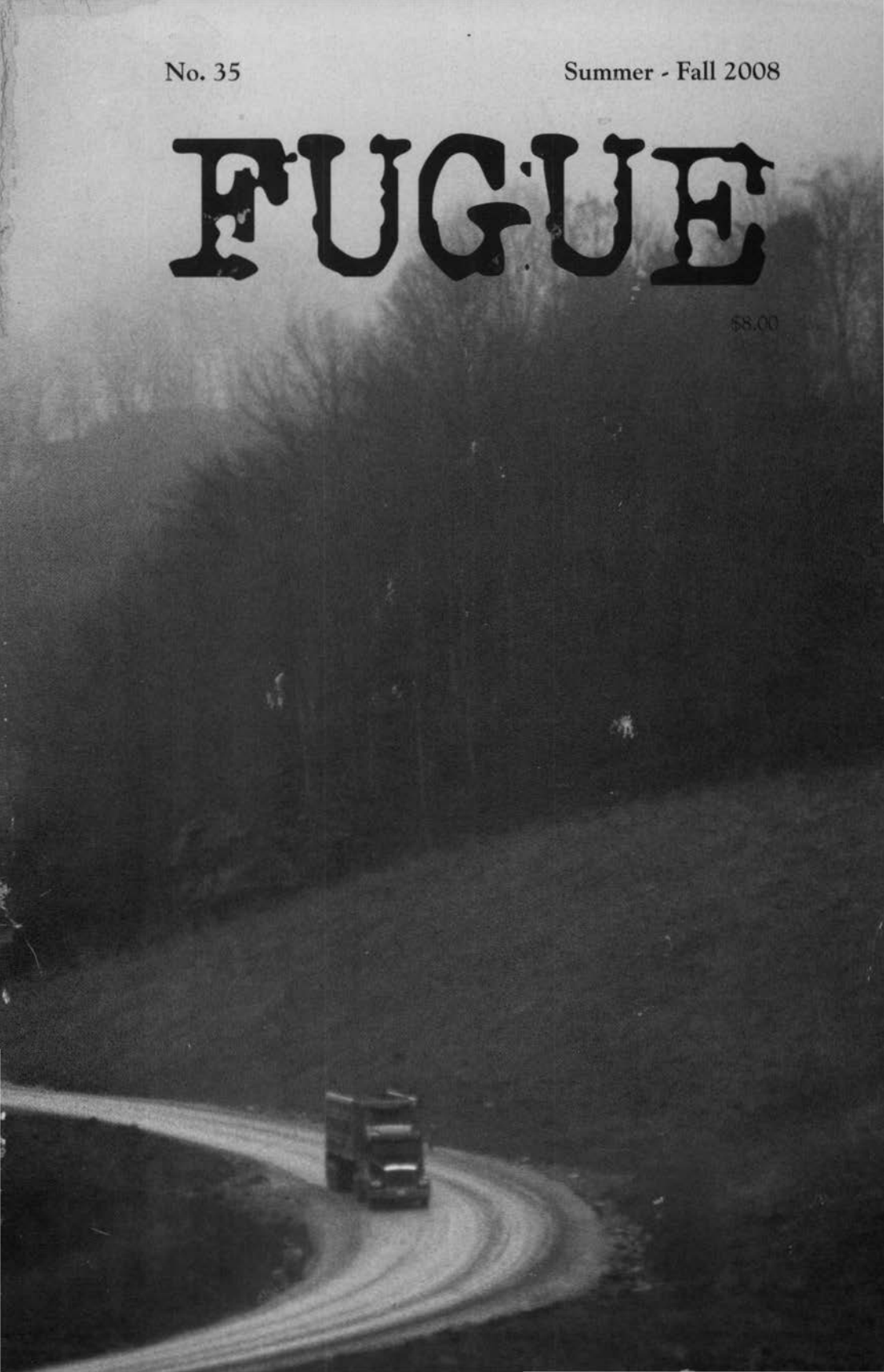


No. 35

Summer - Fall 2008

FUGUE

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FUGUE



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FUGUE

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of

David Foster Wallace

(1962-2008)

“Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf, and there was no wolf behind him.”

—Vladimir Nabokov—

FUGUE

Summer-Fall 2008, Vol. 35

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Cover art, *Coal Truck*, by Shawn Poynter, 2008.

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—From the Editors—

We are pleased to present herein the winners of *Fugue's* Seventh Annual Poetry and Prose Contest. Discerning judges Ann Pancake and Mark Halliday selected our finalists. These judges have been very generous with their time and we are in their debt. We are also indebted to all the writers who participated in our contest. We discovered many works of high caliber, which is top among the rewards of editing *Fugue*. The editors were provoked, amused, moved, and always grateful for the opportunity to read. We hope you'll participate again in the future.

Readers may be surprised to find that in this issue, we are not featuring an "Experiment." Rest assured, our commitment to this category has not waned. But our past editors set the bar high, seeking experiments of "sublime merit," that are a "product of necessity, a last ditch effort to tell a story that can't be told any other way." Within our deadlines, we did not uncover that sublime experiment. We're still looking, and we love the search. (For more information on the Experiment category, visit www.uidaho.edu/fugue.) And now, on to what you will find in these pages.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "The Dark—felt beautiful—," and it is our opinion, always, that she knew what she was talking about. Our cover art for this issue, "Coal Truck" by Shawn Poynter, is dark, but it feels beautiful too. It is muted and haunting, like some of the best writing. And the pieces featured in this issue represent the best writing we saw over the past several months. Some of them are dark. Some of them are less so. But they all boast the contrast—darkness infringing upon beauty, beauty in the shadows of even the darkest moments—that makes for complex, satisfying literature. Read on, and see for yourself how artfully these authors have articulated that contrast.

As always, we wish to thank the University of Idaho for its continued support. We are grateful to Ron McFarland, our talented genre editors, and the dedicated readers who help us find the work that we're so pleased to feature. Our subscribers and the writers who send their work are the only reason that *Fugue* continues to exist, so we are very thankful to them. Editor Michael Lewis has graduated, and lives now in a distant city, but through the magic of the internet, he has continued to edit this issue, including providing an interview with the incomparable Jo Ann Beard, and we are grateful for the seasons he spent editing the journal. In the very near future, Andrew Millar will be stepping up to co-edit with Kendall Sand, and he deserves a shout-out for the help he has already provided with this issue. We're bringing on new genre editors and we've got an expanded batch of readers. The faces are changing, but the name remains the same. It's still *Fugue* (not *Rogue*, as we've seen on a few cover letters), and we're still very proud of it.

Michael Lewis and Kendall Sand

Seventh Annual Poetry Contest Winners

Judged by Mark Halliday

First Place:

“My Sweet Little Pigeons”

by Lisa Bellamy

“‘My Sweet Little Pigeons’ caught me immediately with its richly packed opening sentences that are simultaneously funny and disturbing. The imagination in this poem is strikingly alive, ready to consider anything and to confront contradictions. This humorous vitality creates a context in which the plaintive wishing for happiness and safety can seem deeply based, not cheap. An impressively vigorous poem.” -M.H.

Second Place:

“Letter to Dr. Goldberg”

by David J. Corbett

“‘Letter to Dr. Goldberg’ has the charm of the unforeseeable. I don’t know where the poem gets the name Shlomo Goldberg for its addressee, but the poem’s advice is interesting because its basic ‘seize the day’ message seems complicated by an understated melancholy in the mind of the speaker. I liked the way the poem avoids dumb enthusiasm and even allows an ironic reading.” -M.H.

Third Place:

“Getting enough”

by Carol Louise Munn

“‘Getting Enough’ pleasantly prefers good food to church, and then becomes a poem with more kick to it by means of its neatly managed ending which calls to mind youthful sexual adventure.” -M.H.

Lisa Bellamy

My Sweet Little Pigeons

At the Buddhist party I help Nyima-la, the monk
who loves Volvos as if they are ponies,
hang scarlet banners from elm trees in the parking lot
until I hear shouts: exhausted vegans
banging into each other at the volleyball net.
“They need red meat,” our resident lama says,
flinging his cigarette butt into the grass.
“Jesus,” someone says, “I thought Tibetans
were supposed to be, like, spiritual?”
Tenzin laughs, his face a brown wrinkled moon
and I remember Byron Putnam, my Chippewa uncle,
belly swollen with Hamms and beef stew,
lying with his friends on the courthouse lawn
in our town in Wisconsin, smoking and singing,
I am ready now, my sweet little pigeons,
I am ready for love; how he held me, hands soft
on my shoulders when I was scared,
before he unraveled after years of hard drinking,
dying silently in the VA Hospital in Marion.

The afternoon breeze flutters red and white prayer flags,
releasing 27,000 invitations into the ghost realm.
A white feral cat crouching under the magnolias
opens her eyes, tracks birds overhead.
May she be happy. May all beings be happy.
May the bacteria in the strawberry yogurt I swallowed
for lunch be happy, enjoy a pleasing ride
down my gullet like sailors sailing boats
down a slow easy river, lives gliding
to an end before my colon’s spasmodic turbulence
induces vertigo, panic, hysteria.
May they be happy and free from fear.
May the gnats tearing at me as I hang the last banner,
leaving bloody welts on my arms, legs and crown of my head,
having gorged themselves on my blood,
having had their fill of mindless aggressive absorption
in their own survival, take rebirth as neonatal nurses
and tenderly care for me the first hours of my next life.

May they be happy and free from fear.
May the elderly alligator sunning himself on the putting green
adjacent to my mother's condo in Boca
loosen his Leviathan jaws, allow the visiting pug from Brooklyn
to wiggle free. May they both be happy,
and so may my mother, binoculars raised, although
I'm not 100% sure which one she's cheering for.
May she be happy. May beings everywhere be happy.

Tonight Tibetans will empty glasses and bowls
to keep lonely circling spirits from drowning.
May they be happy and free from fear.
Uncle, may you quench your unquenchable thirst.
May we climb the wish-fulfilling refuge tree,
happy and free from all fear.
May I sleep, a baby swaying in bunting;
the beloved undevoured lamb.

David J. Corbett

Letter to Dr. Goldberg

Court that girl, Shlomo

You are a libertine
accept it
 embrace it
 move on

teach her the difference
between pinot noir and zinfandel

play chopin
on a shitty day
the hail pelting your roof

smile
when you see
the wind whip through her hair

that song she likes
on the radio
turn it up

on a whim
drive her down to mexico
buy a long-sleeved t-shirt
garishly emblazoned
with the name of your resort hotel

listen
to the soft cadence of her breathing
early
in the morning
her cheeks flushed pink with sleep

chop some garlic
the Lakers on the radio
and sautee it in sweet butter
just for the smells in your kitchen

seek to be kind
run out every ground ball
I try, too
but seldom get there

Carol Louise Munn

Getting Enough

In the dark of a low oven, pot roast mingled
juices with potato chunks, carrot nibs,
celery hearts sliced clean through the strings

floating in the hot pot liquor while we churched
at the corner of Wabash and Cantey. Baptists sang
bringing in the sheaves in the sweet by and by

holding onto the pew in front, waiting
until we got home for the benediction
of familiar vegetables, fragrant meat.

Primal meal in these parts, Sunday dinner
was a craving I could indulge without shame,
a hunger sated with biscuits

sopped in gravy; sweating glasses
of sugared tea washed my fingers
sticky from the gooey pits of sliced peaches,

one of the few things I could suck
to the rough dimpled bone
and get more of at home.

Seventh Annual Fiction Contest Winners

Judged by Ann Pancake

First Place:

“Driving School”

by Roger Sheffer

“Unlike any story I’ve ever read, ‘Driving School’ is risk-taking and inventive, hilarious, yet darkly and deliciously unsettling. The author manages to carry readers on this wild ride into escalating surreality without sacrificing clarity, breaking suspense or momentum, or violating the story’s complex tone. And just when you can’t imagine how the story could possibly end, ‘Driving School’ finds its perfect landing.” -A.P.

Second Place:

“For Lack of Wood”

by Margaret Zamos-Monteith

“This is an ambitious piece, original in structure and premise and chillingly insightful in its examination of contemporary suburban culture. The story’s social critique is made organically through setting, character, situation and plot; it’s never didactic and very effective. The desperate understatement of ‘For Lack of Wood,’ along with its razor-sharp observations, will stay with me for some time.” -A.P.

Third Place:

“Visual Goals”

by Sage Marsters

“Here is an unflinching look at a young woman’s anxiety and depression as she struggles to figure out her place in the world. The parallel story of the mother and her nearly pathological dissatisfaction with her body deepens the piece, each thread shedding light on the other. I admired the textured language of ‘Visual Goals,’ the deftly chosen details, the unique, yet precise, figures of speech. I finished the story moved, and with much respect for the author’s honesty and heart.” -A.P.

Driving School

Oftentimes, when I'm driving the quarter-mile remedial track, my instructor will make a reference to the founder. Like, "Mr. Wilton prefers that students not smoke in the cars." Or, "Mr. Wilton watches from his bedroom window." I've never seen this Mr. Wilton, except a black and white cartoon version of his face on a dusty package of graduation party napkins. These were on the kitchen counter in the main building. Inverted V-shaped eyebrows, a tiny Hitler mustache, a caricature of bonhomie. "Congratulations!" the face is saying, and in smaller print, "Better driving since 1949." Which, I'm told, was the year Wilton bought a section of public highway, fenced it off and built this academy next to it. The only other road out here is a low-maintenance horror—County Road XX, loose gravel on a swamp. A half inch of rain will flood it.

"Don't drive the double X." That's what we hear from Giles Henderson, an 80ish retired banker with a big nose and sloping forehead, now doing his fourth gig at the academy. DUI this time, though Henderson doesn't call it that. He says, rather proudly, "I must have nodded off for a split-second. Scratched a piece of bark off a maple tree that would have died anyway. No real harm to nature or mankind. It was my own front yard, for godsakes. *I was still in my own driveway!*" The people who run this academy let him get away with such remarks. This is not, evidently, a twelve-step kind of place, where they make you tell the truth. I'm not sure what the philosophy is at Wilton, and I have no idea whether I'll come out of here a better person.

"Don't drive it," Henderson says.

But if we can't drive County Road XX, how will we ever escape from Wilton Academy? On foot? By helicopter? I ask Henderson and he looks at me like I'm crazy. "What's the hurry?" he says. "Do you have some urgent need that isn't being met?"

A sprawling aluminum ranch house overlooks the property. Mr. Wilton comes out once a week, they say, and only for a few minutes, to present scrolls, diplomas, ballpoint pens. Last time, he merely tossed them from his bedroom window into a puddle, no names on them. No graduation party, no napkins. I fear I won't complete the training. I've been here two and a half days. I've driven the remedial course twice each day, and each time, something terrible has happened. The employees of Wilton Driving School don't seem to care. They stand with clipboards and walkie-talkies at both ends of the course, statue-like, making observations. Some of them, as it turns out, *are* statues, or, rather, two-dimensional wooden silhouettes. One of them is supposed to look exactly like Broderick Crawford, another like Erik Estrada. I have no

idea who those people are.

"It was this, or prison," Henderson says to me, without context. He just starts up talking. We face each other across the big yellow picnic table, eating box lunches, near the window from which the diplomas were tossed. A few commemorative pens are still stuck in the ground over there, like misfired missiles. I pick one up and read it out loud. "Better driving since 1949."

"You don't need a pen," Henderson says. "Just sit and eat." He has a good appetite. I nibble at the edges of my peanut butter sandwich, chunky peanut butter, which I don't care for. It may even have bacon chips, made of cellulose and low-grade motor oil. I sip cautiously from my carton of one-percent milk.

"Prison? For you?"

"Oh no, not me," he says. "They'd never send me to prison. I'd actually have to kill somebody. No person has ever died as a result of my driving."

"Serious injuries?"

"Or even spent more than one day in the hospital." Henderson sucks his dentures. "I'm talking about the big guy now. Wilton. He offered this contribution to society, this driving academy—as an alternative to twenty years at the Sand City Correctional Institute, which would have been his sentence." Henderson laughs while food escapes from his mouth, noodles and meat chunks, bouncing off the table onto the ground.

"Why would he build it here?" I ask. "One hundred miles from nowhere."

"This isn't *nowhere*. It's the scene of his so-called 'crime.' That's the beauty of it."

"Drunk driving?"

"Not a crime in '49." Henderson says, almost rhyming. "You have a lot to learn, young man. We should take a stroll by the Sculpture."

"I'm ready."

"Let's do it around sunset, when the remedial track is shut down and it's safer to go walking."

So I have a couple hours free time, during which I ponder my crimes: driving 63 past an elementary school while school was in session and children frolicked on the playground and mothers were pulling up along the curb in their minivans, some double-parked, screaming, throwing apples, flipping open their cellphones and bringing the cops down on me. Fifty dollars for every mile per hour above the speed limit. My punishment was a \$2150 fine, reduced to \$1500 if I spent two weeks at the Wilton Driving Academy. How was I to know?

Clarice, another first-timer at Wilton, has come along for Henderson's tour of the Sculpture. She's sixty or sixty-five, a retired hand model. The hands may be retired, but they're still way too active. On my first ride-along,

sitting in the backseat (an instructor rode shotgun), I took notes while Clarice drove the course, not quite steering around the orange cones and road kill that had been set out to lend interest to that otherwise boring track. She couldn't keep her hands on the wheel, knocked down two cones and ran over a dead cat that had an orange flag sticking out of it. She kept gesturing, pointing, touching the instructor (a stout young woman who did not appreciate the physical contact), and I noted all this on the score-sheet. Which is part of our punishment, to do ride-alongs in the back seat. They don't call it "punishment." They call it "your responsibility," as if, once we returned to the real world, we would serve that world most responsibly by riding in the backseat of strangers' cars, critiquing their driving.

The next day Clarice sat across from me at the picnic table and rubbed pink cream into the back of her hands. An age-spot remover. She had been avoiding eye contact all morning.

"Don't take his critique too personally," Henderson said, nodding at me. "Ever since he found a pen on the lawn, he's been writing like there's no tomorrow."

"I'm upset," she said.

"Learn from it, young lady, but don't cry about it. I hear weeping every night when I pass the ladies' dorm."

"We all cry," she said. "You men, you should be crying, too."

And where were the professional staff, the clipboard people who observe us when we drive? In a room somewhere on campus, in a bunker perhaps, getting drunk, viewing student-driving films and laughing their heads off. They never take a meal with us.

We walk in the near-dark toward the Sculpture, Henderson in the lead.

"There's the cat I ran over," Clarice says, pointing. "Poor thing." Her hands fly up above her head.

Two-dimensional. That's all I can discern in this light. My eyes are shot. The cat is flattened, like a shape cut out of black construction paper lying on the pavement, a child's idea of an unlucky cat.

"I always find it interesting," says Henderson, shining his moribund flashlight at a shapeless wad of metal, a former car. The Sculpture.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Clarice asks. "Coming out here like this?"

"Absolutely," he says. "I have a piece of paper in my pocket says it's okay. Wilton and I happen to be long-time friends and acquaintances. Business rivals."

"You had a driving school?" I ask.

"No. But Wilton once owned a bank."

"He's rich."

"That wonderful man took what could have been a tragedy in his life and

made something positive out of it. He could have ordered this awful wreck hauled away to the crusher, but he left it here, as an inspiration to the rest of us. So many of us drivers simply deny our guilt."

"Like you," I say.

"Is this the actual car he was driving?" Clarice asks. "Please tell me that it's only a replica."

The weak flashlight beam jerks around the edges of the memorial car, which would be a legitimate antique if it were not ruined. A shard of window glass glimmers, some ancient chrome not completely twisted out of shape. Other surfaces seem to be made of rock, as if, like petrified wood, the original substance had rotted away.

"Wilton's car came out just fine," Henderson says, briefly shining the flashlight under his chin like some kid on Halloween. "Cadillac." His mouth is shaped like a pumpkin mouth. "Minor dents and scratches. He still drives that thing."

"While this one is, of course, undrivable," I say.

"Undrivable. That's the word. Write it down."

Clarice laughs nervously. "Oh my god. There are *bodies* inside. Can we look in? Is that allowed?"

"Nothing to see, young lady. The bodies of those teenagers were removed long ago. Boy and a girl. They'd be old like us if they'd lived."

"But it was *their* fault, wasn't it?" Clarice says. "Speeding, not paying attention, kissing, that kind of thing?"

"Nope. Wilton says the two kids were just sitting in the car, pulled over on the shoulder. Sitting there with the radio turned off, talking about the wonders of the invisible world."

"He actually said that?" I ask.

"He gave a talk about it, years ago. He used to give a talk every Monday night, for the students." Henderson's flashlight beam now points at the treetops. Blue spruce, mostly. "He plowed right into those kids, eyes open. Then he drove off, to a picnic. Church picnic, is what he says. Methodist camp meeting, with lunch on the grounds."

We can hear something downshifting far away. A truck probably. A normal person driving it.

"So how old is Wilton?" I ask.

"Ninety, a hundred. You've seen him, right?"

"The face on the napkin."

Clarice laughs, then covers her mouth.

Then I say, "I probably heard him cough once or twice, on the other side of a wall, that's the extent of it."

"I saw him naked," Clarice says.

There's a metallic sound, *kerchunk*, and Clarice steps back with a little yip. "What is going on here?" Her hands fly up. Often, they float above her head,

useless, like hand-shaped balloons. "I think I got dropped off at this school by mistake," she says. "It was supposed to be a different kind of rehab."

"Damn thing happened again just a few days ago," Henderson says with a chuckle. "A student crashed into the Sculpture. Wilton doesn't know."

"I won't tell him," Clarice and I say in unison.

Actually, I may be the errant driver. There have been several blackouts, these past three days.

In the Welcome-to-Wilton brochure, we were told it was okay to bring our own cars, "even if you wrecked it, as long as it's drivable," and my car was fine, mint condition—after all, I was guilty only of excessive speed—but when we arrived at the check-in gate our cars became part of a common pool, keys left in the ignition, and I was assigned a cream-colored Buick Regal from the mid-to-late Nineties, dark brown leather interior, and a phrase lit up on the dash: *perf shift*.

"What does that mean?" I asked the instructor.

She covered it with a piece of masking tape. "Just drive," she said. "I'll deal with the warning lights."

Low tire, another phrase flashed, in yellow. She tore off another piece of tape. *Trunk open*. More tape.

I checked the rearview and noticed a child seat in the back, some oversize rag doll strapped into that seat. Smiley-face, red-yarn hair. "Is that who I get for my ride-along?"

"Sorry," the instructor said.

"Is the child's mother in the trunk?"

My instructor didn't care for the joke. "Take care of Patty," was all she said. "Patty trusts you like a father. Take care of her." She nodded toward the back. "You need to work on that aspect of your driving."

Ten seconds later a car bore down on us from the other direction, one headlight disabled, swerving and honking, I braked, lost control, ended up in the ditch—hardly a ditch, only three inches deep and full of beach sand.

"Was that Wilton?" I asked.

The instructor unbuckled her seatbelt. "No."

"He still drives, doesn't he?"

"After a fashion."

"Come on," I said, "be honest with me."

An observer stepped from the shadows. This orange-vested individual held his clipboard in one hand, pointed at a tree with the other, to the low branch where "Patty" was hanging upside down, still smiling. She must have flown out the window. I didn't know the window was open. I can't be held responsible for things like that.

"I'm not riding with you again," my instructor said as she got out of the car. "But don't take it personally." She started walking fast along the other

side of the road, stuck out her thumb, and an unmarked vehicle came to a rolling stop and gave her a ride. The driver honked at me. It could have been Wilton. Could have been the original Cadillac. The orange-vested observer kept pointing at Patty. I reached up, grabbed that doll out of the tree by one leg and put her in the backseat, strapped her securely into her car seat, rolled up the window, and drove back to the parking lot, cursing. The hell with Patty, I said to myself. Let her real father take care of her.

Clarice has a female friend. The friend has been here at Wilton even longer than Clarice, six or seven months. But she's younger and much more attractive. Crystal. She has glass beads woven into her straight blonde hair, gems embedded in her three-inch nails. "Yep, that's my name. I'm perfect, but fragile. I'm a snow crystal. Don't touch me. Don't even blow on me."

