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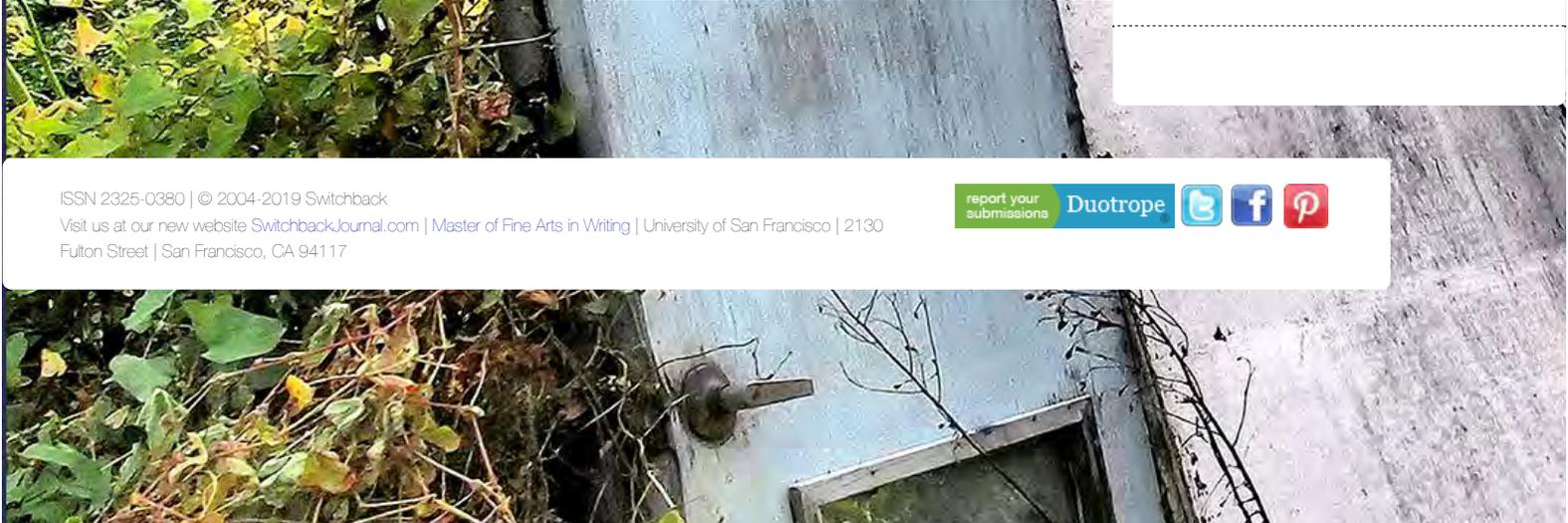
D.A. Thompson

D.A. Thompson has published numerous essays in literary journals, including *The Missouri Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Creative Nonfiction*.

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Remedial Romance

[D.A. Thompson](#)

I'm trying to figure out this "moving on" thing. Which direction is "on"? They say that when widowed people begin dating they revert to the maturity level of their last date as a single person. For me, that age was 26. But dating in middle age is far more complicated. On top of the awkwardness of integrating sciatica and arthritis into our bedroom fumbblings is the uncontested truth that all of us who find ourselves single in middle age come with baggage.

So I found someone new. My boyfriend now is not the love of my life. He's the one after that. In truth, I can't exactly call him my boyfriend. A 51-year-old, never married, inveterate bachelor, he's far from a boy, more than a friend, less than a "boyfriend." In the past few years we've broken up almost as many times as we've drifted back together. We're love-stuck.

He dramatizes realism's triumph over romance. Check out his version of gallantry: We're at a specialty food store in the mall, where we've both accepted a free sample of coffee. I am a caffeine fiend. He is not. I drink my sample in one shot and think of asking for a second, but since he's only taken one sip of his shot and then carries it untouched through the store, I assume he's saving it for me.

When we get out of the store, he drops his cup into the trashcan.

"Hey," I say, "I would have drunk that. I need more caffeine."

"Oops," he giggles, covering his mouth with his hand. He reaches into the hole of the mall garbage can and pulls out the still-upright espresso shot. He inspects it quickly, blows on it, declares the three-second rule, and hands it to me.

I drink it.

To be fair for just a moment, I should point out that he's a chronically overworked oncologist, who gives his all to his patients, and doesn't have a whole lot left for me. After treating the terminally ill all day, he may find my needs less than urgent. I understand, but sometimes only cognitively. It would be nice to know what he was thinking once in a while.

At a bookstore I saw on display the title "If Men Could Talk." I asked him, "If I buy that book for you, would you read it?" He shrugged.

His favorite word is "okay." The worst thing he's ever said about anyone is "Bless her heart." Praise from him is "You know, that's actually not too bad." He resists manipulation. When I tell him I'm feeling insecure about, say, my writing, he says, "You'll get better." When I beg him for a compliment, he offers, "You look good." If he's trying to seduce me, he says, "You wanna go upstairs?"

Here's what happens upstairs. My geriatric dogs bark at the door, too deaf to hear me shouting at them to stop. They don't like to be separated from me, especially Chappy, my 14-year old mutt, who looks like a miniature golden retriever. I'm so used to their barking I barely notice it, but my not-exactly-boyfriend sometimes wants to afterglow in peace.

"Oh, just let Chappy in," he said one night. Springing off arthritic hips, Chappy plopped in bed between us. Not-exactly pushed him away. Chappy circled once, then plopped down beside me and settled in to sleep.

Not-exactly rolled to his side to spoon me. Chappy got up to investigate, sniffed his face, circled, plopped

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back at my side.

Not-exactly, who can't lie still for long, started drumming a tune on my back. Called by movement, Chappy got up, tried to nudge between us, got pushed back, and stood over us.

Chappy stood. Chappy stood. His head slowly drooped as his eyes closed, but he stood.

“What's wrong with your dog?”

“He's old. It's such an effort to get up that, with your ADD, it's easier for him to just stay standing.”

Chappy bent in to our voices, tried to step between us, got pushed back again.

“I guess I can't get a new boyfriend until after Chappy goes,” I said.

“Ha!” My not-exactly laughed in his high-pitched squeal, which I find endearing as few women would.

Then he tried to comfort me in his way. But effeminate as he is, he doesn't have a clue what women want.

“Don't worry,” he consoled me. “Chappy's not looking so good these days. You won't be stuck with me forever. Chappy's not long for this world.”

The temptation is to compare him to my late husband. No good could come of such a comparison. He was the index finger to my opposable thumb. After years together, two people coordinate. My Exactly would have comforted and hugged me unbidden. That “would have” would be called my baggage. Once upon I had it all. Now I have “that's actually not too bad.” How do you know when to accept not too bad as good enough?

Like my 14- and 16-year-old dogs, I've bypassed maturity in my aging process. One evening I called my not-exactly-boyfriend from my university office (before we lost our phones to budget cuts). He was reading an article for his Urology Club.

“What's up? How was your day?”

“Well, I finished teaching at 5:15, and then I came up to my office to do email, and I hadn't eaten all day so I ate my lunch, and I was going to go work out, but then I swallowed funny and started coughing and I went and peed myself. So now I'm stuck in my office till I dry off.”

“Ha!” He boomed, then tapered off into giggles.

“Yeah, it's funny.” But I smiled, as much at his goofy giggles as at my predicament.

“It is funny.”

“I'm feeling a tad demoralized.”

“Don't worry. We can fix your bladder. There's surgery for your condition.”

“I'm glad I called you. I feel so much better.”

“Oh. I guess I didn't say the right thing, did I? What should I say?”

I can't let myself think that my true love would have known exactly what to say. I certainly can't let myself say it out loud.

“My true love would have known exactly what to say,” I said out loud. “He would have known what I'm really upset about.”

“Your bladder?”

“But what is my bladder serving as a metonym for?”

“Your urinary tract?”

“But what's really bothering me?”

“That you wore black?”

Okay, I laughed “carefully, doing a Kegel squeeze.”

“You're upset that you're getting older? That you're middle-aged?” he tried again.

“Close enough. So comfort me.”

“Oh. You want to be comforted. Why didn't you say so? Okay, wait. I know this one: You're wonderful? You're pretty? I love you? I told you that last week. Nothing's changed since then.”

“Dude.”

“It's not I love you? What else could it be? I've offered up all my lines. I'm fresh out.” He's like my border collie, running through the whole repertoire of tricks to get the treat.

"It would be nice to be told that I'm still desirable. That you'll stand by me as I amass the indignities of age."

"I said I love you. Doesn't that cover it? Why don't you just wrap a sweater around your butt and go home?"

When I got home, all four dogs sniffed at the pee spot on my new, expensive, black (he'd guessed right), dry-clean-only skirt, which I took off at the door, bundled up, and threw into the washing machine. Then I plopped onto the Lay-Z-Boy and settled into middle age, ensconced in a pile of old dogs not long for this world.

I was supposed to have someone at my side when my body failed, in sickness as well as health. Someone who would still love me after I peed my pants. Someone actually human (though my dogs are looking better and better).

We broke up.

We just called to check on each other.

We fell together again.

Before I had my oral surgery, an apicoctomy, I gave him very specific instructions. He was to call me during the day to check on me, and then again in the evening. At a minimum. But when you date an oncologist, your problems will always seem unworthy. Oral surgery, set off against oral radiation burns on esophageal cancer patients, will always look petty.

"Oh, okay, I can do that," he said. "Do I have to come over too?"

The first injection of anesthesia made my leg donkey-kick, and the second brought tears. They told me to turn on my side, and a bit of anesthesia trickled down my throat, so I was fighting nausea as the assistant started talking about the barbeque festival she'd been to that weekend.

I didn't think the drill would bother me. I've had teeth drilled before. But the drilling of my upper left bone was so much more intimate. I could feel the vibrations in my eyeball.

I drove home already angry at my not-boyfriend. But when I got home I found a dozen yellow roses in the sink. He had improvised a vase out of a Fat Free Milk carton waiting to be rinsed and recycled. I called him to leave a message thanking him. He picked up the phone. "I can't talk now," he whispered. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh good. Then I'm off the hook?"

I might have laughed, but my face was frozen, and only drool came out.

As my present for my last birthday, he gave me permission to write about us. It would be nice if you didn't have to use my name. If you write it word for word, no one will believe you anyway.

We broke up.

We called just to check on each other.

At the dog park, my border collie, Olive, ran the fence, back and forth, back and forth, while I went over my recurrent questions. Why does he keep playing all these emotional games with me while claiming that I'm the one playing games? Why will he never answer my questions? Or tell me what he's thinking? Why was he always holding something back? Why does he claim to love me, but then when I say "I love you," he replies suspiciously, "Why? What did I do?"

Back and forth Olive ran, never making any progress, stricken as she was with the border collie's interminable OCD. "Stereotypes" is animal ethologists' term for those repetitive behaviors, indicating psychological distress, exhibited by animals in captivity that are unable to adapt to restricted circumstances. They pace their enclosures, grind their teeth, maybe chew on the bars of their cages until their gums bleed, and then chew some more. Dogs will pace a fence, or run in circles chasing their own tails, or lick a wound until it festers.

Olive was tied to a tree for the first two years of her life before I adopted her, and was never properly socialized or exercised. Now she's full of neuroses. She doesn't even greet me at the door with wagging tail when I come home, a validation I depend on from dogs. Instead she runs to the back door and paces till I let her out so she can pace the fence. Even though she's no longer tied up, she doesn't seem to be able to stop.

Let her run, I say. Tormenting as her fence-running is, she seems to be getting something out of it, and anyway she's too old to change.

He shows up at my doorstep one day, fresh from the flea market, holding a gaudy, 1970s-style glass lamp shaped like a pineapple, with plastic green leaves splaying out the top. I forget if we've broken up or unbroken.

“Here,” he says. “Do you want this?”

I do, actually. I'm surprised at just how much I want it.

I let him in.

When it's time to leave, he says, at the door, “Good to see you,” and pats my back like I'm one of his patients. I burst into what turns out to be laughter.

“What? What?” he asks, looking around for the missing piece.

I take his hand from my shoulder and put it around my back, then wrap his other arm around the other side. “Squeeze,” I instruct.

“Oh,” he says, emits a falsetto giggle, and hugs me.



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Carolyn Kraus



Carolyn Kraus is a Detroit-based teacher, journalist, and co-founder of the Journalism and Screen Studies Program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She has been a Detroit city columnist; a Far-Flung Correspondent for *The New Yorker*; a volunteer writing teacher in three prisons; and, most recently, a documentary filmmaker. Her essays have appeared in literary, academic, and general-audience publications including *The Partisan Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The New York Times*, *North American Review*, *Biography*, *English Language Notes*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *The Best Travel Writing*

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Awakening the Dragon

[Carolyn Kraus](#)

It's Taipei, Taiwan. A rash is flaming up my neck, closing in on my right cheekbone as I scoop up my lecture notes and climb onto the university auditorium stage. This is the first of five lectures I'm slated to deliver on similar themes in the space of three days. How can I go on? I wonder, as blisters swell and pop and weep down my cheeks. But, peering down from behind a lectern, feeling two hundred pairs of expectant eyes upon me, I turn to the dry-erase board and print in big black grease-pencil letters: "WHAT IS CMC ENGAGEMENT?"

Taiwan's not responsible for my scabrous condition. My neck itched before the plane even landed yesterday afternoon. I'd felt the first tinglings as I reclined in my Silver Elite chair-bed, scarfing up five-course meals ordered from the vegetarian menu. I ignored the muffled voices of my fellow travelers in Economy, fetally positioned and munching mini-pretzels beyond the blue canvas curtain. Was my skin condition a symptom of proletarian remorse—the legacy of my upbringing and the mandates of academic culture? I'd suffered the knees and elbows of coach-class seating during lots of previous airline journeys. But in the seduction of first class where the armchairs gave shiatsu massage and the chafing dishes kept coming, I'd stretched out and stuffed myself into a guilty stupor with stir-fry and egg rolls and a mysterious vegetable concoction called "Jin-Jen-Goo-Goo."

