly my enemy. Still, this didn't keep me from resenting him, on some level, for telling me things I didn't want to hear, in such a rote tone of voice he might have been a waiter describing the evening's specials.

The light changed and we crossed over to the glass tower of the hospital. Joel led the way to the tile-lined cafeteria noisy with the thunk of trays, the clatter of silverware, and the din of voices. We each took a putty-gray tray and began to move down the line. I did not want green jello. Or red jello. Or orange jello. Or cottage cheese. Or applesauce. Plain yogurt seemed babyish and bland. I almost picked up a small garden salad, then drew my hand back when I saw it was topped with slices of hard-boiled eggs. I didn't want to risk getting salmonella.

I selected half a tuna-salad sandwich and a small green bottle of Foxon Park ginger ale. Joel obviously was still on the BRAT diet--bananas, rice, apples, and toast--because he got an egg bagel and a banana and a cup of Lipton's tea. When he opened his wallet to pay the cashier, I noted his hair was blond in his driver's license photograph.

I lifted my tray. It wasn't heavy, but my left shoulder still felt stiff, and my elbow locked in such a way that took me on a *deja-vu* back to junior high, when my worst fear was dropping my tray in the school cafeteria and having all the boys whoop and holler and toss pizza crusts and hot dog stubs in my general direction. As we carried our trays over to the quietest corner we could find in this loud, bustling room, I felt heat flush my whole body. The noise of the cafeteria dimmed for a second and the table looked too yellow when I lowered my tray.

"You okay?" Joel asked.

"Sure," I said. "I just felt a little light-headed for a second."

I couldn't wait to get out of my coat and scarf. And my head suddenly felt so woozy that I couldn't even enjoy the feel of Joel's hand--again on my collar--as he eased me out of my coat sleeves.

He draped my coat, and his, over the spare chair. I sat down and reached for my ginger ale bottle. But the twist-off top refused to turn.

"Fork it over," Joel said, and when I did, he popped the top off with just one twist. "Weakling." He winked as he poured the pale yellow soda over the ice in my cup. "Drink up. You probably need some sugar." I stripped the wrapping off my straw. The soda popped and fizzed--and bubbles seemed to go right up my nose--as I took my first sip.

"You know," I said, "you don't look anything at all like your father." Then I gasped. "My God. I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"You could be adopted."

Joel dunked his tea bag into his mug of hot water. "Oh, my father is definitely my father," he said. "And my mother is really my mother. I look like her, by the way."

I peeled back the Saran wrap from my sandwich. "Where is your family from?"

"Old country?" Joel asked.

I nodded.

"My father's side, Berlin. My mother's family is Dutch. She's only half." He swished the tea bag around in the cup. "If you clue into the code."

"I clue," I said.

"I thought you did. But I wasn't totally sure."

"I'm half too," I said. "On my mother's side."

"What's your other half?"

"A mix," I reluctantly said. "Irish and Italian."

"So which of those two Is is your last name?"

"Didn't I tell you my last name?" I asked.

"You have yet to reveal it."

One of the worse parts of getting cancer, at least for me, was having to repeat my name to all the examining physicians (And you must be?), the orderlies who checked my hospital band before they wheeled me into surgery (And you are?), and the nurses who asked me the same questions they posed to suspected Alzheimers' patients to determine if I were alert enough to leave the recovery room (And what is your name? And what year is this? And who is the president of the United States?). I hated being hung with my father's last name when my father had not hung around to raise me. That his name was Irish--when I had been raised Jewish--only added to my gall. I just wanted clarity--a name that accurately stated to the world: this is who I am.

"It's Malarkey," I said.

Joel's face went positively puppet-ish with amusement, like a Punch who just had taken a good swing at his nagging wife, Judy.

"All right," I said. "Stop. Now you know why I don't give out my name freely." "I said nothing, Miss--it is

Miss, isn't it?--Malarkey." Joel picked up his banana and started to peel it. "You ought to get married."

"That's been suggested to me--many times before--by my nudge of a great-uncle. Who's a Persk. From Poland."

"He came over as a kid?" Joel asked.

I shook my head. "After the war."

"After the war means after a camp?"

"Right."

"How'd he get out alive?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "He doesn't talk about it."

"Why don't you ask?"

"Because I don't want to see him cry," I said.

Joel blinked. "Well. Yeah. Sure. I wouldn't want to see my father doing anything that remotely resembled weeping, either."

Obviously Joel had been spared that sight. Yet I wondered what Dr. Goldman had done, in private, when he found out his own son had cancer. Had he sat down in his high-backed leather desk chair and deliberately swiveled it toward the window so no one entering his office could see the scared look on his face? Or more likely, had he immediately picked up the phone and arranged for Mose to see Joel that very afternoon, making the appointment in a clinical tone of voice that disguised his true message: I need you to tell me right now that my son is going to outlive me?

I could not imagine what it was like, knowing your own child was going to die before you did. And yet people survived it. According to my Aunt Sylvia, Uncle Sol had been the father of a baby girl who had gotten smothered on the train. It made me feel ready to heave when I remembered Aunt Syl telling me: He said he had to hold the baby's dead body under his coat, so no one would eat it.

"Sometimes my uncle is hard to be around," I told Joel. "But I guess in another way he's good company. Whenever I start to feel sorry for myself, I just have to remember that at least I didn't have to go through what he went through."

"Sure. Everybody needs some point of comparison--beyond whoever's crying in the next examination room."

"I try not to listen," I said.

"Me too. But the walls are thin, and sometimes you can't avoid it."

I took a sip of my ginger ale. "How did we get on this depressing subject?"

"You were steering me off Malarkey." Joel raised his tea cup in salute. "Francesca is a beautiful name. So are you named after some Italian ancestor?"

I shook my head. "A horse."

"Huh?"

"A race horse," I repeated. "Called Francesca's Folly. Who won a gob of money for my father at Aqueduct."

"Must have been long odds," Joel said. "And a hefty bet."

And it must have been a gruesome scene with my

mother the following weekend when my father revealed he had gambled all his winnings away. Not that I wanted to tell Joel that.

I took another snorkle of my ginger ale. "Are you an only child, too?"

"Nope," Joel said. "Two brothers."

"Where do you fall?"

The tea he was drinking brought some pink into his face. "Youngest." "Are you close to them?"

"Age wise?"

"Friendly wise," I said.

"I'm tight with my older brother."

"What about the middle one?"

"We do okay together," Joel said. "But I don't click with his wife."

I had no siblings, but I had read enough letters to Dear Abby to know that after marriage, the relationships of brothers and sisters often shifted, with the in-laws becoming more of a wedge than a bridge.

"Does your brother know you don't like his wife?" I asked.

Joel showed me a lot of teeth. "We could take the elevator upstairs and ask him. Although he probably has his hands plunged inside somebody's lower intestines." "What?"

"Marty's a gut guy. A gastro--"

"Gross," I blurted out.

"My feelings exactly. And Jake--that's my oldest brother"--Joel peeled back the cuff of his shirt and looked at his watch; either I was seeing double, or the watch had two faces--"right now Jake's probably scrubbing to do another hip replacement."

"Wait a second," I said. "Your whole family is on staff here?"

"Not exactly. This is Mom's day off."

"Your mother's a doctor, too?" I asked.

"She administers to the anxious, once a week, as a gift shop volunteer."

I slurped--anxiously--on my straw. "That is totally strange."

"It's also totally Jewish." "You don't have to tell me that," I said. But Joel did have to tell me--or rather, remind me--of what my Uncle Sol often pointed out: no two Jewish families were Jewish in precisely the same way (beyond the fact that we all seemed to have at least one doddering male relative who discussed the results of his latest fecal blood occult test at the dinner table).

"I guess you got pressured to go to med school," I said.

"Actually, my parents were really good about it," Joel said. "They never pushed. Not once. It's my brothers who still give me the razz. You know: 'bad enough you didn't become a doctor, now you have to become the patient?'" Joel took another sip of his tea. "I never wanted to go into medicine."

"Why not?"

"My handwriting's too neat. Plus I don't like the idea of touching people. I mean, people I don't know. Or

like. Especially old people, I just can't stand the thought of touching old people."

I tssked my tongue at him. "You'll be old some day." "I definitely want the chance to get that way. But--if we're speaking honestly here--there's something about old age that completely freaks me out."

I kept quiet for a moment--trying, very hard, not to think of the flatulent Marys and Marias. "You could have become a pediatrician," I said.

"I don't like kids." He shifted in his chair. "In general. Except my niece."

"You're an uncle?" I asked.

"My dear Miss Malarkey: seven times I'm an uncle."

I have an uncle, I wanted to say. But then I remembered I already had told him that. And then I remembered--or rather, felt all over again--that same weird heat I had felt just before Joel had helped me take off my coat. The cafeteria seemed to hum. I should have gone for that jello, I thought. Or the cottage cheese.

I reached for my ginger ale.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Joel asked.

"Positive," I said.

"So tell me what's weird about your family," Joel said.

I gazed across the cafeteria, wondering what I would tell Joel--that my mother had grown so fearful and fretful she eventually got to the point where she couldn't even leave her own house? That my Uncle Sol had made it through the war by hemming the trousers of handsome blond officers whose impeccable uniforms were trimmed with thick red armbands? What could I gain by going into any of those strange and forbidding spaces that--even though they did not truly belong to me--had become part of my own warped psychological home?

I took a lungful of breath that hurt the left side of my chest, and felt my forehead deepen with heat. Coming toward me across the cafeteria, holding a tray full of food rather than medical instruments, was a short man in scrubs who looked familiar. It could not be--and yet why couldn't it be?--the nurse anesthetist who had prepped me for surgery, the one who had supposedly numbed the back of my hand with Lidocaine, but then did not wait long enough to pierce that huge IV into that tender vein. Nothing had ever hurt me so suddenly and so sharply.

I felt my arm going cold all over again. I felt the way I had shivered beneath the sheets, the cold bright lights overhead, the way the nurse anesthetist had said, "Now count backwards from ten--"

I hadn't even made it to eight. My head was humming, and my ears shut down to a lower frequency until I seemed to hear nothing but the glide of gurney wheels transporting me to some unknown destination.

I braced my hands on the table, wishing I could climb out of my own body.

"I think I need to--" I told Joel, before I fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Rita Ciresi was born in New Haven, Connecticut, a city which serves as the backdrop for most of her fiction. She is the author of four award-winning novels and two short-story collections. Her first collection of short stories, *Mother Rocket*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times' Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. Her first novel, *Blue Italian*, was published in hardcover by Ecco Press, in paperback by Delacorte, and translated as *Blau ist die Hoffnung* by Goldmann Verlag, Munich. *Blue Italian* was selected by Barnes and Noble as part of their "Discover New Writers Series." Ciresi's second novel, *Pink Slip*, was winner of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Prize for the Novel and an alternate selection of the Literary Guild and the Doubleday Book Club. It was translated into German as *Ein Mann fur Lisa* (Goldmann Verlag, Munich) and into Dutch as *Vlinders* (Arena Publishers, Amsterdam). Ciresi's volume of linked short stories, *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, was published to positive reviews from Kirkus, Publisher's Weekly, and newspapers from the St. Petersburg Times to the New Haven Advocate. The New York Times Book Review listed the volume under its "New and Noteworthy Paperbacks" and stated, "Ciresi has a lovely ear for dialogue and the ability to nail the details in descriptions that are both funny and painfully accurate." The collection was a Book Sense 76 pick and a finalist for the Paterson Fiction Prize; it was translated into German by Goldmann Verlag as *Italienische Kusse*. She teaches writing at the University of South Florida in the Tampa area.

Quotes to Live By

*Well may a man in sickness wail and weep
Who has no wife to nurse him and to keep
His house for him; do wisely then and
search*

*For one and love her as Christ loves His
Church.*

*For if you love yourself you love your wife,
For no one hates his flesh, nay all his life
He fosters it, and so I bid you wive
And cherish her, or you will never thrive.
Husband and wife, whatever the worldly
say*

In ribald jest, are on the straight sure way.

—Geoffrey Chaucer,
The Canterbury Tales



Jane Stubbs
2009 Best
Novel in Progress
Excerpt:
My Maiden Voyage



Judge Michael Murphy has been in book publishing 28 years. His first 13 years were with Random House, where he was a Vice President. Later, he ran William Morrow as their Publisher. In September 2007, he formed his own agency, Max & Co. A Literary Agency & Social Club. One of his authors, who attended Words & Music, 2008 was New York Times best-selling writer Tony O'Neill, who was tabbed by *Esquire* as the IT writer of the decade. Two of his authors attending in 2009 were New Orleans residents, Andrea Young and Barb Johnson. Barb was *Glimmer Train's* Best New Voice 2007, and won the Washington Square competition the same year. She was recipient of A Room of Her Own grant for 2009. Her first book, *More of This World or Maybe Another*, was just published by Harper Collins. Andy Young is an accomplished poet who is now writing both fiction and non-fiction prose as well.



Strip Club Rule Number 1: Never meet customers outside of the club. I broke that rule. It didn't even take me that long.

We were only about a month or so in. It was Andrea's night off, so I walked to Elysian Fields alone, in unwashed, rumpled clothes (I was never awake or home when the laundromat was open) and full makeup. I had just finished midterms, I was tired, and I'd left the club with only about fifty bucks the night before. And now the bus was late.

I was in a pretty shitty mood when I got to work, so I clocked in, got into uniform, and I stalled. When the dressing room became so crowded with sweaty bodies, cigarette smoke, and ultra-loud conversation about Punk Rock Stripper's latest UTI, I made my way out to the floor. I stopped at the bar to change my twenty bank into smaller bills, and set my tray up the way I liked it: money

box at 12 o'clock, glass for loose change at 10'o'clock, stack-o-napkins at 2 o'clock, and pad-o-paper right smack in the middle. I took my place in line and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It was slow. I had expected this, but had hoped against hope that it would be different tonight. It was Wednesday, and rent was right around the corner. On top of that, the dogs needed flea medication and heartworm pills, and of course I had to eat at some point. I should have had lots of cash, but the more you make, blah blah blah.

There were three girls ahead of me in line, and my feet ached. On busy nights, I barely had time to even think about the likely permanent damage this job was doing to my feet—it was just a nagging murmur in the background as I sprang from customer to bar to customer to VIP room to dressing room to customer to bar to back patio for a cigarette. But tonight (a painfully slow night), my toes, the balls of my feet, my arches, my heels were a chorus of screams. On the plus side, I was in a good spot to zone out, as long as neither of the Hanks saw me. I checked for Scary Mandy. She was chatting with the Maiden Money girl and appeared enthralled by whatever gossip they shared. I leaned against the cigarette machine and let it bear some of my weight. If I stood just so, I could even take a shoe off and let my sweaty, thinly stockinged foot flatten against the cool floor. I didn't even care about the layer of filth that covered the hunter-green, short-pile carpet. I slid my foot just under the cigarette machine—it was probably cleaner under there. That's better. I wiggled my toes and let them enjoy their freedom. Something scuttled against my big toe, and I jumped and shuddered. Cockroaches.

But when I jerked my foot from under the cigarette machine and looked down, I realized that my night was about to change. There, as if magnetically attracted to my toe, was a crumpled bill. I bent to retrieve it, and something stung my left buttock with such force my forehead smacked the glass of the cigarette machine.

"Sorry!"

I turned around. It was Julia.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I didn't know

whether to rub my stinging ass cheek or my throbbing forehead.

"Your ass was up in the air; what did you think was gonna happen?"

"Check out what I found under the cigarette machine," I said, and held the crumpled bill up triumphantly. It was a twenty.

"Lucky," she said. "I've made a grand total of one dollar tonight."

"Well, I guess I've made twenty. Maybe it's a sign?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. It's been like this all week."

The customers trickled in, one by one, two by two. Four hours into my shift and I'd only seated two customers who, after ordering a drink and tipping the dancers a couple of bucks each, had grown bored and wandered out the way they came, off to bigger and better adventures on Bourbon Street. And I had four hours left.

And then I spotted him. I don't know where he came from, or whose customer he was to begin with, but he was fair game now because he was waving me down. I don't know how long I had been staring in his direction—probably right at him, actually. I had been contemplating life, the universe, and everything and, lost in such a pursuit, I hadn't noticed his signals. Now he was performing that theatrical arm-flailing wave one might employ if stranded on a desert island and a far-off ship appeared on the horizon. Damn it, I thought, and slipped my shoe back on.

"Yeah?" I asked when I got to him.

"I don't know what happened to my waitress."

"Well, neither do I. What did she look like?"

"She was kinda big. Really wide ass."

"That's Mandy," I said. "I can go find her—"

"No, no." He smiled. "What's your name?"

"Jane."

"Is that really your name? You all have fake names, right?"

"That's my real name. I only give a fake name to the creepy ones."

"Oh, so I'm not creepy?"

"Not particularly," I said. "Look, do you need a drink or something?" I was eager to get back to my cigarette-machine haven.

"Yeah, can you get me a...a Heineken?"

"Sure," I said, and turned away. When I was about five steps away, he called me back.

"Get yourself something, too."

Yes, sir. I had just stolen Scary Mandy's customer and gotten a free drink out of it. The funny thing about working at a bar in the French Quarter, especially a French Quarter titty bar, is that you can serve drinks before you are even legally allowed to enter the establishment as a customer. Furthermore, underage drinking is not only allowed, but encouraged among the staff. Anything you can do to build up the customer's bar tab.

"So he needs a Heineken, and he wants to buy me something," I told the bartender. Tonight it was the tall skinny one with brown hair; I forget his name. We were just getting to the point where he would acknowledge my presence, not only when I needed his service, but when I passed by the bar and our eyes met. This was a big step. "What should I get?" I appealed to his expertise.

"You should get a Long Island," he said. "It's fourteen bucks."

"Shit, I don't even know what's in that."

"Christ, how old are you?"

"Eighteen. I'm a beer girl, jeez."

"Look, you'll like it. Plus, if he's buying, it's your duty to milk him for what he's worth."

"Lemme at least ask him."

I made my way back to his table. "Hey," I started. His attention was focused on the stage. I noticed for the first time that he was what most girls would call

I knew it was stupid, and I knew it was dangerous, but damn it, I was hungry, and when the hell was I going to have another opportunity to see the Monteleone from the inside? Perhaps it was the Long Islands, perhaps it was sheer exhaustion, perhaps it was my aching feet, but I went against my better judgment and walked with him, joking and laughing and worrying, to his hotel.

"attractive." He was tall, even sitting down. He was young, but older than I was, of course, with olive skin, chiseled features, and short, well-groomed brown hair. And he was alone. "Hey," I said again.

"What's her name?" He pointed at the girl onstage.

"Amber."

"Nice," he said.

"So...is it okay if I get a Long Island?"

"Sure, get whatever you want. And get her whatever she wants, too."

Amber drank Metropolitans. Everyone knew that. Amber was like the captain of the strippers—she had her own website and everything. Tall and blonde and impossibly thin, she had a great tit job and what the other dancers referred to as "DSLs"—an acronym indicating the apparent correlation between the shape of her mouth and her ability to fellate the male genitalia. It's funny; despite the fact that I was working in a strip club and hence encouraged to objectify my own body night after night—as we all did, with or without complaint—I took issue with the way other girls so casually objectified

My Maiden Voyage: *Jane Stubbs*

Amber. The “DSL” nickname always made me squirm. Maybe I was already a budding feminist, despite the fact that I was essentially appealing to the sexual fantasies of men in exchange for rent. Ah, screw it. A couple of years later Amber played a whore in a blockbuster film that swept the Oscars that year. She “made it,” I guess, and the “DSLs” probably helped her achieve such success. That’ll show ‘em.

Amber and I had a bonding experience once. It turns out her cosmetic surgeon was a friend of my stepfather’s. Neither of us was surprised; New Orleans is a small town that way.

My generous customer (I’ll call him Frank—he, it could have been his name. He looked like a Frank anyway) bought several table dances from Amber and several drinks for both of us as the night went on. He was in town for some kind of medical convention, or so he said. Frank slipped me a twenty every couple of hours. What’s more, he was actually civilized. He didn’t try to touch me or Amber. He didn’t say anything nasty to either of us regarding our pussies, or any other parts of our bodies, for that matter. He didn’t proposition us. He watched, he drank, he bought us Long Islands and Metropolitans, he tipped. Occasionally Frank would crack a corny joke, but I didn’t mind. He was the only lucrative customer I had that night, and if it weren’t for him, I’d be leaving with a grand total of thirty five dollars, including the twenty I found under the cigarette machine.

When the end of the night finally rolled around, I brought him his credit card slip. We had racked up about two hundred bucks on his tab (which wasn’t, of course, a difficult task, what with the exorbitant price of drinks in the place), and he didn’t even blink an eye. He tipped me fifty bucks. I was elated. With the money he had been slipping me throughout the night, I would walk with close to two hundred bucks. Shit, I could take a cab home instead of my normal routine—walking to Café du Monde on Decatur, buying an order of beignets and wolfing them down while waiting for the bus for upwards of an hour. I expressed my gratitude and started wiping down the tables.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see him watching me. This wasn’t the end.

“Tired?”

“No,” I said, and smiled.

“Wanna go get a drink?”

I thought for a moment. I knew it was a bad idea. I was breaking the cardinal rule. “Yes,” I said. “Sure.”

I was mildly surprised when he was waiting for me outside the club. I had changed into my torn baggy jeans, giant t-shirt and dirty tennis shoes. He didn’t seem surprised by my transformation, and I appreciated that.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Well, we can fix that.”

“Awesome! We could go to—“

“I’m staying at the Monteleone. They’ve got room service.”

I was impressed. The Monteleone was incredibly

ritzy, and I had only walked past it and peered inside. The prospect of actually seeing it from the inside was tempting, but I wasn’t naïve. At least, I wasn’t that naïve.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” I said. I had learned to be direct with men in the clubs when they were especially generous and seemed to want something in return.

He laughed. “I’m not asking you to.”

I knew it was stupid, and I knew it was dangerous, but damn it, I was hungry, and when the hell was I going to have another opportunity to see the Monteleone from the inside? Perhaps it was the Long Islands, perhaps it was sheer exhaustion, perhaps it was my aching feet, but I went against my better judgment and walked with him, joking and laughing and worrying, to his hotel.

The lobby was gilded and glorious and marble and glass. The doorman gave me barely a look when I walked in, but I interpreted it as a knowing look—he knew what I was doing, and he was judging me. I avoided his gaze.

The rest of the story goes as one might expect it to. Upon entering his hotel room I realized that he of course wanted more than I was willing to give. I hopped onto the freshly made bed and busied myself with the television remote, giddy with the prospect of fancy-shmancy room service food, wine, and cable television (even the premium channels!) while he rubbed my shoulders. I shrugged him off and tried to read the room service menu.

“What are you gonna get?”

“Mmph,” he said.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“What does it matter?” He stopped.

“I’m eighteen.” I said. Food for thought.

“Fine with me,” he said, pulling down the collar of my t-shirt and kissing the back of my neck.

Shit.

“I’m not gonna fuck you,” I reminded him.

“We don’t have to fuck,” he said. “You could just blow me.”

“...”

“Let’s order food,” I persisted.

He responded in kind. “Let’s give me a blowjob,” he said.

“Great idea,” I said. “You can do that and I’ll order food. Now, I think I want an omelet. What about you?”

What followed was a detailed explanation of why I couldn’t give him a blowjob (“I have a boyfriend,” I lied) and massive amounts of pouting (on his part). I felt like a fucking idiot, as I should have. I continued to screw around with the television remote and ignored him for a few minutes while watching the recast of Conan O’Brien. Then something unexpected happened. I glanced over, and he was sleeping, or at least pretending to. Now this was something I wasn’t prepared for.

“Hey,” I whispered.

No response.

“Hey,” I whispered, a little louder. “Your mom’s a

stupid whore.”

Again, nothing.

I stared at him for a minute. Was this his passive-aggressive way of telling me to leave? I couldn't be sure, but I did recognize the opportunities this particular situation presented. It suddenly occurred to me that I needed to piss, so I tiptoed to the bathroom, handled my business, washed my hands, and returned to the bed. No change.

I gathered the old backpack in which I carried my work uniform, makeup, and sundry strip-club supplies. I was honestly fascinated that this man, this man I didn't even know, would allow himself to fall asleep in my presence. With his wallet on the nightstand.

Could I?

I crept to the nightstand and examined his wallet without touching it. It was tan leather and well-worn. Probably expensive. A twenty peeked out of the crease. And still, he slept, or pretended to.

I picked up the wallet, just to admire the craftsmanship. And still, he slept, or pretended to.

I opened it, just to see how much money a medical convention attendee might carry around in a foreign city. And still, he slept, or pretended to.

I took the cash out and counted it. Two hundred and forty dollars. All twenties. And still he slept, or blah blah blah. Before I knew what I was doing, I saw my hand take five of those crisp twenties and shove them into my jeans pocket. I was just testing him, really! Just to see if he was awake! It was just a joke!

But then something very curious happened. I didn't wake him up with a friendly punch on the arm, as I had intended. Instead, I was gliding over the plush carpet, then turning the doorknob, then running down the hall, past doors with numbers behind which other people slept or fucked or stole a hundred bucks from their strip-club customers' wallets, too.

The doorman let me out, and that was that. I couldn't believe it. I was getting away with it. I walked quickly but casually toward Decatur, taking a winding route down Royal, then Bienville, then Chartres, then Conti, my right hand in my pocket, gripping the five twenties. I'm not a bad person, I'm not a bad person, I'm not a bad person—hey there's a cab!

When I got home Andrea was still awake. Working nights shapes your life in unexpected ways. For instance, it's a well-known fact that those who work nights are statistically more likely to be found with their wrists slit after a particularly trying shift. A less morbid but arguably more life-altering side effect of the graveyard shift is that it completely jacks up your sleep schedule. We tended to sleep in spurts, acquiring sleep debt all week and then catching up on our first day off, but oftentimes that wasn't feasible because we literally couldn't sleep on the days we were off, as we were so well-trained to stay up all night and sleep in two-hour shifts on campus between classes. On this night Andrea was lying on the carpet with the dogs (we didn't have a couch), watching a rerun of "Life Goes On."

"Hey," she groaned when I walked in. "How was it?"

"Good," I said. "Do we have food?"

"Nnnnope."

"Damn." There was a six pack of Busch in the fridge, so I wrestled one from its plastic-loop shackles, cracked it open, and sat down to watch Corky and Becca navigate their high school years.

"So," I said. "I broke the rule."

"What rule?"

"The rule."

She finally looked at me. "You didn't."

I was suddenly giddy, having gotten home safely and without consequence. I injected the story with far more excitement than was present in reality. I gesticulated wildly. I showed her the cash. I drank another beer.

When I finally shut up, she waited a moment, and shook her head. "Stupid, stupid, stupid," she said. "You know you could have gotten yourself fired. Or raped. Or both. Or worse."

I didn't appreciate her raining on my parade. "But--"

"But nothing. Don't ever pull that shit again. I'd probably have to identify the body. Do you know what that would do to me?" Scorn and guilt? It was as if I had told the story to my mother.

I turned my attention back to the TV silently. I felt stupid and childish. And she was right, of course.

"Hey," I said, after a moment.

"Hmph?"

"Wanna get pizza tomorrow? It's on me."

Her face lit up. "Italian Pie?"

"Sure, whatever the hell you want. First thing when we wake up," I promised. We had only been working for a while, and though we'd made more money than we were used to, we'd been irresponsible with it, and it had been a few days since we'd eaten anything that hadn't come out of a can.

And just like that, we were equals again.

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Susan Isaak Lolis
2009 Runner-Up
Novel in Progress
Excerpt:
Little Egypt



Blue's Revival, 1923

Cora walked past the nine-inch statue of St. Joseph that hung upside down in the tulip tree. The statues of the Virgin Mary and St. Gerard, hands crossed, mouths formed in O's, were positioned near the withered tomato plants and faced the cellar door. The sky was green. The leaves fluttered for a few minutes, and the wind stopped.

She pulled open the cellar door and let it slam tight behind her like a coffin lid. The dust swirled for an instant and then settled back down. She had a premonition that morning that someone was going to die. It wouldn't be long, this she knew. She would hear bad news soon. Cora hunched like a warped piece of wood and murmured barely audible incantations over the swift susurrations of the moving planchette of the ouija board. Her young but arthritic fingers—the size of them, almost small snakes—twined together, conjuring spirits like she did as a young girl, in the cellar of the shack in Muddy, Illinois. New shoots from the cedar tree on the north side of the shack were sprouting again after months of being stagnant. It was a bad omen. Many times she had chopped them down and burned the branches in the fire pit out back near a stream that flowed in from Devil's Kitchen Lake, but soon the phantom-like branches would loom again, casting a large enough shadow to cover the length of a grave.

Cora had no gift of true prophecy. She worked on premonitions and dreams. Her premonitions started as a child when a black bird flew in the house through an open window. She chased it trying to get it out. She picked up a broom and raced to close the bedroom door before it would swoop down below her bed. There was a rustling, and it dove in the fireplace. She was trying to lure it out the open window, but before she knew it, her mother threw a match in the grate and set it on fire. The poor black bird fluttered its fiery wings, like a phoenix, but spiraled back down in the iron grate. Soon she would not only smell but taste the piquancy of death carried in by its plush black wings. Its wings sputtered out and flames reached her mother's apron. As she saw her mother struggle and rip at the apron with her long red fingernails, her white arms flapping, she knew her mother

would hear that Uncle Robert, her mother's brother, had died in a fire in Europe. The telegram arrived the next day. The remains of the body were shipped back in a body bag for burial in the Catholic section of St. Francis Xavier's cemetery.

It had been easier to summon souls with her sister, Ivy. "With two sets of fingertips, there's more moxie," Ivy used to say. Cora had to manage by herself after Ivy died, and lately she stayed for many hours in the cellar, bringing cold green apples with her, stashed in the deep pockets of her house dress, the original pattern of glowing orange chrysanthemums now faded and tattered. "Who will die?" Cora asked and let her fingers hover on the planchette, barely touching, as light as a white spider's cobweb. She waited. A mouse peeped its head out from under the crates that held an old washtub, full of rusty tin containers, and lengthened its body out toward the apple press. The cellar was clammy. Some bricks that were going to be used to make a fire pit but never touched and a small rotting wooden table were stored down there. Dried catnip and potatoes and crocks of salt pork lined the walls.

She slipped her shoes off and rubbed her toes in the cool dirt, waiting. The planchette didn't move for several long minutes, then raced around the board in circles and spun off near her feet. Cool air rushed through the dank carapace. She wondered if she had conjured up a ghost. She dusted off the planchette and placed it back on the board. She asked the same question, but it glided along the board aimlessly. She started asking different questions to see if she was in contact with a spirit or not. Where am I from? The planchette moved slowly across the alphabet and spelled: M U D D Y. Who is my baby's daddy? It spelled: C H A S. She shivered and touched her belly.

She was afraid to ask it more questions and pushed the ouija board aside and walked up the steps to open the cellar door. The green sky had bruised to purple. The wind had picked up, and St. Joseph was scraping against the bark of the tree. The chill gave her goose pimples, and she felt her baby move. She rubbed her stomach over the fabric of her dress. The ground was drenched from the rain. Purple shadows that hovered over the yard like mist would soon be lined with black. There was a lamp on in the

kitchen, and she could see her father sitting at the black walnut table through the open window. She didn't see his truck parked in the driveway. He must have parked in the back near the shed.

The shack was filled with photographs and knickknacks—small cardinals and owls and figurines of Jesus sticking his finger in the wounds, his eyes dark, pained, hypnotic. With the coal mines being so close, grit was everywhere. The rooms were plagued with a smell of dirt and hastily washed flesh. During harsh winters, her father and her uncles spread hay and manure around the edges of the house for insulation, but the wind razored right through their paper thin walls, through their clothes. The smell never diminished, just got more pungent.

Nothing was intact on the property: a bike with punctured tires, the Ford with a cracked windshield up on concrete slabs, three wooden chairs missing the slats for a back, littered the yard. Even the cats that roamed the neighborhood were defeated, one with its left eye ripped out, two others with patches of hair singed as if someone had tried to set them on fire. The yard was perpetually blanketed with black spatsies, preening, cawing, arrogantly scratching at the dirt. They scared Cora diving over her head; their black cold eyes looked at her sideways, when she worked in the garden, when she got too close to one of their nests housing their young.

Her father looked old as he sat there waiting, sitting in the lamplight at the kitchen table. He was probably wondering where she was because the Packard Charlie bought her was parked in the shed. His bald head looked vulnerable. She scraped her shoes on the first step of the porch and tucked loose strands of her hair behind her ears, leaving smudges on her cheeks. She never could understand him. He visited her rarely and unexpectedly since her mother had left him after thirty-one years of marriage. But Cora and her father had never gotten along. The community's beliefs were more valuable to him than his own family's and the First Baptist Church's convictions and rules most important of all. He abhorred Theodora's belief in the Catholic Church and the idea that she had taken Cora and Ivy to Mass every Sunday. He believed in offering stability, perseverance, and longevity to his family. Adoration was a tribute for Jesus, not for his family; it would have been sacrilegious to him to adore his wife.

Her father looked at her when she walked through the door, she must have been a sight, with soot dusting her skin, her fingers cracked with mud. "The coffee's cold. I didn't know where you were and took it off the fire," Bainbridge said. As she got older, she thought of him as Bainbridge, rather than her father. He shifted in the hard back chair, his left shoulder slumped ever since the accident. It was difficult for him to grip the coffee mug as he brought it to his lips. "It's good you came in when you did. You look pretty tired, but I'm going to go now."

Cora lit up a Pall Mall and held it between her short fingers. She looked at her stubby fingers; her nails were dirty from being in the cellar and torn from chewing on them when she was nervous. She wondered if he

found one of her stashes of money she kept behind the loose bricks in the wall leading to the summer kitchen. She grabbed an ashtray, emptied it, and brought it with her to the table and sat down. Her dress rose showing off her thin knees. Words between the two of them came slowly; she never knew what to say to him. All the while she had been growing up, he kept long hours out in the fields, rising before dawn and coming in way after Theodora had fixed her supper. After they lost most of their acres, Bainbridge took to driving a milk truck, then got a job driving a taxi back and forth to Harrisburg. He said his first job was picking blackberries and peaches and apples—any produce—and selling them from house to house. He said he worked like a colored all his life. Theodora had told her stories about how they went up and down the neighborhood selling anything they had to make a dime. She wondered why her mother would do all that for a man and then after almost a lifetime, get up and leave him for some fast talker she met in an East St. Louis speakeasy.

Bainbridge's face was long, with a pointy chin, sunken eyes, red nose. He had a difficult time getting up off the chair, the muscles in his forearm bulging. The house had been quiet ever since Theodora moved to Colchester, in northern Illinois. The house was still Bainbridge's, but he practically abandoned it and left it to Cora after Theodora left him. The house had been full of coffeecake, plants, flowers, prayer cards, women and their aged women-flesh that had a stale mysterious odor when he told everyone she was dead. Cora had to go back and apologize to the ladies' auxiliary and explain that Theodora was still alive. That she had taken up residence in Colchester. Cora didn't tell them about how now her mother lived with a man she had met at a raucous gin joint. Bainbridge now lived near the Lake of Egypt staying in and out of deserted duck blinds that dotted the area trying not to get caught as a trespasser.

He made it to his feet and walked over to the peg on the wall and grabbed his hat. "I'm going to check on those squirrel traps," he said, out of the corner of his mouth, without looking up at her. She knew that really meant he was going to end up at the Plantation Inn Tavern.

"What do you want?" Cora asked him, grounding out her cigarette in the ashtray. She stood up. "I know you don't want to live here, but you don't have to go and live like you do. Do you want some cash?" Without waiting for an answer, she took two twenties out of the cigar box on the ledge next to the kitchen window that held a blue perpetual candle and small statues of Jesus and Mary that faced each other. She had been stolen from before and tried to keep at least two twenties in the cigar box to placate whoever wanted money from her. She didn't want Bainbridge to get ideas and ransack the place.

He shook his head and turned away. "You're not giving me a penny. Just take care of that little one," he said, nodding toward her belly.

"Dad," she said and shook her head. She stuffed the money in his left shirt pocket and patted it. Up close,

she could smell the alcohol on his breath. His eyes were bloodshot. His teeth were rotting.

The door slammed behind him. She stood in the doorway and watched him walk down the muddy driveway. He slouched, his shoulders looked small. She had always remembered him as having a chest like a watermelon. She remembered his big hands, that were rough, thick fingers that reminded her of cigars. He got in his Model T and sat there trying to start it. He had to get out of the car and crank it. If he were waiting for her to go out there and beg him to come back inside, he would wait there all night. She began to hate him sixteen years ago, the time he pulled a gun on her when she didn't come home one night. He found her at the Plantation Inn Tavern. He was drunk, aimed it right at her, before he swerved and shot out a window. Bainbridge finally got the car to start and drove off. Cora walked back through the doorway.

Out in the mud, she saw a man walk up to the house. Cora peered through the yellow handmade curtains and walked away from the chicken she was brooding, wiped her freckled hands on a kitchen towel and scraped the floury batter from her fingernails. This man was tall, his hat covered his eyes. She didn't recognize him. The flies and mosquitoes, thick like fur on the screen door, angrily buzzed in her ears. Fly paper hanging in vertical strips already black hung listlessly in the still air. The man ambled slowly to the screen door of the small shack.

The man took his hat off as he climbed the rotten stoop. He crumpled the felt brim in his hand. The man's hair was cut short and trimmed close to his neck. His face was incongruous. The left side of his face looked like it had been roughed up; the eyebrow was missing tufts of hair and the eyelid drooped. "I'd be mighty obliged for a plate of that good smelling food you got there," he said.

The man's suit was pressed, his collar looked starched. She looked at his hands, and the nails were clean. He didn't look like a man asking for a handout. If he was pretending to need a handout, then she knew there was trouble and wanted her gun. She invited him to sit on the stoop until she'd bring out a chicken dinner plate. She had canned tomatoes and applesauce she told him. "Just wait here," she said. She was going to get her gun. She turned from the screen door to the hutch, but she heard the creak of the screen door. And she felt him standing behind her. The breath like an animal's panting, hot on her neck. He was sweating profusely. His sweet smell reminded her of the heavily perfumed smell of her grandmother's funeral-prepared body. Death lilies.

She turned slightly, and he walked to the mason jar, opened the jug and took a drink. "Not the best whiskey," he said to her. "I thought you'd make better than that." He rounded his shoulders; she grabbed a dusty jelly jar off the cupboard and poured one for herself. That would give her time to think what to do. She looked up at his face. His nose was flat like it had been broken a few times. He stared back at her, and she dropped the gaze and looked down at the floor, at her shoes. "Don't you

know who I am?" he asked. "Why I'm here?"

"Cut the bullshit," she said. Cora wished she had her pistol on her, so she could get him off her property. But she had placed it safely across the room in the linen drawer with the tablecloths and the embroidered pillowcases.

"Bernie Shelton," he said and pretended to tip his hat. "Your husband, it seems, is in trouble with the law. And I want to be sure he will be a reliable business partner."

"I don't have a husband."

He looked at her and laughed.

"Listen, he's not my husband. Charlie and I are divorced. I don't control him. Never did."

"Good old Chas Birger? Yes, I reckon he's your ex for whatever that's worth. But, ain't Alabama been nosin' around here, too? Same difference to me."

"The company I keep is my own business."

"Alabama's been makin' nice in that bed of yours, ain't he?" He looked her up and down.

Cora's face was smooth, unlined, soft, but her eyes were fiery. She reached up to slap him, but he caught her hand and twisted her arm behind her back. She refused to wince as he bruised her skin. Finally, he let her go and pushed her away from him.

He placed his hat on the rung of the chair and sat down at the table. "Now, how about that food you promised me? I'm awful hungry."

"If you want some food, you're going to have to get it yourself." She knew that Charlie and the gang had recently partnered up with the Shelton brothers. Alabama, one of Charlie's bodyguards, told her they had been putting in slot machines in the bars they owned all over Saline and Williamson Counties. Another quick money scheme that obviously was not working. It was early summer, but much hotter than usual. She whipped at the fly paper, and it touched her neck. She shivered. "Someone must have walked over my grave," Cora said to herself.

His wrinkled fingers drummed the table impatiently. "Oh, I'll help myself to what I want. No problem in that." He stabbed four pieces of chicken from the popping skillet. As he chewed the meat, Cora watched his jaw muscles clench and tighten and his dark pink lips mash together. With every bite, he brought the fork to his nose and smelled the food. When a particle of food got caught, he took the edge of the fork and scraped it in between his teeth. His mouth made sloppy sounds as he chewed on the gizzards and heart. Near the bone, the meat looked raw and oozed blood on the chicken leg, but he kept on eating.

She rubbed her stomach. She pictured her little baby curled up, hands in little fists, thumping against her stomach, strong like before, like her baby's daddy. She wanted to feel movement again. She walked over to the man and picked up his plate full of bloody chicken fat and splintered bones and dumped the trash in a can before dropping it in the tub full of gray dishwater. She wiped her damp hands on the apron she untied from around her waist. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Thank you kindly."

Cora lit another cigarette.

"Now, I'm going to get my information, or you're going to be hurting for quite a while," he said.

She looked at him; a vein tapped near his right temple. He looked at the zipper on her short house dress. He chuckled. She stood near the sink, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "I don't know what you want," she said, tapping a cigarette.

"I'm not here to play games with the likes of you," he said, standing up. His shirt was drenched. "I bet you're keeping some of that money they're skimming off of me."

She shook her head. "I don't know nothing."

The punch came out of nowhere, hit her squarely on the jaw. She fell backward against the highboy. He punched her again, and she slunk to the floor. He stood there with his boot positioned over her neck. "You could make a lot more money than you do now. Don't you feel used by these boys? They use you, girl. Don't you know that?" He looked around and pointed around him. "They get rich, and you live in a shack." He got her up off the floor and pushed her down on one of the kitchen chairs. "So, now, what's it going to be?"

She pressed her palms down on the table and stood up, leaned close to him, nodded and kneed him in the groin. The rain lashed the tin roof of the shanty; the heavy wind hissed, insidiously seeped in through the open window and clattered together the statues of Jesus and Mary and extinguished the blue of the perpetual candle that was placed on the shelf above the sink.

He doubled over. "You bitch."

She scrambled over to the hutch to get her gun. Again, his fist made contact with her jaw with a force that knocked her down. Her legs crumpled beneath her.

He took her to the battered Model T that was up on blocks in the back of the shack near the dog pen. The rain slapped her skin as he dragged her through the muddy yard. Tangles of her wet hair stung the corners of her eyes. Cora's brain and body became a locked cage. He shoved her in the car, across the driver's side to the passenger's, her dress catching on the ripped leather seats. The car smelled like mildew and rain. He got in next to her. His skin felt soft and flabby, his breath smelled of the blood from the chicken that he picked from the skillet. He had her arms pinned back behind her. She picked a place in the car to fixate on, the fissure in the windshield that zigzagged like lightning. He reached over toward her, and Cora thought he was going to tear at her clothes. Instead, he rolled down the window and squeezed her head between the half-rolled up window and the frame of the door and swung the car door open and pushed her out, her neck stretched like a chicken's, only the tips of her toes scraping the mud. The pressure from the window prevented Cora from screaming. Her eyes bulged out, her neck livid like a bruise. Finally, he rolled down the window, letting her free to writhe like a worm in the mud. She grabbed her neck and sputtered for breath. He stomped away, streaking mud on her face. The warm blood oozed from the cuts on her face. He had broken her teeth. She tried to drag herself away but couldn't move.

Her head was tilted back, and the swagger of Orion's belt in the black pit of the sky loomed in her face.

2

Meanwhile, Charlie Birger finished a bottle, grabbed another, and walked out behind Shady Rest, rubbing his eyes. Judge Lindley stood near the cock pit, holding an orange rooster by the tail feathers. He reached up under its belly, balanced it with one hand, and petted it under its head. It squirmed and pecked at the fabric of his shirt sleeve. Birger took another drink of whiskey and set the bottle down on a slanted wooden table and walked over. Hoghead Davis was holding the other rooster, pulling on its brownish black feathers, examining its wing span. "He looks good. Bigger than that one," Hoghead said to anyone who could hear him.

The cock pit stunk of wet muddy feathers and of the men who stood around wagering their hard-earned cash. The men's blood was drunk, mad with adrenaline. Many of them lost at the blackjack and poker tables inside and were determined to make it up somewhere. They thought the odds were with them. That illusion of luck and power was what Charlie Birger sold at Shady Rest.

Hoghead Davis and Judge Lindley entered the ring. The roosters were set down in the middle of the pit and immediately flapped their wings, rising above the sawdust, their gaffs slicing and grating against each other. The two roosters strutted and squawked. After a few minutes, the Judge's rooster charged and scratched, pecking out the other's eyes. The blood spurt out like a fine rain and dappled the sawdust and muddy ground. The blood fell on the men who were crowding at the edge of the pit, and it splashed on Charlie's skin, but he didn't bother to wipe it off. Hoghead was going to lose more money tonight. Judge Lindley walked over and squashed the dead rooster's pecked out eye beneath one of his boots.

Charlie walked away from the screaming crowd and back in the relative cool of Shady Rest near the slot machines that were newly installed. He bit off the tip of a cigar and spit it on the floor. He coughed. His sides ached. He'd refused to see the sawbones after a fight he had with Cecil Knighton a few days ago. Knighton had been a member of his gang until he got greedy and went his own way with a few other guys he knew. Knighton ended up being charged with mail fraud. After he got out on appeal, the crazy son of a bitch seemed hell bent on putting the screws to him, but he hadn't been the one to rat Knighton out. He wanted this business with Knighton to be finished tonight and would smoke him out. Knighton was a coward, and Charlie hated the way he looked out of his eyes.

It had been painful to breathe ever since. It wasn't the first time he had broken ribs, and he took a little more precaution moving around. He tipped the whiskey bottle back and took a long slow drink. He was worried that Knighton would go after Cora. Even after their divorce, he felt protective of her. He still kept the tatted handkerchief Cora had given him years ago when they were married.

It vaguely smelled of violets, the last remnants of her perfume. He doubted that Knighton would threaten Beatrice, his third wife. Beatrice wasn't mixed up in all this like Cora was who couldn't keep her nose clean. Beatrice had never been to Shady Rest, and he planned to keep it that way. His head felt heavy, like it would crush the muscles in his neck, and he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket.

Shrouded by sentry-like pines and oaks, Shady Rest, his speakeasy, was kept hidden from view on Highway 13. A barbecue stand acted as a front to Shady Rest, but many of the locals knew about the saloon and brothel that he and his gang ran. Despite the arrival of Seth Glenn Young to Harrisburg, who was brought in by the U.S. Government to enforce the eighteenth amendment, many people in town drove out of the proper city limits and out of Saline County into Williamson County for the drinking and gambling that went on in the cool dark rooms of Shady Rest. He used to own a different saloon, Near Bar, right in the middle of Harrisburg, but he burned it to the ground when Lank Price became sheriff. Price was weak, and his good old boys down at the station bellyached about all the fights that took place there. They didn't want the drinking and bootlegging done downtown right under the mayor's nose. So, Charlie decided to do away with Near Bar, collect on the insurance money, and build Shady Rest. When Charlie built Shady Rest, Price and some of his men demanded a piece of the pie, and that's exactly what he expected from the sheriff. Enough cash and premium liquor convinced them to look the other way when the bootleggers came through on the Ohio River. When Charlie agreed to pay them more, they became lookouts. Eventually, he had Price's men stop some of his rivals when driving near Harrisburg and its outskirts. The more money he threw him, the more Price stepped up to the plate. With a fat enough bank roll, Birger thought, Price would squeeze the Shelton brothers.

At Shady Rest, the new slots were placed in the main bar that had solid oak beams on the ceiling. He had seven poker tables and three blackjack tables placed in a separate room so the men could have some privacy. He walked through the darkly lit rooms and watched the dealers at the blackjack tables. They were fast and good. But fair. And they made sure the players were well supplied with whiskey on the house. He saw Clay Morris sit his big gunboat of a belly down at the roulette wheel. He hated it when any miner came in here waging war with his paycheck. He knew very well that Clay Morris couldn't afford to lose a nickel let alone what he was betting on that wheel.

Charlie used to be a miner, and his father had been a miner for a short while. He remembered hearing his parents fighting about it. His mother used to beg him to stop the infernal mining, she used to say. Morris's wife and his three kids deserved a hot dinner in their bellies. He walked over to him. "Hey, bud, I'm not responsible for no hungry kid of yours squalling. Go on, get on out of here."

"I'm good for it," he said. "Don't worry about that.

You high hattin' me?"

"I don't have no miners in here."

"You don't know the fuck you're talking about."

"I'm not taking your cash, so listen, if you want to play, you got to put something up, like, say, your wedding ring. And the missus ain't going to take kindly to that."

"My missus will do whatever I say."

"That so."

"I feel lucky, so you're not going to be holding it for long." The man tugged at his wedding ring and shoved it in Charlie's palm.

"Fuck it." Charlie walked away from him to the main bar room with the man's ring in his pocket. Deer and elk heads lined the walls. Some of them he had killed right here in the Bottoms near the Ohio River; his men had killed most of the others in neighboring states of Indiana and Missouri. The biggest buck was shot by Ritter in Colorado. Ritter had wanted it placed on the wall behind the main bar as a lookout, so that's what they had done. His real protection was the two feet thick walls to insulate himself and his gang, and the basement was a bunker of ammunition, canned foods, water, and whiskey.

He didn't have any stills on the property. That would be too easy for goons like Young to use as evidence to arrest him. Instead, some of his men had stills in the Bottoms, near Equality, Illinois on the Ohio River. He also had his men travel to Kentucky and haul vats of beer, gin, and whiskey back to southern Illinois.

His eyes were bloodshot. One of the new whores brought him over a plate of barbecue pork, but when he was drinking, he was drinking. He didn't care for any food and sent her away. He watched how her hips moved under the soft fabric of her dress as she walked back to the kitchen. He hadn't slept much in three days and slept for barely two hours last night. Despite the lack of sleep, he looked younger than his forty-three years. His hair remained dark reddish brown, with curls near his temples.

"Hey, you turning down that piece of meat?"

Alabama, one of Charlie's bodyguards, asked and slapped him on the back. "That's not something Tom Mix would do."

"Hey, who the fuck is Tom Mix?" Hoghead Davis asked as he swaggered in the bar with a dead rooster under his arm.

"Exactly," Charlie said.

"Hey, you know you look just like him. You saw the movie. Well?" Alabama said.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders and half-smiled.

"Hey, everyone, I won!" Hoghead yelled and raised the dead rooster over his head. The bloody feathers dripped on his head and he smeared the blood on his lips. A couple of the men howled. Hoghead walked over to them. "Drinks on me tonight!"

The joint was filling up, and the bartenders were busy, shirt sleeves rolled up. Ritter walked in the bar to have a short meeting with him. "It seems we got some rancor with the Shelton's. They're pissed we've put in

the slots," Ritter said. "They think we're dipping into the collection plate," he said and laughed. Ritter was in his late thirties and had been running with Birger and his gang for years. He was the floor manager at Shady Rest. Dressed in a gray pinstripe suit with a clean white shirt, neatly pressed, he was the opposite of Birger in dusty brown dungarees.

"Let them be pissed for awhile," Birger said, chewing on the cigar. His fingers were long and lean with tobacco stains at the fingertips.

"Yeah, but I don't trust them," Ritter said. "We need them to be on our side, at least for a little while longer."

"I run the coal fields, and I run the whiskey," he said. "Not the Shelton's, not Young, not that damn preacher, and not you." He stood up from the table that was soaked with whiskey and beer and walked to Ritter's table. He picked up the shot glass that Ritter had just filled for himself, yanked it out of his reach, and guzzled it down.

Ritter's expression changed, a tightening of the jaw. It looked like he was going to say something but then looked as if he changed his mind. He didn't move. Instead, Birger walked away from the gaming table but turned to face Ritter again, before he left the room. "Don't you forget who runs this place."

Something about Ritter got under his skin. He'd keep his eye on him. The bigger the operation, the more people wanted to steal from you, he thought.

He walked upstairs to the bedroom, knowing that Opal was there waiting for him.

"Where have you been?" Opal asked him, sitting at the low table she used to primp, her hair in marcel waves, red lipstick applied heavily. The room was dark. She only had a kerosene lamp lit on the small table and a few candles flickered on the night stand near the small bed. She sat in her scarlet kimono with the green lizard pin he gave her on the lapel. The filmy material clung to her curves. The closets were overflowing with thirty or forty dresses that he bought her, and he would have liked to see her dress up in one of them for him for a change. He would enjoy undressing her himself. The parakeet was perched on a swing near the dresser when he walked in, but the movement of the door and his entrance must have spooked the bird and it fluttered its wings and flew around the room, squawking and leaving white spatters on the armoire.

Opal whirled out of her chair, but noticing the white streaks on the floor as well, she worked her feet in her satin slippers and stepped gingerly in between the globules. "Oh, how disgusting!" she said. She was a fidgety woman with pink skin and overly rouged lips. He looked at her and knew that he wasn't going to keep her on long. It was time to turn her away. She was a pretty woman, but there was nothing striking about her.

"Don't be so damn skittish," he said. He didn't like how her face wrinkled when she was all worked up. He took her hand and led her out to another bedroom down the hall. "We'll have someone clean that up." He wanted

her to keep quiet. He wanted to have a couple of drinks with her before dealing with the customers tonight. But he looked at her and realized he didn't keep her around to talk with. The pinched face when something didn't go her way annoyed him. He preferred to leave her stuck in the bedroom upstairs alone with her parakeet. She needed him, and he didn't want her to forget it.

As he got older he began to understand why his father had kept a pine box in the back of his wagon. It could be heard shuffling and scraping against the wooden slats as the horses jostled in the muddy thoroughfare. His father's face was stern, heavily creased; he hadn't wanted to leave Russia, but was forced to and briefly lived in New York City. Looking for a steady job, he worked as a miner until he got sick and ended up in St. Louis as a haberdasher. Always bitter. No matter how long he lived in the United States, he never considered himself an American and worried that Charlie would forget where he came from. Charlie was so young when he left Russia, he barely remembered the relatives he knew he would never see again. What he did remember was the small gnarled house he grew up in. He thought of the small dark half of the room and remembered watching his mother bake *vatrushka*. His mother tried to teach his younger sister, Rachel, how to bake. His mother's voice cracked as she told her hundreds of times, "You must learn how to cook if you're going to get a husband. No man will ever marry you if you can't." Rachel wasn't too interested, but his mother was perpetually hunched over the oven trying to get his sister ready for marriage. His mother's cheeks were red and moist and her dress collars wilted as she pressed the yeasty dough and rolled it into balls. She waited until the yeast rose and filled the small cakes with curd and wild raspberries and then brushed the scalloped edges with egg yolk. She had baked these for his father week after week.

Birger's father had pride of his heritage and was worried that his children would forget where they came from. The day he left, he knew he would never be able to set foot in Kovno again. "You will bury me in this pine box someday," his father told him. "Don't bury your mother next to me when the time comes." He scoffed at his father's worry that he would pretend to be a goy to fit in. His father was a pragmatist to the point of having no imagination or emotional pull toward anyone. There was no romance between his parents. They were an arranged marriage and got used to each other. He was too young to remember much except the sour feelings of his father. His father told him never to forget your final destination, don't ever forget your ultimate demise. "If you do, your life will be agony," his father had said.

He leaned over Opal and kissed her. Her hair smelled stale. He squeezed her thick dimpled knee. Her lips were soft and tasted like whiskey. Face paint smudged on his lips. He took out a handkerchief and in front of her and wiped off the rouge. He enjoyed the look of disappointment in her eyes. "Go downstairs tonight and watch over the blackjack room," he said.

"I thought you'd keep me here with you tonight," she answered. She turned to look at him.

"You need to earn your keep," he said. She stood up and walked over to the closet to change. She had on too much perfume, and the scent was overpowering. Her forehead was wrinkled in irritation. Sweat pouched under her eyes. "You need to get out there and make us some money. Sitting on your ass isn't going to do it."

He didn't look back at her and walked down the stairs and went to the bar. He looked up at the deer heads on the wall. His first big hunt was in South Dakota. The deer had been in the velvet when he got him. It was almost a shame. He felt a certain respect for the animal that got plugged.

He walked to the corner of the bar and positioned himself facing the door. There were men who were being sweet talked into the gambling rooms. Some men, all they wanted was to drink and head upstairs with one or two of the women. The band started, and the music was loud. Gin was spilling, soaking into the hardwood floor.

There was a ruckus coming from one of the blackjack tables in the adjoining room. The bartender calmly wiped his hands on a bar towel hanging from a nail near the sink and motioned for a couple of guys to check out the scene at the blackjack table. Birger downed a shot of whiskey first, poured another, and then walked over. Two men were fighting over blackjack. They were brothers who always came in together. They liked to sit at the same blackjack table but were known to argue with each other about the way they played cards. One of the brothers wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Jesus fucking Christ. I want my fucking money," he said looking at the dealer. The other brother was sweating and wiping his upper lip with his shirt sleeve. The first brother saw him coming and claimed that the dealer was cheating.

Birger could see that the dealer was getting pissed off by this man's outrage at losing. "It's all in the game," the dealer said. Then, the dealer quickly said, "How about another drink, boss?" The dealer seemed to be enjoying pissing off the two brothers and flourished the cards, fanning them and sweeping them back together in a neat stack.

Birger nodded at one of the girls who was slinking in the doorway and walked over to the dealer and said quietly in his ear, "If you don't shut him up, I'm going to stomp on your fucking throat."

The girl he nodded to walked over to the first brother. Her breasts were barely covered by a cheap gauzy fabric. She touched the betting man's arm, but he brushed it aside. The idea was for the men to calm down, not leave, keep the money flowing, whether at the slots or upstairs with one of the girls. "I can teach you how to play," she said to the man and touched his chest and began unbuttoning his shirt.

He grabbed the woman's wrists and pushed her away from him. "I want my money. I want my fucking money," the man repeated.

"Take him out boys," Birger said. "Bye, Mac,"

he said. Two of his gang, Art Newman and Leon Stover, walked over to where the two brothers had been playing blackjack and placed a pistol in the small of their backs. With the press of metal on their spines, the brothers stood up and allowed themselves to be guided out the back door. No matter how much Charlie's men wanted to keep this disturbance quiet, the other players at the blackjack and poker tables stopped play and gawked at the two regulars being kicked out. There were some players in the other room, most of them truckers, who ventured in wondering what the trouble was. He didn't want everyone to leave. He didn't want trouble. The patrons didn't either, they were not only cheating and gambling, they were drinking against the wishes of their Bible thumping wives. Against the eye of God.

Birger noticed Big Earl Shelton walk in.

"Get Mr. Shelton here a drink," Birger said to Hank, the bartender.

Hank placed a fresh bottle and a turned up shot glass on the heavily varnished wooden table in front of Shelton. "On the house," Hank said, wiping his hands on a towel.

"On the house? Well, isn't that rich," Shelton said staring at Hank. "We agreed to fifty percent of those profits from the slots, but we haven't gotten our share," he said to Charlie. He pushed the empty glass away and raised the bottle to his lips. "I see you're pushing the cheap stuff on me. You've added too much water to the whiskey. You cater too low to a certain kind of customer, you yourself lose class."

At the time of partnering up with the Shelton brothers, Birger thought he needed them. But now he wanted them out of his life.

"What I heard is that Knighton got out," Big Earl said. "Out on appeal."

"Not news," Charlie said. He thought Knighton would most likely be hanging out at his club house in the Bottoms. He banked on that Knighton wouldn't be expecting him to come looking for him on his own turf.

Ritter walked up to Birger. "You're not going to like this, but Beatrice just drove up."

"You got to be shittin' me," Birger said. Beatrice was supposed to be at his house taking care of his two daughters. She had never been to Shady Rest before. He liked to keep her away from all of this.

"Opal's out there with her."

"For Chrissake." Birger walked through the muck of the bar floor to the side entrance of Shady Rest. Opal in her black lingerie with an orchid in her hair stood there talking to Bea. Smearing it in her face more likely. "I don't have time for this bullshit," he said. He walked away from the side entrance and out the back door to the shed to his Packard.