The name isn't spelled the way you would expect. It's more like Khrystle, which should rhyme with gristle. Clarice writes it out for me, but her hands are shaky. "This is not about romance," Clarice says as she finishes writing. We're seated at the yellow picnic table. "She's not here to get a boyfriend. She's here to get better, as all of us should be. And it's been a rough time for her. She may never leave."

"The course runs only two weeks," I say.

"Seemingly."

"Seemingly? What is that supposed to mean?"

"You leave when you're ready, is the philosophy. I know I'm not ready." She rubs the back of one age-spotted hand, then kisses it. "I might never be ready. I have begun to accept that possibility."

"You're staying here permanently?" I ask.

"I've made friends. Crystal, for one. And I share a trailer with two very nice respectable women who were sent here by mistake. They don't even drive. Erma and Berma. They've never driven. They were found in abandoned cars, and it was just assumed." She puts down her pen, one of those over-long, bendable deals with a purple feather. Impossible to misplace. Like, some people will tape a white plastic spoon to their pen and expect you to compliment them on their ingenuity. Or they walk around with a telephone pole strapped to their back, thinking you'll notice.

"I should be leaving the academy in exactly ten days," I tell Clarice.

"If you say so, dear."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm sleeping in the big house now," she says, eyelashes fluttering.

"Sleeping with Wilton?"

"It's nice for the winter, which is coming up faster than you realize. They heat the trailers, but still. If your head is next to the window you can get a terrible headache. And the infirmary is just a medicine cabinet with a sign next to it that says, 'You're on your own.' We have more serious things to

worry about than getting sick.”

“I have it in writing.”

“What in writing?” she asks.

I frisk myself. I’m not even carrying a wallet anymore. I’ve had dreams like this, which, as I now understand, were rehearsals for what I’m going through.

There’s a live dog in the backseat of the next car they give me. That’s my “ride-along,” a longhaired greyhound-type that jumps around and scratches the upholstery and barks the whole time. The instructor is oblivious. As it turns out, the instructor is a mannequin—what they call a “crash-test dummy.” They really don’t like me around here, evidently. A long black vintage car tailgates for a while, then disappears. This drive feels like many miles. My pedals and steering are stiff, possibly sabotaged. All the warning lights are on, and I have no tape. Basically, I can neither brake nor steer. When I crash into a boulder, the dog flies out the window and runs into the woods. Soon as I shut off the engine, this professional observer appears from behind a bush and says to me, in a very kind voice, “It snowed last night, only fifty miles north of here. Lindbergh Falls.”

“An hour away?” I stutter.

“That hardly matters,” he says. “The driving time could be ten hours, depending on road conditions or the frequency of your panic attacks.”

“I don’t have panic attacks.”

The observer smiles and nods. He writes down observations. A tiny orange-haired troll doll clings to the top of his pen. “Stick around, buddy, and wait for that snow to move down the valley toward us. We plow the road as often as we can, but it gets interesting. It’s even kind of pretty after the first snowfall. You don’t want to miss that. People find reasons to stick around.”

“Like you.”

“That’s right,” he says. “I started out as a student here. Everybody did. I’ve been here at Wilton since 1973.”

“Better driving since 1949.”

“Those are old napkins,” he says.

“I like your pen.”

“Personal property,” he says.

I have begun to think that I will never get better. I have met students who have been here as long as seven or eight months, students who remember the last snowfall. I have, of course, met the fragile and bedazzling Crystal.

“Don’t tell me,” she said, not long after we met. Driving conditions were unacceptable that day—cloudbursts, tornados—so we sat in the school lounge and watched a movie. Reel-to-reel, on a creaky projector, with frequent

flashes of pure white, possibly representing death. The title of the movie was "Highways of Horror," filmed in the 1950s. "Don't tell me," she said. "I know why you're here."

"Clarice always screws up the facts."

"I just know."

In one scene, a freight train collides with a convertible full of teenagers, dragging it for a half mile, sparks flying amongst the body parts. Crystal grabbed my thigh with her sharp fingers. "Whatever you did," she said, "it wasn't anything like this movie. I know that much."

"Like a train colliding with a convertible? Me? I'm not a train engineer. I'm not a dead teenager."

"Of course," she said. "That's why I said that."

"What is it then? Why am I here?"

"Guilt."

"Guilt?"

"Guilt doesn't mean guilty," she said. "You could be entirely innocent of any crime and still feel it. Guilt is a sickness, and being here is a symptom of that. Having to watch this movie." She reached for another handful of popcorn, but withdrew her hand, slapping it. "You may as well have run over every toddler in the free world, though you didn't."

"Didn't ever?"

"Well, wouldn't you know?" she said, while popcorn hulls exploded from her mouth. "Wow, look at that. Poor girl. Her head just fell off. Did you see that? It rolled right across the highway. Coulda been me. I'll never drive again."

"Those scenes are staged," I said. "Nobody got hurt. It's a re-enactment. They used motor oil for blood and dressed up pigs to look like people. In the old days they couldn't have had a video camera going continuously at every dangerous intersection in the state of Minnesota. This movie is very misleading."

"Highway porn." She fingered a blond bangle. "I love this kind of movie."

"Listen to the narrator," I said. "I think it's Orson Welles, from around 1971. He's saying things like, 'Last year more than thirty thousand teenagers died on Minnesota's highways.' That's not true."

"Cars were very unsafe back then."

"How would you know?"

"I'm not quite as young as I look."

"How old are you?"

"I could show you the ancient scars on my torso," she said, buttoning her tan sweater, then hugging herself. "I almost died several times when I was a girl. I mean, a teenager could die quite easily, in the olden days. There were these sharp objects that would suddenly pop out and gore them right through

the heart." She mimed being stabbed. "Nowadays, for example, I have a car that drives itself. I can be talking on the phone, putting on makeup, eating a burrito." She mimed these activities. "The car knows what I'm doing and compensates beautifully. My car gives me a total massage. Remember how, when we were young, we were told that we would live long enough to enjoy such innovations? Welcome to the future."

Two weeks after Labor Day, it is snowing. I am seated in the dining area, sipping coffee with Crystal. Another couple lean toward each other across the next table, and there are three students in the kitchen, running hot water, knocking plates together. Kitchen police. I've avoided that assignment; Clarice has been excused from such labor because of her erratic hands. A few minutes ago we heard the old man cough—Mr. Wilton—and it was more than a light cough. He might have been coughing up a muffler. The door slammed, a phone rang, and the coughing stopped. An old man's voice rambled for a while.

"How far north are we?" I ask. "Should it be snowing this early?"

"I'm pretty sure I drove south when I came here," Crystal says. "Pointed the car toward the sun. I'm terrible with maps."

The coughing starts up again, or I am hearing cowboy gunfire on TV, a more comforting sound. The bullets make that pinging noise they always do when fired in canyons where outlaws hide.

"It was a rainy day when I got in the car," she says, taking her last sip and returning her aquamarine coffee mug to its nook. We have personalized nooks and hooks everywhere, like a day-care center. "It's always raining or snowing where I come from," Crystal says.

"Canada? The Maritime Provinces?"

"I kissed my husband goodbye. I guess we're still married."

"Where's your wedding ring?"

"Oh, this was a long time ago. My husband stood in the kitchen and accepted my kiss, but didn't return it. I wasn't upset. He was supposed to drive me here but would not agree to it. Nobody would agree to it. Everybody in my town hated me, and it wasn't just my terrible driving. We lived in a ruined trailer. A car had run into it."

"Your car? Is that why they sent you to Wilton?"

"Don't look now," she says in a bright whisper, "but the founder of our great school is sitting over there, in that dark corner under the spice rack."

"The face on the napkin," I say.

"One thing different about this school, compared to the others I've attended, is that you rarely see a gun or even a rifle. No knives. Just some very bad cars with sharp edges. But I don't blame him."

The old man stirs in his chair, drops some magazines. *Hot Rod*, *Popular Mechanics*. "We're closing down the shop," he says, his voice not much more

than the garbled soundtrack of an old movie. He still has that trademark Hitler mustache, though it appears to be painted on and much too dark. The V-shaped eyebrows have gone white. "Get out of here, you're all pardoned, I'll sign the forms." His hands shake in a blur. We have no idea where they keep the forms, nor does he. Most of us continue talking, and the snow comes down so fast we can't make out the trees that mark the edge of the remedial track, elm trees, most of them, some leafless, others still fully leafed out and bending, breaking. We talk through the noise of trees crashing to the ground, the softer sound of Mr. Wilton sobbing in his dark corner.

I snatch my jacket from its hook, put it on, and walk out the front door toward the main parking lot. Every car has a key in the ignition, the philosophy being that we are free to take any one of them out for a spin, to drive away forever if that is our deranged intention. I find my Taurus, wipe the snow off the roof, the windshield. The engine starts right up, seat in the proper position, gas tank full, an unopened bag of French onion chips on the passenger side. The snow is only six inches deep, no problem. I'm not one of those faint-hearted folk who cannot drive in any depth of snow, who sit at home waiting for the plows to clear the streets. I like to get right out there and lead the parade. I like to fishtail, spin out on the corners. I like to have my passengers falling out of my car into the snow, laughing as they turn somersaults into oncoming traffic.

I drive north on the test highway, past the snow-bedecked Sculpture. Two or three children are climbing on it, sliding down, or lying next to it making snow angels. I am careful not to hit them. I do only twenty through that stretch. They wave to me, the way my children would if I had children, children whom I was sneaking away from on a driving adventure. They run behind me, but not fast enough. No child can run twenty miles per hour in snowboots. I think they threw ice-covered rocks at my car—or pieces of the Sculpture—but, again, no child could touch me, nor could Henderson in his tan overcoat and black ski cap, who somehow has become drawn into the fray, heaving ice-covered Frisbees in my direction.

I hear him yelling, "Don't go, don't go, don't go! I told you to stay off that goddamned road. Don't drive the double X!" And that must be Clarice behind him, waving frantically, or just her balloon-like hands, finally detached from the rest of her.

My odometer has been disabled, so I cannot measure how far I have gone, and I have been at the academy too long, and have not driven locally while snow was on the ground, but I begin to think that I have driven beyond the perimeter of Wilton, although this does not seem like a normal road typical of the outside world, unless all roads now feature observers with clipboards every hundred feet. I am certain that I have driven a half hour beyond Wilton, and not in a circle. I know the difference between a circle and a straight

line. I've learned that much.

The car has warmed up inside. It smells like cinnamon, with a touch of clove. My radio works, though the stations all play the same music. No talk radio. No weather report. No Emergency Broadcast System. Ukulele music, occasionally accompanied by the inarticulate cooing of high-pitched men's voices. Am I really driving north? The palm trees are not especially beautiful, as most of their fronds have blown off, and the snow does thin out quite a bit, until it becomes indistinguishable from beach sand, if that is where I am. The children who now run ahead of me are dressed for cooler weather. Shorts and sandals, yes, but down vests, too, and ski caps and mittens. I honk but they ignore me. They seem happy. They act as if my car were only a fantasy of mine, a projection of unwarranted high opinion regarding myself and my inalienable rights. Like, they know I have not finished the driving course and never will. I won't get far. I will be stopped and pulled out of my vehicle at some checkpoint, divested of that most important human attribute, the right to drive, and made to walk the last mile or two—however long I have left. **F**

For Lack of Wood

Outside

A thin dusting of ash coated cars and shrubs, clung to trees planted smack in the center of square patches of grass. Coral Cay took on the feeling of having been submerged under water for many centuries. The community had been warned to stay inside and for their own protection, they did. The schools, just reopened from winter break, closed. The intersections remained empty as the lights went from green to yellow to red to green again and no one hit the brakes, no one punched a code to drive through gates. The guard went home to his gated apartment on the other side of town, out of the reach of the fingers of smoke that encapsulated Coral Cay.

Caches of unused hurricane supplies would see them through their confinement. A noxious fog clung heavily over the houses while the oil refineries continued to burn. The radio and television assured that foreign terrorists were not responsible, though a pert happy voice noted, "Eco-imperialists have not been ruled out."

Even in normal times, the swings only swung when the wind picked up. The ash had fallen over a sheer layer of dirt. A year before, a swarthy male, 6'2, in a camouflage jacket, had been witnessed near the small picket fence lining the playground. A notice was placed in mailboxes urging everyone to check online for the growing lists of pedophiles employed by the recent construction boom.

No one waxed the slide to make it faster, no one called Marco Polo from the pool the community paid to have cleaned every week. After a heated board meeting, an anonymous email had gone out about chlorine levels, communicable diseases, and amphibians inhabiting the filter.

Inside

Children did not grow cranky. They were not used to playing outside. They reached new levels on their video games and their parents joined the competition. Hands reached into large plastic barrels of bright orange fish crackers purchased in bulk at the warehouse store. They watched DVDs with special features. A few read books or did puzzles. Some practiced the piano. No one mentioned homework.

News

A young couple described as friendly and fit were found dead in their bedroom while their two year old played downstairs. Deputies found Mark Bartholomew, 28, and his wife, Amy, 28, around 7 a.m. yesterday morning at their home in the Butterfly Park development.

Talk

A phone rang. Then another. More. The clicking sound of call waiting. A chorus of cell phone tunes. Bright hellos turned to awkward silences, a whispered not in our neighborhood. The news fanned out across the curving streets as neighbors on Palm Circle told residents of Alligator Way who called friends on Graceland Pointe. There had been a murder, one of their own, behind the gates. Though few had ever spoken to the couple, recently arrived from the Midwest, they remembered seeing her on a run, watching him push their toddler's bright plastic tricycle. No one had ever waved and each neighbor, feeling grace swell in his or her heart, regretted the opportunity to know this couple, this young blond couple now lost to their world. They looked like a perfect family.

The citizens of Coral Cay looked out windows and saw the foggy smoke, the empty streets. They double-checked the locks on their sliding glass doors and turned surveillance cameras on. It could have been us, they said. It could have been us. The evening news was hours away. CNN did not cover it.

Online a forum had already started. The Coral Cay Observer sent out breaking news emails and fingers clicked on keys, mice moved arrows towards inboxes. "What do you think of the Coral Cay Murders?" the forum asked.

Belief

My mother, who told me last Christmas that she has never believed in Jesus, ends her phone calls by asking when I last attended church. "It would take me 30 minutes to get to an Episcopal Church," I claim, using her own excuse for not attending. "Oh," she says. "I understand." Then she adds, "But is there a Lutheran Church near you? Because I read the two have merged." There is an Evangelical Lutheran Church a quarter mile from her house that she will not attend because the congregation sways its hands, whoops hallelujah. My mother does believe that it is unseemly to shout in public, especially in church.

Kinship

They cannot go outside. The Starbucks sits empty; there is no line at the bagel shop. They pull out their immaculate Braun coffee makers and plug in the cord. They extract bagels from the freezer to thaw. The grinder comes out from the cupboard and the sound of beans breaking up fills the kitchen. They sigh, preferring to pay for what they have already invested in being able to make expertly at home. Knowing someone has made the coffee for them makes them feel less lonely.

Update

Not much is known about the double homicide. Postings on The Coral

Cay Observer readers' forum speculate about drug use and a swinger's lifestyle. Someone accuses Mark Bartholomew of having an affair. Someone posits that the lover's boyfriend, a mechanic at Sea 'N Ski, is responsible for the gruesome crime. Other forum members immediately attack any efforts at impugning the dead, insisting that the Bartholomews' were an all-American family.

The Coral Cay Observer has allowed the messages to stand because it is a free speech forum. The editor responsibly cautions, "Just as free speech has its problems and pitfalls, so too, potentially, does content on our site."

Due to the forum, The Coral Cay Observer has had a record number of hits on its site and will be raising advertising rates accordingly.

Town Square

SoccerMom writes: Everyone lock your doors. Hug your children. Work hard at your everyday lives. That poor child was playing downstairs while his parents were murdered.

4KnaKtor writes: How do you think they could afford a house in Coral Cay? They were swinging. They were dealing drugs. I heard that Amy was a whore who cheated on her husband back in the Midwest. They were all doing everyone.

SunshineState writes: You are a very bad man.

Diversity

The Mayflower Colony, built with large stone gates in arcs like palms bent out from the receiving arms of the road, is noted for its diversity. Its neighborhood covenant allows for eight species of trees. There are six different house models to chose from and three exterior options: Berkshire Clapboard, Santa Fe Stucco, or Victorian Shingle. Exteriors may be completed in twelve shades of beige, yellow, or white. The other communities in Coral Cay have only four plans and very narrowly defined covenants for flora.

Family

JesusRox4Ever writes: As an indirect family member of Mark and Amy, I want to thank those who have posted positive messages and prayers. For those who do not know the couple, this story will fade away. But for those of us who love Mark and Amy, our hearts will never heal.

CastleInTheSky writes: I didn't realize you were so close to Mark and Amy. How is the child doing? What do you think of 4KnaKtor's comments? You knew them, so you must have something you could share with us.

JesusRox4Ever writes: By indirect family, I mean that we are all children

of God. I never met Mark and Amy, but they are part of my spiritual circle as is their child, for whom I pray. I have nothing new to share except that I should not have put on that Irish Rovers CD last night and I definitely should have had something to eat before drinking that whisky.

After Work

Patrick O'Brien's, advertised as an old-fashioned, family run Irish Pub, is the hangout of young urban professionals after work and on weekends. The game is visible from any one of ten plasma screen televisions inside the 11,000 square foot building, made to resemble a castle. Their Irish nachos and Angel Wings were voted "Best in Coral Cay" for four years running. In the center is a wood paneled room with a fireplace and a dartboard that does, at times, resemble an actual pub. Across the parking lot from O'Brien's is the cell-phone store behind which men get blowjobs and their wives won't know.

Coconuts in Cocoa Beach is the place to be on a Saturday afternoon. Live bands and free drinks if you know the owners. Their annual "Lemme Crawl to the Beach" bash honors the person who can still pull themselves down to the water's edge without passing out after consuming the most margaritas, of which there are three hundred variations on the menu. The girls with bright fingernails and tossed ponytails prefer strawberry frozen no salt. The stockbrokers take theirs on the rocks, with salt and upscale tequila with names like Two Fingers.

Hearties and Swabs, down by the beach, is for skanks and hos.

The Adam's Rib is a strip joint off I-75 where the tips pay for Hot4you's graduate program in elementary education. She knew Mark Bartholomew by face and by name: he was the only regular patron who put tips in her hands, not her panties. Like others, however, he often came by to talk and she knows how unhappy he was. She stopped contributing to the online forum when JesusRox4Ever accused her of being responsible for the decline of America's public schools.

Seasons

There are no seasons, really, in Florida. Hurricane season means it is wetter and hotter, winter means it is somewhere in the 70's, but the earth does not renew itself. Instead there is constant growth: of foliage, of houses, of people making traffic on I-75. There is no time to turn, no time for every purpose under heaven because there is always a To Do list divided into sections in a Franklin Covey planner consisting of Things I Must Do, Things I Would Like To Do, Things I Ought to Do, Nice Things To Do, and Things I Cannot Do. There is also a wish list, with a small guardian angel sticker affixed by the title. For the most part, the Things I Must Do is a non-evolving list because bills come every month. Estimated tax payments must be made quarterly. The grass needs consistent mowing and you will never finish your

laundry, truly, unless you do it naked and nudity is frowned upon. (See the dangerous repercussions of a swinger's lifestyle on The Coral Cay Observer murder forum.)

The Ecosystem

Most citizens of Coral Cay think of themselves as hardworking, middle class Americans. Whether they own a construction company, work as a mechanic or in an office, they know they are accomplishing the American Dream when they put the down payment on plan A, B, C, or D. They wash their cars in the driveway on Sundays, with specially purchased clothes and wax. They do not trust their shiny black or gunmetal or fire truck red babies to the uncaring arms of the car wash.

Methods of accrual, peculiarities in the tax code, the variances of meaning between city, state, and federal laws. All complications that create the need for the professional jobs that mean a house is 4,000 square feet rather than 2,000; an SUV is a limited edition with heated seats. Groceries can be bought at the local gourmet market: grass feed steak from Argentina instead of local beef from the region. The cattle in their neighborhood are only temporary residents put on the land to declare it a farm so the developers never have to pay taxes. Doe-eyed, sickly cattle moved from site to site, more valuable as a tax evasion than as meat.

Marketing comes up with a list of names. Advertising creates a campaign to convince the public. The accountants make artificial projections of profit and loss to manufacture an artificial picture that is presented in the form of artificial conclusions to analysts and shareholders. PR creates the buzz and organizes the opening event. The salesmen pick up the phones and sell. The landscape architect orders trees from another continent and has illegal workers plant them. A woman slips on an unfinished section of sidewalk at a ribbon cutting ceremony and the lawyer files a brief. The case is settled out of court and the woman no longer works. She uses her money to shop at the mall and pay for the products that will pay for the lights and the fixtures and the salaries of the cashiers. After all, idle hands do the devil's handiwork.

Prayer

My sister tells me that prayer does work. Just last week, she prayed she would get a legal job working for the state. The day of the interview, she prayed to find her stockings and when she went into her closet, a large walk-in where the carpet is invisible beneath the mess of clothes, shoes, and coats piled underneath empty hangers, she found a brand new package of nylons in exactly the color, black, she wanted. Then she prayed to find her shoes, which she never can find, and right next to the bed, not under the bed, were the very shoes she wanted: the Delman patent leather pumps she considers good luck. She prayed to find the right suit and hanging on a hanger in plas-

tic wrap was the DKNY suit her husband remembered to pick up from the drycleaners the previous night, even though she dropped it off two months before. She checked her computer before departing, only to see a new email from jobmonster.com advising on the ten dos and don'ts of interviewing. She got the job, where no one is allowed to work overtime because the state does not pay overtime. My sister had prayed to be able to pick her daughter up from daycare at 5:30. She assures me that prayer does work.

The News at Eleven

Directly in front of the scene of the crime, the local reporter stands in a large yellow slicker usually reserved for hurricane coverage at the beach. She has protective goggles over her eyes as she coughs out her report to the camera directly opposite her. The goggles obscure her eyes, so she resembles a large, shaking bug. The cameraman wears a slicker and goggles too, but he also has an oxygen mask to breathe. "Live from Butterfly Park, the Coral Cay murders demonstrate the fallout of failed relationships," Cindy Smith hacks out. "Jason Riggs, 27, of Castle Springs, mechanic, was a loner and a misfit. Mandy Harlow, 26, also of Castle Springs, mistress, was the mother of Jason's 5-year-old illegitimate child and a woman searching for someone other than a mechanic." The reporter clutches her microphone and gasps for breath. "Amy Bartholomew, 28, of Coral Cay, mother and jogger, was the innocent victim of her husband's infidelity. Mark Bartholomew, 28, also of Coral Cay, surfer and certified public accountant, told his wife of the affair on Christmas Eve, just two weeks before the murder. It's a cautionary tale about the loss of family values in our world. Now back to the studio." The camera shuts off as Cindy Smith reaches for her own oxygen mask and collapses from the burning smoke.

On Christmas Eve

SoccerMom writes: Mark told Amy he was leaving on Christmas Eve. What husband in his right mind would tell his wife on a holiday!

CastleInTheSky writes: I agree. They were the perfect family opening gifts and celebrating the holidays, but now they are dead. That poor child. Christmas will always be terrible.

SoccerMom writes: Well said, CastleInTheSky. Lock your doors, hug everyone you love, and work hard at your everyday lives or you could be Mark and Amy.

JesusRox4Ever writes: I can't believe he told her on Christmas Eve. I would kill my husband if he ruined the holiday that way. I know I'll never think of Christmas in the same way.

Counseling

Amy Bartholomew subscribed to a lot of women's magazines. She would search for surveys, quizzes that might help her save her marriage. She read the sex tips squeamishly, and wondered if good girls really did all that. She contemplated articles with titles like, "Are You Loving Too Much?" "When Being in Love Means Being in Pain," "Do You Make Excuses for His Moodiness?" or "Relationship Jeopardy." She highlighted the names of marriage counselors in the yellow pages even though her family, strict Catholics, did not accept psychiatry. Her mother believed in priests and when Amy was date raped at 14, her father acted as her counselor and guide. Her eating disorder has never been acknowledged, even in the confessional.