Arriving in Taipei, my face hot and blotchy, I'd hurried to the airport bathroom to slather on Cover Girl foundation before meeting my university hosts for a welcoming banquet. Meanwhile, I sifted through possible explanations for the reptilian face in the mirror. Some flesh-eating fungus picked up on the plane? Those mysterious hors d'oeuvres wrapped in bright green banana leaves? Or just nerves?

At the banquet last night, thoughtful attention was paid to my vegetarian diet. My hosts had ordered up a platter of authentically shaped faux crabs and oysters sculpted in tofu. After raising their glasses to toast "our honored, distinguished speaker," they had heaped my plate high with the flesh-colored delicacies. "Vegetarian," they'd insisted, nodding vehemently, but there was an ancient and fish-like smell to most of my dinner. I haven't yet warmed to the Chinese version of Chinese food.

This morning, with my right ear red and swollen and throbbing, I'd tugged on my navy-blue power suit and dragged myself through the motorcycle-exhaust-fumed Taipei heat to a waiting cab. As we tore across the city, I noted in speed-by glimpses a few pagoda-shaped structures and some conventional skyscrapers. In the distance, the 101-story Taipei Financial Building ascended into the clouds. Arriving at the university just in time for my first appearance, I was hustled through an anteroom lined with orderly pairs of shoes and escorted into a packed auditorium. That's when I climbed to the stage in my stocking feet and scrawled my grease-pencil lecture theme on the board: "WHAT IS CMC ENGAGEMENT?"

My preparations have been hurried. A few weeks earlier, a colleague at my Midwestern American university had passed along my name to the English Department here in Taipei. They'd subsequently asked me to headline a lecture series—apparently as a last-minute replacement speaker. I'd politely declined, explaining that, as an English professor who'd written only one short article on the subject, I was scarcely qualified as an expert on civic engagement—and, besides, I spoke no Mandarin. In response, the Taiwanese Department Chair had urgently renewed the offer, adding a number of enticements: a small stipend, a round-trip plane ticket, and hotel accommodations during the week of "Duanwu," the city's fabulous Dragon Boat Festival and Races.

Dragon boats? That caught my attention. A quick Internet search turned up photos of oversized canoes with prows carved into fire-breathing dragons. Each boat carried two rows of bare-chested rowers, paddling

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frantically. Blue, green, and gold pennants fluttered against the boats' red-painted scales. A sweat-beaded drummer kept up the cadence. A photo of the annual festival's opening ceremony showed a local dignitary 'awakening the dragon's spirit' after a year of dry-dock slumber by poking the beast's bulging eyes with a brush dipped in red paint. When I learned from Wikipedia that Chinese dragons embody the will and ideals of the community, I wondered if dragons accounted for the focus on civic engagement during the week of 'Duanwu.' In an email response, my Taiwanese host dismissed the connection, explaining that the university was interested in community service as a component in higher education, a concept relatively new to Taiwan. After wrapping up my duties, he emphasized, I'd have two extra days to enjoy the races and see the city. Incentive indeed, and a break from my dull, wintry Midwestern teaching routine.

What's more, I thought, the trip would be educational. I would observe the ancient cultural tradition of dragon-boat racing. I'd also get my first look at the island where Chang-Kai-Shek's Nationalist Chinese government had fled in 1949 when the Communists captured the mainland. But arrangements with the university remained vague. Persistent email inquiries failed to clarify the level of English proficiency I could expect from my audiences or whether I would be assigned a translator.

"What the hell, I'll go," I decided, after receiving billing instructions for a first-class plane ticket to Taipei the following week. I hadn't exactly lectured on civic engagement before, but I could gather information from my more engaged colleagues and do some fast cramming. Besides, I'd commanded audiences in classrooms for years. What could go wrong?

Indeed. As I pace back and forth on the auditorium's stage, face blistered and throbbing, one ear goes numb. Still, I'm confident after twenty minutes that I've done a fair job of describing the trend in American universities to encourage community service as part of the higher education curriculum. I break down the word "education" into its Latin components for my politely attentive Mandarin-speaking audience—mostly young people dressed like my students back home in blue jeans and T-shirts. I explain that education literally means "to lead out."

"To lead out of what?" I ask the group. Then I sketch a shaky pyramid on the board, caption it "Ivory Tower" and surround it with arrows pointing outward to indicate the university's obligation to engage with communities beyond its ivy-covered walls. Glancing at my grease-pencil drawing, which leans like the Tower of Pisa, I await responses from the audience. Meanwhile, my belly starts itching like mad, so I dart behind the podium, surreptitiously hitch up my white summer blouse, and scratch, noting with alarm that my stomach now matches the Taiwanese flag hanging on a rear wall in all its scarlet glory. From this vantage point, the faces gazing up from the graduated amphitheater appear, not so much engaged as perplexed, so I fold up my notes and call for more general questions.

No hands.

My eyes scan the front row and fix on a professorial-looking fellow who's nodding slightly, his chin cupped in one hand.

Any questions about civic engagement?

Again, two hundred blank stares.

Any questions about American universities?

Nothing.

Any questions about America?

My English-Mandarin speaking handler, a thin, bespectacled young woman assigned to accompany me throughout the lecture series, motions to me from her front row post and stage-whispers the news that Q/A is not a traditional teaching format here. She has prepared slips of paper, which we pass around, instructing everyone to write down a question. We sort through the results as the audience waits silently.

Nearly half the respondents have painstakingly copied 'WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?' from the board. One person has written, "Is this Honda Civic?" But the exercise is not an absolute dud. Someone has ventured, "Is civic engagement like world peace?" That's all the encouragement I need.

"Brilliant question," I gush, waving the slip of paper in the air like a tiny white flag. Something I can sink my teeth into, as a blister goes gooey, and dribbles down my neck.

The professor in the front row is still nodding, but when I attempt to make eye contact, his gaze darts away.

ÕSo, when students go outside the university, they help build houses. They participate in local government. They learn from people in the community. They share what theyÕve learned in school,Õ I explain. ÕPeople begin to recognize their common goals.Õ Raising four flaming fingers to make air quotes, I repeat the slogan IÕve seen on bumper stickers in the U.S.: ÕThink globally. Act locally.Õ

Gazing out at a maelstrom of blank expressions, I blather on in this vein as my watchÕs minute hand inches forward. ÕI mean, if we donÕt understand one another, how can we expect. . . .Õ My neck prickles like mad where vast blisters are oozing. My train of thought rumbles to a halt. IÕm flinching and wincing as the rash ravages a shoulder, mounts an assault down my arm, and advances toward the elbow. But I struggle to hit a ringing note of conclusion: ÕCooperation among communities is like a microcosm for cooperation in wider arenas. So yes. For sure. Absolutely. Civic engagement is a lot like world peace.Õ

As the auditorium ripples with polite applause, heat flashes across my face and my body sways uncontrollably. I close my eyes to steady myself and open them to see my hosts from the English Department rushing the stage with expressions of alarm.

ÕYou are ill?Õ inquires the Department Chair, a middle-aged man with a grey suit and buzz cut.

ÕThe face is quite red,Õ observes his woman colleague.

ÕShe must go to the clinic!Õ cries the Chair. He turns to the crowd filing out through the auditorium door and calls out, ÕSamuel!Õ

A sturdy male graduate student with a black ponytail emerges from the crowd, takes instructions from the Chair, and hustles my handler and me into a white minivan. As we speed through the simmering heat, my eyes follow SamuelÕs ponytail that swishes like a shiny pendulum as the van whips around motor scooters that zip across our path. Eventually, Samuel delivers us to a bungalow in an alley off a busy street lined with tailors, barbers, and small grocery storefronts. Shoppers hurry by, some in white surgical masks. Were the masks worn to ward off the pervasive motorcycle exhaust on the streets of Taipei? Or was there some other danger in the air? I finger the angry ridges now sprouting on my neck.

Inside the clinic, weÕre hustled past a counter, through a door, and into a white-walled room.

"Worst case of hives ever seen," proclaims the middle-aged male doctor who examines me. "You are suffering stress?"

ÕI donÕt feel stress,Õ I insist, shaking my sweaty brown curls as the doctor snatches up a clipboard and scrawls something onto a form. ÕI only feel itchy and achy and very red.Õ

He turns to me, one eyebrow raised: ÕChinese color of good luck.Õ

Is this intended as a joke? Well, the doc isnÕt smiling. The room is silent except for a small, whirring, ineffectual fan.

The doctor wipes his brow on the sleeve of his white coat. ÕWorst time of year,Õ he adds as he hands me the prescription. ÕAllergy. Heat stroke. Influenza. . . .Õ

He sends me off to a nursing station where IÕm injected with antihistamine, handed a vial of pink tablets, and ordered to bed.

Drugged, jet-lagged, and twitching like a pithed frog, I return with my handler to the van, which tears back across Taipei. DoctorÕs orders aside, IÕm delivered to a restaurant near the University, where a half-dozen academics cluster in the foyer, business cards extended. The lunch menu lists a "vegetarian pizza," which turns out to be a flour tortilla heaped with sliced bananas, smothered in grated cheese, and topped with chunks of ginger and red pepper. Eyeing the well-meant concoction and stifling a gag, I recall the elder George BushÕs puking into the lap of the Japanese Prime MinisterÑinspiring the Japanese to coin a new word: ÕBushburuÕÑto barf in public.

ÕNo,Õ I assure myself, as I claw at the welts on my neck. ÕI havenÕt sunk that low yet.Õ

Faithful Samuel pulls up to the restaurant to collect me, and soon weÕre headed for the university auditorium where IÕll make my final appearance of the day. As the van plunges through narrow back streets, I reflect on my visit thus far. The University staff has been unstintingly kind. TheyÕve treated their beet-red, high-maintenance guest with inexplicable reverence. Hand-painted signs posted all over campus welcomed me here in

both English and Mandarin. Faculty members brought offerings of flowers and colorful boxed sweets. Pots of fresh yellow chrysanthemums lined the packed auditorium.

Back at my hotel at last on the evening after my second and final lecture of the day, I ride up to my fourth-floor room. Beneath swollen eyelids, I squint into the elevator's mirrored walls at my face, a glowing relief map of scales, bumps, and ridges. Shuffling down the corridor to my room, I peel off my power suit and drag my itchy carcass to the bathroom for the first of a dozen cold showers.

The air conditioner is stuck on OFF. The instructions are in Mandarin. The desk clerk on duty downstairs speaks no English. There's no possibility of sleep in the damp, 90-degree heat. Naked, I slide open the windows and haul from my suitcase a hastily packed volume on Chinese legends, riffling its pages to find the section on dragons. Research is the academic's fallback device for coping with personal ills. Besides, if I can survive the next two days, I still plan to take in the dragon festival known as Duanwu. Between trips to the shower, I read through the sweltering night to the steady whoosh of motor scooters on the street below my open window.

Chinese dragons, it turns out, occupy an elaborate system of classifications and sub-classifications in a culture that dotes on categories. The book lists nine physical species, from horned and winged to coiled and homeless dragons. There are, furthermore, four dragon kings representing each of the four seas associated with China. There are five major personality types, from the logical and creative wood dragon to the pushy but objective fire dragon to the strong-willed and inflexible metal dragon. This orderly arrangement of dragon sensibilities reminds me of the Myers/Briggs-type personality inventories that I'd once administered to a group of undergraduates enrolled in an internship seminar. Imagining worst-case scenarios for my lectures, I'd copied one of these tests off the web and thrown them into my luggage along with the legend book as I dashed out the door for the airport. It was a desperate back-up strategy, but I knew so little about my topic. What if my mind just went blank?

I pull the surveys from my suitcase and stash them in the bottom of my day pack before subjecting my fiery flesh to yet another cold shower, then returning to the comforting distraction of research.

According to my book of legends, scholars trace the origins of the Duanwu Festival to ancient fertility rites conducted during Southern China's hot, insect-ridden summers, when the Five Gods of Plague ran amok in the villages and people felt helpless before the powers of nature. The dragon boat races themselves evolved more than twenty centuries back, among the folk rituals designed to please and appease the River Dragon, who lives in a palace deep in the water, controls the forces of nature, and requires veneration and sacrifice. The earliest races involved violent clashes between competing crews, egged on by screaming, rock-hurling partisans on the riverbank. A man overboard—even a whole crew—was considered a blood offering to the dragon deity. A lucky omen, I read with alarm. Rescues were forbidden.

Under the circumstances, why would anyone crew, I wondered. Reading on, I learned that that participation in the races was considered a weird form of community service. A sated dragon meant pervasive good luck, good health, and abundant crops.

Modern-day crowds don't throw rocks and no one drowns in the races these days, though boat crews paddle, drummers pound, and celebrants cheer them on with undiminished passion. The River Dragon has to be content with tributes of zongzi, packets of sweetened rice wrapped in bamboo leaves that revelers fling into the water.

After reading the gruesome history of Dragon Boat Racing, I have to remind myself that, in spite of their demeanor and ghastly appearance, Chinese dragons are actually the good guys. Unlike the evil monsters of Western lore, Eastern dragons are divine creatures, wise and protective, generally more peaceful than troublesome. But they're also temperamental and vain. They demand to be worshipped and properly fed. A slighted dragon could wreak havoc on the land, breathing out black clouds, calling forth droughts and floods.

All this talk about feeding the dragon is working up my appetite. With lunch still sputtering in my stomach, I'd declined tonight's dinner invite. Hesitantly, I pick up the phone and punch in the room service code.

"Hungry," I pronounce slowly when a high female voice greets me in Mandarin. "No meat."

"Okay fine. Very hungry," comes the cheerful reply.