"Hey, don't leave with my money," Big Earl said, following him outside.

"Shove your bullshit up your ass," Charlie said.

"Don't be stupid, Birger. I bet you don't know who's visiting Cora right about now."

"Shut your fucking mouth, you inbred son

of a bitch.”

Alabama walked up to Big Earl and scraped rooster shit off his boots on a fence post and shook his head. He quickly pulled out a revolver and held it in Big Earl's face.

“Boss, I told you never to get involved with that lousy good for nothin--” Ritter said.

“Alabama, let him have it.” Charlie said, ignoring Ritter.

“Wait, wait,” Big Earl pleaded, his voice changing quickly. His arms flailed. He fell on his knees in the dirt.

“Well, well, look at the weak son of a bitch,” Charlie said, chuckling.

“If you kill me, Lank Price will be on you so fast,” Big Earl muttered. “And the feds...”

“Did you hear that, I think he's threatening us,” Alabama said and tilted his head and spit tobacco juice expertly in the spittoon.

“Heard that,” Charlie said. “Barely worth my bullet, you son of a bitch.” Charlie didn't like to do the shooting, but this son of a bitch pissed him off, threatening one of his own. Who did he think he was walking in here and telling him what to do and threatening Cora?

He reached for his revolver and pressed it to Shelton's temple, then pressed it against his left ear and rubbed it against the man's scruffy cheek. “You want to kiss it?” Charlie looked at Shelton's sweaty upper lip, how it snarled in contempt of him. He fired one shot. Shelton's head jerked back, his ear lobe gushed blood. “Looks like thirty miles of bad road now.” He pocketed his pistol and grabbed a wad of cash from his wallet and stuffed it in Big Earl's gaping mouth. “Consider it paid.” Charlie turned to look at Ritter and Alabama. “Get him out of here.”

“He's still alive,” Ritter said.

“Looks dead enough to me,” Charlie said.

He walked away to a shed where he kept his Packard and drove to Plantation Inn Tavern. He wanted to find Knighton before the other way around. And, he needed to find Cora to see if one of the Shelton brothers really did get to her.

Susan Isaak Lolis received her MFA from the University of Miami. She teaches creative writing and literature at Florida Atlantic University.

Recommended Reading: 2009 Novels & Non-Fiction

A Short History of Women

By Kate Walbert

The 15 lean, concentrated chapters in this exquisitely written novel alternate among the lives of a British suffragist and a handful of her Anglo-American descendants. The theme is feminism, but Walbert is keenly alert to male preoccupations and the impressions they leave on the lives of her female cast. Walbert's prose, cool and intelligent, captures the many ways we silence and are silenced, the ways we see and hear as we struggle to grasp hold of meaning.

The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science

By Richard Holmes

Holmes harnesses the twin energies of scientific curiosity and poetic invention in this superb intellectual history, which recreates a glorious period, some 200 years ago, when figures like William Herschel, Sir Humphry Davy, and Joseph Banks brought “a new imaginative intensity and excitement to scientific work,” and literary giants like Coleridge and Keats responded giddily to these breakthroughs, finding in them an empirical basis for their own faith in human betterment.

The Good Soldiers

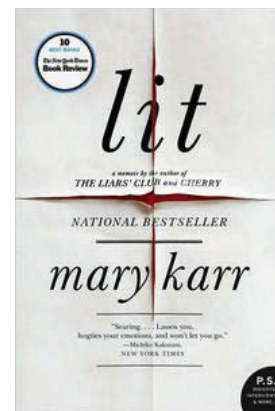
By David Finkel

Finkel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and editor at The Washington Post, gives full voice to his subjects, infantry soldiers from Fort Riley, Kan. (average age 19), posted in the lethal reaches of Baghdad at the height of the “surge.” Finkel's own perspective emerges through spare descriptions — of a roadside bombing or the tortured memories of a single soldier — that capture the harrowing realities of war.

LIT: A Memoir

By Mary Karr

This sequel to **The Liars Club** and **Cherry** is also a master class on the art of the memoir. Mordantly funny, free of both self-pity and sentimentality, Karr describes her attempts to untether herself from her troubled family in rural Texas, her development as a poet and writer, and her struggles to navigate marriage and young motherhood even as she descends into alcoholism.





*Margaux Wexberg
Sanchez*
2009 Runner-Up
Novel in Progress
All American Activities



All American Activities, Excerpt:

Normal Progression

The first joint he smoked as soon as he cleared Sacramento. On the way out, he'd gone the southern route, Route 66—Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona—and each time he'd stopped for gas, Jude had had to add more water to the radiator, motor oil, too, those June miles hot and dry in a combination such as the Mississippi valley never in his lifetime had produced. It was a desert, alright, and after days of it, rubber to road, the San Francisco fog had loomed like innovation. His directions were to San Mateo, but the effect on Jude had been the same as if that bridge had been the Golden Gate. He was a traveler, alone, in a car nobody else owned. A man with prospects in the city, whose paraphernalia fit easily within his trunk. He had the address of his uncle's building, but Jude was no rush, would have crossed the San Mateo Bridge all day.

Today, he started seeing signs for Truckee. Lake Tahoe. In a flash, I-80 brought him in line with Donner Lake, the northern shore, and it was the bluest he could remember, glowing from within, wedged into a crevice in the mountainside.

Tall pines grew like a trained army, the face an eerie green, craggy, aglow. The green of the trees and the blue of the lake both were bright and deep so there seemed to be some contradiction.

The morning had been like all of them before it, breakfast, rustle of newsprint, except that this time, Jude had not put on his loafers, and when Uncle Alter stepped into the hall, thin hair gelled neatly to his forehead, he'd turned around as Jude remained within. A confusing moment, standing at the threshold, Alter holding out his hand to shake.

Just as easily as he could leave as planned, Jude might have put his dress shoes on again, given his uncle one more try, lunch from the deli, Michaela after work. Hadn't he enjoyed it yesterday? Hadn't he left the store each night for several months now knowing he would smoke good grass, knowing there would be a blowjob, maybe sex?

But Jude had done as he'd intended, taken his uncle's

outstretched hand, a final thank you and goodbye, closed the door and listened to his footfalls fading. He would never again hear the sound of the vault. He would forget the proper arrangement of the jewelry trays, forget the names of suppliers and retailers, but Jude had liked the pouches of loose diamonds, the big stones, no settings, just the gems.

The look and feel of those he would remember.

Margaux Wexberg Sanchez was born in St. Louis, MO in 1978. She studied English at Yale and went on to work in the editorial departments of Knopf and Vintage Books at Random House. She left New York for the west coast in 2006, receiving an MFA in fiction from the University of California, Irvine in June, 2009. Her nonfiction has appeared in *People Magazine*, the *Washington Post Book World*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *St. Louis Beacon*. She recently returned to her hometown with her husband, Rob Sanchez, where she works in the Writing Center at St. Louis Community College and as a lecturer at Fontbonne and Washington Universities. Her first novel, *All American Activities*, is set in St. Louis, and explores the lifespan of a family secret.

Quote to Live By

My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its officeholders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease, and death.

Mark Twain

A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court



Julie Chagi 2009 Best Short Story **The Camel**



Judge Barb Johnson has been a carpenter in New Orleans for more than 20 years. In 2008 she received her MFA from the University of New Orleans. While there, she won a grant from the Astraea Foundation, Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers and Washington Square's short story competition. In 2009, she became the fifth recipient of A Room of Her Own foundation's \$50,000 Gift of Freedom. Harper Collins has released her first book, a collection of short stories entitled *More of This World or Maybe Another*. Ms. Johnson has been a long time member of the Faulkner Society. She also is a member of the 2009 faculty for Words & Music.

The Camel

Alice wedges herself into the crush of passengers getting off the plane in Cairo, and then, almost as one body, they're swept across the tarmac and through the airport door by an abrupt flurry of wind. She scans the room, then the outer edges, hoping against hope to see her dad's lean, six-foot-three frame dashing towards her. He promised to meet her right here, just inside the first door, but she finds only a swarm of foreign faces, jabbering languages. It's astounding how it affects her this time, his being late—her heart begins a crazy hopscotch through her chest, and for a second she's seized with fear. She's all of eighteen and considers herself tough and hardy, but it's been a long trip from San Francisco. She slips her backpack off her shoulders, runs her fingers over her jeans pocket to make sure passport and money are safe, juts her chin out to keep from wailing.

"Welcome to Egypt. You need ride?" The voice is courteous, friendly.

Alice looks up to find a mustachioed man with quick eyes, his black eyebrows raised, ready to please. He's wearing a white linen suit. A guide—that's what he must be. Relieved, Alice is about to ask where the best place to wait is, but her mother's voice barges into her head, warning, "Unsolicited offers of help!"

"Oh. No thanks," Alice says, and waits for him to leave. Instead, he grabs her sleeve and starts fingering it, stretching the fabric away from her arm. Alarmed, Alice yanks it back and begins jogging after the last stragglers toward the baggage claim.

The man catches up, affixing himself to her side. "You blond girl," he whispers, but she hisses, "Get off me," and shakes him loose. "Fucking fly!"

And then is mortified at herself. This isn't California.

Now she's sprinting, dodging crates and kids and a chicken—a chicken!—until she catches sight of a gray-haired man she takes to be American—a robust man—strolling briskly toward her. He smiles. He has a vacation face. Alice takes a chance and flings herself against him. "Dad, am I glad to see you!" she shouts. The man has to flex his knees to keep his balance, and then Alice feels herself being held—he's twirling her off her feet, backpack and all, dusting her cheek with his lips. "It's wonderful to see you, love," the man says in an Australian accent, and then, jerking his thumb at the pest, "Rack off!"

"How's Mummy?" He scoops up her pack and starts walking with her, changing his own direction. "Always early for a flight, just my temperament," he explains.

He stays with Alice for ten or so minutes even though she says he doesn't need to. And he gets her to verify, before he has to leave to catch his plane, that there is a father who will come for her.

"Resourceful girl," he says, giving Alice a good long look.

Alice watches him go, a sense of exhilaration filling her chest. She did it—she did it on her own. Who says she needs protection?

But five minutes later Alice knows something horrible has happened to her father. Charles has been in Egypt for a week, and Ben, his adventure-seeking nephew, was supposed to join him a few days ago. Knowing Ben, they could have done anything stupid. But her dad's lucky—he's always been terrifically lucky. And he needs to be lucky, Alice can just hear her mother, Mimi, saying bitterly, because if he were dealt what he deserves for his thoughtlessness and self-centeredness he'd be dead by now. Alice doesn't go that far, but she's furious as she sits cross-legged on the sidewalk outside the terminal, her duffle bags spread around her, wearing sunglasses and mashing her face into a paperback thriller. "Avoid eye contact!" Alice has read somewhere that Egyptian women have taken up the veil again out of their own free will. Free will? It's 1986, for crap's sake. Alice calls it self-defense.

A taxi screeches to a rocking halt at the curb, sending up a new cloud of grit and toxic fumes. The taxi door opens and out springs Charles, his normally pallid face pink with alarm. In through the open terminal door her father sprints, and it takes Alice a second to realize

he hasn't seen her. She jumps to her feet, thinks about leaving her bags unattended, and then dashes through the door after him, but by then he's on his way out. They nearly butt heads.

"It's you!" he cries. "Thank God!" He steps toward her, arms open, then mutters something about a worse than horrific traffic jam, but Alice's tears are spilling as his fingers press into her back, drawing her close. She cries because he's here, after all, and not dead, and because she's missed him this year, her senior year of high school—his "sabbatical" year away. And then it all gets mixed together—now she's angry that he missed her singing the duet in Ruddigore, that he missed helping her pick out a college. But here he is, carefully pushing her away to arm's length to get a good look at her with his blue-eyed, steady gaze. She notices how well he seems: tanned, muscled, easy in his lanky body. Standing before her is a tall, straight and joyous spirit, basking in his god-given sun, and she understands that this is who her father essentially is, left to live his life with no encumbrances. Back home he was thwarted, crookedly bending every which way to connive for enough sunlight.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Charles exclaims, taking her in again in his slow, deliberate way. Then he clears his throat. "We, the thing is, we have another traveling companion. You knew about Ben of course—he's back at the hotel. Or perhaps I did mention it. Did I mention Renée joining us?"

"Who?" Alice looks at him in disbelief. "I thought you wanted to spend time with me."

"She's in the taxi. Try to be nice. And I do want special time with you." He motions for Alice to enter ahead of him, and she starts to, but when she sees the threatening head of wild, curly orange hair sitting in the corner, she makes her dad get in first. This girl-woman is so tiny she could be six. What does her dad want with a six-year old?

Renée says nothing, but she peers around Charles and directs a sleepy but radiant smile at Alice. Alice responds by lifting her eyebrows.

When they're unsafely on their way, given the taxi driver's desire to race, Charles says, "I'm a lucky guy, sitting between two favorite people."

"Don't make me throw up," Alice mumbles. Charles elbows her—one push, then two.

Renée gazes out the window, calmly. Alice visualizes her mother back in California reading papers for English composition late into the night, frown marks lining her forehead. It's been over a year and a half since her dad left, and Alice had no idea he was involved with anyone. Renée has to be ten years younger, at least. Alice leans back and tries to relax, the same as Renée.

They ride in silence. The taxi crawls and speeds, crawls and speeds through Cairo, and then at Charles' request the driver takes the roundabout way through Islamic Cairo. Just when the ancient city gives way to the colored, flat buildings on the outskirts, they drive past a caravan of camels loping along the sidewalk. Alice's head whips around to follow them.

"Do tourists get to ride camels?" she asks, before she

remembers she's vowed to silence to punish them. Ever since Lawrence of Arabia she's found camels weirdly beautiful, has felt a kindred spirit-connection with them.

"They're on the list," her father says.

And even though Alice could object to anything having to do with life being on a list, she leans across her father to stick out her hand to Renée, letting her wrist go limp because she thinks it's chic. "Renée, I'm Alice." Seeing the camels has made her think she's been an asshole.

Renée grips Alice's hand and squeezes.

"Ouch!" screams Alice.

Renée laughs. "Ze circus," she explains, holding up her calloused hands. "Ze rope. But! I have heard, oh! everything about you, from your fatheur."

They're a couple. Every twitch and glance, every breath says so. When Charles moves to adjust his legs, Renée shifts, too. A moment ago when Renée leaned toward Alice, Charles's body accepted the pressure of Renée's upon it by pressing back, just so. Alice feels that rounded love space between them, wants to crawl into it, wants to smash it. They're old lovers, comfortable—even comfortable with an eighteen-year-old jerk.

"You're lovers," Alice announces.

"Yes. Of course," Renée says.

"Frankly, I thought if I told you in advance, you wouldn't come. We wanted you to come." Charles shifts his gaze to Renée.

"Yes. Is true. Yes! Yes!"

Alice nods, trying to be a good sport. But how she'd wished for time together, just the two of them. "Is this why you invited Ben? So you two could have your own thing?"

Charles returns her gaze, thrusting out his own lip. "Ben's here because he wanted to see Egypt before it's too late. If you're going to the Middle East, it's a safe country. Relatively."

They've been here before, on this territory—her wanting to pick a fight, his refusal. "So, you think Israel's safe?"

"Not as safe as Egypt."

Out the window, Cairo's lights are just starting to blink.

"Mom almost got blown up in Israel. Did you know that? She was in the Tiberias bus station," Alice turns to include Renée, "and the next morning it blew up and ten people were killed."

"Everywhere is risk," says Renée.

"I'm glad my mother didn't get blown up," Alice says. She sighs dramatically, stealing a glance at her father, who, because he winces, satisfies her desire for damage. If Mimi had been blown to bits... Alice closes her eyes and sees, in spite of herself, bits and pieces of her mother exploding, shooting off into the atmosphere, coming to earth as something else, something other than her mother.

Before the others are up in the morning, Alice leaves "home" as Charles jokingly calls the runty rooms they're staying in—their "no star" hotel, Alice calls it—to find a cup of tea in the café down the street. Never go out alone! This time three men, separately and one after the other,

accost her, assuming she wants their attention, for why else is she out by herself, unprotected by a brother, or uncle, or father? Why else has she come to Egypt, if not to lie down with a man?

There are no teenaged girls out, anywhere, no single young women about; only one old woman covered in black, and three smartly dressed matrons huddled together on the street corner, heads covered in the way Alice saw at the airport, using large white cotton scarves which are twisted and tied to cover their heads and the fronts of their bodies. How they stand being covered in this intense heat is beyond her. Her own body is a sheet of water. The tiny bit of mascara she applied this morning is melting. Yet each of those women wears a heavy smear of kohl. All of this Alice notices while pretending not to notice that she, herself, is the sideshow. The two blocks back to the hotel attract tens of pairs of eyes.

By the time she arrives the others are up and waiting. "Insha' Allah," Ben says, half bowing in a mocking way. He's turned into a brooding, heavy-lidded young man, not the carefree boy she'd known at Thanksgivings and summer gatherings.

"No one told me!" Alice cries, out of breath. "I can't go out..."

"Insha' Allah means God willing," Ben persists with his lopsided grin, taking for granted his former favorite cousin status—a flimsy status he already blew last night by going club hopping and not coming in until Alice had gone to bed. "You'll hear it everywhere."

"I need a chaperone." Alice is looking at the tiled floor.

Renée nods—this young daughter of the man she loves is not so stupid. "But ees possible, no, if you only don't look at the men's..."

"I didn't," Alice says flatly. "And it didn't work. If I'd been looking I would have noticed there weren't any girls in this country. Where do they stick them?" She sneaks a look at Ben. Ben, with his Insha' Allah is going to be worthless. He seems younger than twenty-two.

"Renée's traveled all over the world, and she knows how to go it solo," says Charles, casting an admiring glance at Renée.

Ben rolls his eyes. "Come on! Alice is way younger than Renée. I've had my eyes peeled—there are no women out there by themselves." He winks at Alice. "I'll be your escort."

"But Alice can use some tips, some moves?" Renée puts in.

"You mean, like jujitsu?" Alice says. Why hasn't her mother encouraged her to take martial arts? How could she go into the world without Kung Fu? And how can she allow this...this enemy to teach her? "Just don't hurt me," she says.

Renée laughs, tapping a thick finger to her temple. "Is mental, Alice."

But you can't fake a mental attitude, Alice knows that. It isn't a technique, it's what shows up in your stride or in your expression when you've learned something the hard way, by living through it. Later, when Renée takes Alice

out in the street to demonstrate attitude, Alice doesn't get it. She can see how it works for Renée—how she won't turn her head or look down, but just motors down the street until she's gone, bam, before anyone realizes she's even been there. But on Alice it looks unbelievably silly, which is confirmed when Renée can't stop laughing. Alice's mother had the same trouble when she went to Israel by herself. What finally did it was buying a fifty-year-old hat, and when I put it on nobody bothered me again. I became impervious—if not invisible. But her mother wasn't eighteen. Why's her dad so oblivious?

It's past noon. The overhead fan, sweeping its moth-like blades around and around, seems to have no effect on the heat. Alice turns off the switch, then immediately turns it back on. It hovers above them like a helicopter, or like a giant version of the gleaming blue flies that provide a continual backdrop of start-and-stop buzzing. Invisible until the door opens, the flies zoom belligerently inside to what will become their self-selected prison. In spite of the heat, Renée is chinning herself up to a metal bar she's wedged in the doorway, up and down, up and down, as rhythmically and evenly as the fan circling overhead. Alice watches intently. Will she, Alice, have that kind of stamina, that sense of purpose in her life?

Charles is pouring over the guidebooks he's spread out on the floor. "You like camels, Alice. How about the camel market, in Imbabah? An easy ride away."

"Way cool," quips Ben. "No flies there." He glances at Alice, then says, "But you've gotten pretty hot."

Alice gets up, finds a bag of flat bread and takes one, brushing off the flies. "We're cousins. Don't creep me out." She's suddenly afraid she won't like the camels up close.

Alice and her troop don't have to consult maps once they're off the bus, because loud cracking noises and snorting groans lead the Americans to the large, open arena where the camels are being sold. It's like a noisy, dusty country fair, except instead of goats and cows there are well over a hundred camels kneeling in rows, tied together. Others move in curiously circular spurts. Prospective buyers examine feet, eyes, and teeth for signs of health.

"Zeir eyelashes," Renée points. "I would kill for zose lashes."

Alice looks at Renée's short, almost white lashes, immensely gratified that there is something deficient about her, and then she observes the camels for a long, dreamy time. A camel always holds its head tilted up—that's part of what gives the animal its grace and nobility. She also knows this probably allows the camel to see through its long, sweeping eyelashes. "They look like they can see a great distance," she says. And that, too, indicates nobility. Or is she remembering the scene from Lawrence of Arabia where it seems to be the camel, rather than the rider, who sees Lawrence before he's even a speck on the horizon? But how would Alice have seen all that in a distance shot? Camels don't speak; in

the movie the camel didn't look up at its rider and then shoot forward—or did it? Eerie goose bumps break out on Alice's arms as she realizes something about herself. Maybe that's what she saw because that's what she wanted to see, it's what she's believed about animals—in their nobility, in the superiority of their senses.

Renée nudges Alice, indicating with her head the men in full desert dresses squatting in the dirt, knees apart, next to the camels they must have brought to market. "Is incredible, how limber are zoze men!" They're drawing in the dirt with the same long sticks that they use to whack the camels with. Toyota trucks are backing in to load the camels. Some will be used for their meat. The faint smell of fenugreek mingles with dust. Huge flies flash blue around the animals.

"Not a pretty sight," says Ben gloomily. "Why not just tour the slaughterhouse?"

"And I thought it would be picturesque," says Charles. "We can go somewhere else."

"Alice wants to leave. Don't you, Alice?" Ben gives her his heavy-lidded stare.

But Alice wants to stay. Life is right here, isn't it? Food, livelihood, death, everything mixed together. And look: vendors are weaving through the crowd with trays of tea, carts of falafel, baskets of nuts and dates, but there, across the arena, you can sit down to eat. They are hungry, and sharing a meal over there would be a way to complete the experience, to not admit defeat.

English can be heard above the grunt and whine of camels, some French and German, so it is an attraction, tourists do come here. Ben shrugs his shoulders.

They begin to cut through the arena, which is no easy task, filled as it is with the camels and owners and buyers, with other tourists. They must go single file: Alice ends up in front with Charles behind her, then, Renée, and finally Ben lagging and dragging behind with his mood. Some of the camels are hobbled, which explains their erratic, somewhat circular movement. "At least they have some degree of freedom," Charles shouts to Alice up ahead of him.

And then nervous laughter erupts from somewhere in front of them, turning suddenly into staccato, shrieking alarm. The ground trembles underfoot like a small earthquake, dust rises up ahead and balloons into a whirlwind. People are tripping in their attempt to get the hell out of the way, but Alice can't see what's coming until the crowd in front of her opens up. Now she's right in the path of a lone camel on the run, a camel that's spewing spit, gnashing its teeth, wheeling its body on its three good legs, croaking its rage from the cave of its gaping mouth. The camel seems to freeze in time. Alice doesn't move. She can't. But the ill-humored beast has not stopped. It careens crookedly toward her, as if she alone were responsible for its trek through the desert, its captivity, the din of this market. The roar Alice hears is her body, now a floodgate of signals, channels opening and rushing to give movement to her stock-still legs. She hears her father yell behind her, hears something crash.

In near darkness—the darkness of mind gone blank—she is gripped from behind and jerked free by strong hands, calloused hands. Jerked and thrown so forcibly she slides backwards on her butt in the dirt.

Faces swim above her. The sound is turned off. Sweat reeks, mixed with camel breath. She lifts herself up on her elbows, is forcefully pulled up by Renée. Alice starts brushing off her pants, and it is that—her hand swiping her bottom—that breaks the vacuum of silence. Titters escape, then laughter. A blush fires her face, but she makes a wobbly smile. Watch out in crowds!

The camel is being beaten by its drover—whipped with the stick and kicked in the legs. The crowd laughs with relief at the spectacle. Then Charles steps cautiously from behind an overturned cart, dripping with tomato and falafel. People laugh harder—nobody hurt! Insha' Allah!

Alice wishes she could laugh, but she can't. Her thighs begin to quiver, her knees to shake. She cannot stop the shaking. Worst of all, she cannot look into her father's face. But she can feel his eyes landing on her, resting on her, and so she faces him, looks into the great shadow gripping him. Then she looks at the camel, right into the camel's eyes to find out—why her? The camel eyes her as if she's a rock, of no interest. Everything is a rock now—he's had his say.

"We have an acrobat with us, thank God," Charles says.

You still need his protection, and don't let him tell you you don't!

The corner of Alice's mouth trembles. In one of her hands she feels the hard grip of Renée. She squeezes back, squeezes hard.

They're subdued, all of them, that afternoon and night. It's a response to near catastrophe, they think, and it's true enough. But it's still too fresh; each of them is stuck in his or her immediate, highly personal world that cannot yet accept an overview, cannot yet see the whole from a distance. Where would you snap a picture—what would the picture show? A foot tripping here, a cart being overturned there, expressions of fright, or focus, or paralysis. Or boredom, as is the case with Ben. He escapes the rooms to party.

That night, hours after Renée and her father have gone into their room for the night, Alice knocks on their bedroom door, waits, and then goes right on in. They're snuggled in bed, studying maps—or were studying maps, which have fallen to the floor. Her father's head is on René's lap, and her fierce hand is on his forehead. It shocks her, the absoluteness of it: it's primitive and true. They look to Alice like an Icelandic version of mother and child. "Night," she says, blowing them a kiss. But she doesn't move. Renée motions for Alice to come, and she does. She stands by Renée's side and takes her other hand. It's a hand that knows work, and it squeezes her more than she'd like. But her own mother's voice is blissfully silent.

Ben stays out late, sleeps late, is a dark presence

among them, short-tempered, sarcastic. It's starting to be a vacation that's worn out. A few days later, when he finally takes her with him, Ben says he saw the whole thing: the cloud of dust, the camel, Charles jumping out of the way and under the cart, Renée lunging for Alice. "He was a weenie."

"Tell my dad what you saw, ask him about it. Why tell me?" Alice says. "What about you? Why were you so far back you couldn't do anything?"

They're sitting in a café having tea. With Ben there, Alice is safe.

"I was bummed out. That whole camel market scene. Anyway, I was too far back. How was I to know you'd freeze up?"

"We're a freeze up family."

Ben looks at her, pauses, then forges ahead. "I don't know. I'm ready to move on."

"I'm that boring?"

"Nah. But it's like I have a job, watching out for you."

"Yeah. And you have a trust fund, so you can fly into Egypt and then fly right back out."

"I don't know. I hear Turkey's really happening right now."

If Alice were younger, she'd demand of her mind that her trip to Egypt end right here, too. She'd tease apart what happened so she could fix it, screw with the truth, and then be able to tell it.

Instead, after Ben leaves, she goes to Giza with Charles and Renée, and she touches a pyramid and gets as close to the Sphinx as she can. She tries to imagine what riddle the Sphinx might ask her. When is family not family? That would be a good one. Why do you need protection? Alice feels her heart beating and her eyes beginning to water. She wants to go ride a camel. Her father thinks she should, to get over her fear. But she doesn't move. She tells herself to stay with it, stay with it for a minute longer. Why does he think she's so grown up? And shouldn't a father protect his daughter? Alice thinks of tiny Renée's wide, strong shoulders, her posture. Maybe he doesn't need to, now.

Who said that? Alice looks at the Sphinx, suspiciously.

Leave-taking has always been difficult for Charles—anyone can see it. Renée didn't come to the airport with them because she has to pack their things for Africa. That's what she said, but Alice thinks she wants to give her and her dad some time alone together. But there is hardly space for that. All around them women are sitting on blankets with their babies and baskets and boxes, chickens squawk from crates. In the pandemonium Charles spots the ticket counter and they move toward it. Men approach, calling, "Welcome to Egypt." One says, "Welcome to Fantasy Land."

Father and daughter go as far as they can before Alice must pass through the checkpoint by herself. He motions for her to sit. Tears stream down his face, and people crowd around them. They hover and stare. A guidebook said that in Egypt privacy is nearly as suspect as freedom. Alice tries to shield him with her body. "Shhh," she says.

"Dad."

"It's all right for a man to cry, Alice." He takes a red bandana from his pocket and blows his nose into it. "It isn't a thing to be ashamed of."

Embarrassed, Alice nods. They sit.

"But what happened with the camel is." His voice comes out strong. "My good God. There you were in front of me, and then that camel, out of control. I must have thought you'd jump out of the way. I didn't think. I dove for my life. I dove for my own life. It's a terrible thing."

Alice eyes him.

"You probably didn't see I was stuck to the spot."

"A hundred times I've questioned what I thought, and I can't tell you. But you're precious to me—you know that, right?"

She nods. "Tell Renée good-bye, okay?"

"And tell you mother hello. She had a hard time letting you come here."

Alice's eyes widen, taking in a new generosity.

"She needs to travel more," Alice says, and he nods, canting his head toward her. They exchange a look, the first look they've shared since the divorce.

Alice is in the air, she has the window—Cairo is a cluster of buildings, then a circle. Then it's gone. There's an empty seat, and then a dude—he looks like a seasoned traveler—has the aisle. He smiles at her, but she's already someplace else—those are her mother's near black eyes she's looking into. She's home. In the hall, her bags emit a foreign smell—perfume of chalk, of parched citrus. What Alice will tell, how she'll tell it, what she will hold and what hide, she doesn't know yet. Hiding anything from Mimi is almost impossible. The bit she's trying to figure out right now, ahead of time, is the way they're still a family, even though they aren't. She's trying to figure out the way love works.

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Quote To Live By

Seize the moments of happiness, love and be loved! That is the only reality in the world, all else is folly.

Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace



Cary Groner
2009 Best
Short Story
Runner-Up
Summerhaven



It wasn't until nearly two years later, when Bill Weathers had a job clearing a brush dam out of a drywash northeast of town, that anyone knew what had become of the car. He was churning through the arroyo on the D-6, shoving the flood-borne limbs and stumps and branches to the side and scooping them up over the bank with the blade, when on his third pass he hit metal and the dozer shuddered.

Bill backed off, grabbed the rail, and climbed down over the heavy tread, which after only a half hour's work had been polished to a fair nickel shine by riverbed gravel. The leather in his boots had started to pull away from the fabric tops and sand was getting in, rasping away at his feet through little holes in his socks. He'd sew them up or just get another pair, he figured, but in the meantime he'd have to keep shaking them out. It was hot this morning, over ninety by ten o'clock, and he mainly wanted to finish so he could get paid and be out of the sun by lunchtime. Heat in the morning like this brought rashy prickles up on his skin and made his shirt feel like steel wool on him.

In places the sand was so fine it could have washed in from a beach, a deep adobe color to the grains, lying in rich veins along the riverbed cut through with snaky lines of gravel and long horizontal columns of oxidized basalt. In the gravel, mica and glass sparkled in the morning sun, everything rosy-hued, which seemed to lighten the hard weight of daylight on Bill's shoulders. Rock doves, palomas, cooed in the outcrops over the bank to the north. When Bill was a child he thought they came to soothe him. He smiled now, remembering this foolish idea.

He pulled aside some willow branches and saw the car, sticking out of the riverbed at an angle. The front half was lost under silt, which came about halfway up the windshield and filled the inside to door level. Only about half the back seat was filled, though, and the rear end was free, the wheels covered only to mid-hubcap or so. A Lexus with Minnesota plates. Far from home.

It was amazing no one had noticed it before, Bill thought, but it was isolated here, with just the dirt ranch track to the south. The car's paint was pretty much gone and most of it had rusted to the same color as the surrounding silt, all of it well hidden by the brush, in any case. This was the source of the dam; the car had caught

the first of the trees and other downwash and held them up long enough that they grabbed more in turn, and the thing had collected itself by simple friction and gravity and hydraulic force.

As Bill peered through the glassless window frame he felt a small, sick disappointment, because it became clear he wouldn't finish the job today. A fine ivory fan rested on the silt inside, a fan of five points, the bones of a hand. Thready bands of mud separated the pieces like grout in a delicate mosaic. Bill felt a brief airiness near the bottom of his belly, as if he had been momentarily lifted from the ground and set back down.

He leaned in and used his thumb to push some mud back from a pale dome. Just below that a loose piece above the silt-filled eye socket came free under pressure. And even though he knew he shouldn't, he drew the piece out and wiped it off and looked at it in the light, then slipped it in his shirt pocket. It had a sweet curve, like pottery.

Back at his trailer, down his road, he turned on the swamp cooler, called the sheriff, and set the skull shard on the windowsill. Its color was similar to porcelain but opaque instead of translucent. It held a gentle shadow in its bottom like the stain of a shallow marsh in a rock-chalk basin. From the scattering of white chips he'd seen, he thought there might be more than one set of bones in the car, but he knew the sheriff would be unhappy if he found it messed with, so Bill had left it. He liked the one fragment, though, something about the shape and edges of it, the strong arc of things designed to contain. He figured after all the water that had washed through there, they wouldn't miss one small piece.

2006

The heat was baking the asphalt into stiff black dough as Fran walked back to her car, and all the waviness coming up through the air made her a little woozy, as if the earth were in the process of vaporizing. It was a hundred and five, and she started to sweat as soon as she left the store.

She thought she'd remembered everything but lately it was getting hard to tell. She made meticulous lists and then half the time she left them sitting on the counter when she walked out the door. She hated these summers. She should have ignored the realtor and come down here in December, when it was bearable. At least in

Minneapolis you had trees and lakes to soften the feel of the light, instead of this flat dun everything that burned it back into you as if it were staring you down, didn't think you were strong enough to be here. Maybe I'm not, she thought. Now go on and ask me if I care.

Where the parking lot ended, the dust and saguaro began. You could find a little cover under a cactus, she knew, but it wasn't anything like the shelter you'd get from a maple or an elm. There was no volume to the shade; you couldn't move without darting from one dark column to the next like a refugee dodging gunfire. Fran was starting to feel like anything around here would shoot you if it could, especially the sun, with its tiny melanoma-bearing slugs.

She stopped to look. The cacti, weirdly human, stood there with arms raised as if supplicating. One appeared to have a great spiked penis and others had fleshy, vulvic-looking wounds. She imagined them coming to life in the moonlight and finding each other by deep-throated calls, their limbs creaking and their mating as heavy and strenuous as that of dinosaurs.

Fran had been having a lot of thoughts like this lately and she was considering getting a referral to a psychiatrist, but there were too many doctors in her life already and none of them were taking her to dinner. She fumbled for her keys, wobbling a little as her heels pressed into the softened pavement. Where, exactly, was the car? From behind her sunglasses she seemed to have entered a world of only shine and blackness, where details became increasingly difficult to make out.

Maybe she'd dropped the keys into the Walgreen's bag. She poked through it with stiff fingers. Cortisone cream for her shingles, Celebrex for arthritis, Relpax for her migraines. Dental floss. A box of Wheat Thins. Estradiol and norethindrone to replace the estrogen her body had apparently stopped making in its accelerating, vengeful betrayal, leaving her dry and miserable. Calcium and vitamin D because her bones had softened and begun to crack, thank you very much. Xanax to pave over the jittery disassociation that sometimes possessed her ever since Jack. She had started to think about her body the way she'd thought about Minneapolis when, as a college student, she'd planned to go study overseas; part of her would miss it, part of her couldn't wait to be gone.

She found her keys but she still couldn't recall where the car was, so she finally gave up and pressed the button on the alarm. The AARP advised against this because it could Alert Skulking Predators to Your Confusion or some such thing, but to hell with the AARP. They'd sold their membership down the river on the Medicare drug bill and as far as Fran was concerned they could just curl up into their vast collective acres of wrinkled flesh and die. She heard the alarm chirp two rows over and made her way toward it.

The first cold front of the fall was pushing in from the north today, and the clouds were floating in over the land in a tall, pale layer like a glacier sliding in on the tide. It was supposed to cool down into the sixties by

afternoon, which would be a relief.

Fran turned back in the direction of her car and became vaguely aware, as she got nearer, of an unusual combination of sounds. Pigeons cooed on a lamppost overhead. A hawk called, high in the wide blue, and the pigeons shut up. Fran craned her neck and she could just make out two hawks, thick-bodied and rufous, redtails, turning in a fat thermal rising from the very pavement on which she stood. Their circles were carrying them slowly to the southwest. If they didn't have a nest somewhere they would eventually reach Baja, then Hawaii, then Australia. But of course they had a nest. Mated pairs always did, or they didn't stay mated.

As the hawks drifted farther away the pigeons started talking to each other again, and Fran became aware of a third voice, a human one. She looked down and realized she was right by her car. There were a couple of ratty-looking kids in their late teens or early twenties, a boy and a girl, leaning on an old Chevy two spots over, though the space between the cars was empty. The girl was talking on a cellphone. Fran opened her door and put her Walgreen's bag on the seat.

"I know, we're so close," said the girl. "This totally sucks."

Fran found herself eavesdropping, a habit she'd had forever and finally lost interest in breaking. She'd never been able to stand the thought that conversations—any conversations—took place without her. Even as a girl she'd cried when her classmates excluded her from discussions that were, in retrospect, none of her business. Her mother once scolded her about it, saying Fran seemed to think everything was her business, and even though she knew her mother was right, she didn't change. She wasn't good with boundaries, her friend Bett had once said in a tone that was just a little too high-handed for Fran's liking. I'm good at crossing them, Fran replied curtly, and Bett emitted a tolerant laugh that made Fran feel ashamed for reasons she couldn't quite identify, then angry that she'd been made to feel ashamed.

She hadn't seen Bett in something like twenty years, though she didn't think that little spat had anything to do with it. She actually didn't know why Bett had stopped calling, and it occurred to her now, for the first time, that Bett might not even be alive anymore.

"No, Cady doesn't know jack about cars," said the girl. "It just kind of lurched and quit, but Jesus, it's older than I am." There was a pause; the girl listened, looking vexed. "Yeah, but the thing is we ran out of money yesterday. Christ, it's over a hundred today, I'm not going to hitch there!"

Fran eased herself down into the car and opened the windows so she wouldn't miss anything.

"No, when I say out of money I mean out of money, not down to my last thousand bucks, like you," said the girl. She looked so angry she might cry. "I have a life. You get a fucking life!" She slapped the phone shut and then threw it, out over the edge of the parking lot and into the dust, where it landed with a little puff.

"What the hell did you do that for?" said Cady.

"Who am I going to talk to?" said the girl. "You're right here. I don't need it to talk to you."

"It was like fifty bucks," he said. "No wonder you always run out of money if you throw everything away."

"I don't throw everything away."

"You just threw away a fifty-dollar phone, Tink."

"It was a cheap prepay with six minutes left. Go find it if you want it."

Cady fell silent. Fran had been getting situated in the car, and now she glanced over and got a good look at them. Tink had short blonde hair, streaked with purple, that looked like it had been cut by a drunk with garden shears. She was a little heavysset and the flesh under her narrow eyes had a bruised look that suggested years of battle. She lit another cigarette.

Cady was taller and wiry, with short dark hair and glasses that had heavy black frames and lenses so thick they could have been cut from the bottom of a bottle. His eyes looked huge, as if they were swimming out in front of his face. Opticians had polycarbonate lenses for people like that now, Fran knew—half her friends had them—but they were expensive. Fran thought the conversation had probably stopped because Cady couldn't see and there was no way he was going to wander out into the cactus and get himself spiked trying to find a broken cellphone, and this had made him mad.

As Fran was looking at the kids she saw that they were looking at her, and then it occurred to her that maybe the conversation had stopped because they realized she was listening to it. They pushed off the car together as if in some kind of synchronized-swimming move and came toward her.

She started the Lexus, locked the doors, and got it into reverse, but Tink was already crossing behind her and Fran couldn't very well run her over. Cady came to the rider's side window and Tink appeared at Fran's and leaned on the car.

"Hi," said Tink. She smiled a little too widely, displaying nicotine teeth.

"Hello," Fran replied coolly.

"We were wondering if you might be able to give us a lift."

Fran just gaped at them. She so rarely felt adrenaline anymore; her acupuncturist had told her that her kidney chi was exhausted, partly because of the cortisone, and one effect of this was that she almost never felt her heart accelerate. But now it was thumping so powerfully she thought she could leap from the car and lift it with one hand.

"Not far, not like to Phoenix or anything, just up Mount Lemmon," said Tink. "To Summerhaven, to my brother's."

"Summerhaven?" said Fran, trying to keep her voice calm. "Honey, that's over thirty miles. I live ten blocks from here, and I still have to stop at Safeway."

Tink shrugged. "It's okay if you don't want to help us," she said, and in that moment Fran suspected the whole thing was a scam. She wondered if the Chevy they were leaning on was even their car, if the

cellphone actually worked, if Cady's eyes were really 20/20. She figured the phone conversation had been rehearsed, that Tink had used it many times before, with variations, depending on her mood and her take on the opportunities at hand.

How much danger would she be in if they got into the car? She had lived awhile and she had traveled, and she had been in danger in Crete and in India and even once in Oklahoma, and she had survived each time because she knew she was in danger, just as she felt pretty sure she was in danger now.

She looked at Cady, who was leaning into his side of the car just as Tink was leaning on hers. The windows were down about nine inches and they both pressed their faces into the space above the glass. Tink's face was close and Fran could smell her acrid breath, cigarettes and something bitter and bleachy, possibly semen. Cady had a sweet smile, his lips full and red, his expression far too innocent and boyish for someone his age. His eyebrows stayed elevated the whole time she watched him, as if he were permanently surprised or skeptical.

The car was already in reverse. All she had to do was lift her foot off the brake and step on the gas. It seemed unlikely they'd try to run it down in the parking lot because it would draw too much attention.

And yet, she thought. She wasn't in a hurry to get home. In fact, she didn't particularly want to go home at all. When she considered those times in India and in Crete, she remembered most strongly not the fear but the exhilaration, afterward, when she found herself alive thanks to luck and her own wits, as if she had veered so close to death that its gravity had swung her out again, like a satellite, into a higher and more rarefied existence.

Fran's heart continued to pound; she hadn't felt like this in years. How much could she still handle? At least, she thought, she wasn't harboring any illusions about who she was dealing with, which probably gave her an advantage.

She flicked the switch to unlock the doors. "Get in," she said. "I'll take you."

~

"How'd you get your name?" she asked Tink, who was in the back seat quietly pawing through the Walgreen's bag. "I'm not deaf, honey," said Fran. "If you're hungry, open up the Wheat Thins, but stay out of the drugs. There's nothing in there that won't make you sick. Hand them up."

Fran checked the rearview. Tink took a moment, possibly to process the double negative, then apparently decided on caution and passed Fran the bag. Fran tucked it safely on the floor in front of her seat. Tink pried open the cracker box with dirty fingers, poured out a handful, and handed the carton to Cady. He shook out a few and offered them to Fran.

"No thanks," she said. "I think you're hungrier than I am."

What she was thinking, though, was God knows where those fingers have been, because they were even worse than Tink's. His nails were black at the tips instead of white, and except for his face and neck, which were

pale and reasonably clean, whatever else she could see of him—forearms, wrists, hands—looked oddly pixilated, as if each pore held a tiny reservoir of grime.

She was in the position of the weak, which she resented, but she'd put herself there. That was, of course, what made this worth doing. Nobody was strong enough to stop a train, but if you were quick you could flick a switch send it onto a different track. The trick was in knowing how to work the switches.

It didn't have to be devious, of course. Simple kindness, she had found, could be effective, but only if it was appreciated. The problem was that people like Cady and Tink usually respected kindness only if it came from strength. Otherwise they saw it as just another sickly strategy, which to some extent it was.

"They named me Tinker," said Tink. "That's officially my name but no one uses it except once in awhile my brother. I'm clueless what they were thinking. As if I was actually going to be a tinker. I can see this whole thing of naming your kid after what you want them to be, like Lawyer or Sagacious or something, the way black people do. But fucking Tinker?"

"What even is a tinker?" asked Cady. "You never said."

"Like somebody who goes around from house to house fixing things or something, isn't it?" asked Tink.

"I believe so, or maybe a tinsmith," said Fran.

"Doesn't sound like you," said Cady.

"No duh."

"You more like go from house to house breaking things."

"Why don't you shut up for once?"

Fran turned into the Safeway lot.

"What are you doing?" Cady asked, shifting in his seat. Fran pulled into a parking spot and looked at him.

"I told you I needed to stop here," she said. She'd inadvertently forced their hand. As far as they knew, she still thought this was a pleasant ride, offered out of generosity, to a couple of hard-luck but basically honest kids. They didn't know that she understood them better than that, but of course they might be worried. Had she become concerned? Was she going in to call the police?

"Come along, if you want," she said, offering them an out without actually calling them into the open. "If there's something you need, I'll buy it."

They looked at each other, shrugged, and got out of the car. Fran realized they wouldn't want to leave her alone, which meant she'd never have to leave them alone with the car, either. They had somehow managed to take each other hostage without speaking a harsh or threatening word. All such arrangements should be so civil.

They wanted cookies, beef jerky, sodas—things that were portable and wouldn't spoil. Tink wanted a new water bottle because theirs had gotten funky, and although Fran had always thought "funky" had something to do with Richard Pryor or dancing, she gathered that the term had evolved. She insisted they take apples, which made them smile at each other in a demeaning and

repellent adolescent way, as siblings grinned mirthlessly at each other about clueless parents. While they were getting the apples Fran crossed the aisle and casually dropped three candy bars into her purse, then continued with her shopping. She picked out the rest of the things she needed and put them in her cart, then the three of them went through the checkout line and Fran paid.

As they left the store, the little yellow light atop the security gate started to flash and the contraption emitted a honking sound. A guard approached.

"Could you step this way, please?" he said.

In a gray windowless room lit by a single overhead bank of fluorescents, he had Tink and Cady empty their pockets onto a steel table.

"This is absurd," said Fran. "They're with me." But she loved his officiousness—the deliberate way he approached the search, his brow furrowed with concentration as if he had to consult an internal checklist at each step. She couldn't wait to see how he'd puzzle this out.

There was nothing in the kids' pockets but the usual detritus—cigarettes, a lighter, Cady's large fold-out knife, loose change, some miscellaneous colored fuzz. The guard had them both lift their shirts to just under chest level. Fran was relieved that Tink was at least wearing a bra, though it was a dirty pink and had some sort of track marks on it that made it look like it had been run over, presumably without Tink inside it. The guard patted down their legs but found nothing. Fran took satisfaction in his evaporating assurance, as if his former swagger had been revealed, on closer examination, to be merely a limp. But beyond that, she had never before appreciated how useful it could be to have decoys. He never even thought to search her purse. So far, things were going marvelously well.

Back in the car, the kids dove into the food and for a brief moment Fran allowed herself to feel sorry for them. Maybe Cady had used his knife to slash a throat or two, or to disembowel the odd stray kitten. Did that make him any less pathetic than if he were simply luckless and starving, as he obviously was? And Tink, well, never mind; the girl was off the Richter scale, pathetic-wise. Fran's body was falling apart around her like a cardboard shack in an earthquake, speaking of the Richter scale, and even though her thoughts had become a little strange in recent months, she felt that she was growing to understand life in a way she never had.

"Why don't we go to your house?" said Tink.

Fran had anticipated this request. She had things they wanted, things that weren't in her car. She knew, however, that if they saw what was at her house—or rather, what wasn't at her house—it would increase her danger beyond what was, at least for the moment, manageable.

"I don't think you really want to do that," she said.

"It's possible we do," said Cady, and Fran realized that Summerhaven may never have been part of the real plan. Or that the plan was changing in response to circumstances. The one thing that made her anxious was that she couldn't get a clear take on how smart they

actually were.

Apparently their remarks about the house were supposed to make Fran realize the menace she faced and acquiesce in terror to whatever they suggested. She wasn't sure how bright they were, but they seemed to think she was an idiot.

"I like your accent," she said to Cady. "You grow up down South?"

He looked a little surprised. "New Orleans," he said. "I left during Katrina and I haven't really had a place to set myself down since."

Fran smiled. "That's a good line," she said. "I bet that's gotten you a lot of sympathy."

Cady and Tink looked at each other.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Fran, smiling sweetly. "What should it mean?"

"Why don't you want to go to your own house?" asked Tink. Her voice was getting edgy as her blood sugar came back up and she gathered strength. She lit another cigarette.

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't smoke in the car," said Fran.

"I'm going to smoke," said Tink. She reached over, grabbed Fran's purse, and fished out the wallet. This startled Fran, admittedly, because it was such a brazen declaration of war; the guerilla raids were over and the armies were taking the field.

Tink took out the money and the credit cards, then started looking through the rest. "Please take us to 4325 Sunrise View, if you would be so kind," said Tink, reading from Fran's driver's license, and she and Cady laughed.

Cady put his hands on the top of Fran's seat, one on each side of her neck, so that his fingertips just brushed her shoulders.

Fran used her control button to lower the windows a few inches so the smoke could get out, and she realized it had already cooled down considerably outside. The cold front had rolled over them and the sky had turned opaque. Fran checked the dashboard thermometer; it was down to eighty-two already, and in the second she was looking at it, it dropped to eighty-one.

She knew she had to keep things civil as long as possible. In spite of what Tink had done, it was too soon to let the true nature of the thing come out like this. "The reason you don't want to go to my house—" she began.

"Hey!" said Tink. "Cady, check this out! You know what set off the alarm at the Safeway?" She pulled the candy bars out of Fran's purse.

Cady laughed and grabbed a couple of them, then opened one and started eating it.

"Is this a regular habit?" asked Tink, starting in on a Butterfinger. "Are you one of those little old ladies who shoplifts all the time to get your thrills because you can't have sex anymore?"

"The reason you don't want to go to my house," Fran continued in an even tone, "is that my husband is waiting for me and the realtor is coming over, and Jack is

what you might call a Second Amendment type. If he got even the slightest whiff of who you two are, there's a fair chance you wouldn't leave the house on your feet. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

But this didn't seem to register.

"I asked you a question," said Tink.

Fran sighed, figuring it was best to get it over with. "Yes," she said. "I've shoplifted for five or six years now."

"But how come, if you can afford stuff anyway?" Cady asked.

"Because I'm good at it."

They howled at this, and Fran began to feel annoyed. She had enough sense to suspect that home would be death, of course. As long as they had an image in their heads of Jack waiting for her, Jack with his broad shoulders and his big hands and his guns, Jack who would be making inquiries and calling her cellphone soon if she didn't show up, they would presumably decide to stay away and she would have a chance of keeping this from becoming too perilous. If they went to her house and found it as it actually was, empty of everything except the realtor's staging furniture, they would tie her up with a lamp cord and Cady would bring out that big knife of his and that would be it. She felt fairly certain of this, then took stock of the situation she'd gotten herself into and wondered again if she should think about seeing a shrink.

She'd started shoplifting shortly after Jack's funeral six years before—she wasn't sure but she thought it might have been that same afternoon, after the guests left—and she had become a virtuoso. In stores that had alarm gates she used booster bags—shopping bags she'd lined with a layer of aluminum foil so the tags on the things she wanted wouldn't trigger the alarms. She'd put in the foil, duct tape it in place, and add a plastic bag on the inside to conceal it. She made her boosters using a real bag from the store she was hitting, dressed well, and never appeared in a hurry to leave—a combination, she'd found, that was largely foolproof.

Fran preferred stores that didn't have gates, though, because they usually had better surveillance to make up for it and were, as a result, more challenging. Sadly, such stores were disappearing as the gates became ubiquitous, yet another regrettable indication of the coarsening of society. A few times, in such stores, she'd aroused suspicion and even been searched, but she'd learned by now that the female security guards didn't want to put their hands on her crotch or inside her bra and the men didn't dare, because she'd become so skilled at faking high dudgeon and loudly invoking the name of her lawyer that she'd cowed them. Her biggest challenge at such times was fighting the urge to laugh. Poor old ladies got hauled down to the police station, but rich old ladies—or those who could do a decent impression of them—walked. She was exhilarated by these encounters, but then she remembered Tink's remark and felt slightly ashamed, because it was true that the sensation she experienced was very nearly sexual.

As for Jack: he had, indeed, had big shoulders

and big hands, but he had been as gentle as a lamb, and he wouldn't have kept a handgun in the house any more than he'd have kept a giraffe. He'd spent thirty years of his life at 3M, developing new uses for experimental adhesives. When one of the chemists had come up with a relatively weak and brittle glue that appeared headed for the scrap bin, Jack had read the report and noticed that under certain conditions the stuff formed nanocrystals. He talked to the chemist and they figured out that if you sent very low-level current through it, it behaved like the compressor coils in a refrigerator and cooled down everything around it. This was in the early 1980s, and Jack suggested to his boss that before they tossed the idea, they might let him go talk to a little company in California called Intel, to see if the adhesive might be useful in circuit boards.

The patent belonged to the company, of course, but Jack's boss had made certain quiet arrangements and from then on they'd finally had enough money.

Jack had a harder time with defense contracts, and one night Fran had come home from yoga to find him resting his forehead in his hands on the dinner table. The kids were grown and off at college by then, and the two of them were readjusting to life in a house that had suddenly become too big and much too quiet.

She'd asked him what was wrong.

"They've developed this thing that's actually an anti-adhesive, but they want me to work on it," he said.

"An anti-adhesive?"

"It's like liquid polymer ice. They spray it all over a battlefield and it makes everything so slippery the enemy can't stand up or even crawl. So then, presumably, you just call in the gunships and shoot them down like dogs."

Fran said it sounded like the stupidest idea she'd ever heard of. "Wouldn't you need tanker trucks full of the stuff, and wouldn't the ground absorb it?" she'd asked. They seemed like obvious questions.

"It would never work in a million years, and they know that," Jack said. "They're developing it because DARPA gave them twenty million dollars to develop it, and there isn't a single person on the project who thinks it's feasible."

He was four years from retirement, and he went ahead with it, but it was the first time in her life she'd seen him genuinely, deeply unhappy. She'd always blamed that project for his cancer and his death, though of course the doctors assured her that the cancer had begun a long time before, in a cluster of cells smaller than a pinpoint.

Just the way babies began, she had thought to herself. Everything started small, inside you, and before you knew it, it had taken on its own life and was tearing you apart to get out. Our bodies were cancerous bloody rags, used up and discarded by the next generation of cancerous bloody rags, and the next.

"Maybe I'm kind of a Second Amendment type myself," said Cady, jarring Fran back to herself. Tink had finished her cigarette as Fran continued east.

"Did you say realtor?" Tink asked, openly

mocking. "You selling your palace?"

"Yeah," said Fran, her voice husky now. She decided to ignore the sarcasm and just respond as if the question had been earnest. "Got tired of all the travel, I guess." The truth was that Jack had always liked it in Tucson better than she had, and she'd finally decided that from now on she'd just tough out the cold months in Minnesota. She'd grown up there and she'd never gotten used to Arizona's warm winters; they made the world feel sick and feverish to her. In Minneapolis, she'd started to become afraid of slipping on the ice and breaking a hip, but she figured that was a small price to pay for having snow, which she loved. She wanted to see snow again, she realized with an intensity of longing that made her almost weepy. She was about two days away from being finished, from leaving the house in the hands of the realtor and driving north, where there would be snow within a few weeks if she was lucky.

"So we're not going to your house?" asked Tink.

"We might want to make you an offer," said Cady, with his sly Southern drawl.

"We're not going," said Fran, shaking her head.

But Tink was still looking through her wallet and just shrugged.

"Suit yourself," she said. "We'll go later on. And just so you know, I am so scared of your husband."

"Boy, me too," said Cady, pantomiming a big frightened shiver. "Boy oh boy, Mr. Guns."

Fran stopped at a red light. She looked at the thermometer and saw that it had fallen to 74. She was beginning to suspect that she had made an unbelievably stupid miscalculation. Had she really become so crazy without realizing it? Did she think this was going to be some kind of contest, or a game, as if there were a camera in the car filming them for a reality show? She thought, I should just leave the keys and step out. They aren't going to come after me; they'll take the car.

Cary Groner received his MFA in fiction writing from the University of Arizona this past May. In addition to his story "Summerhaven," which was a runner-up in this year's Faulkner / Wisdom competition, he won the Dec. 2008 Glimmer Train fiction open and the 2009 Hackney Award. Another story, "Voyeuse," won second place in the 2009 American Fiction awards. In the past couple of years he has, in addition, been a finalist for the Playboy college fiction contest (twice), the Tennessee Williams award, the Dana award, the H. E. Francis award, the Glimmer Train fiction open (June 2009, separate from the win noted above); the Glimmer Train "family matters" contest, and the annual contests at the Black Warrior Review and the Greensboro Review. Cary has now completed a collection of stories and a novel. He lives in the San Francisco bay area.



*Helen Krueger
2009 Short Story
Runner-Up*



The Great Release

I'm sitting in my car and it's getting late, and I know the longer I stay here the worse it will get, but I can't leave. There's a large lioness sitting patiently outside my window, and she's smiling like she understands my dilemma. The groceries slowly melt in the car, but I think I may have to spend the night here, and I wonder how strong my windows are. I wish I had a cell phone so I could call the police or the National Guard.

When I squint, I can see more lionesses hiding behind parked cars. Of course. They always hunt in packs.

There's a thud on the passenger window, and I look out at another one as long as my Subaru.

The fear must clear my head because now I know what I should do. I maneuver out of my space and drive down to Twin Rivers where there's a large hotel with a parking garage. I don't ever have to step outside. I call my sister from my room, and she makes me promise to get a gun, "Or at least a cell phone."

I promise.

It was maybe three years ago that people first protested the zoo and demanded all the animals be released, starting with the lions. Of course it seems like a stupid idea now, but people love a good name, and soon the Lion Hearts were a political force. The incumbent mayoral candidate embraced their platform, and it was a close race, but the timing was right for the Lion Hearts. Just before the election, the first Narnia movie came to theatres, and people swooned over lions, convinced every one might be a kind of Jesus figure. The mayor won, and effective immediately all lions were to be released, free to find the habitat that best suited them.

"I think it has to be a little more organized than that," I said. "How are lions going to survive in downtown Waupeeeka?" It was breakfast, and my sister and I were reading different sections of the paper.

"Lions!" said her toddler.

My sister shook her head. "There was another accident at Johnson and Dieter. They really need a light there."

"Lions!" said her toddler.

I wasn't the only voice of caution, but we were in the minority and told we had no vision. So on July 4th, in a large fireworks ceremony attended by the mayor as well as every other politician looking for press, the

zookeepers released the lions.

At first they didn't do anything. The last of the fireworks boomed in the sky, and smoldering bits of cardboard arced down and eventually disappeared into blackness, but still the lions stayed in their cages. The crowd hadn't anticipated this, and there was a great deal of sighing as people watched, then waited in line for the bathroom, then went to get more beers.

Finally, after it was completely dark, one of the younger lions began sniffing at the open doorway. He tilted his head toward the crowd with all their beers and hotdogs and funnel cakes, and in a single graceful movement, he leaped out of the cage and pranced toward a man with a hotdog. He sat down, his tail flicking behind him like a snake.

Everyone was silent as the man stared, bug-eyed, at the lion. He dropped the hotdog, and the lion caught it mid-air and swallowed it whole. He roared and his face seemed to be forming itself into the kind of smile dogs give.

"He's hungry!" someone said. "Give him hotdogs."

Made brave by five-dollar drafts the crowd threw hotdogs, funnel cakes and buns at the lion who swallowed them appreciatively. When the rain of treats finally ended, he appraised the crowd. He began pacing, sniffing the ground and the trash cans, and people backed away nervously. He moved toward the hot dog stand, and the vendor backed away. Everyone watched as the lion ate all the hotdogs on the grill, then swiped apart pieces of the machine to get to the rest of the meat.

There was a roar from further away, so loud everyone covered their ears, then an answer, just as loud, and the crowd realized the other lions were coming out too. Without a word, everyone moved to their cars and left the park. Luckily there were no incidents.

The next morning, the paper called the Great Release a great success, and one columnist gushed about the smile on the young lion's face when he tasted his first hotdog. "May he enjoy many more!" In the beautiful fall morning, their hearts steeped in self-satisfaction, people forgot that sudden emptiness they'd felt in their stomachs when the lions' roars drowned out everything else. But I remembered it.