Identity Theft

What you wear, what you drive, how you twirl your hair around your finger, can you twirl your hair around your finger or is it too short, defines who you are. Fat or thin, athletic or not, you own sports attire. You wear pajamas to the mall and a baby-t that exposes your belly regardless of its girth. A Care Bears backpack and a pink I-Pod Nano with an inscription "Best Friends Forever" is one way. A vintage shirt for a YMCA camp in Iowa bought at the church thrift shop for \$12 paired with fashion sneakers that cost \$100 is another. New Balance because no one will wear Pumas since a rumor started at the high school that the leather comes from baby seals. A bake sale was organized to send money to protect baby seals from Puma hunters. Parents wear Pumas, so kids want something else anyway.

For everything you can imagine, there is a group, a cult of followers, a fashion statement worn devotedly by loyal participants who think this is it, these fur trimmed boots in a tropical climate are it, while mocking the person with soccer shoes and the person in soccer shoes mocks the kids who play soccer. It is cool to wear soccer gear. It is not cool to play soccer.

Evolution

GolfAddict writes: Jason is an animal. He has not evolved from higher than an ape. And if Mark wanted to have sex with someone else, he should have left his wife first or thought of his kid and stopped the affair.

JesusRox4Ever writes: There is no such thing as evolution. It is a lie perpetuated by the communist left, like global warming.

GolfAddict writes: Who calls anyone a communist anymore?

JesusRox4Ever writes: I know about you GolfAddict! You are one of those bleeding heart liberal lunatics for government health care! You're probably

an eco-imperialist like the people who started the fire. Move to Canada and get in line. Or to Russia and see what communism is really about. It is about the eradication of God. God Bless America!

4KnaKtor writes: GolfAddict is one of those anti-death penalty pansies. Wah Wah Wah! Whine me a river that some sociopath murderer is being electrocuted! Remember the bar-b-que they had when Bundy was executed? I miss the days when the radio played Electric Avenue whenever there was an execution. It's all those snowbird liberals moving down here changing this state. Welcome to Florida. Now go home! Anyone want to meet up at Hearties and Swabs for a drink once the smoke clears?

GolfAddict writes: Are you denying evolution JesusRox4Ever?

JesusRox4Ever writes: I am not related to apes!

SunshineState writes: I find it easier to believe I'm related to apes than to 4KnaKtor.

Business Model

Which came first? The box store or the house? The mega church or the followers? The cashier asks for your zip code so the company can build a new store closer to you saving you from a long drive. (You never would walk and there are no sidewalks). You might visit your relatives at Christmas, fly to another state for a wedding, but you never need to leave because everywhere is the same. Or, you feel safe leaving because everywhere you go has a TGIF and an Olive Garden. You're family.

The superstores look alike, but one gives benefits to employees while the other doesn't. Each store will match the other's sale price. Outside the Walmart, college students protest. The news reports a grocery store strike because the local chain can't give health care benefits if they want to compete. People smile, have sympathy, but walk right past to shop because time is money and who has five minutes to drive to another store? That is on the "Nice To Do" list and gas costs are rising. JesusRox4Ever calls the protestors unpatriotic communists. 4KnaKtor tells them to do their jobs or go home.

My sister continued to shop at Walmart anyway until the checkout girl stole her credit card and racked up \$750 charging groceries and baby clothes. My sister stopped shopping at Walmart because Walmart employees steal.

Appreciation

Mark Bartholomew took Art History 101 at the state college when his fraternity brothers advised him that the hottest chicks would be enrolled. In a class of 200, he ended up next to Amy, his future wife. Mark surprised

himself by realizing that he admired things of beauty besides his fellow co-eds. While he found modern art to be a snobby joke, he had a deep appreciation of artists within his reach, painters he felt comfortable with and able to collect. Painters who appreciated sports as he did like Leroy Neiman and an original Deborah Sampson image of a surfer cradled in the curl of a wave. Thomas Kincaid, Painter of Light (registered trademark) for Amy who was fond of Impressionists.

Art turned him on. The metaphor of creation and sex. A year before, he had enrolled in a painting class and ended up doing the teacher in the supply room after class. He liked to describe his affection for art to his lover Mandy using the four techniques of art criticism he had learned in college: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. He took her to a gallery by the beach and pondered which new artist they might collect together. He felt tacky sharing Thomas Kincaid with his mistress. The Painter of Light belonged to his wife and Mark tried to be considerate.

Conversation

While the oil refinery continues to burn, they do not grow antsy about leaving their houses. They are addicted to the forum and the passage of time is lost in the growing pages of posts. They worry about the start of work until someone sheepishly admits to perusing the Internet all day anyway. They realize that they can read the forum at the office too.

At the table during dinner, when they are forced together, their conversations are cut-off, lacking focus. They can't communicate with their children, their spouses; they prefer not to talk about real issues. On the forum, behind the mask of their avatar, they show their true colors.

The prior week, JesusRox4Ever complained to her husband and daughter about a particularly chatty co-worker. "She is so self-involved, always talking about herself," JesusRox4Ever had sighed. When the co-worker persisted, made vain attempts to have one linear conversation, JesusRox4Ever told her, "Look, if I cared about what you have to say, I'd read your blog. So either write it, or shut up."

Justice

LegalGenius writes: I visited someone in maximum custody prison and then the Earl Warren Work Release Center. Free as a bird all day. It isn't like those television shows where the bad guy serves his sentence in some dark cell. These guys hang out. They have picnic tables and green lawns just like we do.

JesusRox4Ever writes: What a warm fuzzy feeling of security that gives.

LegalGenius writes: In real life, the criminals are out there. That's why

I keep a list of my neighbors' license plates on a spreadsheet that I check on the Internet regularly. I also keep a list of wanted license plates and profiles of pedophiles and kidnappers in my glove compartment, so I can be aware when I am away from home. I Google my kid's teachers online. My wife and co-workers consider me to be a bit of a legal/forensics expert because I watch so many television shows about crime.

CastleInTheSky writes: What do you think about the case against Jason, LegalGenius? It sounds like Jason is guilty, but I hope he didn't do it. Mandy is the one who should be in jail or on a slab in the morgue. She is deceitful and manipulative. She is old enough to know better. Did she think she was the first woman ever told, "My wife is mean to me?" May she burn in hell.

SoccerMom writes: Right on, CastleInTheSky! Is your man good looking? Watch out! I know women who've had their husbands stolen by a no class, no morals woman. If I had to choose between Jason and that whore Mandy, I'd have Jason on the streets. Mark would never leave Amy for such a skank. Woman watch out! I lost my first husband to a ho like Mandy Harlot.

4KnaKator writes: Amy is a whore, Mandy is a whore, and you are all idiots. So he did both of them. Who cares? Women are all cheating whores. Anyone want to meet up at Hearties and Swabs for a drink once the smoke clears?

SunshineState writes: 4KnaKator is a redneck!

JesusRox4Ever writes: I skip his posts. He adds nothing to this forum.

Feeding Frenzy

The forum grows like a beast and the victims' families steer clear of the Internet. They turn off the local news and tuck the small child left parentless into bed. They pull their blinds and pray to be left alone by the reporters who will blanket the street once the smoke clears and the area is declared safe.

The forum members turn on each other with random pleasure. They research online and call the home of the mistress, post the name of the child. LegalGenius pays \$19.95 for an online background check of the victims and the murderer. SunshineState tells them they are overstepping the boundary of privacy, so they attack her. JesusRox4Ever taunts her by writing, "SunshineState is clearly a communist idiot like GolfAddict." SunshineState stops posting, peers out the window wondering when she can go outside again. GolfAddict keeps fielding their abuse.

Miracles

The rain began in the late afternoon. The already dark sky filled with driving lines. The water poured into the night and helped the effort to extinguish the fire, which had spread to surrounding brush. Businesses reopened, schools welcomed back begrudging children. Early, before the light fully pierced the day and the street lamps still shone in the grainy morning, a man walked out into the street, his dog prancing on the leash, pulling to sniff at the road. The air was clammy and fetid. As the dog yanked forward, closer, the man rubbed his eyes. The asphalt was slippery, seemed to move. He bent down and realized that catfish were flopping about, glimmering in the dim but growing light of day. He had been sleeping when the water rose through the drainage holes, filled the street so that the nearby lake flowed like a river, for no more than an hour, through the curving streets before receding and leaving in its wake the bedraggled and thumping fish. He leaned even closer as fish gasped for breath, shimmied across the road. An act of God, he thought with awe before returning inside to tell his wife, with no attempt to understand what exactly a sign from God would mean for him, a computer programmer who traveled frequently and had no time for church.

In their offices, the forum members were already logging on. ¶

Visual Goals

Amber finishes her first year of college up at the state university and knows she will not go back, knows she can't, but cannot explain it. "You have to come back," her roommate Heather announces, stomping her tiny white foot like a clean hoof. All year, Heather's kept her closet stocked with rows of white cotton sneakers, cheap, thin-soled, identical. She always has a clean pair; on Sunday mornings she bleaches them in the sink down the hall, rubs at the tongues and the soles with a toothbrush, lines them up across the heater to dry. She has worn a clean and perfect pair every day that Amber has known her, even in the snow, especially in the snow, prancing about.

It's the dorm room that's making Amber leave. It's the fake pine furniture that is the color of beery vomit, the way the bunk beds and the desks are bolted snug to the concrete walls, the darkness that comes at 3:30 in the afternoon, the resigned mornings, flat, shy, pale. For months she has been making her muffled way up and down a badly lit corridor, the smell of mildew and perfume clinging at her shoulders. All the ceilings are too low, and there's a rumor that the architect who designed the dorms also designed mental hospitals. There's nowhere high enough to hang yourself from, everything is blunt-edged. She suspects the school has changed her somehow, physically. The roots of her hair sometimes ache, and her teeth feel thick, as though coated in dust. In the bathroom she leans forward into the mirror, smiling like a horse, inspecting herself, pressing a fingertip hard to her gums. She can't remember what she's learned.

She goes home, to her town, to her childhood room, unchanged, waiting for her: the wallpaper with violets twisting into a pattern of repeating diamonds; the lamp with the oversized shade; her socks and tights and underwear, the elastics stretched, tangled in her old dresser. She paws through it, pushes it aside. In the pink wicker hamper next to her bed she finds what she left there the last time she was home, winter break, a dirty flannel shirt and under that a warm six-pack of Coors, from when it was Christmas and Desert Storm, fire and sand always on the TV, talk of Nostradamus, something about a man wearing a blue turban coming to end the world. She wraps herself in the flannel shirt. It smells of smoke and the rose oil she got for Christmas. It smells like the mornings she spent in her room then, the snow at the window, the radio on, the weight of blankets at her feet. She lies back in bed, sipping a warm Coors.

Her mother Diane is on a diet. She sits in bed at night with the windows open and the TV on, chewing slowly, intently, on the one tiny treat per day she is allowed. Only one a day, she tells Amber, raising the treat, clutched in her fist, shaking it, discipline. She sits on top of the covers, in her work clothes, her hair up, her ankles crossed.

Amber gets a job at a new bakery in town called Dolphin Delights. It's in a squat, one-story building where nothing has ever stayed for long. It was a penny candy store years ago; there were dusty shelves of Atomic Fire Balls, Jaw Breakers, Swedish Fish, Pixy Stix, Smarties. And packets of Pop Rocks, and a pile of paper bags to fill with candy, and a woman with hair on her face who poured the candy onto a silver scale and counted it piece by piece. There was that story everybody told about a fat kid from the next town over who ate Pop Rocks and then drank a Coke too fast and exploded his own stomach.

Later there was a pizza place, but it was depressing. The brown paneled walls and the dingy carpet made Amber think of acne and child molesters.

Now the building is painted red. Out front there are rows of pansies, faces like smiling dogs turning to the sun, and there's a big sign with a playful dolphin balancing a cherry pie on its nose. The cook, Deb, is a plodding lady with a long braid flecked with flour.

"Amber," Deb says after she hires her. She tucks her hands into her armpits and leans back against her counter. There are plum-colored burns scattered across her arms. "Amber's this beautiful stone," she says. "Your mother name you after that? After the stone?" Then Deb tells her about amber the stone, how it's millions of years old, a mysterious fossil, and how it's got leaves and insects and feathers and ancient creatures trapped inside it, and how it looks like frozen sunlight. Deb says it's a beautiful and a powerful thing to be named after. Amber shrugs. She knows all that, people often tell her about her name, what they know about it, what it means. She never bothers to say that she is not named after the stone, nothing to do with the stone, but after her father's sister who had a reckless laugh and really long hair and died hiking alone somewhere in North Carolina.

Amber works every day, bikes out the driveway and along the roads to the bakery, pumping up the hills, the lawns metallic with dew, the crows shrieking. She hoses down the brick patio Deb's got going out front, blinking in the early light, watching the road, still empty, and Tully's Grocery across the street, the lights flickering on, the shadowy movement inside. She sticks her thumb in the nozzle and makes various arcs of water for a long time. Then she goes in and starts the coffee machine and arranges all Deb's muffins and cinnamon rolls and danishes, nestles them on red and white checkered cloths in big woven baskets and sets them in the glass case for the first customers.

There is the morning rush, a lull, dishes, lunch, sandwiches to make, afternoons are slow, special orders, fancy cakes, she fills tubes of icing for Deb, cuts triangles of dough. She learns the cash register, the curve and pattern of the keys under her fingers, like familiar bones, the nudge of the drawer butting open against her stomach. At the end of the day, Deb gives her the leftovers and she takes them home and sticks them in the fridge, but they never get eaten. When Amber puts them out, she's already seeing them dry and neglected in the corner of the crisper.

After work she comes home, finds the key under the plastic rock on the doorstep and lets herself in. "Is that you?" her mother calls out. "That you?" The banister runs cool and familiar under Amber's palm and she counts the stairs to her mother's room, chanting the numbers under her breath as she remembers she did in childhood, stepping firmly to arrive at twelve, as though it is the counting that allows her to arrive at the top. She stands in the doorway to her mother's bedroom and her mother keeps her eyes on the TV and pats the spot on the bed next to her. "Sit," she says, "come sit."

Amber can't bring herself to tell her mother that she's done with college, that she will never go back to the cavernous seminar halls and the damp notebooks, she will never sit cramped at a plastic desk, squinting at a distant podium, flashing slides. She took notes in what looked like someone else's handwriting. Intro Psych, Anthro, Environmental Science, the classes ran together, and eventually she stopped taking notes, instead she sat studying her hands until they looked unattached to her. In the spring, she attempted to write one final assignment, neatly inserting a sheet of paper into her electric typewriter. But then she couldn't bring herself to put anything on the paper. She sat looking at the paper for a while, and then she walked away, leaving the typewriter humming in the library, the paper waiting for someone else.

"Tell me about school," her mother says. "Tell me something."

Instead Amber asks, "What's on?"

Her mother rubs her face with her hands, pressing her fingertips deep in around her eyeballs. "I don't know," she says. "What's on is on. I don't know what it is. Watch it with me." It's always the middle of something, some old movie, grainy black and white figures, women with beautiful throats, twisting roads along a coast.

Diane has lost thirty-six pounds already, in the spring while Amber was still at school. Her cheeks and her chest seem sunken, like earth caved in on itself, her skin bluish and moist, there is the smell of rotting squash about her. Amber doesn't know the smell at first, can't quite describe it, this wilted flatulence, but eventually she can name it.

"That's not even real food," Amber tells her mother while she watches her chew her treat at night. It's a discolored tidbit, something you'd feed a small, sharp-toothed animal, pressed oats, who knows.

"What is that even?" Amber says. All the food her mother eats comes sealed in white plastic. Food for the future, Amber thinks, food for when the world ends.

Scotch-taped to the wall above the TV there's a picture torn from a magazine, a lithe woman in a hot pink silk shirt and a black miniskirt, leaping in the air, legs scissoring out, toes pointed, mouth and eyes wide with elation, hair rising above her head like a flame. Under the woman's feet, in red marker, Diane has written: "Coming Soon! The New Diane Perry!!!" The diet place said to do that, for inspiration. You have to have a visual goal, you have to know exactly what you want to be. Every time Diane loses five pounds she gets a blue ribbon with a golden 5 printed in the middle, and she tapes those to the wall too, like a teenager placing in horse shows.

Diane tells Amber stories about when she used to be thin. "Did you know," she says, "I remember just lying in bed and being able to see and feel each of my individual ribs rising against the sheet? I could count them through the sheet. Did you know that? I was like an African woman. That's how skinny I was."

Diane's been kind of fat as long as Amber can remember. Even in her wedding pictures she's plump, chubby fingers clutching a bouquet, breasts pressed into white lace, standing next to Amber's father with his mustache the size of a cat hanging over his lip. Amber only knows the mustache from pictures, it's from the late 60's, before she was born, and she only knows the two of them together like that from pictures. Now her father is a tire salesman in New Hampshire, making good money, he always tells her. He has dark, thick hair and the careful lines from the teeth of his comb remain etched there all day. He wears thin white or blue or yellow button-down shirts. He has a giant, white wraparound couch, it's the couch he always wanted, it flanks his living room like a spaceship. There's almost nothing besides the couch in his apartment, in the kitchen, a coffee maker, a set of dark blue dishes, in his bedroom, only a bed and a dresser, like a model home where no one actually lives. They sit on the couch together eating peanuts from the can when she visits him, then they go out to dinner. At dinner, he tells her about the illnesses he might have, his intimate symptoms of early Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, prostate cancer, diabetes. He's always researching the latest possibilities for his death. Her parents never mention each other, except her mother will move her mouth rigidly and say, "Hello to Don," as Amber's leaving to see him, once or twice a year. Not quite a request, Amber thinks, just the most her mother can say.

Amber tells her old friend Tina about the smell of her mother, while they're drinking beer at the end of the breakwater at night, like they did in high school, like they decide they might do forever. "We'll be old ladies drinking out here," Tina says. "They'll build us a bench to sit on. With our names on

a golden plaque." Tina says she knew Amber would come back. Tina's been living at home, working at her father's office, filing, faxing, copying, saving money for something, maybe a business, she thinks, a used clothing store that also serves coffee. They swing their legs out over the rough edges of the granite slabs and pick at the dried bits of fish scale left here and there. It's satisfying to get one scale on a fingertip and turn it and catch a flicker of its iridescence.

"You think your mother's bad," Tina says, "my mother's way worse. Out of the two of us, you're the one with a normal mother."

Tina's mother has gone religious. There is a plastic loaf of bread in the middle of their kitchen table from which you can pull daily prayers, and now Tina's mother huffs up and down the stairs carrying laundry and singing hymns like television jingles.

Most nights Amber and Tina split a six-pack and get just to the edge of drunk, and then sometimes they strip down to their underwear on the gravel beach and step into the dark, cold water. "Sharks," Tina says. "Feeding time." She won't go in past her hips, stays in the background trailing her fingers in the water, but Amber swims out, first diving down, her eyes open and stinging with salt and seeing nothing, surfacing only when a compulsion in her chest forces her up, thrashing, breathing hard. She pushes against the black waves, not looking back at Tina but going a little farther each time, to the end of the breakwater, past it, her arms reaching for seaweed and the hulk of a great, sleek body gliding slowly and silently past.

Later, the house is dark and her mother is asleep and Amber makes warm milk and honey and brings it to her bed, where she reads the fraying books of fairy tales off the shelves in the den, the books from her childhood. The pages are thin, like skin, rimmed in gold. She remembers her mother reading them to her, Diane's body in this bed, curving to her, her thick sweaters and corduroy skirts, the roll of her belly, how she would take her nylons off and throw them on the floor in a curled heap and her smell would come out a little. And then the stories come back to her, the months of sleep and the dark, deep forests feel familiar. This is a place she understands, the branches of ancient trees clawing like fingers, the bright moon, the animals, wolves and horned beasts breathing yellow chicken liver breath, birds chirping secrets and riddles. This is the best part of every day and the part she never tells anyone about and never thinks about until it is happening, her wet hair drying thick with salt, the yellowing pages beneath her fingers, the mug of milk resting warm against her stomach. She reads into her sleep, her eyelids heavy, the mug slipping, the book falling to her chest.

She gets to know the customers, finds the rhythm of listening and nodding, handing over food, counting change. A few people she thinks she knew before,

summer people whose children she once baby-sat for, she remembers their front walks, boiling hot dogs for their children. She flirts with a lobsterman, likes his chapped lips and the crowded freckles across his forehead, the top of his nose is raw, burned, she can see layers of dead skin peeling away. He gets a large coffee and two blueberry muffins to go. She imagines his laugh rolling up from the bottom of his boat as he bends to lift traps and buckets, his smell of bait and salt and rubber lingering in a small house, on sheets. There's a collection of women who graduated from high school a few years before her, she thinks she remembers them as the older girls in the hallways, wearing tight jeans and fringed boots, slamming lockers and calling out to each other, now they have children slung to their hips, their faces are enormous and clean, yelling baby-talk. And there's the hippie farmer and his wife, the wife is sick with something, dragging one leg, her jeans sliding down her hips, the smell of cats and patchouli and hay all over them. They were using bees, they tell Amber, to cure the sickness, bee stings, but stinging kills the bees and the wife won't harm anything to save herself, it doesn't make any cosmic sense. This other woman comes in with her two little kids, their faces rimmed in snot and crumbs. Her sweaters are always rumpled. She gets coffee with extra cream and lets the kids play on the floor with a few sugar packets. She says she's trying to start up a dance studio, but her husband's liver is failing.

Deb's a talker and every morning she starts in telling Amber about how she's lived other lives before this one. She says she hitchhiked across the country one time, and lived in a cabin way out in the woods in Washington with no electricity for one year. She goes on and on about the green growth, the trees and the ferns unfurling and the moss, the mushrooms sprouting overnight and the rain. "That green," she says, "I mean, emerald, deep emerald. You're just in this green haze, you know, you're breathing it." She says how the cabin grew moss on the walls and snails crawled in and lived with her. "That was my boyfriend Glen I was out there with. He was a musician. Guitar. He played folk stuff, you know. He tried to make money giving lessons, but it never really went anywhere." As she talks she kneads the dough, her body rolling forward, wiping the hair off her forehead once in a while with the back of her hand. "Troubadour Glen," she says, "that's what he was calling himself. He had little cards that said Troubadour Glen, with a little gryphon on the card. You know what a gryphon is? It's like this beast, half an eagle, half a lion? That was his symbol, I guess."

Behind Deb's talking the radio is always on, the staccato clip of AM from Boston with the call-in shows with advice on homosexuality and cheating and lying, and the weather and sports, and commercials for

vitamins guaranteed to improve the quality of your life. By the end of the day Amber can feel Paul Harvey in her jaw.

Deb tells her about how when she was a little girl her mother was a waitress at a diner, the old kind of diner like they used to have, and her mother would let her sit at the counter spinning on a stool and drinking huge glasses of cold chocolate milk through red and white striped straws. She goes on and on about spinning on the stool faster and faster and seeing the chrome and the red leather and her mother's pink uniform and the thick white coffee cups and the hands of the old men all whirling together.

Amber leans on the glass counter that Deb says is an antique. She looks at the food perfectly arranged and waits for the customers. Sometimes she takes out a squirt bottle and Windexes the glass down, whether it needs it or not, or she goes around the counter and runs the rug sweeper across the carpet, collecting muffin crumbs.

Diane loses fifteen more pounds and puts on her favorite old clothes that she has saved all these years, folded in cardboard boxes, knowing she would fit into them again one day. She comes and stands in the bakery wearing a red dress and drinking hot black coffee and looking at her reflection in the glass case. She stands on the other side of the counter and tells Amber, "I wore this dress before you were born." She blinks and nods her head a couple of times. "I wore this dress when I was nineteen," she says.

She sneers at the muffins, the plastic cups of cold mousse, the tarts, Deb's savory danishes filled with cream cheese and caramelized onions and red peppers. "Black coffee," she says, "that's all I want. I only want black coffee." There's a shine across her skin, even her lips seem smaller.