Wrapping up in a robe and returning to my book to await the mystery snack, I learn that, at some point in the mists of history, a separate legend merged with the ancient dragon-worshipping fertility rituals and became associated with Duanwu and the Dragon Boat Races. This is the tragic tale of Qu Yuan, a great Chinese poet and social idealist who lived in the third century BC and was beloved for both his poetry and his commitment to civic duty. As I read Qu Yuan's story, it occurs to me, as a recently anointed community service pro, that this man might even be said to constitute an ancient model of civic engagement.

A contemporary of Confucius, Qu was a court official in the southernmost of China's seven warring states. Because Qu was a favorite of the king as well as the people, envious rivals duped the king into banishing him. "Why should loyal men be slain, flatterers rewards obtain?" the poet wrote in one of his laments. He is said to have carved some of the best-loved early Chinese poetry into the walls of shrines while an exile, wandering broken-hearted around the Southern countryside. Unbeknownst to Qu, the king longed for his favorite minister's return, as his state descended into corruption and military defeat. In despair for his homeland, believing himself unloved, the exiled poet waded into a river, clutching a gigantic rock in order to drown himself. When news of Qu's desperate action reached the common people, they swarmed to the rescue in their fishing boats. Arriving too late, they settled for beating drums and slapping the water with their paddles to keep the fish from consuming Qu's body. The Dragon Boat Races are said to be a reenactment of the race into the river to save Qu Yuan.

It's now 4 A.M. Having nibbled the rice and vegetables ringed a generous hunk of pork, I'm sprawled atop my hotel bed sheets, my tender skin cringing with each gust of hot air from the window, as I contemplate Qu Yuan's tragedy of miscommunication. After my first day of lecturing, the legend strikes a chord. I know close to nothing about my audiences. My lectures are completely inappropriate; I may as well be doing pantomime. Staggering into a cool river lashed to a rock has a certain appeal.

The next morning, I drag my weary self back to the University and head for the English Department, passing through a courtyard where students are hunkered down on the grass in small groups, packing pyramids of sticky rice into bamboo-leaf bundles. These are the zongzi they'll toss into the Keelung River to appease the River Dragon, or, according to the Qu Yuan legend, to distract the fish from lunging on the body of a beloved poet.

When I show up at his office, the English Department Chair takes one look at my oozing right ear, trundles me off to the school nurse, and I'm back in the little white van with my handler and Samuel. Roaring through the already steaming streets, past a blur of morning commuters on motor scooter and foot, we pull up to a second clinic. Here I get another shot of antihistamine, plus a bottle of lotion labeled "Sin Baby." Back in the van, I slather the thick white concoction over arms, face, and belly as we dash back to the University with faithful Samuel at the wheel. Somehow he always collects me on time.

This audience is clearly older, more advanced in English than yesterday's. I see nods of agreement, along with the scattering of raised eyebrows I've come to expect. All ghosted up in Sin Baby as I deliver my third lecture on Civic Engagement, I doubtless resemble the Five Gods of Plague reputed to wander the streets during Dragon Boat season.

When the lecture is over, a few people linger. "Your speech was awesome," a young woman tells me. "It is an honor to meet you." I want to throw my arms around her and would have too, if my rash hadn't busted through its chalky glaze, percolating down my arms, seeping under my fingernails.

The next morning, the last day of my lectures, both ears are stiff like a Schnauzer's and cauliflowerered like a lousy boxer's. My neck is bleeding where my fingernails have been raking it. My mind is a feverish blur. With one eye sealed shut, I look like a florid pirate.

"No more clinics," the school nurse decrees. It's off with Samuel and the handler to a hospital where I'm hustled to the end of a fast-moving line and treated to the efficiencies of Taiwan's National Health Care System. One line to register. Another line to receive a number. A third for the diagnosis. Swept along from station to station like a dragon boat in a rolling current, I finally hand off my number 39 to the bright-eyed English-speaking dermatologist, before collapsing onto a folding chair. It's 10:00 A.M. I'm her thirty-ninth patient of the day.

“Have you had this before?” the doctor inquires.

I shake my head, shrug my flaming shoulders, and sleepily admit: “You got me.”

“Have you eaten new foods?”

I describe those elite-class delicacies I’d been served on the plane, the tofu shellfish, the ginger and red-pepper pizza.

The doctor shakes her head in disapproval. “Bad, bad hives,” she intones as she dashes off a prescription for steroids and appends a list of forbidden foods typed in Mandarin. According to my handler the list includes: “no mango, no litchi, no strawberry, no moon cake, no alcohol, no shark fin, no cheese.” There’s a fourth line to pick up a Ziploc baggie of capsules and tablets. A fifth line for two ampoules of liquid medication, which I carry to a sixth station, where the medications are injected. One shot in each mangy arm, and I’m done--no charge. The entire process has consumed a mere thirty minutes.

Back in the University van with my weary handler at my side, I shamelessly pull off my shirt and slop on more Sin Baby. Samuel, at the wheel, politely avoids any glance into his rear view mirror.

This time when I enter the auditorium, slip off my shoes, and add them to the hundred or more neatly paired in the foyer, my fifth and final group is already seated.

Now striped red-and-white, I’m a Sin Baby candy cane. Both ears are crusted, stuck flat to the sides of my head. My clawed pustules are seeping into my eyes and trickling down my chest as I climb to the stage—noting indifferently that my power skirt may be on inside out. This group is a class of English beginners. All eyes are drawn to the ghastly apparition onstage, as I trot out Qu Yuan and his dedication to public service, weaving it skillfully into my canned lecture on civic engagement.

This audience clearly doesn’t understand a word, which is actually a good thing. After twenty minutes, I relinquish the stage to my handler, who puts on a floor show of her own. Lulled by the soft, rhythmic sound of her voice, I watch her thin arms gesturing as she addresses the audience in Mandarin, nodding my way on occasion. I imagine her recounting the tribulations of the last two days and pleading for absolution for “Our honored speaker—the red, scaly beast now willed upon an auditorium chair.

The students laugh. I’m too beat to ask why, though I wonder if it’s possibly the inch-wide hole in one of my white cotton socks. Eyelids glued at half-mast when I’d stashed my shoes in the vestibule, I hadn’t noticed the damage.

“Who cares?” I tell myself. I’m just grateful for the respite. I’m beginning to smell the barn.

But no. It turns out the university has scheduled a surprise sixth appearance for this afternoon. Either numerical concepts are as flexible as vegetarian ones, or I’m a bigger smash than I’ve so far detected. This time I’m dismayed to recognize several repeat customers in attendance, so I can’t recycle my standard lecture. Reaching into my backpack, I pull out the emergency bundle of Myers/Briggs-type personality inventories. My colleague translates the list of questions into Mandarin as I follow along in English: “Would you rather be considered (A) a practical person or (B) an ingenious person? “Would you rather work under a boss who is (A) good-natured but often inconsistent, or (B) sharp-tongued but always logical?” The students work diligently, filling in squares with the stubby yellow pencils I’d thought to bring along in a zip-lock baggie. When the test concludes, we enlist some students to score it with clear plastic templates. Meanwhile, I doodle illustrative stick figures on the board and expound upon Personality Types, a system I find about as plausible as belief in the Four Dragon Kings. Never mind. My integrity has vanished along with any sign of my actual skin.

At the end of my sixth and final lecture, the English Faculty lines up to thank me. “I’ll be fine on my own from here on,” I insist to the Chair, who agrees--a bit readily in my view. He rushes to his office and returns carrying a little white box tied with a ribbon. “Red, the color of good luck,” he points out, echoing the allergy doctor at yesterday’s clinic. I drop the box into my purse and shake hands to bid farewell to a half-dozen smiling professors. I try not to speculate on the source of their joy.

As the van pulls up to my hotel for the last time, I raise a flaming arm to wave goodbye to Samuel. I tell myself it could have been worse. One ear is coming unstuck, and it looks as if I’m finally going to lose those pounds I’ve been fighting, since my stomach churns each time I catch a glimpse of my red dragon-face in the mirror.

Two days before I fly back home. Hives or no hives, I'm going to, by god, do Taiwan. I may never again lay eyes on the brave little island that has faced down the Communists for more than six decades. I'll begin with the Duanwu festival that kicks off on the broad Keelung River. There'll be kite flying, carnival rides, drum beating contests, and of course, the dragon boat races. Below my hotel window, motor scooters gush along nonstop like blood through an artery as I gratefully drift off to sleep.

It's nearly 3:00 P.M when I wake the next day, just in time to catch a bus to the Keelung and the last of the races. I stagger down to the river, hoping to blend into the crowd, my hat pulled down over my still-volcanic skin. People smile politely. A few edge away, glancing back at me out of the corners of their eyes.

As I search for a spot on the benches lined up by the river, an old man smiles, bows, and offers his front-row seat. Accustomed by now to courtesy and solicitude, even a touch of dragon-worthy reverence, I merely nod back and plop down to study the fleet of dragon boats lined up at the starting line, all eager for the last flag to drop.

As they set off, the rowing teams keep time with the drummers, dipping their paddles in frantic unison. The flag-catchers squat atop the dragons' heads where they'll lean dangerously far over the bow, each straining to be first to snatch the victory flag.

The energy of the all-male crews with their glistening bare chests contrasts to the dazed appearance of the dragons, hauled out for their fifth and final race of the day, their eyes newly "awakened" with dabs of red paint. I lock red eyes with one slightly shopworn beast and detect a weary, imperious kinship in its gaze.

The next day, on the plane heading home, I reflect on my time in Taiwan. Despite my good intentions, I wrought chaos on the University's nice lecture plans and proved quite a troublesome creature.

Digging through my carry-on bags for the bottle of Sin Baby to dab on my still-raging hide, I notice the gift of the English Department Chair, the little white box forgotten at the bottom of my purse. Pulling off the red ribbon, I lift the lid to discover a pyramid-shaped bundle wrapped in bamboo leaves, and I recognize the fragrant scent of the dragon-appeasing sticky rice treat known as zongzi.

Leaning back in my Silver Elite recliner, I tune out a whimpering infant on the other side of the blue curtain. "I could get used to this," I muse, as I wiggle my scaly toes and stretch out my blazing red limbs.



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Alice Lowe



Alice Lowe reads and writes about food and family, Virginia Woolf, and life. Her work has appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Prime Number*, *Phoebe*, *Jenny*, *Writer's Ink*, and *Raven Chronicles*. She was the winner of a 2011 essay contest at *Writing It Real*. A monograph, "Beyond the Icon: Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Fiction" was published by Cecil Woolf Publishers in London. Alice lives in San Diego, California and blogs at www.aliceloweblogs.wordpress.com.

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Fruit Tramp

[Alice Lowe](#)

When classes ended in mid-May, Kevin and I loaded up his rusted red Datsun pick-up and headed north out of San Diego. An air mattress took up most of the back, where we would be sleeping for the next six weeks, the snug camper-top allowing us just enough room to sit up. Camping and cooking gear and as little else as we could get by with were stacked and wedged into every available space, shoes hanging from a curtain rod, books under the mattress.

I had succumbed to an invitation to join him in the cherry orchards of Eastern Washington. Picking fruit in the sweltering heat, back-breaking labor for long hours and low wages—how could I resist?

“Come on,” Kevin said. “You know it’ll be fun.” He counted on my being intrigued. I was.

Kevin’s goal was to collect data for his master’s thesis on migrant agricultural workers. He had recently spent three months in a village in central Mexico where most of the working-age males traveled across the border each spring to find seasonal jobs in the U.S. and send their earnings home. Now he would follow their path and work with them in the fields.

And what was in it for me? After spending my twenties and early thirties in virtual blinders, rarely veering from the safety of my circumscribed life and levelheaded choices, I’d met Kevin. He appealed to my long-stifed appetite for adventure, luring me with promises of what I’d been missing. I saw my chance—Double Jeopardy, Door Number Three—and I jumped at it. Our time together was one of personal challenge and discovery that led, among other things, to my leaving a dead-end job to go back to school, where I was studying sociology and planning a previously unimagined future.

Now Kev and I were veering off in different directions, but that didn’t preclude what might be our “sunset” trip. “Maybe you’ll get a paper out of it too,” he had added as a sweetener to his invitation.

We camped one night along the rugged central California coast, another amid the rolling dunes of southern Oregon. We pulled into Portland on a bleak afternoon, the day after the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Just fifty miles from the volcano site, the city was dark with debris, blanketed in ash. The volcanic matter—inders, shards and powder, like vestiges of a cremation—had brought daily life to a slow-motion slog, and people were warned to stay inside or to wear masks outside to protect their lungs, glasses or goggles for their eyes.

We spent a quiet night cocooned, virtually marooned, at a friend’s apartment. Thirty years later the memory remains more vivid than the rest of the trip: our serene candlelit dinner, the glow of merlot in delicate stemmed wineglasses, listening to our friend’s new album of Krystian Zimerman playing the Chopin waltzes. Ambient light, good food and wine, the poignancy of the music, feeling warm and safe while danger lurked outside. Early the next morning we unmasked the tarped and taped truck and sputtered out of the murky cloud.

Cherry growers proliferate in Central and Eastern Washington, but Kev’s contacts had recommended Grandview, a small agricultural city two hundred miles northeast of Portland, halfway between Washington’s Tri-Cities area and the Yakima Valley, its namesake view that of snow-capped Mount Rainier. We arrived around noon and prowled around the town, delighted with its rustic, shuffling, old-world ambiance. At a local bar we quizzed the bartender and chatted with a couple of guys shooting pool. They told us who was hiring and where to go, but when Kevin asked about the migrant laborers, they told him that the growers who use the Mexicans never hire Anglos and vice versa.

“What now?” I asked after we’d parked the truck for the night amid some trees off a side road, more or

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less out of sight. "This defeats the purpose of the trip."

"But we're here," Kevin said. "You don't want to turn around and head home, do you?"

We'd come this far and had committed the time. We agreed to stick with the original plan if we could get work. Kevin would still try to make contact with the Latino workers. We would have our adventure.