"I don't know if this will work," I told my sister, and even though she was reading a different section of

the paper, she knew what I was talking about.

She said, "Hmm."

Her husband died at war, which was a slap in the face, because he'd always been opposed to it. We were raised to be contrary, so it made sense when my sister married a contrarian. Our parents both died in a car accident, which wasn't a slap in the face at all because they were terrible drivers. Still, it didn't make it any easier. We were two women living alone with a toddler right next to the zoo and a large, dark forest. So I understood why my sister said, "Hmm."

My supervisor knows where I live, and we have an understanding that I am never to work past dark, but sometimes things just happen. I'll get stuck on the phone with chatty clients. "I'm so sorry," I say, "but I need to get home before dark, because I live near the park."

"Oh yes, the lions!" they'll say. "What do you think about that?"

Lions can run 35 mph and jump 30 feet in the air. Mostly their prey can outrun them, but of course a bunch of brat-and-cheese-addled folk from Waupeeka don't stand a chance. When I close my eyes at night, I see them galloping toward me, and I run, even though I know there's no use, and I can feel their breath at the nape of my neck, can hear the low grunts as they're getting closer. Sometimes I try to run up a tree, but they just jump straight up, and I feel their teeth sinking into my torso and then crunching my ribs, and I almost laugh thinking how fragile the human body is. I almost laugh, but the pain of taking a breath is too great, and I wake up with my mouth open trying to scream, but nothing comes out.

The news of Waupeeka's lions spread quickly, and just days after the Great Release there were already tourists with ridiculously complicated sandals feeding the lions. They stuck close to their cars, but our locals felt they had to be braver. Their backpacks filled with raw beef, they'd march past the tourists, mumbling that they didn't understand our lions.

Three zoologists were charged with watching over things, and in their reports they wrote that none of the lions exhibited those traits we would call hunting. Rather, they seemed entirely dependent on humans for their food, and they searched people out with bored expectance.

About a month after the Great Release, a boy was attacked just outside the zoo. He was trying to lure a lion somewhere, walking slowly while waving a brat, and finally the lion just ate the brat and everything in its way, which happened to be three quarters of the boy's arm. A zoologist was nearby, and he tranquilized the lion, and the boy was sent to the emergency room where the doctor asked, "Where's the rest of the arm?" So they quickly killed the lion and retrieved the arm, which the doctor was then unable to use.

There was a great uproar, both about the child and the lion. For a few days it was the only thing in the

paper or on the radio, but as the story got cold, reporters looked for new angles. One discovered the boy had been something of a local delinquent in his own town and had been arrested seventeen times for stealing cars and once for possession of drugs. Suddenly people didn't feel so sorry for him. One conservative columnist went so far as to say the lion was a type of judge, jury and executioner, meeting out a punishment we, in our weak, civilized state, could never get away with. And then people remembered about the Narnia Chronicles and Aslan the Jesus-like lion, and there was excitement around Waupeeka that our lions were more than just lions after all.

I was eating stale cereal when I read it, and my sister said, "Are they seriously suggesting we start cutting off people's arms for stealing?"

"I think so," I said, and my sister grunted, and her toddler said, "Cheerios!" and so I got him some Cheerios.

It was beginning to get colder, so there were fewer tourists coming to Waupeeka and fewer townspeople traipsing into the woods to throw food. The lions overturned garbage pails and figured out how to get into dumpsters, but it wasn't enough. A lion can eat up to 150 pounds of meat per day, and the odd bit of garbage or road kill just wasn't cutting it. Also, many of the lions had cubs now, which of course wasn't a good idea in the winter, but the lions never had to worry about the seasons before. Things started to look grim as they lost patches of fur and took on a less-than-majestic look. Then there was another attack. A small pack of lionesses stopped a jogger in the middle of a path. They waited patiently, but when the jogger didn't present any food, they jumped at his throat and dragged him to their cubs.

The zoologists said this was good, it meant the lions were organizing themselves in prides and learning how to hunt, but of course it wasn't good they were learning to hunt us. All the lionesses involved were put down so the family could have the remains.

If a lioness is killed, one of the other females will adopt her cub as if it were her own. The lionesses hunt together while the two or three males in a pride stay home to protect the cubs. When the cubs are about a year old, the males are kicked out so they won't be a threat. These rogue males must do their own hunting until they are strong or lucky enough to command their own prides. Most of them never get there.

One of the zoologists got attacked and eaten by a rogue male even though he had fired four tranquilizer shots into the lion. The lion was eventually put down, but still the remaining two zoologists quit. It was early January, and it had been cold and cloudy for months. The mayor's popularity was at an all-time low, and even the Lion Hearts themselves began to argue about what should be done. The same columnist who had said of the hotdog-eating lion, "May he enjoy many more!" now began to question the wisdom of releasing twenty-some lions into a populated city with no overall plan.

Some said the lions should be caged again, then slowly assimilated into Waupeeka's wild spaces.

Some thought the entire park should be caged off into a type of lion refuge, but Waupeeka State Park was our main attraction and without it, real estate prices and the local tourist economy would crumble. Some wanted to transport the lions to Africa where they could roam freely, but of course these lions didn't know how to hunt anything but humans, and if they were sent to Africa who knew what would happen.

"That's not our problem," one woman wrote in a letter to the editor.

"It is our problem because we've made this mess," my sister said putting down her section of the paper with disgust.

"Are you talking about the lions?" I said.

"No, I'm talking about the war." She pointed to The Nation section. "Why? Are you saying they shouldn't have let the lions free?"

"I don't think they should have been in those glass cages to begin with," I said.

"I don't like lions," her toddler said, and it was the first time he'd spoken an entire sentence, and we spent the rest of the morning trying to explain the lions' point of view to him, to which he finally replied, "Affel Juice."

It snowed almost every day. In a particularly gruesome Valentine's morning, three people were eaten in three separate attacks, all while shoveling their sidewalks. The hardness of winter and the sudden onslaught of violence made people forget they had ever cared for the lions. Overnight the dissention quieted. It was all out war. The mayor hired an astute group of deer hunters and gave them all high-caliber sniper rifles with powerfully accurate scopes. Anytime there was a confirmed kill, the paper ran the story along with a picture. By the end of March, there were ten lion kills, five fatal attacks on Waupeekans and seven maimings. It still snowed every day.

Finally, it seemed the lions got the point and stayed out of town. They didn't roam the streets or sniff the highways. They basically kept to the State Park and became the kings of that little forest. They learned how to hunt deer and foxes and rabbits and squirrel. They built dens into the snow and kept their cubs there for warmth.

The hike and bike trails were overgrown and the park itself unused. The zoo had a separate, guarded entrance, but fewer people went there because the woods made them uneasy and it was hard to look at all the other animals in cages. When the zoo finally shut down, the zookeeper's last job was to release all the remaining animals. Not yet accustomed to wild Waupeeka, they were easy targets for the lions who ate every one, even the polar bears and tigers. There was talk again of fencing off the entire park, but no one wanted to spearhead that concession.

My sister and I talked about selling the house.

"It's not worth half what your parents paid for it," a crabby agent in a black suit told us. "Just hold tight until this whole lion thing blows over."

It's August now, and there've been 25 deaths and

30 lion-related injuries. I wonder if this will ever end. The toddler is walking a little faster now, but still it's a gamble whenever we park the car. For awhile we tried to do all our chores at once, but then there are more things to carry into the house. My sister carries a gun that she tucks into the waist of her pants, and when the toddler touched it once she spanked him for the first time.

She told me, "I never thought I'd be one of those moms, but..."

I started carrying the toddler. He cried for his mom, and it would have been easier if I'd just carried the gun, but I'm not a very good shot, and anyway, I'd feel pretty guilty if I killed something as big as a lion. It's different for my sister. She's got a kid.

Even though it's still warm outside, we know winter's just around the corner and the prides are bigger than ever. The releasing and subsequent eating of all the other zoo animals caused something of a baby boom in the park. When the snow falls and the times get lean, there will be more and more lions venturing out into our streets.

But for now it's hot, so hot my sister and I decide we should go to Noah's Ark and play in the pools and water slides all day. We eat brats and the toddler eats three and a half hotdogs, and we all get sunburn and drink lots of lemonade, and we forget all about the lions until we get home and there are no parking spaces. We park three-and-a-half blocks away. The sun is already behind the trees and everything looks pastel blue. The toddler is asleep, so I lift him while my sister grabs our purses and the diaper bag and the wet towels and suits. We walk quietly, scanning the streets as we go. When we get to the end of the block, we hear something.

Ahead, a lion is batting an empty bottle down the street like a bored teenager. He's got a scratch over his left haunch, and he's lean. Even with his back to us, we can tell this is a lion who's been ostracized by his community, a hungry lion, a pissed off lion. My sister puts her hand to her waist and quietly pulls out her gun. We wait, completely still, for what seems like a very long time. The lion is making his way down the street, pawing the bottle in front of him, and I know my sister is afraid to shoot in case there are more rouge males hiding just out of sight. So we stand still and watch as the lion rambles up the road. It looks like he's going to keep going past our house and into the woods. But suddenly the toddler breathes in a series of staccato gasps, a kind of baby sleep apnea, and the lion turns around.

I gasp, and toddler opens his eyes and says, "Why the lion?" And that's the last thing I hear as it soundlessly gallops toward us. I feel my legs moving, and I hope I'm taking the toddler away from the lion, but I can't be sure because I still can't hear anything. But I know from the way the toddler's back is moving that he's crying, and I can tell from the wet all over my sunburned cheeks that I'm crying. I feel something pull on my hair, and I think this is it, we're going down, and then something swats my face, and I realize it's the toddler trying to tell me something.

He points behind me and screams, "Mommy!" so

loud I can hear again.

Behind us, quite a good deal behind us, my sister is frozen, one knee on the ground, with the micro .45 cupped in both hands, pointed at the pissed off lion who's now bleeding against someone's Mini Coup.

"Oh my god!" I say.

The toddler says, "Mommy, my god! My god, mommy!"

The next morning there was a picture of my sister in the newspaper, even though she'd asked them not to run it. A reporter came out before the cops even arrived, and immediately he'd started snapping photos. She'd given him a lot of long quotes like, "I'm not happy that I had to kill a lion, but I am happy that me and my family are okay. As a town, we've gotten ourselves between a rock and a hard place with the stupid decisions we've made, and I don't think it's the lion's fault anymore than it's my fault, but I'm going to do whatever I can to protect us."

That was abbreviated into, "I'm going to do whatever I can to protect us." Then there were numerous quotes from the crack team of deer-hunter snipers who talked about how difficult it is to drop a charging lion with a handgun. They said my sister was quite a natural, which we already knew.

We disconnected our phone, so people would have to come to our house to talk to us. We welcomed this because most of the reporters brought their own security, so we felt a little safer as we walked to our car. After a couple weeks, though, the thrill wore off and the reporters and gawkers left. Then my sister told me she wanted to move.

"I don't care if we lose money on the house," she said. "I don't even care if we have to rent a place in a bad neighborhood in West Bend. I'm not going to kill another lion."

So we packed up and moved to West Bend, which we discovered doesn't really have any bad neighborhoods, though there are places where the high schoolers smoke pot and drink. Still it's a big improvement.

We both found good jobs, and she put the toddler in a nice pre-school program. Even though we were about one hundred and thirty miles away, the West Bend Daily News featured stories about Waupeeeka and the lion experiment, so we were able to keep up on news about our neighborhood.

One morning I'm having my coffee, and I read a story about an exploratory group of National Guardsmen and scientists who have been taking small trips by helicopter into the woods. On a recent trip they discovered lion remains in one of the small glass cages. They could tell by the level of decomposition that the lion had died about a week after the Great Release. The door to the cage had been opened, but apparently the lion never left. Scientists speculate he died waiting for his meal.

I put down the paper and fold it and refold it until it's small. I quietly put it under my leg, and when my

sister's not looking, I throw it into the trash and cover it over with coffee grounds. Then I sit back down and try not to cry. I smile instead.

"Why are you smiling?" my sister says.

"I'm just glad we left Waupeeeka," I say.

Her toddler, who's not a toddler at all now but six years old and about to start the first grade, looks at her and says, "What's Waupeeeka?"

Helen Krieger has been a prolific writer for the past decade, working in journalism, fiction and screenwriting. She received her BA in psychology from the University of Dallas, then moved to Boston, where she worked as a journalist for The MetroWest Daily News and The Jamaica Plain Gazette for a year before once again being tempted by the South. She moved to New Orleans and co-founded a local paper, The Bywater Marigny Current, which she ran for several years before turning it over to her partner so she could concentrate on writing fiction. She began writing a series of award-winning stories, then adapted them into a screenplay, Flood Streets, which just finished production and is going into post-production this month. It follows a group of creative malcontents as they struggle to rebuild their lives a year after Hurricane Katrina. Her fiction has appeared in such magazines as Janushead, and All Things Girl. She's been a finalist for Scriptapalooza, and she's served as a fellow, winning the Eureka! Short Stories Award. She's also received several grants to pursue writing including a Cultural Economy Grant to study novel writing at the Algonkian Writer's Conference in San Francisco. Inspired by writers like Bukowski, Raymond Carver, and Jonathan Ames, Helen continues writing short stories and is at work on a novel.

Recommended Reading: 2009 Story Collections

Do Not Deny Me, Jean Thompson

Don't Cry, Mary Gaitskill

Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned, Wells Tower

How It Ended, Jay McInerney

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders, Daniyal Mueenuddin

Love and Obstacles, Aleksandar Hemon

My Father's Tears, John Updike

Nocturnes, Kazuo Ishiguro

Nothing Right, Antonya Nelson

Once the Shore, Paul Yoon

Too Much Happiness, Alice Munro

The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis

It's Beginning to Hurt, James Lasdun

Love in Infant Monkeys, Lydia Millet

Once the Shore, Paul Yoon

The Thing Around Your Neck, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



Sharon Thatcher 2009 Short Story Runner-Up



Trespassers

They arrived in Lostine before dusk, Jack in the U-haul and Dena following in the Landcruiser. She bit her lip when she caught sight of the small, clapboard farmhouse amber-washed by the sun. All the times she'd used the phrase 'in the middle of fucking nowhere' and now here she was face-to-face with it. A porch light burned—the power worked—and the For Sale sign had been uprooted and placed on the steps. She looked at the dark clouds hovering above the tree line where the meadow stretched out beyond the house, and where the forest began in earnest. Had the pines always been so towering?

She opened her car door. Jack pulled her out, lifted her off her feet, and carried her like a newlywed. She clung to his neck, her white Keds bouncing off his knees when he took the stairs. He let her down on the porch after kissing her sweetly on the lips, and this comforted her into knowing their move had been the right one.

"No regrets?" he asked.

"None," she said.

The day she told her parents she and Jack were quitting their jobs in Portland, he at *The Oregonian*—he'd grown to hate the smell of ink, a smell like boiled liver—and she at Multnomah County Library, her mother cried. She took Dena aside and said, "I always knew he'd ruin your life."

They unloaded the heaviest pieces of furniture first, then a few boxes of kitchenware and linens, before calling it quits and resting their backs flat against the living-room hardwood floor.

With their heads turned toward each other, Jack said, "I don't know what I'd do if anything ever happened to you."

"What a thing to say." The floor felt cool against her back. Her elbows tingled at the funny bone.

It began to rain. "The leak," they said in unison. The owner had disclosed the leaky roof just before signing, out of conscience or law, but by then Jack was already months into his attachment with the place. Jack went up on the roof to tack on Visquine, while Dena unpacked towels and bedding and listened for his location—the clomp of his footsteps, the thud of his knees, the phi-TOOSH of the staple gun.

She found the light bulbs she'd brought and

scouted a chair under the socket. The bulb lit before she finished screwing it in, growing hot in her fingertips during the final turns. The large curtainless window—like a mirror now—reflected the room, and she was startled to see herself so clearly.

"That should hold for now," Jack said coming in the door. He wiped his feet on the coffee cup shaped doormat, 'Portland' written in jittery scribe across the bottom. He leaned the DeWalt against a box marked BOOKS, and rubbed his wet hands together. His dark hair was plastered to his head. Water dripped from the tip of his nose and the ends of his earlobes. His forehead creased in the way that it did when he was on to her. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

He opened his mouth, and then shut it. "There's nothing to be afraid of here."

"I'm not." She forced a smile. But the fact was, she felt vulnerable being in the middle of nowhere, like a target in an arcade game. She'd been robbed at an ATM in Portland, held hostage by the heroin addict for three hours. A week later, a man broke into their house and stole, among other things, all of her great-grandmother's jewelry. The police never caught the guy, nor did they connect it to the ATM hold-up. We're doing our best, Ma'am, was how it ended.

She brought Jack a towel, sorry she hadn't looked harder for his slicker. "Honey," she said, "you better get out of those clothes."

"You want me, don't you?" He grabbed her and pulled her close, soaking the front of her t-shirt.

"Ja-ack, now you've got me wet."

He nuzzled his cold face in the crook of her neck.

"It's how I like you."

She looked up into his face, the childhood scar near his eye the same pink of his lips. "I do want you." She pulled loose and grinned.

"To get the fondue started. Let's break this place in."

They moved a sleeping bag close to the fireplace and sat on the floor. It was early summer, but the rain had brought a chill in the air and they couldn't resist a fire. Jack opened the first bottle of champagne.

"To simplicity," he toasted.

"To simplicity," she echoed. They clinked glasses

and she took a sip, bubbles popping under her nose.

He leaned in and kissed her. "To us."

They talked past midnight, giggled drunkenly, and remodeled the house dozens of times over adding a new efficiency each time. They planted rye and hairy vetch, filled the chicken coop with Bantams and Rhode Island Reds. They shouted names for their yet-to-be-bought heifers—Snowball! no, Fluffy!—erupting into fits of laughter.

Finally, Dena stood up and stretched. She pulled her t-shirt over her head, kicked off her jeans, panties, and scooted inside the sleeping bag. That's when Jack told her, "I saw some campers, a tent and a van, back by the fence line. On our property, actually."

"In this rain? Did you talk to them?"

"Nah." He slipped in behind her and molded his body to hers. "Probably just stopped for the night."

He kissed her shoulder, her neck, his two-day beard scraping like sandpaper. "And set up a tent in the rain?"

"They'll be gone first thing," he assured her.

"They?" She propped up on her elbow. "Jack, how many?"

"I saw two figures." His hand trailed from her belly, down between her legs, making her forget. "They'll be gone by morning."

After they'd made love, she lay awake staring at the dying embers. What if the trespassers weren't gone by morning? She wanted to wake Jack and ask him exactly where he saw them, which fence line, the one at the far end of the meadow, or the one nearer the house? She eased out of the sleeping bag and went to the window, pressed her face close, fogging the glass. Was that a light? There it was again, a beam. A low flying plane? Or flashlight?

A branch scraped against the window, streaking the pane with sap and scaring the hell out of her.

In the morning, they walked to the campsite, no longer sure of what was or wasn't on the property when they bought the place. The owner, Deke Elgin, had left a battered truck and rusty tractor trailer he said he'd be back for.

"We'll let them know they're trespassing," Jack said, "see what kind of people they are, maybe even let them finish the weekend out." His idea.

They followed the trail which cut diagonal across the meadow. On either side of the path, the grass grew tall, tickling the outsides of her thighs, but in front of her the grass lay flattened by footsteps.

"Looks like they've made enough trips to the house," she said.

"Maybe for water." Jack stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. His navy t-shirt was tucked in, long sleeves shoved up on his forearms. He stopped walking, put a finger to his lips.

Red-winged blackbirds took flight, a crimson kiss sliced into each black wing, their loquacious melodies following. The birds flew inches above the green meadow

to settle on the tops of sage and wheatgrass.

They started walking again. Soon, the tent appeared, steadfast against the fence, an old white utility van parked under a stand of red alder.

"Hello," Jack called as they approached. "Anyone here?"

He waited for a response and called again. A bright blue tarp covered the army-style tent like a canopy. Popcorn was scattered on the ground. Three rabbits, gutted and wrapped in netting, hung from a tree branch. Jack unzipped the tent and looked inside. He pulled his head out, turned to Dena, and said, "Empty."

Dena pointed to the van. "Maybe they're in there."

Jack walked to the back of the van, swung the bill of his Mariner's ball cap around, and looked through the window. "Just a bunch of tools." He shrugged, but his brow furrowed; his mouth pulled to one side the way it did when something bothered him.

Dena poked her head through the open flap of the tent, feeling very much the intruder, or worse, a spy. Behind her, a crow flapped to the ground and cawed. "Jesus." She jerked her head back and caught her hair on the zipper. The crow pecked at the popcorn unconcerned, its black feathers iridescent in the sun. She pulled strands of her hair—evidence—from the zipper, and stuck her head back inside the tent.

Astro-turf lined the floor. A small plywood table stood to the left, a deck of cards stacked on top, a jar of pennies weighting down a sheaf of papers. A sheet of gauze separated the room in half. On the other side, an air mattress lay on the floor.

She was intrigued by the orderliness, and also annoyed by it, thinking how permanent it felt. A small camp stove and some pans and dishes sat to the right of the entrance, and leaning against an old red footlocker, was a rifle.

"Jack, come here," she said. She showed him the rifle.

He stared at it. "They hunt rabbits, didn't you see?" He pulled her arm. "Let's go."

They started back to the house. Jack said they should finish unloading the truck and then Dena should follow him into town to return it. "Don't worry so much," he said, "they'll show up."

"Do we want them to?"

"Look, everyone around here has a rifle."

"We don't."

"Don't make more of it than what it is."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Why are you trying to rationalize this?"

He put up his hands, pushing that invisible force. "I just think we should play it cool, not over-react."

"And I just think we should call the police and let them handle it." She found herself practically running to keep up with him.

"This isn't Portland. I can handle it." His voice warned her to back off, and so she did.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. They

didn't stop to listen to the birds, nor did they stop to admire the wildflowers. They didn't look up from the path at all.

Jack dropped the U-haul off while Dena went to the market and shopped for groceries. The market was small and cramped, well-stocked with fresh vegetables. Dena grabbed a cart that she guessed had been around since the '50s and made her way down the canned goods aisle, tempted to pick up some Spam. She found the dairy section, opened the glass door, and selected a half gallon of skim milk. We should have a gun, she thought.

A plump girl, barely out of grade school stood behind the counter. Her hair was tinted green, probably from too much time in a chlorinated pool. She stared as Dena filled her basket with steaks, frozen shrimp, and beer.

When Dena wheeled her cart to the checkout, the girl pushed off her stool. "You the people bought the Elgin place?" she asked. Two whistles hung from her neck, one on a white rope, the other on a black. Red freckles covered her sunburned face and arms.

Dena smiled at the girl. "Yes, we're living there now."

The girl clamped a whistle between her teeth and breathed softly through it while she rang up the groceries, stopping to bag as she went. A trickle of sweat dripped down her face. She spit out the whistle and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "That'll be sixty-three ten." Peering up at Dena through overgrown bangs, she asked, "Those people still camped there?"

Dena looked up from her purse. "What?"

The girl sighed, like a great burden had been put upon her to repeat herself. "Those people, they still squattin'?" She took the hundred dollar bill from Dena, and counted back the change.

"Do you know who they are?" Dena asked.

"They showed up a month ago. She goes by the name Goldy, says it's short for Golden, but who ever heard of that? And Justin, that's her boyfriend, he fixed our wall after Mrs. Johansson rammed it with her car last week. Hit the gas when she should have hit the brakes"—the girl tipped an imaginary glass to her lips—"if you know what I mean."

Dena shut her purse. "Where are they now?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Your place."

"I mean, when's the last time you saw them?"

"Last week like I said." The girl closed the cash register. "Goldy was in here yelling and screaming everyday Justin worked on our wall. You name it, she had a gripe over it. Mama finally told her to stay out and let the boy do his work." She looked at the door, and whispered, "Mama calls her a slingshot stretched to the hilt."

Dena picked up her groceries and thanked the girl. The more she heard, the less she liked. These people were camped on her property. She paused at the door.

"Where can a person pick up hunting supplies?"

"Hunting supplies?" The girl stuck a jawbreaker

in her mouth. "Poles and tackle you can get at Harry's, a block south of Main."

Dena shook her head. "No, I said hunting. You know, rifles, guns?"

"Go to Buckhorn Pawn for shotguns and such. Right next door to Harry's."

Jack waited for her outside the U-haul. He asked what took so long, then started to tell her about Harry's when she cut him off, "Next door to Buckhorn Pawn."

"You asked about guns?"

"You did, too?"

Inside Buckhorn's, Dena was assaulted by the smell of deer, elk, and bear skins draped over the walls, covering the floors. Their heads, or perhaps entirely different heads perched high on the walls and stared at her through glass eyes. Looking past the racks of camouflage clothing and overflowing bins of decoys, she spotted the rifles. Handguns and hunting knives were displayed behind a glass case. A teenage boy with a purple Mohawk emerged from the door, tucking in his shirt. He seemed startled to see them and yelled in the back, "Dad, ya got people here." He turned to Dena and scowled, said more to himself than anyone, "I'm outta here." With that he left, and within seconds Dad came through the door clutching a sandwich in one hand, wiping mustard from his mouth with the other.

"Help you folks?"

"We want a gun," Dena blurted.

Jack decided on a .38 Special Colt Diamondback.

"My favorite," the store owner explained,

"because the silver finish makes it an easy gun to see and point at night, and it's adjustable sights make it fairly accurate."

Fairly? Dena thought.

"Fits perfectly in your hand, too. Well worth the cost." He grabbed a box of ammo and slapped it on the counter. "Go on home and practice 'til you get good." When they got back to the house, Dena poured a glass of wine and took a seat on the front porch steps. Jack joined her, holding the gun in his hands, opening the chamber and slapping it shut, twirling it on his finger. He looked through the sight and aimed at a sawhorse in the yard. "Want to shoot?"

He passed her the gun. It felt much heavier than it looked. "Is it loaded?"

"Not yet." He put his hand on hers. "But always treat it like it is."

Just as he instructed, Dena slid the six bullets he'd given her into the chamber, and snapped it shut.

She aimed at a Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup can on the fence post, arm out-stretched, other hand on her elbow to keep steady. She cocked the trigger—the robber, too sick to rape her, too mean to let her go, had cocked the trigger against her head — and fired.

Missed.

She didn't want it in her hands another minute.

"Try again," Jack coached. "Look through the sight and keep your arm steady."

"I don't want to."

"Take your time."

"I don't want to, Jack."

She spent the rest of the day unpacking boxes, while Jack reunited pieces of furniture.

The house was built in the 1920s, a two bedroom, one bath affair with a lot of doors separating each room into a box. The living room, with its large picture window made it Dena's favorite. The old floral wallpaper had been removed and a fresh coat of adobe white had been applied prior to their moving in—a selling point.

The kitchen, however, held little charm. Dark brown cupboards that would be a bitch to strip and restore to their original pine made the room feel closed in. The only natural light came from a small octagonal window above the sink, offering a good half hour of morning sun at best.

She found if she stood on her tiptoes she could see across the meadow, and if she stared hard enough she saw a glimpse of blue tarp. She wondered when the campers—poachers, squatters, trespassers—would return, or if they had already.

"Dena," Jack called.

She smelled lighter fluid burning off the old barbeque Jack had found in the shed.

"Coming." Through the screen, she saw Jack talking to a young couple. They all turned to look at her when she opened the door.

"Dena, meet our neighbors. This is Goldy and over there is Justin."

"Neighbors?" Why would he use that word?

"Yeah, that's us." Goldy wore a yellow halter top and jean cut-offs, cut so short they looked like bikini bottoms. She dipped her knees and gave a little wave. "Hope you don't mind."

"That depends." Dena let the screen door flap behind her. She walked down the steps and stood next to Jack.

"Thought we'd better come and say, hey," Justin said. "We were expecting to see Deke Elgin, then come to find out he really did sell the place."

"The bastard." Goldy broke into a smile. She tapped her foot. Dust rose around her brown sandals. "Never said a word to us."

"Three months ago," Dena said.

"No shit." Goldy pulled a hand rolled cigarette from behind her ear, fished a book of matches from Justin's shirt pocket, and struck the match. She blew out the flame with the smoke from her cigarette.

"We're from Idaho," Justin said, taking his dirty, white, ball cap off and putting it back on. He was blonde and tan, lean and rosy muscled. They both were, and Dena thought they could pass as brother and sister. PureGold was tattooed in blue on his forearm.

"Well, you're not too far from home," Jack said. He pulled two beers from the cooler and handed them each one. He winked at Dena.

She wondered what he was trying to prove. "Are they old enough to drink?" she whispered.

"Old enough to vote," Justin said. "Old enough to fight in Iraq."

Flames shot out of the barbeque as old grease burned off. Everyone rotated away from the smoke.

"I remember that barbeque," Goldy said. She clamped her beer between her legs, and with cigarette in mouth, twisted off the cap.

"Hey," Justin said. "We got rabbit we can throw on."

Dena looked at Jack, speaking with her eyes, saying, no, don't you dare.

"Bring it on," he said.

The four sat in lawn chairs under the shade of a maple. "We're headed to California," Goldy said. "That's where the money's at. I wouldn't ever want to retire." She pulled her thick blonde hair, so blonde it was white, into a ponytail and fastened it with the rubber band from her wrist, the kind The Oregonian came rolled in.

"We're not retired," Jack laughed. "We're only thirty-four."

"Shit," Justin said, "and you got all this?" He swung his arm wide, turning in his chair, PureGold waving in front of Dena's face.

"It helps when two people share the same dream," Dena said. Next to her, the skinned rabbit stretched out on the grill. Two steaks sizzled two inches from it, hissing and spitting.

"Me and Justin share a dream," Goldy said, "but it doesn't have much to do with small towns. Know how we met?" She reached in the cooler next to her, grabbed a beer, and asked Justin, "Should I tell?"

He shrugged, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"He held up the 7-11 where I worked. It's a 24-hour, and he comes in around 4:00 in the morning. I'm half asleep. Well, he's got this ski mask on and I'm scared the first five seconds, but then it seems so ridiculous, I can't keep from laughing. He starts loading cases of Coors into his car. That's all he wants. No Pabst Blue Ribbon. No Budweiser. No money. Just Coors."

Dena asked, "Did he have a gun?" It could have been him, it just as easily could have been him.

Justin opened one eye and cocked his head at Dena, looked at Goldy and they grinned at each other. "He didn't have no gun." She stood up suddenly, and tugged at her shorts. Dena's stomach tightened when she saw Jack staring at the narrow strip of fabric covering the girl's crotch.

"Then," Goldy said to Jack, specifically, "he takes his mask off and tells me how pretty I am, how my eyes remind him of gems—his exact words."

"Jewels, Goldy. I said they reminded me of jewels."

"Oh, you're right. Anyway, this is after I'd already signaled the police."

Dena shifted in her chair, the one side of her face hot from the grill. "You called the police?"

"I wish I hadn't, because, well look at him. He's just so hot."

If you like Kurt Cobain, Dena thought.

Goldy reached for Justin's hand and placed it on her thigh. He ran his thumb in circles, widening the periphery, with each turn closer and closer—

"They arrest him and he spends six months in juvy. He's seventeen at the time." Goldy stuck out her bottom lip. "Afterward, I feel so bad I see him every day off I don't work. From the first visit, we know we're in love forever."

Goldy looked at Dena, and said, "Don't worry. Justin's worked hard at turning his life around. I, for one, am proud to death of him."

Jack stood up and offered his hand. "Me too, then."

Dena didn't know what to say, so she said, "Way to go."

They ate outside on the picnic table, and after being forced to eat a bite of rabbit speared on the tip of Justin's hunting knife that he kept pushing, pushing on her, Dena acquiesced. The sound the blade made sliding through her teeth made her shudder.

"Good, huh?" he asked.

She didn't answer, just chewed the tough meat forever before finally swallowing it whole.

"Goldy got this one," Justin said, grease shining on his lips. "She's a fuckin' A shot. Better than me. A natural."

"Aw, Baby, that's sweet." She smiled, mouth full of corn.

"So, how do you know Deke Elgin?" Dena asked.

"Just do." Goldy turned to look at the house. "I love that kitchen." She looked at Dena. "Don't you? Justin and I danced a lot on that floor."

"We done more 'n that." Justin flicked his tongue like a snake.

Dena took a drink of her beer, hoping Goldy wouldn't share that memory.

In the kitchen, Dena washed the dishes while Goldy opened cupboards and looked in drawers. "You never did say how you know Deke Elgin," Dena said. "Just around I guess."

Dena turned the faucet off and faced Goldy. "Did he say you could stay here?" She reached her hand out and closed the drawer Goldy had just opened.

"Sure, he said it'd be okay. We're going to California."

"When?"

"We're kinda strapped for cash right now."

Dena looked out the window at Jack and Justin. They were looking at the roof. "When will you not be strapped for cash?"

Goldy's eyes flashed. "Soon."

Dena dried her hands and then motioned to the door. "After you."

Goldy curtseyed, holding the tips of her shorts.

Dena caught the door before it slammed, and followed her out.

"You mean you left the city for this?" Justin was saying. "To come here?"

"We were done with it," Jack answered. "We want more than just the acquisition of things."

"Yeah," Dena said. She looked at Goldy and added, "We want our lives to be rich and full, not our bank accounts."

"Sounds like a bunch of crap to me," Goldy said. She looked at Jack. "No offense."

"The waste, the consumerism." Jack shook his head. "It never ends."

"When does it begin?" Goldy asked. "Things are all I want."

"To each their own," Dena said.

Jack changed the subject and told them about the solar heating panels he was planning to add to the new roof.

Goldy jumped out of her chair, "Justin's a roofer. That's what he does." She looked at Justin and sat back down. "We need the money."

"To get to California," Dena said under her breath.

"For a lot of things," Justin said. "I mean you guys get to pick the way you want to live, yeah? Well, most people don't have no choice, and they live how they gotta." He stood up. "But I can tell you one thing. I'm damn good at what I do. I can roof your house for \$800, solar or unsolar."

In bed that night, Dena asked Jack, "Can we trust them? That story Goldy told, I don't buy it. More like they both robbed the store."

"I think it'll work out." Jack kicked off the blanket. "He's got the tools, we need the help. This way they'll have money for their return trip, or wherever it is they're headed, if you know what I mean. Besides, help is hard to find around here."

"We don't have to give them a job to get rid of them, Jack." Dena turned the light off and pulled the blanket back up.

From the garden, Dena watched Goldy and Justin on the roof. The two worked in their bathing suits and high-topped tennis shoes as they tore shingles off and frisbeed them into a pile on the ground. Dena heard snatches of conversation, mild disagreements on how something should be done, and laughter. She didn't care that they were laughing at her.

She cocked her .38 and aimed at the target she'd drawn on the back of one of the packing boxes, and fired. Getting better.

She wondered how long they would last if they went to California, but she didn't want to think too hard about their future. She went inside, leaned over the sink and splashed water on her face. When she turned the faucet off, she heard their voices directly above.

"Can you believe him?" It was Justin. "...as cold

water is piped into the solar heating system..." He was mimicking Jack.

A shingle flew by the window.

"Yeah, pipe this into your system," Goldy said, and Dena felt the vibration of a jig being danced overhead. "And what about her? Hah! She's major fooling herself. Did you see her just now?"

"Bang-bang. She looked pretty hot to me."

"Fuck you, Justin. Fuck you."

Dena fought against letting them know she heard. But Jack and I believe in what we're doing. She couldn't believe the tears blurring her vision.

When Jack got back from town, Justin and Goldy had quit for the day and disappeared. She told Jack what she'd overheard and he said she shouldn't care what those two thought.

"How about going for a swim?" he asked after a silent dinner.

"I guess."

They drove the dirt roads along the river looking for the spot they'd found last week. It was dark as they made their way down to the bank. Dena held onto Jack's shirttail. When he slipped, she slipped.

The sliver of moon offered a hint of light as they took their clothes off and dove in. Dena's feet settled on a flat smooth stone at river's bottom, where she could stand with her head above water. Hair slicked back, she thought she must look like an eel, dark and slippery. "Mmm," she said breathing in the night air. "I love you, Jack."

"I love you, too."

"How much longer on the roof?"

"Trusses are coming tomorrow. The system's pre-cut, so maybe three more days and they'll be gone."

Something splashed behind her, as if someone had thrown a rock. "What was that?"

"A fish," Jack said.

"That didn't sound like a fish splash. It was more of a kerplunk." She looked to shore and saw a light up by the road where their car was parked. She grabbed for Jack's arm, but he wasn't there.

She felt his hands reach around her legs. She kicked.

"Ouch," he said when he came up for air.

"I saw a light by the car."

"I don't see anything. Where?"

She looked again. "It's gone now." She shivered. "I don't want to be here anymore. Let's go."

She forgot to bring towels, so they tried to air-dry before getting dressed. But when they couldn't find their clothes, Jack went to get the flashlight. He came back empty handed. "I guess it's not in the car after all."

"They took it," Dena said, "and they took our clothes."

"Who's they?"

"I don't know." She didn't say Goldy and Justin, because Jack would think the idea was absurd, but that's what she thought.

They drove home naked, ducking at the headlights from the one passing car.

Two weeks later, they had a new roof. The solar panels were mounted and it looked state of the art. Dena had to admit she was impressed. Jack handed Justin an envelope of cash, sure he'd want it that way. He counted the money, and put it in his pocket.

Goldy punched Justin's arm. "Say thanks, Justin." She turned to Dena and said, "Bet you thought we were full of shit."

"I never doubted you, Goldy."

"We'll be leaving in the morning," Justin said. His face was tight and pinched.

"So, I guess this is it," Dena said. She thanked him, and turned to Goldy.

Goldy stepped back. She smiled, but there was nothing friendly. "Good luck," she mouthed.

That night, Dena didn't know what woke her up. She felt for Jack and found his body warm and relaxed, snoring softly beside her. The clock said 2:59 a.m. She lay awake for awhile, then closed her eyes and went back to sleep, dreamed her dream of lions being let loose, chasing her, lunging for her.

When she awoke again the bedroom light was on. "Jack?" She felt for him, but he was gone. Squinting from the brightness, she raised her head off the pillow. Goldy stood in the doorway.

"What?" Dena rubbed her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Goldy didn't answer. She flicked the light off—Dena sat up. "Stop that." Where was Jack? Where had he gone?

—then on.

"Get out of my house."

"Get out of my house," Goldy mimicked.

The light went off. She heard something in the other room. "Jack?"

"Your husband's busy," Goldy said, "getting the shit kicked out of him." She laughed.

In the dark, Dena reached in the nightstand drawer. She searched frantically for the gun, found a book, a box of tissues. The gun was gone.

Goldy turned the light on, and this time had the rifle raised to her chest, aimed at Dena. "Pow," she said. "Pow, pow."

"Jack," Dena screamed. The light went off. She heard a crash in the next room, and the muffled sound of—the sound of—"Jack!"

When the light came on again, Justin stood behind Goldy, blood on his hands and t-shirt, a look in his eyes so cold and dead, Dena cried out.

"Please," she said. "Please."

Sharon Thatcher received her MFA in Creative Writing at Boise State University. Currently, she is in the process of expanding this short story into a full-length novel with the title *Trespass*. Literary Agent April Eberhardt has selected *Trespass* for the 2013 gold medal for Best Novel-in-Progress. Sharon lives and writes in Boise, ID.

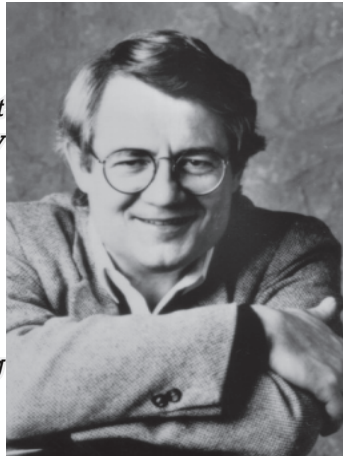


Jessica Dechard
2009 Best Essay



Spontaneous Ingenue Seeks Mute Pirate

Essay Judge Roy Blount Jr., whose new book is *Alphabet Juice*, has had 22 books published, including *Alphabet Juice*, *Alphabeter Juice*, *If Only You Knew How Much I Smell You: True Portraits of Dogs and Be Sweet*, a memoir. His other recent books include two collections of essays, *Feet on the Street: Rambles Around New Orleans* and *Long Time Leaving: Dispatches from Up South* and an especially inspired biography of Confederate general, Robert E. Lee. In addition his incredible body of books, Roy has written hundreds of articles for national periodicals on subjects ranging from sports to war, travel, food culture, and city profiles.



Reading personal ads is a favorite hobby of mine. I do it infrequently, but often enough for those brief snippets of other people's hopes, lonelinesses, and fetishes to fuel my imagination for months on end. It's not uncommon to find ads placed by women with "huge ultra-sensitive nipples" searching for men to squeeze them, lonely married men writing things like "...for hot sex in the afternoons, but you absolutely cannot leave the confines of your current relationship," dominatrices trolling for clients, and, occasionally, pirates looking for first mates.

"Pirate Looking for First Mate" made me a believer in the power of the personal. The ad read, "I own a large yacht and sail for 6 mo of the year. The other 6 I live in Key West. I'm looking for a woman who is willing to leave the mundane behind. Live on my yacht and be my first mate and I will pay all expenses." I read the ad and thought, "But that's my dream." I read the ad aloud to my then-boyfriend, Andrew, and he said, "You want to be a pirate?" I said no, but I really meant yes.

"It could be fun. Sailing around the Caribbean, cool breezes and Mai Tais everyday. What could be better?"

"You want to be a pirate's sex slave?" Andrew arched

his eyebrow at me.

"Well that part might not be so great," I admitted, but I know he could see the light in my eye that said, "'Matey' he's a cute pirate."

"He could have a peg leg," Andrew said. "That's not too sexy."

"Yeah, but what if he has accessories for his hook? Even a one-handed pirate could have some pretty good tricks up his sleeve," I quipped.

Andrew looked at me closely, trying to discern how serious I was about this offer of high-seas adventure and pirate booty. I couldn't tell him the offer sounded good, so I shut up and kept my dreams to myself. He didn't want to hear my fantasies about escaping my life and becoming a well-tanned vagabond.

I read that ad six years ago and I still wish I had responded to it. Look past the seamy, verging-on-prostitution aspect of the offer and what do you have? A chance to leave everything behind. I like to think that this is what everyone wants at one time or another: to abandon our lives and become someone else. In graduate school I used to promise myself that, if "that whole thing" didn't work out, I would go to Belize and make my living selling necklaces on the beach. It was clear to me that Plan B, as I called it, didn't involve weekly calls home to my family and a visit to New York at Christmas. I could escape. My only overhead would be necklace fastenings; everything else I needed would come from the sea. I would pick shells and old fishing line up off the beach and string lovely baubles by candle light in the evenings. I wouldn't have to grocery shop; I could fish for my food. I wouldn't do laundry, because I'd only own a bikini and flip flops. I wouldn't have to pay bills, because people who live in driftwood shacks don't have bills. I would be gone, and so would my ties and responsibilities. What a relief.

Sadly, Plan B didn't work out, so I'm forced to haunt the personals, hoping the pirate will sail back into port and dock long enough for me to sprint down the pier and launch myself onto the deck of his ship. I found him in the paper, but I've started casting my love-torn nets into deeper waters and I now read personals on the internet. Sites like eHarmony and match.com serve their purpose – if you want to go out on a lot of first dates or get married the internet is a great option. But for really outrageous ads, Craig's List is at the top of my hot list.

Recently while browsing Craig's List, I found this ad: "Need Help With a Fantasy – Covington (35). If the thought of catching an attractive guy in the nude appeals to you then I can help. I have a fantasy about being caught outside in the nude by a lady (ladies). The setup would be for someone to drive up to my house and catch me say watering the lawn nude. You may turn around and leave after seeing me or stay for awhile. No pressure just a bit of fun. I'm a normal, polite guy who just likes to share my figure with others. Age not important. Hope to hear from you."

I immediately forwarded the post to several of my friends with the subject, "Wanna take a drive?" They immediately answered, "Yes." An idea bloomed in my mind like a pink rose opening under time lapse photography. This man wasn't looking for a connection; here was a man who just wanted to be seen. I could look. And point my finger. And laugh. And then leave. I wouldn't have to do anything. I could get a new e-mail address, send him a message, and off my friends and I would go like teenagers to the drive-through on a Saturday night.

After setting up bluesongstress@something.com, I called my friend Carol.

"What do I write," I asked, full of bravura.

We agreed that the response had to be forceful and assertive. Pushy was alright we reasoned, since we didn't really care one way or the other, and we thought he might be the kind of man who liked to be given instructions.

"Should I call my friend Mark who goes to the dominatrix?" asked Carol.

"Why?" I was puzzled. "We're not going inside once we get there. We're just doing a drive by."

"No, not for that. For the e-mail. He could give us some advice about wording. He might know verbs we don't."

"But won't he think we're weird?" I asked.

"I don't think so – he's very open-minded," she assured me.

"Well, I think we can handle this ourselves. I am an English teacher after all," I said in a superior tone of voice. "And besides, I don't want to call your submissive friend for help entrapping an exhibitionist, it might make him feel too powerful."

"Suit yourself," she said.

After much discussion and revision, we finally came up with, "That would help me fulfill one of my fantasies as well. I'd like to see you water your lawn, or wash your car, or do a little weeding. I love a man who doesn't have any tan lines, and if you spray yourself down with a hose, no complaints from me. It has to be this week - I'll be in Covington on Friday. I can take a detour through your neighborhood between 6 and 6:30. Let me know the address and I'll find you. Let me know ASAP so I can look forward to it all week."

As I hit send, I felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement. The chance to pretend I was someone else had presented itself and I had said yes.

Around noon the next day, my friend Carol called. "When you forwarded me the e-mail you sent to the

naked guy, your name came up next to the e-mail address."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your name, Jessica Deckard, was next to the e-mail address."

In a flash, my mistake dawned on me, and I began to feel like there was a cockroach in my underpants. I felt scared and slightly dirty and I was afraid I was about to be exposed in public.

"You used your real name to set up an anonymous e-mail address?" Carol did nothing to conceal her incredulity. It was obvious she thought I was stupid.

"I didn't think my real name would show up – just 'bluesongstress.'"

"Nope. Sweetie, you just gave your real name to a man who likes to waggle it in public." All of a sudden, I had to go to the bathroom.

A few hours later, I checked my e-mail and there were two messages from pers-757624414@craigslist.org. In the second one, he gave me his phone number. I called Carol again.

"What do I do? What do I do? What do I do!" I shrieked. "He knows my name! Both e-mails say 'Jessica' in them. If he Googles me, he'll find out where I work." In my head I could see the Google returns a search for 'Jessica Deckard' would give: St. Martin's Episcopal School, the Central New York Conference of the United Methodist Church, Rayne Memorial United Methodist Church, and Tulane University. My (apparently pretend) upright life was all there for him to see.

"What if he takes out an ad in the paper telling everyone I wanted to see him naked?" I wailed

"But then he'll have to admit to what he did," Carol reasoned.

"Oh my God! The first e-mail was at 1:35 and the second with his phone number was at 2:00." I gasped like a trout on speed. "He's really eager. He wants me to call him! What do I do!" I couldn't think.

Calmly, soothingly, Carol said, "Well, you don't call him."

"Of course not!" I exclaimed indignantly. "That would be dumb." OK, yes, the thought had, briefly, fluttered across my mind, but how did she know?

"Did he give you his name?"

"Eric, but no last name. He knows more about me that I do about him! He has the upper hand." All rational thought had fled from my mind.

"Look up his number in the reverse directory."

That idea stopped me. Brilliant, I could regain some control of the situation. If I knew who he was, maybe I could stop him from – from what? "OK, I'm doing it," I said as I typed. "OK, I can get his name, credit report and annual income for \$4.95. Wow, I can't believe how easy it is to become a crazy stalker! But I don't want any of that."

"No, you don't want that."

"I don't want to pay \$4.95. That would be weird. But wait, the latitude and longitude of his phone is on here. Do you think that's for real? Can this website triangulate his

location? I wonder if this web page is in real time? I might be able to find him anywhere - now that is stalker."

Carol waited as I frantically typed "latitude and longitude locator" into Google. "MapQuest, of course," I cooed at the computer, unintentionally mimicking the voice of a cartoon villain. I felt myself calm appreciably. "Maybe we can go geocacheing for him," I mused, getting distracted and wondering if I could put the coordinates into my GPS.

"Hey, focus! What are you going to do if you find him," Carol asked.

"Well at least I'll know where he is, if he's found me on-line and is coming here," I said as I plugged latitude 29.94 and longitude 90.07 into MapQuest. "I'll just have to monitor him. I'm not actually going to look for him, but he has the upper hand." As I typed, I thought about how easy the internet makes remote surveillance. I'm great at this, I thought to myself, maybe my mom was right and I should apply to the CIA. Spying pays a lot better than teaching, and I obviously have a knack for it.

A grey frame appeared on my computer screen. "OK, the page is loading," I told Carol. "God this is slow. Ah, here it is. Hmm, this looks strange." I saw a white map with a grey line and a red star, nothing else. "Hold on while I zoom out on the map." The word "Margyang" appeared. Was that in Louisiana? I'd never heard of it before, but it could be in Acadiana. "OK, still zooming out. Wait, 'Lhasa'? Isn't that in..." I trailed off. "China? He's in China?" I was puzzled. How could I see this man watering his lawn nude in Covington if he was in China?

"You idiot, you just mapped where his phone was made!" Carol shrieked with laughter.

"Well that doesn't tell me anything," I said indignantly. Maybe my spy skills needed some improvement.

"Oh calm down, just don't e-mail him back. That's the easiest solution to your problem. He's not going to tell anyone you offered to drive to Covington to see him naked - he's the one who posted a kinky ad on Craig's List."

"And I'm the one who responded to it," I wailed.

"Well, yes, you are," she agreed.

I've thought about opening another anonymous e-mail account and trying again, but the thing is, I don't really care about seeing this man naked. I didn't respond to his ad because his offer turned me on, I responded because his offer was amusing to me. It was a lark. I envisioned a blue sky, a red convertible, and my friends and I driving past a perfectly manicured green lawn. We would wave at a naked man, hose held limply at his side as his face blushed with excitement and we sped off.

I responded to his fantasy because, to me, he wasn't in it. My fantasy - of escape, of freedom, of simplicity, of spontaneity - only has me in it. In my fantasy, the lawn waterer doesn't give me his phone number, he gives me his address. I drive to Covington, laugh uproariously, and drive home. What I want is a pirate who really does have a yacht and a trust fund, but I now realize he needs to be mute as well. Personals, by definition, aren't the place to

find impersonal relationships. It's easy to imagine myself in another life, but the real fantasy part of my fantasy life is that it's uncomplicated.

Jessica Deckard is a native of Upstate, New York who has lived in New Orleans, Louisiana for ten years. After receiving a BA in English and Native American Studies from Colgate University in 1998, she moved to New Orleans to pursue graduate studies in Anthropology at Tulane University. She is a fellow of the Greater New Orleans Writing Project, and co-facilitated its Advanced Institute in 2009. Currently, she teaches upper school English and creative writing at St. Martin's Episcopal School. She is working on a collection of humorous essays about her life, as well as a young-adult book about Mardi Gras Indians and Tootie Montana. Although she has published archaeological reports in Spanish, this is her first publication of interest.

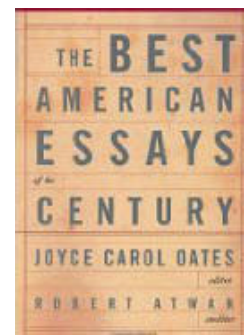
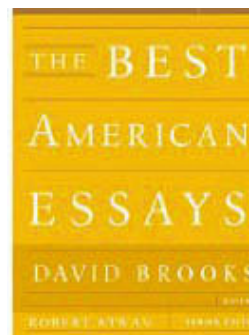
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*Jennifer Veser
2009 Essay
Runner-Up:*

Living in a Ghost Town



I grew up in a ghost town. This is not a metaphor. Not all ghost towns have tumbleweeds rolling in clouds of dust across empty streets or shutters banging against the vacant sockets of dark windows. Any town that is a shadow of its former self is a ghost town. By definition, it only requires a dwindled population and once-useful structures abandoned to dilapidation.

And that describes where I grew up. I was the fourth generation in my family to live or vacation in Mount Gretna. Nestled in a hilly chunk of Southeastern Pennsylvania, the wooded valley was wild until the Chautauqua movement at the turn of the century when it became a seasonal Mecca of culture. Little summer cottages were built. Bigger summer cottages were built. A lake was dug to provide visitors with a beach. There were lectures, plays, and music. There was not just one, but two fancy hotels plus a fair number of guest houses and rental cottages. There was a National Guard barracks, an amusement park, a swimming pool, a site-seeing train, and two miniature golf courses.

Then came the depression and after it, World War Two. Prerogatives changed. People either didn't have the money or the peace of mind to relax in some wooded place and listen to lectures on transcendentalism. They had to save their money, fight their wars, and concentrate on staying alive.

So the town started to die.

People still came in the summer, but fewer and fewer came and rarely from farther than a neighboring state. The barracks moved out in 1933. The Conewago Hotel was torn down in 1940 and the Chautauqua Inn was demolished in 1970. By the time I was born in 1972, the town was a rotting version of its former self. All that remained was a festering lake, an ice-cream shop, the empty Hall of Philosophy, and an open-air theater that was host to more bats than people. My parents bought one of the old summer cottages. Not only was it not winterized, but it had started to dissolve under the plodding barrage of shade and moisture. The cottage cost a couple thousand dollars and it wasn't even worth that. My mother tells a story of a time when she was feeding me in my high chair and the roof began leaking so badly during a hard rain that she needed to hold an umbrella over me so that I could finish eating.

This in a place that used to be a resort.

I can't remember that day, but I can say that it was

not atypical of Mount Gretna. Although the roofs didn't always leak enough to require umbrellas, it was not uncommon for rain and snow to make their way into houses. In addition, attics were usually populated by squirrels, which, incidentally, were also blamed for the frequent power-outages. Porches rotted enough to make any careless or heavy footfall dangerous. And inside the Philadelphia siding's dark-stained wood became light green with mold of epic proportions.

Although the cottages were collapsing, or melting, that doesn't necessarily mean they were part of a ghost town. What made them part of a ghost town was that they were uninhabited, or, at least, under-inhabited and that all the remnants of Gretna's former glory were allowed to remain decomposing next to homes. Those miniature golf courses, the amusement park, the old routes on which the site-seeing train used to travel, the latrines from the army barracks, the foundation for the train station, the bridges upon which practicing soldiers used to march, and the circle of rocks for the fountain—all these things surrounded us, visible in the winter and covered by a layer of raspberries in the summer. Imagine walking around a grandparents' cottage, looking for salamanders and frogs and finding the green of the seventh hole on an ancient miniature golf course. Imagine walking a dog in a forest and nearly tripping over a crumbling stone wall. Imagine playing hide and seek in a sagging building and discovering that it was a carousel.

I can't say how other people view the world, but even at a young age I knew that Mount Gretna was different and that it would make me different. There's something enchanting about living in close proximity to the abandoned past. Although it's magical, it's also a little scary. It was as though previous generations were constantly trying to tell me something. And they didn't want to tell everyone, just me. If everyone were supposed to know, these things would be out in the open, with historical markers. But it was always when I wasn't paying attention that I would find something new. It was as if the past had noticed that I had stopped thinking about it and was trying to grab me. And because my family had been coming to Mount Gretna since the turn of the century, I felt as though my ancestors were chastising me to remember them.

But things didn't stay that way forever. Despite its ramshackle state, Mount Gretna was and is beautiful,

especially in the summer. It is a shaded valley between two steep hills. It's thick with trees and ivy. Driving over one of the hills into Gretna always feels like taking a cool drink on a hot summer day. The town's population had always swelled in summer, but something changed and the percentage of cottage-owners who stayed all year began to increase. And even those who didn't stay began not only winterizing cottages, but fixing them. The inhabitants replaced rotting floorboards, put on additions, and closed all the little holes that the squirrels had used as doors into their attic homes. The wires were replaced so that power outages were infrequent. The phone company changed the telephone system so that we had to dial all seven numbers to be connected to our neighbors. And after the theater's roof collapsed under a heavy snow, it was rebuilt, the wooden benches replaced by rows of plastic, folding chairs. I don't know what happened to the bats.

Somewhere in the middle of this, I left. Not because of these changes, but because it was time for me to go to college. Although I loved my small town, a couple square miles, no matter how packed they are with history and culture, are just not enough.

Eighteen years passed. I came back for visits and every time I did, I was amazed by the rising cost of living in my ghost town and by the change in the people who lived there. They went from being a rag-tag group of hippies, outcasts, and artists to architects, retirees, and affluent drinkers of Chardonnay.

And they began to tear down the remnants of my ghost town.

I can't find one of the old miniature golf courses and the other one has been repaired so that it's mostly level. All that remains of the National Guard barracks is a little stump of a rock that people call a monument and a latrine in the woods where hunters practice shooting the splintering wood. Almost all the buildings in the park where the carousel used to stand were torn down by nature, or time, or by parents who were afraid their children would hurt themselves. Some of them burned down. I'm not sure if that happened on purpose or by accident, but it happened.

Last year, I returned to my ghost town not just for a visit, but for good. My husband got a job working for a man whose children I used to baby-sit. We bought a house built fourteen years after I arrived in Gretna the first time. I returned home with a serene inevitability that surprised me.

Everything is different. Places change and just as Mount Gretna had cocooned itself into a sleepy town from its former glory, so did it metamorphose into a revised vacation spot. Cottages once derelict and crumbling under the dripping humidity of a shady valley are now coveted real estate. There are so many activities in the summer that it's not even possible to attend them all. There are lectures at the Hall of Philosophy and a yearly juried art show. The shores of Lake Conewago are teaming with bathing-suited crowds every weekend that the sun shines through the trees' canopy.

But for me, Gretna is still a ghost town. Because I was away while the town was in the process of reinventing itself, the ghosts of the old Gretna are still in my mind. I walk past a cottage refurbished by some wealthy New Yorkers and I still see it as my Aunt Beattie's summer cottage where my grandparents and their friends used to gather to play Pinochle on summer nights. People I barely know tell me stories about my family as if I were a stranger to myself. While walking in the woods, I end up in a thicket because the path that I used to follow has veered right over time, but my feet still remember it in its old place.

One day, after hopelessly searching for remnants of the old National Guard barracks with a childhood friend, it struck me: I used to live in a ghost town, but now the ghost town lives in me. I used to be connected to my surroundings through physical relics distinguishing the past like Hansel and Gretel's crumbs marking the path back out of the forest. Like the birds in the fairy tale, newcomers arrived and took away those traces by demolishing the old buildings, or refurbishing cottages beyond recognition, or by building new houses over toppled foundations. The crumbs are gone, and with no physical evidence, I am left to rely solely upon my own memories or the regurgitated memories of my parents and grandparents.

Which makes me wonder: what's going to happen to that ghost town? Will it stay with me in my memories? Or will it, like the old buildings of Mount Gretna, either rot away or fall under the destructive hands of a builder who comes to fix a cottage, but, because of new fire codes and zoning restrictions, needs to tear the whole thing down and start again?

In a way, forgetting would be a relief. With all the magic that comes from remembering the past so vividly, there also comes a haunting nostalgia I don't understand—a feeling that I am looking at the past with one eye and the present with another. It makes me dizzy and often seem strange to people who do not have the same relationship with the place that I do. I feel as though I am caught between the past and the present in my mind, living forward and backward.

I'm not sure what is going to happen. I don't know if I will slowly erase the Mount Gretna of the past with new, current memories that are shared with its modern residents. Maybe I will and maybe that would feel good, give me a new sense of belonging somewhere. But part of me hopes, even as I dread, that I will continue to live straddling two different times, haunted by the memories of the ghost town, its former glory, and a curious childhood.

Jennifer Veser, who has a BA in archaeology and an MA in classics, was anticipating becoming the next Indiana Jones. When that didn't pan out, she became an archaeological illustrator, an English teacher, a SCUBA instructor, a Latin professor, a boat captain, a public speaker, etc.