Amber's getting paid \$7.50 an hour. In the fall, she'll take it and she'll do something with it. Maybe move somewhere. Maybe travel, that's what she tells Deb, that she's saving money to travel. "Right," Deb says. "Get the hell out of here. Go off and find yourself. Adventure, you know? California? Alaska? Mexico? Anywhere, you know?" She pauses in her mixing or chopping or rolling and flings her arms out wide from her chest as she talks, indicating these places just beyond the row of rectangular windows, the back screen door and the fringe of sumac and goldenrod that edges the parking lot. On the radio there's been a commercial running all summer for a cheap Greyhound ticket across the country. "Fifty for fifty," a woman croons, fifty states for fifty dollars, something along those lines.

Or maybe get an apartment with Tina, out on the river near the mills that are renovated now into shops and classrooms and offices. Amber tries to see herself in a sensible skirt and nylons, a job sitting at a desk in an office. Eating salad for lunch, dabbing neatly with a napkin for dressing at the corners of her mouth, coming home to sit on a Goodwill couch spruced up with a

tapestry, having a cocktail in a small, thick glass with ice. Tina can have the store she wants. Or Florida, move into one of those trailer parks right near the beach, waitress at night, walk down a sandy path to a stretch of ocean in the morning, tan shoulders in a tank top, later rest stretched out on an unmade bed with the air-conditioning humming in the afternoon, cold cans of beer, a loaf of white bread, a package of ham in a small fridge. Buy pretty dishcloths and underwear and kitchen tools on sale, find pink shells and nice stones on the beach, line them up across the top of the TV.

And then it's September, the waves languid, the water eerily warm, the way it gets before it changes. Amber feels the fall coming, the trees turning, soon, the cold that will make everything stark and clear: Deb's hands curved to the rolling pin, the key under the plastic rock, counting the stairs to her mother's room, her fairy tales and her warm milk after her beer, waking with her mouth thick. Time to return to school. Maybe her mother hasn't noticed, Amber thinks, it's like the way some girls get pregnant and let it grow and wear bigger and bigger sweatshirts and no one knows until the hospital.

Amber's in the back peeling apples for Deb the day the woman comes in, over and over fixing apples to the sticky spike, turning the silver crank, revealing rounds of white flesh. Ribbons of peel surround her feet, they've been gathering all morning. Her arm is tired. Things have been slow, the regulars sluggish, the summer people mostly gone. Deb's keeping her as a favor, Amber knows. Some days, she's sent home early, and she goes home and watches Donahue, the house empty. Amber doesn't even see the old woman at first, intent on peeling. Deb has to nod her chin and say, "Hey, customer."

The woman is standing at the counter with her purse on her arm and this hair that rises and quivers like milkweed, bursting. Amber looks at the woman, her body small and dry and inconsequential, a husk, but her hair, electric, white-blue, the color of veins. The fairy tales, Amber thinks, yes, pluck three hairs from the devil's head and carry them home through an enchanted forest. *The ghostly white orb of her head.* The words are written out in Amber's mind. She smiles shyly, stumbles forward from the circle of heat and spoons and flour. "Can I help you?" she asks the woman, it seems funny to ask, to wear an apron, to wipe her hands of apple, a pantomime.

The woman orders six of the little tarts Deb makes, a shortbread crust filled with lemon custard and topped with a few blueberries and a wedge of kiwi under a sugary glaze. The woman prattles: she woke with a yen for something sweet and cold and custardy. Usually it's salty things she craves, briny things, pickles and strong tea, dried fish. She doesn't know where this taste came from. Amber listens, she can hear the woman's tongue moving against her gums and teeth as she talks, she can see her in a bed, her head sunken on the pillow, her nightie, a rim of yellowing lace at her neck, her mouth awake

with the taste for sugar. She wants to touch the woman, her hair, to run her palm slowly, delicately, across the woman's head, to run hairs between her fingers; she keeps her hands moving, it's not quite a thought, it's something her hands want to do. She arranges the tarts with care, nestling each one between crinkling pastry paper. She ties a red string around the white pastry box. She gives the neat bow a pat and rings everything up.

The old woman smiles, her lips a hook. She steps toward Amber, she puts her purse down on the counter, and then she bends her head low, peering into her purse, digging for change. Amber's breath moves through the woman's hair like wind over grass. Amber can touch this hair, she can touch it lightly, just lightly at the very ends, the woman won't even notice. Amber will run her fingers across the hovering tuft that springs from the woman's forehead. Amber raises her hand, the blood inside her fingers itches, she will touch the hairs lightly at the very ends; they will be sharp, maybe they will leave thin slits like paper-cuts across her skin. She reaches out, barely touching. The hairs run like spider legs beneath her fingers. The woman does not notice, or pretends not to, Amber thinks, pretends to feel only the tickle of something, a breeze, the motion of the fans, a fly. The woman keeps her face to the counter, poking intently at the darkness in her purse, grunting softly with concentration, teasing, tempting, offering. Amber pauses, taps her toe, looks behind her at the waiting shelves of food, at Deb's aproned body moving patiently in sunlight and flour, and then back at the woman's head. In the stories, there's always a forest, with thorns, there's blindness, or sleep, there are horrible and beautiful birds. Something is lost, or hidden, or disguised. There are tricks, wishes, spells. You undo them by accident, by luck. A current runs through Amber's arm; she has not wanted anything in a long time, but she wants this hair, not just to touch it, to take it, to possess it. The woman, the hair, is waiting for her, this moment will not move forward until she does this thing. Her fingers leap. Amber grabs, clutches, yanks.

It's instantaneous, there's the sound of hairs snapping, and then everything moves, she possesses, and something lets go of her all at once, like stepping suddenly into the cold lip of winter, a door, a room, a house behind her. The woman springs back, lets out a wild cry, the high-pitched yowl of a cat in heat, of a crazed jungle bird. Deb lunges from the kitchen, her apron streaked with cinnamon and butter, her tired eyes wide. "What's going on?" she says. "What's happening?"

Amber steps away from the counter, two steps, knocks her back against the warm loaves of bread lined up behind her. She's breathing fast, flushed, full. She has done something.

"This girl," the woman stammers. "This girl," she says again, her mouth feeble and crooked now, her hand at her forehead as though she has forgotten something. Tonight Amber will swim out with these hairs and let them go in the water. She sees her body in the water, the flash of her legs and

feet and arms moving in the waves. She'll swim until her arms and legs are heavy, used, until she's hearing only the rush of water, and then she'll let go, she'll open her hand and watch as the hairs spin slowly away through the water beneath her, released, moving as one phosphorescent body, and then, suddenly, dispersing. Amber looks steadily at the woman. She's sure of herself, sure of what she'll do next. She can feel each hair against her palm. She closes her fist tight. **F**

Gabriel Bravo

“In the ocean the biggest boat is still, like, a little thing,”
~ Luis Grass

Camionautas

after Miami Herald clipping July 2003

To know the labor of water
you must see it clearly,
as Archimedes did in the bathtub
or Cuban Rafter, Luis Grass, did
through the windshield of his 59' Chevy
truck that shone like a green whale
traversing over currents
off the Florida straits.

In the photo,
he steers through the waves
atop oil drums.
The sharks confused
as the coastguard that circles
the makeshift truck-raft,
sputtering a trail of bubbles
from the axel-swapped propeller,
rather than a cloud of smoke.

And ingenuity, it will not
conquer the elements,
as little Angelito seems bored
in back of the coastguard cutter,
hand rested fist against cheekbone
like a child that counts the billboards
to Disney World, but never arrives...
or Pilgrims in search of a Northern Pass.

Justin Vicari

TO A YOUNG POET

Why do you try to write like an old man?
You are twenty-one ~ gold and purple
should stand sturdy in your garden.

You
break off all healing lustral howls
and welcome wintry frost upon your page

with steep-pinched, hard-shored resignations,
wisdoms ceded by the blooms who died.
Count quick shadows, enigmas,

make of them your inventory.
Enhance your boldness, your despair
of wanting everything, even what isn't there.

The Intern

What we do here at the Digitalization Project (DP) is scan books. Am I good at it? I am so good at it. My speed and accuracy, combined with the fact that our turnover rate is pretty high, enabled me to make Scan Manager in a brief 6 months, and I've been one ever since. I'm in charge of a team of 20; it's our team's goal to scan every book in the Tri-State into a single database to which the public is allowed unfettered access for a nominal one-time subscription fee of \$39.99. The books come in via 18-wheeler from libraries, bookstores, peoples' houses etc. and we scan them, save them to the database, and then send them to recycling.

For the most part, our brand is strong, but we do have our detractors. There's a group of anti-DP activists called Luddite2K who oppose "technology's symbiotic relationship with corporate power." One time, they sued the DP because books "smell of knowledge," and without books: no smell. How did the DP's attorneys deal with that? In a word, expeditiously. But that was then and this is now. Luddite2K is what you call a grassroots organization and it seems that they have been fertilizing. Their ranks are swollen and they're at it again. This time the DP is embroiled in a lawsuit the likes of which we've never seen before. I don't get all the info but, from what I understand, this is the big one. We could be shut down. I don't like the sound of that.

In fact, things are so busy around here because of the lawsuit that I got the OK from corporate to hire an intern. She's a godsend, if you ask me, but the lead general counsel for the DP was against it. These are perilous times, he said. We need to maintain the utmost confidentiality, he said. This is no time for interns, he said. But who's going to photocopy all these legal documents, I said. That won him over.

Let me describe the intern to you via her CV, which I keep folded neatly five times over in my sport coat pocket. She graduated from Swarthmore in 2007, which makes her, by my calculation, circa 23 years old. She's from downtown Philadelphia. I'm guessing that she lives in a townhouse—a brick affair with white shutters and a gated driveway—but really this is only a guess, since I've never been. It's possible that she'll invite me someday. We don't know each other yet but maybe we'll become good friends. But getting back to the CV, her major: Latin American lit, her minor: women's studies. Extracurriculars include crew and the debate club.

The intern does everything I ask of her including, but not limited to, photocopying, spreadsheet creation, bagel runs. Bagels fuel the modern workplace and the intern, I believe, knows this. She and I are on the same page re: bagels. Calorie intake affects energy levels affects output ergo profits.

Thanks to the new intern, the bagels are plentiful and varied in flavor, all things necessary to stoke the furnaces of digitalization during these trying times. I love her for that. I'll spare you the disastrous state of the bagel situation before the intern's arrival, but suffice to say it was sub par.

I get to the office early and have my first bagel of the day (everything, toasted, whipped butter). I turn on my computer and I have ten emails from the lead general counsel. See me ASAP, is the gist of all ten. So I go to his office.

"There's been a development in the case," he says.

"What's that?" I ask.

"As I'm sure you've heard, this is the big one."

"I've heard."

"Well, it just got a helluva lot bigger. They're claiming we've taken books without permission."

"Of course we had permission."

"Of course we did. Which is why I need you to pull the files and bring me copies."

"Pull all the files?"

"Yes."

"And copy them all?"

"You betcha."

"But there are tens of thousands of files. It will take my whole team a week."

"No can do. We need your team doing what they do best: scanning. We need to present a façade of normalcy so that this lawsuit doesn't cause any hiccups in the DP's stock."

"It can't be done."

"It has to be done."

"It can't."

"Let me ask you this, you're up for a promotion right?"

I am, and let's just say I need it. With the promotion comes more money and with more money comes a happy wife who won't leave me and take the twins along with her. She's never said this was going to happen, but I get the feeling it's imminent. There are certain things that make me think this way, the first and foremost being that we no longer share a bed. Frankly, I don't really care about my wife. The flame burned out long ago, I'm afraid, and my mind began to wander. But when I think of the twins, it all seems worth it.

"Yes," I say.

"OK. Just wondering. Don't forget that as lead general counsel, I have some sway."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"You have an intern, right?"

Back at the warehouse the team is hard at work scanning. Our unit is housed in a warehouse with loading docks at either end. On one wall is a table stacked high with bagels and accoutrements. The big rigs back up to the dock at the east end of the building, the books are unloaded, and then split up among 3 teams. Each team scans their books manually and then packs them into boxes and loads them into the trucks at the west side of the building. It's all pretty low-tech when you think about it, but we don't have any competition so corporate hasn't had any reason to upgrade and reduce our gross profits for that quarter.

The intern is unloading books from a truck. Despite her delicate hands and fair skin, she is clearly quite a laborer as well. With every box she lifts the muscles in her arm tighten and the flesh of her legs fills out her jeans that much more. Her brow is damp. She stands there, hair mussed, dripping sweat, muscles flexing, grunting and moaning and I have to admit it is not truck-unloading that crosses my mind.

I picture myself with the intern, for a second, and then she disappears and all I can see is the body of my wife carrying the disembodied head of the intern, a blue-collar cephalophore. And, of course, the twins are running around at her feet. I don't think it, it just appears in my head and then disappears just as quickly. And the weird thing is, the first thought to cross my mind is not about my disembodied half wife/half intern, but about the twins, body parts intact, playing at her feet, and how serene they look.

As soon as the intern walked in, I started picturing her in my house, with the twins. We could even push the beds together. But it's all a fantasy because my wife and I have to stay together, for the kids. That's what I think. My wife doesn't quite think that way. She'll have them out of the house so fast. Which is why I have to appease her. Get the promotion, make the money, appease the wife, keep the kids. That's what's on the agenda for today.

I call the intern. She puts down a box, wipes the sweat from her forehead and saunters over.

"Great work over there, really great work," always start with a compliment. That's psychology.

"Thanks," she says.

"I have something else I need you to do, though, so come with me."

I lead the intern from the warehouse back through the main office down a flight of stairs about ten miles long, past the triple locked door marked DATABASE and into the records room. Along the walls are cardboard boxes, stacked six high. In each box is about a thousand permits. The room has that musty, mildew smell of old damp books, just the type of smell the DP is trying to eradicate via digitalization.

"We need copies of all these files," I say. "And put the copies in the empty storage room adjacent."

"OK," she says.

She walks over to the first box, opens it, pulls out the first file and copies it with the old Xerox machine by the wall. No complaints, she just does it, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Can it be that the intern is that good? That she's going to make these copies without a complaint? Without the slightest peep of malcontent?

I start to back out of the room. Get while the getting's good. The intern turns around. Foiled, I think. She'll probably ask for a pay raise.

"Isn't this the Digitalization Project?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

"So wouldn't you have scanned all of these records?"

"Nope. Takes too long. Not enough scanners. We have to keep our eye on the prize, and the prize is books, not records."

"And what's through here?" she asks.

"Emergency exit," I say, because it is.

The intern smiles. That smile really is something. The twins will be calling her Mom in no time.

After my morning bagel I call the intern into my office. She sits in the chair on the other side of my desk and for the first time I realize that the intern must have long legs and a short torso, because when she sits she seems much shorter than when she stands. I'm not discouraged by this fact; on the contrary, her minor imperfections only make her seem more attainable.

"Can I get you another chair?" I ask.

"This one's fine."

"The thing is, that's my negotiating chair. It's intentionally uncomfortable and slightly lower than my chair."

"Why?"

"To give my opponent the impression that I am taller than him."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Have you read *The Art of War*?"

"No."

"Sun Tzu. I think you'd like it. It's about being a winner."

"I finished the copying."

I am stunned. It's not possible. No one could have finished that much copying in one night. But the intern did. I find her take-charge attitude very appealing, I must admit.

"You finished? Everything?" I say, just to make sure I heard her correctly.

"Everything is copied and placed in the room adjacent," she says. "It took me half the night, but I did it."

"How?"

"For you," she says. "You're a boss, FTW."

"FTW?"

"It's a compliment."

"Ah. Flattery will get you everywhere. Give me one second."

As the intern sits patiently, I compose an email to the lead general counsel. Copying finished lickety-split as requested, it says. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or need to discuss my pending advancement in rank, it says. I send it off.

"You know what," I say. "You saved my rump. I'm not going to beat around the bush. You're doing a bang up job around here. With everything. The warehouse work, the copying. And especially with these bad boys."

I take a bite of my bagel. Toasted, but not too toasted. Buttery, but not too buttery.

"Delicious," I say. "Would you like a bite?"

"Yes, please," says the intern and crosses her abnormally long legs. Is she being coy with me? She knows very well what she does when she moves like that.

"Here, have a bite," I say.

"Well, I want to but, well, this is a little weird, but I don't want to get butter on my hands. Would you mind just feeding it to me?"

"Drastic times call for drastic measures," I say. I hold the bagel out. She leans in and takes a dainty little intern bite. She snaps playfully at my finger.

"Oops, don't bite the hand that feeds you."

She smiles and I can see the little bits of everything—the garlic, the sesame, the poppy, the salt—on her teeth. Somehow it's endearing.

"Am I right or am I right?" I say.

"Uhlihsih," she says through a mouth of bagel.

"I knew you'd think so," I say. "Those bagels are to the modern workplace what iron was to the Iron Age."

"If I could come back as any bread, I would choose the bagel."

I nod in agreement. We both chew our bagel in silence. Our bagel, singular. Not our bagels. We share a single bagel. The bagel was one, was split and is now a part of each of us. Listening to the dim sound of intern lips smacking, I can't help but think: will this be a day we'll think back upon with great happiness? Were Tristan and Iseult alive today, would their love blossom over an everything bagel smothered in whipped butter, instead of wild boar or whatever they ate in ancient times? Not for a decade have my wife and I shared a bagel.

"Look, other than this delicious fare fit for a melech, there's another reason I've called you here," I say. "As I was saying, you're doing a great job. These Luddite2K folks, who we shouldn't talk about for reasons of confidentiality don't know about our secret weapon: you. I'll say it again: you're doing a great job. So much so, that I think you deserve a promotion."

"I accept."

"That's what I like to hear. Unfettered zeal for advancement at the DP."

"So I'd get to see the database?"

"I didn't know you wanted to see the database. You just need to ask."

I swivel my computer around so she can see the screen. I click: Start>My Computer>The Database (H:). The database pops up in all its glory.

"Voilà," I say. "The database."

"No, I mean the physical database," she says. "The real deal."

"Try not to be ridiculous. Access to the database is for managers only. Plus, why would you want access?"

"I don't know. I guess I just think I'm ready for more responsibility."

"Mo' money, mo' problems, that's what I think. I believe The Notorious B.I.G. said that."

"Who?"

"The rapper."

"Never heard of him."

"Biggie Smalls? Big Poppa? He died in '97."

"I was 13."

"Bring in your iPod, I'll upload a few songs."

"Don't have one."

"You don't have an iPod?"

"Yeah, I don't want one. Pandora's boxes those little things are."

It's hard to pay attention to the intern when she gets all philosophical. Especially when there are little bits of everything on the corner of her mouth. My mind starts to wander. I start to think about whether or not it is within the realm of probability, that we could get married someday, after my wife leaves me and the divorce is final. Why not? As we both get older, the years between us will become increasingly inconsequential.

"Foxy boxing," I say.

"What?"

"Never mind. Where were we? Ah yes. Prepare to get excited. Because I think you are ready. To be promoted. To. Senior Administrative Intern."

Her little intern jaw drops open in what I can only call astonishment as unbridled as *The Black Stallion*. She is silent.

"Please," I say. "Please. Don't say anything."

I pause to see if she will be able to not say anything, or if her glee will get the best of her. But she remains silent. I can only imagine what cogs are turning behind her big hazel intern eyes. Those eyes are beguiling. Not adult beguiling, of course, but subtle, intern beguiling. She views me as somewhat of a father/big brother/potential lover figure, that's for sure. I'm not quite old enough to be her father (full disclosure: biologically, I am) so let's say big brother/potential lover. I feel close to her now. So close, in fact, that if she

were to drop to her knees at this very moment, unzip my fly and hungrily welcome me in, I could only utter vague remonstrations re: my wife and/or the boss/intern relationship before giving in to her lust.

"HR will process the paperwork. Now go!" I say in my Moses voice. "Go whence you came child, sally forth and prosper mightily."

The next day I arrive at the office and am woe to find a dearth of bagels. I seek out the intern and ask her what gives.

"You promoted me," she says. "Per my new job description, the bagels are no longer my thing."

I hate her so much but I love her at the same time. The Iron Age! Acquisition! The modern workplace! What happened? I thought we had something! Did I not feed her a bagel from my very hands?

The Intern—the Senior Administrative Intern—is technically correct, but I thought that she was the type of person who takes initiative, who thinks outside of the box. Would it have been so hard for her to do something not expressly outlined in her job description? No. Which is why I can't help but take her civil disobedience as a personal affront. She knows what I think of those bagels, how they are so much more than bagels. She knows how I felt when I placed that everything bagel on her tongue, like a priest giving communion.

Why, then, has she shunned me? We ate from the same bagel. We discussed ancient Chinese literature. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Maybe it was too far. What does she care about Sun Tzu? She is an intern, not a warrior.

St. Jude, S.O.S., I scribble on my mouse pad, but perhaps I'm too far gone?

The next day, I do the thing that I've never done: I pick up the bagels on my way to work. My first thought is that I'll have compromised my authority as Scan Manager if I start doing the work of interns. Then I remember that Gandhi wove his own cloth to unite the people of India against the English. I buy the bagels. I segregate those with more aggressive toppings (garlic, salt, everything) from those without (cinnamon raisin, sesame, plain). I have to admit, it feels good.

Back at the office, I choose the intern's favorite bagel from the bunch: the cinnamon raisin, toasted twice, with cream cheese. A combination whose elusive charms I could never comprehend. An affront to the bagel eating population? Perhaps. But for the intern, I am willing to go there.

I arrange the bagel on a paper plate and bring it to the intern's cubicle. I knock on the wall and she spins around to face me. Suddenly, everything I planned to say is gone.

"Here," I say instead, and hand her the bagel. She takes it from me and

inspects it.

“Cinnamon raisin?”

“Yep.”

“Double toasted?”

“Indeed.”

“Light veggie cream cheese?”

Suddenly, disaster. The cream cheese, of course, is plain, veggie-less. My knees shake. My mouth is dry, my plans dashed. Now I know how Custer felt at Little Bighorn.

“Oh, it’s plain,” she says, examining the interior. “That’s fine too.”

Instantaneously, I am rejuvenated. It seems that I have misjudged this intern. The reaction that I anticipated, I realize, was my reaction, not hers. By underestimating her, I have illuminated my own shortcoming and that just makes me love her more. She takes a bite. I hold my breath.

“Pretty good,” she says.

“I’m glad you like it,” I say.

But what now?

“How are you liking your new job?” I venture.

“It has its ups and downs.”

“Like any job, I guess.

“Does your job have ups and downs?”

“Like a roller coaster.”

Why do I say these things? She laughs anyway. She laughs anyway? She’s never laughed before, and that foxy boxing comment the day before was a non sequitur worthy of Duchamp. Was a bagel all it took to turn her around? I wouldn’t be surprised. I make a mental note to add aphrodisiac to my list of the bagel’s numerous medicinal qualities.

“Like a roller coaster,” she repeats. “That’s a good one. What are some of the highs?”

The highs are when I go the long way to the exit to pass your cubicle. When you send me emails with spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations, whatever. It doesn’t matter.

“You know,” I say. “This and that.”

“The database?”

“What?”

“The database.”

“The database looks like a refrigerator except: no food.”

“Still, I’d like to see it.”

“It’s really not so impressive. Plus, it’s off-limits to employees.”

“But you have a key.”

“It’s only for emergencies,” I snap, perhaps a bit too harshly.

She turns her head quickly but not before I see, I’m sure, a single tear roll down her cheek. What would be the harm in just showing it to her? I

wonder.

"OK, fine," I say. "I'll take you to see the database, but you can't tell anyone."

"Mum's the word."

She smiles at me and it's already worth it.

Later that day we meet in the back stairwell. We climb the staircase down to the second sub cellar. The room is made of stainless steel and smells faintly of disinfectant. The dehumidifiers hum. In the back of the room is the database. Like I said, it just looks like a stainless steel refrigerator. Pretty uninteresting if you ask me.

"Well," I say. "There it is."

The intern walks around it slowly, looking at it from all sides. She puts out a hand and touches it gingerly. I can't help but think that I recognize that delicate gesture from somewhere. She looks at me. Is this it? I think. Is it finally happening? The intern walks up to me slowly and puts her hand on my cheek.

"Thank you," she says and kisses me on the cheek.