Washington State produces more than half of the sweet cherries in the United States on tens of thousands of acres. Growers target the Fourth of July—peak cherry pie time—for getting most of the crop into stores and stands, so the big push is in June. The first grower we visited the next morning hired us on the spot. We were directed to a makeshift campground on the property, where a handful of others were setting up temporary homesteads around their campers, vans, and trailers, putting out folding chairs and tables, hibachis and camp stoves. Country music blasted out from boom boxes. "Mammas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys" takes me right back; "Shadows in the Moonlight" recaptures slow, humid, mosquito-infested nights.

Our neighbors were what was known as "fruit tramps," nomads who followed seasonal crops around the country. They took their place in a long history of transient field hands, from Steinbeck's Oklahoma Dustbowl migrants of the 1930s heading west with little more than hope and the clothes on their backs to the hippies of the '70s, picking up work on the road as they roamed the country in psychedelic vans. During World War II the bracero program imported laborers from Mexico, but with the end of the war and domestic war work, jobs were reshuffled and reclaimed. The ebb and flow of Latino workers continued, however. There was still a demand for their services, and the work paid well enough to make it worth the risk of entering the country illegally.

By exploiting the Latino labor force, growers found they could pay their Anglo workers less: take it or lump it. Fewer jobs, lower pay, and child labor laws that prevented children from working the fields with their parents led to a shrinking corps of home-grown fruit tramps. When we appeared on the scene in 1980, the field workers were mostly undocumented Mexicans. The Anglos still on the circuit—couples and single men, most of them from the midwestern farm belt—came here for the apple and cherry harvest, after which they would spread south and east, picking citrus crops in California, Arizona, and Texas.

We bought picking buckets at the hardware store in town where you could find just about anything, from kitchen gadgets to hiking gear. The buckets were light-weight plastic, kidney-shaped to mold to the body. You strapped it on with a harness over the shoulders like a front-loading baby carrier. We filled buckets—which held about thirty pounds of fruit—then dumped them into flats. We were paid for the number of full flats at the end of each day, I can't recall how much, but it worked out to more than minimum wage once we got into the swing of it. At first the others would fill their buckets two or three times before I had a single one. But I was a fast learner and soon was keeping up with the best of them. I could get a good rhythm going, both hands in motion at all times while getting a strong grip on the stems so as not to "milk" the cherries, pull them from their stems. But I would lose my equilibrium and my confidence when I went too far up the ladders, where so much of the fruit was tucked into the high inner limbs of the fifteen to twenty-foot trees. So Kevin and I teamed up; I worked at ground level and on the lower rungs of the ladder, while he harvested up in the higher reaches.

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Fruit Tramp

[Alice Lowe](#)

The expression “low-hanging fruit” is used to mean easy picking, but there was nothing easy about this. I considered myself fit, but I wasn’t used to manual labor. My back and shoulders would start aching after a couple of hours. The work was exhausting, and even the seasoned veterans were wiped out by the end of the day. We started early, as soon as it was light, and knocked off by mid-afternoon when the heat and humidity made work intolerable. The air was oppressive, thick and heavy, felt as if weights were tied to my limbs and made worse by the volcanic ash that had carried across the plains and chucked its residue on the trees. Pulling on the branches disturbed the settled deposits, and ash permeated our hair and clothes, got into our eyes and mouths and lungs, even with surgical masks and glasses.

It didn’t stop me from eating the fresh, juicy cherries, a bonus of the job. I couldn’t just pick and eat them with their coating of sooty scum, not to mention the hidden taint of pesticides, so I would wash them off at faucets in the fields for immediate gratification and take more back to camp. A few of the workers thought I was crazy. “Aren’t you sick of these damned cherries by the end of the day?” After cleaning up in the sparse facilities provided, we spent our afternoons resting, but the heat in the truck was unbearable. We would drive around the countryside with the windows open, stirring up the stagnant air, or drink iced tea at an air-conditioned café in town.

Men and women harvested cherries side by side, up and down the trees, equally tired at the end of the day, but the women were expected to cook and serve and clean up back at camp. Domestic servants, just as they were at home, I supposed. I watched with a mix of annoyance and amusement as Kevin slipped into their macho mindset.

“We have to go along with it,” he said; “we have to fit in.” Kevin didn’t want his research agenda known; we needed to be like everyone else. We had created a back-story in case it was needed, but no one questioned us.

“How convenient for you,” I said. “What are they going to do, take you out to the woodpile and beat you up if you make a salad?”

He would join the guys drinking beer and shooting the shit as I took my place with the women at coolers and cookers. I bought groceries in town every few days—produce and bread, canned and packaged foods (tuna, peanut butter, beans, rice), milk and cheese that we could fit into our cooler, meat to cook up on the nights that we shopped. Somewhat of a gourmet cook at home, I fell easily into the routine of fixing simple fare from my limited pantry. I liked the homey impersonal chatter among the women—Na quick chili recipe, the price of bacon, aches and pains, grumbling about the guys:

“You’d think they’d have heart attacks if they lifted a finger to help.”

“What if we just sat around and drank beer, who’d get our supper?”

I couldn’t resist being a rabble-rouser. “They love to barbecue,” I said. “Maybe if we beg for more of their fantastic steaks and burgers, they’ll get off their butts.”

It worked, and we would grin knowingly at each other when the coals were lit or the propane started. Kevin accused me of inciting the troops.

“What are you doing, spouting your middle-class feminist views? What next, a protest march?”

“I’m thinking about it,” I said. “Are you afraid I’m going to disturb the status quo?”

“Just keep a lid on it, will you? We’re not here to organize the masses. We’re fruit tramps,” he said,

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Not lefty intellectuals.

We went into town late one afternoon with another couple, and on the way back, splat! A quail hit the windshield, dead on impact.

Dinner, the driver said as he stopped to retrieve it, but one ain't gonna be enough.

When we got to camp he went back out with his shotgun and brought back a few more, which he cleaned, split and grilled, inviting us to the feast. I was shocked at the brutality and squeamish about eating freshly killed game. I averted my eyes while he was prepping them, and I wasn't going to eat any. Until I smelled it cooking. He basted them with a mix of butter, beer, lemon and Tabasco. I was seduced by the succulent aroma as they sizzled on the coals, salivating by the time he took them off. I swallowed my qualms about road kill and gunslingers as I greedily gobbled up every morsel on my plate.

The work didn't get easier; if anything it was worse. Tedious. Relentless. I wisecracked about cherries of wrath. Our living conditions had started closing in on us. A weekend camping trip is one thing, but sleeping in the cramped pick-up night after steamy sweltering night became claustrophobic. We both needed privacy and space; we became snappish with each other. I slept fitfully, helped only by physical exhaustion. I tried pep talks: What's a little discomfort? Appreciate the experience, but they didn't help. I was worn down physically and mentally. I felt like Goldie Hawn in Private Benjamin, whining about her boot-camp regimen: I want to wear my sandals; I want to go to lunch.

We had allotted four or five weeks in the fields before we would need to get home to our jobs and lives. But I balked, I bucked, I caved in the middle of the third week. I'd had enough. Kevin protested at first, but feebly. He was wearying of it all too. He hadn't been able to further his research, and he wasn't any better suited to the work than I was. I suppose he would have gutted through it if he'd been on his own, but now he was able to use my feminine frailty and capriciousness as the pretext to pack it in. We made our excuses, said our goodbyes and hit the road.

Kevin and I went our separate ways a few months later, the demise of our relationship hastened by the ordeal of total immersion. And over the years my memories of that summer have faded like a pair of Levis after repeated washings. I dig down but can't dredge up the names and faces of our companions. I mine for insightful impressions, amusing anecdotes, but come up with debris. The rough edges of discomfort and resentment have worn smooth too. It was, after all, an adventure. But now it's shrouded as if under a cloak of ash. What I remember is flushed with the hot summer sun, the truck's chipping paint, the evening sky at dusk, and the sea of cherries in trees and buckets and flats and truck beds from brilliant crimson to dark claret, their juice staining my hands and mouth. I think about the term "cherry-picking" as a metaphor for choosing just those ideas or incidents that we like while ignoring the rest. Perhaps that's what I'm doing, reclaiming my memories selectively, cherry-picking what resonates for me, leaving the detritus buried. And I still get flashbacks. Glimpses of red when I pick a scoop full of cherries, sweet burgundy Bings, from the bin at my neighborhood farmers market.



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Sue Granzella



Sue Granzella has loved writing since she was six, although she waited another 45 years to start taking writing classes. She has won awards for her writing from the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition, and from MemoirsInk. Her work has been or will be published in *Rougarou*, *Apeiron Review*, and *Prick of the Spindle*. Sue teaches third grade in a public school in the San Francisco Bay Area. She loves baseball, road trips, dogs, quilting, stand-up comedy, hiking, and reading the writing of 8- and 9-year-olds.

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Morning-Night

[Sue Granzella](#)

Constance saved my life when my dad was losing his. I will never think of it any other way.

It is Tuesday, three days before I meet her. I am sitting on the floor of Dr. Hanson's office in Napa, staring at my dad's face as the doctor gives voice to what we already know. Mom is in a chair to Dad's left, Ann is standing behind him, the doctor stands before him angled off to Dad's right, and I am sitting on the floor just in front of him. It crushes me to hear out loud that my dad will die soon. And it is worse to be looking up at Dad's face as the words strike him.

"There's nothing else we can do. If we increase the medicine for your heart, your kidneys fail. If we cut back on the medicine to save your kidneys, your heart will fail. It's been a careful balancing act, and the medication needed now is just too much. There's nothing more we can do."

These words are all-powerful. They push against every instinct telling me that to live in this world means to have my dad in it, too. No matter how mightily I push back against them, the words win. They knock me flat.

"How long?" Dad asks with his eyes on Dr. Hanson. I don't look at the doctor. My eyes are locked on Dad's face.

"A few weeks. Less, if we keep you comfortable."

And so there is nothing more to say.

We use the word "ospice," and we may say "thank you" to the doctor as we all leave the office. In my physician sister Ann, my Alzheimer's-affected mom, my dad, and I. The doctor follows us out to the front desk, where there are awkward half-words and half-motions towards us as we head for the door. Dad doesn't look back at his doctor or at the young receptionist who watches us with big eyes. How do you say good-bye when you know for a fact that it's the last time? I think you don't. You just head for the car to go home.

Outside, Mom, Dad, and I hug Ann, and she gets back on the road to go to work in Elk Grove, south of Sacramento. I settle my parents into their large white Plymouth and take the wheel to drive us up Trancas Street, past Trader Joe's and Long's, past cars full of people who haven't just had the life sucked out of them.

As we wait for the red light next to Target to change, Dad says simply, "Well. I guess that's it. Is that what he was saying?"

I want to make it less hard-edged, less true, more gray. But I can't soften it, so I grip the steering wheel and say, holding most of my breath in, "Yeah. That's what I understood."

And there is nothing more to say.

We tromp up the stairs from their garage to their family room. The staircase walls are bare, unable to absorb the hollow sound of our heavy steps on the wood below our feet. Dad grasps the rail tightly as he pulls himself up. At the top, Mom opens the door and we enter the carpeted family room, where everything feels a tiny bit less cold. I shut the staircase door behind us.

I don't know how much Mom understands, and I do not want to ask her. She sets her purse down on the oval dining table, its stained green tablecloth sprinkled with bread crumbs, and then starts busting in the kitchen, making half a tuna sandwich for her lunch. Dad drops into his beige corduroy recliner and reaches for the TV remote. But he doesn't use it. He just holds it.

I pull off his black faux-leather shoes from Walmart, and he pushes up the footrest on the recliner. Then my father looks at me with his brown eyes that are just a shade lighter than mine and says, "So what are we going to

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do about Mom?Ó

I strangle myself inside so no tears will come out. I say, ÓWeÓll always take care of Mom. She can live with me and John. Ann has said that she can live with her and Jim and the boys. We wonÓt ever leave her alone.Ó

Someone else is inside of my body, making the words come out of my mouth. I cannot be having this conversation with my father.

Mom sits in her own beige recliner, just four feet to DadÓs right. Content with family around her, she calmly eats her tuna sandwich.

Dad answers me. ÓI donÓt think she should live with any of you. You guys have your lives. What about The Redwoods? Edna Bertinelli lives there. WeÓve looked at it before. ItÓs nice.Ó

I will agree with anything he says. I take very shallow breaths and say, ÓDo you want me to go check it out? I can go now, if you want.Ó

ÓYeah,Ó says Dad.

And so, twenty minutes after IÓve watched my father learn that he is about to die, I drive three miles to the lovely retirement community on Redwood Road, off to find a new home for my mother.

Dad is right; it is very nice. A large fountain bubbles in front of a wide expanse of lawn. Arches of fragrant red baby roses line the walkway to the front door. Inside, floor-to-ceiling windows ring the center atrium, which houses a gleaming grand piano. Instrumental music floats from an unseen speaker. The melody is still audible over the hum of voices off to my left and the clinking of silverware on dishes, as residents finish up their lunch in the large, warmly carpeted dining room.

And all I do is cry. I sob. I brush the lustrous wood of the piano with my fingers, I enter the office and ask for the manager, I go see an empty one-bedroom apartment, I put my momÓs name on a move-in list, and I stumble back out to my car. I cry the entire time, in huge sobs that rack my body. Everything pours out of me, everything that I choked back when I was in front of my dad.

I wipe my swollen eyes dry, drive back to their home, and tell my dad that itÓs a really nice place and that Mom can move in whenever she wants. His forehead smooths, and his eyebrows lower, the news helps him.

Mom looks as if nothing unusual has happened. She is comfortable in her recliner, her feet up and a thick word-search book open on her lap. She smiles at me. ÓHave you eaten yet? What do you want for lunch? Do you want a sandwich? Do you know where the bread is?Ó She is already kicking the footrest down, ever the mom, ready to feed me.