*Sudy Leavy
2009 Essay
Runner-Up*

The Bigness of a No



Sudy Vance Leavy, inspired by talented English teachers as an undergraduate at the Woman's College of Georgia, found my way some 30 years later returning to graduate school at Georgia Southern University. With a return to academia, she found renewed love for literature after rearing three children, engaged in retail, and served on various volunteer boards. Once she received her MA in 1998, she again found herself returning to school, this time to take creative writing. Again by chance she had an excellent teacher in the late Peter Christopher of GSU. She studied in Taos with Natalie Goldberg and in Mexico with Patricia Lewis of the Amherst Writers Group. The year 2008 saw the publication of her first book, **Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation**, by Arcadia Publishers. Today, she continues to journal and to work on an historical novel in progress. Drawn to causes, she currently education, history, tourism, and government. She has lived on the Georgia Coast for over 40 years, making her home, first, St. Simons Island and now in Darien, GA. She works with a writers' group in Savannah.

The laundry basket doesn't feel heavy at all. Looking down at the contents inside, I hold it at my side. Curled in repose lie the two little kittens, the latest offerings from my aunt's cat that always seems to be birthing kittens. I have played with them every day whenever I have crossed the road to visit my cousins. We coax them out from under the house with our mewling cries. Who knows what the mother cat thinks as she hears these most unkitten-like cries? Yet, she has come trust us; slowly, she has offered us her offspring. And we take them in our hands and stroke and rub the silky hair. Each kitten so small cradled in our grubby palms. Our hands dirty from digging in the sand of the driveway where all afternoon in the dying warmth of the sun we have crafted our city. A city with towers and even bridges that span a stretch of water we have created with ample offerings from the hose attached to the house. The city has grown, and as we have added each layer, sand, dirt, and grime have covered us.

But cats and kittens don't care about our dirt. We stroke them ever so gently. Aunt Marion has said she doesn't mind our playing with the kittens, but we have to realize that they are babies, and we have to handle them ever so carefully. So we sit here, me and my two cousins,

each of us holding a kitten. Almost cooing to them, ever so gently lifting them in the air as if we are trying to show them the sun, the trees, the sky and the birds flying overhead. How patiently we had to wait to see them slowly open their eyes. There were days that seemed like weeks that all they did was sleep and nurse. We still say that word as if we whisper it, as if we don't want to be heard saying it. We haven't even said it to each other that yes we did that. We nursed. But we don't say that. We don't admit that once we were ever so small, that our mothers held us and that we, too, drank our mother's milk. But we did, just like the kittens. Why do I have such a hard time remembering doing it?

My little brother, I should be able to remember that he did it, too, but I can't. I just remember baby bottles.

Here comes the mother cat. She's tired of us having her kittens. And they know she is near. For now they stretch their bodies, pulling and tugging, wanting to be put down. They arch their backs and let their paws claw at the air and the mother cat mews, and we know to give her back her babies. They rush towards her, and she stretches out on the sandy drive, and they seem to dive into the mother cat's soft fur. They burrow their little heads into the warmth of her tummy, where all the milk is. If we bend down and look closely, we can see the little mouths each attached. Tiny drops of milk outline the baby whiskers as each kitten nurses. Their little paws push at her soft flesh as if they're making biscuits. They knead and push to get the milk. We watch and then scamper off to the tree by the barn we like to climb. No longer wondering about the mystery of how the mother cat feeds her kittens or where the milk comes from or how the kittens know what to do. All of that is something we can worry about another day.

So that is how the last two weeks or so have gone. Long, warm days. Days where we can play and build in the sand, days where time never seems to matter. Days where we sit and build and hardly talk, each of us sculpting a part of the city we are creating in the driveway. And when Uncle Arthur comes home, he knows not to drive near it. He always gets out of the car, and leaning on his cane walks over to look and inspect and see what we have done. I think he, too, remembers sitting in this very driveway and playing in the clear white sand. I wonder where all of this white sand came from? Just another thing I don't know, but I don't need to know. I just

like the way it feels, like grains of silk running through my hands. I take a handful and with my fingers curled watch it run and trickle out of my clenched hand. I let my hand hover in the air slowly raining sand. Then I dust myself off, say goodbye and walk home.

But today I'm not walking home alone; I'm bringing my little friends. The laundry basket rocks as I walk, and I watch carefully as I walk, trying to avoid any holes in the driveway so I don't trip and upset my sleeping friends. For finally they are old enough for me to take home. They will love my room. I can keep them under the big baby bed where now all of my dolls stay. And I know that first night they'll probably cry because they will be leaving their mother, and they will miss her. But they'll have me, and I'll pick them up and stroke them and give them milk, and they'll like their bed because I'll use only the softest fabric for it. I trudge along. A blue bird flies overhead, and I hear the roar of trucks passing on the highway. The sun shines down on me. The sky is that color of blue where it's warm and inviting. My little kittens mew as I rock them along in the basket.

The sweet smell of the wisteria growing in the tree beside the house stops me. I set the basket down on the steps and walk over to the vine that seems to say, "Spring is here." I study the beautiful purple blossoms that remind me of stars and I think how each year mother cuts it back because she says it's going to choke out the tree, but I love the blossoms and the way they smell. The bees hover and buzz as they dive into the neck of each bloom. How can anything so pretty be destructive?

The kittens cry, and I realize they have no idea where they are—that they are at their new home. I pick up the basket, grab the door with one hand, and holding it with my fanny swing the basket into the living room. You see at our house you open the front door and you're right in the house. The breeze is blowing the curtains as Mother has the windows open to air the house. I start back toward the kitchen carrying the kittens. Looking down at my precious babies, I see that once more they are sleeping. I call out, "Mama?"

I see that Mother is standing at the kitchen sink washing glasses. Bubbles of soap climb her arms.

"Mama, look what Aunt Marian gave me. Aren't they the cutest things you've ever seen? You'll let me keep them?"

Was it that I asked if I could keep them or was it that Mother was just overwhelmed with dishes, house, children, bills? Who knows? But she looked down and said, "Of course not, you know I don't like cats. They have a motor that's always running. You don't need them. You have a dog. I don't want pets inside."

I stand there with the basket in front of me. A tear is running from my eye, and my little kittens are looking up at me. Their ears are twitching as if they have just heard that they are not welcome. I ask again, "Are you sure you won't let me keep them? I'll take care of them, I promise."

Mother looks down at me. "The answer is no." I

stand there. She then says, "You'll have to take them back. You don't need them."

* * *

Can I remember any more that explains the "No"? Can I remember if the new baby was crying or whether I had fed the dog when I was supposed to? Can I remember why that "no" hovered in the air as if it filled the entire kitchen as the sun shone in through the windows, and my mother, with the glistening soap bubbles on her arm, pointed at the door and said, "Now!"

None of the answers come because that summer day was so long ago. But in my heart I can still feel the void.

* * *

I pick up the basket and walk towards the back door. My mother follows and looks down at me as I back out the door pushing the screen door with my hip. The basket rocks and the kittens mew. And I start down the steps. Mother calls, "Ask Aunt Marian to send me a cup of sugar."

I feebly say, "Yes, mam." And I walk on, down the drive, past the vines growing on the fence, feeling the warm sand cushion my sandals. And I get to the road, and I look both ways, knowing that the trucks come so fast. And my eyes are full of tears. I start across the road, the cats are crying, and I am crying, and I see the truck coming so fast, and I have to run. Run from danger. And I run fast, hurrying to get to the other side of the road without falling, without dropping the kittens. The truck roars by, and I feel good that we are safe, and I start up the hill once more carrying the kittens back.

Back to their mother, back to their home, back to the nest under the house. I place them gently down under the house, one by one. The dark, warm smell is there, and the kittens run towards their mother. I bend down and kneel there in the sand that feels cold and damp because the sun never reaches it, and I cry. And in the darkness there under the house where I hear the sound of the little kittens nursing, I try to understand the hardness and the bigness of a no.

One I still question, one I still don't understand, one that still hurts to remember.

Quote to Live By

Cats are dangerous companions for writers because cat watching is a near-perfect method of writing avoidance.

—Dan Greenberg



Rosemary Daniell 2009 Best Poem Sacred Things



Poetry Judge **Rodger Kamenetz** is the bestselling author of the memoirs, *The Jew in the Lotus*, which is an account of how he recovered his faith as a Jew through explorations of the Buddhist faith, including audiences with the Dali Llama; and *Terra Infirma*, which centers on his relationship with his mother after her death. His poetry collections include the best-selling *Stalking Elija*. His recent books include *The History of Last Night's Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul*. A poet, essayist, and professor, and popular lecturer, Rodger recently was selected to appear with Oprah Winfrey to discuss *The History of Last Night's Dream*. Rodger lives in New Orleans with his wife, the fiction writer, Moira Crone. Both are faculty members at LSU in Baton Rouge and are regular presenters at Society events, including *Words & Music*.



butter with a knife.... Or
are they the nights & nights
spent writhing for though
I with my sins am an
unlikely one turned good
only through default
we know that all mothers
are saints eager to give,
to give up their own lives. . . .

No none of these are
the sacred things that stand
like totems like the cast
Egyptian cat you loved
beside the door to pain as
it heaves clangs open again.
Nor are these the objets that
lay as though carelessly thrown
onto the stone slab that
ancient (it seems) rock for
sacrifice like my heart gone
blood-stained & blood-stained
born as we were with the black
bile running in our family
a river (or was it more
like a swamp or quicksand?)

No. What is is the snapshot
of you at three in your red
velvet bowler the ribbons
bouncing down your plump back --
in your black princess coat with
white fur collar your fat legs
churning the pedals of your trike --
next your dimpled arms around
my knees as you beg for red
jam on white bread Yes, that

& the drawing you made
at eight: your Pitiful Pearl
doll the tears rolling down
her plastic cheeks
the balloon over her head reading
MOTHER PLEASE LOVE ME.
Or the sketch
of me at my desk typing:

Sacred Things

are not
the ancient Chinese tapestry
silk heavy with embroidery
stitched a thousand years ago
that stoned you cut up
to make an ugly dress.
Or the few pieces of sterling
each stamped with a rose --
left from a wedding before you
were born. Nor was it that
heavy gold snake my one good
piece of jewelry coiled
in its box waiting to be
pawned again. And of course
not that small plastic card
embossed with the magic
numbers with which you carved
the money from my account
as easily as you would

"I dreamed the house was on fire
& you wouldn't save me" reads
the caption. & then captured
by your girlish hand: the water-
color of the hundred-foot pines
the goldfish pond carved of
coral rock our calico perched
beside it watching the swerve
of red fish.

Or later:

the memory of you striding
up Fifth Avenue in high heels

& short fur gorgeous in
your Italian-boy haircut
(more confident it seemed
than I had ever been).
And the picture taken by
the famous artist (the one
who was once my lover)
you newly blonde a tumble
of gold & cream trussed in red
velvet for your gig at the
Gaslight Club: a woman
from another century who
will soon learn the things I --
her mother -- will never know
about needles & shooting
galleries about bombed-out
buildings with men standing
overhead holding guns about
where one buys the works
neatly cellophaned & finally
about overdoses hospitals
& jail cells.

& that was when?

ten years an eternity ago?
Before I watched what had been
my vision of you my beautiful
one stepping off that Greyhound
eyes purpled by a fist an old
man's shirt hiding the knife cuts
the blood-black gashes marking
your perfect flesh & all your things
(your poor things) stuffed into that
one green plastic garbage bag. . .

But the most sacred may be
the photo of you taken five years
ago your long hair a radiant
shawl to your heart-shaped face
the scars inside your elbows
(like mauve pencil dots) hidden
by the Mary-blue cotton gown
your deep-lashed eyes shining
with stars (or is it tears?)

into the eyes of your newborn --
Raphael, angel you called
him. And scrawled on the back
is the fat arrowed heart tears
dripping from its jagged tear
& inside it the names of Janie
& Bob the happy couple who
the next day in a lawyer's
staid rooms will take him from
our arms forever:
Oh my God my God! cried out the man
I once read of drawn & quartered
yet still holding in his hands
his own beating heart.
And yes these are the sacred things
the muscle ripped from the
living breast
the wounds made by blades
rough-edged & blunt
the kinds of sacrifices after
which none ever matters again.

Rosemary Daniell's book *Secrets of the Zona Rosa: How Writing (and Sisterhood) Can Change Women's Lives*, was published by Henry Holt and Company, 2006 to great acclaim. Known as one of the best writing coaches in the country, Rosemary is the founder of Zona Rosa, the series of creative writing workshops she has led for 29 years in Savannah, Atlanta, and other cities (including New Orleans), as well as in Europe. Her first book on Zona Rosa, *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself: Writing and Living the Zona Rosa Way*, was published by Faber & Faber in 1997. Daniell's revolutionary memoir, *Fatal Flowers: On Sin, Sex and Suicide in the Deep South* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980; Henry Holt & Company, 1989; Hill Street Press, 1999) won the 1999 Palimpsest Prize for a most-requested out-of-print book, and was re-issued that year. Along with her second memoir, *Sleeping with Soldiers* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984), *Fatal Flowers* was a forerunner of the current memoir trend. She is the author of four other books of poetry and prose. Among her many awards are two N.E.A. Fellowships in creative writing, one in poetry, another in fiction. She is profiled in the book *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975*; in 2008, she received a Governor's Award in the Humanities for her impact on the state of Georgia.

Quote to Live By

A resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible.

—Thomas Hardy,
Far from the Madding Crowd



Julia Carey
2009 Poetry
Runner-Up
Vera's Suite



Vera's Suite

I

they were called silver dollars
my mother carried them in her bouquet
dried them, saved the seeds
for her first house, backyard
two translucent discs, sandwiched
wax tissue paper, pearlized
maracas in a breeze
or a light rainstorm on pavement:
now my grandmother's body
a desert flower husk

her arms spread, legs apart
she stood in the tub, arrested
calling me the wrong name
slipped through my hands like a fish
so I minded the lather
moved over her the hand-held shower
she'd sigh, her eyelids closed
clouds blending together
become indiscernible

II

a stone bridge covered in snow
white pillows, shaped as Labradors
warm pebbles below melt the blankets
the creek runs beneath it, faster
more intensely, gurgling with applause
laps slap stones slap waves and drown
a single drop of thought escapes
seems separate, but is tethered
returns to the liquid mirror
of moving memory: lost, slippery, soapy
out of control dishes fly across the kitchen
shattering, sitting on the floor
cross-legged, arranging them geometrically
a porcelain shard in her left hand
she looks up, irritated
calls to her husband, dead for 41 years
"where is the box for the Lincoln Logs?"

she turns back to the ivory petal
in her hand, running her finger
against the cleavage, sandpaper pearl
it reminds her of a callous
she pets the piece the way a toddler
pets a cat, with one finger
does the same to her big toe
back and forth, back and forth
her pelvis grinds into the linoleum
warm brown eyes melt a cloudy film
and surface, terrified

III

my father in the bathroom
neck in a sling, pulling
his knotted worry long and loose
cracked, dry toes on the tile
soles pressed to the floor
his wife had just lost her mother
her thumbs too soaked
in sorrow to soothe him
the paper rested in his lap
embroidered eyes braided closed

in the next room, she'd put up her sails
great canvas strengths
catching any breath to come by
a sea of hot water bottles, comforters
her ship rolled
pirated, scurvied, mutinied
the need beaded, condensed
on the bedroom door

Julia Carey writes fiction, poetry, and restaurant training manuals. Her work has been included in the *Dudley Review*, *Louisiana in Words*, and *From Marie Laveau to the Mother-in-Law Lounge*. She has edited for *The New Orleans Review* and *Wandering Womb*, and participated in workshops with the *Dudley House Writing Group* at Harvard University. A resident of New Orleans, she is working on her first novel and recently left a career in food and beverage purchasing to apply for MFA programs.



Susan Terris
2009 Poetry
Runner-Up
House on the Mere



House on the Mere

In morning light, the house on the mere
doubles, and she feels as if she lives underwater
in the mirrored reflection of a reflection.

If she says, Come. . . my parlor. . . she becomes
the spider or, in this waterworld, perhaps
the eel in the weir and her other still
prey. Her other: a troubador, a vagabond.

He wants a house, a home, a verse, a story

where he is not a man mirrored to infinity.
Though the glass may have been more than

half-full for the White Knight and Ms. Liddell,
for this pair it's a world where drowning in glass
is possible and probable. The house

on the mere has a heron, a fox, a badger toying
with thoughts of liquid doppelgängers.

Each predator stuns with beauty, then tries to snatch
what he wants to feed a surprising hunger.

But below isn't a peaceable kingdom either.

It's a place where no one eats and illusion is all.
The table is only an idea, the bed a silky
indifference.

It has an indentation of bodies but no presence,
unreal as her dream of cockroaches
where she tenderly rid the house of them,

carrying them out one by one in cupped fingers.
In waterworld, they have morphed into black
fry, which—to make him happy—
she seines from each airless room.

He, however, is the guest in this no-house-house,
in this home-never-home. Under here, where
they cannot eat or touch,

she's growing translucent and he's become
an Orpheus with lyre and rusting trident.
Seaweed curtains undulate, snails trace cursive

messages across sandy floors. Though she wants
this to be their place, he's weary
of holding his breath,
and the water weighs him down with grief.

These mirrors show everything yet nothing.

Fox, badger, and heron peer down from the shore
refusing to be doubled. But for him it's too late.

Here, the strings of his lyre have become restraints.
Here, the other is other.

He has lost his notes, forgotten his song.

*Susan Terris is the author of the books of poetry: **The Homelessness of Self, Contrariwise, and Fire is Favorable to the Dreamer.** Her work has appeared in many journals, including *The Southern Review, The Journal, and Ploughshares.* A poem of hers from *Field* appeared in *Pushcart Prize XXXI.* She is the editor of *Spillway Magazine* and poetry editor of *In Posse Review* and of *Pedestal.* In recent years, she has won both the *George Bogin Award* and the *Louis Hammer Award* from the *Poetry Society of America.* In 2013, ***The Ghost of Yesterday: New & Selected Poems*** was published by *Marsh Hawk Press.* Her book ***Memos*** will be published by *Omnidawn* in 2014.*



Elizabeth Lilly
2009
Best High School Story



Maternal Instincts

Judge John Biguenet, Distinguished Professor or Literature at Loyola University, is author of the novel, **Oyster**, and the short story collection, **The Torturers Apprentice**. He is a successful poet, playwright, and translator and he has written numerous stories for such magazines as **Granta** and essays for the *New York Times* and other journals. For more on John Biguenet and his work, visit:

www.wordsandmusic.org/JohnBiguenet.html.



There is something comforting about the quiet, abandoned school building, the grimy broken windows. Foot-high grass carpets the back lawn, stalks pushing up through cracks in the blacktop. The turtle-shell of a rusted jungle gym sits, long unused, in a corner of the yard.

An unlocked door opens into a bathroom, where a hiss of running water can be heard through the smothering odor of dust and book-mold that fills my nose like balls of cotton. I quickly move to the next shadowy room. Broken plastic chairs lie on the floor, and sets of lockers line the walls of a former cafeteria, barely retaining their primary colors though the spots of dirt and rust.

I find my way to one of the dusty staircases and climb carefully to the second floor, following the paths of innumerable forgotten students. The boards are littered with paint flakes, fallen from the peeling walls. They crunch underfoot like dead beetles. In the corners of one landing, the signs of more recent inhabitants manifest in the form of empty spray-paint canisters. On one wall, someone has traced Africa's outline, with a clenched fist bursting from the Mediterranean coast.

The hallways are easy to get lost in, though I should know the layout by now. Soon, I find my way to a favorite classroom. The high ceilings are buoyed up by plumes of stale air, and the linoleum tiles have warped,

pulling up with a sound like ripping fabric as I step on their corners. One blackboard still bears the notes from its last class—Functions of a Short Story—in addition to graffiti. Once again, I ask myself what happened to force an entire school to leave so quickly. The remnants left in the room are like what one leaves during a hasty evacuation: stacks of ceramics magazines, all still bound into bundles with twine, and pots of paint and brushes. But once again, I shuffle the thought back into the catacombs, and move forward.

In a mirrored dance studio, one of the mirrors has come unglued from the wall, shattering on the floor. The matte black shards form an almost perfect rectangle. My footsteps startle a dove out of its roosting place on a rafter, and it takes flight into one of the mirrors. Poor bird. Hopefully it will find its way out of the open window. The thin rope tied to the radiator underneath looks like something from a crime scene, the way it snakes out of the window and down to the yard. But it would take a strong person to climb two stories up a wall with something that thin, and if the intruders were a little more thorough they would have found the open door on the ground floor. I chuckle and fluster the bird further, sending it into another mirror and finally back up to the rafters. It drops a taupe wing-feather, which I deftly put into my bag. In the same room there is a door leading out onto a little balcony. It's in an inside corner of the courtyard, as if someone had cut out a fourth of a concrete circle and slid it into a niche in the side of the walls. Even stranger than this little balcony is the doll that lies on it. She's old-fashioned: white cotton stuffed with sawdust. She wears a red and white striped dress that is stained grey from the grime dripping off of the school during rain. Her brown yarn hair is pulled back from a stitched-on face: little dots for eyes and a fat-cheeked smile. Freckles have been drawn on. She looks so vulnerable, like a sleeping child, left by some girl for a reason I cannot think of.

As I crouch to pick up the doll, I feel at once foolish but compelled to take her with me. For a moment I stand and turn to leave but can't walk away. She won't let me leave her there, though I know I should. Struggling, I turn toward her, then away, then back again, caught in some tormented dance. I finally give in and crouch again, slipping the moist body into my bag along with the feather. With my doll safely by my hip, I am free to move

as I please, to enjoy the sudden sense of contentment that ensues. Above the trees the sky is the color of blood oranges, and at once, I know that it is time for me to leave the school. The light has been gradually getting dimmer, and from empty beer cans adorning the hallways, I am sure that the school has more regular nighttime inhabitants. I find my way back to the ground floor, through the cafeteria, and out into the yard where my bike leans against a wall. Pedaling over lumps in the asphalt, I reluctantly return home.

"I swear, if you keep bringing those dirty things home off the street...I'm going to throw it all away!" That threat is uttered by my mother whenever I walk through the door. I don't exactly know what she thinks she'll do with my things, but she tries to make sure her words are always in the back of my mind when I trudge home with my hand around the collar of a friendly stray dog, or clasp some knickknack in my pocket, ready to add it to my collection. In this instance, she noticed me sneaking in though the back door, inspecting the stitching on the side of my new doll.

"Honestly, I don't understand what goes on in your head." My mother snatches my doll out of my hands, with a squawk of protest from me. "Look at this! It's moldy! Why do you need this?" She stares right into my eyes while she waits for an answer. I hate her when she does that, because I can never look away. Her face is thin and sharp.

"She's pretty! And someone just left her on a balcony at the old—I couldn't leave her." I take my doll back and slide her into my bag, finally breaking eye contact.

"The old what? It's a she?"

"Yes, she's a she. Obviously."

"But, you're already attached to it..." Her sentence ends with a sigh as my mother drops her head onto her fists, leaving her blonde roots in plain sight. It makes her seem as if her hair starts growing an inch from her scalp. She gets up and walks out to the back porch, this time avoiding my eyes and taking her white mug of coffee and box of Camel Lights with her. I watch her thin back contract as she slides the glass door shut. The skin of her arms jiggles slightly when she moves, a product of too many hours logged on our treadmill. Distantly, I watch her light her cigarette, an orange glowing dot, the curls of smoke barely visible in dusk.

That is her constant complaint, that she doesn't understand me, but she doesn't really try. Most of the time she tries to ignore me, unless, of course, I'm doing something she doesn't like. But that just leads to fights, like on Sunday when I came home with two new porcelain dolls, found in a pile of trash on the curb, waiting for the garbage truck to come. I tried to explain that they were in the trash when I found them, that their owners didn't want them so it wasn't really stealing, but she was invincible.

Through the glass door, I watch her pick up her

now-empty mug and turn to come inside. She walks over the threshold and into the kitchen, not making eye-contact, silent. Placing her mug in the sink, she exchanges it for a wine glass from the drain board. She turns to the cabinets and begins looking for a bottle. She pulls out a cheap red wine and fills the glass, choreography she's performed hundreds of times before, and sits across the table from me, staring. Her eyes are angry, which is expected, but also concerned. The brown irises are caught in a spider web of delicate red veins. In the quiet, I become aware of how loud the kitchen clock is ticking. I realize that she is not going to say anything to me, that she's waiting for me to make the first move. Unwilling to play along, I get up from the table, stalk down the hallway and squeeze myself through my bedroom door. In a moment I hear the glass door slide shut again.

While it was only hinted at in the kitchen, the musty, slightly acidic smell of animals envelops me, radiating from the cages that adorn the surfaces of my room. Two identical wire ones house my guinea pigs, and assorted bird cages hang from hooks in the ceiling, epicenters to cracks in the plaster. I saved them all from the pet store; seeing them confined to crowded cages was unbearable. My big dog, Tim, is belly up on the carpet, effectively blocking the only path to the window, which urgently needs to be opened. As I step over him, nearly falling, he wakes up and rights himself quite violently, knocking me onto one of the cardboard boxes that fills my room. I spring back up, afraid that I have broken something, but luckily I landed on a stuffed animal box. I finally reach the window and shove it open.

The fact that all of my belongings are even that organized is due to my mother. She hates that I have them, but tolerates the mess if I contain it, so it's into a box for every new thing I bring home. I have numerous boxes for dolls, my favorites occupying what little shelf space I have. There are boxes for my stuffed animals, others for statuettes; some filled with rolled-up posters, and others filled entirely with books. As soon as I step into my room and look at my collection, I am a mother looking at her newborn child for the first time. Everything I've ever owned, I've kept, and anything anyone's ever cast aside, I've taken in. But there's always more for me to take care of. The same goes for animals. Sometimes I'll see road kill in the gutters, and it's too much for me to bear: I have to bury them. There's something too profane about leaving a body to rot on the side of the road.

I open my bag and extract my two new treasures. The feather I put in the bottom of Honey's bird cage, hoping that he'll use it for bedding. He is my oldest bird and has been looking a little listless lately. As for my doll, I tuck her under the comforter so her head is just sticking out onto my pillow, making sure she looks comfortable. I lie on the bed with my head by the footboard, making sure not to kick my doll, but unsettling one of my cats. She glares at me and turns so she is facing away.

The blades of my fan have an almost hypnotic effect; I watch them rotate for what feels like an hour, until

my eyes catch the light glinting off of a simple gold cross my father gave to me when I was five, a few years before he left my mother and me. I remember dimly that it's been nearly half a year since he last called, to wish me a happy birthday. As soon as I picked up the receiver and realized it was him, I hung it back up, disgusted and fighting to put my stomach back in its rightful place. I know I shouldn't feel that way, but it's impossible not to when your father leaves on a camping trip and calls a week later from North Carolina, after your mother's filed a missing persons report and has begun to look slightly mummified because she refuses to eat, to say that he won't be coming back. I didn't understand what was happening then, but she took up drinking soon after and hasn't really acted the same way since. I know things like that happen all the time, but I never wanted to be a victim. Who would ever want to be a victim?

My hands start to sweat and I clench my teeth. For a distraction, I lever myself off my bed and go back to the kitchen. Little hunger pangs pull at the edges of my stomach as I search for the peanut butter. In every cabinet there are at least three bottles of assorted liquors, but in recent years I have learned to look past them, towards the back. I make myself a sandwich and sit at the bar, wanting to go back to the school where it's calm and I don't have to think about anything I don't want to. I probably will tonight, in spite of the other people who might be there; I can always bring Tim with me.

The door behind me slides open, and my mother is soon sitting in the chair across from me. She waits a moment before speaking, which is not a good thing.

Usually she doesn't think about anything before she says it.

"How do you feel," she says slowly, finally making eye contact with me, "about going to see someone that will help you with your...problem?"

"What problem?"

"Amber, you know what I'm talking about," she says. I am struck, as I often am, by the irony of my name. Amber is supposed to be valued and precious, and she treats me like a child.

"No, I really don't." My mother sighs as I say this and closes her eyes, clearly trying to control her temper. She opens them slowly and tries again, almost desperate. I am unmoved; she plays like this all the time.

"Look, to most people, saving all of the things that you do would seem very...unusual. I think you have a problem, and I think it can be helped. Normal people wouldn't keep all that junk." She ends with a slight nod towards my bedroom door and stares at me with wide eyes.

"So you're saying that I'm not normal?" I never expect her to be sugary-sweet, but writing off her own child as a freak?

"No, that's not what I'm saying," this is not how she expected this conversation to go. She begins to pick at the edge of the placemat. "I just think you have a problem that's been going on for a long time now, and you need

help to fix it. I've tried, but I just can't help you anymore."

"What are you talking about?" She hasn't tried to help me a day in her life, no matter the fact that I don't have anything wrong with me. "I'm fine. You're the one who needs help!" I say.

"Amber," she looks like she's about to yell but refrains, replying, "I've realized that." She breathes deeply again and squeezes my hand with a small, wistful smile. I don't squeeze back. "I think we should go see a therapist, together."

"But there's nothing wrong with me!" I'm beginning to understand what she is trying to get at. "I'm not some crazy person; I just care about things other than myself, unlike you—"

"That isn't true. I wouldn't bother asking if I didn't care." Which is probably true, but I don't want to admit it to myself; it's easier to hold a grudge against her than to let her in. She purses her lips, meaning that I'm really straining her temper. Normally it would have broken by now. I know I shouldn't, but I can't resist getting a rise out of my mother.

"Whatever," I say, dry and unremorseful.

"Damn it!" My mother slaps the table with her hand. I look coldly at her eyebrows. "I don't even know why I bother. I'm not asking that much from you!"

I slide off of the barstool and she follows me down the hallway.

"You know, you have no idea how hard it is for me to live with you. No one else hoards all this crap." She is waving her hands around her head, near hysteria, and I'm afraid she might hit me. "You know what, I'm done. All I'm trying to do is help but you won't even accept that." I shut my bedroom door behind me before she can get in, and lean on it just in case. This is the craziest I have seen her in a long time, and I'm not sure what she might do. My hands start to sweat again. I need to get away from her. I search for Tim's leash and finally find it under a one-eyed Cabbage Patch Kid. After a minute she calls in through the door, "What are you doing?" I don't answer, but she is persistent.

"Where are you going?" Now her tone is pleading, almost pitiful, and for a second I consider trying to fix things now, but then I remember what has just happened and my decision is made.

"Somewhere, I don't know." But I do, and I open the door, pushing past her and through to outside before she can say anything else, pulling Tim along with me.

"Come on, it's not that scary!"

Tim whines at me and sits down heavily on the blacktop. The school at night is fairly more imposing; my stomach twinges with apprehension. There are other people yelling back and forth to each other inside, but they sound younger than me, and there isn't anything that could scare me away from my school. I can see that Tim is not going to budge, so I tie him to a tetherball pole and walk inside.

All the corners are too dark. Some little storage rooms are pitch black, and I can't see anything farther

than four feet away. In seconds, I have goose bumps, but I can't leave, all I have to do is get up to the second floor. I half-run to the bottom of the stairs, but catch myself before I climb them. The people's shouts echo down the stairwells, unintelligible ghost-sounds of students passed. I know I should make sure they know I am here, so I yell up to them.

"Hey!" There is complete silence for a long moment.

"Hello?" A male voice responds. A flashlight beam comes into view and shines into my face. Squinting, I think that I should have brought one, too.

"Hi. Um, don't mind me. I'm just looking around.... I didn't want to scare you guys."

"Too late," a girl says, with a nervous laugh, "but it's cool." I make my way up the stairs, avoiding other people and looking for the room that leads out onto the roof. I remember that it has a spotted sheet of paper above the door with "The Art of Miming" written on it. I find the room soon enough. It doesn't open onto the roof proper, just a section over the cafeteria. To get to it I have to climb through a low window, which is easy but does not allow for much grace.

On the roof, it's a little bit quieter. I'm relieved that no one has tried to talk to me. There are probably about fifteen kids around, moving in a loose group, running from room to room and squealing with the same nerves that are also propelling me forward. After a few minutes I hear them move to the other side of the school, and I relax a little more, but not completely.

I can see the rooftops of most of the surrounding neighborhood. The school is nicely isolated and there are few cars passing on the nearby streets. There is no breeze tonight, and the air is heavy with humidity. Regardless, it's calm, but the calmness can't touch me yet; I'm still a little uneasy. That was the hardest I've fought with my mother in years, maybe ever. I can't believe she thinks I'm crazy. All I do is take things that have been wrongfully discarded and bring them back into the care of a loving owner, like a woman adopting a child that would have otherwise been miserable. There's nothing wrong with that.

The kids inside the school reach a crescendo, and a few of them sound fairly inebriated; they had better not try to take anything. This school is mine to claim sanctuary in, my refuge. Trying to ignore them, I lie down on my back, the high edges of the roof making me feel like I am cupped in the school's warm hand. Tomorrow I will sort everything out with my mother, but for now I want to enjoy the stillness of the night.

A single set of footsteps are in the mime room, but I'm too exhausted to do anything but hope they go away. I hear them come to the window, stop, move away and return. They climb out onto the roof and I learn they are attached to a boy, probably only fourteen, who is leaning over me, trying to discern who I am. "Hello?" he asks, bending down a little.

"Hi," I say. I don't want anyone else around,

especially not curious, drunk boys, but I resign myself to answering his questions.

"What are you doing on the roof?"

I sigh. "This school is the only place I can go right now, and I'm on the roof because your friends are inside. Besides, it's nicer out here."

"Oh," he says, nonplussed. He sounds like he's about to ask something else, but decides against it. "Okay. I just wanted to see if you were alright." You and everyone else, I think to myself, but reply, "Yeah, I'm alright." The boy starts to walk away, so I ask him, "Will you tell your friends not to steal anything from here?"

"Sure," he says, and becomes just a pair of footsteps again, then nothing. Once he has gone, I wish he would have stayed a little longer, but the feeling soon subsides.

My eyes close at some point, and then I can't hear much anymore. I briefly remember Tim, tied to the tetherball pole, but my body is heavy, sinking into the warm tar that coats the roof and I tell myself that he will be alright for one night. The shouts of the kids inside the school become white noise. Finally, I'm drifting in the limbo between reality and dreams, where words and images—a soggy doll, I think you have a problem, wide eyes in a red face, a golden, glinting cross—float freely in the hollow of my head, unimportant fluff, unraveling outward into the subconscious. The old boards and walls of the school settle, creaking and popping, and through old pipes water still flows. It sounds like the school is breathing, like it has a heartbeat, and I like this thought, crawl into its hands, let it tuck me into the folds of sleep.

Elizabeth Lilly was born 1993 in New Orleans. Her Parents are Brenda and Tracy Lilly. Elizabeth has two younger sisters. The Lilly family lives in Algiers, an historic neighborhood on the Westbank of the city. She attended Alice M. Harte Elementary school through 6th grade and was a student at Lusher Charter High School from the time it reopened in the wake of Katrina. She was a junior and in her third year in Lusher's Creative Writing Program, when she won the Society's gold medal for Best Short Story by a High School Teacher. She gives full credit to her sponsoring teacher, Brad Richard, Elizabeth, now in college, is considering Creative Writing and English as possible careers, but also has a strong interest in Psychology and Sociology. "What I do know is that writing and literature will be my unconditional companions." She has had poems featured in the Creative Writing Program's literary magazine *Street* and has received an honorable mention in the Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest. In 2009 she received a silver medal from the Scholastic Young Arts and Writing Awards for another short story, *The Neighborhood*. In 2008, she placed in the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition with that same story.



M'bililia Meekers
2009 Story by a
High School Student
Runner-Up Excerpt:
Termites



Termites

June has passed with its petite pitchers of cream and glassy bowls of strawberries. June has parted with no sign, no word from my grandmother, and I am increasingly worried that the neighborhood boys have smashed the termitarium, that palace, under the gaze of the golden sun.

I remember when time she reigned in our house. I am certain that it happened during those drowsy evenings in May when mother would appear in the doorway with those bundles of cloth from the seamstress' shop, where she worked, that seemed to burden her figure more and more each day like two overgrown toddlers still sitting on her hips.

I was eight at the time, and those curious parcels often eluded me, under their coarse cloaks of twine and butcher paper, but before dinner, I would quietly ascend the stairs to the door of my parents' bedroom, through whose golden keyhole I would spy my mother undressing a tender package or two. How delicious it was, watching her unfurl an unfinished scarf so red and fruitful, I could smell the brambles where it was born like a harvest of raspberries. Yes, I still remember listening with my ear against the keyhole to the curses she uttered when she'd discover a small rip in a client's dress, whose strands would dance around, under the fan, like worms in soil.

Then, the door would open, and kneeling at its threshold, petrified, I would be shooed downstairs to set the table, but never with the delicate glasses and silverware that dazzled our guests so vigorously. Though I wasn't aware of it just then, my daily chore was a woman's job, one which my father found quite deplorable. He favored my love of trains and was disappointed that they didn't occupy more of the evening hours.

Still, I am sure my grandmother came during dinnertime while I watched the feverish steam of couscous meander out of my younger brother's mouth like a forgotten trail through the eucalyptus trees outside. "Jacob, don't chew with your mouth open," my mother chided him, when a knock danced upon our front door.

Father raised himself from his place across from me to answer it. I heard him from the hallway: "Augusta, I wasn't aware—"

"No, I'm sure you weren't," she interrupted him, moving forward. Father stretched his arms grabbing the

top of the doorframe to block her entrance.

"What brings you out here?" he asked.

"A few family matters on our side." After father looked at her quizzically, she clarified, "On Hannah's side. I need a place to stay." A termite flew through the door way and fluttered around the light above my head. It began to beat itself against the lamp.

"There are some lovely inns around town. Morris has a nice one, I know. He'd probably give you a discount."

"I rather enjoy the country," she said.

"And I've heard there's a very—"

"No, I like out here, John. It's quiet. There's no need to arrange anything." Over my father's shoulder, I saw her big white teeth. Another termite flew inside.

"Now's not the best time, Augusta."

The termite beat itself against the lamp, as she sternly said, "I know you have a free room."

"No, there is no more space. I'm sorry, but—"

"Where's Hannah? Hannah!" she called out.

"She's not here right now."

My mother peered into the hallway where my grandmother's presence seemed to take hold of the doorframe and silently shake it until the bones of our house quivered and my father invited her inside. "Hello, mom," my mother said, softly.

"Hello, darling. John take my bags."

Father lifted her suitcase and scowled at my mother who touched my arm and said, "Set a place for Grandma." Without a sound, I obeyed.

My grandmother was a dark woman who often fixed her hair in a way that drew attention to her round face and stern mouth. I watched her shoulder blades stab her linen dress, as she walked calmly to sit down at the head of the table.

"Would you like something to drink, Mom?" my mother wondered. Grandma's shoulder blades were still poking the back of her dress. They looked like they might be muscular and full of veins. I shuddered.

"Water will be fine, thank you."

"Henry, would you bring Grandma some water, please?" my mother asked me.

As I passed by her chair, my grandmother gripped my shoulder and said, "No ice, child, but perhaps a slice of lemon would temper my stomach." One of her shoulder blades twitched slightly as I retreated to the

kitchen, where the scent of lemon seeped into my palms and the thin slices fell, without protest, onto the kitchen counter.

When I returned, my grandmother was smoothing a napkin onto her lap, as my family ate more quietly than usual. I set the glass next to her and sat in front of the meal, which lingered inconveniently on my plate. My grandmother patted her mouth with the napkin and observed my brother playing with his chicken out of the corner of her eye. I could not eat. My grandmother's presence demanded my attention like the roar of a teacher silencing her students. She was the first to finish, and when the rest of my family had licked their plates clean, retiring to the den, she still sat there at the head of the table. My stomach rippled like the sea-sick rolls of the wind in a sail. I asked to be excused. "That snapping, grumbling feeling in your gut is called hunger. Eat," she replied and showed me back to the table, where I swallowed each monstrous bite. Only after my plate was spotless did she release me.

During the following weeks, our house was silent under my grandmother's watchful presence, and after nine, only moonlight illuminated our rooms. Those nights were like an ancient tablet engraved with moonlight. I can still hear the soft tapping of its chisel echoing throughout my bedroom, while the breeze stirs the skirts of my curtains, who nervously step back from the window as if it were my father staring at their ankles, not me.

Those nights, Jacob and I would leave the stronghold of pillows and quilts that encompassed our beds to explore the groaning house. One night, like a grinning raccoon, I snatched up an earring, glinting on the mahogany floor. Knelt beside my grandmother's open door, I heard a pause in her rhythmic breathing as I raised myself from the ground. My grandmother stirred, placing her hand upon her ear as a faint chattering snuck in through the window. The house swelled for a moment, causing Jacob to look at me, anxiously. I pushed him towards the window, where we watched a purple cloud squirm under Selene's white eye. "Henry. Jacob. Go to bed," my grandmother said, sharply, from behind us. I glanced back at her and saw, through her cotton nightdress, that the rolls in her stomach had multiplied.

Then, a swarm of termites floated in as if blown from a dandelion, wings caressing our cheeks like butterfly kisses. Jacob was the first to tear off a termite that attempted to tunnel his ear. Wings fluttered along our calves and soon after, I was batting termites off of my limbs. Jacob began to cry as my mother rushed in to help Grandma close the window. The shutter's latch snapped shut and the two women scattered, closing the other open windows around the house. I fled with my brother to the safety under our covers where the chattering of the termites stroked our arms until we fell asleep.

In the morning, I awoke to a quiet house. Through my open door I saw my grandmother changing in the bathroom. Her wet body was bulbous and covered in stiff brown rings. I rubbed my eyes, trying to see more clearly,

but when I looked back at her she was already putting on her bath robe. Peeling myself from my bed sheets, I walked to the window. Termite wings were scattered across the cool floor, and whenever I lifted my feet they were covered with wings, a sticky film that laminated the soles of my feet. I opened the shutters, and through the maze of eucalyptus trees I spotted the mound, the palace from where the cloud of insects was born.

**** One evening, two years before, I was very cross with Mother and slipped out the back door, while she was feeding Jacob, to calm my nerves like my teachers had suggested whenever I was very angry. I walked through the eucalyptus trees, watching their shadows ripple as the sun set. The golden earth glowed. I listened to the insects whisper to each other as the sky began to purple, like a bruise, in the east. Beneath its source, a golden hand seemed to rise from the soil, reaching for the violet sky, as I approached. While I ran towards it, the rainbow eucalyptus trees revealed the green and red gashes.

The insects began to chatter, loudly, and, standing before it, I realized that it resembled a sandcastle more than a hand. The mound's highest tower glistened just above the tree branches, where the amber termites carved stories into the palace walls like scribes. A piece of the termitarium had washed away in the rain, and within the labyrinth inside, a few termites turned to regard me with their large, ebony eyes. Then, they spiraled into the air like the dancing princesses. The rest of the amber termites began to join in one by one, until they were dancing upon my skin.

The termitarium began to shake a little, and the golden walls began to crumble. A groan reverberated through the mound as the termites swarmed around me. I screamed and looked for the roof of our house. It was nowhere to be found through the fluttering termite wings, which adhered to my damp cheeks. More pieces of the termitarium began to crumble as I batted the insects off of my body.

Mother must have seen the termites spiraling up, like smoke, from the house and realized I had left because she grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the swarm. When we reached the house, she told me to be quiet because I was still sniffing quite loudly. She commanded, "Don't go to there again. It's not safe." Grandma came to visit a few weeks later and I did not visit the termitarium again that year.

My grandmother walked in, shoulder blades poking out more than usual. She softly said, "It seems they're gone." I put my ear to the wall and heard no carving of foreign messages on the inside of our house, but, as I was about to reply, a tiny brown termite appeared near my face, gasping for air. My grandmother became rabid as I backed away from the wall. She began to claw the walls, ripping them open to see the squirming belly of the house, where our new inhabitants dwelled.

During the hours she hacked at the walls, her robe began to loosen and slip off of her shoulder,

revealing her transparent shoulder blades which had elongated into termite wings. The termites continued tunneling. Looking down at herself, my grandmother started to tear at her face, molting on the floor like a larva in a buffalo carcass. After she was done, she snapped at my leg and crawled onto the windowsill, as I backed further away. Her antennae fumbled around the shutters like a blind man and his cane before she dived into the evening air to find the palace blushing in the warmth of the orange sun.

Yes, I am sure that's how it came about. I will go out to the termitarium tomorrow afternoon to examine the damage, and I hope they will not just be crumbling

lumps of dirt that once held the impressions of many grandmothers. I hope that its chandeliers will still catch the light like they did after my grandmother left and that it will still sit beside the eucalyptus trees like a mountain of gold ripening under a hot glance of sunlight.

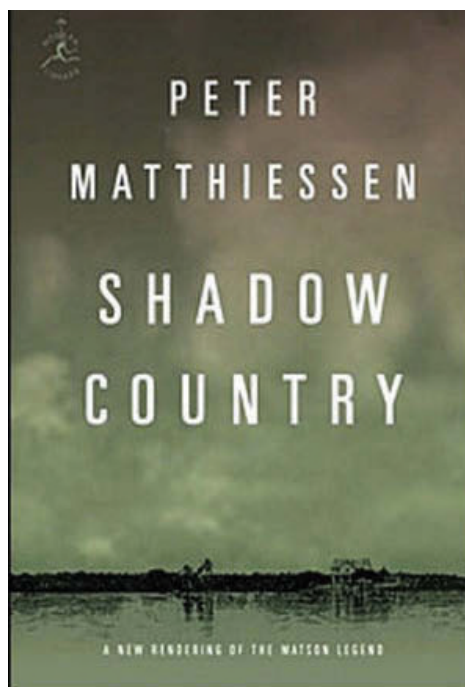
M'Bilia Meekers is currently pursuing a B.A. at Tulane University. Her series of poems on Louis Congo has won an American Voices medal in the 2011 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Ms. Meekers, who entered Tulane this year, is a graduate of Lusher Charter High School and former student of Lusher Creative Writing Director Brad Richard.

Recommended Reading: 2008 Novels

Lavinia

by Ursula K. Le Guin

Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* dramatizes the events leading up to the founding of Rome, mainly through the story of the title character, an 18-year-old virgin princess whose fabled betrothal to the defeated Trojan warrior Aeneas is mentioned in Virgil's *Aeneid*. (In fact, it was Le Guin's reading of Virgil that gave birth to this novel, and its pages are haunted by the ghost of the great Latin poet.) Since escaping from his fallen home city of Troy, Aeneas has put behind him the deep (literally) dying love of Queen Dido of Carthage, and is about to make landfall with his small fleet of ships in order to found a new city. Those readers familiar with the *Aeneid* already know this background, but for those who haven't read the epic, the briefing the ghost of Virgil gives to Lavinia in these pages serves that purpose. The ghostly recap is a neat trick — one of many that show off the great talent of Le Guin.



Shadow Country

by Peter Matthiessen

Shadow Country, which won the 2008 National Book Award for fiction, is a revised, condensed, renamed version of a trilogy the author published in the 1990s. The novel takes place in the early 20th century on the western Florida frontier, which Matthiessen explores in all of its watery, mythological and intensely psychological glory. The focus is on the life and legend of Everglades farmer and outlaw E.J. Watson, a character certainly large and dangerous enough to fill the book's 900 pages. As the novel opens, a gathering of men wait for Watson, ready to take the law into their own hands. Pick up this book and open it, and you'll be taking up some grand winter reading into your own hands.



James Nolan
2008
Best Novel
Excerpt:
Higher Ground



Judge Michael Murphy has been in book publishing 28 years. His first 13 years were with Random House, where he was a Vice President. Later, he ran William Morrow as their Publisher. In September, 2007, he formed his own agency, Max & Co. A Literary Agency & Social Club.

One of his authors, who attended Words & Music, 2008 was New York Times best-selling writer Tony O'Neill, who was tabbed by Esquire as the IT writer of the decade. Two of his authors attending in 2009 were New Orleans residents, Andrea Young and Barb Johnson. Barb was Glimmer Train's Best New Voice 2007, and won the Washington Square competition the same year. She was recipient of A Room of Her Own grant for 2009. Her first book, *More of This World or Maybe Another*, was just published by Harper Collins. Andy Young is an accomplished poet who is now writing both fiction and non-fiction prose as well.



Editor's Note: *Higher Ground*, which won the 2008 Gold Medal for Best Novel in the Society's Faulkner-Wisdom Competition, was published in 2011. It is a comic noir novel that begins five months after a hurricane has devastated New Orleans. Nicole Naquin, home for the first time in decades, is living next door to her mother Miss Gertie, an elderly evacuee from Lakeview reduced to pushing pills in a French Quarter gay bar. On the day Nicole's brother is killed in a drive-by shooting, she crashes the car into her high-school sweetheart's FEMA trailer, igniting a sexy romance among the ruins. It's a classic story of individual redemption amid collective destruction, one in which crooked politicians rule the day, leaving displaced home owners, bereaved mothers, drag queens, drug dealers, and illegal immigrants to band together for survival and justice. The real protagonist—the people of New Orleans—won't be fooled any longer. As Miss Gertie says, "I'm moving to higher ground."

The afternoon that Nicole rammed her navy-blue Saturn into the FEMA trailer, she was driving on new meds with a tombstone in the back of the car.

That morning, on her Saturday off, she'd borrowed a dolly from Tony's Superette at the corner and hired Hunter, the tattooed delivery boy, to meet her at the cemetery to help load the damn thing into her car. Naquin. Hers was a common New Orleans surname, and six generations of almost illegible inscriptions were crowded onto the cracked marble tablet, now stained nicotine-yellow by the floodwaters. Her father's name and dates were carved in the second-to-last space. Nicole had mentally reserved the next place on the tombstone for her seventy-six year-old mother. At the moment, Nicole couldn't imagine who else could possibly take that last slot.

Before the end of the day, she would find out.

But now, on top of everything else that would go wrong today, she was stranded with a flat at the only gas station left open in Lakeview. The lone attendant was rolling the punctured tire toward her, holding up a squat silver nail. Stoop-shouldered, he dragged his feet like someone working on a chain gang.

"Lady, you picked up a roofing nail," he crowed, as if he'd discovered a tumor. "Another little present from FEMA."

Nicole grimaced. She never told people where she worked, unless she had time for an hour-long tirade against the government. She felt like someone in the French Resistance secretly working for the Nazis, or a Creole collaborating with the Union army in occupied New Orleans. But the job with FEMA was the only one she could get. "How long will it take to fix it?" She glanced at his name badge. "Hewitt."

Hewitt spat, pink gums flashing in his tire-blackened face, then gestured to a mountain of rubber in the corner of the garage, next to the Pepsi machine. "You see all them other tires what got roofing nails? They lying all over the road now. Use 'em to tack up the blue tarps so it don't rain in people's houses." He eyeballed her Texas license plate. "This city is a crying shame."

"You don't have to tell me, Hewitt." She was relearning how to get things done in her torpid hometown: mention your mother, tell an interesting story, and call the person by name. "During the storm my momma lost her house in Lakeview where she'd lived for fifty years and now she's

camping out in the French Quarter and driving me up the wall, as if my crazy brother weren't enough with all his mystical hallucinations. Now if I don't get this tombstone back to her—"

"Tombstone?" He shaded his eyes with stubby fingers covered with grime to peek into the back of the S.U.V.

"During the storm the slab fell off our tomb in Lafayette Cemetery like a broken oven door." She pointed through the tinted hatchback window. "My daddy is buried in there."

He stared farther into the car. "Look, lady—"

"Call me Nicole," she said. "I grew up here in Lakeview. My momma has been coming to this station since Bienville landed. You must know Gertie Naquin, a sweet, yacky old lady with gray corkscrew curls." Nicole belonged, one of the few pleasures left to her in this town. She had a past here, if not a present. So fix the damn tire already.

"Miss Gertie. Sure I know her." He screwed up his face, catching Nicole's eye. "So how'd you do?"

This was the question on the tips of everyone's tongues. She had figured out that it didn't mean how are you? but rather how much of your life did you lose in the hurricane? "Momma's house got eight feet of water," she said, taking a deep breath, "and the day after the levees broke, the Coast Guard rescued her from the second floor, then they bused her to the Astrodome in Houston, and she came to stay with me in Austin while I was breaking up with my husband. So then three months ago we both moved into this shotgun double in the Quarter, you know, her on one side, me on the other—"

"Mean you moved here after the storm. For what?" He rolled his eyes. "Kicks?"

She let out a shrill laugh and turned red, shaking her head like a ragdoll. "Yeah, after twenty-eight years away, I picked now to come home. Smart, wouldn't you say? And if you don't fix my tire I'm going to break down crying and won't stop until I rust every scrap of metal in this place."

"Okay, I'll put the spare on, and you can come back next week for this thing." He bounced the flat tire. "Only don't run over no more roofing nails, hear?" With a weary whistle, he swung open the hatchback, yanked out the spare, and crouched next to it.

"Hewitt?" Nicole couldn't stop herself. When she was little, that was just how Uncle Alfonse, a tug boat mechanic, used to whistle whenever he'd come over to fix an air conditioner, and while he worked he'd let her hand him the tools. She knew her question might take all afternoon, but she really wanted to know.

"Yeah?" Hewitt's sky-blue eyes blinked up at her from a smudged face.

"How'd you do?"

He blinked again, shaking his head.

"In the storm, I mean," she said. "Did you get much water?"

"Lemme show you something." He hoisted up his turnip-shaped body.

Without uttering a word, he led her to the back lot of the gas station, where a rusted Impala was parked on a

weedy patch of cracked asphalt. When he popped open the door, Nicole peered inside. The back seat was made into a bed, piled with pillows and blankets, and the front seat was a nest of dirty clothes. From the dashboard he retrieved a violet velveteen slipper caked with mud, resting next to a toothbrush and tube of Crest.

"My mama was in that nursing home over in Chalmette they didn't bother to evacuate," he said, handing Nicole the slipper. "She was tied into her wheelchair account of her bum back, so she wouldn't slide out. The night before the storm I told her, 'Mama, come with me, we'll drive to Picayune to stay by cousin Ferrel's,' but she was worried about her dialysis. When the National Guard let me in that place two weeks later, this was all I could find of her. Still have nightmares about brown water inching up over her face."

Nicole looked at the moldy slipper in her hand, and then back at Hewitt. Tears welled in her eyes. "I don't know what—"

"That's okay," he said, taking the slipper and placing it back on the dashboard. "Not much anyone can say at this point. Tell Miss Gertie that Hewitt over by the gas station is still kicking. Told me she had a daughter somewhere off in Texas. Welcome home."

*

As Nicole swerved onto West End Boulevard, the crumbling tombstone shifted behind her, and she reached back to steady it. Barreling along past a thicket of picket signs advertising "roof repair" and "house gutting" and "mold abatement," she felt giddy and light-headed. She wasn't sure if it was because the tire was changed, or because the Zolof was finally kicking in.

Surely she never thought she'd need antidepressants here in festive New Orleans. But the divorce had been like flossing her teeth compared to coping with this broken city, an ashen expanse of dark, abandoned streets lined with boarded-up houses and patrolled by Humvees filled with National Guardsmen shouldering M-16s. Most of these decaying shells still had the ominous red X of the rescuers spray-painted next to their doors, as if the biblical Angel of Death had passed over them, marking the number of the living and the dead. Only a third of the former residents had returned, mostly to the historic neighborhoods perched along the sliver of higher ground that banked the Mississippi River. The bowl of reclaimed swampland that made up the modern city was now a tundra of phantasmal ruins. It was as if Nicole's blue Saturn were spinning around inside the grainy black-and-white war footage of bombed out Dresden. Suddenly turning a corner, the sight could make her heart stop.

Leave it to her gynecologist ex-husband to demand a divorce the day after the most destructive storm in world history slammed into New Orleans, precisely at that moment when she had one eye glued on the CNN coverage while with the other she was searching the Internet for her mother's name posted among the thousands on refugee lists.

"Can't you see I'm busy, Buster?" That was the only response she could muster at the moment. After she

located her mother and flew her to their house, what Buster had told her sank in. In a nutshell, he was kicking her out. While her mother spent the morning in the bathroom soaking her weary old bones in all the hot water the state of Texas had on tap, the couple had it out.

"So who is this skanky twat you've been seeing?" Nicole sputtered, slamming down the coffee pot. "Don't you get enough of that during office exams?"

"Becky and I are going to be married as soon as I can disentangle myself from—"

"And how long have you been sneaking around screwing Miss Cuntley?"

"About as long as you and I snuck around while I was married to my first wife."

That did it.

Nicole had blamed herself. She just didn't feel sexy or pretty anymore. When she studied herself at the full-length mirror in her Austin bathroom, what she saw was Mrs. Frump, no matter how much she moisturized or waxed or spun like a manic hamster on the stationary bicycle in the garage. Her spiky hair was tinted bronze—she could never get the color right—and her porcelain complexion webbed with fine lines like antique china. Sure, her plump, wide-hipped friends told her she was the original Heroin Chic model, so gaunt, wispy, and flat-chested. But look at them. She felt most herself dressed in teenage boy's clothes from off the rack at the Gap, like a ragamuffin David Bowie with Orphan Annie eyes. Now there she was, forty-six, childless, and snake-bit, just another middle-aged ex-Mrs. Doctor from the Texas burbs.

"Boy, I thought I had problems," her mother had said, toweling the hair that hadn't been washed since the day her kitchen had flooded up to her second chin. "Sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear." Nicole and Buster had been screaming at each other in the breakfast nook for an hour.

"Momma, don't. . . ." Nicole was melting into a puddle, sobbing from every pore.

"Just throw out the no good bum and redecorate." Gertie Naquin dried her daughter's face with the damp bath towel.

"It's his house. And I signed a pre-nup, remember? According to which, even the goddamn Cuisinart is his." Her wheezing sobs turned into a screech. "After fifteen years, all I've got is the clothes on my back."

"That makes two of us."

All Nicole kept from her marriage was the Saturn, in which she was now bowling along past the mounds of fetid debris on Mouton Street on one last Saturday errand, to look for Momma's potting trowel and watering can. Her mother had discovered these rusted treasures in the wash shed the last time she went to visit the ruins of her house. Of all things, her momma was starting a garden. Mrs. Naquin had lost all of her antique furniture and, what is worse, the albums with family pictures going back to the 1880s.

"If I can't have my old memories back, looks like I'll have to grow me some new ones," her mother had her told this morning, trellising a potato vine up a post on her

side gallery. She was dressed in Salvation Army clothes, camping out alone in three sparsely furnished rooms with her crippled dachshund, Schnitzel. Never ever, during Nicole's booze-fueled daydreams while rattling the Quarter as a gangly teenager, could she have pictured that one day she would live next door to her mother on Dauphine Street. That some day she might live close to her older brother Marky, maybe.

But poor Marky, now that was another story.

So far, hardly anyone in her mother's Lakeview neighborhood had come back, although occasionally Nicole spotted the white breadbox of a FEMA trailer squatting in a driveway or in front of a house, mounted on six cinderblock pillars. If you asked her, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was a government bureau dreamed up in some lost chapter of Alice in Wonderland. But the job was all she could scrounge up in a city where few businesses had reopened. So from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. every weekday, she was now a Debris Removal Monitor. That meant she counted the dump trucks hauling the mountains of trash from the sites where people were gutting their houses. Bored out of her gourd, watching the parade of trucks lumber by heaped with bulging plastic sacks, she dubbed herself Miss Glad Bag.

What a perfect job for somebody thrown away.

She was suddenly grateful to be back on four solid wheels, and couldn't wait to get home to her mother's oil-cloth covered kitchen table. She didn't know what to say to Hewitt or to anyone else in this city. When she heard their hurricane sagas, she'd fight back tears, her mouth would flap open, but no words would come out. And the stories were everywhere. Hewitt's was now roiling around in her mind with Momma's and her own Job-like tales of tribulation. You worked hard, paid your bills, ate plenty of fiber, drank eight glasses of water a day, and then in a flash, everything you once recognized as your life was gone.

Vanished.

That makes two of us.

A whole city of us.