"Thank you," is all I can think to say.

The next day I make sure to arrive at the bagel store right as the cinnamon raisins are coming out of the oven. If I rush, I can get the intern her bagel while it's still warm. But as soon as I get to the office I know something's wrong. The intern is nowhere to be found. The lead general counsel is in my office, along with a detective.

"To make a long story short, you were taken for a ride, amigo," says the detective. Suddenly the shit has hit the fan, the shit being my life, my job, my promotion, my wife, the twins, et al. and the fan being the intern.

"She played you like a fiddle," says the detective.

"Is she OK?" I ask.

"Perhaps you should be thinking about the DP," says the lead general counsel.

Then it all comes out. How the intern is an operative for Luddite2K. How she's actually 29. How she never went to Swarthmore, doesn't live in PA. How they've wanted access to our database for years.

"You were in serious danger, compadre," says the detective. "She's killed before."

"I knew hiring an intern was a bad idea," says the lead general counsel. "Do you have any idea what this does to our case? They have everything now."

"Don't feel bad," says the detective, "She's an expert at the psyche of middle managers."

"It's true," says the counsel. "She's done it before. Let me guess, she wore short skirts, maybe flirted a little bit, then came across as cold, made

you think that you did something wrong and had to win her back. Then you probably made some meaningless gesture, flowers or whatever—”

“Bagels.”

“Whatever. You probably made some meaningless gesture—bagels in this (weird) case—and she came running back to you. Men love that, especially sort of semi-unsuccessful men like yourself. Makes you feel like you’ve won something. Like you were proactive. And you probably got so worked up you would do anything. Like give her access to the database. Our case is shot.”

“What happened to the database?” I ask.

“Gone,” says the detective. “It is no more. Forensics told me it was wheeled away on a hand dolly.”

“What about all those copies she made? She stayed late to make copies.”

“She didn’t make any copies,” says the lead general counsel. “Did you actually see the copies? Did you see them with your own two eyes?”

And of course, I didn’t. I trusted her.

“No, you did not,” he answers for me. “All she did was let in her little cronies via the emergency exit into all of our records.”

“Just tell me this,” I ask. “Does she even like bagels?”

“What am I, her personal chef?” he says. “How should I know?”

“But how can they just steal all of this stuff? That’s not legal.”

“Of course it’s not ‘legal,’ caballero,” says the detective. “But they’ll deny the whole thing. Luddite2K will say they had nothing to do with any of this, that they’ve never heard of any intern. And then sometime in the next week or so, their case will magically get a bit more focused.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“No,” says the detective. “You’re just a rube.”

“I suppose this means no promotion?”

“Not a chance.”

“Fired?”

“Look,” says the counsel. “I really feel for you. I do. But obviously I have to recommend termination. Hell, the board wants my neck. I figure I’ll give them yours in dramatic fashion and hope for the best. So if you wouldn’t mind walking out in handcuffs—just for show of course—past the corporate offices and maybe making a scene, forcing me to subdue you, that would mean a lot to me. It would really make me look like a hero. Since I hired you, I have a lot of explaining to do. You understand. I’ve got mouths to feed.”

And the thing is, I do understand. I’ve got mouths to feed too. I tell the detective everything I know about the intern, which is essentially nothing. I give him the CV I have folded up five times in my pocket. He laughs and says he’ll put it in the fridge at the precinct with all the others. Then he puts me in handcuffs, just for show, and leads me past the corporate offices. At the opportune time I make a halfhearted grab at the lawyer’s throat. First,

he twists the handcuffs so they dig into my wrists. He slugs me in the gut a few times and then throws an elbow into my eye. He comes in real close and whispers, "you have no idea what this means to me," and then a knee to the groin. I go down. That's when he takes it a bit too far. But I can't blame him. The corporate offices are cheering now. A few quick blows to the head. I get woozy. I swear I see my wife's body standing over me, and she's beating me senseless with the intern's head. The twins are laughing. Take him out! That'll teach him! Bravo! Bravo! Bravo! is the last thing I hear before it all goes black.¶

Albert Garcia

River Scent

It's death you smell
down by the river, decay
of leaves and the mudflat's sedge,
rot of salmon carcass,
algae dried white over gravel.

You smell it from your car,
window open to the spring sun,
idling in traffic on the bridge.
It's only a trace
of what the canyon carries
but you realize that scent—
of mud and freshwater clam,
of heron shit and poplar leaves,
of water-soaked cottonwood trunks—
has been with you always,
ever since you stood in a riffle
with your father, casting
for steelhead, or earlier
as you sat in the warm shallows
of a backwater, your parents
picking berries behind you.

That's when you breathed and the scent
settled in the cells of your lungs
so even now it's a mystery
in your breath. And when you're close
to death it's what they'll smell
when they bend to kiss you.

Nancy White

LOOK UP

could you refuse the stars the sting
bringing us to the brim at fifteen
you can hear them

chime and cold but the telescopic
bottomless doubt our singular
unmattering another fragile hour up

the cone of night throat of nothing they fly away
from your eyes the hand
at your side fisted warm still a little uplifted

My Titter

Even now, whenever I see a bowler hat I remember the Donkey-man. We were docked in Rosario, Argentina, taking on grain at the time. I believe it was '26 when we shipped out of Cardiff for that voyage, but it might have been '27. Anyway, it was the year that all the mines in South Wales were closing so most of the ship's stokers were out of work miners. The Donkey-man was the odd man out. He was Norwegian but he stuck with the Welsh miners because he tended the donkey boiler. It was like a brotherhood, all the boiler-men together.

The donkey boiler supplied the power when we docked. It ran the winches for loading cargo, so normally the Donkey-man didn't get to go ashore with the other stokers. But in Rosario it was different. In Rosario we didn't need the winches. The banks of the River Plate were high and steep enough to gravity load the grain. They made for a stiff climb ashore and most of the men cursed the iron ladder that was rivetted into the face of the cliff. But not the donkey-man. There'd be no trip ashore for him if it weren't for the steepness of the cliff. To him it seemed to be a stroke of good fortune and he intended to make the most of it.

I'd signed on as ship's cook so there were no days off for me, understanding that the boys had to eat whether they worked or not. That was fine, I'd have been quite happy to complete the voyage as cook but the steward took appendicitis and we put him off in Buenos Aires. I was elected his successor. I told the skipper I was a cook not a steward but he just smiled and said, *You used to be the cook, Steward.*

Come to think of it, it was my first night in the stew's bunk. I might have had a drink or two before tucking in and I was sound asleep. Hard to wake, I was told by one of the stokers, in fine shape himself I might add and blabbering something about the donkey-man falling off the cliff.

And sure enough he had. There he was, sprawled on deck and dead as a proverbial nit, while all his mates were still up top, too scared or too drunk to make it down the ladder. *He don't need this*, I shouted up to them, waving the first aid box above my head. Then I went back to bed. The skipper said I should have done more. But what? Compared to the rest of the proceedings I thought I did alright.

There was a morgue at the end of the pier, just a wooden shed with

a couple of tables in it. This was where they took the donkey-man. In the morning his friends went to pay respects and came back just about in tears. *His boots was still on*, they whimpered. *He hasn't been washed!* They moaned and carried on something fierce and one real stickler for protocol even demanded to know where the shroud was coming from.

All the wailing soon got to the Captain and he sent to town for a shroud. Not out of sympathy, mind you. That wasn't one of his weaknesses. He wanted to be away. There was still more grain to be taken on back down in Buenos Aires and we were already behind schedule. That's why he sent for the shroud in such a hurry.

The shroud was hard to find and a long time coming. When it came to the question of who would wash the corpse, the stokers went quiet pretty quick. By this time the Donkey-man had been lying in the heat for two days. Nobody wanted to wash him. No one would even take his boots off.

The Captain was getting impatient. He might have promoted me to steward but he sure as hell wasn't going to make me undertaker. He knew this so he sent me to see the port official. I was to demand an explanation for such inhumane treatment of the deceased.

The port official just laughed at me. Said there were far too many corpses passing through that morgue for him to attend to. Asked me how he was expected to know the next of kin and all the particulars when they came from God knows where and were dying deaths that many kin would just as soon not hear of anyhow. He felt it was up to the shipmates to do what was necessary. I couldn't argue. He did have a point, so I folded the shroud back under my arm and that was that. The burial proceedings were begun as soon as I returned to the ship.

The skipper had the last word ~ Any man with a bowler hat goes to the funeral. There wasn't too many sailing with the S.S.Trewalis that year that carried bowlers in their kit and it was only five of us that went to see the Donkey-man buried with his boots on.

If You Want to Get Ahead, Get a Hat. There's a lot of truth to that old slogan. (Sold a pile of hats too, I'll betcha'.) Finding exactly the right hat, now that's the challenge. I believe there's only one particular hat destined for each of us. A pre-ordained titfer, that was my bowler and it was a sad night, the last time I wore it.

The local Conservative Club had planned a joint meeting with our political brothers across the river. A few pints and some heated debate exhilarates the blood like nothing else and we were the fittest group of men as we started for home, if you can imagine.

My bowler wouldn't stay still that night and Willis Baird had taken it onto his head. He swore he'd tame the beast. A couple of times through the evening I noticed it down over his one eye but I didn't make a point of it. You could tell he really fancied himself in a hat such as mine. To tell the truth it was a cut above him but he was feeling prime that night and I was never one to piss in a mate's beer. That was one time I wish I had, wish I'd told him he looked like a fool. That would have started a barney and the course of destiny...

Willis kept wearing the hat, feeling like a toff, thinking he was better than he was. So much so that on the way home, when we reached the river, he decided he'd swim across while we took the bridge and that he'd beat us all to the other side and win a shilling from anyone who cared to take him on.

Without another thought he was in the River Taff, with all his clothes on and my bowler hat. Not wanting to be beaten the rest of us raced onto the Clarence Bridge, shouting out the odds to Will who was swimming furiously. About half way across he began to clown around, swimming underwater so that just the hat moved like it was floating, then popping his head up and shouting, *That fooled yer! Ha, ha!*

All of us on the bridge were laughing so hard we had to hold each other up and it was a while before we noticed that the hat had changed direction. It started going downstream like it was floating out on the tide. That was Will for you, he'd do anything for a laugh. And we laughed 'til we cried, watching my bowler hat bobbing down the river in the moonlight. Then somebody said it was a trick so that Will could win the bets and we all ran like hell to the other side of the bridge.

None of us believed it wasn't a trick until they found his body washed up in the mud. And there was me with no hat to wear to the funeral or to any funeral since and there have been a few. I knew I could never replace that bowler, so I never even tried. As I told you, some things in life you can only have one of. And once they're gone, they're gone. Always remember that now. **F**

I'm Not Old

Flowers, flowers, scramble over the wall.
Branches, branches of willow at the road's dead end.
Flowers flaunt their new red pollen.
Green willows bend soft strands.
The players are all pimped out.
I break willows, trash flowers
until they're thoroughly fucked up, dead.
Half my life I've pawed willows, snatched flowers,
all my years bedded flowers, laid willows.

Under heaven I'm the leader of young studs.
Worldwide I'm the playboys' foreman.
I count on my rosy cheek not caving in.
I scrounge for my jollies among flowers.
I booze away my fear.
I bet on tea froth, ink blots.
I gamble on chess, horseshoes.
I've got five melodies, six tones down cold.
I kick worry away from my heart.
I'm hangin' with three honeys. One strums a silvery zither. Another,
perched at the silver counter, tallies silver nuggets. And a pricey call
girl, all smiles, lounges against the silver paneling.
My white jade angel, your jade hand in mine, jade shoulder pressing mine,
we're climbing up inside the jade pagoda.
A songbird in a golden headdress drawls out "The Golden Net," dandles a
gilded cup brimful of gold nectar.

You say I'm old.
Not so fast!
Nobody throws a hipper party.
I'm with it, dialed-in.
I'm general of the silk brigade, the cool platoon.
I play in every city, province.

Dude, it's me galloping the grasslands, the sandy steppes, hunting bunnies.
It's me on horseback drawing my feathered bow at wild old pheasants.
I've stretched it and shot cold-forged arrows, not ones made of wax.
On a chase I never trail the pack.
Don't they say you hit middle age it's all over?

Do you think I'd piss away my springs and autumns?

I'm a brass broad bean. Steamed, I'm still firm. Boiled, I'm not tender.

Pounded, unflattened. Roasted, unburst.

Your silk body armor's not for me. Mine, a mattock can't sever, a machete cut. It can't be stripped off, can't be ripped.

Where I play: Liang Yuan Yue.

What I drink: Dung Jin.

What I prefer: flowers from Ruo Yan.

Where I climb: the willows of Zhan Tai.

I play go, kick the hacky sack, ride to hounds, do standup, song-and-dance, toodle the flute, invent music, scribble poems, lawn bowl.

Knock out my teeth, bust my jaw, break my leg, smash my arm—if heaven blesses me with all these maladies, I'll still resist.

If Nian Wang, king of the underworld, shows up in person to summon me,

Sheng Gui, his enforcer, snatches at me with his hook,

three lost souls beckon me into the grave,

seven minor goblins try to drag me underground,

I'm first-off making a stop at the whorehouse.

NOTES

Guan Hanqin (ca. 1225-1305)

Yuan Dynasty physician, Chancellor of the Royal Academy of Medicine. Not only was he a major poet, he is considered one of the four leading playwrights of his era. Thirteen of his sixty plays have survived, as well as fifty-seven of his poems.

I'm Not Old

"The Golden Net:" a Tong Dynasty love song.

Liang Yuan Yue: a royal garden built during the Han Dynasty.

Dung Jin: wine from the East Capital (Han Dynasty).

Ruo Yan: Henan Province city famous for its exquisite roses.

"willows of Zhan Tai:" a metaphor for prostitutes.

Stephen Larson

Revenge

Of course it is snowing. You've checked that the sheriff is at dinner.
His deputies shooting craps, or poaching deer.
You drive slow, chin up
Two inches from the wheel
On your way to settle things up.

Like dog shit dried hard between boot treads
You cannot forget your small brother
One arm dangling.

His shredded flowers.

His catechism workbook, finished this Saturday
For once, folded into the hot spill
Of Penzoil the drunk on the Harley left
After sliding through the Stop sign.

Up ahead, past where the road ends
In water and ash and prayers for the Disappeared
Lightning smashes into the pine standing tallest.

You cannot forget
The letter of apology mumbled in the courtroom
The violin, humming in its closed felt case.
The rip in this sail. And your anger tearing through it.

Lovingly, Your Sister

L At night when we slept, June would sometimes sleepwalk. Her eyes were open and she seemed awake, but she would be different somehow, hollow and absent. It was very spooky and I often had nightmares about it. In the dreams she would pinch me and smile grotesquely, sometimes laugh, as though she were possessed. I would try to scream, "wake up," but only a hoarse whisper came out. Most of the time in the dreams, we would be knee deep in mist that seemed as thick as water. I must have cried out during those nightmares because when I woke up, her face loomed over me, shushing and soothing. She had an enormous metal contraption that came from her mouth and wrapped around her head, some kind of industrial retainer that she was supposed to sleep in every night. That combined with the huge lenses of her glasses was a terrifying sight to wake up to in the dark. A terrifying sight meant to comfort me.

A rearranging of bedrooms took place when June and her twin, my brother Scott, turned sixteen. They were each to have their own rooms. I moved in with my other brother just down the hall and June took over our room. I still sat on her bed with her every night and listened to her stories. She started inserting French-speaking characters into them, as she was becoming fluent in her fourth straight year of honor's French. She started speaking French in my dreams too, lispy words I didn't understand. Most of the time, I fell asleep in her bed to her metallic breath and the warm closeness of her familiar body.

Four months after her sixteenth birthday, just days before my eleventh, less than a month before she was due to go to Paris with her French class, she took the car out on her own to go pick up her paycheck from Bob Evans. It had been raining. The roads might have been slick with oil, she might have been looking somewhere else, reaching for something in the back seat, or just staring out her window at the sky. Nobody knows why she crossed left of center and crashed head on into another car. She was not wearing her seatbelt. My mom was the only one to see her when they first brought her into the emergency room at Lakewood Hospital. She told me about the red and blue windbreaker, how they were cutting it from June's body with scissors. The worst was her teeth: They had been ripped, root to tip from her gums, jutting from her mouth in a ragged arc, strung together and held in place by her braces.

We didn't know if she would live or die, but my mom knew that if she lived, she would want her teeth, so she called June's orthodontist. He came that day with his assistant. They went into the ICU where she was hooked up

to life-giving machines by slender, plastic tubes like veins creeping out of her body. They worked on her teeth, fitting them back in place and twisting the wire from the braces around them in a tight, makeshift bracketing, planting them firmly in the gums where they would take root and heal. The awesome power of living flesh to grow, to patch up, would combine with time and restore her mouth, whether she ever needed it again or not. When they left the ICU, the two men were glossy eyed and silent. I stood back and watched my mom take the hand of the orthodontist and squeeze it. His eyes were watery and red, his mouth opened then clamped shut again. A quick, nearly imperceptible nod was all he managed before walking away.

After spending the first several days at the hospital, I returned home to go back to school. I entered her room on that first night back and held my breath. I felt hollow and cold, my fingers, which I had been chewing nonstop, were aching and bleeding as I stared out the window. The sky was thick with low-hanging ghosts. I had something like a prophecy then, a sense of the future filled with solitude and strange dreams; its damp certainty was something real, something I could smell in the air. That pinching smiling phantom of her continued to haunt me, but I was wide awake. I was not sleeping.

2.

I was in the sixth grade when I beat myself up. It had been eight or nine months since the accident and June was still deep in a coma. It was common practice for my brother and me to go to the hospital for a few hours every day after school. On one such day, I was sitting in the bathroom feeling dread. I didn't want to go. There was nothing for me to say and nobody ever said anything to me. I was in the middle of biting my fingers to a bloody pulp when I had a fantasy of walking into the hospital with a puffy black eye. My mom would turn from June's bedside and gasp then rush to me and hold my face in her hands. She would probably cry or at least be very upset. She would ask me what had happened but I would just shrug and act all tough like it didn't matter, like I was fine. She would wrap up some ice in a cloth, sit in the padded chair against the wall, and pull me onto her lap. She would place the ice gently against my black eye.

I made a fist as tight and as hard as I could get it, looked at it for a minute while I worked up the courage, then punched myself solidly in the eye with the hard part of my knuckle. It hurt and my eye started to water, but it wasn't hard enough. I tried it again and again maybe six times but my arm would invariably hesitate and lose power just before my fist connected with my face. It was as though my body contained a built in mechanism to prevent me from delivering the full power of my punch on my own eye. I looked around in the toilet stall, considered getting on my knees and knocking my face against the porcelain, but that would have been less precise. My eyes rested on the metal toilet paper holder. I touched it with my fingers; it was a hard metal

box with a somewhat sharp corner. In slow motion, I lowered my face to it, practicing my aim, lining up the bone just under my right eye with the hard corner. I flattened my palms against the side of the stall on either side of the metal box, took a few practice bows, and hurled myself down face first against the box. Unspeakable pain exploded through my head and for a moment, everything went black.

I nearly fell but caught myself on the toilet where I sat back down. I held one half of my face in my hand and steadied myself with the other against the wall. It wasn't until I noticed the blood on the metal box that I realized my hand was wet. It was covered in blood. I stood up on shaky legs and walked out of the stall cautiously, grateful that the bathroom was empty. I washed my hands and face and looked in the mirror. My eye had already begun to swell and darken. A small but deep triangular cut oozed in the center of the wounded area. It hurt so much I thought I might cry.

By the time I arrived at the hospital, I had the story worked out in my head: Some crazy kid beat the hell out of me with brass knuckles. I imagined this kid would have manhandled me a bit before wailing on my face, grab me by the collar and throw me around, perhaps, so I tugged at the neck of my tee shirt until it tore a little bit. I walked into June's hospital room to the familiar smells of dry shampoo powder, disinfectant, and urine. I stood in the doorway and saw my mom from that distance, perched on a stool, bent forward a bit hunched but with the hard, squared shoulders that came with her steel determination to take care of things, fix things. The exhaustion could not help but display itself in the dark crescent pockets beneath her eyes, in the new slackness of her features, as though her skull and bones had shrunk a bit inside her skin. There was also my sister, all gray and shell-like.

I watched and waited for my mom to look up from the magazine article she was reading aloud to June. When she finally did, she squinted at me and said, "Oh my God, honey, what happened?" Her voice was hushed, quieter than her reading voice had been, as though June might hear and become upset by it. I shrugged and stood tough, just like I imagined.

But the rest of it didn't go as planned. My mom looked over my shoulder to one of the nurses who was coming in behind me and nodded toward me. "Would you look at her face," she said in the same hushed voice. The nurse turned me around and lowered her face to mine. She lifted my chin and studied my eye.

"Come on, honey, we'll clean this up a little," the nurse said. She took me to the nurse's station and dabbed cotton balls soaked in alcohol against my cut. I clamped my teeth together and took the sting like I saw my brothers do in similar situations. The nurse's eyes were soft and brown and a little curious. I could tell she wanted to know what happened but was waiting for me to offer the story. I decided to remain mysterious.

"Have you seen worse?" I asked her.

“Oh yes, much worse,” she said with a chuckle, utterly dismissing all my hard work. She was not impressed. I stayed quiet then and let her finish cleaning it. She put a white gauze pad delicately against it then taped it in place. When she was done, she patted me on the top of the head and told me to go in and see my sister.

My mom was still reading, but not quite as loudly. It was just the three of us in the room, my brother hadn't arrived yet or if he did, he was down in the cafeteria getting dinner. I sat in the padded chair against the wall and listened to her voice reading. It was only a few more sentences to the end of the article before she folded the magazine closed and put it down. She rubbed her eyes and looked up, exhausted.

“Will you come sit with her while I go get something to eat? I'm starving,” she said, getting to her feet warily. I brushed passed her as I went to take her seat and she patted my shoulder.

“Thanks, honey,” she said and walked out, not even noticing my bandage. I sat beside June's bed and held her cold hand. She was propped up on pillows with her head, neck, and back ramrod straight, held in traction by the body and neck brace. In addition to the closed head injury, which was the worst, she had broken her ankle, both her knees, her pelvis in seven places, and her neck. I leaned forward and put my face close to hers, smelling the plastic smell of the thick tube that disappeared into her neck just beneath her Adam's apple, and something else I could never identify but that was always present on her skin. It was like the smell of a leather jacket that had been hanging in a musty closet for too long. I kissed her between the eyes and brushed my bandage against the cool skin of her cheek.

“Hi June,” I said and watched her face. Sometimes, her eyeballs moved beneath the lids but just then they were still.

“Would you like to hear a story?” I asked. It was what she used to ask me late at night when it was dark and we were each in our beds and I couldn't sleep. From my pillow I could see the moon above the trees outside the window, how it laid down soft, white light on the windowsill where shadows of branches tangled in the wind. Her voice would rise from that moonlight, high and sweet, draw it into the room, steal its light, make it her own.

That day in her hospital bed, her face was pale and moonlike. Looking at it, I could hear her voice in my head. I told her a story she once told to me, as much as I remembered of it. I wondered if she heard me, certain that somehow, somewhere, she did.

3.

There was a routine each day at the hospital: arrive through the west parking garage after school, pass by the gift shop and café, stick my head into the red chapel and quickly check in with God, depress the elevator button that protrudes from the wall like a spigot, wait too long for the doors to slide open

from the center outward, step in and ride up to the fourth floor step-down ICU, go to my sister's room, walk in, and show my face. My mom would be thoroughly engaged with my sister, who lie in her hospital bed with a large, metal halo brace on, held in place by four metal screws embedded in her skull, the skin around each screw end scabbed and leaking red. My mom might be washing June's hair with the dry shampoo, a process that involved shaking a powder onto her hair and brushing it through with a bristled hairbrush for a solid ten minutes. Or, she might be clipping the lifeless fingernails at the end of June's dead weight hands. If she wasn't clipping her fingernails or dry washing her hair, my mom might be putting ice chips on June's cracked, dry lips or bending her legs and arms one at a time to stimulate circulation. No matter what it was that my mom was doing to June every day when I arrived there after school, she was always, always talking. If she wasn't telling June a blow-by-blow of her day or of her plans for the next day, she was reading to her from a magazine or a book.