ÓThanks, Mom, but IÓm not hungry yet.Ó I donÓt tell her that I was hit by diarrhea at The Redwoods, and had to stagger to the bathroom.

My father then says, ÓSue, grab me the phone, would you?Ó

I hand it to him, and he starts punching in numbers, always the talkative extrovert. I listen, frozen, to his side of the first call. ÓYeah, Frank, I just got back from the doctor. Well, I guess IÓm at the end of the road.Ó His face looks like it always does when heÓs on the phone, which is often. HeÓs gazing straight ahead with a light in his eyes and a slight smile on his face. It looks like heÓs talking to someone he can see right in front of him.

After a few moments, a high-pitched beep signals to me the end of that phone call. Then come the musical tones of the next string of seven numbers, and I hear it again: ÓYeah, Dino? I just got back from the doctor.Ó I leave the room and head for the back bedroom. ItÓs as far away as the house will let me go.

There is a hand clutching my heart, and my breath catches when I inhale. I want to escape this, but I canÓt, because I was there on the floor of the doctorÓs office. I heard his words, and I saw DadÓs face as he heard the words. Those words overpower everything.

I donÓt know if I can survive my fatherÓs death.

The next three days pass in a surreal swirl. It is night and IÓm leaving message after message for my sister Nan, who is on a cruise in the open seas off of Nova Scotia. IÓd promised to call if something went wrong with Dad, but I know from her itinerary that this is one of the two days when she has no phone or internet access. And so IÓm leaving messages, knowing that they will rip her apart when she can finally retrieve them, but hoping that will be soon.

I am back at my Hayward teaching job for one day. ItÓs only an hour from my dad, but the distance pulls

too tightly on the cord connecting me to him. I do not tell my third-graders that I am taking a leave of absence until my father dies, which will be soon. I do not tell them that I am only there so that I can write up several weeks of general lesson plans for the person who will take over for me. I am nervous all day, too far away.

Nan calls me early in the morning, hollow. She will leave the cruise immediately, but it will take her more than twenty-four hours to complete the emergency transportation patchwork back to Dad. She instructs me on exactly what to tell Dad: that he must wait for her, that she loves him, that she's grateful for everything he's ever done for her. She cries and begs me to tell him all of it. I promise that I will.

I am back in Napa, staying at my parents' house. I drive to Brown's Valley Market to get chocolate milk for Dad. He's had a lifetime of loving to eat and struggling against gaining too much weight, and I feel something stab me inside when he shrugs and says, "I guess it doesn't really matter now." I hand him the chocolate milk and a sweet roll. He picks off the crumbs that fall onto his thin white tee-shirt, and eats those, too.

I meet with the hospice nurse, and though a tiny part of me hates her before she comes, I now feel how much I need her. I'm afraid for her to leave. She gives us a binder with phone numbers and lists. She tells us she will come back the next day to teach us to give the morphine.

Nan is still en route from Canada. My sister Ann and my brother Mike scramble to rearrange the details of their lives, of young children and jobs, in between their daily two-hour drives to Napa to be with Dad. I live the closest to Napa and I've taken a leave from my job, so I offer to stay full time with Dad while the others commute. We siblings are in a dreamlike dance as we come and go, in and out.

During the days, Dad naps on and off, but I can't sleep because I'm running to Long's, talking with Mom, calling relatives. The nights are blurry. I try to sleep on the floor next to his bed, but Dad can't lie down for more than two minutes at a time. His organs are under pressure because of his failing heart, and when he lies flat, his squashed bladder tells him not to. Every few minutes, he struggles to rise again, bouncing back up as if on a slow-motion trampoline.

"Oh, I think I have to go to the bathroom."

He sounds surprised every time, but, somehow, not irritated. In the dark, as my mother breathes deeply in her heavy sleep, we shuffle to the bathroom, my arm curved around his shoulders. Together we shift his weight until he's seated on the toilet. Then I slide to the carpeted floor, facing him, my back against the wall and my knees bent and up against my chest. We stay there for a long time. The elevated toilet seat seems to be where he has the least discomfort. I am so weary. My eyes close and we sit in companionable silence in the tiny half-bathroom.

In these moments-into-hours in the bathroom, it's in my head over and over: "He won't be here very much longer. And we're here now. I have to hold this moment." I am conscious. I grasp the moments.

We talk. He, naked, on the toilet seat, his bare rounded knees eight inches from my eyes, and I, back pressed to the wall, head resting on my knees. Both hearts broken, in different ways.

He says, "So I guess this is how it goes. Once you get to this point, people don't come by."

I breathe in shallowly, wanting to shield him from this, my dad, whose whole life has been about friendships and connections to people. The phone has been ringing a lot, and a few people have come. But I see it's not enough. Dad is feeling that he's alone, isolated, a pariah to his myriad friends. I can hardly bear this.

I want to remind him about the people who've called, the ones who've come. But more than that, I want to affirm whatever he's feeling. I think he'll feel even more alone if I don't. So I say, "Well, Dad, I think a lot of people just don't know what to do or say. You're braver than most people about going to see friends when things are bad."

He nods, considering. We're quiet again. I grab another moment, breathing it in.

I know he wants me to be happy in life, so I say: "You know what John said to me the other night? He said I'm the best thing that's ever happened to him. We're so happy together."

Dad nods again, smiling this time. "That's good. That's real good."

Somehow, they are peaceful, inexpressibly sweet, our soft times together in the bathroom in the middle of the night. Somehow, when the whole house is dark except for this one light overhead, and everything else is quiet and I can still see Dad in front of me and still touch his leg and still hear his voice. Somehow, I feel that maybe I

can survive this. That maybe I won't die when he does.

And then it's daytime. I'd heard that hospice takes care of everything, but what I most desperately need is something they don't do. I need someone to stay awake with Dad at night, because I need to sleep. Even in his recliner, he can't lie down for very long before needing to get up, and he can't get up by himself. So I'm up with him all night. And during the day, there is too much happening for me to rest. It goes by in a blur.

I am bone-tired. My need for sleep is primal and makes me frantic. I haven't slept more than one or two hours in a row since Tuesday night, and it is Friday. I know that once the weekend comes, one of my sisters can take over. But I need help now. I'd been so sure I could handle it that we siblings hadn't discussed what to do if I couldn't. I thought I could make it, but I am spiraling downward, falling. I start thinking about hiring someone to help, and I wonder if I can decide by myself to bring a stranger into the house to sit with our dying father. Should I call everyone and make sure we all agree? I think so. But what if someone says no? I want to respect everyone's wishes, but my exhausted body and the weight of the impending loss are crushing me, and as the hours pass, I realize that it's not an option I can handle.

I call the hospice number, but she tells me to find the "home help" section in the binder and start making calls. It is four o'clock in the afternoon, and in between doorbells and bathroom trips and microwaved meals, I am punching in strings of numbers and asking about cost and if someone can come right away.

I am breaking.

I keep pressing numbers, my mind spinning. What does "bonded" mean? How much money is too much to pay someone to sit all night in the dark next to Dad in his recliner? I vacillate between personal need, family accord, and guilt. Dad is very clear that he doesn't want to have someone come. We need to respect what he wants. I want to respect him.

But I am breaking into tiny pieces. I don't see how I can survive my father's dying.

I keep making calls, not sure what I'll do if anyone says yes. And then it's too late in the day. There is no agency left to hear my question. I am panicked.

I call my friend Beth, whose Napa friend Eleanor is ninety-four and has a live-in caregiver. Beth gives me the name "Constance," a woman who has filled in once or twice when Eleanor's caregiver is out of town. My hand trembling, I write down the number.

It is nearly eight o'clock. Mom is already in her nightgown, and I'm terrified to face another long night in the darkness without sleep, without relief. I have never felt this exhausted, this fractured. I am shaking, I am so tired. And I know that this is what grief feels like. Slow-motion grief, a heavy mallet pounding me over and over. I can't imagine remaining conscious, continuing to feel. I can't.

It is my last, desperate chance. I hold the scrap of paper with Constance's number, and I call. I'm not even sure what city I will reach. I get her voicemail. It all pours out, the words with the tears.

"You don't know me. I got your number from my friend who knows Eleanor, who lives in Napa. I heard you do home-health care and my dad is dying and I need help, someone who can come here tonight and sit with him so I can sleep. I have no idea what you charge, and I know this is completely last-minute, and I'm sorry. I just don't have anyone else to call. I know you probably can't come."

I give my parents' phone number, and it is done. I can't do anything else. I hang up and sit in silence. I hear my mom murmuring to Dad in the next room.

And then the phone rings. I hold it to my ear and hear, "This is Constance. I can come. I'm working another job until eight, and then I have to go home to sleep for a few hours. I will be coming from Vallejo. I could be there after I sleep, around midnight or one o'clock."

She can come.

I breathe in the miracle, choking out my parents' address between my grateful sobs. She will show up in the middle of the dark night, and I will entrust my precious father and some of his last few hours on Earth to this stranger. My need is so great that I am willing to sleep through some of his final moments. Constance recognizes my need so fully that she is willing to forego her own sleep for me, a stranger. I am certain that this is the single greatest act of kindness that has ever been done.

Constance is saving my life.

I hear a gentle tapping at 12:45 a.m. I pad over to the door, pull it open, and there, at the top of the brick staircase in the dark of morning-night, she enfolds me into her arms. I find comfort in her embrace, my cheek against her strong shoulder. I feel an intimacy with this woman I've never met, and I know that I will never forget her. She has never seen me, but she does this work so she knows my grief. So she knows me.

I can't stop crying, can't stop saying, "Thank you. Thank you so much." I bring her into the family room to meet my dad where he's propped up in his recliner, now that he can no longer lie down. He greets her, and I am relieved that he doesn't question her presence. Constance lowers herself onto one knee so that she can be at eye level with Dad as she introduces herself, and I am touched by this simple gesture of respect.

"I can help you whenever you need to get up," she tells him. "I'm strong." I feel the truth of those words. He is in good hands. Then Constance sits down on the black vinyl couch, and asks if it's okay with me if she lies down while she stays. It is. I am just so grateful that she's here.

I go into the back bedroom, far away from the entire world that has been happening in the family room and the bathroom. I fall into bed, and I sleep.

For those hours, I do not have to feel. I do not have to ache. I do not have to grab and hold moments, knowing that they are the last there will ever be with Dad. I do not have to imagine the future without him. My heart has a little time to rest, to breathe into me a bit more strength to help me survive my father's death.

I wake up at eight, in time to tell Mom to grab her checkbook and write Constance a check before she leaves. I say good-bye to Constance. And three days later, we say good-bye to Dad.

I still place a protective shell around my heart when I think about Dad, especially about his last week before dying. Though it's been six years, it still is unbelievable to me that I can exist in this world without him in it. How can he not be here? Even now, sometimes it hits me anew, raw and fresh. I don't know if that will ever totally go away.

But when I remember those days, something else surrounds my heart, too, permeating my protective shell. I see it as golden light, and feel it as warmth. Constance's compassion encircles me. Her kindness, a willingness to extend herself toward another human in need.

It has stayed with me, and I am sure it will never go away. Her gift six years ago didn't erase my pain. But it did alter it, softening it with a gentle touch of kindness. Infusing it with hope that maybe, somehow, I could keep going.

I think of Constance on Dad's birthday, on the anniversary of his death, on New Year's Day, and whenever I hear the words "home health aide." I would not recognize her if I passed her on the street. But I will never forget her. Constance saved my life as my father was losing his. I will never think of it any other way.

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Gail Seneca



Gail Seneca lives and writes on the Point Reyes Peninsula in California. Her short stories have been published in the *MacGuffin*, *Passages North* and *Westview*. Currently, she is working on a novel. She is the grateful beneficiary of good advice from all sources, such as the oracles she quotes in *OBe Gay!*

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Be Gay!

[Gail Seneca](#)

The year Ronald Reagan became president, my girlfriend and I decided to get pregnant.

We conceived the idea over an elaborate Indian meal in our steamy, fenugreek-scented kitchen. The conversation lasted for hours, as we listened, challenged, teased and dreamed. We celebrated our decision by playing four hand piano, creating round, harmonious chords - the soundtrack of our relationship.

Under Reagan, we couldn't call a sperm bank; and we couldn't adopt. But we found that the world teemed with willing sperm donors; not one man refused our request. Finding an obstetrician proved more difficult, but crusty, no-nonsense Doctor Jane finally took us on. She assessed our medical histories. I was younger, but had health problems; Doctor Jane preferred Karen as the biological mother.

"Öm 41, Ö Karen said. ÖsnÖt it risky at my age?"

Doctor Jane patted Karen's knee and said, ÖDonÖt worry, dear.Ö

On the first insemination, Karen conceived, but the pregnancy was troubled from the start. Restlessness plagued her sleep. She craved fresh brown bread and peanut butter, and refused all other food. Violent morning sickness forced her to cut back on her work at a feminist journal. She tried to edit manuscripts from home but gradually, almost imperceptibly, parenting manuals replaced feminist tracts on her desk.

The more she read, the more we worried. Birth defects, learning disabilities, allergies. One night during week six, Karen woke with a scream. Ödreamt,Ö she said, Öthat the baby was a goat.Ö I stroked her back and tried to calm her. ÖAnything can happen,Ö she wailed. ÖWe canÖt control it.Ö She sniffled. ÖBut I know what I can do. IÖll set up the babyÖs room.Ö

She flung herself so energetically into the project that it puzzled me. SheÖd never shown interest in interior design, but now, she examined sample books as if they were hieroglyphs. ÖWhat the baby sees will influence her attitude,Ö she said. She chose inspirational images for the wallpaper: sunrises over lakes, over mountains, over fields of sunflowers. ÖThe babyÖs grounding in the world,Ö she said, seeking the perfect carpet color. Over green tea and incense with a Zen practitioner friend who sold carpets, she selected a gentle rose-magenta.