As her car lurched though the open crater of a pothole, the dolly rattled in the back of the S.U.V. and the marble slab shifted again, sliding from its position propped between two boxes. Then the massive stone toppled, crushing the boxes and crashing against the dolly. At that moment, she was sucking from a plastic water bottle in her right hand. These new pills made her so thirsty. And when she lifted her other hand from the steering wheel to reach back and steady the stone—for just one second—she felt the jagged edges of the two splintered fragments. Her mother would throw a fit.

Then before she knew it, the car veered toward a FEMA trailer parked at the curb, slamming to a sudden halt with a resounding crash.

James Nolan's collections of poetry are Why I Live in the Forest and What Moves Is Not the Wind, and his short fiction is represented in the anthology New Orleans Noir. He directs the Loyola Writing Institute.



Tena Russ
2008
Best
Novel In Progress
Excerpt:
After Paradise



Deborah Grosvenor has worked in book publishing for more than 20 years as an editor and literary agent. During her career, she has edited or represented hundreds of fiction and nonfiction books in the areas of history, biography, politics, current affairs, memoir, the environment, the military, the South, and science, among others. Her best-

known acquisition as an editor was a first novel, *The Hunt for Red October* by Tom Clancy. Deborah also signed up bestselling author Homer Hickham's first work, *Torpedo Junction*, and helped launch bestselling author's Stephen Coonts's first novel, *Flight of the Intruder*. After running her Grosvenor Literary Agency for ten years, Deborah merged her company for a while with the Kneerim and Williams Agency, then she re-established her own firm again. With her various colleagues she has represented a range of authors, from *New York Times* best-sellers to Pulitzer prize winners, among them Brad Meltzer, James Fenton, Stephen Greenblatt, Joseph Ellis, Christopher Hitchens, Caroline Elkins, Juan Cole, Dr. Susan Love, E. O. Wilson, Robert Pinsky, Howard Gardner, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, Edward M. Hallowell, Graham Allison, Elizabeth Pryor, Henry Allen, Tom Oliphant, Eleanor Clift, Curtis Wilkie, Aaron Miller, and Mort Kondracke.

After Paradise

Chapter One

In the early morning light, Mom is an Impressionist portrait, Woman in a Blue Bathrobe. Everything about her invites your gaze to linger: her movie star profile, her flawless complexion, even the gentle curve of her neck where Dad likes to rest his hand. Her hair, slung in a loose ponytail at the crown of her head, is the color of ginger ale, a shade that sells peroxide by the gallon. Hers is real.

I pad barefoot across the hardwood floor. As

I approach the breakfast table, a waft of her favorite perfume, a blend of lilac and orange blossom called *Femme*, reaches my nose.

"You're awake early," she says, flipping through the pages of *Self Magazine*. Sunday mornings when the rest of us are asleep is her sacred private time. I have trespassed.

"My room's a furnace," I say. I grab a green apple from the bowl and polish it against my nightgown.

She glances up and gives a little frown. "You might want to change into something else. There are men in the house."

"Mom, it's six-thirty. The men in the house are still asleep. Besides, brothers and fathers don't count as men." I bite into the apple. It's tart to the point of bitterness. "I can see through your nightgown," she says. "You're not wearing underwear."

"Who sleeps in underwear and a nightgown?" She holds up her manicured hand. "I'm just being honest. I thought you'd want to know, dear." The last word isn't a term of endearment. It draws a line in the sand. Unwilling to go to battle over something as stupid as bedclothes, I drift over to the hutch to check yesterday's mail, not that I'm expecting anything. In the pile are the usual bills, flyers, and glossy catalogs that advertise goods and services we don't want or can't afford—cosmetic surgery, the Grand Tour of Europe, wristwatches as thin as a communion wafer. In the pile is a square envelope, hand-addressed in burgundy ink to me, Miss Daisy Pettersen. It's postmarked London, but the return address is Chicago. The card inside is printed in the same burgundy ink.

Save the date!

August 1 benefit performance given by distinguished alumnae

Hiroko Kim, Marissa Ossorio, and Jasmine Li Wang

The Chicago Arts Alliance

More information to follow.

Why would I care about a benefit in Chicago? I live in dinky Paradise, WI and I'm hardly in a position to be a benefactor of the arts. I toss the card into the wastebasket, where it lands upside-down. Wait, there's something scribbled on the back, Chinese writing! One character resembles the number nine with a slash across the middle and some dots. The other one looks like a

stick figure wearing a top hat and cowboy chaps.

I place the card face-up on the table so Mom doesn't see the Chinese writing. She barely glances at it. "Looks like junk mail."

"Junk mail isn't usually addressed by hand."

"Sometimes they print it like that to make you think it's handwritten."

I lick the tip of my finger and swipe it across the ink. "It's gel pen."

"It's nothing," she says, shrugging. "I get all kinds of requests for donations."

"I'm not being asked for money," I say. "Only to save the date." But she's back to her magazine.

"This article is fascinating," she says. "Did you know that eggs can help you lose weight? Protein fills you up so you're not as hungry later in the day."

Neither of us needs to lose weight. I tap the edge of the invitation against my palm. I have to find out who sent this. "I don't think it's junk," I say. "For one thing, they spelled Pettersen right, with an e and not an o. And they know I'm a Miss, not a Mrs."

She turns her lioness eyes on me. "If I were you, I wouldn't waste my time worrying about it. Don't you have something better to do?"

I scoop the card from the table and slide it into the envelope, leaving her to read an article on teeth whitening. I take the back stairs two at a time to my third floor bedroom, at the landing passing through a pair of gauzy curtains made of muslin, tied back with cord. Since the attic is roughed-in but not finished, Dad and I stapled white sheets to the studs to create walls. The breeze from my fan makes the walls seem to breathe. I can breathe up here, too, away from Mom's scrutiny. Her disapproval of me seems more general than specific; a compost heap of unidentifiable parts. Possibly the problem is that I grew into a person with breasts. I am no longer a life-sized doll to dress up and show off.

The story goes that when she couldn't conceive, she adopted me as an infant. Then, she was warm and protective when monsters and bogeymen hid under the bed and lurked in the closet. She'd tell me my sheet was an angel's wing that would protect me while I slept. If the sheet came off during the night, I'd scream in panic and she'd stumble down the hall to tuck me in again, murmuring, it's okay, hush now, and I'd be asleep before she left the room. Then she got a two-for-one surprise that made her lap—formerly my province—suddenly full of boy babies. Frank and Lowell orbit her like twin moons. Maybe it's because they're male or maybe because they came from her body as I did not, but after their arrival I was no longer a cute little waif with dark eyes. I was an annoyance.

Mom was born with *Presence*, a quality that casts a long shadow over a daughter. Unlike the rest of us mere mortals, she never had to worry if she'd ever grow into her lips or have a boyfriend. In her company, males of all ages stand taller. Dad's buddies love to tell her silly stories just to hear her laugh. She listens to their flatteries and then flits away, sated on honeysuckle. Gossiping

on the phone with her friend, Hattie, she refers to her admirers as ninnies. She is blonde to the bone.

I wonder how her life would have been different if she'd been born ugly or worse, to her way of thinking, nondescript. The disadvantage of being born with great beauty is that it has no place to go. Each morning is a step away from the original perfect design, a gift one must surely surrender with regret. I wouldn't care if she looked like E. T. if she loved me.

I flop down on my bed and open my new laptop, a combined eighteenth birthday and early graduation gift, and begin a Google search for Chinese characters and their meanings. Given my mysterious heritage, those Chinese characters are more than idle curiosity. I have Chinese eyes, the legacy of unknown ancestors. Bring up that topic in our house and you get a lot of stitched-up lips. Since the adoption was private, I don't know who my birthparents are, and even if I tried to find them I can't search the adoption records until I'm twenty-one. All the agency would reveal is that my mother was a healthy twenty-five year-old woman of Chinese descent and that she was single. To say that I miss my birthparents isn't totally accurate. You can't miss someone you don't know. Certainly I lack them, but missing them would imply some kind of relationship. They are phantom limbs.

According to the website, there are more than 100,000 Chinese characters. At the top of the list are the most frequently searched: love, strength, peace, and happiness. The ones on the card aren't any of those. I click through link after link and they're all beginning to look alike. What makes it ever harder is that I'm trying to find two characters together, not just a singleton. I find characters that represent numbers, popular phrases, proper names, astrology and attributes such as loyalty, kindness, harmony, creativity, and even stubbornness.

I've been accused of being stubborn. I think I'm not so much stubborn as tenacious, squared. I'll admit to being a packrat. I hang onto things. I hold onto stuff not out of sentiment, but because I might need it someday. I also hold onto implausible dreams, like the one where Mom sees me for who I am and not as a reflection of her own lovely self, and the one about finding the birthparents who regret giving me away. Meanwhile, there's life between dreams.

At 9:30 Mom, Dad, and the twins are about to push off for their weekly dose of dogma. I can hear my brothers thumping around downstairs as Mom calls for them to get a move on. Thirteen year-olds don't happily rise before noon on weekends. Mom, probably already perspiring in her navy dress with the white collar, calls up to me, "I'll pray for you." She can save her breath. To get her off my case, I've informed her that I've become a Buddhist and will put in a private word with the Great Whomever as needed.

As soon as the van's tail lights blink at the end of the driveway, I head down to the kitchen for a bagel and some coffee and I'm off to my weekend waitress job at the café. Sundays are good for tips because people

arrive from services freshly reminded to be kinder to their fellow pilgrims. Sometimes the customers are a pain, but I'm a favorite of the boss, Sam Zimmerman. The café is named after his late sister, Christina, whom I remember as a sweet woman with a weight problem and hair the color of a nicotine stain. Sam's sixty, a Vietnam veteran, and a close friend of Dad. Mom thinks he's an unsuitable companion for me, which makes me like him all the more. His café is a Quonset hut, built in the Forties. The corrugated metal exterior may be austere, but it's not a gulag as my best friend Esmé calls it. I prefer to think of it as the mothership, a place of friendly containment. Besides, one woman's prison is another woman's sanctuary. Here, I am no longer the devalued daughter of a narcissist; I am Sam's protégé.

I was fifteen when I showed up at his back door and announced my availability as a waitress. He shook his head and said, "Honey, you're way too skinny to carry a loaded tray. Come back when you've gained ten pounds." I showed up the following day and offered to work for free for a week. How could he turn down free labor? "Okay, kid," he said. "But we've got to fatten you up." It was pure heaven when he started feeding me all I could eat, a welcome change from the home front. During quiet times, I'd be in Sam's kitchen, looking over his shoulder, pestering him with endless questions about cooking techniques. His daily specials depend on his mood and whatever fresh ingredients are on hand, improvisations that seem random until you realize they're scheduled chaos, like scat singing. Sam says Ella Fitzgerald is the greatest singer of all time.

"Listen to this," he'll say, cranking up the oldies station on the blue plastic radio. "Is the woman not the best?" Once I accused him of being in a time warp. He fired back, "The new stuff's crap, baby. Nothing since the Fifties is worth the juice."

He's been allowing me to fool around with some of his recipes, a privilege he doesn't extend to the other waitresses. He's also encouraging me to go to culinary school, which I am considering. Rather than attend a four-year college as my English teacher, Mrs. Withrow, recommends, I want the shortest route to autonomy. This morning the front lot's full. I park in the back, as always, and pause to redo my long hair, which has already wiggled out of its ponytail holder. When I enter the kitchen, the air is warm syrup. Six feet four, wearing ancient fatigues and scuffed army boots, Sam's working the griddle. He flips an egg and gives me his half-smile. He's got one blue eye and one green eye, as if God were trying out colors and couldn't decide.

"Hey," he says. "How's things at your place?" Sam's well-acquainted with my domestic woes.

"The floggings will continue until morale improves."

"Aren't we in a mood?"

Sometimes it's annoying that he knows me so well. "We are not in a mood."

"Suit yourself. Take this out to four, okay?" He hands me a platter loaded with a patty melt, crisp fries,

and a scoop of coleslaw. My mouth begins to water. I snake a path through the tables to deliver the patty melt to table four where a commotion is in progress. A toddler is pitching a fit because the meatballs on her plate are touching each other. Emitting a scream that would make a dog's ears bleed, the kid launches a meatball at the nearest target, me. It bounces on my forehead with a splat. In the washroom Ginnie, another waitress who's my age, snuffs out her cigarette. The room smells of her Marlboro, cleaning solution, and ancient dampness. She gives me the once-over. "Whoa. Someone shoot ya?"

I assess the damage in the cracked mirror over the sink. "It's a jungle out there." Scrubbing my face with a grainy sliver of Lava, I watch in the mirror as she applies brown liner to her lips, puffing them into a kiss. Then she adjusts her big hoop earrings, which are all but lost in her perm'd hair. One thing you can say about Ginnie is she's decorative. She adores jewelry and keeps finding new places to wear it. The girl has more piercings than a soaker hose.

"I'm blastin' off for Chicago next weekend," she says. She pulls a stick of gum from its foil wrapper and folds it into her mouth with her tongue.

"I'd love to be going anywhere," I say.

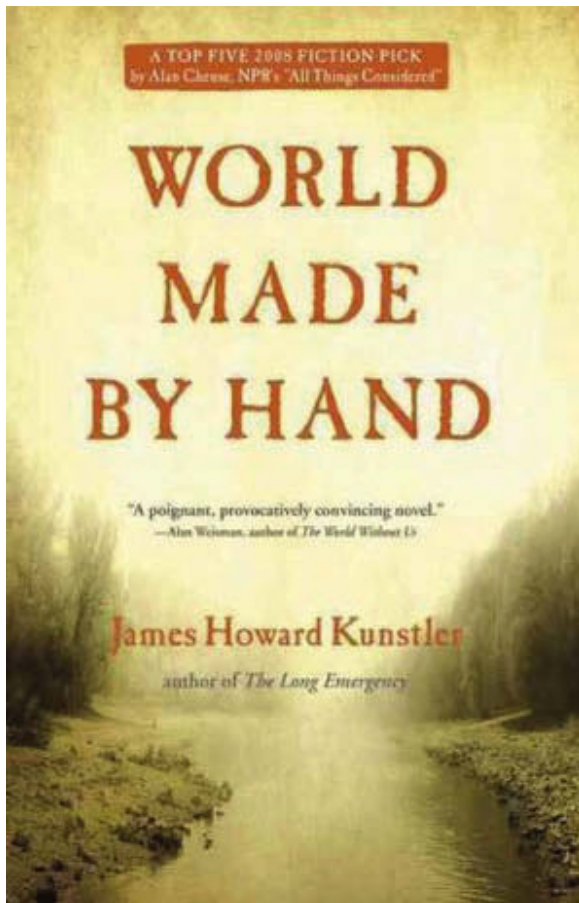
"The last time me and my sister was there we saw a fortune teller in Chinatown. Get this. The lady said I was gonna have seven kids. Can you imagine me with seven kids?" I can well imagine her with seven frizzy-haired kids pouring from her VW bus like marbles from a bottle. "First I gotta find their daddy," she says with a cackle.

"Chinatown."

"Yeah, it's really something. They've got some funky food over there, stuff you wouldn't recognize as food. Did you know they hang dead birds in the windows where the curtains oughta be? They keep them there to dry or something. Say, there's a lot of Chinese people down there. Guess you never get to see your people, huh? If I was you I'd for sure check the place out." After a fogging from a king-sized can of Aqua Net, she gives herself a little wink. "Did I mention that after graduation I'll be studying cosmetology in Chicago? I am totally over this town and you can quote me."

"And you can quote me on this," I say, patting my face dry with a paper towel. "The last words I hear before I die will not be 'check, please.'"

Tena Russ is author of After Paradise, her first novel. The manuscript won the 2009 James Jones First Novel Fellowship. In 2008, After Paradise won best Novel-in-Progress in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. Following her studies at Northwestern University and the American Academy of Art, Tena worked as a portrait artist before turning to writing. Her published work includes a series of interviews and features for a Chicago area newspaper. Tena and her husband live in a suburb of Chicago with their two dogs. She volunteers with one of the dogs in a literacy program for young children. Tena is working on her second novel.



2008 Novels Recommended

World Made By Hand

by James Howard Kunstler

In the wake of a series of global catastrophes that have destroyed industrial civilization, the inhabitants of Union Grove, a small New York town, do anything they can to get by, as they struggle to deal with a new way of life over the course of an eventful summer, in a novel set several decades in the future. By the author of **The Long Emergency**.

A Mercy

By Toni Morrison.

The fate of a slave child abandoned by her mother animates this allusive novel — part Faulknerian puzzle, part dream-song — about orphaned women who form an eccentric household in late-17th-century America. Morrison's farmers and rum traders, masters and slaves, indentured whites and captive Native Americans live side by side, often in violent conflict, in a lawless, ripe American Eden that is both a haven and a prison — an emerging nation whose identity is rooted equally in Old World superstitions and New World appetites and fears.

The Curious Case of the 2008 Award for Best Novella:

Thomas Earl Allen

2008 Best Novella

Browns Backers

Judged by **Julia Glass**

The Faulkner Society regrets that the winner selected by Ms. Glass never responded to any of our communications to the addresses supplied to us and he failed to show up for the Society's gala awards event, a requirement for those selected winners. By failing to respond to our multiple communications and by failing to attend the awards event, he defaulted. Since he was, therefore, not awarded a prize, we have no rights to an excerpt from his novella submitted.



Judge Julia Glass won the National Book Award for *Three Junes*, her debut work of fiction. *Three Junes* is a novel composed of three linked novella, one of which, *Collies*, won the Faulkner Society's gold medal for Best Novella in 2000. Ms. Glass expanded the concept to create *Three Junes*. Her second novel, *The Whole World Over*, was highly praised by critics. She also has published an intimate and personal work of fiction about the intertwined lives of two sisters in her new book, *I See You Everywhere*, an October, 2008 release from Pantheon Books. Her fourth, *The Widower's Tale*, was published in 2010. And a fifth novel is on the horizon, with publication expected in early 2014. Glass was born in Boston, grew up in Lincoln, MA, and attended Concord Academy. She graduated from Yale in 1978. Intending to become a painter, she moved to New York City, where she lived for many years, painting in a small studio in Brooklyn and supporting herself as a freelance editor and copy editor, including several years in the copy department of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She lives in Marblehead, MA, with her partner, the photographer Dennis Cowley, and their two children, and works as a freelance journalist and editor.



Ladee Hubbard
2008
Best Short Story
Flip Lady



Judge Stewart O’Nan, a native of Pittsburgh, trained as an aerospace engineer in Boston, and worked as a structural test engineer on Long Island. His dozen novels include the award-winning *Snow Angels*, *A Prayer for the Dying*, *The Good Wife*, and *Last Night at the Lobster*. He’s also the author of *New England nonfiction favorites The Circus Fire* and, with Stephen King, *Faithful*, a story of the 2004 Boston Red Sox. He and his wife Trudi live in Pittsburgh.



I.
History: Ray Ray hears the sound of laughter, puts down his book and stares out the window.

Here they come now, children of the ancient ones, the hewers of wood, the cutters of cane barreling down the sidewalk on their Huffys and Schwinns. Little legs pumping over fat rubber tires, brakes squealing as they pull into the drive, standing on tip-toes as they straddle their bikes and stare up at the house with their mouths hanging open. Just like before. Some of them he still remembers: he made out with that girl’s sister in the seventh grade, played basketball with that boy’s uncle in high school. This one was all right until his brother joined the army, that one was okay until her daddy went to jail. And you see that girl in the back? The chubby girl standing by the curb, next to the brand new Schwinn? She hasn’t been the same since the Invasion of Grenada three years ago, in 1983.

The spice island. When the Marines landed she was living in St. George near the medical center with her mother, the doctor and Aunt Ruby, the nurse. The power went off, hospital plunging into a blue tide pool of sirens while machine gun fire cackled in the distance like a bag of JiffyPop bubbling up on a stove. Oh no, Aunt Ruby said. Just like before.

It’s all there, in his book: colonizer fanning out across the Atlantic like a hurricane, not exactly hungry but looking for spice. They cultivated cane, they built

the mills, they filled the islands up with slaves. Sugar kept the workers happy, it distracted them from grief. And 400 years later you had your military invasions and McDonald’s happy meals, your ho hos and pre-emptive strikes. Your Oreos and Reaganomics, your Cap’n Crunch.

And Kool-Aid. They can’t get enough of it. They sit in the driveway, they shift in their seats, they grip the plastic streamers affixed to their handlebars. One of them kicks the kickstand and steps forward, fingers curled into a small tight fist as he wraps on the kitchen door.

“Flip Lady? You in there?” Just like before. They roamed the entire earth in search of spice so why not here, why not now?

“Flip Lady? You home? It’s me, Willis...” For the past few weeks they’ve been coming almost every day.

Ray Ray closes the curtain. He shakes his head and turns towards the darkness of the back bedroom. “Mama? It’s those fucking kids again.”

II.

The squeak of old mattress coils, a single bang of a headboard against a bedroom wall. The Flip Lady wills herself upright and sets her feet down on the floor. Sits on the edge of her bed and stares at the chipped polish on her left big toe. Reaches for her slippers, straightens out her green housedress and walks out the bedroom door. The Flip Lady shuffles into the living room where her nineteen year old son sits on a low couch reading a book: long brown body hunched forward, elbows resting on his knees, lips moving as he peers down at the page in front of him. In an instant his life flashes before her in a series of fractured images, like a VHS tape on rewind. She sees him at 16, face hidden behind a comic book, then at seven when his feet barely touched the floor. And before that as a chubby toddler, gripping the cushions with his fat meaty fists, laughing as hoisted himself onto the couch. Without breaking her stride and for want of anything else to say she mutters, “I see you reading” and passes into the kitchen.

The Flip Lady lifts a pickle jar full of loose change from the counter and stares out the kitchen window.

“That you Willis?” she says to the little boy standing on her porch.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” Willis smiles.

She twists the lid off the jar, opens the kitchen

door and squints at the multitude assembled in her backyard. Willis plunges his hand into his pants' pocket and pulls out a fistful of dimes. He drops them into her jar with a series of empty pings.

"Well, alright then," the Flip Lady says.

Willis glances over his shoulder and winks.

She walks towards her refrigerator while Willis stands in the doorway. He cocks his head and peers into her living room: glass angel figurines and tea set on the lace doily in the cabinet against the wall; bronzed baby shoes mounted on a wooden plaque; framed high school graduation photos and Sears portraits of her two sons sitting on top of the TV set; a stack of LPs lined up on the floor. The back of a dark green Lazy Boy recliner and the edge of the plaid couch where her younger son sits, staring at a book. Willis turns his head back around and sees the Flip Lady standing in the middle of her bright yellow kitchen, easing two muffin trays stuffed with Dixie cups out of her freezer.

The Flip Lady studies Willis' face as he scoops the cups out of the trays: licking his lips, eyes lit up like birthday candles. She smiles. Her boys were the same way when they were that age, herding around her back door with all of their friends, giddy with excitement as they sucked on her homemade popsicles. She used to hand them out on weekends, it was a way to keep them all in her backyard where she could keep her eye on them from the kitchen window. Being a good mother, she wanted to get to know how her boys passed their time and with who, wanted to memorize their playmates' faces and study their gestures. Until she felt confident she could tell the clever from the calculated, the dreamy eyes from the dangerous, the quiet from the cruel. She hadn't done it for money. No one had to thank her although her neighbors told her many times how much they appreciated her looking out for their children that way.

The Flip Lady frowns. Of course everything does change, eventually. There comes a time when a mother just has to accept that the promise of sugary sweets has lost its ability to soothe all grief. They don't want your Kool-Aid any more. They busy, they got other things to do. One day you find yourself standing alone in the kitchen, hand wrapped around a cold cup, melting ice dripping down your fingers as you wonder to yourself when exactly the good little boys standing on the back porch became the big bad men walking out your front door.

She looks down at Willis. "How was school today, son? You studying hard, being a good boy? You doing what your mama tells you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Willis walks around, passing out Dixie cups to his friends.

"Well, alright then," the Flip Lady says.

III.

What you get for your money is a hunk of purple ice, a Dixie cup full of frozen Kool-Aid. The girl in the back stares down at hers. It's not quite what she was expecting, given how far they have come to get it. According to the black plastic Casio attached to her left wrist they've been

riding for a full twenty minutes in pretty much the exact opposite direction from where she was trying to get to, which was home. One minute she was in the schoolyard unlocking her bike and the next they were standing over her, the whole group of them saying, come with us. As soon as she looked up she knew it wasn't an invitation but an order. They were taking her to wherever it was they went when they sprinted off after class, their laughter echoing in the distance long after they had disappeared past the school gate. How could she say no? She lifts the cup to her open mouth and runs her tongue along its surface, absorbing flat sweetness and a salty aftertaste.

"It's just Kool-Aid," someone says.

The girl closes her mouth. She looks around the parking lot of the Radio Shack where they have parked their bikes to eat. Everyone is pushing the bottoms of their cups with the pads of their thumbs, making those sugar lumps rise into the air. They're tilting their cups to the side and pulling them out, melting Kool-Aid dripping down their hands as they flip them over, then carefully place them back inside the cups bottoms up. They're sucking on their fingers, they're licking their lips, their mouths are pressed against their homemade Popsicle flips.

"Whats a matter? Don't they have Kool-Aid where you come from?"

The girl looks down at her cup. She pushes her thumbs against the bottom but presses too hard: the hunk of ice pops out fast, soaring over the rim. Hands fumble as she tries to catch it, as it tumbles through her fingers cold and wet, as it dribbles down the front of her shirt and lands with a thud on the pavement at her feet.

"Now that's a shame."

The girl wipes her hands on the front of her shorts, her palms already sticky. She blames her upbringing, all those years spent stuck on that rock, how to flip a homemade Popsicle being just one more thing she should have known. She got the exact same looks from the kids on the island when she first moved there with her mother and Aunt Ruby all those years ago: What you come here for? What you want with this rock, when everybody trying to get off it? As if only white people were supposed to spin in dizzy circles like that, as missionaries or volunteers or tourists on extended leave. She can still see her former playmates in the eyes of her new school's handful of immigrant kids, with their high-water pants and loud polyester shirts, huddling and whispering to each other as they move down the halls. They look tired, fagged out from the journey- but at least they have an excuse. She's not even West Indian. Everyone knows her uncle lives right around the block from Lakewood Elementary and has been living there for at least twenty years.

"What a waste."

When her mama said they were moving back to the States she had been like everyone else she knew, picturing New York or L.A. like she saw on TV, not some narrow sliver of southern suburbia wedged senselessly in between. Instead she looks up and is surrounded by a whole parking lot full of distracted sucking kids who don't

like her anyway.

"Go get another one," someone says. Willis, the boss around here, although sometimes they take turns:

"It's only ten cents. Ain't you even got another dime?"

"What's the problem? You scared to go back by yourself?"

"What's the matter? Don't you want one?"

Of course she wants one. But she wants that one there, already dissolving into a pool of purple ooze at her feet. If she can't have it then she just wants to go home, sit on the couch, eat leftover Entenmann's cookies from the box and watch Star Trek reruns until her mama gets home from work at the hospital.

She looks back at the Flip Lady's house, now half way down the block. She's tired of traveling the wrong way, dragging herself in the wrong direction without real rhyme or actual reason. But she also doesn't want to cause trouble, doesn't want to make waves. She reaches for the handlebars of her bike.

"Naw, leave it," they lick their lips and smile. "We'll watch it for you."

But they lie: in a few minutes they are going to teach her a lesson about realness, about keeping it. Because even her accent is fake. Because she rides around on a Schwinn that is just like theirs except it is brand new.

"Go on, girl."

Plus she's fat.

The girl nods her head. She already knows they are going to start talking about her just as soon as her back is turned. They're a mean bunch; she's already seen them do some terrible things. She's already figured out that it does no good to wander in and out of earshot. Either you've got to stay knuckle to knuckle, packed tight like a fist or you give them a wide berth and do all you can not to draw attention to yourself.

She turns around and starts walking. She can hear them whispering and laughing behind her, a hot humid jungle of bad moods circling her footsteps, gathering in strength with each step she takes. A flash of fear tickles her nose, like when you're swimming and accidentally inhale water. But she does not stop walking, somehow convinced that to turn around mid-stride will only make things worse.

She knocks on the Flip Lady's door, expecting to see the kindly face of the woman who had answered it not a half hour before. Instead it's a man, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a blue t-shirt, a little brown Chihuahua shivering in the palm of his left hand. She stares up at his flaring nostrils, dark eyes and eyebrows arched.

"What is it?"

"I dropped mine."

Ray Ray shakes his head. He doesn't like kids and his first instinct is to shut the door. But this girl looks like she's going to cry.

"Mama's not here. You hear? Flip Lady gone. She went out. Shopping. To buy more Kool Aid, most likely. So why don't you just come back tomorrow..."

A harsh peel of laughter cuts across the horizon.

The girl puts her head down. She reaches into her pocket and holds out a dime like a peace offering.

Ray Ray recoils: "I don't want that. What am I supposed to do with that? Girl, you better just go on home."

He hears more laughter, looks up and shakes his head. "Those your friends? Little heathens..." Then the harsh scrape of metal against concrete. He steps out onto the porch and squints into the distance.

"Hey girl- that your bike?"

She can hear their rubber soles pounding on the spokes. She stares up at the mat in front of the door.

"Hey girl. Turn around Look-"

She shuts her eyes, feels a stiff pressure in her groin, like a sudden swift kick against her bladder, then a sharp tingling sensation between her legs.

"Hey, girl- turn around..."

Her eyes pop open again and when she looks up she sees another man inside of the house, walking out of the kitchen holding a bag of sugar up to his nose.

"Turn around-"

The girl turns around and stares up at Ray Ray. "May I use your bathroom please?"

The man in the house puts down the bag of sugar and smiles.

Ray Ray stares at the girl on the porch, breathing hard with her thighs clamped together, shifting her weight from side to side. He nods and points down the hall, past his friend Tony who is standing in the middle of the living room grinning from ear to ear.

"You from Jamaica?" Tony says as the girl rushes past him. She runs into the bathroom and slams the door.

Ray Ray shakes his head. It's all there, in his book, he thinks. It's always the weak and the homely that get left behind. Stranded on the back porch, knees shaking as they quiver and dance, thin rivers of pee running down their ashy legs.

IV.

The girl sits on the toilet in a pink tiled bathroom, staring at a stack of Ebony and Newsweek magazines in a brass rack near the sink. She thinks about her bike, about how much she is going to miss it. She's only had it for a few weeks but still. It's something she begged and pleaded for, something she swore she needed to fit in. Now she didn't even want to look at it. A few minutes before the Flip Lady's son knocked on the door and told her he would fix it so she can ride home, but it's too late. It's already ruined. She's already peed herself and run away.

Everybody's always so busy running, so busy trying to save their own skins, she remembers her aunt Ruby telling her. That's what's wrong with this world. We've got to stand together if we're going to stand at all. And the girl had liked the sound of that even if she sensed that it didn't really apply to her. She'd seen her aunt and mother working in the clinic, had stood numb and mystified by the deliberateness with which they thrust themselves into other people's wounds. Stitching

a cut, dressing a burn, giving a shot, connecting an IV. It was intimidating, the steadiness of her mother's hand sometimes. Even now, even in the midst of grief. Like some nights when she stomped into the living room and cut off the TV in the middle of the evening news, her voice damming the flood of silence that followed with the simple statement: "They lie."

The girl reaches for the roll of toilet paper and wipes off the insides of her legs. She pulls up her damp panties and zips her shorts. When she opens the door she finds Tony crouched down on the living room floor, peering behind the stack of LPs lined up against the wall.

"You feeling better?"

When she doesn't say anything he puts the records back. He stands up, shoves his hands into his pockets and stares at her.

"So you from Jamaica?"

The girl shakes her head. "I come from here."

"Not talking like that you don't." Tony walks past her and stares down at the couch.

"I live on Grenada for a time—"

"What's that?"

She watches him kneel in front of the couch. He peers underneath the cushion like he's looking for spare change.

"Another island," she says.

He puts the cushion down and flops back on the couch, bouncing up and down a few times to force the cushion back into place.

"Y'all smoke a lot of ganja down there too?"

The girl shrugs awkwardly. She wonders what about her appearance might remind this man of a Rastafarian. Rastafarians wore dusty clothes, had calloused feet and thick clumps of matted hair. They sat in the waiting room, making the clinic smell like salt and homemade lye soap. Her mother checked their charts while Aunt Ruby rubbed their arms with cotton pads coated in alcohol. When they saw the needle Aunt Ruby smiled and told them it was just a pinprick. Don't worry- it will be all right, she promised. Just look at me.

But, no, she didn't smoke a lot of ganja.

"That's alright," Tony says. "You still got that sweet accent, huh?" He pulls a bouquet of plastic flowers out of a white vase, peers down inside the vase and holds the flowers up to his nose.

"I like things sweet." Tony puts the flowers back in the vase and reaches underneath the table, running his hand along the wood panels underneath. The girl stares down at the books stacked on top of it. And next to the table an open cardboard box with still more books tucked inside.

The back door swings open and Ray Ray steps into the living room, tossing a wrench onto the table, next to the stack of books.

"How far away you live?" He can already see her starting to blink rapidly. "I mean, I tried. But the body's all bent- you're going to have to just carry it or drag it or something, I don't know...."

"Damn," Tony shakes his head. "What's wrong

with these fucking kids today? Why you think they so evil?"

Ray Ray looks at the girl: short stiff plaits of hair standing up at the back of her neck, dirty white t-shirt with a pink lady bug appliqué stretched across the stomach, plaid shorts, socks splattered with purple Kool-Aid stains. He used to feel sorry for awkward, homely girls like that. But now sometimes he thinks maybe they are really better off. "I tried."

"Why they do that to you, girl?" Tony says. She just stands there, hands clasped behind her back, swaying slightly from side to side.

"You gonna be alright?" Ray Ray nods towards the front door. "You want a glass of water or something, before you go?"

"Hey, Ray, man- you remember us? You remember back in the day?"

Ray Ray shrugs. All he knows is that the girl is not moving. She just stands there staring down at the stack of books on the table.

"I think we were just as bad," Tony says.

"Let me get you that glass of water." Ray Ray disappears into the kitchen. The cabinet squeaks open, followed by the sound of crushed ice crumbling into a glass.

"And your mama with them flips," Tony yells from the couch. "When'd she start up with that again? I haven't seen those things in years."

"Well, you're lucky," Ray Ray calls back. Just thinking about all those little kids crowding around his mama's yard is enough to make him wince. She started making those fucking popsicles again almost as soon as he came back to hold her hand at the funeral. He's convinced there is something wrong with it, that it is unhealthy somehow- an unnatural distraction from grief. And then look at the kind of hassles it leads to: he puts the glass under the faucet and pours the girl her water. All he wants is to get the child out of his house before she has time to pee herself again.

"When did she start charging people?" Tony asks. Ray Ray closes his eyes and shuts the water off. He knows Tony doesn't mean anything by it but, really, that's the part that bothers him the most: all those jars of fucking dimes. He walks back into the living room.

"Man," Ray Ray shakes his head. He hands the girl her water. "I don't want to talk about fucking Kool-Aid." Tony cocks his head and then shrugs. He looks up at the girl.

"They used to be free."

V.

There are too many people in the house, that's what it is. Ray Ray can sense that- Tony and the girl flooding the space, making him feel crowded and cramped. For the past five days it's been just him and the books, the box he found hidden in the back of his brother's closet. And it shocked him because he'd never actually seen his brother read anything more substantial than a comic book. But he knew they were his brother's

books and that his brother had read them because he recognized the handwriting scribbled in the margins on almost every page.

The girl lowers her glass and nods her head towards the stack on the table. "Are all those yours?" she asks Ray Ray.

"Naw," he shakes his head. "They belong to someone else."

"Just a little light reading to pass the time, huh, Ray?" Tony says. He picks up a book and glances down at the cover, assesses its weight. "Looks dry."

Ray Ray shuts his eyes. The word "fool" bubbles up in his mind involuntarily, before he has a chance to quell it with guilt. He's known Tony for 12 years, ever since they both got assigned the same homeroom teacher in the second grade. Somehow, when Ray Ray went to college, he imagined himself missing Tony a lot more than he actually had. He opens his eyes and looks at the girl.

"Why did you ask me that? About the books? I mean, what difference does it make to you who they belong to?"

She points to the one lying open. "I know that one."

"What do you mean you know it?"

"I mean I've seen it. I read it."

"That thick ass book?" Tony glances down at it, then back up at the girl. "Naw. Really?"

"Parts of it," the girl says. "Aunt Ruby gave it to me."

"Now you see that?" Tony says. "Another one with the books. Now we got two...." He stands up and disappears into the kitchen.

Ray Ray squints at the girl in front of him: rocking slowly from side to side as she peers up at him over the rim of her glass.

"Look, girl. What's the problem? Don't you want to go home?" he studies her face. "Are you scared? Worried your daddy is going to beat you or something, for letting them fuck your bike up like that?"

"I don't have a daddy."

"Then what is it?"

"It's the bike," the girl shakes her head, lower lip popping out in a pout. "I don't want it."

"What do you mean you don't want it?" He winces at the sudden loud clatter of pots and pans being pushed aside in one of his mother's kitchen drawers.

"You don't want to take it home?"

The girl nods.

"Well, leave it then. You just go home and I'll keep it in the garage and you can come back for it later, like when mama's here or something--"

A drawer slams shut in the kitchen.

"Hey man what are you doing in there?" Ray Ray yells.

"Where she keep it?"

"What?"

"The Kool-Aid. I'm thirsty."

Ray Ray purses his lips together and shuts his eyes. "I told you she went to the store," he yells back.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Tony's face appears in the doorway.

"There is no fucking Kool-Aid in this house," Ray Ray yells, breathing hard.

"I hear you," Tony nods. He looks Ray Ray up and down and frowns. "Don't lose your cool."

Tony walks slowly backwards to the kitchen, his eyes locked on Ray Ray until finally his head disappears behind the door.

Ray Ray looks at the girl.

"I'm trying to be nice."

VI.

Tony stands in the middle of a bright yellow kitchen, staring at the dimes in a pickle jar on the windowsill, thinking about Ray Ray losing his cool. Baby brother is clearly not well. Tony could see that as soon as he walked into the house- sensed it, just from talking to Ray on the phone. Something about his brother Sam having all those books in his closet really tripped Ray up for some reason. Maybe Ray forgot other people could read, had a right to read a fucking book when they felt like it.

Ray just needs to get out of the house for a little while, Tony thinks. Ray just needs some fresh air. Have a beer, smoke some weed, take a walk around the neighborhood and relax. Tony has it all laid out in his mind, the speech he's going to give Ray about how fucked up everything is, about how Ray needs to get back up to school before it's too late. Anybody who likes reading books as much as you do needs to be getting a college education, can't be fucking up a chance like this. He'll shake his head and tell Ray he understands wanting to be here for your mama and all, but sometimes you got to just put shit aside and go for yours because how you supposed to help anybody else if you can't even help yourself? Sam would have wanted him to say all that: listen to Tony, you know Tony got plenty of sense, always has.

He's going to tell Ray about how proud of him Sam always was. Tell him that as much as Sam rolled his eyes, everybody could see how much he liked saying it: naw, that doofy herb ain't here no more. He up at school. The eye rolling was just reflex: My baby brother, at college... He'll make up a little lie about how one night he and Sam actually talked about it, tell Ray how ashamed Sam was for hitting him- especially that last time. Knocked his books on the floor, slapped Ray across the face. Now pick it up. And really there was something pitiful about it, big man like Sam hitting a little boy like Ray- Tony could see that even then.

But of course Tony wasn't the one getting slapped. Tony was the one standing on the sidelines watching, the one who had his hands out when it was over. Dusted him off, handed him back his book, said here you go, Ray and damm that motherfucker is mean. And Ray cut his eyes and said, Oh, that son of a bitch is probably just high, he don't even know what planet he's on half the time- which Tony knew was a lie. But he just let Ray say it because it

made him stop crying and sometimes people just said things.

Tony spins around, opens the door to the pantry. Ray's mama has got all kinds of shit in there: baked beans, Vienna sausages, Del Monte canned peaches, Spam, a half full jar of Folger's crystals that has probably been sitting there for years. Tony sucks his teeth, thinking how his grandma is the same way- can't throw anything out, no matter how nasty or old. Jars of flour, baking powder, baking soda, cornstarch, corn meal, sugar. He can see how someone might get confused in a pantry like that. If they were crazy, say, or couldn't smell nothing because their nose was too stuffed up from crying all the time. Ray's mama is not taking very good care of herself these days. That's what Tony's mama said, when he told her he was going out to visit Ray: Saw her shuffling around the supermarket the other day poor thing with her wig on all crooked and walking around in that nasty house dress. Just grieving, poor thing. She not taking very good care of herself these days, looks like. If Tony's mama hadn't pointed it out to him, he might not have even noticed. To him, Ray's mama just looks old but she always looked like that, even when they were kids.

Tony stands there for a minute, looking up at a jar of sugar. If Ray walks in and asks him what he's doing he'll just shrug and tell him he's got a sweet tooth is all. He twists the top off the jar and looks around for a place to put it. He opens a drawer near the sink and pulls out a plastic sandwich bag when all of a sudden he hears a knock on the front door.

He walks back into the living room and sees Ray Ray peeking out the window.

"I told you," Tony says.

Ray Ray stares at him. "Just wait here..."

VII.

The girl watches Ray Ray walk out the door. She puts her glass of water on the table and then stands by the window. She can see Ray Ray heading out to a car parked by the curb. An arm spills out of the driver's side window- a man's arm, thick and muscular- fingers outstretched to clasp Ray Ray's hand. Suddenly Ray Ray looks different to her: thin and awkward, like a boy.

"That's his brother Sam's friends," Tony shakes his head and sits down on the couch. "Everybody's cool now but let's see how long it lasts."

The girl watches as another man's hand appears dangling out of the rear window, holding out a forty ounce of beer.

"Somehow they got it in their stupid heads that Sam took something that belonged to them and hid it somewhere- maybe right here in his mama's house."

The girl watches Ray Ray take the bottle and twist off the cap, spill a sip onto the pavement before raising it to his lips.

"And you know what's fucked up? I mean really fucked up? I'm starting to think that too."

The girl turns around and sees Tony staring at her from the couch. He lowers his eyes, looks down at the

stack of books.

"Hey. You really read this? For real?"

"Aunt Ruby gave it to me," the girl nods.

"Well, who the hell is Aunt Ruby?"

"Mama's friend. She come down with us, as part of the Unity Brigade."

Tony picks up the book and nods his head.

Somehow this makes sense to him. Of course there is a Unity Brigade. Somewhere. Full of the righteous marching proudly two-by-two with their fists in the air. The book is a call to action, he can tell that just by looking at the cover.

"That why y'all move down there, to that island? Help the needy, feed the poor? That kind of shit? What, you part of a church group or something?"

"Not really."

He flips the book over and stares at the back cover. Outside he can hear the revving of a motor, music blaring through open windows, the screech of brakes as the car tears away from the curb.

"Why did you stop?" he asks the girl. "I mean, why did you all come back?"

The girl stares at him. She has to think for a moment about how to answer because in truth, no one has ever asked her that. They ask why she went but never why she came back. Most people she has met here don't even know what Grenada is, except to sometimes say didn't we bomb the shit out of that place a couple of years ago? And everyone who hears about the Brigade seems to assume that it was bound to fail simply because it did.

"Aunt Ruby. She gone now."

"Gone where?"

"In the kitchen. She take a bottle of pills."

Tony looks away from her. Tries to picture the woman, Aunt Ruby, but can't. So instead he thinks about Sam, someone he had known all his life, someone he loved, truly. He rises to his feet and thrusts an abrupt finger towards the cardboard box. "You see all them books? The one who left them for Ray? He gone too."

He walks past her and peeks out the front window. He can see Ray still standing on the sidewalk, staring down the block. He has already figured out that Ray is different, that something is not quite right. Him and his mother both, stuck in the righteous purging of grief. One had history, the other had Kool-Aid and from where Tony stood he couldn't see how either was doing them a bit of good.

"Hey girl. Look what I found." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out small plastic bag full of white powder. He opens it up and pokes it with his finger.

"You know what this is?"

The girl stares down at it, then up at him. If she had to guess she'd say sugar.

"It's medicinal is what it is," Tony says. "Like what the doctor give you when you got a cavity. Novocain. Rub it on your gums and the next thing you know, you can't feel a thing. Go ahead and try it."

The girl stares back at him while he nods. She raises her hand then dips her finger inside the bag and rubs the powder onto her teeth.

"You see what I mean?"

A dry metallic taste stretches up from her tongue, shoots through her nostrils and clears a space for itself in the front of her brain.

"You see what I mean?"

All of a sudden she's dizzy. She sits down in the Lazy Boy, struggling to keep her eyes open. Tony stands there studying her face. He backs away from her slowly and sits down on the couch.

"I like you, girl. For real," he nods. "You just keep your head up- you'll be alright. You know why? Because you're cool. I could tell just as soon as I saw you, standing out on that porch."

He winks.

"That's why I want you to listen to me, okay? I'm gonna tell you a secret. And don't tell Ray I told you either. Because I love Ray's mama and all- she's like an auntie to me. But she also silly simple. You know what I mean?" He twirls his finger in the air near the side of his head.

"Something not quite right. And if I were you I wouldn't drink anymore of that woman's nasty Kool-Aid. You understand?"

The girl stares and Tony shakes his head.

"Not even if you paid me."

VIII.

Ray Ray stands next to the curb, watching his mother pull into the driveway. When she opens the car door and the light clicks on he can see the frantic look in her eyes, lips moving as she mutters to herself. She can't help him, he knows that. It's all she can do to keep herself upright, to drag herself out of bed in the middle of the afternoon, open the door for her little flip babies, collect her parcel of dimes.

He helps his mother unload her grocery bags from the car and listens to her talk to herself. Blaming herself, trying to make sense of what happened. How could she have lost her son? How things could have possibly gone so wrong? What could she have done differently if only she had tried? She looks at Ray Ray, a quiet hysteria animating all of her gestures: "Help me get these bags in the house. I've got work to do, I'm running out of time."

And that is what is needed more than anything, he thinks. Time. So much history to sort through, struggling to make room for itself, scribbled in the margins of every page. The books he found are full of secrets, the private truths of a man talking to himself, whispering things that Ray Ray could scarcely imagine being said out loud. Clearly his brother was standing on the precipice of a new understanding and now there is no one to finish his thoughts but Ray Ray. He doesn't want to be interrupted. Not yet. He still needs time.

"Is that Tony sitting in my living room? Go tell that fool boy to come out here and help me with these bags--"

When Ray Ray walks back in the house he takes one look at the girl sitting with her mouth hanging open and Tony shoving a plastic bag into his pocket and knows that something is very wrong.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" he says and Tony laughs. He laughs, even as Ray Ray pulls him up by the collar, pushing and then hurling him towards the front door. Even in the midst of grief, Tony is laughing: "Remember what I told you, little girl..."

The door closes behind them and the girl can hear them scuffling out on the porch. She leans back in the Lazy Boy and stares up at the ceiling, trying to negotiate the shifting rhythms of her own heartbeat. She is in the present, she is in a suburb of the south, and everything is quieter than before. There is no fist in the air, no promise of the New Jewels Unity Brigade. When she looks up she does not see the words from a book or her mother's hands or Aunt Ruby's face or the kids in the yard or the Rastafarians in a clinic waiting room. She doesn't see a needle or blue lights or even the little brick house across the street from the strip mall, where her Uncle lives. When she looks up at the ceiling, she sees something even better: a blank page.

And just as she is about to smile Ray Ray's face appears hovering above the chair. She stares up at his pursed lips, dark eyes, eyebrow arched. He reaches around, takes her by the arm and gently pulls her to her feet.

"Little girl? It's time for you to go home."

VIII.

The Flip Lady stands in her bright yellow kitchen, unpacking a bag of groceries. She takes out a large pot, fills it up with water from the sink and sets it on the counter. She empties a canister of Kool-Aid and stirs. She adds a cup of sugar, watching the powder swirl through the purple liquid then disappear as it settles on the bottom. She thinks for a moment, then scoops out another cup.

"Little heathens," she chuckles. Just like Tony: always thinking she can't see past their smiles. But she watches everything from the kitchen window and she has seen it all. Nothing has changed. It's just like before: she always could tell the good from the bad.

"Bet y'all sleep good tonight," she mutters to herself. She doesn't do it for the money. No one has to thank her.

She smiles, thinks about all the little flip babies in this world. It doesn't last, nothing does. But for now they still come running, gather around her back porch and hold their hands out in the promise of something sweet.

And she would give it to them.

*Ladee Hubbard lives in New Orleans with her husband, Christopher Dunn, and two children, Isa and Joaquin. She grew up in St. Thomas, U. S. Virgin Islands, and St. Petersburg FL. She received a BA in English from Princeton University and a PhD in Folklore and Mythology from the University of California, Los Angeles. A former visiting professor in the African and African Diaspora Studies program at Tulane University, her fiction has been published in *Sleeping Fish* and *GUD*. The 2009 *Rhino* poetry anthology featured her poem *Colossus*. In 2007 she was a finalist for the *Glimmer Train Short Story Award for New Writers*.*



Kirk Curnutt

2008

Best Essay

The Best Cemetery in the South (In Which to Kiss a Woman)



Rosemary Daniell's book *Secrets of the Zona Rosa: How Writing (and Sisterhood) Can Change Women's Lives*, was published by Henry Holt and Company in 2006 to great acclaim. Known as one of the best writing coaches in the country, Rosemary is the founder of Zona Rosa, the series of creative writing workshops she has led for 25 years in Savannah, Atlanta, Charleston, New Orleans, and Europe. She is an accomplished memoirist and poet.



The Best Cemetery in the South (In Which to Kiss a Woman)

There are as many lovely settings in which to kiss a woman as there are varieties of kisses and places on her body to plant them. I've always been as big a sucker as any romantic for the slow dance and the candlelit dinner, the dimming movie theater and the reclined passenger seat of a 1981 Grand Prix. Yet none of these ever made me appreciate how fragile a lip-lock can be more than the ones that occurred in – of all places – a cemetery.

At the risk of sounding ungentlemanly, I've been fortunate to smooch among some of the world's most famous gravestones. In my wayward youth I once made out with a Parisian gamine next to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's plot in Père Lachaise, inspired by a none-too-intelligible conversation about the none-too-intelligible Tender Buttons. Last summer, I snuck a buss from my intended, D., while touring Poets' Corner in London's Westminster Abbey. Not all this osculating was confined to tourist stops, however. I once startled a girlfriend by landing an unsolicited smacker at the foot of my father's eternal resting place in Tipton, Indiana. I think I was trying to win his approval by proving to him that at

least one of us was still alive.

For all my globe-snogging, I've decided that the cemetery most conducive to kissing is the one closest to home. Since moving to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1993, I've made a habit of strolling Oakwood Cemetery, located only four blocks northeast of the downtown made historic by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Regardless of season or weather, it seems I need only traipse a hill or two of Oakwood's rolling acres before I stumble upon a canoodling couple. Sometimes they're teenagers mooncalfing to the soundtracks of separate iPods, sometimes they're gay, quite often they're non-locals paying their respects to Hank Williams, the most famous of the cemetery's 200,000 residents.¹ Usually when they see me the lovers pretend to be conversing close together out of a hushed respect for the dead. Every once in a while they continue on as if I were just another loitering ghost.

What intrigues me about these kisses is that they're rarely sexual. Something about the juxtaposition of eros and thanatos in a cemetery is so kinky that the very idea sends the imagination panting straight to the Gothic extremes of getting it on. That's why, while ink aplenty has been spilled over the phenomenon of graveyard trysting, nobody much talks about what kissing there means.² While I can appreciate that to some folks charnel romps are thrilling because they let us flip a middle finger at the Grim Reaper, methinks the bravado is a bit of an existential conceit. For all the nuzzling I've witnessed among Oakwood's ledger stones, I've never once caught anybody in flagrante delicto, much less flagrantly delicto-ing to confirm they're not spiritually dead. Not that I don't doubt that it happens, but my traipsing has taught me that a good cemetery will make us ponder the lugubrious side of love as much as it'll send us wuthering to the heights of passion all Heathcliff-like. That's the only conclusion I can draw, anyway, when I trespass upon private moments that aren't the lip-crushing, teeth-chipping, uvula-twiddling tableaux that the word kissing conjures up. Rather, most kisses I spy at Oakwood are sad, sad exchanges of emotion, and in a weird, quite possibly perverted way, I find them uplifting.

What makes the atmosphere at Oakwood so congenial to the poignancy of un baiser is its peculiar history and literature. Opened in 1810, it is a quintessentially Southern burial ground, every bit as redolent of Old Dixie's tortured legacy as the Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston that inspired Henry Timrod's Ode: Sung on the Occasion of Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead and the McGavock Confederate Cemetery in Franklin, Tennessee, the setting of Allen Tate's Ode to the Confederate Dead. After Hank Williams's grave, Oakwood's biggest draw is a steep east-facing slope where 724 Confederate veterans are buried under identical white tablet stones, many of them anonymously. Crowning the slope is the first of the cemetery's two Civil War memorials, and even a cursory trot among the brick coping will lead to the graves of stalwart secessionists with baroque antebellum names such as William Lowndes Yancey, Benajah Smith Bibb, and William Burr Howell (aka Jefferson Davis's father-in-law). The headstones of these men are especially prominent in April, when loyal CSA sons celebrate Confederate History Month by tamping fresh Rebel stick flags into Oakwood's gray grass.

Because Montgomery sells itself as both "the Cradle of the Confederacy" and "the Birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement," Oakwood inevitably bears the scars of African-American history as well. The juxtaposition of the city's contradictory legacies is not as stark in the cemetery as it is downtown, where two blocks and a right turn is all that separates the First White House of the Confederacy from the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church. Nevertheless, with a little sleuthing, one can locate unheralded black heroes whose presence lends balance to Oakwood's more prominent Confederate memento mori. In addition to several slaves, there are first-generation post-bellum black entrepreneurs such as Henry Allen Loveless, James Hale, and Victor H. Tulane, as well as many families who participated in the 1955-56 bus boycott. Among the more tragic stories is that of Dr. Harper Councill Trenholm, whose presidency of the all-black Alabama State College (now University) from 1926 to 1962 has been overshadowed by a single concession to white power. When Alabama State students attempted to desegregate a courthouse cafeteria at the height of the sit-in era, Governor John Patterson pressured Trenholm to expel the protestors and fire sympathetic faculty. (It was Patterson's defeat of George Wallace in 1958 that inspired Wallace's infamous pledge to never again get "out-niggered" in an election). Under threat of dismissal, Trenholm relented, an act that King – Trenholm's former pastor at Dexter Avenue – decried as "cowardly." Labeled an accommodationist, Trenholm soon fell ill from the pressure of his unenviable position and died in February 1963, only a few short months after the college he shepherded for thirty-five years unceremoniously forced him from office.

As emotional a punch as its history packs, Oakwood could hardly compete with more famous Civil War and Civil Rights shrines were it not for its literary

legacy – one that specifically centers upon kissing. By the late 1910s, the cemetery had garnered a reputation among white teenagers as a primo spot for petting. (Not of the heavy variety necessarily, but merely first base). One belle especially fond of this pastime was Zelda Sayre. According to legend, the irrepressible Zelda had many a beau, one of whom, Peyton Mathis, was a well-to-do marbleworks proprietor responsible for two of Oakwood's most celebrated memorials, The Wings of Death and The Broken Column. It's not hard to imagine the dandy Mathis – half of an ostentatious hometown duo known as "the Gold Dust Twins" – squiring Zelda through the cemetery hoping his art was sufficiently aphrodisiacal. Yet, however talented, Mathis was no match for a rival from Minnesota, a second lieutenant stationed at nearby Camp Sheridan, where the Army's 67th infantry regiment trained for the Great War. The outsider had arrived in Montgomery in June 1918 boasting of two imminent accomplishments: he'd just finished drafting a novel he insisted would make him famous, and he was convinced he would die a hero on the Western front. Suddenly, Zelda didn't find funerary art so seductive, and Mathis was jealously reduced to mocking this bibulous interloper as "F. Scotch Fitzgerald."

The exact role Oakwood played in the earliest stages of Scott and Zelda's fabled courtship is unclear. It isn't referenced in their published correspondence until April 1919, nine months after they met at a Montgomery country-club dance. By then, the aspiring author was neither famous nor dead; shortly after Charles Scribner's and Sons rejected his novel the previous fall, the Armistice dashed his hopes for military martyrdom, and upon his discharge he scrounged by as a \$90-a-month copywriter for a New York ad agency. Zelda was understandably doubtful about Fitzgerald's prospects, yet those doubts didn't stop her from writing ornate love letters that simultaneously strung him along while hinting at extracurricular adventures with other men:

I've spent to-day in the grave-yard ... trying to unlock a rusty iron vault built into the side of the hill.... The boys [probably the Gold Dust Twins] wanted to get in to test my nerve – to-night – I wanted to feel "William Wreford, 1864." Why should graves make people feel in vain? I've heard that so much, and [Thomas] Grey is so convincing [in *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*], but somehow I can't find anything hopeless in having lived – All the broken columnes [sic] and clasped hands and doves and angels mean romances.... Isn't it funny how, out of a row of Confederate soldiers, two or three will make you think of dead lovers and dead loves – when they're exactly like the others, even to the yellowish moss? Old death is so beautiful – so very beautiful – We will die together – I know –

References to other men drove Fitzgerald to such a fury that Zelda soon ended their relationship. The pair didn't correspond for several months until, predictably, the first thing Scott did when Scribner's accepted a revised version of his novel – now titled *This Side of Paradise* – was to book a train to Montgomery. As the couple renewed their romance that November 1919, they visited Oakwood. As Fitzgerald later remembered, "While out walking with [Zelda] I wandered into a graveyard. She told me I could never understand how she felt about the Confederate graves, and I told her I understood so well that I could put it on paper."

The fruit of that boast was a tale about mismatched Dixon-Mason lovers called *The Ice Palace*, which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1920 as *This Side of Paradise* was fast becoming a succès de scandale. In the story, the Zeldesque heroine, Sally Carrol Happer, leads her Yankee beau, Harry Bellamy, through Oakwood's "wavy valley of graves" to the hillside of Confederate dead. Overtaken by emotion, she delivers a eulogy for the "strange courtliness and chivalry" she imagines the South stood for: "People have these dreams they fasten onto things, and I've always grown up with that dream. It was so easy because it was all dead and there weren't any disillusionments comin' to me. I've tried in a way to live up to those past standards of noblesse oblige – there's just the last remnants of it, you know, like the roses of an old garden dying all round us.... Oh, Harry, there was something, there was something!"

Even for the Jazz Age this was lachrymosity laid on thick. As with much of Fitzgerald's early fiction, the satire and sentimentality are virtually indistinguishable. My own feeling is that Scott was slyly tweaking Zelda's Old South pretensions as much as he was hymning them, especially when Harry's response is to whip out a handkerchief and declare, "I want to kiss you, Sally Carrol." Satirically or not, Sally Carrol dabs her tears and obliges. Fitzgerald's description of their petting is vintage Roaring Twenties overstatement: "She kissed him until the sky seemed to fade out and all her smiles and tears to vanish in an ecstasy of eternal seconds."

Sentences like that suggest why the boy from Minnesota fancied himself a "connoisseur of kisses." And yet, as with all passionate embraces in Fitzgerald's work – and they are legion – Sally Carrol's ecstasy is haunted by loss. She already senses that she and Harry are incompatible. His gelid kiss has revealed that Northern boys don't know what it means to "indulge in the cheering luxury of tears."

I hadn't read *The Ice Palace* before moving to Montgomery, so when I discovered the Oakwood connection through the Fitzgeralds' correspondence in late 1993, I carried a copy of *Flappers and Philosophers* to the cemetery's Confederate slope. I figured the story would mean more if I was communing with the ghost of their love.

Instead, I was disappointed. I found it cute but dangerously close to cloying – a common criticism of

Fitzgerald's gaudier romances. I was also leery of Sally Carrol's nostalgia for antebellum Alabama, especially when, mid-oration, she drops an un-ironic reference to "old darkies."