"It doesn't matter what you talk about or read, as long as a familiar voice is going at all times," my mom would say. She had read that after a traumatic brain injury, especially a closed, diffuse axonal injury like June's (nerve fibers throughout the brain have been damaged or torn, usually by violent motion such as that which occurs in a car crash), emergence from coma does not occur suddenly or smoothly, but rather follows a wave-like motion, a rising and falling of levels of consciousness over time.

At around seven o'clock, everyone would meet in the hospital cafeteria for dinner. Sometimes, when I was sick of the same old food selections down there or just not hungry, I would skip this family get together and go keep June company instead. These were spooky visits, because the lights would be low and the Doors would be playing, which had been her favorite band before the accident.

I would sit on a stool beside her bed, stare at her bloated, pink and white face, and align my breathing with the rhythm of the song. Leaving the music on was another idea my mom picked up from reading a book about music therapy and neurological rehabilitation. She found a study that showed how patients in a persistent vegetative state brought on by a traumatic brain injury would respond consciously to familiar music and rhythm. June may not have responded consciously during her dimly lit dinner hour serenade, but when I was present for it, I responded unconsciously.

With breathing and relaxation, the songs teleported me back in time and across space to where I was sitting in June's room listening along with her while she painted her toenails. I heard her wispy voice singing; I saw the cotton balls between her toes, I even felt the bedspread beneath me where I lounged beside her. Simultaneously, I could feel myself still in her hospital room, watching her features and searching for a response. It was as though I was straddling time: one figurative foot in the hospital room with my sister

broken and indefinitely sleeping, and the other back in her room at home where she was awake and alive. One of these times, I stood up from her bed and walked to the mirror. My legs were heavy and slow, preventing me from moving with the urgency that I felt. My face in the mirror looked wavery, my hair stood on end, floating. I smiled and saw that my teeth were very loose and coming out. I caught them in my hand, then inspected the tender, red gum, naked and gaping, inflamed around the tooth holes. I watched as the holes closed up and smoothed over and when I looked back at June on her bed, she was surrounded by teeth, molars and incisors and canines, all whole and unbroken and bone white, all with their roots. She was picking them up one at a time and fastening them together at the roots with metal twine, a long tooth necklace, a growing string of teeth that wrapped around and around her. I wanted to help her, to string together more teeth, even my own, to fasten them tightly around her, an enameled armor to protect her, but I could not move or breathe or make a sound.

The music stopped and jarred me awake. I was there in her hospital room, the lights had come on, and I was standing over the bed, on the stool at its precarious edge, looking down into the confused face of my mother.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a clipped whisper, glancing nervously toward June. I climbed down from the stool and sat. I touched my teeth, pulled on them, and bit the pads of my fingertips.

“What were you doing?” she asked again. I looked at my sister with my skin still between my teeth. I felt weedy; too tired to explain.

4.

I was twelve when I took June to the shower myself. June’s floor on the hospital was particularly busy that day and the nurses were short-staffed, so when it came time for her shower, I volunteered to take her and get her started, assuming that my mom or one of the nurses would be along any time to take over. The Glasgow Coma Scale gives a range of numbers to represent the different stages of coma based on response to external stimuli. By that scale, June was at a level 9 when I took her to the shower, meaning she responded to her name being called by looking at me, she was able to sometimes focus her eyes on me, and if I made a face at her, she would mimic and make the same face back, much like a baby.

She sat robed and glassy-eyed in her wheelchair, which I pushed up close to the shower stall. Inside the shower was a waterproof chair, squat and sturdy with holes in the seat to drain the water falling off the body, with a back and two arms to pen in the unsteady, unbalanced weight it supports. My first task, and the hardest, was to maneuver her from her wheelchair into the shower chair. I had observed this being done countless times and felt somewhat confident that I could do it, but was hesitant and afraid. I let her sit there in her chair with her robe on for several minutes while I looked

toward the door, wondering if I should go get a nurse, or wait for my mom. June stared at the wall, her eyes unfocused, her lips pursed a little as if she were waiting for a kiss.

Compelled, I bent down and kissed her, put my mouth to hers. There was a sensation of nourishment in it, like I was a baby bird feeding from the open mouth of my mother, bitter tasting and unpleasant, but necessary and automatic. I helped her out of her robe, bending her forward and pulling free her arms, then letting it collapse open around her, cascading over the sides of the chair, revealing her. I looked her over, from head to toe, noticing everything. My eyes stuck to the deep red scar on her throat where the tracheal tube had been; it was sunken in and shadowed. It appeared so tender and raw in the context of her pale naked body, the fair skin stretching out all around it made nearly pastel in comparison. Scars were everywhere: squat ankle scars, long knee scars, nearly indistinct, smaller scars around her pelvis and on her arms. The untouched places, her thighs and breasts, looked sculpted from soft, pink and white clay. I tried to keep my eyes there; it seemed to tame the fiery grief burning my ribs.

I leaned down and hooked my arms underneath hers, my hands clasped behind her back, hugging her. I stood still there for a while, cheek-to-cheek with her, in that gentle and awkward embrace, then I counted to three, whispered the numbers in her ear like I had seen my mom do, to prepare her for the lift. I waited a few beats after three just to see if she would respond at all, some part of her go tense with effort to stand, but nothing happened. I pulled her body up on unsteady legs and she fell forward against me. I held her tightly against my chest, pushed my hips in against hers to brace her weight. I was nearly as tall as her and strong enough to hold her up, but too uneasy to try moving right away. We stood there that way, me holding her naked body in my arms, pressed together like petals, breathing. I nearly cried at the weight and the helplessness of her. I breathed deeply and squeezed the tears back. I held her tighter, wanting to collapse into her and meld and disappear.

The heat of our two bodies became overwhelming and I started to sweat. The pivot, swing, and lower maneuver to get her positioned safely in the shower chair was the trickiest part. I tried to see it in my mind before attempting anything, but I only saw myself dropping her, letting her go, crumpling under her, failing. I stepped back with one leg, leaned forward just slightly, flexed my arms and back into a rigid framework, turned us both from the hips like a dancer, and lowered her as gracefully as possible to her seat. I pulled away from her slowly, carefully, almost regretfully. Something had happened; I knew it even then. What had seemed so tragic and meaningless for so long, what had up until then been nothing but hollow, agonizing misery for us all, somehow magically, although briefly, filled with dense purpose. If there were such things as souls that existed before and beyond and in spite of our bodies, they would have wanted that moment to occur, they would have set

things up to allow it to come about, and in its happening, would have been pleased. To have my sister lean on me like that, naked, dependent in my arms, thick with complicated history and implications of an even more complicated future, covered in scars; it was a sad and colossal gift.

5.

Dear June,

There is a time I never told you about. I was twelve, maybe thirteen, standing there before those same painted cupboards in the kitchen. Mom was at the sink, framed by the brick-patterned wallpaper, washing dishes or her hands or something of that nature. I stood there looking up at her, searching among the limited collection of words I had in my mind for an assemblage that would articulate how I was feeling. Finally, I said simply: "I wish it would have been me in that accident."

Mom whirled on me, her face instantly red, dark red and growing redder as she leaned toward me, pointed her finger between my eyes in a rigid, angry way, and said: "You would never trade places with your sister. Do not ever say anything like that to me again." Tears welled in her eyes like they always do when she's angry and I felt some pooling in mine at the same time. I looked at the floor and tried to swallow it. She turned away from me again, back to the sink, resuming whatever washing she had been doing. What I felt then has only driven my guilt deeper and ground it sharper ever since. It is not something I have ever admitted, not even to myself. I will confess it to you now, June. I wished you had died in that accident. I just wished you had died, June.

Then, after I let that feeling rise to the surface and allowed myself to recognize it for what it was, I wanted to die myself. Right then, immediately and without a word. And part of me did die. The part that had held onto you the way you were before and could not let go. The connection died.

I went on for years with the dull pursuit of self-destruction. Don't feel that this has had anything to do with you, June. It had to do with the world and how beautiful it had been when you were unbroken. It had to do with the contrast of that world to its aftermath. It had to do with the unutterable need that filled me to brimming so that I walked around overfull, carefully avoiding spillage. And now I empty myself a little every day. Now I take you as best I can and you greedily receive me. Now we have our awkward, unbalanced dance.

Lovingly,

Your Sister

Daniel Polikoff

Dear William,

Thank you for the poem. It was dear
of you to put me in it, and contains
many affecting passages. I myself
was thinking of the abbey—how stone can soar
birdlike, and marry air, as if aspiring
to shed its native weight in union
with the tender, unpunctured skin of heaven.
Is it not even so, William,
with human thought, and human feeling too?
I can well understand you when you write
for that is *your* building, and you, dear brother,
are a monkish sort, content to consort
with speechless stones and swallows. Do you recall
how they flitted across the ruined face
of the chapel, a tracery of angels?
As if penning with quick and fluent wing
something for us to con—perhaps your poem,
William, or mine, if I could write it.
And the thick green sward beneath our feet—
was it not a poet's prayer rug?
I so clearly remember kneeling there
in the vast, cloud-vaulted chamber, meditating
how close we are so oft to one another
as earth and sky at Tintern, yet how then
there are those other times, those too long spans
I cannot comprehend. And so I rise
up, William, like stone from grass again
in worship of architecture, and ever and anon
your dear, dear sister

Dorothy

Paul B. Roth

Nothing Gained

Stones
we follow
even as they
turn on us

lighting our way
into the earth

rolling
one of our skin cells
at a time
between spaces

buried
under centuries
whose artifacts

cracked vessels
unclasped necklaces
mosaic bath tiles

keep them lit
for the late
hour
of our arrival

Water and What It Knows

*I've decided to make up my mind
about nothing, to assume the water mask,
to finish my life disguised as a creek...
—Jim Harrison, "Cabin Poem"*

1 Sjöberg. Swedish: *sjö*,—lake; *berg*—mountain. Most of the surnames of my Swedish ancestors indicate that some only where they lived, but it became who they were. There's a very solid, comforting thought there. Identity as tangible.

Thorsander: *Thor*, Ostra Torsas (a region in Sweden); *ander*, "where they came from." Holm: small island. Dahlberg: *dahl*, valley; *berg*, mountain. And Sjöberg, anglicized eventually to Shoberg.

Sjöberg, pronounced *whew-berg*. (Shoberg is much easier for the average American to say, probably why they changed the pronunciation and spelling.) The first syllable is little more than a puff of air, hardly a vocal sound at all. *Whew*. As if you're blowing out a candle, gently, so that you don't get wax all over everything. Along Hwy 10 in Lake Park, Minnesota, there's a gorgeous church along the road called Eksjö, a bit of Swede in the vastly Norwegian prairie landscape. *Ek*—oak; *sjö*—lake. Lake Park. *Ek-whew*. But the people familiar with the church say *ek-sho*. It's easier. My grandmother reports that some of the old-timers in Shafer, one of the many small, Swedish towns in the very Swedish Chisago County of Minnesota, would call the town *whew-fer*. Still, in Chisago County, you can hear Swedish being spoken on the street. Not as prevalent as it once was, but the language still is important here.

There were probably mountains where the Sjöbergs came from in Sweden, but there were none in Minnesota, where they eventually settled in Chisago County. Where the people would pronounce the name right. There weren't any mountains, but there were lakes. *Sjöberg* no longer accurately reflected where they were from, probably the original purpose for names. The Sjöbergs were no longer of the lake and the mountain. Who were they now, then?

2. Minnesota. Dakota: *minne*—water; *sota*—somewhat clouded.

There's good reason as to why Minnesotans dry up when separated from the water of their home state. There's ecology and psychology at work here, but there's also a linguistic element that most overlook. Our connection to water starts in the most basic places and it's most obvious in the names we've chosen to identify those places. Our state name is the most obvious. Down by the Twin Cities, you'll find a suburb named Minnetonka (big water) and

a waterfall named Minnehaha, which translates to falling water, not laughing water. Half of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis, is a lovely linguistic hybrid of Ojibwe and Greek—city of water. *Minne*, meaning water, and *polis*, meaning city. Up north, Camp Minne-Wa-Kan, one of my favorite places on Earth, translates to *spirited water*. But because that doesn't seem to be too appropriate for a Bible camp, we choose to translate the name as *spirit over the water*.

Water is, for Minnesotans, at its root, a language. Water is the way by which we can understand ourselves, each other, and the surrounding world. It is how we communicate. Water is how we connect with the land under our feet, the land under our plows, under our combines. It's the way we know where we are geographically, who we are personally, and who we are as a community. Humanity may be able to connect more clearly with the more physically-consistent land, but Minnesotans, residents of the Land of 10,000 Lakes, must also reconcile their relationship to water because the native ground of a Minnesotan is water, not land. Water is what Minnesotans do for fun, it is what we build dikes and levies to protect against. We want to be surrounded by all the forms water can take, because humanity isn't predictable and constant either. We want the ice, we want the snow, we want the rain, the hail, the flood—even when the presence of water is destructive, it still reminds us that water is a give and take and we can't always have it good. And it reminds us that things can always be worse. The water gets into a Minnesotan's personality and that's permanent. And the path to that ecological reconciliation is linguistic.

3. Winter

In high school, I learned that water is one of two elements that expand when frozen. And because frozen water is less dense than liquid water, it freezes from the top down, making life possible in the lakes even when the air temperature is well below zero. Water is sticky, which enables its surface tension to support floating objects. Water's unusual physical properties correspond to the weather, where water presents another paradox: forty-below winter temperatures are not exactly cancelled out by hundred-degree summer days when the air is liquid with humidity, sending the heat index further up into the triple digits.

Minnesota smiles at knowing that both *water* and *winter* share the same word root. She laughs at her people, who find no irony in fishing on the surface of the water in summer as well as in winter. This spectrum of temperatures finds particular irony in the winter. Sometimes it's just too cold to snow. When I was little, I couldn't understand why it would be too cold to snow. But cold air cannot hold water and if there's no water, there's no snow. Meteorologists also point out that because Antarctica is so cold, the snowfall in certain areas is so minimal that it's actually classified as desert. -10° F is about the cutoff point for snow.

At -40° , Celsius and Fahrenheit are the same temperature.

Much fun can be had when the temperature gets down that low. Below -10° F, true, there's no snow, but once the thermometer hits -40° , if you toss a cup of boiling water into the air, the water will vaporize before it hits the ground. It's pretty amazing to fling that water into the air and watch it poof into a cloud for a moment, then watch it disappear in the next instant. My senior year of high school, the governor cancelled school across the state twice because the air temperatures—minus windchill—were supposed to get to -60° F. The first time it did; the second was only a measly -40° . We'd done -60° , so -40° wasn't special anymore. The novelty of the boiling water was so much fun that my mother ended up standing in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, giving my father dirty looks for starting the whole thing and winding up my two sisters and me. My father just looked back at her and grinned.

For Minnesotans, more than a psychological connection exists between ourselves and the snow. Snow is necessary, on many different levels. Of course, it's fun. In old photo albums, I've found pictures of me at age three or four, bundled up in my snowsuit, and the snow on the sides of the sidewalk is taller than I am. My sisters and I used to build elaborate forts not only in our yard where Dad had pushed all the snow from our driveway, but across the street in the Catholic parking lot, where all that snow had been pushed into an immense pile. We built tunnels, stockpiled icicle weapons and snowballs against intruders, but the three of us never had the desire to have the war we'd prepared for because we didn't want to destroy our masterpiece forts. But there's more to snow than fun.

On a purely practical level, if the ground freezes and not enough snow has fallen to provide insulation, pipes will freeze and burst. Snow has immense insulating properties and I know that some have done scientific studies to compare it to standard insulation. I don't understand the insulation jargon, but I just know we need snow—or in its absence, straw—to keep my grandparents' drain field from freezing. I remember in college a couple of friends spending some time on the North Shore, a place called Wolf Ridge, overlooking Lake Superior, and when they returned, they told me that they had the opportunity to spend the night in a snow cave. Sounds uncomfortable, I thought—but then, I use my electric blanket in the summer in conjunction with my air conditioning. But they said that if you've got a small heat source, like a candle, or even just body heat, you can be fairly comfortable. Not only that, if you're caught in a blizzard, if you make yourself a snow cave, your chances of surviving are much greater, because the temperature inside a snow cave never goes below freezing. I've never put this to the test. I'll take their word for it.

On an economic level, if there isn't enough snow, tourists don't come to Lakes Country. They won't be there to ice fish, to snowmobile, to cross-country ski. I gave up fishing before I hit double-digits, I've never been

snowmobiling, and I used to enjoy cross-country skiing when I was younger, but I'd always manage to fall into a position that would wrench joints when I tried to stand again. Downhill skiing is a sort of wonder in Minnesota, since we don't have mountains, not that I'm brave enough to risk literal life and limb for that sort of fun. But there are those who do.

On a recreational level, the more snow the better. Tourists come for the recreation, but it's part of our world too. Snowballs. Snowmen. Snow angels. I asked the six-year-old son of a friend if he'd thrown a snowball at his dad yet this winter, and Grant looked at me and with a frighteningly firm tone said, "No. But I will." Until my parents moved, my youngest sister liked to make snow angels on top of their garage roof. The colder the temperature, the more mighty I feel. It's a pride thing—especially shocking the California family with our tales of below zero temperatures. I remember when we went out to California for Christmas once and Grandmother came outside to greet us, wrapped in her long wool coat, gloves, scarf. We were out there in our short sleeves. It was fifty degrees. Coats? What for?

The bottom line is that Minnesota needs snow, even if we can't articulate it clearly. If we don't have snow, parts of us begin to die.

4. Language of Light

When I moved to Spokane, my mother's cousin warned me that while Minnesota winters skies are most often blue, the customary gray skies over eastern Washington cause seasonal affective disorder in many people. I didn't believe him right away, but so many days would pass without sun that I would lose track of when I last needed my sunglasses. Something amazing inhabits this paradox so common to Minnesota and the Midwest, of blue skies and sunshine and very, very cold temperatures.

What I love most about blue skies and cold temperatures has everything to do with breathing. How can people breathe with so much cloud cover? There's something elemental in the sharpness of the inhale, feeling the molecules of cold shoot to your fingertips down every inch of your veins. It hurts to breathe deeply, but you do it anyway, because you have to. Stand up straight. Breathe in slowly, but fill yourself. Pretend you're a singer. Don't just fill up your lungs, but your abdominals as well. None of these short, shallow inhales that allows your body heat to thaw the air before it hits your lungs. Fill yourself, until your toes and fingers begin to swell with air. And then you will know what it is like to be truly alive.

Interestingly enough, within the word *cloud*, paradoxes fight and leave bruises. The word in Middle English means a *hill*, but from Old English, it not only translates to *hill*, but also to *rock*. Not exactly *water*. The assumption being, that cloud means *to obscure*. But this etymology is a bit troubling, especially for a Minnesotan, whose name means *somewhat-clouded-water*. How can a thing that is made up of water come from a word that is the exact op-

posite of water? We believe that water and land cannot peacefully coexist. One will always dominate. But here there is one word for two combative elements. How can that be? Does that translate to ourselves? Can we hold several mutually exclusive elements inside ourselves without the juxtaposition tearing us apart?

If cloud cover blocked Minnesotan winter skies, then the difference between winter light and summer light would be less obvious. This is likely due to the reflective qualities of snow and ice, but the difference in the light can't be explained in such a manner—and if it could, I wouldn't want to read it. Nights are also longer during a Minnesotan winter, giving rise to other phenomena that you'll only find in the winter, waking up in the middle of the night and finding your bedroom light enough to navigate through without turning on a lamp. Going to the window and looking out and seeing what mariners called "whiskers 'round the moon," ice crystals around the moon. Of course, this was a bad omen, if you were on the water at the time. Crew members saw this phenomenon the night *Titanic* sank, for one.

Take the northern lights. *Aurora borealis*: Latin. *Dawn-northern*. I'd like to describe them as "writhing ribbons of color," or something equally fanciful, but the northern lights are not always ribbons. There are several different forms, from rays to curtains. In the summer, the most brilliant I ever saw were aqua blue, above Lake Andrusia in northern Minnesota. In the winter, mint green lights were almost blinding. Maybe such a blinding would not be so terrible.

And sun dogs are a welcome sight, those rainbow-colored bookends of the sun. *Parhelion* is the scientific term—and it's just a good word. *Parhelion*. Greek: *para*—beside; *helios*—sun. Sun dogs are the result of the sun's rays being bent through ice crystals, which act as prisms. Sun and ice, light and warmth. Opposites can certainly exist in the same sphere. If they didn't, we wouldn't have rainbows in the winter.

5. Lake of the Woods. French: *Lac Du Bois*.

Lake of the Woods Bible Camp, known affectionately by its acronym, pronounced *low-beck*, sister-camp to Minne-Wa-Kan, sits on the Rainy River in the far north of Minnesota. On the other side of the river is Canada. Every Wednesday, we took the kids to Zippel Bay State Park, which is on the Lake of the Woods, for the afternoon. My first time there, I didn't understand the empty water coolers we packed into the van. I was told we'd fill them at the spring, but I didn't understand what that meant either.

The spring wasn't too far from the swimming beach, and when my fellow staff members emptied their Nalgene bottles and filled them with spring water, I did the same. This, I understood. The water at LOWBC is not known for its purity. The spring water, however, was everything water should be. Cool, clear, sweet. After the day was over, we filled the coolers with water again

and took them back to camp, then hid them in the kitchen. We'd make the campers drink the camp water, but we didn't tell them our bottles held good water. The spring water became one of the perks of working at LOWBC. It was a place where we consumed the water of the spring, even as we were consumed by the power of the lake itself.

The language to the Lake of the Woods is primal, a language without words, which appeals to Minnesotans. This was a place where the lake is so large that on the right day, at the right time of day, with the right slant of light, the lake is exactly the same color as the horizon, making the water and the sky one entity. Many people feel a calling when they are near the ocean, even if they have no desire to swim in it. Water is an exercise in humility. I am powerless, incapable of asserting myself if the water decides it wants to keep me. And maybe Minnesotans fear captivity as well, given what we've constructed to escape our dwellings during all four seasons.

I remember a photograph I saw during the spring of the 1997 Red River flood. A field covered in water, a blurred barn in the background, and the brilliance of the northern lights, vibrant blues and greens, reflected in the flood waters.

Water is wild and will remain wild, in fluid conversation with the sky above. They are not as separate as we sometimes like to make them.

6. River People

My college years were spent on a prairie in western Minnesota. I couldn't understand the language of the prairie. I couldn't understand the flatness of the land, the immensity of sky, the lack of water. But to be fair, I didn't really try. I spent my time by the Red River and comforted myself with the knowledge that before long, I would be back in Lakes Country. These days, I'm out on the prairie of northwestern Ohio, not close enough to Lake Erie to make much of a difference. If I were to give a translation to the prairie, it would be the opposite of Minnesota. Sometimes in opposites we find the truest definitions.

The language of the eastern Montana prairie—and the other prairies I am familiar with—is not of water, but of sky. My first real exposure to this came in August of 1998, when I spent an afternoon on the Missouri River. In the time since, my sister moved to Missoula, to the valley surrounded by the Bitterroot Mountains. Were she actually to come from this place, were this place to become part of who she is, not just her place of residence, I would call her a Dahlberg. Valley-mountain. We were Dahlbergs once, once upon a generation.

The Big Muddy offered up some contrasts I didn't expect. I wanted the water to be the constant, so that I could feel more comfortable just being near it, but it wasn't. And that was strange, especially as I tried to figure out why that was. The answer came in the difference between river people and

lake people. Lake people, like those of Lakes Country Minnesota, don't seek anything beyond the shore. Those who settled Minnesota and dug themselves into the soil had no reason to look beyond. They had found what they needed. River people are always looking for more. Find yourself standing on the shore of a river, like the Mississippi or the Missouri, and you'll find yourself compelled to walk it. You may not know where you're going or why your legs don't obey your mind, but you'll keep walking. You'll keep wondering about where you'll end up. If you walk the Mississippi long enough, you'll find its beginning, up at Itasca, thirty miles from where I grew up. If you walk the other way, you'll find yourself in New Orleans. And once you've done this, you'll find another river. And another one. A lake is self-contained, complete. There's no need to wander. Everything you need is right there. Scott Russell Sanders writes, "Riverness—the appeal of a river, the way it speaks to us—has to do with our craving for a sense of direction within the seeming randomness of the world. Narrative offers us the same pleasure, a shape and direction imposed on time. And so we tell stories and listen to them as we listen to the coursing of the water." But water is water and you take what you can get when nothing else is available.