She woke me early one January morning and led me to the porch where a cup of hot coffee and a duvet awaited. Pointing to the horizon, she said, ÖWatch.Ö The grey dawn yielded to orange, and then pink. ÖSee it?" ÖKaren said. ÖThe precise shade of the babyÖs carpet.Ö

Squinting, I nodded. I wouldn't have described daybreak in those terms. But pregnancy hormones cast a powerful spell on a person, and I was not that person.

Karen listened to childbirth tapes instead of Mozart. She studied baby books rather than *M/s.* magazine. Instead of politics, she wanted to discuss controversies in infant education.

I began to look forward to the days my job required that I stay late. After ten one night, I sat alone in my office, closed my eyes and summoned the memory of snorkeling in a Hawaiian cove. Amidst fuchsia fan-tailed fish, Karen and I floated, carefree. A different life. I pinched myself and drove home through the cold, cloudless night.

Bread crumbs speckled Karen's pillow. I watched her swollen belly rise and fall, listened to her contented breath, and imagined our perfect little girl suckling at her full breasts. I wondered how the bed could accommodate all of us.

To ensure my place, I inserted myself into baby preparations: bassinet choices, furniture moving, lists of

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baby names. We were into the Jeans, the Joans and the Jocelyns when Karen began to hemorrhage. At the hospital, the admissions nurse peppered Karen with questions. Address, insurance coverage, next of kin. "Gail Seneca," Karen answered. "Relationship?" "Partner." "Next next of kin?" Somewhere during all the questions, we lost the baby.

Karen slept for three days, waking occasionally to weep. Soggy tissues littered the bed. Blood-stained pads piled up in the trash. When she finally got up, she shuffled to the piano, where she played Chopin nocturnes so melancholy that I stuffed my ears with cotton. I ran my fingers through her unwashed hair and nuzzled her neck until the music died away. "We'll try again," she said.

Doctor Jane instructed Karen to take her temperature every day and plot it on graph paper in order to pinpoint the ovulation spike. The goal was insemination as close to that moment as possible.

The first insemination failed, memorialized by the arrival of Karen's period and an outburst of sobs. I couldn't console her; only the opportunity to hit the spike again in two weeks heartened her. As she waited, she researched the literature on pregnancy at the medical school library with the same zeal she'd applied to the baby literature. Tears welled in my eyes as she explained preeclampsia and life-threatening ectopic pregnancy. "You don't have to do this," I said. But she wanted to.

Her calendar, with its photos of marching suffragettes, splayed out on the kitchen table and spliced time into two weeks of hope and two weeks of despair. Six months coozed by, each day longer than the last.

To lift our spirits, Doctor Jane enrolled us in an infertility support group. As we entered the meeting room for our first session, three heterosexual couples and an older woman in a pantsuit stared at us with pinched expressions. Someone drew a tissue from one of the many Kleenex boxes. "You must have the wrong room," the suited woman said. We backed out, embarrassed and relieved at the same time.

"It's a sign," Karen whispered. "I don't belong with the infertile people." I averted my eyes.

At the one year point, our house piled high with pregnancy literature, the nursery vacant and still, I proposed a change of scene. Karen agreed, provided we scheduled the trip outside the possible spike week and spent no money, because we were saving for the baby.

We drove to visit my father in his senior living community on the Jersey shore. Years before, Dad dove into retirement as if it were a swimming hole at summer camp where he could splash around with his pals until sunset. He'd surrendered any semblance of parental obligation and never looked back. I anticipated shuffleboard, bridge, senior discount lunches and not a shred of attention to our problems. Not Hawaii, but a thoroughly mindless distraction.

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Be Gay!

[Gail Seneca](#)

When we arrived on the last day of February, Dad was planning his monthly fling to Atlantic City. The next morning, he'd cash his Social Security check and board the bus with a hundred neighbors. He invited us to go. "Money will get your mind off your crazy project," he said.

Neither of us frequented casinos, but we'd grown accustomed to gambling. We agreed.

In Atlantic City, our entire busload of seniors headed for the "ALL YOU CAN EAT" buffet at Harrah's. "You girls won't believe this," Dad said, his eyes shining. "ALL, I mean ALL, you can eat. Bet you don't have this in New York. \$1.99, by the way. I'll pick up the tab." His face reddened as he hustled through the casino to the long line snaking out of the restaurant. "Hang on to me," he said, grabbing my arm. "Like I can't walk and you have to hold me up. Then we get to the head of the line." I tightened my jaw and obeyed.

Mounds of potato salad, spaghetti, and chicken outlets later, Dad tossed his napkin on the table. "Enough," he said. "Our fortune awaits."

We followed him to the casino floor, where bells clanged and lights pulsed. Frank Sinatra competed with Elton John and grey haired men and blue haired women hovered over slot machines. We passed idle blackjack dealers, empty craps tables and marched, my dad's loyal lieutenants, toward his chosen row of slots. "This is it," he said, his pink polo shirted chest swelling with pride. "Last bunch of nickel slots in the joint." He spun around as bells from a winning machine clanged behind him. A woman with thick pancake makeup and red lipstick smeared beyond her lips leapt up from her stool and applauded the nickels crashing into the metal tray. "I told you," Dad said. "These babies are hot."

He dug into his pocket and displayed two tiny magnets in his palm. "My little helpers," he said, and affixed them to the backs of two machines.

"How do they help?" I asked.

"Watch." He sat down and draped his jacket across the stool next to him. "I use two," he said. "Most people can only handle one at a time." He set a paper bucket on the vacant stool. "For my winnings," he said. "You're not gonna believe this."

He operated his two slot machines simultaneously, one with his right hand and the other with his left, pulling and releasing, never stopping the motion, his gaze darting between the whirling cherries, apples and watermelons. At the occasional sight of a "Jackpot" banner on the machine, he exclaimed, "Yeah, baby."

We stood behind him, mesmerized.

"Don't hang over me," he said, "you're bringing me bad luck. Get outta here." He dug into his pocket and passed me a \$20 bill. "Go somewhere else," he said. "Have fun."

I took the money. "We'll save it," Karen whispered.

We walked out into the grey afternoon. The boardwalk rides and games were mostly shuttered. An occasional food vendor shouted to us, "Hot dogs, french fries, ain't you hungry, girls?" At the far end of the boardwalk, amidst neon signs beaming salt water taffy and souvenirs, a sandwich board teetered. *Discover Your Future*. \$5. We looked at each other. Irresistible.

In the dimly lit storefront, strains of salsa music leak out from a curtained off back room. "Un momento," calls a female voice from behind the curtain. The lights come up. The room is bathed in magenta, the exact shade

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Karen chose for the baby room rug. A white Christmas tree blinks magenta colored light. The worn shag carpet blushes magenta, the walls shine magenta, the velveteen love seat sags magenta. On the wall, a velvet weaving of Martin Luther King, Jr., wreathed in a brilliant rose sunrise, smiles down on us.

ÒHola.Ò A big-breasted woman with brassy hoop earrings, a bandana over thick, frizzy hair and a long flowered skirt frounces toward us. ÒSoy Mariluz Consuelo Matamoros,Ò she says, hands on her wide hips. ÒHow do I help you? St.Ò She indicates beach chairs at a round table with a yellowed lace tablecloth and a crystal ball in the center.

We gather around the table and Mariluz Consuelo Matamoros asks, ÒWhat is your problema, mis hijitas?Ò

I peer into the crystal ball and realize it is merely smoky glass. ÒWe canÒt get pregnant.Ò My voice trails downward, laden with the weight of the past year.

Mariluz Consuelo Matamoros spreads her hands on the table and stares at us, with a confused expression that resolves into exasperation. She crosses herself in the way Catholics do. She sighs. ÒYouÒreÉ gay? No?Ò

I slam my palms on the table. ÒThat doesnÒt matter,Ò I say.

ÒDios Mio!Ò Mariluz Consuelo Matamoros, paces toward the door, sighs, turns back to us and sinks her heavy body into her creaky plastic beach chair. She shoots her gaze up to the heavens. ÒMiren,Ò she says, Ò mis hijitas, this is your future.Ò Karen clamps my knee under the table. ÒYou will estop this. Right now. Inmediatamente. You will estop.Ò

Karen turns to me, mouth open in a startled oval, and wails. ÒWhy? Why should we stop?Ò

Mariluz Consuelo Matamoros sits up straighter in her chair and stares us down. ÒI tell you why. Eschuchenme,Ò she says. She leans into us. ÒAll day I sit here, and I hear the problemas they bring me. They come from the beach, from the buses, from Brooklyn.Ò She flings her banged arm toward the boardwalk. ÒAll the same problema.Ò She pauses, lights a Camel and sucks in the smoke. As she exhales, she speaks in a low, conspiratorial tone. ÒYou know the problema? They kids. They kids are sick, they kids donÒt go to school, they kids do drugs, they kids donÒt work, they kids donÒt love them! All day I hear this. And your problema is you donÒt have kids? Dios Mio!Ò She crosses herself again. ÒYou will estop! You will have no kids. You will have fun. You will be gay.Ò She turns up her palm and slides it across the table. ÒFive dollars.Ò

Outside, the sun breaks through the overcast sky. We sample salt water taffy. Biting into it, Karen says, ÒShould we estop?Ò We burst into laughter, suck on the taffy and head back to the casino. Some boardwalk games have opened and we pause to marvel over an enormous stuffed whale, the grand prize for knocking down a row of bottles. A teenager pitches softballs at the bottles as his girlfriend cheers him on. They kiss as he passes her the turquoise whale. On the beach, two gamine young women jog, the sun glinting off the barrettes in their glossy hair. A boy fishes from the pier. I gulp the crisp sea air and think of swimming. When I dug through the basement last night for our suitcases, I uncovered our snorkel masks, abandoned since the baby project overwhelmed us. I visualize them there, patient, ready for our return.

An older couple in quilted coats toddle toward us, hand in hand. The man doffs his hat. ÒBright day, ladies,Ò he says. ÒThe oceanÒs sparkling.Ò

We stop and gaze at the glittering water. Karen hums a bouncy melody from Carmen and I join in, happy to be back in synch with her. ÒDo you remember that cove in Hawaii?Ò she says. ÒLetÒs go there again. We can use the baby money.Ò

Back at HarrahÒs, Dad commandeers his machines, both arms pumping, the bands of fruit in perpetual motion. ÒYou girls having fun?Ò he asks, without turning around.

I look at Karen for the answer. Even under the freakish neons of the casino, I see pale, gentle light in her eyes, the hint of sunrise. She nods. ÒWe are,Ò I tell Dad. ÒWeÒre just beginning to have fun.Ò



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Heather Rick



Heather Rick is a New England-based writer with a Midwestern heart. An art school drop-out, she is currently churning through the bowels of community college in the cultural wasteland of north-central Massachusetts. She is suspicious of writers with fancy degrees and believes in the power and importance of fucking up.

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Shards

[Heather Rick](#)

Charlie Hennessy was a Golden Gloves boxing champion. That was the first thing he wanted you to know. He wore a maroon hoodie boasting the words *Golden Gloves Boxing* beneath his crinkled denim jacket, when he came in from the 5:30 rush hour cold. He looked like he'd never seen a summer, the way his body was this scrap of tin beaten into a cursive letter by thirty-three years of Chicago winters. Charlie was like an El train at night or a character from a Nelson Algren story or the glow of skyscrapers against the face of the Midwestern sky—something that you sense has always been a part of this place, that makes up the big-city blue-collar bones, and the beautiful grit of the cityscape between sunset and steel.

I sat next to him every week in the creative writing class that met Monday nights through one of the worst winters in decades. He lived underneath the beige brim of his panama hat, a jerky little guy. Charlie had turned his schizophrenia into a manic, stuttering creativity. You could feel it coming off the pages he held in his shaking hands when he read, this vibrating heat emanating from that tangled black knot in his mind. If I reached over and removed the panama, the top of his skull would be gone, just a pink-gray brain sparking like Christmas lights, with the evil genius illness seething like a black spider knotted up in the meat. Even the howling wind and snow in the cement-walled courtyard outside the windows quieted when Charlie read, as if in deference to the gift that wore this scrappy human vestige.

By day, Charlie was an art promoter and ran a gallery out of a storefront in Humboldt Park. That was a poor Puerto Rican barrio, full of abandoned buildings barred with wooden planks and iron grills, staccatos of broken glass and graffiti, Latin Kings territory. You pushed open the door of one such storefront, on Milwaukee and Washtenaw, and there was this space: walls painted lipstick red and branches jutting from the wall like antlers hung with Buddhist prayer flags. People-sized paintings loitered in the middle of the floor like dignified guests you were supposed to greet every time you entered. A makeshift stage swam beneath strings of blue and white lights and a bar was in the back set up on milk crates, cases of Old Style going warm on the paint-splattered concrete floor.

Mattilda was the primary artist there. He was responsible for the cigar store, Indian studded with rusty iron nails and the life-sized portrait of Mayor Daly as Madonna. Mattilda was like some Babylonian mother goddess. He moved through the obtuse colors and bright geometry of the gallery in the full glory of his rolling obesity, draped in bright silks, beads that clacked a holy rhythm, face of blue and white and golden paint.

Charlie ran a story slam there the last Wednesday of every month. He invited poets and playwrights to read, from staid professors who waited in on tenure and shining publishing credits to ex-gangbangers and Renaissance women from the deeps of Pilsen. Others got up there with a beer can in one hand and a page of scribbled prose in the other to read as much as they could before the crowd booted them off, hoping to win the sweaty fifty-dollar bill in Charlie's pocket and the distinction of being the hippest writer in Chicago until next month's slam. Charlie's wife, Inez, would hang out in the back during the slam, disappearing into Mattilda's monsters, smiling at you like she was your big sister, somehow anchoring the anarchy her husband had unleashed. She had skin the color of caramel candies melted in the sun and this Medusa-black hair; I could understand why Charlie had gone to jail for her, beating her ex nearly to death with those Golden Glove fists.