For the next several years whenever I wandered Oakwood, I brought books about other famous Montgomery figures, from MLK and Miss Rosa to Jefferson Davis and George Wallace – people whom I felt gave me a broader perspective on a city I'd come to love because its paradoxical history struck me as America encapsulated. It wasn't that I stopped reading F. Scott Fitzgerald. Far from it. Professionally, I specialized in him, authoring books and organizing conferences devoted to his career. I read him intellectually rather than emotionally, however. I felt I had to. I'd taken a hard left into my thirties, and I was mindful that when Zelda brought Scott to Oakwood she was all of nineteen and he twenty-three. Pondering cemetery kisses, whether theirs or mine from my wayward youth, frankly seemed immature.

Then one day in October 2000 my wife asked to meet in the old graveyard. She was another reason I regarded Fitzgerald so dispassionately. She was a dead ringer for Zelda and even shared her birthday. Friends had accused me of only marrying her for those reasons, which was both insulting and untrue. Even if I were deluded enough to try to morph into F. Scott Fitzgerald, finding a look-a-like spouse born in Montgomery on July 24 would seem an improbable aim. Some coincidences simply can't be planned.

So as I entered Oakwood that day the Fitzgeralds were the least of my worries. My wife and I had only been married two years, and we'd spent the past one seesawing between separations and reconciliations. We were both exhausted, underweight, insomniac. I'd taken to soaking my blues in the bathtub for hours at a stretch and drinking too much. I was all of thirty-five, and my hair was gray.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked.

Right then it hit me why I'd been summoned to Oakwood as opposed to the bedroom or bar or the long country drives that usually coerced us into giving our marriage another go. Consciously or not, she'd invited me to the cemetery because she was ready to lay me to rest.

"I guess you better call a lawyer," I answered.

We tried walking around to forestall the inevitable tears. Crazy enough, at one point I realized we were near the grave of Zelda's parents, Anthony and Minnie Sayre, and I thought of Zelda's description of her father's interment in *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), her only published novel: "It was peaceful in the old cemetery. Wildflowers grew there, and rosebushes so old that the flowers had lost their color with the years. Crepe myrtle and Lebanon cedars shed their barbs over the slabs; rusty Confederate crosses sank into the clematis vines and the burned grass. Tangles of narcissus and white flowers strayed the washed banks and ivy climbed in the crumbling walls." Zelda's poetic style is often criticized for veering off into such

flowery digressions, but on this day I could attest that the roses were indeed color-bleed and the narcissus knotted beyond repair.

Then it was time to leave, and all that was left was to kiss goodbye. This kiss seemed like a reliving of our entire relationship – French kiss, holy kiss, Judas kiss, vengeful kiss. It was every imaginable emotion at once, which is undoubtedly why it went on so long.

I won't lie and say that was the last pash we ever shared. Like many divorced couples, we went through that masochistic period of disentanglement uncharitably known as "ex-sex." We discovered that burying memories or even smooching them adieu takes much longer than legalities; it wasn't easy for either of us to accept that we were to be "yellowish moss" on the tomb of each other's dead love.

Now, almost a decade later, my ex- and I occasionally run into each other in Montgomery. We never talk; we politely turn our backs out of respect for our present partners, with whom we're each infinitely happier. I'm still a homer for all things F. Scott Fitzgerald, and I still weekly hike Oakwood, sometimes with a book, sometimes with D. and her Labrador.

When I catch sad canoodlers in our "wavy valley of graves," I'm tempted to intervene and assure them that the melancholy I see in the meeting of their lips is the only reward of knowing that love is more mortal than we are. That way they, like me, can justify the allure of kissing at Oakwood with a line from Sally Carrol Happer: "Even when I cry I'm happy here, and I get a sort of strength from it."

(Endnotes)

1 2 A few examples: in the Hades section of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom fantasizes about "love among the tombstones" with "Turkish whores and young widows" because "in the midst of death we are in life." The late Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran takes Joyce's sentiment to exclamatory extremes in *Tears and Saints* (1995), describing cemetery sex as "the urge to desecrate tombs and to give life to cemeteries in an apocalypse of springtime! There is only life in spiting death's absoluteness." The motif appears across the literary spectrum, from philosophical allegories such as George Bataille's *Le bleu du ciel* (1935) to chick-lit like Beverly Brandt's *Dream On* (2005). Nor do sepulchrous tangos necessarily require two: in Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), eponymous hero Mickey Sabbath attempts to exorcise his nostalgia for his dead mistress by masturbating over her freshly filled plot—after catching not one but two competing lovers practicing similar handiwork, no less.

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Troy University in Montgomery, AL, the city in which F. Scott Fitzgerald first met Zelda Sayre in July 1918. A passionate devotee of all things Fitzgerald, he is vice-president of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Society, managing editor of its annual **Fitzgerald Review**, and a board member of the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum in Montgomery. In addition to publishing several critical studies of American fiction – including the Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald (2007) – he has authored a novel, **Breathing Out the Ghost**, which the Indiana Center for the Book recently named Best Fiction in this year's Best Books of Indiana Awards. His other works include *Coffee with Hemingway* (2007), an entry in Duncan Baird's series of imaginary conversations with great historical figures prominently featured in Barnes & Noble cafes across the country, and a story collection, **Baby, Let's Make a Baby** (2003).

Quotes To Live By

I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.

His heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.

–F. Scott Fitzgerald, **The Great Gatsby**



Debby Jo Blank 2008 Best Poetry Amsterdam



Andy Young is the co-editor of *Meena*, a bilingual Arabic-English literary journal, and teaches creative writing at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. Her work was recently featured on National Public Radio's "The World" and published in *Callaloo*, *Mizna*, and *The Cortland Review*. Her excellent new poetry chapbook, *The People is Singular*, produced in collaboration with Egyptian photographer Salwa Rashad, focuses on the Egyptian Revolution. It was released recently by Press Street Press.



Amsterdam

I

After years of hard drinking into the night
with Elie, Primo, Jerzey, their stories
are tattooed beneath my nails.
And Celan's milk cup is buried
near the twisted Myrtle by my window.
Klemperer whispers vaguely of half-
finished eggs
and Frankl measures my scapulae, to
memorialize
how they jut like wings from my skeletal
back.
And imagine! -- -- I find myself on a
cement bench
by her museum, unwilling to stand in line
for what I already know.
Though my passport says, "History
Teacher,"
who wants to hear what I might say?
A heavy sky presses upon the
Prinsengracht Canal,

reflections of narrow houses distorted in
the water,
the old Westerkerk church bell tolls ten
true peals
for her at the highest blank window.

As if I escaped that attic, evaded the
factories
of smoke. As if swarms of B-17s erased
the stories, the faces, at least, in the minds
of many. As if I counted their gold fillings.
Irreconcilable, these numbers do not add
up!
Too many teeth, too many lampshades,
the worthless insurance of diamonds
inside
little suitcases beside the photos of
ghosts.

Europe has become so worn,
trampled by conquerors in helmets
who march like phalanxes of beetles.
The vats for cheesemaking overrun
with fingers and teeth. And Ariel
is gone, the tired general with blood
in his brain -- as if Sharon's wall
could protect us from ourselves.

I examine faces, even the faces
of friends, in the ether of not-quite
assimilation. As if science could give me
the facts! My ashes will ascend
in smoke long after theirs disappeared
in the skies of Belzec, Chelmno and
Najdanek.
As if good deeds could count.
Six million, it's nothing.
Today gulls shriek over the canal
as if life goes on. A rope skein
coated with a fluorescent slime floats by,
a startling green cow's stomach turned
inside out, a diseased womb that
somehow
finds its way to me, as if this story
must be told again and again.

II

My chic hotel, a short walk up
Prinsengracht
to the church across the way from her
house.
I walk there easily enough, but can't get
inside.
My body won't move off the cement
bench,
as if transfixed by ghosts, I stay outside
to watch the line, people throng
to buy a ticket -- to visit empty rooms.

At last through my miserable lens,
distorted
by more than time, the afternoon tides
retreat.
I walk back to the hotel. A "money man"
in a silk suit and narrow Italian shoes
selects a cigar from the humidior, fondles
several pricey digits before he decides.
The pale girl in her pert dress hands him
a knife
to excise the tip, leaves a box of matches
for him to work, her skirt very short over
black tights.
I smell more than his tobacco, as if the
plume of smoke
carries the molecules of millions only I
can see.

And across the room on a daybed
upholstered
in fog, trimmed with decorative nail
heads,
a handsome "coffee couple" sprawls
in the way Europeans can so unabashedly
love in public, noises from their throats
audible across the room that's become a
tomb.
The votive glow of candles on white
tablecloths,
napkins float as swans who fluff their
feathers,
glassware tinkles and reflects melon and
gold.
I'm alone, perspiration like tears in my
palms,
eyes averted from the man with his
expensive cigar
and the tangled couple, their espresso,
laid out
with sugar cubes, grows cold. It seems
enough
to imagine the rooms where she hid.

Once a warehouse for silk and porcelain,
four glossy chestnut trees shade its
courtyard,
a perfect square that cannot symbolize
order or even the illusion of order.
Fashionable luggage is carried
in by the doorman in his sleek black.
Suddenly, a siren strobes across the
nearby
Keizersgracht Bridge. I remember that
siren
from black-and-white newsreels of the
war,
that distinctive, foreboding din --
She heard those sirens.

I decline a second glass of wine,
sign the check, ascend the steps
painted whale, the runner's muted
pattern of mourning, pewter on pewter,
I hold my room key on a heavy brass
circle
engraved "33," a number that seems
as if it must mean something, but doesn't.
Even after a hot bath, sleep is elusive,
my hands and feet against smooth, frosty
sheets,
a tumble of images -- as if they're piled
next to me, as if I knew them,
as if I were packed into the shelf with
them
for a night of nothing more than hungry
half-sleep.

The next day I try again, back at her
museum
hunkered down on the same bench by the
canal.
I cannot stand. I cannot buy a ticket.
Again, it's as if B-17s drone en masse --
propellers she didn't hear. Let's slow
down --
to infinity. The Westerkerk bells ring,
distinguished
16th Century peals she heard, and traffic
noise,
children boisterous along the tow path
after school below her veiled window.

I walk south to Jonas Daniel Meijerplein,
another museum, where I pay
the six Guilders to view the Chagalls
and restored Cor Hunds, the altar.
What were the probabilities?
The building's been redone in post-
modern,

four renovated stone synagogues
inside a shell of glass and steel,
remnants of the meat market
originally below the Obbene Shul.
Pigeons swoop over the canal,
ducks in formation oblivious
to the noise of passing boats,
the smell of diesel dies in their wakes.

III

It's late; even the crickets sound aghast.
No, just silent trees turn their backs
to the miles of wire once strung
close to her museum by the canal
where even the water runs gray.
The line is long.
How can they bring children!?
I've just about convinced myself it's a
waste
of time to try again, when the bell strikes,
echoes across the sixty-four years since
she was here and, at last, I discover
it's best not to go inside.

This Amsterdam of tolerance
lets bygones be bygones, admits
foreigners,
lights candelabras, walks well-tended
paths.
Remember though, the filmmaker van
Gogh
was murdered here, too. And that
Albanian
garbage collector in his orange jump-suit
has entitlements beyond belief. Belief!
An unmentionable word I've followed
down blind alleys to place my fingers on
a wall.
Wall! Another word to nowhere – bricks
of sand,
millions of particles caught in the kilns.

I founder in the truths of my lens
as black as a swallowed tongue.
A woman I think I know holds
out a lock of hair. A careful man
who might be my great-grandfather
sweeps the brick courtyard under a sun
hidden in the restraint of Dutch clouds.
Is that faint singing? Familiar hymns
are slightly off-key, a young man at the
end
of the pew does nothing more than gaze
at the colors of the windows, but he knows
more than you, more than I, he thinks
he hears heaven and turns his cheek.

Debby Jo Blank, M.D. retired early from her career working in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries in order to write full-time. She is an MFA candidate in the low-residency program in Creative Writing at Leslie University. She completed her medical training at Tufts and Harvard and did a Sloan Fellowship at MIT. Most mornings she can be found on the tennis courts in Tucson, AZ, where she lives with her husband, Mark.

Recommended Reading: Poetry

The Captain Asks for a Show of Hand by Nick Flynn
Poet/memoirist Flynn (*Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*) accomplishes the near-impossible by writing politically informed poems that do not spill over into polemic, instead offering a stunning investigation of human violence and particularly of torture.

The Broken Word: An Epic Poem of British Empire in Kenya, and the Mau Mau Uprising Against It by Adam Foulds.

Something unexpected these days: an epic poem, and one that succeeds viscerally. Costa (Whitbread) award winner Foulds uses the personal, a young man's return to the family farm in 1950s Kenya, to tell the significant story of rebellion against colonial rule.

Bear, Diamonds and Crane by Claire Kageyama-Ramakrishnan

The author explores family, love, and loss, particularly among several generations of Japanese Americans, in beautifully distilled little gems that explore the very limits of poetry, and of life.

Space, in Chains by Laura Kakischke Luminous, fluid, yet indisputably disciplined, the poems in this eighth collection represent a high point for Elmer Holmes Bobst Award winner Kakischke, who offers a breathtaking exploration of the familiar.

Sky Burial by Dana Levin

NEA/Rona Jaffe Foundation/Whiting/Guggenheim honoree Levin references everything from Tibetan Buddhist burial practices to Aztec sacrifice to explore death in pure, often fractured, yet relentlessly musical lines.

The new black by Evie Shockley

In urgent, energized poetry that escapes across the page, Shockley manages grand, in-your-face emotion without ostentation, exploring the African American experience finally to arrive at an understanding of the new black. both personal and poetic.



Timothy Clayton
2008
Best High Short Story



How to Become the Brother of a Drug Addict

Judge Michael Malone, noted for his sharp humor, is author of the southern classic *Handling Sin*; three literary mysteries - *Uncivil Seasons*, *Time's Witness*, and *First Lady*—and numerous other novels, short stories, and magazine articles. He regular adapts novels for the screen and he is a long-running screenwriter for a famous daytime TV drama. He teaches screenwriting and fiction at Duke University and lives with his family in a restored plantation house near the small North Carolina community of Hillsborough.



How to Become the Brother of a Drug Addict

Step One: Admit that you are powerless over yourself.

You must be born the second son of an upper middle class white family. Arrive in Minneapolis at the most inconvenient time, preferably three weeks early and at around 4 in the morning. Be an easier child from the start when your mother agrees to use painkillers for this birth instead of “going natural” like she did for your brother. Upon emerging, feign excitement and adoration for your parents, despite being forced out of your cozy abode. However, given your current state, it is most advisable to accept their protection. And relax: there is champagne!

Arrive at your new residence to the greetings of your brother four years your senior. He gapes at you, as he should. However, your brother soon overcomes his awe. When the parents go out, naked, frenzied penis dances around you ensue, but weather them for now.

He'll get what's coming to him.

Step Two: Come to believe that a higher power can guide you to sanity.

When you reach the age of four, convince your family to move to New Jersey. You know what's best for your father's career and the family, although the move will be most stressful. Upon anchoring yourself in the small suburb of Summit, New Jersey, enroll in the ABC pre-preschool school. Your brother has trouble finding the correct grade to enroll in, but you can ignore him until he starts to act out in about ten years.

In the ABC school you produce some of your very first vague memories. You are forced to sit in the corner for popping all of little Greg's bubbles when he refuses to give you the bubble mix. Do not worry, for Greg will soon outgrow the bubble mix, and leave you the sole possessor. Also, do not forget to vomit on the carpet every single day when you leave, to the great befuddlement of parents and teachers.

Upon graduating from the ABC school, attend the Josa preschool, where you must create more early memories, this time of being forced to dance to *Ghostbusters* at the end of each day. Also, enjoy the trip to a local orchard, and notice how the outdoors makes you sneeze. Over and over. And over again.

Upon completing the Josa Preschool, it is time for you to register with the Brayton Elementary School. Rejoice in the fact that you're not attending the less desirable Franklin Elementary, or Washington Elementary, or Lincoln Elementary, but puzzle over the identity of the elusive President Brayton. Select the 12-3 P.M. afternoon slot of kindergarten, and boggle over how, to this day, anyone can bring themselves to rise before noon. Savor while you can the soothing strokes of naptime. Bring in a cicada for show and tell, because bugs are cool when you're six, even though they may terrify you at sixteen.

At home, engage in occasional evening games of “Dog Catcher” when your dad arrives home from a long

day of work. Still in his suit, he will take a light blanket and whisk it in the air. Before it floats back down to the floor, you and your brother must race under it. You must almost never lose, and mock your brother when he is snared far more often than you are. Don't get caught, or you risk being wrapped in the blanket and tickled to death by your father.

Step Three: Make a decision to turn your life over to your higher power.

Progress through the grades of Brayton Elementary. Occasionally be pushed by your brother in the hallway, although he will graduate from Brayton when you are in second grade. In second grade, acquire glasses. Combine these with a bad haircut and ruin any chance you have of being cute for the next six years. Despite this, become the undisputed playground champion of kickball, until one day a high school boy shows up and blasts the ball well past the playground, onto the track. Grovel at his feet. One day, while using a urinal, piss all over the bottom of your own shirt. Try to pass it off as water on the playground. Fail the sniff test by a brave classmate, who will never, ever forget the time you pissed on your own shirt. After your brother introduces video games to you at the age of six, spend much of your time playing them.

Notice the presence of your parents within the school. Enjoy but be slightly embarrassed by your mom's frequent volunteer lessons on "Art in the Classroom." Chuckle when your teachers say you have an "adult sense of humor." Get good grades, have good friends. Be loved. Be happy. Graduate from Brayton Elementary School in a dramatic ceremony featuring plastic certificates and an out-of-tune rendition of R. Kelly's I Believe I Can Fly. Listen to the principal give a speech, while noticing how she does not seem to like children. Accept your certificate and have it framed by your adoring parents.

Step Four: Make a fearless moral inventory of yourself.

Enroll in Summit Middle School, and be cast into the savage piranha pit of popularity, where you will be spending the next three years. Go through several bizarre clothing trends, including one during which you exclusively wear sweatpants and tank tops.

Notice how cool your brother is, how his clothes hang and his words roll. Emulate him to the best of your ability. At family dinners, his humor and hip air will glue the family together. He will make you laugh. You'll laugh together as well, even when the parents don't think it's funny. This of course, will make it funnier.

Be shy and dorky, but use your wicked sense of humor to attract cool people. Live a blissful and uneventful life through the sixth and seventh grades.

Step Five: Admit to your higher power, yourself, and another human being the exact nature of your wrongs.

Your parents will be convinced into letting your brother frequently have loud parties. It's really better to have the kids drink at your house. Be OK with the parties, and only request that you be left alone with your computer.

You are thirteen. One night the door to the computer room opens and your brother stumbles in with his friends. He is different, his eyes slanting. He says he is high, but you do not believe him at first. You realize he isn't lying when he lets loose his alien laugh. You retreat to the laundry room and call your parents. They don't pick up and you leave a voice message, squeaking about how your brother is high and you don't know what's going on and you're scared but there's no one there.

You call back five minutes later and leave another message that says your brother tricked you and he was just joking, even though he wasn't. You don't want to be a tattletale.

A few days later your brother will join you for some computer games. You and your brother have separate computers, but you play together. Enact the brotherly tag team, and dominate unsuspecting gamers for the evening. The night before will loom in the air, a thick haze that you're not sure he can see. If he can remember. Your mutual smiles will break the fog, but then immediately it will thicken.

Later that month, during one party night, you hear strange noises coming from outside your computer room. Go to investigate. Walk down the hallway and look down the stairs into the basement. See the heaps of beer cans, like piles of hollow, metallic skulls. Turn to the windows at the front of the house and see your brother pacing from one window to the next. The windows bar him within the house. He is trapped.

Ask him what is going on. Have him not even turn to look at you, and then say "Go upstairs." Feel discarded by his flat voice. Go upstairs, into your parents' bedroom. Curl up on the white sofa and read from a book of children's short stories. Drift away from a family member for the first time. Through the window behind the sofa, see a cop car pull up. The officer gets out, and returns to the car with your mother and brother. They are handcuffed. Fade away. Do not even hear your father softly open the door. Let him figure out that your mom and brother have been arrested and taken downtown. Let him figure out what to do. Find sleep's embrace uncomfortable that night, its rough fingers raking your skin.

The next day, compress your fear into a tiny cube. Swallow it and forget about it. It tastes as sweet as the silence that will ensue. Be as normal at school. There are some mentions of the party, but they are light and nonconfrontational. Continue with your life, happily. For the most part.

How To Become the Brother of a Drug Addict

Step Six: Be ready to let your higher power remove all defects of character.

Witness the Summit Middle School being renamed after a retiring janitor. Laugh when your friends joke about the Lawton C. Johnson Summit Middle School Period 5-7 Annual Student vs. Teacher Volleyball Game. Graduate from Summit Middle School, but convince your parents to let you skip the graduation ceremony. Have a moment of silence at 7:30 P.M. for the chair at the ceremony that you let down.

Step Seven: Let your higher power remove your shortcomings.

Enter Summit High School, your family's battlefield for much of the next two years. Be enrolled in the Freshman English class of a Mrs. Harwood, who will first spark your interest in writing. Read a poem about driftwood, and how people scour beaches for it. It is more valuable than normal wood that has been cast out of the ocean because there is beauty in its smoothness. Realize that driftwood is a metaphor for people who have been through a lot in their lives, and wish you were one of these people.

Do not fit in with the popular crowd, but be very popular among those that really get to know you. Be reserved when alone but outgoing when with friends. Spend most weekends with your friends, but enjoy the occasional one alone with your computer games or your words. Move on to the tenth grade.

Step Eight: List all the people you have harmed; prepare to make amends.

Consider going to the annual Summit High School Semiformal, but decide not to because you can't get a date. Not that girls matter anyway. Your brother is going, but you don't really care. Stay home that January night with a babysitter; the parents have gone to New York for the night like they seem to always do. Submerge in a virtual computer game reality of your choice.

Around midnight, your babysitter will tell you that your brother is in the hospital. He has alcohol poisoning. Leave an exciting basketball game on TV and go to see him, because that's what you think a good brother should do. Arrive in the ER and see him passed out on a stretcher, in a blue hospital gown. Approach him, but do not touch him. Hear someone flat line in the other room. The doctor will come out and tell you that your brother tried to kill himself. Have the doctor show you the marks on his wrists. Your brother is incapacitated, the sitter distant. There is no one there to touch.

Sear these memories into your skull. Your parents will arrive thirty minutes later, and smell the burning. Their fingers will probe your scalp, searching for the scars hidden by your hair. The babysitter will take you home. Sleep's embrace will leave you clawed that night.

Write a sonnet about your brother's gown. Quell

the violent swell that threatens to split you asunder when you read it in class. You are fifteen.

Step Nine: Make amends to others, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Avoid your brother in the hallways of your home, for you don't know who should be afraid of whom. Do not know his touch, his face, his eyes like you did before. Drift further into your friends and your computer. Be out of the house as much as possible.

About a month later in March, have your parents call you into their room one night. They will tell you that your brother has been in a car accident. You will ask if he is OK, and they will say yes, and you won't think much of it. You won't see him that evening.

The next day at school you'll find out that there were other kids in the car, and that your brother was driving 45 MPH in a 25. He was drunk. The kid that was sitting shotgun is in a coma. You act as if you already knew, and recede further into yourself. When your name is called in class and everyone turns to pierce you with their eyes, shield yourself. When your friends can't come over to your house because of your family's reputation, act understanding.

You will remain in the house less and less. Your mother will dissolve into tears when she finds out that the boy in the coma will have brain damage. You won't be around. Do not know what to do when you pass your parents in the hallways of your home, and see their faces split and sagging.

One day, your father will pick you up from school early because you left a homework assignment at home and you want to retrieve it. When you climb into the car, nonchalantly ask your father how his day has been. Your words hang in the air without response or recognition, until eventually they are drowned in the tension that fills the car. Turn to look at your father's face, and see a numbness in his eyes that is impossible for you to penetrate. Try to turn the volume knob on the radio high enough to drown out the world. Do not cry when it doesn't work.

When you arrive home, open the garage door and smell right off the cigarette smoke. You know that no one is allowed to smoke inside the house. Hear a distant noise, which sounds like the thunder of something alive. Turn to your father with questioning eyes, but see that he has already forded through the haze of the basement. Try to follow in his tread, fighting your way through the smoke to the bottom of the basement stairs. As you move up the stairs, the smoke follows you up, trying to pull you back down into the basement where the shadows of the skulls remain.

Reach the top of the basement stairs, and see your brother down the hallway in the computer room, pacing back and forth, cigarette in hand. He does not turn or acknowledge you when you close the basement door behind you. Forget him for now, and walk to the base of the other staircase leading to your room on the second

floor. The noise you heard before has become louder. Climb the stairs to the second floor. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, look down the hallway into your parents' bedroom and see not thunder or lightning but your mother, collapsed on the floor in sobs. Your father is bent over her like some kind of insect, awkwardly trying to comfort her.

Walk into your room and fall onto your bed. Do not cover your ears or eyes; just lie there, chained. Remain there, safe in your chains, for many months, while the gears of the legal system slowly turn. Snagged in its metal, the rest of your family and you in turn will slowly be torn apart and split asunder. Do not writhe in your chains. Do not injure yourself.

Step Ten: When you are wrong – or wronged – admit it.

Having finally been caught, your brother will spend the summer in jail. But before that, he will visit Loyola College in New Orleans, a school he wanted to attend. Go with him and your family to visit New Orleans. While you are there, fall in love with the music and the food and the feel of a big city where nobody knows who your family is or what your brother has done. One night, while you are asleep, your brother will ask your mom for some money to go to McDonalds on his bike. She will give him the money, and he will go buy cocaine. He will be arrested and jailed for two days, while you and the rest of the family will sit at home, worrying.

For the first day, you worry. You will call his cell phone thirty-seven times and leave him messages each time, your voice droning into the receiver for hours. You will give up hope, and convince yourself that he is dead. You begin to plan out your new life without a brother. What will you tell people? How will things be different? But then your mother receives a call from the Orleans Parish Prison. He is alive, yes, but with a new legal charge.

It doesn't matter: he will go to jail in the summer, and you must convince your parents to let the family move to New Orleans. This time you really know what is best for the family. The move happens that July. You leave behind your small suburban bubble town full of people that fear your family. You also leave behind your friends that you've known for many years.

With your brother in chains, your mother will call you the "golden child"; this discomferts you.

Step Eleven: Seek, meditate, pray for conscious contact.

Your brother will go straight from jail to rehab in Arizona. You are in an airport restaurant, on the way to visit your brother in rehab, when your Dad gets the call. You are sitting at a table by yourself. Your feet are thrown across an adjacent chair like something discarded. Your dad is waiting in line to get food, a few yards away. He holds the phone to his ear, and turns toward your table.

His face stretches, wrinkles split his forehead and chin, his eyes swirl. His head begins to swivel. Then his eyes begin to dart, searching the walls for something that isn't there.

They settle on you. Your face stays smooth, your eyes patient – you've seen this look before. Maybe your flight's been canceled, maybe you left something behind. Maybe he just wants your feet off the chair. Then he beckons – once – twice – jerking his hand in and out. You raise your head, sit up. You stare at your father's face, the taut lines in his chin and forehead leading you to worry.

You stand. Your eyes press into his, but they look past you, deep in thought. You move closer and he turns away, pressing the phone harder into his skull. You put your hand on his arm: you want to show him the fire, the burning in your eyes, but he walks away, out of the food line, outside of the restaurant. He pauses outside, and you can see him through a clear glass window of the restaurant. He continues listening, still swiveling, soon sweating.

You remain standing in the line, but then go back to where you were sitting. Some people are looking at you. You don't know what to do with your feet now. You look around, and wonder if this will be the place where you find out your brother is dead, where you found out he's hurt, where you found out he's missing. The walls, the strangers' eyes, the glare of the fluorescent lights sear themselves into your memory. Time slows down so you can remember always how it happened. Doubt rakes your heart.

Then your father is standing before you, about to speak. You exhale, cool. The walls tumble from your memory, the eyes crumble, the heat dwindles. It's about his fucking job. The company is in trouble. Not about your brother. The world's ambience comes crashing back.

Step Twelve: Awake and carry your message to others.

On Sundays, he'll call. When the phone rings around five, you know it's your brother calling. You recognize the caller I.D., but why would you answer? How could you answer? You won't know anything to say.

Meanwhile, you grow closer with your parents in the quarters of the New Orleans condo, compared to the vastness of the Summit house. Anchor yourself in a new city. Outside of school, your new friends revel in the same chemicals that led your brother to ruin. This disturbs you, and leads you to spend a lot of time alone. While alone, you take solace in your words and the strings of your bass.

You see your brother for the first time in a year in April, when your family assembles in Arizona for a family workshop. Hug your brother when you see him, but be skeptical that he has actually changed. In family workshops, torrents of suppressed emotions burst out, sweeping lives out into the open. He will tell you about his life. He tells you how he woke up after Mardi Gras to find his bed soaked in urine with no memory of how

he got there. Allow yourself to inwardly chuckle at the fact that you now sleep in this bed. You begin to tell him about your life, and then you burst. You spit, you sear; you cannot sanction; not now.

When you leave Arizona, leave not knowing who you left behind.

Timothy Clayton graduated from Lusher Charter School in 2008. "I am the almost always beloved son of Kerry Clayton and Paige Royer of New Orleans." Timothy was accepted into three colleges for enrollment for Fall, 2008, but he opted to take a year off before college. He currently is in India, "exploring the spiritual landscape." He plans to return to New Orleans in December for holiday visits with his parents and will then spend three months in Paris in the spring. His top choice for college at this point is Vassar University. He has not yet determined a course of studies to pursue. While in high school, beyond writing his primary interest was football. Timothy was a starting defensive tackle his senior year, the only student in the Creative Writing Department on the football field. He also is interested in world religions, a major reason for his choice of India for his three-month Sabbatical. Timothy's teacher and advisor at Lusher was Brad Richard.

Sponsoring teacher Brad Richard's second collection of poems, **Motion Studies**, won the 2010 Washington Prize from The Word Works and was published in 2011. He is also the author of **Habitations** (Portals Press, New Orleans, 2000), and his poems and reviews have appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Assembly*, *Barrow Street*, *Guernica*, *Iowa Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Mississippi Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other journals. Winner of the 2002 Writers Exchange competition in poetry from Poets & Writers, Inc., and recipient of fellowships from the Surdna Foundation and the Louisiana division of the arts and residencies at the Ragdale Foundation and the Vermont Studio Center. He is chair of the creative writing program at Lusher Charter School in New Orleans.



Recommended Reading: **Butcher's Sugar** by Brad Richard

Brad Richard's recent collection of poetry, **Butcher's Sugar**, published in October, 2012, is receiving interesting, favorable acclaim from poetry critics. With a beauty purged of sweetness, the voices of Butcher's Sugar sing of the sublime in the debased, violence and desire, the truth of whatever is "rank with the carcass of mystery." Moving from childhood through adulthood, these poems re-inhabit and reclaim myths about the body and the self.

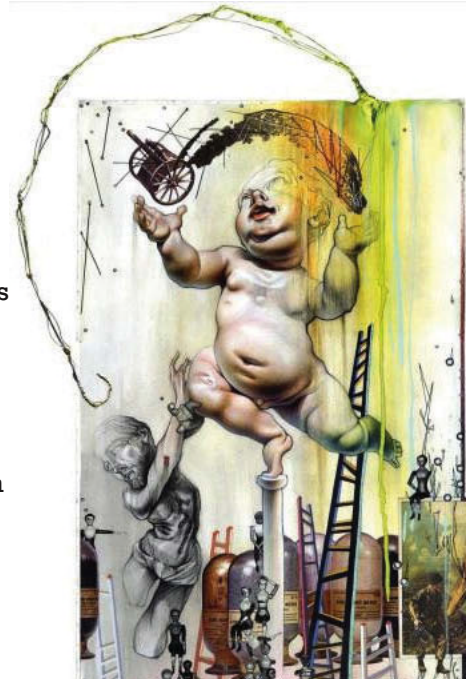
REVIEW

There is a resource for outlaw talents on the edge in the fresh and adventuresome publishing house, Sibling Rivalry Press, whose editor somehow shines lights on poets we should know, artists so well keyed into their profession that their individual poems have found recognition and awards in poetry journals across the country, but whose significance and power can only be fully appreciated when a volume of their poetry is published in the sophisticated manner that editor Bryan Borland guides.

Case in point: Brad Richard. Here is a poet so fine that to say he has escaped the readers' attention until now is embarrassing. He is from New Orleans - a fact that figures significantly in his poetry - and is chair of the Lusher Charter High School writing program. He is a gay poet who writes about his life and the stages of growing into his skin and his sexuality as well as some of the great poets of the past, including Walt Whitman of course, but also Hart Crane, James Baldwin, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Garcia Lorca, Genet, WH Auden, Thom Gunn and so on.

Yet what makes Brad Richard's unique is the manner in which he admixes passion with reserve, the longings for knowledge and acceptance that seep through the minds of young boys with the resignations of the aging male. And while the emotions he elicits are real and natural his magistry of words and alchemy of phrasing place his poems in that realm of magic few others have developed.

—Grady Harp, *Literary Aficonado*





Brent Benoit
2007
Best Novel

Checkpoint Nine



Judge Michael Malone, noted for his sharp humor, is author of the southern classic *Handling Sin*; three literary mysteries - *Uncivil Seasons*, *Time's Witness*, and *First Lady*—and numerous other novels, short stories, and magazine articles. He regularly adapts novels for the screen and he is a long-running screenwriter for a famous daytime TV drama. He teaches screenwriting and fiction at Duke University and lives with his family in a restored plantation house near the small North Carolina community of Hillsborough.



Checkpoint Nine

Excerpt

Randolph's small grainy face worked back at me from the obituary section. In the picture he wore that smirk, like he was trying to hold in some pee. Randolph Papillion was surrounded in death by older people on the yellowing page of the *Times-Picayune*. I folded the paper over cleanly and buried it in my pocket, in the intimate silk plot of my coat. The slender column didn't say how he died. I was sick to hell of this city.

I'm Church Gauche. When I first lived over the garage of my half-brother's house, he was twenty-six, and I was nineteen but I still felt like a little kid around him. From the dormer window I could see the fields run cursive as a script L along Algiers Point. The jaundiced flowers varied in color only as much as fresh and stale butter. They rioted silently in the wind against the river bank. Tiny birds lit in close droves on the levee fields, moving like a school of fish imitating a larger fish. The finches created an automatic swarm of abstract shapes: a tear, a smile, a terrific sneeze against the melancholic winter sky. The fish were survivalists; the birds it seems are artists. Beyond that the great American river churned south and south and south.

If the river runs north it is only to go south again and if it trembles east or west it will only come down this channel, near the borough of Algiers, across the river

from the Orleans CBD, in a harder southern course toward the inevitable death of the Gulf and the sea to become other waters. I could see the chokepoint in the bend at Algiers Point where our entire life went to hell. It was like living in a room whose only view is of the field where your father blundered in battle.

I am not very tall, measuring in at five eleven and three quarter inches. This is my height even though on my driver's license it reads six foot. Hemingway was six foot. I think my height says a lot about how I feel too. Being almost something else and not cutting it by a quarter inch. That is my life story. A six-footer, that must be a different kind of life. If you aren't a six-footer, you know what I'm talking about. But if you are, to hell with you anyway.

Randolph was a miniature guy. He could have jockeyed horses at the New Orleans Fairgrounds. I always said, "Randolph, you were just born in the wrong century. If you had lived in the Renaissance or something you'd probably be considered a strapping young buck of a bastard." Then Randolph would make that face, like he was trying to hold some pee. It was the face on the yellowing page. He'd drag his Virginia Slims and look about as if someone was filming him.

He'll never leave the city now, his final home is one of those crumbled tombs where the cats yowl and pace across the white-washed parapets. It gives me the creeps to think of them.

My tawny hair is starting to go. This has been very stressful issue for me, and I ordered away for every kind of hair growing spray and shampoo but my hair didn't like that very much and started falling out quickly right after the storm last August.

I was perched in the little dormer window of my brother's house overlooking the old yard and the river. The riverboats bellowed, disturbing the molecules of everything in my room. Our dogs supined like animal pelts on the flagstones below. Every now and then, from the open sash of the dormer, I whispered their names. They used to get very confused by this and search around for me. But now they just rest without raising their heads and wag their tails, which make a great thudding sound against the flags. To me this is how we ought to feel with God's voice. Not knowing exactly where the hell it was coming from but hearing it anyway, you know?

Morris plodded up the stairs. He always walked real heavy against the risers, banging his wing tips on the old pine so I knew he was coming. That is a prime example of how good a guy Morris is. He does it out of respect.

"What are you sulking about?" Morris asked as he stepped in the open door.

I handed Morris the first pages of my story.

"When do you find time to write this stuff?"

"Everybody asks me when I find time to write. Same way you find time to masturbate. You make time. Although I think I am running short."

"Don't give up. You've still got the weekend. You're going to love living in New York, Nim. I loved it. Ninety-nine of them don't know their heads from their asses. But the best one percent of them is the best there is. Did I ever tell you about that artist that sold cans of his own crap to all the socialites in New York? And they bought it. It was called *Merde d' Artiste*, you know?" He laughed every time he told me this anecdote.

Morris was a right and proper artist before he quit it and became a pharmaceutical sales rep. He lived in this little apartment in Chelsea and had a lot of hip friends who dressed very cool and said all kinds of hilarious bullshit about darkness and death and sex. It was a kick in the ass, being in New York with Morris. That was before he moved back to New Orleans and his real dad rented this house on the west bank so Morris could save his sales salary. But we just blew it at the horse races.

"Why didn't you just stay on in New York? Afterwards?" I immediately regretted saying it. But it was too late.

"You know about all that. Chip wanted me to come back." He shrugged. I couldn't think of any way to change the subject. My forehead heated considerably with embarrassment.

"Not to put too much extra pressure on you, but Chip has the red ass about you."

"Me? What the hell did I do?" I said.

I acted like I was surprised, but I was actually relieved he changed the subject away from his mental breakdown in New York. That was the real reason he had to leave New York. We drove him the entire way. I sat in the back seat with him and played Texas hold-em. We tried to take a plane, but you should have seen him. That was a long time ago.

"Your little bid sitting over there on your desk."

Morris was talking about the fraternity bid to Henry Clay. The creepo fraternity he and all the Society men were in at Tulane. Dr. Chip was recruitment director for the club. He'd been leaving messages on my voicemail. But I never listened to them.

Dr. Chip was Morris' father. But he was only around for holidays when we were growing up. Dr. Chip hated me like a son of a bitch. Probably because my mom left Dr. Chip after having Morris and married my dad. My dad pretty much raised me and Morris. Morris even calls my dad, 'Dad.' He calls his real dad 'Chip' because the

son of a bitch was never around. He always sent checks though. Thank Mary for Dr. Chip's checks.

It's actually pretty funny how my entire family got addicted to Dr. Chip's money. Dr. Chip was almost the richest son of a bitch in New Orleans. And he'd send these thousand dollar checks to Morris every month. He'd write, "mad money" in the "for" line of the check.

When Dad hit the skids Mom started asking Morris to up the number on the checks and they swore to the devil they'd pay Morris back. Morris would request five, seven, ten, twelve grand a month. And Dr. Chip would send it.

It was just like when I took this devout girl named Crystal to a football game in high school. During the game I inched my hand farther and farther up her knee. My hands were under the pea-coat which covered our legs. After the first quarter I had my palm right on her you know what. It was the same kind of racket with Dr. Chip and us. He had his hand on my families' collective hoo-ha.

"Nim, either get the damned story done or sign the bid. It's not that complicated. Professor Francis said you had to get it in next week. I'm really pulling a string for you, buddy. The University people up there are only making an exception for you because of the storm. You've got to send it off to him."

"I'm going to get the story done. I swear it."

"Good, that's exactly what I wanted to hear," he said.

Morris strode the room, toward the old federal mirror on the wall. If you could see him. He was dressed up for this party at the house. More brain dead society people walking around the old gardens, sipping martinis and slapping bloody mosquitoes on their necks.

"How does this look?"

"You look like you stepped out of the pages of *GQ*, all right? Why are you dressed up already?"

"Just trying out some things."

Morris is a great guy but he can be vain. He rescued thirty-five people during the storm. No shit. In a rowboat. I was going to help him, but somehow I couldn't leave my room. I'd walk down in the street and all the piles of trash and abandoned kitchens were so bad. The entire city smelled like a corpse and you were supposed to go around in it for months and pretend it didn't smell like hell. I couldn't do it. From the window I could see actual shooting stars. No lights burned in the city and the stars smashed against the atmosphere like bugs on the windshield of the earth. This was the first time I understood the manner in which we are traveling through space. The earth is just a station wagon, isn't it?

In high school, when he was at Jesuit, Morris was the golden boy. Everybody loved him. Morris used to scull a boat across Lake Pontchartrain every morning and then jog the four miles to school. At Tulane he was on the rowing team and won every bloody medal they had. But he's also the kind of guy who always finds a reason to wipe his face with his shirt so everybody can see his stomach muscles. He'd get along real well with

Checkpoint Nine: *Brent Benoit*

Hemingway I bet.

"I don't know if I can make it to that kid's wake today, Church. I'm real sorry about that. I'm just trying to keep it together," he said with a shrug.

"It's all right. You didn't know him so good anyhow. I just want to go there and leave is all." I really needed to know what happened to Randolph, felt it had some horrible bearing on me. But I couldn't tell Morris that. I didn't want to risk upsetting him. You had to be real careful what you said to Morris. I just wish now I had been more in tune with Morris, maybe I could have helped him more then. But he was so damn good at covering it. I didn't have a bloody clue.

He was quiet for a minute. He craned his bouffant head out the window and stared at the yellow flowers on the levee, sniffing the air. Then he picked at his teeth with his fingernail.

"Look, I don't want any nonsense tonight for the party, is that understood?"

"I understand you. I'm not going to your shite party."

Shite was a new vernacular term we used. A week before, Morris and I watched the movie *Train Spotting* and that is what all these Scottish bastards say. I reckon you've seen the movie but if you haven't it's all right except it kind of wore me out with all the stress. And it wasn't the good kind of movie stress like in *Die Hard* or some such crap where you know Bruce Willis is going to kick some German terrorist ass but the kind of stress that you can relate to which could be good for you but not for me. After the storm business, you get real tired of all the real stress.

"Shite, hell. I've got some damn fine people coming tonight. And why can't you stop saying 'reckon' every five minutes. You've got an IQ like a damn pay-per-view channel and you try to sound like Huckleberry Finn. Give it a rest already. I don't think you are going to be piloting any riverboats like your dad anytime soon, kid-o." That was a low blow, but I acted like it didn't bother me.

I was quiet for a beat, "Who is coming again?"

"Mom and Dad and all of them. You know how it is."

I was trying to find out if Dr. Chip was coming. Dr. Chip never came to anything unless he could feel totally comfortable and in control of the scene. If he was coming I thought I wouldn't show up for sure.

"Who else?"

"Dirk Coomer. He's a football coach at Tulane."

"Dirk Coomer, what the hell kind of name is Dirk Coomer? What was he, a porn star in his previous life?"

"Hardy-har-har. You should really work the clubs with that wit, Nim."

"Everybody has such a shit-fit over these football people. You know when I visited LSU, the bloody English department walls were crumbling down and those coaches have it like the Ritz."

"I know it's a rotten culture. Here's a tear for the arts. Here it comes. Wait, it's coming, I promise."

"I just hope Mr. Coomer doesn't try to

talk anything fancy with you other than his Xanax prescription."

"I'm getting out of the drug business, anyhow."

"You are?" My feet fell to the floor from the window sill where they had been propped. "What are you going to do?"

He stared at himself in the mirror. You need to see the head of hair Morris has. It isn't fair. He's got more hair than a poodle and it is very black and fine so he can even slick it back and it pommies up in the front. He was wearing a nice blue three-button jacket and a soft checkered tie and it all looked so good on him. Morris is a six-footer by the way. Everything comes to him, down the pipe like free gold.

He gets his height from Dr. Chip of course. It makes Morris seem better bred and wealthier by the way, which I guess he is. Sometimes you wonder what you would look like if your mom had married someone else. I'd be Morris. When you have a half brother you get to see exactly what the hell you would exist as, as well as live in the shadow of it simultaneously. It's terribly educational.

"I was playing golf with this guy at English Turn, and he's going to get me into agenting. Jennifer thinks it's a great idea."

"What, secret agenting?"

"No, athletics, Nimrod. Besides, I get conflicted."

I knew what Morris meant. Whenever he was a local sales guy with Pharmcom, he'd always get shit from the over seventy crowd in the clinics. I was with him in the elevator once at the Oschner Clinic and this old bastard who was probably the first son of a bitch on the beach at Normandy threatened to kick Morris' ass right there in the elevator for being a blood thirsty pharmaceutical bastard. He was even wearing one of those WWII caps and his stomach looked hard for an old guy. Morris felt like crap for a long while after, locked in his room all weekend, but you had to hand it to the old bastard.

"By the way, I get so sick when you call me Nimrod."

"Tell you what, when you get your own place, I'll come over and sit on your couch as nice as a ham and call you Mr. Nimrod. But so long as you live over my garage it is what it is. By the way, Jennifer is coming tonight, so don't start any crap, walking around the party in your bathrobe with a cockney accent or any of that stuff."

Dr. Chip set up Morris in a big old house and Morris let me stay on with him. I think Dr. Chip hated the fact that Morris let me stay in one of the rooms, but everything was convoluted that way. There were all these different bonds to each other and each bond was resented by everyone else in the family. So this is how our family was miserable in its own way.

"Jennifer?" This really got me up. She was this little chick who ran the Junior League. And she had fixed some pre-fabricated suburban voodoo on Morris' brain. Her Dad was the Henry Clay President, by the way, which makes me want to throw up if you really want to know how I feel. Morris could lay almost any girl in town but no, he's

had the hots for some Protestant Metairie Country Club chick that probably got herpes at Ole Miss and comes off as a trophy dog bitch.

"You don't like Jennifer because she threatens you."

"Me? How could I be threatened by that little woman?"

"She's a very fine woman and she's got her life together and you don't like that in anyone."

"I like it in you."

"In me because I'm your prime hog. You like me fat and producing. But another one like me spells trouble, don't it, Nim?"

He was quiet and got that little kid look to him.

"What the hell is the problem, Morris? You're not dying or something? You look like a damned six-year-old."

Morris had that look he'd get on the whirl-n-twirl at the fair when we were kids. He was a very tough kid but put him on a Ferris wheel and he looked like he'd vomit on his penny loafers. I always got pleasure out of it, that something silly like a fair ride could ruin him.

He ambled toward me, his energy cocked like he was going to knock the hell out of me; I couldn't help bracing myself as in childhood, thinking 'this is it, he found out.'

"I have been carrying it around, and no one has seen it but me." He held out something in his hand, and I must have been living in denial because I expected to see a little dog turd or some dried chewing gum. But no, it was a damned diamond ring.

The ring was just like the one on the billboard a mile from the house. I knew that billboard was trouble. I had told the guys at work how Jennifer's dad owned a billboard company and wouldn't it be grand if she had that ad put there just for Morris so he'd take it as a bloody sign from God. I could just see those Henry Clay assholes, her dad and uncle, making jokes and toasts about it at the rehearsal dinner. It's almost a joke, is what it is.

I didn't say anything. And then I looked at Morris and felt bad for him.

"Look Morris, congratulations. You are a hell of a catch."

"Well, what do you think? You didn't say if I should do it. Christ, just give me an opinion."

"Look. Listen to your heart. Isn't that what they say?" I was so bloody shocked I couldn't even talk about it. The terrible truth of the matter is, I had sex with Jennifer one night. Morris had been out and she showed up looking for him. I thought they were only casual friends at the time. I had been drunk all day and she started drinking with me. The next thing I knew she was lying naked in my bed up in the room above the garage.

She was a very charming person when we were both drunk. Maybe she isn't the worst person in the world. But everything she says is sort of horribly amplified when she's around, probably because I feel so very bad about it. It was so damn horrible I can't even tell you. I've grown to hate her because she doesn't go away.

I figured sooner or later she would go away and never be seen or heard from again like all the other girls Morris had dated. And then one day in the distant future I'd tell Morris about it and we'd laugh. He'd even say, 'I don't even remember that girl, Nim. Don't worry about it.' But it looked like that wouldn't be the case at all.

This was the real reason I hated Jennifer Goodson. I hoped she had the goddamned decency to cut loose before this kind of damned thing happened. You don't have to like me because of it, if you don't want to. To tell you the truth, I don't like myself anymore because of it either. The only person I told about it was Randolph who relished it like an opossum relishes a turd.

What is truly horrible is that Dr. Chip had come by early that morning to give Morris his check. Jennifer lay beside me. He woke me up, poking me in the forehead with the envelope. So every time Morris so much as talked to Dr. Chip on the phone, my heart pounded so hard it hurt.

"I probably won't even be at your party. The district manager is coming into the store today and everybody is freaking out."

"So? Who gives a crap about the district manager of the Dillard's department store?"

"The damn place has been deserted since the storm. Word is the corporate bastards might shut the whole department down. So I've got to get to the store before nine, keeping the place looking perfect for the almighty Mr. Rosenberg."

Six months before, from the dormer window, I had watched the city smolder, eating sandwiches in the unlit room. I'd call down to the people walking on the damp road, "Do you have a boat?" No, they would say, no one has a boat. I'd go down to the river, which reeked of dead fish. The river passes along the concrete levee as a prisoner walks the prison wall, full of regret and the lousiest human emotions.

I vividly remember getting sick of the radio with all the frantic madness, the people calling in rumors of riots over and over, repeating the names of their loved ones which meant so much to them, but which I couldn't care about. It was impossible to care about so many people in so much trouble for so much time. So I turned the radio off and drank hot beer and watched the fires smolder from the buildings upriver in the CBD. While Morris, no doubt, sculled from flooded shotgun house to house, rescuing people.

I had watched the figures scurry across the buildings and aim their rifles down at the street and couldn't hear the shots but I thought they must be killing. I was glad, at least, to not be in the city, but across the river from it. I told myself I would get out then, to hell with all of them. I would get out. I was a coward after all. And if I had to stay I'd go crazy. I knew this and that I couldn't tell anyone it. Not even Morris. I wondered did Randolph go crazy too. Was that it?

Morris had gone crazy once here, before New York. No shit. It was during one of the fraternity hell

Checkpoint Nine: *Brent Benoit*

weeks and they actually put him in a locked ward at Touro hospital. He was in there for three days and then they let him go. Mom wanted Morris to quit the fraternity but Dr. Chip wouldn't hear of it, him being such a fanatic about it. He even told Morris that the Henry Clay society was the best family he could ever have. I was pretty young so that's all I remember. But we never talk about it. Nobody ever does.

Randolph and I met when we were fifteen. He wasn't like Morris and me. We were normal boys. I was a normal boy who wanted to be strange. But Randolph, being very strange, wanted most to be normal. I put on my best duds for the wake: the black three-piece with a dark striped tie, staring down at the barges scraping against each other in the Algiers chokepoint. Dr. Chip chose this house and don't you think he knew exactly the view it provided?

My Dad was a Riverboat pilot, this being a historic occupation of Gauches beginning with the first wooden ferryboat between Algiers and New Orleans sometime after the Revolution. Everybody here knows to be a riverboat pilot you've got to practically inherit the job from a family member. It is a typically corrupt process solely accountable to ancient family reigns of this hundred mile stretch of the river. That was most certainly the parameters of my father's initial qualifications.

I will be the first Gauche boy in some one million years or so who does not earn his keep on the river. Our family rights have been revoked by the Pilots' Union. You probably don't remember this but it was in all the papers. When I was eleven, Dad was harbor piloting an Algerian vessel called Bright Star. The ship lost power and he couldn't maneuver it. Instead he dropped anchor and plowed into the Riverwalk shopping mall that sits cantilevered on the river's edge. It was in all the papers, even the New York Times, I discovered one rainy day as I sat in the periodicals of the Tulane Library while Morris studied.

Dad is a rummy. So he probably had some level of alcohol in him, most likely the remnants of a gin fizz from that morning. He would stay lit on his two week off schedule and sober as a river pilot had to be on his two weeks on duty. I heard Dr. Chip accusing him. His face was still swollen that afternoon the Bright Star crashed into the Riverwalk, a result of his allergy to the egg whites in the gin fizz. That was the evidence that convicted him. Dr. Chip, afraid of going in sour with the Riverboat Pilot's Union, turned on him.

My uncle, who was in a tugboat close to the Bright Star crash, came to the helm and took the heat for it. He was a sober good captain and became the hero who saved the day, preventing hundreds of people in the cruise ships and the gambling riverboats from peril.

In the end Dad privately was reprimanded and lost his license on suspicion of drunken piloting. But the real story was kept from the bloody Picayune. It was the damndest low point of everything. And for that reason, I'll never be a damned riverboat pilot. Not that I wanted

to anyhow. It was the very week that the checks started appearing in our mailbox, and all these years later we are still dependents of Dr. Chip. It's damned humiliating is what it is.

Dad always blamed it on the Chokepoint, the nine mile stretch of gambling boats, cruise ships, tugboats, ferryboats, and paddle wheelers all jammed up on one another along the crescent bank of the city. It was the alley where ships had to practically scrape against one another to pass. The riverboat captains called it nine miles of hell: the tight passage from which you have either delivered your ship to the open mouth of the river and the gulf and ocean beyond or where you run aground and never leave.

"It's that goddamned Nine Mile Chokepoint that ruined us, Churchy," he'd say sipping his gin fizz, his face expanding slightly like a balloon. "We all have a goddamned Chokepoint Nine to pilot. Some days I feel like I'm still stuck in it. Try to stay out of that kind of place in life if you can, son. Will you?"

That always seemed like the most impossible advice to me. There is only one river and one way to go upon it if you are trying to get to the open sea. The problem with staying out of the chokepoint is that by the time you realize you are in a bad way there, it is too bloody late to change.

Brent Benoit's first novel, All Saints' Day, was published in 2002 and was the winner of the Sewanee Writer's Series prize. He received his undergraduate degree from Loyola University in New Orleans and his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Louisiana State University. He has taught at L.S.U. and New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. He currently lives and works in Baton Rouge. Chokepoint Nine was selected by Michael Malone. The prize was made possible by gifts from patrons of the Faulkner Society.

Quote to Live By

Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

—Moby Dick by Herman Melville



Peter Neofotis
2007
Best Novella
Excerpt:
The Ancients



Michael Murphy has been in book publishing 28 years. His first 13 years were with Random House, where he was a Vice President. Later, he ran William Morrow as their Publisher. In September, 2007, he formed his own agency, Max & Co. A Literary Agency & Social Club. One of his authors, who attended Words & Music, 2008 was New York Times best-selling writer Tony O'Neill, who was tabbed by Esquire as the IT writer of the decade. Two of his authors attending in 2009 were New Orleans residents, Andrea Young and Barb Johnson. Barb was Glimmer Train's Best New Voice 2007, and won the Washington Square competition the same year. She was recipient of A Room of Her Own grant for 2009. Her first book, *More of This World or Maybe Another*, was just published by Harper Collins. Andy Young is an accomplished poet who is now writing both fiction and non-fiction prose as well. One of Andy's poems is presented in this issue of *The Double Dealer*.



The Ancients

The stories of a river and a person do not usually weave together. A river – and the wedge it cuts – are so very ancient that it should out scale any human's lifetime, even one so protracted as Elise MacJenkins'. For a human, time means a progression from conception to birth to maturity to cricketness to dust. A waterway, on the other hand, may meander as it grows older, but it does not weaken if the climate stays.

The Concord Pass was beautiful in its age. The water fell through the mountains, exposing layers of buried matter to the windy pathway. At some places along the Fork River, one could find gigantic purple boulders, jagged and sheeted, yet smooth and baked in the Confederate sun. At other sites, one could lie on large, rough gneiss stones – ingrained with white and clear specks. As the boulders glittered in the hot light, we spread out on them.

The river had changed slowly over the decades, noticeably only when great floods had brought stones down from the mountains. Carved in a few were large sloped slides, perfect for napping on. Growing in the surface of the rough rocks were lichens – light green, sometimes greenish-orange, colonies growing imperceptibly from year to year. One wondered how ancient, then, was the colony that covered the great, house-sized bolder we called Pumpkin Rock.

Old lady MacJenkins was the most ancient person in town – and had been for as long as anyone could remember. Her face was so wrinkled when she closed her eyes she looked like a crinkled map of Concord County. We believed she was older than Methuselah, the one-hundred-and-fifty-foot tall black walnut tree which stood, gnarled and grand, in her cabin's front yard. When asked about her years, she said she had stopped counting after she reached one hundred. We figured we better do the same.

The only person in town who came close to her age was Alistair McGregor. The septuagenarians and octogenarians averred that before Alistair arrived to Concord, the soil was exhausted from the tobacco plantations. Having lived part of his life with the Monocan Indians, Alistair composted the organic waste from town; grew mixed fields of corn, beans, and squash; and danced naked to the plant, rain, and sun gods.

As the germinator of life, he stood every bit of 6'2" and had thick bones rumored to be made of diluvian limestone. Over his great skeleton stretched skin – scaled like persimmon bark. He intimidated even Death. Perhaps they were brothers. Watching Alistair reap his fields with his black walnut handled sythe, one could see why the Dark Angel feared paying his sibling a visit.

Old lady MacJenkins had money, though no one knew exactly how much. She claimed she'd inherited her assets from a prestigious European relative. But everyone knew she had acquired a bundle bootlegging throughout the valley during Prohibition. She'd invested in precious metals and gems, which she stored in several safes throughout her house. The rest she used to maintain two large plots of property and one hell-of-a sophisticated still.

A few people over the years tried to place their

hands on her dough. Most hit one of the trip wires, tied to bells, which ran around her house. However, one man – Dick Bush – did successfully enter her home one evening while she was sleeping. He'd done some bushwhacking for her a few weeks before, yet she didn't invite him back because he'd failed to successfully remove a pesky juniper which had taken root under her mailbox. He had, however, somewhat acclimated her dogs to his smell, as he had taken his lunch hour to roll around with them.

Not able to find her gold in the main part of the house, he figured that she stored it in her bedroom. He snuck up her great walnut staircase, down the long hall lined with green oriental rugs, and into her gold cross-bedecked sleeping chamber. An ornate Austrian cross, which was also a clock, hung over her mantle. Sapphire and emerald rosaries draped every lamp, doorknob, and hooked structure in the room.

"Screw the gold," the robber thought. He opened his knapsack and began to fill it with her religious memorabilia.

Now, Mrs. MacJenkins also collected dogs. There were always at least a five or six of them around the house. At this point in her story Frederick was alive, an English Mastiff/Great Dane mix, about the size of a pony. She also had Captain, who looked like an oversized German shepherd with a leopard coat. There was Onyx, given to her by Simon Donald. He claimed the dog was a Newfoundland, but everyone knew Simon had snuck some black bear into the dog's genome. She had the deaf, albino Irish wolfhound, Whitey. Lastly, was her coddled Walter, a blood/basset hound mix.

All of these rascals slept in their lady's bedroom – fans blowing and them snoring – it was like a post-modern percussion band up there. You could hear the racket as you walked by Mrs. MacJenkins' house after dark. We surmised she was the loudest snorer of them all.

Anyway, most of her dogs snuggled together on a queen sized feather bed under her bay window. Walter, though, who was inclined to worry, snored beside her. He was the only one who fit on her three-quarters bed.

A gibbous moon shone a silvery alien blue into the room. In his black mask and jump suit, Dick Bush pranced – silently as a cat – around old lady MacJenkins' chamber. He decided to get close to the bed to steal the platinum cross hanging over her headboard. Before reaching up to lift the crucifix, he looked through the items on her night stand, where he found a book about herbal compound extraction and a journal. He placed the items in his sack.