I was nineteen years old, having just finished my first year of college, accompanying the youth group on a mission trip to Montana. My role was awkward—I was not one of the youth anymore, but I wasn't an adult. Should I hang out with the kids? The adults? Neither was appealing. On Tuesday of our week there, we planned to spend the afternoon canoeing on the Missouri River. I'd been drafted—as a semi-adult, a role I had no language for—into the canoe that held two rowdy sophomore boys. It would be an interesting afternoon.

The summer-warmed water was a benefit, since the boys in my canoe wanted to be in front and splashed anyone who came near. Not having a paddle of my own, I made do with my hands, which were not particularly effective. Our lead remained unchallenged for several miles, when we upped the deterrent. Splashing was not enough. We now had to tip anyone who came near.

So we did.

We called ourselves the Missouri River Bandits and we made it our mission to tip every canoe, and we did, except for the "safe canoe," piloted by my mother and the pastor of the church we were helping. It was great fun.

At the sand bars, the lot of us—fifteen or so—covered ourselves in mud, tossed mud, and explored the mud. Covered in mud myself, I stood at the edge of these sand bars in ankle-deep water, noticing the unusual sensation of the world under my feet dissolving. Hours later, I could still feel the sand shifting underneath my feet. My feet were toughened from two months of being barefoot, but they were still sensitive enough to feel the grains of sand. The sand was firmly packed as I walked across it, but something in the current

of the river and the shallows dissolved the sand whenever I stopped and stood. It almost tickled. But it was also unnerving, especially for a lake person who wants to stay put. The river itself was literally compelling my movement.

Trevor and Brian had something to do with compelling my movement as well. They covertly got my attention and the three of us jumped in our canoe and headed downstream before anyone noticed that we had all the paddles.

7. From the Ojibwe: *the lake into which the river pitches and ceases to flow.*

Lake Belle Taine, formerly known as Elbow Lake, remembers little of its original Ojibwe name except the translation. (Nobody knows where “Belle Taine” came from either, but that’s a different story.) This is all that remains: a lake, one of seventeen in the Mantrap Chain, carved up by glaciers aeons ago, into which water flows, but there is no outlet. Belle Taine is one of ninety lakes in a ten-mile radius, at the heart of Lakes Country in north-central Minnesota. My hometown is built on its shores, my childhood home three blocks from the beach.

Until only a few years ago, the lake level wasn’t a problem, as drought kept Belle Taine at a manageable level. When I was younger, spending all my summer free time at the beach, I used to measure the lake level by the square of concrete on which the lifeguard’s chair was perched. I remember that when we moved to Nevis, the water lapped at the base of the concrete, but in the following years, dry yards separated the red chair and the lip of the lake. But in June of 2001, the lake hit its highest level in recorded history, nearly five feet higher than average.

Homes built before the 100-feet-from-the-lake requirement was enacted found themselves in trouble. The sandbagging against floodwaters so common to the Red River Valley to the west now became a common sight around Belle Taine residences. The public beach, which was by now a misnomer, was suffering from so much erosion that a retaining wall was built to hold in the hill. Lawns turned into swamps.

Consequently, the city lost its public landing, the only public landing on Belle Taine. The city council finally decided that if the landing remained impassible, the tourists would take their boats and money and go elsewhere, so the council dumped truckloads of sand so that vacationers and locals would be able to use the landing.

The county has done little more than fight over how to resolve this problem. They’ve brought in the DNR to assess options, but that has not helped. I wonder, though, how the ecological balances the psychological. How is our language complicated when water is stilled against its will? When the water is clouded by something other than sky? What happens to our language when streams are dammed? When I walk along the Columbia River in Washington, or other Pacific Northwest rivers, stand at the Grand Coulee Dam—what’s the

real effect of this? Do we destroy or just complicate our ability to understand the world around us?

Part of me just wants to let the lake have its way. It was here first, after all. Whatever the outcome, however, Belle Taine retains a sense of irony about the situation. Despite the flooding, the aquifer underneath the lake is nearly dry.

8. Translating a Rant of Rain and Wind

The winter rains were a continual presence in Ireland for most of my six months there. As I recall, it was raining when I arrived. Except for the expected green of the grass, everything else was gray: the sky, the Atlantic, the rain, the stones. Minnesota rain is not like Irish rain, I observed. Irish rain is influenced by proximity to the ocean, which produces thick mists and light patters that don't really require a raincoat, and Minnesotan rains are the result of clashing fronts of hot and cold air masses. I much prefer storms to gentle downpours or mists, another reason I love Minnesota, the northern portion of Tornado Alley, where the summer rains are much like my bad moods—vicious, but never lasting very long—storms that bring bruising rain, hail that dents cars and crops, winds that lay waste to all obstacles, and then an hour later, it's calm, and there's a blue sky in its wake.

Perhaps a Minnesotan's relationship with water stems from the realization that water is both life-giving and life-taking. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but water can hurt you too. It's constructive and destructive. The residents of the Red River Valley between Minnesota and North Dakota know this well: they've tried to control the Red for years. During the spring of 1997, the river won and no one who witnessed it will ever forget. We've had floods since, bad ones, but 1997 is the high-water mark. Picture Katrina, but without the hurricane, without the advanced warning, and add in eight blizzards, record-setting snowfalls, a crazy melting pattern, and a flat land so intense that you can actually see the curvature of the earth. Now picture water spreading out over that flatness like an ice cube melting on a flat table, overwhelming homes and livestock and wild creatures. Water is humbling; there is nothing we can do to beat it. We should know that by now, but we still fight. We complain when there isn't enough water and we complain when there's too much.

And sometimes we just play. Sometimes we just have to.

Minnesota is full of Scandinavian Protestants, people stereotyped as stoic and serious. The stereotype isn't all that far off. We Minnesotans are, psychologically, people of middle-ground. We admit it. We may even be proud of it. The water, extremes in both summer and winter, rarely finds this middle ground, so something has to. If anything, Minnesotans err on the side of serious. But it's not good to keep emotions bottled, so maybe summer thunderstorms are the weather-equivalent of Minnesotans losing

their temper, yelling at the top of their lungs.

One summer, there was this unforgettable storm up at LOWBC. As I stepped out of my cabin that morning, the storm rippled along my skin like a promise. The air was heavy, still. I could very nearly taste the anticipation and tension in the air and it made me grin like a fool. I forget how many storm systems they say hit us that July day, but it thundered and lightnined all day, the clouds dropping about eight inches of rain in twelve hours. We couldn't see the Rainy River in the darkness, but we could hear it. We weren't in danger of flooding, because the Rainy emptied into the Lake of the Woods, which was large enough to handle the volume. But we sure had a lot of mud to deal with. And nothing attracts kids like mud.

About 9:00 that night, we snapped. Several of the staff decided to give a staff initiation to my sisters, which involves being tackled and then dumped into the showers fully clothed. Somebody got thrown into the showers nearly every week—if there wasn't a newbie around, then any staff member was fair game. The campers loved it. We decided the tackling would be more fun if we hauled Kris and Kim outside, dumped them in the muck of the lawn and tackled them there. The still-torrential rain would make a suitable shower. We were drunk on rain, high on thunder, buzzed on lightning.

What is the language of a thunderstorm? What happens within a Minnesotan thunderstorm that we can't get elsewhere? Sometimes, it's just a purity of emotion made tangible by the weather. A thunderstorm may be what we are afraid to say. A thunderstorm may be a release from the constraints of Minnesota culture, which, at times, can be restrictive. We could yell and scream and let loose all the messy emotions inside us and have it drowned out by the noise of the storm. There's a privacy there. A thunderstorm may give permission to say what I want, act how I want, and woe to the person who gets in my way. It would be too exhausting to act that way all the time, but it's fun—and perhaps healthy—to act without caution once in a while.

During that storm, as well as many others that summer, Carrie and I—the leadership staff—sat on the steps outside the dining hall, with the campers tucked safely downstairs with the counselors. We noted the difference in thunder: rumbles that sound like marbles on a hardwood floor, bass drum booms, and cracks that sound like the sky is being cracked like an egg. With the phone in hand, the National Weather Service on speed dial, we would watch the clouds rotate, rating the thunder on a scale of 1-10, often heckling, "Come on, God, just one funnel cloud—is that too much to ask?" We didn't want a tornado. We'd seen the ravages they'd left behind. But we wanted to see, really see, the power held in that water and those clouds. We wanted to be surrounded, really, truly surrounded, by what made us wholly Minnesotan. **F**

Judith Cody

DOORWAY TO THE OLD COUNTRY

to my grandparents, and their stories

Surprising their village, the ancient wraith
arrived on the death rattle of wind whipping
the parched crops. Famine swept out the grain
bins with the energy of a fresh bride
scouring potato cellars spotless
even bread basket bottoms
to remove yesterday's crumbs.

Yet some stale bits of cake
stayed in the woman's apron pockets
so the man and the woman knew
that they would set a weighty door
on the ground in the scorched field.
They found a firm stick to prop the door
open about two feet on one end. Using the
identical knot he had used to lead
his last calf to butchery the man
bound a long rope to the stick.
The woman—with forethought born
of motherhood—emptied her pockets
over the earth beneath the door.

Secreted under their blanket the man
with the woman waited until the indifferent sun
rose as usual while the heedless sky stared down
at the stock-still couple as usual
and then—spying the crumbs—starving
sparrows flew in, hundreds of small, insanely
chirping birds struggling, clawing
to possess the particles of food.

Nothing moved. Then the instantaneous
snap of the man's wrist then the big
whomp when the doorway closed on
the feasting birds then the momentaneous
hush then the man and the woman laughing
embracing, examining their scrawny, toothsome harvest.

Still Life

Nowadays, when my neighbors throw horseshoes, they're not aiming for each other. They must have worked it out. I'm happy for them. I really am. I want to send them a fruit basket full of star fruit and nectarines and papaya, anonymously, so they'll have something to guess at.

Just this morning, before I left for work at the salon, I scribbled my son a quick note on the message board on the fridge. It said: *Be sure to take care of your hamster, Brett.* The phrase "take care" means: "put out of its misery." Brett knows this. It is a code we've created. Just recently, we'd discussed life and death and what pet-owner responsibility means to him.

At social events like anniversary parties or graduation parties or it's-warm-and-someone-has-a-backyard-and-tiki-torches-were-on-sale party, I introduce Brett as "the son I've had for eleven years now." Nobody knows how to respond. They nod and sip fruit punch or wine coolers or take a stab at a square of cheddar stuck to a glossy red plate. I smile so all my teeth show, and I pull on Brett to do the same. I wrap an arm around him and sometimes he crosses his eyes.

At this point in conversation, people plop the cheddar into their mouths, then excuse themselves, casually asking the host if Brett has been adopted, which he hasn't. I made him myself, almost.

Here's a secret I rarely tell: once, I had sex with a man painted entirely green. He just stood there, hardly breathing, as I dabbed at him with the brush. The paint dried quickly and later, when we peeled it off, we peeled it off in strips and laid them on the kitchen counter like fish filets. That wasn't the night Brett was conceived, but it was close.

We live on the ocean, which means we have sea grass in the backyard. Beyond that, sand, seagulls, water. These neighbors, they have no ear for volume. They don't know how sound carries. Back in the days when they flung horseshoes, they'd scream obscenities while Brett and I lay in the kiddie-pool and let the sun roast the tops of our knees. We'd lounge there, dabbing at the shallow water, trying not to rip the plastic sides, while Henry called Liz a "Goddamned arrogant cunt-rag whore," and Liz, quite succinctly, called him "scum."

At first I was hesitant about Brett listening in, but it was such a lovely Sunday and the kiddie-pool felt fantastic, and we had lemonade within arm's reach. So all afternoon, the metal horseshoes chinked indentations in the wooden fence that separated our yards and Brett refilled our drinks. Henry continued his strings of names while Liz rotated within one-word rebuttals:

scum, slime, slob.

Sometime around dinnertime, they must have tired because the horse-shoes stopped clinking. I perked up and heard Henry mumble something about egg rolls, and how did that sound? I couldn't hear what Liz said.

At the end of our soak, as I slid on a t-shirt and flip-flops and removed my aviator sunglasses—stood there with my swimsuit seeping through—I turned to Brett and said, “Well, did you learn anything important today?”

Brett bent down to empty the kiddy-pool. The water surged over the colored whale prints on the bottom of the plastic and then moved on to the grass, spread over the lawn, absorbed. He turned to me and said yes, he'd learned many, many things.

“Name one,” I coaxed, and he scratched his ear and said, “Well, I don't know. Umm...boys talk more than girls do. I didn't know that before.” I nodded. I flung an arm around him and walked him to the house. Our feet squished, and the grass stuck to us.

“That's right,” I agreed. “That's absolutely right. Good observation.” He shrugged, and I opened the screen door for him, the ice in our empty glasses clinking.

These parties we went to, sometimes we weren't even invited. Every time, really. “But don't feel bad,” I'd assure Brett as we walked into some stranger's backyard bearing an angel food cake, “because probably, if they actually *did* know us, of course they'd want us to come. Does that make any sense?” He always promised it did, that it made some sense, and I always said I loved him very much.

The party I remember most was a graduation party. But it wasn't a high school graduation or even a college graduation. It was Sara Elbridge's graduation from Steambrook Middle School. According to the tri-fold her mother had prepared and placed on the picnic table, Sara excelled in mathematics and French. She had a fairly lovely smile to boot.

“So Sara,” I'd said, cornering her midway between the volleyball net and the croquet wickets, “tell me a little about your math experiences.” It was best, I'd discovered, to approach the host or hostess before they got to you. Poor Sara, she didn't know who I was, and she was about to ask, but I interrupted, told her she looked cute with her braids, and had her mother done them for her? She said yes, and I smiled, then searched the Elbridge backyard for the mother who I didn't know but who'd done a fine job with those braids.

“Janice?” I called. “Ohhhh Jaaanice?”

Her mother's name was Aimee.

At that party, Brett seemed to thoroughly enjoy himself. All of those kids zooming everywhere, zooming with bows in their hair and dirt in their nails and laughing. He played freeze tag and lawn darts and ate three pieces of cake, the icing smudged all over his lips. He grinned at me, and all I could

see was chocolate with marshmallow teeth.

Meanwhile, to pass the time while Brett made friends, I mingled with people I'd never met before. I laughed at their jokes and I patted their shoulders and I asked questions about daughters and sons and pets. *Do you still have that cat? The old one? Oh what was her name?*

When they gave me updates, I'd shake my head, say, "Seriously Victoria, it really has been much, much too long for us. We can't let this happen again, you understand?" Victoria always understood. All the Victorias did. We all had so many regrets, and when had time started moving so quickly, and how had we all lost touch?

By the end of the evening, as the night darkened and the cake trays were dumped into bins, the punch swirling down sinks, most of those people were hugging us goodbye.

"Now promise us," the Victorias said, kissing Brett's cheeks and ruffling his hair, "promise that you come back soon. Do you promise?" Brett and I nodded.

"Well good!" they beamed. "No need for you to be strangers!"

The man's name was Cliff, and let me preface this by saying that he started out the color of peaches. I met him in aisle nine. He had a box of Frosted Cheerios in his cart, and I, a box of Fruit Loops. We eyed each other's boxes. It was enough.

And then, quite suddenly, we were wheeling down aisles, comparing prices and ounces, sorting through two-for-one coupons. Gasping, thrilled at the need for two of anything: TV dinners, Campbell's soup, loaves of bread. Meow Mix, even. We divided the cans equally, and promised to find the cats later.

Finally, when we ventured to the frozen foods, he asked what kind of turkey he should get, and was an entire turkey too much for one man? I placed my hand on the bird, stared at its weight and said, "Cliff, tell me your favorite color."

At register four, we paid for our items and bagged them ourselves. A small black girl named Lachanda told us to have a great day, and I promised I would, and Cliff promised too.

"And thank you," Cliff winked, "for all the well wishes."

He followed me in his wood-paneled station wagon, waving to me at the Stop signs.

We pulled into my driveway, and in a fit of passion, the first thing we did was heave our food side by side in the fridge. We didn't even try to divide it or remember.

"My cheese pizza is yours and your Ritz Bits are mine," he ordered. I swooned, and we kept everything from spoiling.

I was in the middle of repainting the porch, so we moved to the garage,

and I spread out my paint tarp and told him to take off his clothes. He did it—I was nineteen and lovely—and I dabbed a thick, bristled brush into a gallon of hunter green and told him it might feel a little cold at first.

“But not to worry,” I shrugged, lifting the brush, spilling dots to the tarp, “I do this all the time.”

I started with a big slash right down the center of his chest. And the first thing he said was, “Hey, that’s not blue!” I said, “Sorry Charlie, but my porch is going to be green.”

Small brushstrokes and I filled in the curves of his armpits, the skin between fingers, beneath his stubbly chin. He shivered. “Now stay still,” I whispered, slipping the brush around his outer ear. “Don’t move a single muscle.”

Twenty minutes later I’d finished him up and snuck the brush bristles into all his secret corners. When I was done, really done, I noticed I’d missed a few pretty significant regions and he stared directly down at the white patches and asked, “You do *this* all the time?”

And then Brett was born ten months later, and Cliff and I were just a little off from sharing pizza and crackers forever.

“Shucks,” he said when I told him, and I always believed in that shucks.

I wanted so much for my son to know stories of his father: that he was a green man, a god; that it all began with our shared affinity with circular cereals. But that would be lying, I realized, though a lie I was comfortable with.

I gave birth, and for the sake of the birth certificate, the doctor asked whom he should list as the father. It could have been one of four different men, I told him. I mentioned how they’d all been so warm and wonderful and so surprised by my advances.

“It’s like they couldn’t believe,” I explained to him, “that I’d ever show them to my bedroom.” Worried, a nurse stuck a stethoscope to my chest and told the doctor I sounded normal enough.

The doctor cleared his throat, and reminded me that there was only one line for the name, and that scientifically, no child can have four fathers.

“Leave it blank then,” I ordered, still groggy. “I’ll fill it when I’m feeling a bit more creative.”

But after Cliff, my creativity seemed to vanish. Though there were plenty of paint cans lined up in the garage, there was no painting after him—just clean sheets, pale men, and the missionary position.

When Brett had been my son for nine years, I made the mistake of getting him that hamster. We were browsing through Paws N’ Claws in the mall and sucking on Orange Julius’s. I was leaning toward a bubble-eyed goldfish, and I’d already picked out a nice ten-gallon aquarium and everything, even the

neon pink stones. But we glimpsed that baby hamster to our right, and he looked so lovely and fresh pushed up against the glass, and how could I say no to something so new? Since Brett, the hamster, and I were all so lovely—and death seemed so far away—I demanded that Matt, the Pet Specialist for Paws N' Claws, box that hamster right up.

“I am prepared,” I informed Matt as he reached for the hamster, “to pay for him in full.”

Just last night, while Brett slept with glow-in-the-dark stars gleaming down on him, Hamster rocked off his wheel, and he looked as good as dead. I knew it. He didn't move; he just lay there in the shavings, sniffing out at me beyond his wire cage. Brett's entire room smelled like sawdust and feces and rotting vegetables. Hamster shook like his bones had turned sharp, and I didn't want to see him shake like that any longer. Hunkering low, my lips to his nose, I promised him I'd leave Brett a note on the fridge.

“This,” I told him, reaching out to pet a wisp of fur, “is for your own good, and you're welcome.”

I waited for him to say thank you or goodbye or for some miracle to occur. But he just lumbered back to the wheel, and the wheel squeaked. I nodded. I assured him I understood completely.

Right now, I'm driving home from the salon, and today, I gave three perms and four haircuts. I made forty-one dollars in tips. With that kind of money, I could buy half a dozen hamsters or more. But what would we do with half a dozen hamsters or more? Sometimes these replacements just don't work out. Even after you dress them up and paint them up, they still don't look quite the way you'd imagined.

I'm pulling into the intersection, and I wonder if Brett saw my note, and if so, what he's going to do about it. Poor kid. He's only been my son for eleven years now, and maybe I haven't taught him enough about putting things out of their misery.

I see a sign for a Scott's Foods, and on a whim, I pull into the parking lot. That parking lot is full and noisy and all the cars scuttle like ants lost in a smog.

When I get inside Scott's Foods, all I do is mull over aisles of soda pop and potato chips and Rubbermaid, and nothing strikes me as the kind of gift that could suck out the blackness and shoot out the light. Scott's is a small, local place, and maybe, I think, I should try somewhere with a larger inventory.

I search the highest parts of shelves and reach my hands deep inside freezers, finding nothing but icicles there. Eventually I grow cold and tired, so I tell a woman I want her finest fruit basket. She says her name is Edna.

“Edna! What a relief,” I say. “Sometimes it feels like the whole wide world is made up of Victorias, right?” I hold out my money.

Edna smiles and says I can hold onto the money and pay at the cash register—she's just the one who arranges the oranges. She begins limping around and directing me to the baskets, but she looks so old, and I don't want to make her walk any farther.

"Just the one who arranges the oranges?" I say, giving us both a chance to rest. "Edna, I think you're being modest." I wave my arm over the vast landscapes of her fruit geometry, her tomato pyramids, her lettuce heads parallel to the grapes and perpendicular to the squash. She smiles and says it's really nothing special, just something she picked up after forty-two years of service.

"I don't know, Edna," I say, shaking my head as we continue walking. "Maybe it is special. Have you ever consider that?"

She shows me her finest fruit basket, and it is fine—bursting full of the ripest melons and pineapple and grapes.

"Do you have anything of the star fruit/papaya variety?" I ask but she says no. I nod. I consider my options. "Well this one will be great," I assure. "Did you make it yourself?" No, but she says her friend did. Her friend's name is Betty. Betty has forty-eight years of service, and Edna says I should see what Betty can do with nectarines.

"What can she do?" I ask, and she glances behind her and then whispers: "Rhombus."

I admire the fruit basket she shows me. We both just stop and stare at it, and she pats my hand as we stare. It's so lovely I'd like to hang it on the wall like a three-dimensional picture. But it would rot, probably, and very few people want rotting fruit dangling in their living rooms.

Edna points me to a small card dangling off the side. It's cream-colored, gold embroidered. On the front, in perfect cursive, it says, "Much Appreciated."

"For my neighbors," I lie, hoisting the basket into my arms. The plastic rubs against my cheek and turns it red. "I'm just going to leave it on their door step. Won't sign the card or anything. A good, anonymous, deed."

A mother does not buy a fruit basket for her son.

Through the plastic, I smile at Edna. She says it is a lovely gesture and what lucky neighbors I have!

"It's nothing," I admit, peering down into the fruit at all those grapes and melons.

"But I have a son, you know," I tell her, glancing up. "I've had him for eleven years now. Funny story, his hamster passed away today. Thought he could use something a little bit special."

She eyes me strangely, and then I remember that I just told her the fruit was for the damn neighbors.

Edna's very, very sorry about the hamster. She offers condolences.

"Yes, well," I shrug, glancing at the bakery and the people wheeling carts. "At least we don't throw horseshoes."

After a time, Edna asks, "Just the one basket then?"

"Oh yes, just the one, thank you. For my neighbors, of course."

I walk the basket toward the register, and a few loose grapes fall out of position and a melon follows, tumbling. The entire mountain collapses, pushing against the plastic wrap, deforming everything and bulging. Edna says oops. She says sorry; Betty usually packs it tighter. But Betty has arthritis, she explains, and Betty's husband, Wilbur, recently passed and she's sure I can understand if I only open my heart and...