Every year Charlie scraped together what was left over after paying tuition and the water and electric bills at the gallery and went to Pamplona, Spain to turn his manic tic against the bulls. One July night at the slam, Charlie was up there on the plywood stage, his hat brim casting blue and gray shadows on his sweaty white t-shirt,

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narrating Charlie versus the bulls. He sucked up every pair of eyes like he was a gyrating black hole at the center of the gallery, the way he shouted and ducked and jerked, sweating like those bulls were after him again. I imagined this is what people did back in the primeval folds of Africa and Asia and Europe, gathered around those with the mystical illness of creativity to absorb the electricity of story. Suddenly, as the bulls of the story approached and Charlie was hunched over, ready to run again, lightning struck a car outside on the street and the whole building flickered and shook. And it was like Charlie was God, calling down the shades of those Basque bulls from the thunder to beat their hooves against the metal and concrete of this decaying barrio.

Most of the time I brought Alicia with me, a tomboy in a cruelly feminine body, her double-D breasts stuffed and smothered into a sports bra. She shared a love of Midwestern beer-belly punk rock, those bands that make you feel the despair of tiny flatland towns and the reckless hope of youth perched on the city skyline with a three-chord heartbeat. We saw the Lawrence Arms and Dillinger Four together every time they played, pooled our singles and bought seven inches at shows to listen to on our shared record player, and pretended love in the bubbling malt affection of forties of King Cobra.

The slams were likewise part of our courtship. We cuddled into each other's hair, leaned flirting thighs together in the metal folding chairs in the pool of the stage, and took turns with two dollars to get lukewarm cans of Old Style. The bartender was beautiful, with pecan-colored skin and licorice dreads down his back, a smile like an embrace that took in the sweaty money we pushed across the board, our age and nervousness, but he hadn't the heart to deny a couple of nineteen-year-olds an alcohol bath for their puppy love.

Sometimes Alicia couldn't go. She had to get up early for court-ordered community service in the morning, or she had to go visit one of her mystery friends in a posh highrise in the Gold Coast, probably remnants from her coke-dealing days. So I brought Token instead, Kyle that is. He was a frat boy from Birmingham, drinking So-Co with Dr. Pepper, a Confederate flag on the sleeve of his jacket, eyes big, but soft, like dogwood blossoms. Somehow he'd become the token straight guy any group of gay people tends to collect. Mostly he hung around to screw the fag hags and confused bisexual girls, but he was also a bit of a lesbro, and listened to riot grrl bands like Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear.

We would stand by the aquarium tank in the back of the gallery, draining our beers and tapping fingernails against the glass. The turtle munched romaine lettuce while we discussed the politics of punk rock and sex, the catharsis of gritty guitar chords against the regret that hangs like a poison sack in your stomach, the painful shimmering beauty of our lusts and angers. We'd drunkenly sing snatches from our favorite song, "Rebel Girl," cooing to the shy turtle, "You know I wanna take you home I wanna try on your clothes ð Ohh!" and everything we knew about rock n' roll and desire hinged on that plaintive "Ohh!", the cry of three-chord-souls of white-trash punk rock youth, exploding from bedroom speakers and basement shows up and down the heterosexual backbone of the Midwest.

If it was Token/Kyle, he'd drive me home in his Jeep with the Alabama plates. Growing up, my dad never driven sober, so the can of beer between Kyle's knees and the steering wheel didn't panic me. If it was Alicia, we had our legs and the El. The slams ended too late to catch the Milwaukee bus, so we had to walk the mile to the Damen Blue Line station. Humboldt Park was the sort of neighborhood two drunk, white lesbians should not have been able to walk in the deep of the night. But at that hour Milwaukee was deserted, only a ghost of salsa music and barking male voices drifting in from the black yawning side streets.

Sometimes the city gives you a break, in the static late-night hours when the streetlights flicker through unslept sleep and the normal laws of urban physics bend. You'll find yourself feeling safe and alone, untouchable and filled with a lambent glow like a train coming around a subterranean bend, or a heart-black saint on some crumbly street where you should be getting mugged or raped. But for every peaceful 3 a.m. walk you find yourself gifted with, you know the city is going to throw you a subway masturbator on your morning commute or a face-full of stinging February hail. Nobody's every really lucky.

But the barrio would be beautiful in its abandonment, as it was that night we walked to the train in the dregs of Charlie's storm, the echoes of his bulls rumbling off into Logan Square, the Ukrainian Village, out to O'Hare and the northwest suburbs. The parked vans and busted windows and graffiti slumbered like dusty preserved jewels of some civilization that had died a long time ago, when the sun went down. Then Milwaukee

Avenue folded us back into the lights and bustle of Wicker Park, and we rode the train together as far as Clark & Lake, where Alicia stayed on southwest to her neighborhood, and I caught the Red Line to the North Side.

There's not much point to this story, besides the fact that when I got home my roommate had left all the windows open and the dresser beneath my window was swimming with water and receipts and change, and a green beer bottle had fallen from the sill and shattered emeraldly in the water on the floor, and these are things I don't have any more. Charlie's stories and Milwaukee Ave at 3 a.m., these friends and that bedroom. A verdant spray of glass across the fractured surface of my life.

Memory is broken-bottle green, the same color as the nausea of nostalgia. It's these shards of glass I can't stop chewing on.

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Jennifer McGaha



A native of the North Carolina mountains, Jennifer is known for her sharp, quirky take on everything from parenting to relationships to slaughtering chickens and raising cucumbers. Jennifer lives with her husband, sons, five dogs, twenty-five chickens, and one high-maintenance cat in a tin-roofed cabin on fifty-three wooded acres. In her free time, Jennifer enjoys hiking, running, mountain biking, and drinking local beers. She is currently working on a book, tentatively titled *Frog Strangler*, about her adventures in the woods.

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Tribulation

[Jennifer McGaha](#)

It was mid-July, 1977, and we were cruising down I-40 in a '69 Ford LTD on our way from North Carolina to the Grand Canyon. My father did not believe in listening to music while driving. He wore a light blue cap that said "Ford" in darker blue on the front and he stared straight ahead, his eyes focused on the road. My mother angled toward him, one foot tucked underneath the other thigh. She filed her fingernails while she chattered.

"Sixty-two cents for gas? Oh, my goodness! Look at those Crepe Myrtles! Aren't they beautiful?... I'm feeling warm. Are you all feeling warm? I wonder what the temperature outside is. I bet it is 95. Do you think so?"

Every now and then, my father offered a one line response, but mostly he nodded and muttered. My brother and I rode in silence, our mother's voice a melodious backdrop to the drone of the highway falling beneath us. I was ten years old and my brother was fourteen. We wore short shorts, tube socks, and had matching winged hair. I had outgrown the sticker books that had entertained me all the way to Myrtle Beach and back when I was little, so I had brought along a stack of *Nancy Drew* mysteries and seven of my favorite stuffed animals—a collection of various sized dogs. The largest was roughly the size of a hearty butternut squash. The smallest more closely resembled a red new potato.

Snuggles was the mother of the group. She was white with pink ears and large brown eyes. The father, Hershey, had long, floppy ears and was the color of my mother's chocolate sheet cake. And then there were the little ones: two whose names are forever obscured by childhood and my favorite, Brownie, a miniature version of Hershey. This was pre-Furbies, pre-Bearie Babies. I had never seen these dogs advertised on TV. None of them *did* anything, nor could you collect them and keep them in a curio cabinet for a few years before selling them and buying a new car or second home. And so my love for them was pure and untainted by commercialism or the promise of investment.

By the time we hit Knoxville, my brother and I were already bored. My dogs had undergone several family crises, which I had expertly guided them through, and I was halfway through *The Mystery at The Ski Jump*. My brother had completed all the word games in three *Reader's Digests*.

"I'm bored," I told my mother.

"See if you can find the alphabet on the road signs," she said. "Look. There's an *a* over there on that A&W sign."

Twenty miles later, I was still searching for a *c*, and my brother had found the entire alphabet. I gave up. I arranged my dogs in birth order on the vinyl line between the seats, then stared out at the billboards floating past to a kid in jeans and a blazer thumbing by the highway and at the prison crew stopped for lunch. And then, just as we crossed the Tennessee-Arkansas state line, I got a cramp in my left calf. I reached out my leg long to stretch it and accidentally knocked my brother's leg. In return, he edged the bony part of his knee into that soft spot just beside my kneecap and pushed with such force that I screamed, "Stop!" at a frequency which only dogs should have been able to hear, but which our father did, in fact, hear.

"Do you want me to pull over?" he said, breaking eye contact with the road just long enough to glare at us over the seat. "Huh?" he said. "Do you?"

A smirk began deep in my brother's throat, a distant hum growing, which spread to one side of his mouth, at which point my dad caught it in the rearview.

"What did you say?" my dad said. "What?"

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Don't say it, I thought. Do. Not. Say. it.

Go ahead, my brother said, his jaw twitching, his dark eyes meeting my father's in the mirror.

For a moment, there was only the sound of the highway rippling. Then my mother trilled, "Oh, my goodness! Look out the window, everyone! Look at that groundhog! And is that a hawk over there? I think it is! Look, everyone! Na hawk!"

My mother was petite with full, black hair and deep brown skin, which belied the Cherokee ancestry our family did not discuss. She had a breathless way of talking, her voice high and fluttery like a bird's, and she tackled every silence as if it were an emptiness she could fill. When she didn't know what to say, she made up words.

"Woozie!" she would say if she were cold or shocked. "Woozie be doozie be!"

Around the house, my mother wore shorts and went barefoot. She smelled like Jergens' hand lotion and she had lovely, flawless skin, except for one varicose vein in the shape of an oval on her right thigh. When I was little, I would clutch her knees and trace the outline of that mark with my fingers. The only times my mother ever dressed up were for church or bridge club. For these occasions, she dabbed Jovan musk on her wrists and neck and she wore high heels, brightly patterned floor length skirts, and bright red lipstick. Men thought she was beautiful, but she never seemed to notice, and I think she was as surprised as I was when men commented on her appearance.

"Your mom sure is gorgeous," one of my friends' fathers would say.

And I would look at her again—her high cheekbones, pitch black eyes, slender shoulders, and delicate waist—and I would try to see her as a child can never really see her mother, as a man might see her.

Now, my mother's strained voice set off all sorts of alarms in my head. I was an anxious kid, prone to all sorts of compulsions. The year before, in fourth grade, I had had a cough that lasted roughly six months. Our family doctor had sent me to a pulmonologist, who told me to try sipping water whenever I felt the urge to cough. Every day, I carried a bottle of water to school and alternately sipped and hacked throughout the day. Back then, carrying a water bottle to school was unheard of—right up there with experiential learning and ADD—and my teachers treated me as if I could spontaneously combust at any moment. This disease was more mysterious than others they knew about, like diabetes, and potentially more dangerous since it involved *the lungs*.

I didn't even have to participate in P.E. No more getting hit in the face with a dodge ball or running laps around the school. No more sit-ups or flexed arm hang. Perfect. That spring, I saw two or three more specialists before one of them finally decided my cough was psychosomatic, a theory my brother had been embracing all along.

"I told you she was faking!" he told my mother. "I told you! What an idiot!"

My mother explained to him that psychosomatic did not *exactly* mean faking, but he was undeterred in his quest to harass me back into mental health, a plan which, in all likelihood, is the reason I am not still coughing today. Over the next few months, my hacking cough diminished into a loud sputter, then a periodic throat clearing, until finally vanishing completely.

In the car that day, I knew this contest of wills between my brother and father could escalate. If this went any further, we would find ourselves pulled over on the shoulder, my father ordering my brother from the car. However, we managed to cross half of Arkansas without actually pulling over, and somewhere near Little Rock, we exited I-40 and found a motel for the night. The next day, we were on the road again, headed to Oklahoma City. Oklahoma was immensely, incredibly flat, not South Carolina flat, which was really more wavy, but flat like I had never seen.

"It's really flat here," I announced.

"Mmm hmmm," my mother said.

"Do they have tornadoes here?" I asked.

"Only every now and then," my mother said. "And then people have plenty of warning and they go to their basements where they're very, very safe."

Dark clouds were forming in the distance. I opened my book again and tried to read some more, but I read the same page over and over. I looked back outside.

“It looks like it’s about to storm,” I said.

“No,” my mother said. “I see a blue spot over there. Look.”

She pointed to the only opening in the sky that was now purplish-black. My brother looked up from his *Reader’s Digest*.

“You’re so stupid,” he said.

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Tribulation

[Jennifer McGaha](#)

Thunderstorms were number one on my list of fears. Back at home, whenever we had a thunderstorm at night, I dragged my pillow and blanket into the hallway and slept on the floor outside my parents' locked bedroom door. Now, as the rain began to fall in fat discs on our windshield, I cranked my window closed and clasped one clammy hand to the other. The rain picked up speed and pummeled the roof. Lightning streaked the entire landscape, a fierce, blinding light that brought to mind an event that was number two on my list of fears—the Second Coming. In fact, these top two fears were connected in my mind.

In all the pictures from Sunday School, Christ returned in a brilliant, holy flash just before he sent all the whoremongers and pregnant women directly through the earth to burn in eternal agony. I pulled my knees to my chest and rocked side-to-side. While Dad turned the wipers to high and Mom strained to read the map, I searched the sky. We crept along, doing thirty-five in a fifty-five, until eventually, finally, the tall buildings of Oklahoma City emerged out of what seemed like nothingness. As soon as we pulled in the motel parking lot, the rain eased, the clouds parted, and a flicker of sunlight emerged. We had made it. It wasn't the Rapture after all. Yet. I wiped my hands on my shirt and scrambled from the car.