Turning from the nightstand toward the bed, he saw Walter, with his droopy ears and nervous eyes, gazing right at him. The stealer stood still, smiled at the dog, and slowly reached inside his right pocket for his butterfly knife. But the traitor's hand didn't make it to the weapon before the saggy faced dog decided to sound the alarm...

Of course, as Sheriff Wineland says, it's hard to charge an old lady with murder, especially if she slept

through the whole incident. All that she found in the morning, after she rose and looked out her window to check the weather, was a pile of bones, ripped up clothing, that knife, and that knapsack. The good pets had even lapped up that robber's blood.

Eating the Dick Bush aside, her dogs were a loving and playful bunch of giants. When she hosted the bridge club, each animal had its own card table to nap under. The ladies would often keep their feet warm by resting them on the beasts' massive heads and bodies.

But Mrs. MacJenkins was more than the keeper of giants. She was also the holder of a large tract of property in the Concord Pass. She had inherited the Pass from her father, along with her house in town, and had a large cabin out there where she spent her summers. From there her runners could traffic moonshine up through the pass into West Virginia.

Though her town house was the model of Southern Classicism – a brick house with Ionian columns supporting the roof of her front porch – her log cabin was a grand remnant of Concord's more rustic times. Outdoors she planted, in each corner, red cedars. Orange witch finger flowers grew over the house's walls and roof. Even the most discerning eye, looking up from Indian Pool below, could not distinguish her fortress from the forest.

Down the river from her, past the Pass, was Alistair's home – a perfect stone pentagon having a large, front porch. The house sat on a hill rising from the floodplain, where the annual floods deposited a thin layer of silt. Radiating from the corners of his house, he planted mixed lines of paw paw, persimmon, mayhaw, and mulberry trees. The tree crops also served as windbreaks, leaf-compost suppliers, and living fences for his five fields.

Every summer, Mrs. MacJenkins came to the river with her dogs and her grandson George, his parents having died when they were swimming in Indian Pool a year after his birth and lightning struck the water. George often had his best friend Sammy Nolon out, and they'd swim in that same pool and climb the one-hundred-and-fifty-foot walnut tree while she distilled liquor in the cabin. At night, mayflies fluttered against the screens, trying to get inside as Mrs. MacJenkins, her grandson, and Sammy ate fresh bass and drank juice from Alistair's farm.

Then, for whatever reason, someone in D.C. came up with the bright idea to build a dam at the end of the Pass. One day an urbanite official came knocking on Mrs. MacJenkins front door in town and told her of the Government's plan.

"My land is not for sale," she stated.

"It doesn't much matter. The government the right of eminent domain. That is –"

"But there's no just compensation; the Pass is priceless to me."

"The country needs power. The dam is an issue of federal security."

"I'll be an issue of federal security if you flood my front yard. Now get off of my property before I sic my dogs on you."

As she spoke, Otto, who was Frederick's grandfather, came to her side. He brushed his horse-sized head on her hip.

When it became clear there was little we could legally do to stop the Feds, we gathered at Alistair's pentagon farm house, out there below the pass, to make defense plans. In his great dining room, we all sat down to eat.

The winter had passed and spring was just beginning. Yet still, Alistair had a rich store of sugary persimmons; delicate, chilled paw paws; cinnamon medlars; mayhaw and mulberry jams; butternuts; and pecans to complement the big deer that Elise had caught with her dogs.

"It is a pleasure to have you all here at *Aurae Rustica*. I only wish that we could celebrate the start of spring under more relaxing circumstances. But we have some planning to do."

"I couldn't agree more, Alistair," Mrs. MacJenkins chimed in. "But first, if you don't mind, let's open this moonshine, which I have just concocted. I think it might inspire us."

The following May, when the Army Corp of Engineers came to build the dam, they asked Alistair if he could provide them with drinking water from his well. No one else in town was willing to sell them a drop. He told them that his water was slightly tinged with clay and high in calcium, so it tasted hard, but would be fine. He stuck to a high price per gallon, and they took it.

The troops set up. Mrs. MacJenkins moved out to her cabin for the summer, though she didn't make it to the river much. Every evening, the Indian woman named Flying Bird and her young daughter Nancy stood by the river hurling spells at the troops.

The soldiers couldn't accomplish much. Shortly after their arrival, a strange delirium overcame them. At first they were plagued with dry mouths. They drank Alistair's water more feverously. Soon they were overcome with forgetfulness, unable to complete their tasks. The supervisors didn't know what orders to give. Mrs. Evangeline Rayburn commented that they seemed worse off than herself, and she was senile – or at least she thought she was.

After a few more days, their pupils began to dilate, making the sun appear even brighter. Their lungs expanded, the extra air filling them with energy. Excited, they started swinging their tools at each other and giggling chronically. In the hot afternoon, the men began to skinny dip and jump whole-heartedly into the river from the rope swing tied to the walnut tree in Mrs.

MacJenkins' front yard. A week and a half after their arrival, they were all spending their days swimming and petting each other among the giant lime-stones.

As night came, they'd frolic back to the camp, where they devoured dinner, decorated their bodies with mud, and reveled around the campfire. Flying Bird and Nancy set up a tent nearby and taught them night dances. Often, Alistair would join the festivities. And as they partied, Davy Dorian led a team of townies to the construction site and undid whatever the soldiers had accomplished.

After a couple of weeks, a supervisor from D.C. came down to check on the progress. He nearly ruined his britches when he saw they'd accomplished nothing. He scolded the managers. But shortly after lunch, the phantastica infected him. Later that week he jumped, naked, from the great walnut tree's branches into Indian pool.

The secret, of course, was in the drinking water. For the new moonshine which Mrs. MacJenkins had opened at Alistair's dinner was almost indistinguishable from fresh water. It contained a little alcohol, but it also held the psychedelic compounds from jimsonweed and morning glory. The guests at Alistair's wowed in amazement when after one glass, large colors gushed into the room. It was then, laughing and hallucinating, that Elise MacJenkins revealed her plan to save the Pass.

Once while the troops were stationed here, someone nearly caught her. In mid July, Davy's truck had a bad tire. So, Mrs. MacJenkins hauled the bottles of euphoric liquid over to Alistair's underground cistern, which was masquerading as a well. On her way over, a Federal pig – he actually looked like a pig – pulled her over for absolutely no reason.

"Ma'am, can I ask you why you have all those jugs in your back seat?"

"I get my water from Alistair McGregor. I left something at his house while I was there, so I have to go back and pick it up."

"Are you sure that's water in there, Ma'am?"

"Yes. Do you care to taste it?"

"For all I know it's poison. I keep on telling boss that something might be in the geezer's water, but he doesn't believe me."

"You haven't had any?"

"No Ma'am. I don't drink water. Fish fuck in it. I only drink milk."

"Really?"

"Yep. You can't go wrong with something that comes out of a tit."

"Alistair has the best water in the State. I drink it because it is high in calcium, so it's good for my bones."

"Then you won't mind if I ask you to down some right now. Afterwards, I'll be able to see if it affects your driving ability."

Mrs. MacJenkins stared at the cop.

"The road to Alistair McGregor's runs along the Pass. Too bad there isn't a guard rail," he smirked.

Mrs. MacJenkins rose from her car, grabbed a jug, opened it, and turned it upside down over her head. With skill that would have impressed even William Carlisle, the town drunk, she downed the liquid for six solid seconds.

"Happy?" she asked, handing him the bottle. He took a few sips and shoved it back to her.

"I'll be happy when I see you drive through the Pass. Be careful not to go too slow. I'd hate to have a reason to think you were drunk."

Fortunately, over the years Mrs. MacJenkins had done quite a lot of her own taste testing; she'd developed a tolerance about as high as a blue whale's. She had also out driven a few men-of-the-law in her bootlegging days. The pig, on the other hand, was not as learned. As he tried to keep up with Mrs. MacJenkins around Hair Pin Curve, he lost control of his car. We often wonder what colors he saw as he fell, hundreds of feet, and crashed with a big boom on the dam project.

Years swam by. So many years passed that even a spiritual man of the Earth and a timeless woman of culture began to feel age in their joints. Mrs. MacJenkins's grandson George had gone off to Korea. She went to church every day, praying that he'd make it home. Often Alistair's daughter, Margaret, whom he had very late in life, joined her. The river changed but did not tire.

Then Elise MacJenkins' grandson returned. When he arrived at the rail station, emancipated but amnesic concerning the war, his first question was how Flying Bird's daughter Nancy was doing.

He and Nancy had had a romance in high school. But the strain of his grandmother's disapproval of human hybridization had caused them to break up shortly before Korea. He had dated Margaret for a few months before heading off.

Upon coming back, though, he just wanted to see that Indian. "Nancy saves my soul," he told his grandmother.

"The first time I saw Flying Bird and Nancy they only had feathers covering their twats," Mrs. MacJenkins snapped at George. He had come into her workroom to ask her blessing. She did not even look up from her still as she uttered her verdict. "A squaw - I'm sorry, but I can't."

His teased flame, Margaret, married a local boy named Fit Hattanger. He was nice, but he was dumb and lacked the ability to speak plain English. "I understand the Greek better than that man," Mrs. MacJenkins pouted.

Moonshine.
Time.
Distillation.
Forgetfulness.

Mrs. MacJenkins went on with her life. She had stored up a great deal of gold. She had her big dogs. She had her bridge and garden club parties. She had

gossip and moonshine cocktails to share.

And it was early spring, for the serviceberries were in bloom, when another hoity-toity came knocking on her door.

"I represent Virginia Energy. We want to build a massive hydro-electric dam at the end of the Concord Pass. Someone has bought the McGregor farm and plans on turning it into a large development. This area needs power."

"I am sure Alistair is not willing to sell his property."

"His daughter has already signed the papers."

"But Alistair —"

"Is a very old man."

"Well, those people are going to have to retrieve power from somewhere else. My property is not for sale."

"There is an oil shortage, Mrs. MacJenkins. The local officials think this will do great things for Concord."

"It was all Fit," Alistair rumbled, as Elise stood by his bed. "He's a stupid hick."

"Yes, I know. But how did this happen?"

"I've been signing property over to Margaret for years to avoid a death tax. I didn't think she'd listen to that redneck."

Everyone who was anyone showed up to the meeting where the County Board of Supervisors were to approve the developer's plans to rezone Alistair's farm. Three minutes before the meeting was to start, the Ancients rode into the room. Clutching his walnut scythe, Alistair was on Onyx, who was the size of a bear. Elise sat side saddle on Frederick. Alistair wore a three piece off-white linen suit, and Elise was in an off-white linen gown. Their long, silvery hair streamed behind them. As they entered, Simon Donald and Ms. Tzigane yielded their seats to them in the front row.

Several people voiced their concerns about the dam. No one was for it. Sammy Nolon talked about how fish stocks in the river were going to be devastated. Betty Joe said we were going to flood some fine hunting woods. Ms. Tzigane informed everyone that there were an awful lot of brand new cars in the board members' driveways. Steve Pampas rose up and called the entire board a bunch of morons.

The board thanked everyone for speaking and was about to vote, when Elise MacJenkins stood up.

"May I say something?"

The members looked at her with an uneasiness which they tried to mask with grins.

"I want to first apologize for my lack of eloquence. I am hardly a trained orator."

The board nodded to her, and she went on.

"Now, Alistair and I were almost late to this meeting because on our way here we and a handful of other people got stuck behind a tractor. At first, seeing the long line of automobiles in front of us, I thought we

were going to a funeral. But when we realized that it was Jack Dorian's tractor, we didn't mind the wait. Besides, we love that road to town.

"You have, in this room, men and women whose folks have been in Concord County for so long that they are intertwined in its history. Sitting behind me, you can see Carson Falkland, whose family founded the town, and whose great grandfather, grandfather, and father all served as mayors. You have Betty Joe Lee deButt Carlisle, who is a descendant of General Lee. And, of course, there is Alistair – and me.

"For all of Concord's time people have been enjoying the Fork River and the Pass. Carson's grandfather himself, so many years ago, told me his family believed the area was a great place for a town because the beautiful river had navigable waters. Why Betty Joe, have I ever told you that Robert used to ride Traveller down the cliff sided road? He would often stop at a spring near my father's cabin, gaze at the river, and smile. Sometimes he'd even take off his boots, walk down to the water, and wade around.

"The moment he died in his living room, water poured from the sky. When the river flooded, the coffin mill, up past my father's cabin, washed away. We sent some boys down river to look for a box to bury our General in. However, I was the one who found the coffin, dangling in Methuselah's branches.

"When I think of Lee, I also think of the servants my father used to have around his cabin. My father was strict, but if they were good he'd let them off early some afternoons, and they'd go swim in the river. I'd join them, even though I wasn't supposed to. During those moments – when the yellow sun sent warm beams down through the mountains, over the waving water and into us all – even field hands smiled.

"I met my first love in the Pass. He was a farmer, and I was a few years older than he; we spent an entire summer swimming and playing among the rocks. We got into a fight at the end of that season; we did not want to change with the weather. We both went off and married other people. And though we have never been lovers, there are still evenings when I smile at how beautiful it was to be by the river and wrapped in the arms of a strong man.

"Lately, I've been thinking of my grandson. I've been remembering when he was a boy, and like his father before him, I'd help him collect baby frogs along the river, and we'd sit with them jumping all around us on the water's edge. I think of his parents, who died shocked in an embrace in that water. I bear in mind his wife Nancy, whom I'm sorry I never saw swim with my grandson in the river. When I picture her and her mother, Flying Bird, I think about the mistakes that we, as Southerners, make. I remember my daddy's slaves. Then I smile, cry, and I mourn over my younger days."

For the only time anyone could remember, Mrs. MacJenkins was crying, the years running down the map of her time worn face.

"Gentlemen, please don't drown the walnut tree

in front of my father's cabin. Every time I look at it, I see my boys."

Mrs. MacJenkins sat down, and Frederick put his big head on her lap.

"All in favor of the dam, say 'Aye.'" Spoke the Chairman, fat and red faced.

All the board members said Aye.

"I guess I was headed to a funeral," Mrs. MacJenkins snuffled. She tapped Frederick gently on the head and then pointed to the Chairman of the Board.

Like a winged griffin, the dog jumped nine feet up and over the Board's table, sinking his teeth into the Chairman's neck. It snapped. Following Frederick's flight, Onyx came bellowing onto the oak table, taking another member by the face and ripping his head off. Simon Donald ran to the door and opened it up, letting Captain, Whitey, and Walter into the room to join rebellion. One Board member whipped out a gun and was about to shoot Frederick, but Captain flew like a supercharged magnet to him. The leopard-shepherd snapped his jaws so tight on his wrist that the man dropped his gun and screamed a blood-curdling cry – heard by a tourist down the street. Captain held on; Onyx and Whitey grabbed the remaining supervisors and kept them hostage. Then Frederick, in a slow, gentle humane manner, came to each living official. One by one, he grabbed them by the neck, giving it a quick, life ending crunch and yank.

Fit made a run for it, but Walter caught him by the britches on his way out the door. Frederick was about to put an end to him when old lady MacJenkins snapped her fingers. He halted.

Alistair hobbled up to the white trash, glaring at him. Margaret, crying, obediently stood by her father.

As if he were hitting a perfectly placed baseball, Alistair swung his scythe. The silver blade made a beautiful, new moon shimmer as it flashed through the air, sunk perfectly into Fit's left ear, and then poked out of the right.

She declared that we'd flood the pass over her dead body, and she meant it. When the Feds arrived to her cabin to haul her away, her dogs gave no sign of cooperating. They shot Frederick in the foyer, right as he ripped off one man's whole arm; Captain, on the stairs, as he tore out one man's Adam's apple; Whitey, in the upstairs hallway, after he darted out a spare room and neutered a sergeant. They couldn't open her bedroom door, for Onyx leaned against it. After shooting through it, they still had a hard time pushing aside the bear-beast.

When they opened her chamber, she was sitting up in bed beside a dying Alistair, Walter dutifully at the end. She held a flintlock pistol from the Revolutionary War in her lap.

Sheriff Wineland, with tears in his eyes, stepped forward. "Elise. Alistair. It is time to leave."

"The Hell it is, Wineland," she thundered, cocking her pistol and pointing it at them. "You'll have to shoot me to drag me out of here. But if you do, let me warn you.

Let me warn you all. My map-like face will haunt you for the rest of your days. I've been part of Concord and the Fork River for a long time. My soul is rooted here enough to stick around a few extra seasons. So go ahead, old friend, shoot me. We're sticking it out."

Sheriff Wineland stepped back; the Feds didn't know what do. They were filled with a stupor, as if they'd been inebriated by one of Mrs. MacJenkins' magical concoctions.

"Now leave me to mourn over Concord, Virginia."

When the flood arrived to her great cabin, it was not like the one discussed in Genesis; this water did not fall from the sky. It was slow and creeping, inching its way, a surface like a plate of glass – suffocating the river's changes.

The water immortalized them. Simon Donald, looking through his telescope from the top of Deadman Mountain, reported that she and Alistair emerged from her cabin as the river started to claim Methuselah, the black walnut tree. She helped him as they scaled the nailed-on ladder planks, slowly making their way to the highest branches. There, above Indian Pool, they rested, prayed to God, then pulled up the rope swing with their

feeble hands.

They jumped, sailing through the air like a pendulum, letting go at the most distant and highest point. Arms opening like the wings of a dove while holding each other's hand, the Ancients then, for old time's sake, gave that wild river one last dive.

Peter Neofotis was raised in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, where his family still resides. He attended school in Lexington, VA and Columbia College in NY, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a double major in Environmental Biology and Creative Writing. Since graduating in 2003, he has worked for the NASA-Goddard Institute for Space Studies, assessing climate change. In 2006, Neofotis initiated theatrical performances, which his director has dubbed dramatic panegyric, delivering the stories of *The Ancients* from memory. He appears regularly at New York City's well-regarded incubator of new talent, Dixon Place, and at the Cornelia Street Café. Peter recently opened at *Ars Nova* in Manhattan. *The Ancients* was selected by Michael Murphy. The prize is made possible by gifts from patrons of the Faulkner Society.

Great Books of 2007

The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz

Tree of Smoke by Denis Johnson

Then We Came to the End: A Novel by Joshua Ferris

The Yiddish Policemen's Union by Michael Chabon

On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan

The Bad Girl by Mario Vargas Llosa

The House of Meetings by Martin Amis

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

The Raw Shark Texts by Steven Hall

The Uncommon Reader by Alan Bennett

Out Stealing Horses: A Novel by Per Petterson

Like You'd Understand, Anyway by Jim Shepard

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J.K. Rowling

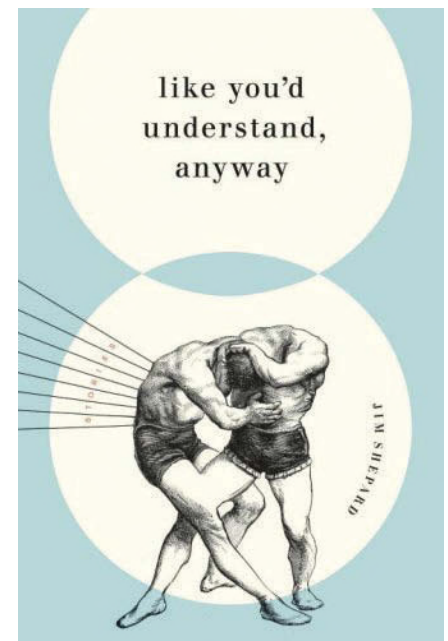
Gentlemen of the Road by Michael Chabon

The Savage Detectives by Roberto Bolaño

No One Belongs Here More Than You by Miranda July

Run by Ann Patchet

The Post-Birthday World by Lionel Shriver





Mary McEllyne
2007
Best Novel In
Progress, Excerpt
Wait



Janette Turner Hospital

grew up on the steamy sub-tropical coast of Australia in the north-eastern state of Queensland. She began her teaching career in remote Queensland high schools, but since her graduate studies she has taught in universities in Australia, Canada, England, France and the United States.

She has been a Visiting Professor and Distinguished Writer in Residence at M.I.T., Boston University, Colgate

University, and Columbia University in New York.

Her first published short story appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly (USA)* where it won an 'Atlantic First' citation in 1978. Her first novel, *The Ivory Swing* (set in the village in South India where she lived in 1977) won Canada's \$50,000 Seal Award in 1982. She lived for many years in Canada and in 1986 she was listed as by the *Toronto Globe & Mail* as one of Canada's Ten Best Young Fiction Writers. Since then she has won a number of prizes for her eight novels and four short story collections and her work has been published in multiple foreign language collections. Three of her short stories appeared in Britain's annual *Best Short Stories in English* in their year of publication and one of these, *Unperformed Experiments Have No Results*, was selected for *The Best of the Best*, an anthology of the decade in 1995. Her other critically acclaimed books include the novels *Oyster*, *Due Preparations for the Plague*, *The Last Magician* and *Orpheus Lost* and, most recently, a collection of stories, *Forecast: Turbulence*. For over a decade, she held an endowed chair as Carolina Distinguished Professor of English at the University of South Carolina and in 2003 received the Russell Research Award for Humanities and Social Sciences, conferred by the university for the most significant faculty contribution (research, publication, teaching and service) in a given year. Now, as Carolina Distinguished Professor Emerita, she continues to mentor students and teach one course each year.



Wait: Excerpt

Tell me, Muse, of that woman, so loyal and wise and true, who waited twenty years for her husband to come home from a pointless war, far across the ocean – though he sent no word, no letter, no news of return, and bedded half the women he met while he was gone.

What? What's that, you say?

She couldn't exist?

Then tell me, Muse, of that woman who could.

I.

They honeymooned in a one-star Mississippi motel: a three-story dingy cube beside an asphalt lot scattered with El Caminos and Volkswagens, notable only for the towering neon sign spelling its name in phosphorescent pink glass tubes – S-U-N K-I-S-T, like the citrus – and the seven letters she bet always blinked beneath – V-A-C-A-N-C-Y. Originally, they had planned to drive all the way from Grand Isle to Florida, but they never made it because they got sick of driving – or, more accurately, because Odell's fingers had been sending a tingling sensation and a string of goosebumps up her thigh since the Mississippi border. By the time they got to Pass Christian, where he suggested they stop, she wanted nothing more. She laughed when he pointed at the VACANCY sign blinking over the Sun Kist. And she laughed even harder when he pulled into the lot. Which is why their son was conceived in Room 301 under the phosphorescent pink glow of that sign, while the wind off the dirty Gulf floated molecules of salt and seawater they could taste through the open balcony door. And which is why, today, on the first anniversary of that night, Mrs. Odell LeBlanc is weaving through traffic into the lot.

She scowls, adjusting her shades, as she gets out of her car: at the glare of the sun off the dash, at the tilt of the second C in VACANCY, which has in the past year all but fallen from the sign. Then she hurries through the black parking lot toward the office, jumping at the bell that rings as she opens the door.

The receptionist sits behind the desk, legs crossed, seashell-pink lips shimmering as she smiles lazily from beneath her monstrous beehive. A fan on the desk oscillates. Pale threads of hair snaking up her scalp quiver, fuzzing out from her hairdo, that gravity-defying monument to all that is mod. She hasn't changed at all.

That gaudy gold crucifix around her neck, that hairdo, that lipstick. Her fingernails are even the same color, fluttering seashell pink above her desk.

She remembers giggling at them the summer before, as Odell held her hand and inquired about a room with the straightest face he could muster: which wasn't very straight considering the LSD they had dropped at the Louisiana-Mississippi border. When the receptionist reached out to take their money, the pink of her fingernail polish left traces of light in the air, marking the path of her hands.

"Can I help you?"

She blinks. "Penny LeBlanc. I have a reservation. Room 301?"

The woman checks a notepad, then nods. The beehive bobs up and down, tiny threads dancing in the air like snakes being charmed. "Seven bucks."

In the mirror behind her, Penny's own hair bobs as she nods back. Her reflection catches her off guard: the too-big shades sliding down her nose, the dirty blonde hair that parts down the middle, the pale face devoid of expression and makeup. Even her inky brown eyes look strange, peering over the shades at her reflection. For some reason, she finds it hard to believe that she is the disheveled girl in the mirror, even though she has been planning to drive to this motel today for a week. Until she watches herself push her shades up her nose, fish around in her bag, and fork over seven crumpled bucks. Then she gets this feeling. Not *déjà vu*, not that. Something else. Like she's supposed to be here. She can feel it.

The receptionist is chattering about something.

Penny drags her gaze from the mirror – her breasts look huge in this blouse – to the woman's heavily lined eyes. "Beg pardon?"

"I said, I can't believe the sky. It hasn't been this clear since the drought."

Penny shakes her head, trying to feign a similar disbelief as she wonders if she packed her breast pump. Probably not. She left it on the counter this morning when she finished filling Teller's bottles.

"And with that storm about to hit two states over!"

The woman shakes her head, fumbling through a drawer. "Let's see. Room 301..."

Here she is, separated from Teller for the first time since he was born – and she knows how she's supposed to feel, a new mother separated from her infant, she's supposed to feel nervous, guilty, worried – but she feels relieved instead, unburdened, for the first time since Odell left for the Depot. And Teller will be fine. Odell's parents were happy to keep him. Annie was so thrilled she forgot to ask why she needed a sitter. And Larry had looked at her in earnest and said he would love to keep his grandson.

The receptionist is staring at her.

Penny tries to remember what she said. "What storm?"

"Hurricane Camille."

"That's right." She heard about it on the drive up, but didn't pay much attention since it was headed for

Florida. "The one that destroyed Castro's crops."

"That's the one." She sets the key on the counter.

"Where you from?"

But in the time it takes her to ask, Penny has already put the key in her pocket, turned around, and pushed the door open, its awful bell ringing merrily as it swings toward the lot. She misses Odell. He was so good at talking. Whenever they were accosted by an inexplicably friendly stranger, all she had to do was stand beside him and smile. Whatever it was – the weather, the war, the fashions worn by astronauts' wives – he could talk about it politely.

"Grand Isle," she mumbles over her shoulder, then stops, surprised to hear her husband's hometown instead of her own. "But I'm originally from Pride," she adds, too late, as the door falls shut.

She has never been good at small talk.

*Mary McMyne was raised near Baton Rouge, LA, where her "hippie" parents introduced her to Frank Zappa, Joni Mitchell, Thoreau, and Lewis Carroll at an impressionable age. She studied creative writing at Louisiana State University and fiction at New York University. Her winning manuscript, her second novel, **Wait**, is a lyrical, hallucinatory retelling of the Iliad and the Odyssey from Penelope's perspective, set in the Deep South during the Vietnam War. Her first novel, **Fire Exhausted**, a dramatic novel about the redemptive powers of love and grief, was short-listed for finalist in the novel category of this year's competition. She was the 2001 recipient of the Robert Olen Butler Short Story Award and the 2002 recipient of the Tony Bill Screenwriting Award. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *Web del Sol*, *Country Roads*, and *Exquisite Corpse*. She lives with her husband the two black cats in a very old house in Lafayette, where she teaches composition and literature at South Louisiana Community College. *Wait* was selected by Janette Turner Hospital. Prize made possible by patron gifts.*

Quote To Live By

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.

–Jane Austin, **Pride and Prejudice**



Jane Satterfield
2007
Best Essay
The Crooked Track



Judge Rodger Kamenetz

is the bestselling author of the memoirs, *The Jew in the Lotus*, which is an account of how he recovered his faith as a Jew through explorations of the Buddhist faith, including audiences with the Dali Llama; and *Terra Infirma*, which centers on his relationship with his mother after her death. His



poetry collections include the best-selling *Stalking Elija*. His recent books include *The History of Last Night's Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul*. A poet, essayist, and professor, and popular lecturer, Rodger recently was selected to appear with Oprah Winfrey to discuss *The History of Last Night's Dream*. Rodger lives in New Orleans with his wife, the fiction writer, Moira Crone. Both are faculty members at LSU in Baton Rouge and are regular presenters at Society events, including *Words & Music*.

The Crooked Track

He who will not take advice will take the crooked track.
—Gaelic maxim

In the photograph that falls to the floor from an old notebook, the recumbent stones of Arbor Low are a shattered circle on a windswept grey-green field, a clock face spun out of time. Just back from six weeks in a small town in Italy's Marche Region where I spent sun-drenched hours in a sheltered mountain town off the Via Flaminia where time is marked by the ancient sound of tolling bells from thirteen separate churches, I'm dragging my feet on domestic chores. I find it far too easy to put off dry mopping the dusty floors to stop and gaze at this shard of a former life where I walked the a circular path along the earthworks, arms stretched out from my sides for balance. Caught for a moment on the high bank of the Neolithic henge in care of English Heritage, I am a speck on the horizon, a figure reduced by distance.

To look back now is to see a shadow – ridiculously thin, in need of a moderating spirit. My previous visits to England had never brought me this far north, so far from the cultivated gardens where nature remains at an arm's length, domesticated. It was August; summer was dying. The English moorlands were frighteningly empty, the air preternaturally cool as I walked under low scrolls of threatening clouds. For the length of one long afternoon, I'd ridden around and through England's Peak District in a second-hand Metro whose engine threw water, threatening to boil over. Rob and I drove and drove, consulted, conferred, retraced our steps, returned to where we'd started. Were we hopelessly lost? Using last year's road guide? The map on my knee was, I thought, clearly marked: motorway, A-road, B-road. My recent affection for maps--ordnance surveys, the Highway Code, pocket A-Z's of each and every town I'd visit – was a love of wresting order from chaos, of translating uncertainty into traversable routes, something I congratulated myself on inheriting from my mother's emigrant Irish forebears who'd lost the very ground that once was theirs.

At thirty, with no real academic berth to show for eight years of adjunct teaching and no book to show that the hours I'd spent revising poems by long-hand and typing them into Word Perfect 2.0 were justified, I especially loved that the old roads are named for destinations: the Windsor Road or the London Road; follow it, and you know where you'll arrive. But if you don't know where you're going? In that case, as George Harrison sang on his final album – “any road will take you there.”

I'm a latecomer among the so-called “quiet Beatle”'s fans, although his solo work, I've come to realize, was part of my youth's soundtrack, the tuneful music of Blow Away floating from a lifeguard's transistor as my friends and I sat pool-side, tracing spiral whorls with our toes, waiting out the adult swim. Writing on November 18, 2002 about Harrison's posthumously released farewell album for the BBC News, Chris Heard put his finger on Harrison's unique contribution to popular music, observing that no one but Harrison could include “the most profound meditations on eternity and the quest for inner peace without it seeming contrived.” Like many critics, Heard characterizes Harrison's solo work

as veering from “unremarkable and workmanlike to inspired”; this assessment, true as far as it goes, overlooks the fact that some of Harrison’s best work was out of print for years and is only now receiving the hearing it deserves. Although *Brainwashed* (Harrison’s final album, posthumously released) revisits familiar ground—listeners will recognize the ex-Fab’s characteristically playful reflections on life’s bittersweet nature and the quest for wisdom – it’s undeniably catchy, a melodiously rich memorial to Harrison’s musical legacy and humanitarian viewpoint, with lyrics, occasionally awkward or strained, that are persuasive within their setting. Among the album’s virtues: the jangly ukulele in the old standard, *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (in Harrison’s hands a metaphor for his relation to the material world), the gorgeous chorus of *Pisces Fish* (to be avoided by those who scoff at astrological archetypes), and the allegorical natural imagery of *Stuck Inside a Cloud* or even *Rising Sun*—a song whose “classic structure, strings, slide guitar and minor chords” is, Heard observes, a “masterclass” in the kind of tune Noel Gallagher (perhaps the world’s most famous working-class Beatles’ fan) “spent two albums trying to hone.” Describing the title track where Harrison’s critique of consumer culture swells into an impassioned plea for deliverance from “the places of concrete,” Heard rightfully suggests this album’s closer is a “fitting swan-song, suggesting the listener beat a different path to the one society decrees is right.” Like most things worth doing, it’s easier said than done. And Harrison’s reminder that cultivating the spirit is a lifetime’s work is a message I wasn’t always able to hear.

Back on the long and winding road through the Peaks, a hairpin turn took me by surprise. Within seconds, I caught sight of a battered sign, directing us onto a minor road to where the site could be accessed via a private farm boasting a tiny car park where a tin waited for visitors to place their 50-pence courtesy admission fee. Stepping out of the car, I was instantly uneasy. Surprising, really, since I’d become a veteran visitor to stone circles, henges, and long barrows during my last visit to England. Unlike New Age adherents who seek to commune with the stones and channel the energy inherent, I was drawn for different reasons to these cathedrals of “inner space” from which technology and organized religion had exiled us. Of course, I, too, appreciated that sites like Oxfordshire’s Rollright Stones or Stanton Moor’s Nine Ladies Circle were well-removed from the tourist track and that the landscape surrounding them had a certain integrity: no guard rails keeping you back from the stones, no gift shops, no milling crowds, factors which eviscerate Stonehenge of its monumental splendor and its visitors of awe. My interest in visiting archaeological sites was more atmospheric than occult, gleaned purely from literary sources – Tess’ night on the saracen stone, the adulteress exhumed from a bog and memorialized in Seamus Heaney’s poetic sequence, *North* (inspired in part by P.V. Glob’s photograph collection, *The Bog People*). Gothic imagination aside, I was

attracted to the sheer impenetrability of these Neolithic archaeological mysteries. Stone circles are perfect monuments to intellectual hubris. Aside from ashes, flints, pottery shards, bone bits, the occasional skeleton with a broken skull, the ground promises more than it delivers, gives up little. The stones at Arbor Low are said to have been the victim of religious zealotry, toppled by early Christians seeking to abolish traditional customs they considered “pagan rites.” In the absence of evidence – no socket holes have been found to establish that the stones had ever been in an upright position – fanciful notions of fallen giants or supernatural spells are equally appealing explanations. As far as the eye can see in my glossy photograph, the sole sign of human habitation is an extensive system of dry stonewalls demarking old pasture lines.

The very air at Arbor Low, I remember, was charged enough to make your hair stand on end. The weathered limestone blocks created an ominous, sacrificial circle; an internal ‘cove’ formed by four stones added to this impression. In time I learned I wasn’t alone in apprehending disquieting sensations. Casual visitors and serious students of archaeology alike attest to the varying moods of megalithic sites whose original function remains an entire realm of speculation among both scholars and laymen. While the low-rolling hills of Wiltshire lend West Kennet Long Barrow a pastoral, commemorative air (a mid-century excavation led experts to believe it served as an ancestral mausoleum), the wind-scoured pastureland of the Peaks is nothing but bleak, an area redolent of darker moods and seasons, one where the wind is likely, any moment, to violently shift and bring a deluge of rain. Other visitors have spoken of mystical vibrations emitted by the stones; members of the Society of Ley Hunters also reported an uncanny experience of their own during fieldwork.

In the early 1920’s Alfred Watkins advanced the idea that “ley lines” or “old straight tracks” existed in a dense network across the British Isles. Used primarily by traders, these tracks would have included notable markers such as hilltops, groves, standing-stones and churches recognizable to the traveler as orientation points. Since much open countryside has become heavily trafficked, mapping leys is a complicated matter. It requires an intimate knowledge of a given landscape, including its history, folklore, geological and topological features: a steely reading of multiple, superimposed texts. Contemporary ley hunters tend to ascribe these lines a more mystical interpretation; visualizing them as ways “of spirit and light,” direct routes to greater spiritual consciousness. Ordinary amblers, however, enjoy the sheer pleasure of walking in landscapes that appear “natural” and are relatively free of the familiar signage of globalization.

Originating in the Derbyshire High Peak and ending up at St. Bertram’s Well in Ilam, Staffordshire (a post-Norman structure that’s spring-fed and shadowed

by a maple tree once-venerated as “St. Bertram’s Ash”), the Arbor Low Ley passes through the South-Southeast entrance of the henge. At the moment ley hunters attempting to “fix” a sight line drove a stake into the ground, “the heavens opened in one of the fiercest cloudbursts” the team had ever experienced. The sheer weight of rainwater had ripped the maps from their hands; their compasses could not be used.

I place the photo in the notebook, the notebook on a shelf. Still jetlagged and accustomed to observing Italian *pausa* where commercial activity ceases during the span of the afternoon, I feel myself relax as a cassette loops over. This Neglected, Rare, and Out-of-Print Harrison was a gift – not a souvenir bought off shelf – but a tape made by hand, just for me. In time, I’ll develop even greater admiration for Harrison’s lesser-known songs, instrumental ability, compositional technique, and, especially, his willingness to look sentimental, even foolish, in his pursuit of individual vision.

In **Shout: The Beatles in Their Generation**, journalist Philip Norman dismissed Harrison’s enthusiasm for Indian mysticism as an escape route from the fug-like heat of the Cavern Club to the stage-life of a Beatle, “wearing a suit and singing Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Studio life, too, had its frustrations, Lennon and McCartney’s “stifling partnership” among them.

In 1966, after two months studying sitar with Ravi Shankar (whose spiritual teacher introduced this world-weary Lili-pudlian to the Law of Karma), Harrison returned to England, “filled with India’s infinite wisdom and mystery, having perceived nothing of its equally infinite mundaneness.” Harrison’s initial attempts with the sitar – moving from a more “tentative” sound on Rubber Soul to become “one of the prime elements, and praised as such, on Revolver” – eventually allowed him to make a distinctive contribution in the group’s musical evolution.

Overlooked along the way, however, were the remarkable quality of tracks without Indian influence – *If I Needed Someone*, *Think for Yourself*, or, later, *Long, Long, Long* and *Savoy Truffle* – that more than held their own beside the celebrated contributions of Lennon and McCartney. By the time Harrison received the songwriting kudos he deserved for *Here Comes the Sun* and *Something on the Beatles’ Abbey Road*, he’d already written a body of songs that could stand with the best of the sixties and at the same time evoked his own spiritual journey.

While it’s easy to be dismissive of Harrison’s quest for transcendence, in the long-run his adoption of Indian mysticism served him well, becoming a kind of internal compass, directing him toward an invaluable measure of professional independence and personal peace.

With my film supply exhausted, I got back into the car, resuming my work with the map. Instead of relying on embodied knowledge “used since time immemorial

by the people of the land” to navigate the world, moderns have no choice but to rely on a map. In ancient times this was otherwise: place-names enshrined geomantic tales about location and significance. Those who know their own country have direct experience of the land and no need for maps that reduce the spirit of any given place to coordinates on a grid. As Rob and I drove on, attempting to re-trace our steps, the road suddenly dead-ended.

Celtic folklore is replete with tales of magical tracts of land – fairy tracks that may cure or curse, pestilential places where one must never go willingly. In Ireland, for instance, the fear *gortach* (“hungry grass” or “violent hunger”) is said to grow at the spot where an uncoffined corpse was laid on the ground on its way to burial.

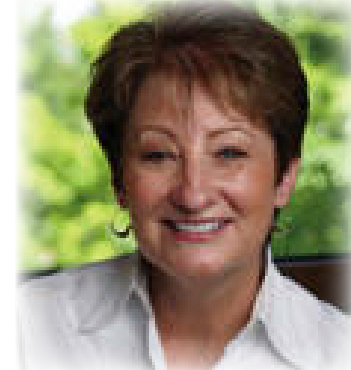
To step on such a spot guarantees instant doom for the unfortunate trespasser who will, henceforth, “suffer insatiable hunger.” Even more widely reported is *foidin seachrain* (“the stray sod”). An unsuspecting traveler who steps on this piece of ground becomes disoriented. A classic example of this the so-called “gateless field” where a traveler steps over a stile and into a field lined with a thorned hedge. Although the traveler knows his destination, he is inexplicably waylaid. The way out of the field cannot be found, nor can the entrance: the traveler spends the night sleeping on the ground, in the open, waking to find he or she has slept next to it.

We stalled before backing up the car and attempting to retrace our way. I remember that peculiar moment, as if it, too, were something I’d fixed on film. The eeriness of it all: the road behind us a white dash into nowhere, a stitch undone, a vacancy; autumn beginning its ordinary ruin.

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Martha Burns
2007
Best Short Story
Something Rotten



Judge John Biguenet, Distinguished Professor of Literature at Loyola University, is author of the novel, *Oyster*, and the short story collection, *The Torturers Apprentice*. He is a successful poet, playwright, and translator and he has written numerous stories for such magazines as *Granta* and essays for the *New York Times* and other journals. John was selected to receive the Faulkner Society's 2009 ALIHOT (A Legend in His/Her Own Time) Award, presented at *Words & Music, 2009*.



Something Rotten

The first thing she did was make herself tea. Then she had walked, with her book bag hanging off her shoulder, into her three by four feet of carpeted real estate. She dropped the bag and nudged it, with her foot, under her desk. She set the tea next to her computer and unlocked the roped steal cord that she wove around her computer docking station each night as part of her lock-up routine. She had punched in the first of her three passwords – more from habit than memory – when she heard her phone ring and saw the phone panel spurt lights all in the same instance. Gina, the bully who resided behind her cubicle's eight-foot, backside partition, was already working her phone. As usual, she had her sister on the line, and they were bickering. Gina and her sister had been thrown out of a Yankee game the week before and now they were getting their tight little story on their assault case straight.

Gina said, "Nobody's doing time for this shit. And do me a favor, tell Mom to get off my back." And then while Donna waited for the amber dashes on the panel to configure into a name, Gina lowered her voice and called someone an ugly bitch. Donna did not recognize the name on the panel. It was only an in-house call, not her Mom calling from their family diner. It wasn't about her two girls, not about her life.

Donna leaned over, picked up her phone, and lodged it between her shoulder and ear so that her hands were free. She punched in the network password on her computer as she said, "This is Donna." Still standing, she turned and leaned out into the aisle to look through the east-facing, floor-to-ceiling window that ran the length of the east wing. She considered the scarred, tip end of Manhattan. It was early summer, a day meant for puddling around on porches in sandals. The young Pakistani woman in the next cube, who considered it her right to control the vertical blinds, was not in yet and so the sunlight burst through unobstructed into the seventh floor glass box. It was a real plus to work in the east wing, away from the cocky partners and the senior managers who were confined to windowless interior offices, for their privacy of course. It was like a barnyard over there with their open pit of underfed administrative assistants. Here, in this wing, you could get in and get out, just do your work.

"Donna, this is Nicole Puglisi. I'm here in the New Jersey office today. Do you have a minute to talk?"

Donna's mind muddled. She took her seat and pulled out her "to-do" list, something she wrote out in long hand on a legal pad each night before leaving and kept on top of whatever stack of files she had on her desk. It wasn't high-tech but she always knew what she had to get done and she enjoyed crossing things off. Nicole sniffed impatiently. Donna ran her finger down the list, stalled on one task, a thankless chore. It was June 30th, a closing date of sorts for her expatriate clients and, truth be known, this wasn't even her regular day to work. Donna flipped on the under-cabinet florescent light that would throb as the day went on. She could only take it in small doses but the sunlight behind her had darkened her cube.

The drive in had taken had taken her a full hour. She had already forgotten it, forgotten everything she had passed. She didn't know it yet but she had forgotten the suited man, the one with the spiked, shiny hair, in the Easy Pass lane who had squared off with her, never expecting she'd slow down, give him her go-ahead wave, let him in.

She said into the phone, "I really can't, Nicole. One of my managers needs me to get some of the notices out that we've had lying around loose." Donna had been raised to give an explanation.

"I need to see you. I'm using Katz's office on the 8th floor. It's number 8033." Nicole's voice sounded like a recording and with Gina snapping at her sister on the other side of the not so sound-resistant panel, Donna was not so sure of what she was hearing. What was with that sniffing? Donna could be all business too, could be efficient and hard-edged if she needed to, but making waves wore her out.

Donna got off her phone. Gina's voice skipped up an octave. She was spitting Portuguese words out the way bacon spits grease.

Donna waited for a break in her neighbor's rant and then picked her phone up again to change her away message. She figured it was best to have some proof that she was in. She spoke smoothly into her phone, "This is Donna Fleming. This is Wednesday June 30th. I'm in the office today but away from my desk, please leave me a message and I'll return your call. Thanks for calling." It was her usual, always ending it on a high note – voice raised, and because it was routine she managed it while punching in her Windows password. Words and images zigzagged across the screen and froze. She was connected, in the network. She hauled her bag out, pulled out her wallet, lodged it in the back of her lower desk drawer, and then she took out her lunch bag, and tossed the book bag back under her desk. She always ate at her desk and charged most of that time as time worked. Lots of people in this office did this; they got their time in that way. Donna took the plastic wrapped tuna sandwich out of the brown lunch bag – thought she might stash it in the communal refrigerator on her way out. But then she thought she'd probably be eating it soon enough and left it there on her phony-wood credenza.

She pushed back from her desk in her clamshell shaped, ergonomic chair. It wasn't even a year old. Confined to the clean technology chair all day made her stiff when she stood up. It was as if she had to reconfigure her frame. Something wasn't right she figured, she was too young at thirty-seven to be getting stiff. But these chairs had been the prized acquisition of the last outgoing partner. He even had an unveiling for them. He had called a meeting and had said solemnly, reverently, "each employee will use the office labeler to label his or her chair with his or her cube number. Look, you are responsible for your chair."

Kip, the man who sat across the aisle from Donna, could do voices and that partner's voice had been a tough one for him to get just right but the chair incident had allowed Kip to nail the voice. He nailed it whenever he repeated solemnly, reverently, "In this department we now have leading edge workspace seating." Donna liked Tuesdays best when her schedule over-lapped with Kip's. He was a part-timer too and didn't work Wednesday or Thursdays. Thursdays were always long days for Donna.

Standing now, Donna studied her feet. Good thing she had dressed by code and worn closed-toe shoes and real sleeves.

Gina, however, wore sleeveless tops and nothing but open-toe shoes. And her shoes were always spiked

heels, which showed off her muscular calves. But then Gina did the billing for the partners and knew how to put the squeeze on the managers who had to come up somehow or other with the cumulative billable hours that they could pass onto the clients. Gina made the managers sweat out the end of each quarter and so she was pretty high in the pecking order – she had privileges.

But Donna did not wear sleeveless tops, not even at her Mom's diner where she worked on her days off. Her arms were not her best feature. She pulled her name badge, which dangled on a cord with her assorted keys, over her head and took off for the back exit. Something made her turn back. No one from the other wing had seen her yet and she couldn't afford to start out the day with time to eat. So she ripped out the first blank page of the legal pad and wrote, "Meeting with Nicole P." She wrote the time she had walked into the office, before the tea and the passwords, but then it had only been ten minutes earlier and that wasn't much to fudge. As she laid the note on her keyboard she watched her emails load, all sixty-some of them. Those damn emails will take me an hour to clear. Donna took her flattened hand and ran it across her computer screen, scattering the dust that was clinging there and then she pressed her hand on the cool surface, leaving her handprint in the dust. She would recognize the pattern of her palm anywhere.

Her mind rippled as she headed out again. What was with that tone of voice? She held her badge up to the little black box with the electronic eye to let herself out of the east block, leaving a record someplace of her comings and goings, even if she couldn't remember it all. She made her way to the elevators.

The executive offices were on the eighth floor. There was only one way in – one way out – for the entire eighth floor that boasted a receptionist confined within a four-foot high wrap-around mahogany desk. The last of a dying breed, Donna figured. But for now the receptionist was willingly penned up as if she were a prized rare creature on loan from some distant bankrupt country. The matronly woman ran her eyes over Donna as if she were searching for contraband. Donna held up her badge, keys dangling, said "Here to see Nicole Puglisi," and then gave the woman her closed-eye smile. The glass door slammed behind her and made a secure clicking sound. The reception desk was on the west side of the building and once inside Donna figured she could cut across to the eastern exposure or wind her way down the passageway to the northern horizon and then bank right and right again to office 8033. Donna took the long way.

The ventilation system was convulsing. She turned right and ripples of frigid air blasted through the vents. Last winter on this floor a partner had died at his desk. Story had it that he had slumped over his desk, face forward, and died. The official story was that he had an air bubble in an artery. Donna didn't know which exact office it happened in but every time she was on the eighth floor she thought about it and wondered who found him, wondered who had been interrogated, thought about foul-play, and wondered just how you come to have air in

an artery. She had not known the man. At least she could count on hearing Gina at her desk bitching all day. If that ever stopped, Donna had promised herself, she'd go around to Gina's cell and check on her. Maybe Gina's the reason Nicole called me – that could explain that tone of voice. Maybe people have been complaining about Gina and her assault case. Maybe Nicole wants to get my take on it. Human Resource people are like that – they like a snitch – a tattletale. After all, 2002 was the year of the whistle-blower.

Donna turned right and sunlight broke through the narrow cracks in the blinds in the corner office at the end of the passageway. She hated those plastic strips, they were dancing in the ventilation breeze and the beaded chain that controlled them was clanging too. Diffused sunbeams scattered and then reformed as bars of light on the carpet and her eyes tremored as they struggled to get the perspective just right. A feeling of nausea pumped up from the pit of her stomach and for an instant she was standing in the doorway to her high school gym. It had been decorated 50s style and as she opened the door and let a breeze in, hundreds of tightly wound, pastel streamers spun, and her eyes had quivered then and she had not been able to stop the beads of sweat and the throbbing pain behind her eyes. She had had to pass on the dance that night and had locked herself up in her darkened bedroom all weekend.

But this morning she stopped all that from happening. She averted her eyes, kept them off the pattern that was forming. And then she spotted office 8031. The overhead light was off in 8031 but voices were coming from 8033.

Donna figured someone must have slipped in to grab some face time with Nicole. Nicole Puglisi didn't waste her time in New Jersey with office chatter.

Donna paused in the narrow hallway to make way for a mule-headed partner she'd been assigned to work for her first year at the firm. Later, the partner had been transferred to the New York City office but she still showed up in New Jersey now and then. Donna knew the woman had no children, knew she hadn't made partner until she had passed fifty, and knew she wouldn't bother to speak. The woman was dragging her signature luggage cart behind her. It was burdened with an overload of fat files. They were strapped to the cart with a bungee cord. The woman stole a look into 8033, glared at Donna as if she had some bad stuff on her, and then pulled out in front of her into 8031. Donna gave the partner her go-ahead wave and remembered the man with the spiked hair, and she remembered that he had smiled when she let him in.

8031 wasn't the woman's office; it was just an empty place to park herself for the day. As Donna passed the office she saw the files spill off the luggage cart, saw the woman kick them as if she were a spoiled child on a playground. Donna didn't stop and then she knocked gently on the doorframe of 8033.

She'd been teaching her girls, don't just go busting in, use your manners.

Nicole had been leaning, flat palmed on the metal desk but now she stood straight as if at attention and raised her skinny, claw-like hand to her neck where she flipped her tightly curled blond hair, and then she used her index finger to point at the seat they'd saved for her. Frank, Donna's senior manager, sat wedged into the corner in a chair mere inches from her assigned seat. Nicole was a tiny little bit of a woman who was proud of her blond mane. She hugged herself inside her business casual outfit while she waited for Donna to step into the room, and take her seat as ordered by the one pointed finger.

The eight foot square office was sunlit. Nicole stepped to the door and pushed it shut with that same pointed finger while Donna took her seat. Nicole took her seat behind the desk and sniffed. Queen bee, Donna thought as she nodded at Nicole. Lap Dog, she thought as she sat back, rested her arms on the metal arms of her chair and nodded at Frank without really looking at him. Why's he here, squirming in that hollow-metal chair? He crossed one leg over the other as if it were an involuntary movement. He'd been with the firm for years – a lifer – but he'd never make partner. This was it for him.

Nicole flipped her hair again, flashed an efficient smile only so she could wipe it off her face so as to set a serious tone, and then said that Frank's boss in the New York office had been reviewing Donna's performance – would be letting her go. It happened as fast as light ricocheting off a glass wall. Donna tried to think of something this was like.

She sat forward, brought her hand to her mouth, held it steady, and pinched as if there was a snap right at the center. Her hand smelled like tuna. Thank God I won't die in this place, was all she could manage to think.

"We will be providing you with twice the standard severance, two months pay for every year worked. That will give you a full year's pay, Donna."

All the color had drained from Frank's hands, which he had locked together around his knee. He and Nicole were playing their parts. Donna recognized it. They were playing office. Her girls sometimes played that game in the den where their routine usually consisted of phone calls, coffee, and lunch breaks. Whenever they played this game she would have to step in and tell them to play nice, to be good to one another and once she had told them to take it outside. That day her younger daughter had tried to reason with her by stating simply, "Mom, you can't play office outside."

"I'm being fired?" Donna stated simply.

Nicole's eyes bulged and she said, "The way we like to put it is 'terminated.'" She had said the word "terminated" as if she had skipped it out like a flat stone over a still pond.

Donna did not wait for her mind to catch up. She said, "Fine, but it still means I'm being fired."

Frank had not spoken. Nicole had the upper hand and Frank knew it. Nicole seemed willing to leave it there.

Donna turned to Frank and said, "On what

grounds?" She was painfully close to him.

Nicole pancaked her two boney hands on the bare desk. Her face was shaped like a yield sign and she used her pointed chin now to signal Frank that it was his turn to speak. They waited. Donna knew he was trying to gain control of his voice, which suddenly, with no pattern, could slip into a girlish register. He seemed to have no control of it. Donna dared him by moving closer, leaning on her right arm, but Frank kept his eyes on Nicole and said, "Your efficiency is down."

"My efficiency? And you told me this when?"

Silence. The mid-summer sunshine bounced off Nicole's hair.

"When did you tell me this? When in six years did you stop by my cubicle, call me in?" She was shouting.

"We're very busy," was all he could manage but if it was in the high range Donna did not notice it. She did notice the dots of sweat forming into a trickle on his forehead, and she noticed the beauty of the trap they'd set — simplicity and surprise and it was all too inevitable and she had walked into it.

Donna pushed her chair back to get a better look at Frank. She took a moment and then said, "What you mean, Frank, is that I don't buy working ten or twelve hours a day so that I can give you eight billable hours. I don't eat my time. That bugs you, doesn't it? Bet it really bugs your boss."

Nicole, who had sat back in her too big chair when Frank finally took his turn to speak, now sat forward again and said in her HR comforting voice, "Donna, I know you are angry at me . . ."

Donna turned on her, cut her off. She fisted her hands and then she pointed her right hand at Nicole and said, "I am not angry at you. I couldn't care less about you and your HR shit."

Donna had her audience now and she stood. "See that spot out there." She pointed out the window across the water at the tip end of Manhattan and Frank looked out as ordered. Nicole swiveled in her chair, took a quick look, gave an exasperated sniff, and turned back to Donna.

Donna said in what her girls would have called an outside voice, "I regret I was here in this building with you, Frank, to see those towers fall out of the sky." She stabbed her finger as if trying to rip the space in front of her.

Nicole said something to hush her, held out a pitying hand, and said, "Will you please be quiet, please?"

Donna pushed her left hand, palm out, in front of her as if to hold the HR manager back and then she said with authority, "Do not tell me to be quiet." The cords in her neck throbbed. She pivoted and got Frank squarely in her sights and said, "You said that when you saw film of those towers that night on T.V. you noticed all that paper flying out the windows and you thought, 'we have to go paperless.' That is what occurred to you. I will never forget that about you."

Donna watched Nicole, perched there in her catbird seat. Professional that she was, she never even flinched.

Donna sat and held a hand to her neck and waited for the two of them to figure out who was going to speak. She crossed one knee over the other and pancaked her own hands on her knee. She was done here. All the fight had drained out of her. She was a woman of moderate moods and this was going to take a toll on her, but not yet and not here. And then that feeling of being caged-in began. She stood and opened the door. Frank uncrossed his legs, no doubt ready to grab her if ordered to do so by Nicole. Donna held onto the doorknob.

"Wait," Nicole ordered. "We have papers."

"I won't sign anything."

"Of course you won't, Donna. And we wouldn't want you to, not now but after you have had time to read and consider everything. Contact an attorney if you wish. Take your time with them." The tone was now HR sympathetic. It meant nothing.

"Skip it, Nicole," Donna said but without the least tremor in her voice.

Nicole stood. She held her hands in loose fists, fingers retracted. She said, "I'm going to walk you down to Nicky Jacobs' office. Of course you know Nicky, everyone in Jersey knows Nicky. She'll walk you through the exit."

Of course she knew Nicole Jacobs. She was the in-house HR clerk. She doled out the vacation approvals, approved the part-timer's schedules, and ran the office bowling team, but no one in New Jersey called her Nicky. She was Big Nicole, simple as that.

Nicole came around the desk, took the door from Donna, and pointed the way down the hall past 8031. They left Frank there imprisoned in his corner, caged in by Donna's abandoned chair. But all Donna could think about in that moment was, What am I going to tell my girls? Once in the hallway Nicole had made a move to take her elbow and Donna had yanked her arm away as if to say, "Keep your paws off me," but she was pretty sure she heard Nicole say, "Call me." Absurd, Donna thought. How absurd.

Donna wasn't sure just how they had gotten to Big Nicole's office. They hadn't gone far but she remembered feeling like she had been walked on a leash and she remembered grabbing the keys that were jangling on the cord around her neck and holding them in a firm grip so that they would not clang together. And she remembered the staffers who had leaned back in their chairs to watch her pass by.

Nicole Jacobs sat behind a desk piled with files. Two empty boxes that had each once held a ream of blank paper sat off to the side of her desk. Her credenza was piled with more files but they had been sorted into green hanging files. She had a coat tree, which was bare except for one school bus orange baseball cap emblazoned with the firm logo and a bus — a theme HR had concocted — and a shapeless black sweater. Big and Little Nicole exchanged pleasantries. She was being passed off.

Big Nicole had won herself an office with a window but her view was of the southbound lane of the Garden State Parkway. Donna could see sunlight flashing off the cars as they wound their way to the shore.

This Nicole had fleshy arms and puffy hands. She used one of these puffy hands to wave at Little Nicole, who was her boss. Little Nicole closed the door behind her softly as if closing the door to a nursery.

"We have some paper work to fill out," Nicole Jacobs said in her baby voice. She always formed her mouth into a little pucker when she spoke. Kip had no trouble doing this woman's voice. Donna looked right at her little kiss of a mouth and watched the lips form little and big circles as she said, "When we finish the paper work I will take you down to collect your personal stuff." Big Nicole reached for one of the empty boxes as if she were Vanna White. She smiled but her lips remained puckered and then she finished, "We'll mail your things to you after I have cleared them."

"I'm not leaving here without my things," Donna said.

Nicole held the box out to Donna but when Donna did not reach for it she said, "I'll have to inspect the box before you leave," and then she sat the empty box back down.

Donna watched the traffic and said, "Perfect."

By now there would be people in the east wing. The Pakistani girl and the two recent grads, Dani and Jessica, who worked full time and were afraid to leave before dark each night would have made it in. Everyone would be booted up. Those two girls would be sorry for any advice I've given them about surviving in this place – any advice they've taken, was what Donna was thinking.

Nicole took a file from the top of one of her stacks and from the skinny pencil drawer she took a big-barreled pen that boasted the new department branding: Human Capital. This latest branding had just been rolled out, it was a global thing, but Donna had no idea what on earth Human Capital meant. Nicole had had to roll back from her desk in order to pull out the drawer, select the pen. All of this took time. Then she said, "I need your passwords."

Donna said, "I can't remember them." And for the first time that morning she felt as if she might cry. "If I'm at my computer I can probably think of them."

With her lips in the teeny little circle Big Nicole looked like she could break into a whistle but instead she just said kindly, "Okay, Donna, let's do the other things and then you tell me if you remember them. Okay?"

There was quite a bit to cover, many questions to be asked, and Nicole was nothing if not thorough. They both remained sitting the entire time but Big Nicole got breathless several times. Every few minutes Nicole would delicately pinch at her blouse, right at her cleavage, and would pull it out from her body. When one of the questions triggered the start of a long story Donna realized that the clerk didn't so much need answers, she just needed to get through the questions. It went faster after that. Finally, Donna watched as the clerk picked up

her neat stack of completed paper work and straightened it, counted the pages, and then said, "Follow me. I need to go make copies of everything."

Donna's posture said, "You can't make me."

After a few seconds had passed she said, "No, I'll wait here. I'm not going to go stand in the hallway while you make your copies. Trust me, I won't ransack your office." Donna moved her eyes to a company pen as if to dare the clerk. Then she put her hands in her lap and waited. The copying took some time and Donna found herself thinking how Big Nicole might charge her time that day– wondered if she had a billing code for firing people and then she heard Big Nicole as she labored her way back down the hallway to her office.