"Hey," I say, pushing back against the wrapping. "Edna, I want you to listen, and I want you to listen good." I put my hands on her shoulders and I try not to crack her bones with my fists. "My son's hamster died today, okay? So if anyone can understand what you must be going through, it's me. Watching a loved one's loved one die? It's not an easy task, I know. Trust me. I was in love once too, okay? He wanted the color blue, but we compromised with green. So I painted him green and then I painted the porch. He's not even my son's father, for crying out loud, and still I painted him green. Does that make any sense?" I think we might hug, so I open my arms, but we don't.

"Okay, unrelated question: have you seen a wood-colored station wagon? This man I knew, before I painted him, he drove this wood-colored station wagon. And he liked Frosted Cheerios. He doesn't own a cat. Have you seen anyone who fits that description?"

She holds my hand and says the grief is a very difficult emotion to harness.

Anyway, we push and prod at the plastic, but the fruit doesn't fit like it should. It just keeps falling, and I think it will take at least five hands to right what we've wronged with all the nudging.

"You hold it on this side," I order, "and I'm going to work from the back."

Together, we convince most of the melons to stay. We don't move, and poor Edna hardly breathes. In a show of solidarity, I decide to hardly breathe too. Edna and I hold that basket, motionless, afraid to disrupt the newfound balance. Like crabs, we walk sideways to the cash register, and once there, a woman asks if I'd like to pay debit or credit. I say I am prepared to pay cash. I balance the basket with a knee and tug a few bills from my pocket. I look to Edna. I say, "Okay, now give it to me straight. How long we got before this whole thing starts to rot? Before it all comes tumbling down?"

Later that night, Brett and I bury Hamster in the ocean. I try to play Taps on a kazoo. Afterward, we pray the morning tide will not return poor Hamster to our shore.

"One day," I tell Brett, "maybe the ocean will bring us something that isn't dead or dying."

"Like sand dollars," he says.

"Sure! Like sand dollars."

But you can only collect them for so long. And they will not buy you the things that you want. **F**

The Nicest Person Michael Lewis Has Ever Met: A conversation with Jo Ann Beard

Jo Ann Beard is the author of *The Boys of My Youth*, a collection of autobiographical essays, as well as other works published in magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. In 1997 she received a Whiting Foundation Award for Emerging Writers, and in 2007, was named a fellow with the John



Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Originally from the Midwest, Beard now lives in upstate New York. *Fugue* editor Michael Lewis conducted this interview with Ms. Beard over the late summer and early fall of this year.

Michael Lewis: Jo Ann, we've talked in the past about the process of writing for you; how deliberate and exact it is. We've also discussed some of the misconceptions people have regarding writing as a form of work. It seems like people oftentimes hold a belief that writers don't work in the same way other

artists do, that the creative process for writers doesn't involve turmoil or determination, as if not wanting to admit that real writing happens when you sit and work at it. I wonder if you could comment on that.

Jo Ann Beard: Well, for me, it certainly isn't play. Although occasionally something will happen and I'll stumble upon a passage that is fun to write (this has happened to me three times in the last decade) and suddenly I understand why certain other people actually like the process of writing. Not me! As Shirley Hazzard once said: "It's a nervous work. The state that you need to write is the state that others are paying large sums to get rid of."

To write well, to really get at something deep down, to make art out of life, is truly difficult. I avoid the effort and the pain most of the time by simply not doing it, which has in a way ruined the second half of my life. It's why I frequently find myself saying to people: "I can't go with you to do the fun thing, because I have to do my *work*." The injustice of this is always

followed by me changing my mind and doing the fun thing, but balancing it out by not enjoying myself.

ML: Likewise, I wonder if you could spend a moment talking about how you came to your own approach to writing. When did you realize that there was no set blueprint for a writer, that each writer can form their own system?

JAB: My process hasn't changed much along the way, although it has slowed down some. I work sentence by sentence, shaping the piece as I go, not always knowing where it is leading but always moving forward, never backward. I'm like the Tin Man who started out much less nimble than everyone else and ended up rusted to a halt.

ML: I read in a past interview of yours that lots of times writing an essay becomes a sort of "jigsaw puzzle" and I wonder if that is still true for you and if you ever find yourself NOT decoding a puzzle you the writer have created?

JAB: Well, if I may contradict myself, nothing seems puzzling to me when I write. Although I may not always know where it leads, I do trust either that my subconscious knows, or that my conscious writing brain will make it work out in the end. It's like making a painting—you have to believe that you can work with any mark you put on the canvas. That mark may not be right at first—say a green shadow or a daub of crimson—but you have to trust that you have enough skill to make it right. And the painting progresses, mark by mark, as the artist builds toward something he or she could not wholly have predicted. Writing is like that, for me.

ML: Do you feel like there's a "Jo Ann Beard essay"? It struck me when I was preparing this interview that I was having the hardest time trying to find certain things that appear in your essays and what I found was this sort of compassion for people. All your characters are treated in this very tender and humane way. All your sentences seemed carved out of wood. In short, your essays are all good! But I do wonder if you feel you have an aesthetic, or if at some point there has been an editor or a teacher, or a fellow writer, who approached you about your style of telling stories and made you aware of it.

JAB: Again, if you go down deep, examining the characters who populate your work, you will see them as whole, three-dimensional beings who are not just one thing but many things. Faceted, like a diamond, each slant reflecting the light and surroundings in a different way—this is what we mean by complexity in writing, and in character building on the page. People are incredibly complicated and unique, it's only when they are reduced to their most basic parts that they become stock characters, flattened out, and don't

refract/reflect their own (and our) milieu. It doesn't just pertain to writing, of course: Seeing people as complicated, many-faceted individuals who have absorbed and reflected what is around them...that is the path to human compassion.

ML: I know you read a good deal of poetry - dare I say an avid reader of poetry? - and I'd like to talk about that. What draws you to poetry? Do you read poetry while you're working? It's old-hat to say that the personal essay and the poem are very closely related, but if you would, could you give me your explanation for that connection?

JAB: What draws me to poetry is what draws me to prose--the distillation of language and idea. I guess one of the things that I hesitate to say about writers in nonfiction graduate programs is that they don't seem to hold themselves (I'm generalizing here) to a high standard in terms of artistry. Many people show up because they have a story to tell, hoping to learn how to make a book, and then a bundle. My thinking on that is: We don't care about your story, we've heard your story, we've seen your story, we watch a hundred hours of television a week, and if we haven't seen your story yet it's because it isn't particularly interesting. You have to tell that story in a way that will surpass not only television and movies and video games but John Cheever and Annie Dillard and Jonathon Franzen and Richard Yates. Those last have written starkly brilliant pieces about a man swimming through a lonely afternoon (Cheever), a moth caught in a candleflame (Dillard), bird watching (Franzen), and a grade school teacher who hands out pink rubber erasers to her students at Christmas (Yates). Of course, none of these pieces were about swimming or burning or watching or giving *really*, they were about something deeper, darker, lighter, and more profound. That's the challenge each student is given; to create art and profundity out of their own common, humble experiences. It's tough, yes, but exalting.

ML: I'm a big fan of your essay "Out There." The essay is so steady, so controlled. Your essays never seem to run to things. They just sort of "get there" and that to me is what makes your collection *Boys of My Youth* so wonderful: the control. Every essay gets to where it is going without really making a show of how it got there. So my question is, as a young writer, how did you learn that restraint? How did you learn to control an essay the way you do?

JAB: I better go back and read that essay again, because my memory of it--of the real event as much as the written event--is now pretty gauzy. What I remember about the writing of it is trying to describe that feeling of being stuck to a car seat while having a nervous breakdown. What I remember about the real event is much more diffuse--I think it all happened so fast that

all I can summon is Neil Young on the stereo and the man's hat. Also, the fact that my elderly Toyota had had a paint failure and when you leaned up against it you came away silver.

But you're right, the issue of control in an essay is very important-though you can't control that control much. If the writer goes deep enough, and records accurately what she is feeling/seeing/remembering, then there won't be any control issues involved...the essay will emerge fully formed, like whoever from whoever's forehead. My forehead, and yours.

ML: I read recently where you said you started "Fourth State of Matter" as an essay about dogs and it made me wonder, how often do you surprise yourself as a writer? With on the one hand, the deliberate style of your writing and the process of it, how is that sometimes softened or countered by the surprise of writing, by the actual "moment" of it?

JAB: That was an unusual case for me-it started out being about dogs, then about a specific dog, then about that dog's decline. A month before her death, a surprise occurred in my life and in the lives of the people around me; in that way, the essay emerged organically from real life. But mostly things aren't that extreme in terms of surprises: they certainly occur in life, but if you're fully seeing/imagining/remembering during the act of writing a story, there's something profoundly unsurprising about psychological truth. We may interpret something as a surprise, if we're reading, but for the writer there should be no real surprises; if you're writing the truth (and even fiction writers must write the truth) everything that happens should be absolutely inevitable.

I like a story by Alice Munro called "Floating Bridge," which has a surprise in it. Also a story by Zadie Smith called "The Trials of Finch," which has a different kind of surprise in it. Both of these stories-and others as well-surprise the reader on her first time through. Second time through, though, the reader sees the inevitability, the careful peeling back of the layers until the surprise is visible, under the surface...in one case a terrible wound, and in the other, a beautiful kernel of joy.

ML: Someone once told me there are two types of creative people: those that embrace the world around them and those that exile themselves from it, and I wonder which strain you are. When you approach something like "Undertaker, Please Drive Slow" does it help to have an informed sense of what is going on, and to understand possibly what the public response to the topic might be, or is it best to dive in head-long and form a point of view as you go?

JAB: I never did form a point of view about that piece; the issue is too com-

plicated. It seems best to show it as completely as possible, which sometimes just furthers ambivalence, but that's all right. Again, if one goes deep enough and far enough into a piece, one arrives at some kind of truth, psychological and otherwise. People tend to recognize truth when they read it.

ML: How does the process of invention differ from the process of research for you? How does the approach change from an essay such as, say "Out There," to an essay like "Undertaker, Please Drive Slow"?

JAB: In the "Undertaker" essay, I had to research it first and then imagine it. So I got a full picture of everything I could, from the nuts and bolts of what happened to this woman who got sick and tried to get better and then died by her own (and Jack Kevorkian's) hand, and then I made myself live it as I was writing it, so that I could describe on the page all the feelings she might have had, and the details that might have surrounded her. Those details, of course, are what make an essay or a story come alive for the reader—in this case, the dog Ursa, an ice rink, a lonely parakeet, the scent of burning leaves, girls in flannel shirts, a pair of yellow clogs. Those images and details are things I shared with someone I never met but came to love. Some of them were real and some were real only in my head.

To write "Out There," I simply had to revisit my memory and mine my knowledge of certain things. In terms of memory, say, I had to think about what the road looks like in Alabama, deserted and verdant, or what the hot wind felt like blasting through the silver Toyota; in terms of mining my knowledge, I had to think about specifically what one might see on the road when it isn't deserted (maybe a truck that says England on the side), or what one thinks about when driving a long time in a shaky state (maybe the demoralizing things said by a departing husband).

ML: I wonder if we could talk about last lines. Yours are always powerful and complete and there are a good number of your essays (Most notably "Fourth State of Matter" and "Boys of My Youth") where the end line is often just a sentence long. Are you thinking of that last line before you get there, or is it simply just a matter of realizing that the essays feel done?

JAB: The best endings create resonance. As in: reverberation, intensification or amplification. Everything in an essay (and a story) must be made to mean something; the short form requires that there are no wasted words, scenes, images, but that everything is in service to the master. Keep in mind that the master is not the writer, though, far from it.

ML: I wonder if we could spend a bit talking about teaching. Specifically, what advantage does teaching offer you? And what do your students teach you?

JAB: I teach writing because I need a job and it's the job that gives me the most pleasure. I love literature, I love talking about writing, ideas, language, images--this is vastly and constantly stimulating to me--and I learn how to write better by immersing myself in these things, and by talking to colleagues and surrounding myself with art and artists. It's easy in this culture to zone out, to sink into the too-much-information world of flickering light. We used to call TV the plug-in drug because it was recognized that all those technical events--fast cutting in particular--had a numbing, hypnotic effect on the viewer. Somehow we knew it but we didn't care, and in fact have embraced it, and now spend more hours staring at light than not. I'm as susceptible as anyone, but for me the the voices of amazing writers like Stephen Crane, Rick Moody, Joan Didion, Leo Tolstoy, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Lorrie Moore (I'm looking at the bookshelf next to me as I write this) act as an antidote.

What my students teach me is everything. About writing, about creativity, about the scope of human experience. They offer respect to their professors, which is a great thing if you're on the receiving end of it. I was always a nobody, somebody's sidekick, secretary, wife, friend, and then I became a teacher. I have to be careful that I don't enjoy it too much--people deferring to my opinion simply because I'm the one with the class roster and the overhot shared office--because it's a power that comes with responsibility. To educate and to inspire, which is not as easy as it sounds.

ML: I'd like to spend a few moments talking about your dogs. We've talked in the past about the joys you get from walking them, but I wonder if you also find some sort emotional, or creative, outlet in them.

JAB: I do love dogs--though I will say that the dogs I end up with are nearly always secondhand, and the current ones have a lot of problems. I spend a great deal of time now managing them as much as enjoying them, to the point where I have fantasies about running away with other dogs. I went into a local pet store to buy something the other day and caught a glimpse of a dog in a (too small) crate, staring out at me. This dog looked gentle, intelligent, and had a long nose and I've been thinking of him ever since: I have a crush on a dog.

It seems like, for a personal essayist, anything that you can get a crush on is inspirational.

I like the way their minds work and don't work, I find it fascinating that they can be resting a head on your knee one moment and killing a fawn in the tall grass the next. It's terrible for the fawn and for the human, although most humans do worse to animals at every meal. Though again, no consolation to the fawn.

ML: Could you describe what would be the perfect writing day?

JAB: Go straight to the computer in pajamas, drink tea out of my lucky cup and look through the binoculars at the birds on the wire outside my study, see a bald eagle sitting on top of the tree in the field (this happened once), and imagine, then write, a scene from the point of view of a turtle. The turtle might eat a leaf of lettuce and fall off a motel bed, but be caught by the narrator. The narrator in real life would have purchased the turtle while she was driving through Florida, from a boy who sold it for a dollar at a gas station. The turtle would have had an STP Oil sticker on its shell, and all this would have happened the day before she was chased by a man in Alabama. For me, that would be the perfect writing experience: the combination of seeing the real world and then imagining it from a more interesting perspective. After a couple of hours of that, I would quit and do something else for the rest of the day.

ML: Finally, Jo Ann, I'd like to ask you about David Foster Wallace. When he passed, lots of writers came forward to discuss who he was as a writer, as an editor, and as a person, and I wonder if you had any stories or moments about him that you'd like to share.

JAB: His work meant everything to me as a nonfiction writer, his willingness to reveal his own inadequacies meant everything to me as a fellow traveler. His love of dogs and his brilliant and sly defense of the lobster; this is a person I wish we could have kept with us. The world of nonfiction grew dimmer when he left. **F**

Contributors' Notes

Charles Antin's stories have been published in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ballyhoo Stories*, *Rosebud*, *Alimentum*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Food & Wine*, and *Glimmer Train*, where he won the award for short fiction. Charles is also a commercially rated pilot, a wine specialist at Christie's, and an MFA candidate in fiction at New York University.

Karen Babine teaches at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Her essays have most recently appeared in such journals as *Ascent*, *Sycamore Review*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *South Dakota Review*, *River Teeth*, and others.

Jo Ann Beard is the author of *The Boys of My Youth*, a collection of autobiographical essays, as well as other works published in magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. In 1997 she received a Whiting Foundation Award for Emerging Writers, and in 2007, was named a fellow with the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Originally from the Midwest, Beard now lives in upstate New York.

Lisa Bellamy studies with Philip Schultz at The Writers Studio in New York City, where she also teaches. She has published poetry in *Tiferet*, *Harpur Palate*, and other magazines. She was a finalist for the 2008 Gerald Stern Poetry Prize and received an honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror 2007*. She graduated from Princeton University.

Jenni Blackmore grew up in the industrial north of England but is now living her dream on a small island just east of Halifax, Nova Scotia. "Some days find me as a painter, other days I'm a poet, or a playwright, a short story writer, a novelist . . . my hyperactive imagination does not allow for just one mode, and besides, life is way too exciting to fit into any one mould, yes? (Well, that's my excuse :-)) I like to explore the mystical and suggest playful alternatives to the seemingly mundane and of course the influence of my maritime home seems to wiggle its way into much of my art and writing. The experiment, *My Titfer*, was inspired by stories told me years ago by my Welsh uncle, an itinerant story teller himself. Thank you *Fugue* for allowing his words and experience to echo back through time."

Gabriel Bravo was born in Miami, Fl. in 1980. In 2007, two of his poems were published in the *Pacific Review* (San Diego State University), and he also was the recipient of the 2007 "National Gold Circle Award" for "Free-Verse Poetry" from Columbia University (New York City).

Judith Cody's poetry has won national awards from *Atlantic Monthly* and *Amelia*, three honorable mentions from the Emily Dickinson Poetry Award, and is in the Smithsonian Institution's permanent collection. Poems appear in: *Nimrod*, *New York Quarterly*, *South Carolina Poetry Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Xavier Review*, *Texas Review*, *Primavera*, *Phoebe*, *Louisville Review*, *Madison Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Westview*, *Ginosko*, *Rio Grande Review*, and others. Poems are anthologized in: *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry 2007*, *Oakland Out Loud 2007*, *Words Upon the Water 2006*, and *Anthology of Monterey Bay Poets 2005*. Books are: *Vivian Fine: A Bio-Bibliography*, Greenwood Press, 2002; *Eight Frames Eight*, poems; *Roses in Portraiture*, photography, Kikimora 2008. She is a University of California Master Gardener. www.judithcody.com

David J. Corbett lives in Lake Barrington, Illinois with his wife and two children. "Letter to Dr. Goldberg" is his first published poem.

Elizabeth Earley's fiction, poetry, and prose has appeared in *Whiskey Island Magazine*, *The First Line Magazine*, *the Story Week Reader*, *Windy City Times*, *The Chicago Reader*, *Chicago Life*, *Time Out Magazine*, *HLLQ*, *Backpacker Magazine*, *Geek411*, and *Hair Trigger*. She lives in Phoenix, AZ and is currently working on her second novel. Learn more about her at www.learley.com.

Albert Garcia's two books of poems are *Rainshadow* (Copper Beech Press) and *Skunk Talk* (Bear Star Press). He is also the author of *Digging In: Literature for Developing Writers* from Prentice Hall. He lives in Wilton, California and works at Sacramento City College.

Mark Halliday teaches at Ohio University. His books of poems are *Little Star* (1987), *Tasker Street* (1992), *Selfwolf* (1999) and *jab* (2002).

Guan Hanqin (ca. 1225-1305) Yuan Dynasty physician, Chancellor of the Royal Academy of Medicine. Not only was he a major poet, he is considered one of the four leading playwrights of his era. Thirteen of his sixty plays have survived, as well as fifty-seven of his poems.

Stephen Larson is a house painter, musician, organic gardener, writer, and student of dreams who lives in Northern Minnesota on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area. He has worked with mentally handicapped adults, with boys judged to be juvenile delinquent, as a light bulb salesman, a school bus driver, a poet/teacher in the Minnesota Poets-in-the-Schools Program, and as an educator in public schools.

Sage Marsters lives in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts and works as a writing coach for WriteBoston. She has published short stories in *Green Mountains*

Review, *Rosebud*, the *New England Review*, the 2008 Pushcart Prize Collection, and forthcoming in the *Alaska Quarterly Review*. She is currently completing a collection of short stories.

Carol Louise Munn received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Michigan and received the Academy of American Poets Prize and the Michael R. Gutterman Award for Poetry. Her work has been published in *Poetry*, *Ilya's Honey*, *So To Speak* (George Mason University), and *The GSU Review* (Georgia State University). Her poems have been anthologized in *Stories From Where We Live: The Gulf Coast*, and the *Houston Poetry Fest 2004, 2006, and 2007 Anthologies* and will be the featured poet in the Houston Poetry Fest in October 2009. Carol teaches English and Creative Writing at St. John's School in Houston, Texas.

Ann Pancake is the author of a collection of short stories, *Given Ground* (winner of the 2000 Bakeless Award), and a novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* (finalist for the 2008 Orion Book Award and a New York Times Editor's Choice). Her fiction and essays have appeared in journals and anthologies like *Glimmer Train*, *New Stories From the South*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Pushcart Prize*. She teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University.

Daniel Polikoff's first collection of poetry, *Dragon Ship*, was published by Tebot Bach in December 2007. His poetry and translations have appeared in over fifty literary journals, including *Nimrod*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Literary Review*. Daniel teaches literature in the Bay Area, and is currently at work on a book on Rilke and archetypal psychology.

Shawn Poynter is a freelance photographer based in Knoxville, TN. You can see more of his pictures at shawnpoynter.com. You can read his cute animal blog at shawnpoynter.tumblr.com.

Paul B. Roth is the author of five collections of poetry, the latest *Cadenzas by Needlelight*, to be published by Cypress Books in 2009. His work can be found more recently in journals such as *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Osiris*, *Common Grounds*, and *La Jornada (Mexico)*. He is the editor and publisher of *The Bitter Oleander Press*.

Roger Sheffer teaches writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He's published stories in *The Missouri Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Harpur Palate*, and other magazines, and recently won first prize in *Third Coast's* fiction contest.

Alex To was born in China, spent his teenage years in Hong Kong, then at eighteen emigrated to the US. After finishing medical school in Boston he took a detour and went onto Wall Street. For the past seventeen years he has worked as a biotech analyst, and at times has managed hedge funds. He writes poems in between his trades. Dr. To is a contributing editor of *Fulcrum*. He is also on the Board of Governors for the Poetry Society of America. His poems have appeared in various journals.

Justin Vicari's first book, *The Professional Weepers*, won the 2007-2008 Transcontinental Award and is forthcoming in February 2009 from Pavement Saw Press. He is also the author of the forthcoming poetry chapbook, *Siamese Twins of the 21st Century* (West Town Press, 2008), and the translator of *Woman Bathing Light to Dark: Prose Poems by Paul Eluard* (Toad Press, 2006). His work is appearing in *Disquieting Muses Quarterly* and *The Ledge*. He lives in Pittsburgh.

Paul Watsky, a clinical psychologist who works in San Francisco, is co-translator with Emiko Miyashita of *Santoka* (Tokyo, PIE Books, 2006). His own poetry has appeared in various journals, including *The Cream City Review*, *Poetry Flash*, *onthebus*, and *Cave Wall*.

Nancy White's first book, *Sun, Moon, Salt*, won the Washington Prize for Poetry. Further poems have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *FIELD*, *Harpur Palate*, *Ploughshares*, *Seneca Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and others. She teaches at Adirondack Community College in upstate New York.

Margaret Zamos-Monteith holds a Masters degree from Columbia University, an MFA in fiction from CUNY/Brooklyn College, and a BA from the University of Southern California. She is the recipient of a stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and has recently completed her first novel, *East of Five*. A resident of Brooklyn, NY, she is living in Rome for one year with her husband, photographer Matthew Monteith.

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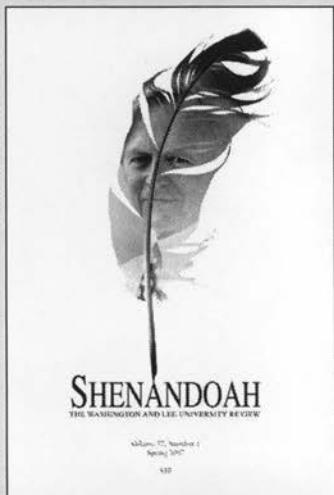


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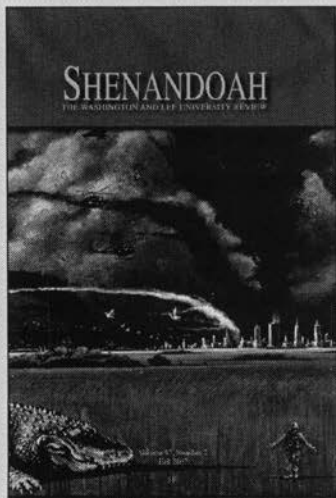
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