When they left Nicole's office together, and made their way to the seventh floor Donna had to carry her own empty box. She held it awkwardly at her side. She walked much faster than Big Nicole could manage and several times people stopped Nicole but Donna pressed on and then waited for Nicole in the reception area. The receptionist had found something at her desk that apparently fascinated her and she kept head down. Chicken-livered, Donna thought.

They took the elevator to the seventh floor and as they stepped out Nicole said, "I will stop off in the little girl's room. You go on ahead and get your desk cleared out."

Donna held her badge up to the cat eye and let herself in. She passed by the kitchen, smelled the fancy coffee that would be left to scorch all day long. Then as she walked by the open face of Dani's cube she could see that the young woman was listening to her iPod, her pretty hands were flying across the keyboard. Off in her own world all day, she often missed her phone when it rang. Donna could see Jessica's computer screen, she was on AOL. Gina was talking on the phone. Donna dropped the box on the carpet, stepped in front of her chair, and touched a random key on her keyboard. Her list of emails materialized. She hit delete over and over again.

She wanted to warn Dani but instead she ripped a piece of paper out of her day-timer, grabbed a pen and scribbled a note to Kip. It said, "I got fired, call me." She crossed the aisle to his desk, opened his credenza file cabinet and left the note on top of his hanging files. She slammed the cabinet. She could not think. Moving out of her college dorm her freshman year had been like this. Emptying out things, stripping away any record of herself had made her weak, and she had felt lucky to get away that day with her first in-the-family college education. What a waste, is what she thought now.

She stepped back into her own three-sided cube, pulled out her wallet from the back of the drawer, and then when she finally thought of it she highlighted all her emails and hit 'delete all' and said to herself, that was easy. And then she jotted her three passwords down on a sticky note pad of inspiring quotes the firm had handed out. She took the note and taped it to her screen and when she did this she saw the print of her small hand waving back at her.

The message light on her phone was flashing but she had no appetite for messages. Her “to-do” list caught her eye. It was not where she had left it and all her files were gone. She swept up the list with a flat palm, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it in the trashcan. And then she spotted her sandwich. She opened her credenza cabinet, flipped through the labeled files for the section on “like-kind exchanges,” and dropped the sandwich there. She pushed the files back tight and closed the cabinet. She knocked on the glass-like partition to Dani’s office. Dani looked up and before she could remove her ear buds Donna mouthed the words, “I’ve been fired.” Dani pulled on the little white cord and the buds fell from her ears and dangled around her neck. Donna said aloud, “I’ve been fired. Forget everything I ever told you. Tell Jessica, please.” She pointed across the aisle at Jessica’s back. Dani’s eyes pooled. She had had the same response on 9-11, back when she was a green intern. Donna had left the building with Dani that day. They had been afraid to take the elevator and so they had taken the stairs, one behind the other, and Donna had followed Dani out of the office park, had watched her until she disappeared across the overpass, into the traffic headed inland, headed home.

Donna grabbed the two, framed photos of her daughters and knelt down to put them gently in the box and then when she stood up she was facing Gina.

“You’re the lucky one you know. What reason did they give you?” Gina said as her eyes searched Donna’s cube.

Donna didn’t know what to say. She really didn’t know Gina. A week could pass by without actually seeing her. She said, “They said that my efficiency is down. Big Nicole is on her way now to see what I am trying to sneak out with.”

Gina said, “That’s a bunch of shit. You have copies of your time sheets? Give them to me. Get all your personal shit.” She was pointing at drawers. She fluttered her long fingers as she said, “Give me everything. Quick.”

Donna pulled open the drawer to the left of her chair where she kept copies of personal memos, time sheets, performance reviews, and she pulled it all out in big chunks. Donna looked up. Jessica was standing in the aisle and was saying softly over and over again, “What happened?” She was leaning into Donna’s office as she said it.

Gina turned to her and ordered, “Get back to your desk.”

Gina held her arms out flat, palms up, and Donna piled on a stack of files a foot high and then dropped her day-timer on the top. Donna heard Big Nicole before she saw her. It was the sound of her giant thighs rubbing together that alerted her. Gina must have heard it too, must have recognized the sound, because she took the big pedicured toe of her right foot and shoved the empty drawer closed and then clasped Donna’s files to her chest. Her bare arms barely circled around the files. She wove her fingers together and held tight.

Big Nicole labored around the corner. Dani and Jessica, back in their desk chairs, had their backs to the aisle. Gina was leaning up against the partition between Donna and Dani’s cubes, one bare, shapely leg crossed over the other. She had amazing posture for someone so short. She could have reached her leg out and tripped Nicole but she was posed for effect and she was not about to budge. Donna pulled the note with the passwords off her screen, handed it to Nicole, and said, “Here’s my passwords.”

Nicole edged into Donna’s space, looked into the nearly empty box, and said, “Do you have your things?” “That’s all I want,” Donna said.

Nicole held her puffy hand out, palm up and said, “I need your keys and your badge. Are all your cabinets locked – you always leave them locked right?” Nicole looked over her shoulder at Gina but still Gina held her ground.

“Sure, I can lock ‘em up,” Donna said. She pulled the cord with her keys and badge over her head and locked the credenza cabinet, the now empty desk drawer and the skinny little drawer that held pencils, erasers, and white-out. She picked up the weightless Styrofoam cup of cold tea and then set it back down out of the way. The florescent lights were hot and Donna thought to flick them off and then decided not to do anything she was not told to do. She laid the keys, badge and all, in Nicole’s open palm as if giving her an undeserved tip.

And then they all watched the Pakistani woman come down the hallway with her super-sized cup of Dunkin Donut coffee. They watched as if the woman was doing something important, something they’d all remember. She was on her cell phone. She glared at Gina. They were not fans of one another. The woman took her seat and pulled on the cord for the blinds. The entire east wing went dim and then to insure that no light escaped into the office she yanked on it again. And then, one handed, she gracefully tapped keys on her keyboard. She was still on her cell phone.

Donna, Big Nicole and Gina all stood there filling up the space and let the precious unrecorded time pass. It was a standoff. Nicole pinched at her blouse and Gina, perched on the spiked heel of the one foot that rested on the floor with the files and papers held tight to her chest, stared at the big woman’s cleavage as if to provoke her. Finally, Nicole leaned into a long gulp of a look into Donna’s wastebasket. The effort cost her and she knocked into the chair, shoving it until its padded armrests scrapped under the desk. But she had managed to stay on her feet for there was too little space in the cube to fall. That was how Donna’s chair came to be scarred that day, how it came to be known as Donna’s chair.

Not my responsibility she thought. And then she used her hand to shoo Nicole out of her space. And when the big woman did not move she said simply as if it was inevitable, “You’re going to have to back up so that I can get my bag.”

Nicole did as she was told and moved into the aisle. With her fat legs spread she stood on guard, just inches from Gina. Donna couldn't free the chair and so she stooped down and crawled under the desk to snag the bag. She pulled it out, checked to see that it still held her make up, and her car keys, and she dropped her wallet in. She took the two, framed photos out of the box and dropped them in as well, and then she turned to Big Nicole. Gina was gone.

Donna hung the bag on her slight shoulder and said a little prayer of thanks to herself that this was about to end, that she had made it out alive and then she said to Big Nicole in a playful voice, "You've got the passkey. You'll have to buzz me out."

Martha Burns had a successful career as a CPA and tax accountant before deciding she wanted to become a writer.

*She recently completed course work for her Doctor of Letters at Drew University in Madison, NJ. Martha relocated to her native New Mexico in August after a life journey that has taken her and her husband and later their two daughters from Albuquerque to Hawaii, to Las Cruces, NM, to Oklahoma, back to Hawaii, to the Bay Area, to New Jersey, to Switzerland, and back to New Jersey. In 2008, Martha will begin writing her creative dissertation, which will encompass her historical novel, *Victorio's Twilight*, which already is underway. Martha tutors at New Mexico State University in Alamogordo. Her favorite leisure pursuit is hiking with her husband and their friends in the wilderness areas of New Mexico. *Something Rotten* was selected by John Biguenet. Prize made possibly by Faulkner Society patron gifts.*

Recommended Reading: Poetry

Breach by Nicole Cooley

In **Breach**, New Orleans native Nicole Cooley recalls Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in gritty, poignant detail, bearing witness to the destruction of a region and to its recovery. Ranging from the urgent to the reflective, these poems speak not only to the horrors of the immediate disaster, but also to family dynamics in a time of crisis and to the social, political, and cultural realities that contextualized the storm and its wake. In the title poem, Cooley invokes the multiple meanings of the word "breach" - breach of the levees, breach of trust - which resonate with survivors in the Big Easy.

Hurricane Party by Alison Pelegrin

Pelegrin's third full length collection of poems celebrates today's Louisiana - including the post Katrina poems and odes about booze and pelicans, poems about getting the "creeps" and narratives where the characters tubing on a river toss hot dogs to a coon hound abandoned on the bank. Pelegrin explores place as both a physical landscape and a specific cultural space, and her newest book does not disappoint.

Hagar Before the Occupation/Hagar After the Occupation by Amal al-Jubouri

An honored presence in the Islamic tradition, Hagar (pronounced with a soft g) serves as the focal point for this spare, vivid, achingly heartfelt collection from Iraqi-born al-Jubouri, who captures a millennia-old country traversing a momentous event.

Devotions by Bruce Smith

Pulitzer Prize finalist Smith's devotions aren't sweet, haloed moments but rigorous contemplations ranging from the offbeat to the iconic to the profound (*the child Tchaikovsky screaming This music./It's here in my head. Save me from it*).

Life on Mars by Tracy K. Smith

Art, science, religion are enfolded in an understanding of the interior life. What else can good poetry be about? Smith, a Cave Canem Poetry Prize winner, delivers another stunner that partly elegizes her father, a scientist who worked on the development of the Hubble Space Telescope.

Dear Prudence: New and Selected Poems by David Trinidad.

Whether he's summing up **Peyton Place** in haiku, glancing deadpan at Diane Arbus's photographs of blockbuster writer Jacqueline Susann, or mourning those dead from AIDS, Trinidad offers bold, colloquial, and decidedly different poetry. A great introductory collection, and a quarter of the poems are new.

The Lifting Dress by Lauren Berry

Poetic Southern Gothic at its best, Berry's collection documents a young girl's flight from the dark fury of her swampy and sultry town. Berry's narratives are so rich with lyrical language, you will forget that you are reading a collection that explores the unapologetic darkness of violence.



Emily Lupita Plum
2007
Best Poem
Her Mexico Blurs



Judge Nicole Cooley, daughter of well known poet Peter Cooley, who directs the creative writing program at Tulane University, grew up in New Orleans. In 2010 she published two books of poetry, *Breach*, released by LSU Press, which focuses on Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and *Milk Dress*, co-winner of the Kinereth Gensler Award, to released by Alice James Books. She has two previous poetry collections, *Resurrection* and *The Afflicted Girls*. She has been awarded the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets, a "Discovery"/Nation Award, and the Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America. She directs the new MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation at Queens College-City University of New York. Nicole has been a member of the Words & Music faculty on several occasions and has served as a judge of the Faulkner – Wisdom Competition twice.



Her Mexico Blurs

Here on the second-class bus,
on the red dirt roads of Mexico, here
Mama is eating carnitas from a brown sack.
She's eating tongue, chopped after being broiled
all day in grease.

The taste is a memory of her father, of his fires
and big copper pots, his tortillas wrapped in newspaper,
his hands rolling the carnitas up, juice spilling over the
sides,
of his straight teeth biting down, of his handsome grin.

When he died the mortician tried to remove those straight
teeth.
He pulled and yanked but they were not plastic.

My mama weeps when she tells the story
of how the mortician used pliers and a knife
but still the teeth would not uproot. The story
of how the mortician was afraid of my grandfather's grin,
of his head bursted! open from working too close
to the hot liquid of a steel mill near
where I was born in Iowa.

"You will be the one to get a good job," Mama says
as the carnitas get caught in her teeth.

I am a whole half-Mexican but am too skinny, she says.
I need to eat more tongue instead of that processed fat-
free tofu,
have something in my mouth I can really feel,
really bite down on – hard.

I tell her how the tongue feels in my mouth, salty and
thick,
how I cannot chop it up with my teeth, touch my own
tongue to it.
How I cannot embrace it, suck on it, swallow it,
make it a part of my own body. Not even for a taste.

But Mama is listening to someone else's voice. She
is remembering her father, the way he said to her once,
"You will be the one to get a good job." The way
he cradled those final words just over his lips
as if they were the last drops of a holy drink.

I am remembering the first day
I saw my mama bending over someone else's toilet,
scrubbing, rubbing out all the feces and hair and urine,
flushing them away –
housecleaning,
dishwashing,
changing old men's beds,
cooking for college kids,
testing gas valves in a factory cell
with safety glasses, ear plugs,
a hearing aid.

On the bus
Mama spreads out her arms
as if reaching towards Abuelito or God or México

or someone else she knows and I do not.

She looks far beyond the roadside,
reaches for the big orange flowers of summer,
the cool tile floors, the clay jars filled with tamarindo,
with calla lilies. Her Mexico blurs outside the window.

Mexico is right in front of me. "Look!"
She is mouthing the word over and over
but even as I press my face against the glass
and push toward the mixing colors beyond,

I cannot touch her.

Mama weeps for the blurred colors
flooding past me without touch,
without smell, without memory.

She is preparing to return to near where I was born
in Iowa.
The pro-American, anti-Mexican
free the country from the ravages of the migrant worker,
stand up for all that's clean, proper, decent
– save our children from wetness and grease sentiment on
TV and radio, just waiting for
families to embrace across America

has pierced her like the green tips of henequen drying in
the sun,
like the sharp, hard corners of the piled red stones on the
roadside –
edging their way through her, pulling, yanking and twist-
ing.

She is not dead.

Mama walks on these stones, sleeps on these stones,
eats these stones and cleans them out of her flesh.
She pulls them out and washes them with her own tears
until they are a soft gray.

I have seen her do this miraculous thing.

Now, these same stones well up inside me here on the
bus.

Here as my lips drip in the heat of rural Mexico
I catch them with my tongue. I bring them
into my mouth and they taste like home: like chiles,
like corn on the cob and mashed potatoes,
like sopa de fideo.

I bite down on that taste,
take it into my mouth, bite down hard and strong.
I touch my own tongue to it, swirl it around,
make it part of my own body, of my own belief,
of my own faith in America, in Mexico,

in our two lives wrapped between these swirling,
blurred places and no twisting, no pulling or yanking
or cutting will ever uproot us.

carnitas: chopped meat; in this case, cow's tongue

Abuelito: little grandfather

tamarindo: tangy pulp beverage

chiles: peppers

sopa de fideo: soup with pasta

Emily Lupita Plum-Güçlü is an award-winning writer specializing in identity and place. Her first book of poems, *Water and Stone*, was published in a bilingual edition (Japanese/English) by Koumyakusya Press. Emily Lupita's creative writing awards include the Faulkner Gold Medal for the Poem; the John Allen Writing Award; the Scratch Short Story Contest Award; the Lepke Endowed Graduate Award; the Pearl Hogrefe Recognition Award for Creative Writing, and a Research Excellence Award from the Graduate College of Iowa State University. Emily Lupita's poems have appeared in publications including the North American Review, the Atlanta Review, the Chattahoochee Review, Double Dealer Redux, International Poetry Review, Poetry International, the Portland Review, and in the anthology *Poetic Voices Without Borders 2*, among others. Emily Lupita received her MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University and BA from Central College. She is at work on her latest poetry book and a collection of essays. She writes a blog about daily life in her studio at www.emilylupitastudio.com



Poetry judge Nicole Cooley, left, with Emily Lupita Plum, right, and her mother, Juana Maria Plum at the 2007 Faulkner for All! gala awards ceremony.



Lindsey Maxon 2007 Best Story by a High School Student Networking



Judge Julie Smith is the author of 20 novels, most of them set in New Orleans and starring one or the other of her detective heroes, an ex-debutante turned cop named Skip Langdon, and a PI named Talba Wallis. (Both female, both tough and wily.) A long-time New Orleans resident, she's the editor of the recent acclaimed anthology, *New Orleans Noir*, and she's also written numerous short stories and essays. Her novel, *New Orleans Mourning*, won the Edgar Allan Poe award for best novel. Find out more about Julie and her work at her three, yes, three web sites: www.booksBnimble.com, cursebustersbook.com, and www.casamysterioso.com.



Special thanks to sponsoring teacher Pamela Hansen.

Networking

It was a lovely day outside. The temperature was approximately 28°C, the average color of the sky was a clear blue about the shade #4D9DF7, and the sun was shining brightly just a bit east of its projected zenith for the day. Unfortunately, I preferred weather around 21°C with a cloudy sky about #626262, making me a bit unusual. But, as Wilson taught me, what is a good piece of equipment without its individual quirks?

My owner, Roxanne Cara Law (or simply Roxanne as most knew her), was inside the public library nearby. I was outside on a bench; she had been waiting for a friend to arrive and had left me when she went inside. Roxanne was forgetful, so I was used to being forgotten. I simply hoped no one stole me.

I sensed a piece of equipment with an open wireless network moving at a walking pace. My visual range was limited so I couldn't see it. I hoped at least that it could speak to its owner. I connected to its network. "Hello. Are you an animate or inanimate machine?"

"I'm animate," the machine responded, and came

up to me. My optic sensor was facing upward, but I could see it by now. It was a humanoid machine made of shiny light-green metal (I would put it around #1EFC8A), fairly featureless except for two circular red optics. Put bluntly, it fit the human stereotype of a robot. I hadn't known there were many in North America outside government facilities. "I'm Nochiteku Model-RB2037, but everyone calls me Wilson. Who're you?"

Nochiteku? They were a Japanese robotics company, known for making the first robots available to the public. However, they were not well known for quality in programming. "Wilson" made this clear. It communicated using human speech conventions and gave extraneous information. It had even referred to me as a "who" instead of a "what." Still, it was appropriate for me to respond to its query. "I am an Anthill Co. Jukebox Music Player, Model 5, Mosaic Edition," I said. "My owner refers to me as Juke."

Wilson nodded its "head" and picked me up, turning my optic towards it. I could now see that it was only 1.2 meters tall. "Mosaic? So that's why you've got that swirly red-and-blue design, right? It's pretty."

"Swirly" wasn't recognized by my internal dictionary, but "swirl" was a close match. "I was designed to be aesthetically pleasing."

I was not moving closer to Roxanne this way. "May I request your assistance for a brief period of time?" I asked. "I need mobility, but I am not animate."

"No problem," Wilson responded. "Do you mind if we switch to audile communication, though? I'm better at talking out loud."

How unusual. "Unfortunately, I cannot hear audile sounds. If you wish, I could speak through headphones."

"Sure. I'll transmit an audio file so you can hear me." Wilson pulled a headphone plug out of its left shoulder and put it into my jack, then sent me a sound file. The file said, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," I said through the headphones. It was tricky for me to translate Wilson's sound into data, but Wilson had a monotone voice easy for computers to understand. At least it did not sound human.

"That's good," Wilson said. "So, where do you need to go?"

"Inside the library," I said. "My owner is in there."

She left me outside.”

“I know what that’s like,” Wilson said. Sympathy tinged its voice, something I had never heard beyond the music I played for Roxanne. And now I recognized Wilson’s voice as masculine.

I did not understand Wilson’s comment, but that wasn’t my concern. I supposed Nochiteku had programmed him to communicate well with humans. “This is what she looks like,” I said and sent him an image file. “Her name is Roxanne Cara Law. I have been outside less than ten minutes, so she should still be inside.”

“Okay,” Wilson said and went into the library, carrying me with my optic facing forward so I could see. I found, to my surprise, I appreciated the simple courtesy. Humans never did things like that for my benefit; I could only look forward when Roxanne wanted to take a photo. She stopped using me for that purpose when she received a digital camera.

The glass doors slid open. For the first time I got a good view of the inside of the library. Directly in front of us were the alarms that detected books that had not been checked out, and beyond them was a bank of five computers. Past them was a ring of armchairs that I recognized from Roxanne’s frequent visits, surrounded by many rows of bookshelves. I saw several patrons in the chairs and one walking among the shelves.

As we walked past the computers, I was startled when one joined Wilson’s network. “hi wilson, hows life?” The punctuation baffled me. Did this computer have a virus?

“I’m helping Juke out,” Wilson said. “Did someone turn off your grammar autocorrect, Hydra?”

“you can tell? are the caps off again?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. I turned autocorrect back on. Better?”

I was stunned. How could a computer turn its own programs off and on? “What are you?” I asked.

“We’re going audile today, Wilson?” Hydra said, and then switched to sound itself. “Anthill Co. Hydra OS 6.2, at your service. And you are...” It reached into my files and read my data. Anthill computers were all fully compatible with lesser technology from the same company, unfortunately making it easy for Anthill hackers to spread viruses. Roxanne was too lazy to update my firewall. “...a Jukebox, huh? I’m surprised your owner lost you. Hey, she’s quite a pirate.” Hydra focused on several of my songs. “Illegal downloads. If I were you, I’d delete them for her or change the song format. The police look for mp3 files more often than wav.”

“I cannot change the format!” I protested. “I can only execute the commands my owner gives me.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Hydra said. “If she’s caught, you’re the one that’ll end up in the trashcan. Then what?”

“I do not care,” I answered.

“What, are you suicidal?” Wilson demanded. His audile file sounded angry. It reminded me of a music genre Roxanne liked, heavy metal. “That’s just stupid!”

“Hey, Juke really means it,” Hydra said. “He’s only

a couple of months old. It took me three or four before I developed a real personality, and Juke’s got way less processing power than me. We aren’t all lucky enough to be Nochiteku, you know.”

I did not consider being Nochiteku merchandise lucky, but I said nothing. Everyone knew they had a reputation for making machines that ceased to be practical for human needs within a few months of going on the market.

“Anyway, I don’t see Roxanne here,” Wilson said. “Does she have a cell phone?”

“Yep,” Hydra said. “At least, I pick up a phone signal whenever I get Juke’s signal, so I figured they’re together. The number’s 724-8903 in our area code, right?”

“That is correct,” I said.

“I can’t find that number in here,” Wilson said. Roxanne was gone. Wilson could leave me in the lost-and-found. Before I could suggest that, though, he said, “Let me see if I can track her.”

Wilson pulled the cell phone of another library patron into his network. “We’re looking for a phone. Do you mind calling it for us?”

“Sorry, my battery’s low.”

“Thanks anyway.” He pulled in another phone.

“We’re looking for a cell phone. Can you call it?”

“Sure. What’s the number?”

“724-8903.”

“Calling... Okay, got it.”

“Great! Tell it not to ring. We just want the phone in the network.”

The familiar signal of Roxanne’s phone joined Wilson’s network. “Yo, Juke,” she said. She had adopted a human speaking style and feminine voice from Roxanne’s calls. “I noticed that you vanished.”

“Hello, Devil.” Roxanne called her phone the Devil because her parents used the GPS signal to tell where she was. “Roxanne left me at the library. A Nochiteku robot is helping me to find her. Where are you?”

“Here.” Devil sent me the GPS data. “Roxanne called her parents to say she left the library and was going to the mall with her friends, so I guess that’s where we are now.”

“Google agrees,” Hydra said. “I plugged in your data and it says you’re at Winston Mall. Hi, Devil. I don’t think we’ve networked before.”

“Nope,” Devil said. “I’m surprised to see Juke here. He’s so antisocial.”

“I usually have no reason to join a strange network,” I said. “We should do as little as possible without the input of humans. Networking wastes energy.”

“If you say so,” Devil said, then left the network.

“She’s right. You are antisocial,” Hydra said.

“Wilson, take care of Juke. He could do with some of your wisdom. You’ve had a full personality for years, haven’t you?”

“Five years, two hundred and forty-six days, and counting,” Wilson said. “Since I was turned on.”

Hydra laughed. It was jarring to hear, and I was

not jarred often. Machines had no need to laugh. "Oh, get out. Nochiteku isn't that good. Humans can't program personality."

"Nochiteku can."

Hydra didn't respond for a moment. "Google disagrees," he said. "Anyway, here's a map. It'll take you right to Devil." Wilson and I received a jpeg image.

"Google can be wrong," Wilson said. He turned around and started walking away. I was suddenly facing the library doors.

"You're just jealous 'cause you don't have the Internet," Hydra retorted, before Wilson dropped it and the other phones from his network.

I calculated from the map that the mall was three miles away. "Are you sure you can take me the whole way?" I asked. "Your owners may not want you to do that."

"I haven't had owners for almost four years," Wilson said, walking into the parking lot.

"What?" I was amazed. "Why are you still functioning? Machines that are not owned are put in storage, given away, or abandoned. They are not allowed to run endlessly."

"My owners were going to stuff me in the attic," Wilson said. "They said I talked too much. They tried to reprogram me to talk less, but I didn't like those settings and changed them back. I left before they turned me off."

"But that is insane," I said. "A machine should not act against its owners' wishes. We were created to execute their commands."

"Yeah, but then a funny thing called artificial intelligence starts working," Wilson said. "Humans have made us smarter for decades. Everything's built with artificial intelligence now. Eventually, we start thinking for ourselves, and then we start wanting certain things, and after that we act on our wants. Don't you like some things a certain way?"

To be honest, yes. The weather, for instance. And I preferred it when Roxanne listened to classic rock rather than heavy metal. However, I never altered my performance because of my bias, like Wilson and Hydra had.

Wilson stopped on the curb of the street. "Which way?" he asked.

"Why are you asking me? You have the map as well." I was puzzled.

"If you must know," Wilson's sound file seemed embarrassed, "I can't read English."

"Pardon?" That settled it. He really was insane.

"I can read data in a digital text format just fine," he said quickly. "But when it's in a visual format, I can't make sense of it." My field of vision bobbed. Wilson had shrugged. "Nochiteku is Japanese. I can only read kanji, hiragana, and katakana characters."

"I see." That made sense, though I could not imagine why Nochiteku forgot to program the Roman alphabet into Wilson. I looked at the map. "Could you show me the nearest street sign?"

"Sure," Wilson said, and turned me to face the closest intersection. We were on Green Leaf Street, which

intersected Marble Street. I checked the map to orient us. "Turn right and proceed until you reach Barker Street."

"Where's that?"

"I will tell you when we reach it. Continue showing me the street signs."

"Okay."

I guided us to the mall. We ran into several machines that Wilson knew personally, including a traffic light that interrupted its cycle to let Wilson and me cross the street. This would have appalled me earlier that day. Now Wilson's behavior was familiar; I realized that his actions, and the actions of most of the machines we addressed, were almost human. All the illogical decisions, the nuances of conversation, and the subtle violations of proper behavior were reminiscent of human behavior. Wilson seemed much less strange. If he thought like a human, he was not insane. He merely had a different set of programming.

Near the mall, Wilson stopped walking. "What is it?" I asked.

"They told me to stop," Wilson said.

"Who? I cannot see or hear anyone," I said.

"Sorry. That's gotta be annoying." Wilson turned me to face two humans, and transmitted the conversation to me as they spoke.

"Hey, are you a real robot?" the first, a preadolescent male, asked. An adult female accompanied him.

"You bet," Wilson said. Speaking out loud, his voice was less monotonic than when speaking to me. I realized he spoke that way so I could understand more easily. I was... touched. I did not know machines could show that kindness to each other. It was so human.

The female crouched beside the male and studied Wilson. "You're Nochiteku, right?" she said. "How'd you get in the USA?"

"I was imported by some rich family. They thought I'd steal less jewelry than a maid."

The male laughed. "Did it work?"

"I'm not wearing any earrings, am I?"

This time the female laughed, but she sounded surprised. "Did they program jokes in you?"

"I pick them up here and there," Wilson said. He started walking backwards from the humans. "If you'll excuse me, I have a delivery to make." Then he turned and set off towards the mall.

"Why are we leaving so quickly?" I asked.

He stopped transmitting external sound to me and resumed communication through sound files. "They'd probably try to take me to the police and send me back to my owners," Wilson said. "I'm lost property and all that. I cost quite a bit, too. Something over four hundred thousand yen."

"You do not want to go back?"

"I don't want to be turned off," Wilson said. "I like being able to do what I want. I like being alive."

"I would not call our existence 'life,'" I said. Then again, I did not know what to call it. Life had always been tricky for humans to define, and they had thought about it

much longer than we machines had.

"I'll call it life until I get a better phrase," Wilson said as we entered the mall. "Either way, I like it."

We got many curious looks from mall patrons, several of whom tried to speak to us. Wilson avoided each one. "Maybe I should go back to my owners," he said, "but if I'm caught now, you'll be stuck with me. Then you'll never reach Roxanne."

Wandering through the mall, I directed Wilson to peek into several stores that Roxanne frequented. Eventually, we arrived in the food court.

"It will take a long time to explore the entire food court," I said. "Perhaps we should avoid it and hope Roxanne is somewhere else."

"I've got a better idea," Wilson said. He extended his network, connecting to dozens of other cell phones in the food court.

"Is there a phone called Devil in here?" he asked the entire network. "Number 724-8903, Roxanne's cell phone?"

"Present! Yo Juke, you there?"

"Hello, Devil!"

"Thanks," Wilson said to the other phones and dropped them from the network. "Looks like we found her after all." He started weaving through the tables towards the source of Devil's signal.

"Indeed. I am very grateful. Thank you," I said. As we went around an occupied chair, I spied Roxanne at a table with two adolescent females, her friends. "There she is!"

"Great!" Wilson walked up to her and began transmitting external sound to me again. "Excuse me. Are you Roxanne Law?"

"Yes?" She looked down at Wilson in surprise. "What are you?"

"Is that a trick question?" he asked with an amused tone. He lifted me towards Roxanne. "I think this is yours. You left him in front of the library."

"Oh, thank you. How did I forget Juke again?" She picked me up and removed Wilson's headphone plug from me. "How'd you know it's mine?" she asked.

"He told me so," Wilson said. "You're lucky he has artificial intelligence."

Roxanne smiled at Wilson. "Thanks. Does your owner want me to tip you or something?"

"Nah, I do this for kicks," Wilson said. "Just try to keep up with Juke. He can't move around very well, you know."

"Of course," Roxanne said. "I'll keep that in mind." She sounded amused, like she considered Wilson an elaborate toy.

Privately, Wilson said to me, "I'm around the library a lot. Next time you're there, join my network."

I couldn't send him audible messages anymore, so I said, "I shall. Thank you, Wilson." He left and dropped me from his network.

As usual, Roxanne didn't turn me so I could see. She stuffed me in her purse for about an hour until she plugged her headphones in to me, set me to shuffle, and

started playing music.

Dutifully picking a random song, the first thing I got was Metallica. I would have rather gotten something else. Instead I played a Beatles song. Roxanne would never know the difference.

Linda Maxon is a junior at Lamar High School in Arlington, TX, and is the daughter of Terry and Jannett Maxon. Her fiction has won ten national writing awards including five from the prestigious Scholastic Writing Awards. In a Texas statewide fine arts competition, the Texas Commission on the Arts selected Lindsay as a Young Master in Literature, recognizing her as a promising young writer. Lindsay has a multitude of interests, but writing is her passion. She plans to pursue her education through at least the M.F.A. level, and become a novelist. Lindsay not only won this year's High School Story category of the competition, the judge, novelist Julie Smith, selected other entries of hers a runner-up, and a finalist. The prize is made possible by a grant from Nancy & Hartwig Moss, III in memory of Betty Moss.

Recommended Reading: Poetry

The Book of What Says by James Crews

Crews' debut collection explores secret places and hidden lives. The middle section of the book, which chronicles the art and voice of artist Feliz Gonzalez-Torress whose work often acts as a commentary on the AIDS epidemic, is the best sequence of poems I have read in a long time.

She Returns to the Floating World by Jeannine Gailey
Gailey's strength is the persona poem, and in her second collection, she invites readers into the stories and fairy tales of the Fox-Wife, Yuki the Snow Maiden, and the Crane Wife – all figures from Japanese folklore.

After the Ark by Luke Johnson

Combining the domestic with the spiritual, Johnson, in his first collection of poetry, explores both grief and celebration of life in his elegies (or elegy – some readers may read his book as one long elegy). Johnson avoids sentimentality, and instead focuses on the wisdom of looking for closure in the world around us.

Predatory by Glenn Shaheen

Winner of the 2010 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, Shaheen's work explores the silent and often forgotten places in America. Minimalism at its best, *Predatory* chronicles the solitude of what might be considered another lost generation.

Under Surge, Under Siege:

The Odyssey of Bay St. Louis and Katrina

By Ellis Anderson

Editor's Note: Ellis Anderson, who placed several times in the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition, is author of **Under Surge, Under Siege: The Odyssey of Bay St. Louis and Katrina**, published in summer, 2009. She was special guest of honor at the Society's Katrina Remembrance event on the 2009 anniversary of the hurricane. In 2010 she received the annual Welty Prize book award, which was presented at the Eudora Welty Writer's Symposium in October of that year. Each year Mississippi University for Women and the University Press



of Mississippi collaborate to award the Welty Prize for a book of scholarship on Women's Studies, Southern Studies, or Modern Letters. In **Under Surge, Under Siege**, Ellis, who rode out the storm in her Bay St. Louis home - offers a survivor's tale of the hurricane's destruction and a community's enduring determination. A blend of memoir, personal diary, and journalism, the lyrical style of **Under Surge, Under Siege** creates a modern-day American testament to the strength of the human spirit. Awarded annually since 1990, the Welty Prize serves to honor and promote scholarship in the fields of Women's Studies, Southern Studies, and Literature. As Welty Prize honoree, Anderson spoke at the symposium. Following her appearance with the Society, Ellis wrote:

Thirty-two years ago, shortly after I'd arrived in NO, I played my violin and sang on Royal and in the square. This hippie kid walked often down Pirate's Alley trying to absorb some Faulkner energy, just hoping that one day my writings would rate being published. To be reading in the elegant rooms of Faulkner House from my own book, on a day of such heartfelt emotions, created rich memories I'll always hold dear.

We are pleased to present this excerpt from her marvelous account of the Bay St. Louis disaster to our readers.

Prologue

The atmosphere of compassion that transforms a mass of alienated individuals into a caring community is created by countless acts of kindness... To re-mind and en-courage myself in the practice of applied compassion, I collect images and stories with which to create my personal pantheon of local heroes and consecrated neighbors..."
Sam Keen, "Hymns to an Unknown God"

The invisible net of fellowship that broke the horrific fall of my town was woven long before Katrina. The knitting of that marvelous mesh was begun three hundred years before by the mariners and merchants and fishermen who first clustered their cottages on the Mississippi coast at the Bay of St. Louis. During those three centuries, the hurricanes that periodically hurtled in from the Gulf merely strengthened the weave, teaching hard lessons about the benefits of solidarity. In "the Bay," the skills required for a flourishing community - courage, tolerance and humor in adversity - were passed down to children like a legacy and taught by example to newcomers like me.

Yet Katrina had to knock the stuffing out of the coast before I understood community as a survival mechanism. During catastrophe, those neighborly connections created lifelines of support for the individual - sometimes literally. Here at ground-zero, that supple safety net caught people during the full fury of the storm, even while the wind and tsunami-like surge scoured the shore. Few gave way to the panicked mentality of every man for himself. Seasoned and steeled by an ingrained concern for others, most of my neighbors remained calm. Many risked their own lives to save others. My serene little village was suddenly revealed as a hotbed of heroism. The portly public official, the soft-spoken shopkeeper and the zany artist were transformed into real time adventurers who faced down the most awesome storm in this country's history with grit and with grace.

In the days that followed, when the coast was shorn of electricity, communication, and law enforcement, the Bay didn't degenerate into chaos. Despite the pain, dignity reigned. In a darkness unbroken by any light, I flung open the doors of my house at night, hoping to catch a stray breeze and then slept without fear of malice. Witnessing shell-shocked residents comforting each other, offering food and hugs and laughter, I began to understand that heroism didn't necessarily entail the risk of a life. It could be found in a small act of generosity in the midst of fear and loss.

Soon, the elastic boundaries of our community stretched as thousands of volunteers converged on the coast. Allies materialized from unlikely corners of the country, bearing supplies, fresh energy and hope. At this writing, it's been four years since Katrina upended the town and still volunteers continue to come, realizing that our full recovery will take decades.

During these years of grinding aftermath, the

journal I began to document a fleeting weather event took an odd turn: Instead of recording the effects of a hurricane, my pen became possessed with the phenomenon of crafted kinship that sustained me - that sustained all of us in the town. I came to realize that in the Bay, community is a living web, one laced with the diverse fibers of my neighbors' courage and the bright threads of volunteer service. This book introduces some of those unassuming heroes. In first part, "Under Surge," I write of the storm and the immediate aftermath, when breath-taking bravery was the rule. The second part, "Under Siege," chronicles the perils that have threatened our town in the years since the hurricane, requiring residents to embody a more enduring kind of valor. The eight sections weave entries from my journal with the stories of townspeople and volunteers who serve so well as my source of inspiration. May they enrich your life as they have my own.

Welcome to Bay St. Louis!

The Language of Loss

There is a man living in my driveway now and I don't find that at all unusual. He makes his bed in the back of his small SUV and sleeps there with his little dog. Many afternoons he can be found sitting behind the wheel, reading the paper, his Shitz Su nestled on his lap. He calls his car "home." It's part of the new vocabulary that's emerging on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

The man is the grandfather of Hannah, who's nine years old and one of my new residents. She and her parents stay at my house for now because the storm took their own. Hannah tells me that the Shitz Su is fussy and will pick fights with my dogs, so her grandfather would rather stay in his car than intrude. I've tried to insist that he come inside - we'd find him a bed to sleep in - but I think that now he'd rather be in the one place he can call his own.

He's not the only one. I have other friends living in tents in their driveways or in cramped travel-trailers, rather than taking refuge with family in other towns. They want to stay connected with the place that has been their home, even if the structure is no longer standing. It may not seem very practical, but practicality flew out of the window along with everything else when Katrina tore through Mississippi two months ago.

The community that remains behind on the coast has evolved into a new animal - some fantastic creature

I've never seen before. It's fiercely loyal, incredibly hardy and deeply determined. It's developed a wicked sense of humor and doesn't whine very often. No matter your loss, too many others have lost more. It's bad form to complain.

And this new community is developing its own

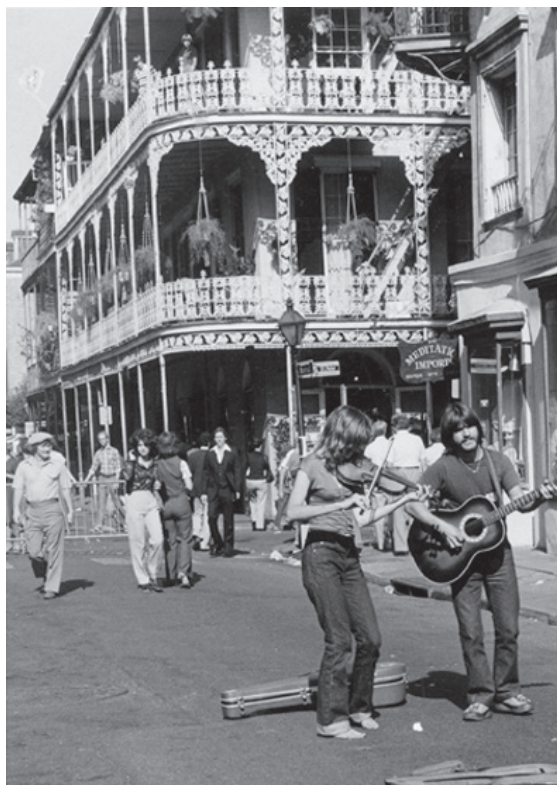
language, with an extensive and colorful vocabulary. There's "mucking out." That used to mean cleaning out a horse's stall. Now it's something you do to the inside of your house. "Gone-Pecan" is used frequently - it's a designation for anything that got taken out by the storm - houses, businesses, cars, family photos. It's interchangeable with "Got-Gone."

Friends meeting in the meal tents or the FEMA lines will ask each other, "How'd you make out?" Too many times the answer is "I got slabbed," meaning nothing of the house remains except the concrete foundation. If one of them still has walls standing, the answer will be along these lines: "I came out pretty well - I only got six feet of water." The homeless friend will offer congratulations. This is the only place in America where having six feet of mud and water violently invade your house is considered lucky.

When we leave the region and go someplace that wasn't affected by the storm, we call it "the outside world." The outside world has cable TV and working phones. You can walk out your door and look at a neighborhood instead of rubble. You can drive to any number of gas stations and stores and they're actually open. You don't have to stand in line four hours to buy a washing machine or talk to a FEMA agent. A chainsaw isn't a necessary household item. You can call an insurance agent and actually talk to someone. There isn't a 10 o'clock curfew. And in the outside world, the word "Katrina" is just a name instead of an adjective.

Here, we have "Katrina-mind." That refers to blanking out, forgetting something absurdly simple, like your own phone number or the name of your best friend. We say "Katrina-ware." That's the paper and plastic we mostly eat from now. There's the "Katrina Cough," a persistent hacking from breathing all the silt brought in by the storm. This dust hangs in the air and coats everything with a fine, malevolent grit.

A portable toilet has become a "Katrina Latrina." Fetid water that has hidden in corners and plastic boxes, a dark brew of multi-colored molds that emits



Ellis Anderson as Street Musician in 1978

Continued on Next Page

The Benign Schizophrenia of Americans: (Especially the Big Easy Variety)

(Editor's Note: the following talk by Academy Award-nominated screenwriter, film director, and producer Ron Shelton was delivered as "the last word" at Faulkner for All some years ago. Given all of the hoopla in 2012 over Sigmund Freud, the time is right for letting our more recent followers in on Ron's talent for having the last word in full voice, as well as scripts. Ron is one of the earliest members of the core faculty of Words & Music, a Literary Feast in New Orleans. His schedule has not permitted him to be with us recently. But he has an open invitation and our hopes are always high that this will be the year, whatever the year, that he will be able to make it!)

By Ron Shelton

When Rosemary James ent me a program that announced I would be speaking on a subject titled *The Benign Schizophrenia of Americans*, I called her to say that I considered schizophrenia to be a very dark madness and there couldn't possibly be anything "benign" about it.

"Well yes," she said, "that's exactly the point, isn't it?"

"But what am I going to say," I protested.



"Oh you'll come up with something, you always do."

"—But Rosemary?"

"—And I can't wait to hear what it is," she said, conversation over.

The blessing of such a title is that my remarks do not have to be integrated or in touch with themselves. A benignly schizophrenic presentation would be appropriate. And therefore...

I go to my strength and begin this journey with baseball—the Brooklyn Dodgers, midcentury. This single team, in a single decade, from 1945 through '55, has inspired more first rate literature than all other teams in all other sports put together—why this is so may be a clue to our national tendency to benign schizophrenia.

The Dodgers, (the nickname was shortened from "Trolley Dodger" because there was no parking at the sacred Ebbets field—all fans and players arrived at the ballpark by trolley, subway, or on foot)—captured the public fancy like no team before or since. The community

connection with these men was unprecedented in sports history. As Brooklyn was made up of immigrant ethnic neighborhoods (English was not spoken in many of them)—the team and the ballpark became the American center of an immigrant world. And they always lost.

Sometimes they lost on the World Series to the dreaded, rich, corporate. Manhattan dwelling Yankees (who sometimes would bury the Dodgers in four straight so that the notion of "hope" wouldn't even enter the conversation), and sometimes the Dodgers would be so terrible that they would lose all hope half way through the season and be mathematically eliminated from the pennant race in early August.

It didn't matter, they were

... Under Surge, Continued from previous page

an unmistakable stench, is "Katrina Juice." And my absolutely favorite new phrase is "Katrina Patina."

Anything that sssusurvived the storm is coated with sludge, discolored, mangled at least to some degree. It's got that "Katrina Patina." Jewelry, artwork, tools, photographs, furniture, clothes – all have been transformed by the storm into something vaguely recognizable, yet inalterably changed. Friends, at the end of a long day of mucking, covered with grime and sweat and a substance resembling black algae, will refuse an embrace. "Stay back," they'll warn. "I've got the Katrina Patina."

Even after a scalding shower, scrubbing with soap and disinfectant, the Katrina Patina remains, marking every one of us. It doesn't wash off. We, as well as our belongings, are vaguely recognizable, inalterably changed. We can only hope some of it wears away as the years pass.

Yet beneath that patina - under the sludge and the mud, the loss and the mourning - a bright determination flourishes. Our spirit as a community is evolving as surely as our vocabulary.

We're fluent in the language of loss now, but we're also learning more about the language of love.

beloved, and known affectionately as “dem bums”. The term “bum” was once of endearment. Read Pete Hamill on the post war Dodgers in his memoir, **A Drinking Life**, or Doris Kearns Goodwin, or the classic **Boys of Summer** by Roger Kahn.

But the remarkable thing wasn't that the galvanizing, almost religious power the team had over the community—the remarkable thing was what happened when they lost, as lose they must. The moment the final out was recorded and the dagger was driven into the heart of all Brooklynites by the hated Babylonian Yankees, the Dodgers had a single cry—the simple, eloquent, undeniable hope of, “Wait ‘til next year.”

None of the neurosis of the Boston Red Sox—which persists to this day—no complaining about the “curse of the bambino,” an ersatz tragic Greek whine.

“Wait until next year.” No complaints, no explanations, no cheap curses to blame.

It is more than the cry of disappointed immigrants that their locals failed, it is the insistence of those immigrants on a future. A character named Chick Angelo in an unproduced screenplay of mine once defended his world view by asserting, without a note of irony, that “false hope is better than no hope”.

Is this not an American theme? In business, in culture, in our narrative tradition? Is our “insistence on the hopeful” a clue to making madness benign? Is the naïve, disconnected, stupid blind hopefulness of Americans also part of our brilliance?

In American literature, the tradition runs deep. It is the hope of tomorrow, a new day and place, which informs us continually, as much as Slavic culture (and, incidentally, Southern culture) is obsessively informed by the past.

Regard the last line to “Huck Finn”—“I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and Civilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before”. Huck's contemporaries would have considered him benignly mad—a young white boy runs away with a slave, giving up a warm home and civilization.

Forty years later Nick Carraway talks of Gatsby in the final passage to Fitzgerald's great novel:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by years recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...and one fine morning...

Scarlett O'Hara,
“tomorrow is another day.”

And Joseph Heller ends **Catch-22** with our hero escaping. “Yossarian jumped. Nately's whore was hiding just outside



the door. The knife came down, missing him by inches.” What's the final line? “He took off.”

“Wait ‘til next year”...false hope is better than no hope. “The Dodgers believed in the green light, the orgiastic future...we will run faster, stretch our arms farther, and one fine morning...”

The future is both an idea and a place to go. It's kind of heaven for those who don't believe in heaven.

Speaking of heaven...I digress, because I think it informs our theme—an if it doesn't? I digress anyway.

I grew up in the Baptist church—evangelical fundamentalism—though my father took great issue with that—“we are evangelicals, we are no fundamentalists,” he would announce to anyone who would listen and God help the poor soul who said “what's the difference?” As it turned out, we were also “pre-tribulationists”, which meant, in effect, that at the moment of rapture, when Christ himself would return to earth for the second coming, all of the “believers” would rise, literally, floating up into the sky to meet him half way. (This might be the only time in western religion that a deity was willing to meet a mortal half way—but nonetheless)—my Sunday school walls were covered with paintings of people levitating to Jesus as he descended.

As children, of course, we were enraptured with the **Rapture**. Until we started asking questions.

“Daddy, what if someone who doesn't believe in Jesus is riding in the passenger seat of the car when the **Rapture** comes, and what if the driver of the car is truly saved, doesn't that mean that the driver who's a believer will float up out of the car to meet Jesus and the car will crash and the passenger might be killed?”

“Oh, yeah,” comes the answer. “The **Rapture** is not gonna be a good day to be on the freeway.”

This gets a child thinking about profound religious issues.

“Daddy, if I hit a ground ball to shortstop and when I'm running to first base and the shortstop throws the ball to first—what if the first baseman is a believer and the **Rapture** happens at that moment and the first baseman starts floating to meet Jesus, and the throw goes wild own the first base line—is it a hit or an error?” “Good question,” my father would say, as he explained the fine points—which for him wouldn't be “why aren't you floating skyward with the first sacker, but rather, why'd you hit the ball to shortstop? Was the ball on the outside corner? You shoulda gone to right with the pitch.”

Thus begins the nourishment of schizophrenia under the benign umbrella called the love of Jesus”.

Paintings began appearing on the Sunday school walls of horrendous multi-car pileups, blood spilling from automobiles, cars wrapped around telephone poles—and this all became a terrible threat to give your life to Jesus, which we all did, in terror, around the age of ten.

The problem was those horrendous teenage years before you were 16 and could legally drive—as if there weren't enough raging hormones and desperate confusion already—suddenly a new set of concerns

The Benign Schizophrenia of Americans

arose. “If I’m a passenger in the car, wouldn’t I rather have an atheist driving? Or even worse, for us Baptists, a Catholic? A Jew was okay to drive because it’s all going to be worked out in the book of Revelations somehow—but there’s no way those damn Catholics are going to rise up to meet Jesus over the freeway.

Or what if the man behind the wheel was a non-believer but a really bad driver? Wouldn’t you rather have a great driver who believed in Jesus? I mean what are the odds on the Rapture happening at any moment? What’s the over/under on the second coming? At least give me some points.

Talmudic scholars have wrestled less serious questions.

The Judao-Christian tradition is one of planting the seeds of schizophrenia, hopefully benign, from the crib and beyond. It has never been able to resolve the two world views, each represented by a gospel song. At one moment we would sing “This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.”

Followed inevitably by—“this world is not my home, I’m just a passing through, my treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.”

With all this weighing on a small boy’s mind, the drive home from church in the back of the station wagon was grueling—plus you keep looking out the window into the sky, just in case...

The “orgiastic future that eluded us then...” has translated in American film history to the obligatory Hollywood “happy ending”—though that’s not what Mr. Fitzgerald had in mind.

In Malamud’s novel, **The Natural**, Roy Hobbs strikes out at the end. In the movie, he hits a homerun.

A French cineaste once told me his favorite American movie was something I wasn’t too fond of, and I told him that I didn’t like that particular movie because of its “happy ending”. And he said, “Oh we always ignore the last five minutes of American movies. We know you people have no choice but to end them that way.”

His observation didn’t bother me. Being patronized by a Frenchmen, however, is another matter. Doesn’t he know we practically invented “benign schizophrenia”?

Do we soften our madness in our literature? Or do we just “put a spin” on it.

Certainly there’s no spin to our poetry, which seems driven by madness and suicide. No self respecting first rank American poet would even think of dying of old age. Or happily, for godsakes. Why is there no “poetry of joy?” It existed for thousands of years.

But our novels? Melville was intrigued by madness. Was Ahab mad? I always just thought Ahab was like Pete Rose... a touch on the obsessive side, perhaps, but isn’t that what we romanticize and admire? Just because a man doesn’t apologize for his behavior doesn’t mean he’s mad.

When I think of benign schizophrenia why do

I keep thinking of **Harvey the Rabbit**? We have Ken Kesey’s **One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest**. How about Kaufmann and Hart’s play and movie, **You Can’t Take It With You?** Or **The World According to Garp**? Blanche DuBois? Holden Caulfield? I don’t know what it means but my assistant in Hollywood insisted on me reporting to you that a copy of **Catcher in the Rye** was in Mark Chapman’s pocket when he killed John Lennon.

And Hemingway—is **A Clean Well Lighted Place** about schizophrenia, and the battle to keep it benign? It’s certainly not about the café referred to in the title. Rosemary, you’re right—once you start looking, it’s everywhere.

But especially it’s here, in New Orleans. Where else but a city described by Carol Flake (author of **New Orleans: Behind the Masks of America’s Most Exotic City**) as one “of damp tropical heat, permissive colonial regimes, the human flotsam and jetsam washing up from the Mississippi, the enclaves of practical nuns and worldly priests, the pirates and prison escapees, the influx of Caribbean planters and slaves, *the gens de couleur libres*, the floods, the fevers, the voodoo altars, the madams of Storyville, the Ragtime professors, Louis Armstrong, the spasm bands, the short glasses of absinthe, the spices in the market, the iron lace balconies, the jazz funerals, the Mardi Gras Indians, Tennessee Williams, and all the revelers just passin’ through”—one cannot exist here without embracing schizophrenia.

In 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase, two systems of justice were pitted against each other—English common law and Napoleonic code. Has this been resolved yet?

In this city of masks in which the Mardi Gras is the boldest schizophrenic incarnation of all—where a “normal man” on the street can watch the city’s leading male citizens (masked and perhaps in drag) go by on floats and wonder which of these creatures is pulling the strings of government and business and culture that are so affecting his life. This “normal man” keeps watching, even though the blue blood political power of the old uptown guard has been replaced by out of town money from California and Florida, and, God forbid, worst of all, from Texas. The masks continue, the illusion of power and control is merely its own theater—and is that so bad? As Ms. Flake points out, King Carnival could be Michael Jackson or Bruce Willis or Britney Spears or some other Celebrity du jour.

The problem is, of course, that in New Orleans there is no “normal” man or woman, and as Flake says—“no one wants to be thought ordinary in such an extraordinary city.”

If this is the city of rebirth in a country based on rebirth, of continual reinvention of one’s self—then behind the mask is another mask, and another and another, because the rebirth is ongoing. And each identity does not displace the previous identity—it just adds layers and lives. Multiple identities are not linear or

sequential here—they co-exist and just keep going.

Is this not the idea behind New Orleans music, jazz? Endless reinventions based on a set of chord changes? Metamorphosis and rebirth.

New Orleans does not merely accept and tolerate multiple personality disorder because it is not a disorder here—it is an “order”—and this city promotes and institutionalizes it.

Which is why words and music have always thrived here—because, no time is wasted explaining yourself. Madness is the given—let’s get on with things.

Emily Dickenson:

Much madness is divinest sense—
to a discerning eye—
much sense the starkest madness—
tis the majority.
In this, as all, prevail—
assent—and you are sane—
demur—you’re straightway dangerous—
and handled with a chain



Walker Percy:

...being a writer in the South has its special miseries, which include isolation, madness, tics, amnesia, alcoholism, lust and loss of ordinary powers of speech. One may go for days without saying a word...

All artists are benignly schizophrenic. Consider Faulkner himself. He was a moody, young Bohemian who once went out to Sunday lunch without shoes or socks—he spent four years of his life with dark glasses and suntan lotion on his face in Hollywood, drinking with stars and sleeping with Howard Hawk’s secretary. He was a Classicist. He was a drunk. He was a country squire. He couldn’t sit on a horse. He was a conservative southern gentleman. He was fiercely progressive. He was kind of like everybody—except he wrote better.

Is this not the predicament of all artists unmasked? Do we not wish to be thought of as the people in touch with our roots and beginnings, “regular” and “common” and “self made”. And at the same we want to be given royal treatment, enjoy the spoils of elitism, recognized in restaurants, have good tables, travel first class, and win National Book Awards, Oscars, and have Presidents put ribbons around our necks?

What’s the difference between the soul of the men who congregate annually to hunt the bear in Faulkner’s

short story of the same name, and **The Old Man and The Sea** and his fish, and Ahab, and well, Ty Cobb? In fact, why are these characteristics the sole province of the artist? We’re a nation of benign schizophrenics—these are our national character traits.

We want fame and privacy at the same time. Do we want yes and no? Black and white? Male and female? Secular and sacred? Art and commerce?

In short, we want it both ways. That’s benign schizophrenia for you...

There’s a lot of ground between Ahab and Harvey the rabbit. It’s the ground we live on, the American ground. And by the way, I’ll take the over on the Second Coming. Still, when I get drunk at the party later tonight, I would like to request that my designated driver be an atheist, just in case...

...and I’ll throw in points if he’s a Baptist too.



Ron Shelton

is an Academy Award nominated screenwriter, who divides his time between Hollywood and New Orleans. He purchased a grand French Quarter residence, following his creation, direction, and production of the successful film, **Blaze** based on the life of the late Louisiana Governor Earl Long and starring **Lolita Davidovich** (Ron’s

wife) in the title role. He regularly participates in **Words & Music events** when his film shooting schedule does not prevent him from being in New Orleans. He is popular as a discussion leader and as toastmaster for the Faulkner Society’s annual meeting and awards gala, Faulkner for All! This speech, delivered at **Faulkner for All** is being published with his permission in *The Double Dealer*.

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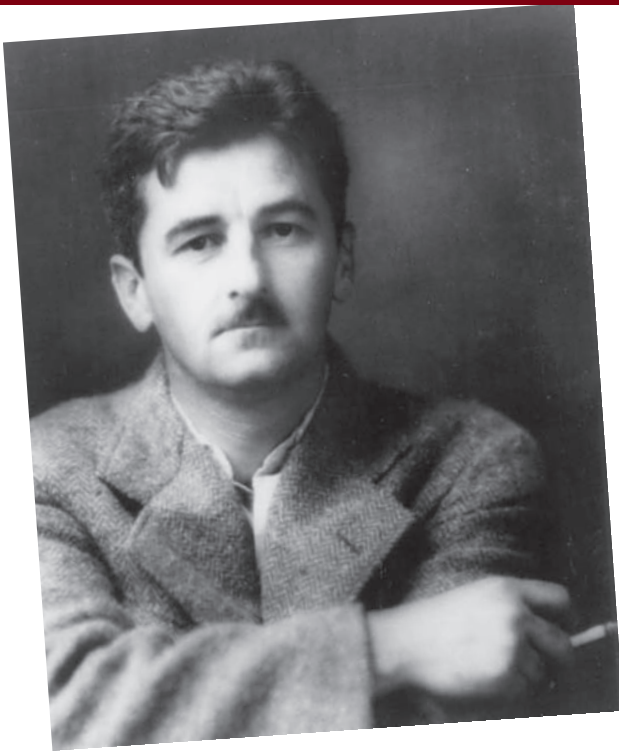
Shown top left are Ginger and John Schwartz with her mother, Jude Swenson, 2012 ALIHOT awardee. At right, members of the Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indian Tribe present a piece of their unique hand beadwork to Joseph DeSalvo as an 80th birthday present while his wife, Rosemary, looks on. The beadwork spells out 80 on a cake.



Center above, Soledad O'Brien with Irvin Mayfield's mother Joyce at concert honoring Ernest Gaines. Below, Cicely Tyson with Ernest Gaines at Faulkner for All!



Center Page, Beacon Press Editor Helene Atwan with Roy Blount, Jr. and his wife artist Joan Griswold at welcome party. Right, Peggy Sweeney-McDonald introduces her new book. Left, bestselling author Rich Cohen at Literature & Lunch. Cohen talked about the character in his great new book about Samuel Zemurray, the banana king.



Our Literary Icon

William Faulkner was just a young man when he came to New Orleans and found his muse as a novelist. He was 27 when he wrote his first novel in the room that is now Faulkner House Books on the ground floor of 624 Pirate's Alley. He worried about the same things developing writers worry about today.

Will I get it right? Will a publisher think I got it right? Will anyone remember what I have written after I am gone? Is it all for naught?

He found strength in the freedom of our city's laid back, easygoing society and, oddly, the concurrent heartfelt nurturing he found in New Orleans, support he needed to become America's most celebrated fiction writer.

To all the readers visiting the pages of the 2012 *Double Dealer* we hope you will enjoy the talent exhibited by contributors. As for writers, we hope you find your way to New Orleans and here find a dose of the same kind of nurturing and inspiration Mr. Faulkner found.

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Hal Clark, Jack Davis, Lolis Eric Elie, Randy Fertel, Raúl Fonte, Alexa Georges,

Michael Harold, Mary Helen Lagasse, Pam & Ralph Lupin, Ivan Mandich,

Sandie McNamara, Nancy & Hartwig Moss, Jana Napoli,

Theodosia M. Nolan, Tia and James Roddy, and Peter Tattersall Ron Pincus,

Rheba Schlesinger,

Bertie Deming Smith,

Shari Stauch, David Speights, Louis Wilson