The motel room had two double beds. My brother and I tossed our luggage in a corner and each flopped on a bedspread. That's when we discovered the slots in the headboards. If you put a quarter in the slot, the bed would bounce up and down for a full fifteen minutes. My brother and I searched through the change that my dad had emptied from his pockets onto the dresser, and then we inserted quarter after quarter into the bed slots, while our parents got ready for dinner. Finally, my mother came in and stood at the foot of my bed.

“Jennifer,” she said, “let's take a walk outside.”

“I don't want to,” I said. Except it came out all warbly, like *I dunnn wannn tooo*, because I was thrashing about like the Mexican jumping beans I had bought at a gas station back in Arkansas. “Why doesn't Robert have to?”

My mother wore white shorts, a sleeveless blouse, and flat, white sandals. Her toenails were painted cardinal red and her mouth was slightly open, her teeth parted an eighth of a millimeter, an indication that she was exasperated beyond all reason.

“Come on, Jennifer,” she said.

I sighed and slid off the bed. As I followed our mother out the door, my brother smirked and stuck out his tongue. His bed was making a grinding sound. I hoped it blew up. Outside, the air was thick and moist and I could see in the windows of the other guests as we passed their rooms. Sitting in stiff, straight chairs, they sipped icy drinks from amber glasses and tapped their cigarette ashes onto gold ashtrays. My mother cleared her throat and began to speak.

“Jennifer, I have something hard to tell you,” she said. “And I wanted to tell you outside, so you could cry if you wanted to.”

Now, in retrospect, I realize this says volumes about our family—the fact that we believed sorrow was a matter best attended to in a public parking lot, rather than in a motel room surrounded by loved ones. But, at the time, I simply knew my maternal grandparents were dead. They were the closest family we had and were in their late fifties by then—practically ancient. It was dinner time. Across the street, families were filing into a steakhouse. I stared at them and tried to imagine what they were saying to one another, what they could possibly find to say at a

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time like this.

"It's just, my mother finally said, that you left Snuggles and the others in the last hotel, back in Arkansas."

It took me a moment to process what she had just said. My grandparents were not dead. They would not be dead for many, many years. They would live to come to my high school graduation and my college graduation, to cradle all three of my children in their wrinkled arms, to reach an age where they would be afraid my six real dogs would jump on them and cause them to tumble over their walkers. I started to cry.

"It's okay! It's okay!" my mother said. "We have already called the motel and they found all the dogs. They are going to put them in a box and mail them to the Grand Canyon. We will meet them there."

And it was only then that it occurred to me to consider how my concern for my own safety during the storm had caused me to completely forget about my dogs. Normally, I would have been checking on them, but I hadn't even noticed they weren't there. I thought of how lonely they must have been in the empty hotel room, how abandoned they must have felt, how scared they were going to be to ride all the way to Arizona in a stuffy, dark box. And so then I cried some more.

"It's okay," my mother said. "You can cry as much as you want to out here."

"It's just it's just..."

My mother waited.

"It's just that I thought something had happened to Mamaw and Papaw," I sobbed.

My mother paused, her lips a tiny oval, her lovely cheekbones cresting into her forehead. "Why, of course not. What on earth would make you think that?"

I cried louder. Sure, my dogs were okay, my grandparents were okay, but now I knew that any minute now someone might lead me outside and tell me something terrible. It was all too much. I had survived what very well could have been the Second Coming only to live through this.

My mother and I stood there for what seemed like a very long time. Steam rose in clouds from the pavement. My hair and shirt grew damp. And then the sun began to dip beneath the horizon and an orange glow gathered around my mother's legs. And while she patted my heaving back, I hinged forward, tears dripping onto the pavement, mucus oozing into my mouth, my gaze fixed on the delicate curves of my mother's red toes.

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Robin Silbergleid



Robin Silbergleid is the author of the chapbook *Pas de Deux: Prose and Other Poems* (Basilisk 2006). Her poems and essays have appeared in journals including *The Prose-Poem Project*, *The Truth About the Fact*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The Cream City Review*, for which she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She currently teaches at Michigan State University.

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Self-Portrait with Head and Hands

[Robin Silbergleid](#)

She paints herself
 painting in an empty room
 wheelchair still
 on the scratched wood floor.
*(She can't remember
 the last time she moved.)*
 When she paints the doctor
 he does not meet her gaze.
 When they talk, his brows furrow
 into a dark sentence.
 He does not apologize.
 He crowds the canvas.
 She holds her palette like
 her heart cut from her chest
 it is bigger than a dinner plate and when
 she dips her brushes in, they bleed
 onto her smock, like the first drops
 on her underthings each month.
 Her skirt, black as a habit, keeps
 her secrets. Where else
 could they go but here?



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Matthew Harrison



Matthew Harrison lives in Northampton, Massachusetts. His writing has appeared or will soon in *Gargoyle*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Word Riot*, *Ping-Pong*, *Atticus Review*, *Kitty Snacks*, and elsewhere.

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Godfrey, Help Me Rest

[Matthew Harrison](#)

Glockenspiel,
 in hissing static reruns
 up my hippocampus,
 that flickering seahorse
 submerged in dark
 folds inside my skull, is a word
 unbidden, insomnia tic
 instrumental tonight
 to my sense of ridiculous.
 Cocker spaniel! A hidden gun
 stills clocks in good time.
 Coldcocks us. IÖm sorry
 IÖm not German. DonÖt know
 much German. Soon fluent almost
 in Google, though. Please
 permit me to mumble toss
 and turn a shtick for a bit,
 be *fasziniert* by dud transmutes,
 jublations, *t-i-o-n* conditions,
 tongue deaf, mist-under-bridge
 utterings. Let me fumble percussive
 jings I must pronounce in dodo
 lip-synch. I want sleep. Nightmares
 canoodle with my lips. Oh cuss me
 with a well-brushed white fence
 of tall packed consonants glimmering
 saliva, a *Do Not Enter* sign implied,
 stained with red wine and meat.
 Honey, call me the fool filled with lines
 typical of dads in bad sweaters.
 God, you done gone and babbled me
 right good. All this gobbledygook
 is a hackneyed horse of different
 equestrians. Gig the flanks, deliver
 poems on greeting cards. Neigh!
 I say, I need to scream fake German
 in a cavalry of muttonchops. Major
 General Godfrey Weitzel guided
 sleep-deprived Union troops
 above the Appomattox River
 against Robert. E. Lee, spring, 1865,
 and he won! The Major General
 I mean. IÖm speaking in Google. A game
 for the Sandman. To sleep, Parcheesi
 dreams, that is the rubadubdub.
 Who knows if Major General Weitzel
 cared a lick for glockenspiels?
 He shacked up cozy in the sacked home
 of Jefferson Finis Davis in Richmond
 and had a son, Godfrey Weitzel, born
 stillborn, and a girl dubbed Blanche
 who paled to measles in the postbellum
 before she could even speak or spell
 her illness. My middle name is Bruce
 thanks to dad. Bruce! I say, try it out.
 Shout it like a football huddle breaking up.
 Matthew the Bruce! No, that is far more

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the Scottish sort. I have no Anglophilia
or phobia, no potent secret fetish
for metallophones, no forte for Civil War
trivia. How many passed away in mud
never knowing their parents' parents'
vocabularies? American tongue ripped
from clots of immigrant fabric,
bleeding Africa. Like *bosh*. *Riffraff*.
The *gumption*. A banjo ain't a glockenspiel
no more than my mouth a harmonica, so
what am I blowing on about? Dying sounds
joked into commonplaces much later
misunderstood and made to bleed
again. The glockenspiel bangs notes
on well-tuned ribs, music spilling
tick-tocks. If the music takes you home,
where? Cemetery. The German in my
English plot, grounded beneath a live
oak near the unmarked African family.
The oak is almost dead, half blackened
from a lightning strike that split the trunk
into a huge reed that whistles in storms
alone. Whoever our ancestors were, they
made instruments first from bones.

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Joe Benevento



Joe Benevento teaches creative writing and American literature at Truman State University in Kirksville, MO. His work has appeared in about 250 places including: *Bilingual Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Southeast Review* and *Poets & Writers*. Among his nine books of poetry and fiction is the novel *The Odd Squad*, a 2006 finalist for the John Gardner Fiction Book Award. Benevento is poetry editor for the *Green Hills Literary Lantern*.

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After Learning Too Much About Oshœn

[Joe Benevento](#)

the santer'a goddess of love, whose favorite
color is yellow: river goddess, favorer of
honey, peacock feathers, mirrors, compiler
of the beautiful, beneficent, sensual force, though
with a temper more dangerous than infidelity,

I thought to use my new knowledge
to help with a novel, where santer'a, if not
sent up, would certainly not be sanctified.
Still, Oshœn's favorite number is five, which
fit the symmetry of the multiple murders

of the mystery novel intimately enough
to make the women devotees of this goddess,
steeped in passion and wise to women's power,
more real to me than my actual wife, or rather
more symbolic of what I was tempted to worship,

not the blue and white virginity of my upbringing
but the yellow custard, golden honey offerings
of a desire I'd been told to abandon with my dismal,
distant youth. Now when I pray, if I'm not
offering Hail Marys for forgiveness, preparing

for the inevitable now of the eventual hour of
my death, Amen, I am with my teen son, fishing
the Chariton River, tying my gold spoon five feminine
knots, letting it start to drop below for a five count or some
multiple of five, before trying to retrieve something which can

never come, but that I am addicted to desiring all the more.



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Matt W Miller



Matt W Miller is author of two books of poetry, *Cameo Diner* (Loom Press) and *Club Icarus* (University of North Texas Press) which one the 2012 Vassar Miller Prize. His work has appeared in such journals as *Slate* and *Harvard Review*. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry, Miller lives and teaches in New Hampshire.

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Oceanography

[Matt W Miller](#)

Road crawls on dusty through the cracks
between toes, between fingers, between
the thing that was us and what has become
our presence in a soft asphalt August.

*Don't forget the daughters, you said,
before there were daughters in that curl
of water where waves whiplash the land.
And this is when your hands witch the air.*

By definition this should be the great
afternoon of our argument but I am alone
in a red 072 Buick that leathers in the nose
like skin left behind from a dream.

And the ocean is attacking the teeth
of the desert trying to slap metal
from the highway. *Just give me a little
taste of your ass* it says, speaking

only when I tell it to again. I am going out,
giving tongue to sea dunes and sage brush.
I silk the red scarf around my waist,
too vain to tie knots around my eyes.



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Jennifer Atkinson

Jennifer Atkinson is the author of four collections of poetry. The fourth, *Canticle of the Night Path*, which won Free Verse's New Measure Prize, came out in the winter of 2012 / 2013. Individual poems have appeared in various journals including *Field*, *Image*, *Witness*, *New American Writing*, and *Cincinnati Review*. She teaches in the English Department and the MFA program at George Mason University in Virginia.

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The Understory

[Jennifer Atkinson](#)

The sycamore doesn't lean riverward.
 It leans toward the light over the river,
 Shading an understory beneath its green,
 Daunting the aster, guarding the fern,
 Cooling the water alongside, waters
 One week raucous with parking-lot run-off,
 The next nearly stagnant. Slow or quick,
 The current undercuts the sycamore's bank,
 Leaves gravel trapped around its roots.

And the sycamore leans further, tipped
 Like an open drawbridge. Already

It's picked up the river's accent,
 That slurred drawl, those schwa-flat vowels.
 It's falling into the rhythm, accepting
 the ethic of onwardness. Only we will miss
 The leaning tree when it finally falls.
 Its birds will choose another to light on,
 Deer will take its downed leaves,
 Asters will star in the light of its absence.
 Though ferns will parch, fish will profit.

And the river will flow under,
 Over, forward, around its trunk, almost as before.



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John Fry



John Fry is the author of the chapbook *silt will swirl* (NewBorder). His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *The Offending Adam*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *alice blue*, *Free Verse*, *Bellingham Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, and *Konundrum Engine Literary Review*, among others. A graduate of the MFA program at Texas State University-San Marcos, he edits poetry for *Newfound: An Inquiry Into Place*, and lives in the Texas Hill Country.

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pilgrim (were you the where)

[John Fry](#)

I was walking when
there was this edge

that was a problem for
words went missing &

dressed in sackcloth & ashes
I needed more than a gust

of god in what wind
blown upon an ember to believe

in more than a word
like loneliness was

(dancing inside my chest
where no one saw)

I this hole in the
heart do you still

shine in the dark
did you want

to be found
I fell in



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Alec Hershman



Alec Hershman lives in St. Louis where he teaches at The Stevens Institute of Business and Arts. He has received awards from The Kimmel-Harding-Nelson Center for the Arts, The Jentel Foundation, Ananda College, and The Institute for Sustainable Living and Design. His work appears in many journals including *Barnstorm*, *Yemassee*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Cream City Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Journal*, *Sycamore Review*, *The Sugar House Review*, *The Finch and Washington Square*. His poems are not collected in a book right now but if you email him [jahershma@gmail.com] subject line "A

Little Bit," he'll send you a custom-made pdf sample of some things that he's been working on.

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The Yellow Names

[Alec Hershman](#)

On the table a memory has been prepared.
 The worried hands of guests
 invite you to rinse distinctions: albumen?
 No, *album* that other sealed place
 where yellow light reaches in
 from the rifled edges and distant relatives
 look small and bland, wasting the exactness
 they've come to since daguerreotypes.
 None betray the ignorance of the wheel-tracks
 shuffling off to the future without them.
 They tried to reason with disease.
 The photographs themselves are light as tinctures,
 and organized by the hand of a witness
 whose own hand came to desiccation
 like a ropey grapefruit, tired of posing in its bowl.
 Now slouching, the book cradled in your lap,
 you give your whole morning to history
 with its grimy leaves and small pale faces
 which have a way of slowing down the day,
 which is just what you need: round aspirin,
 vaporous tea, and the brittle mineral
 of your eyes growing over the story.



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Tournamonde

[Alec Hershman](#)

She's charmed by water on the floor.
The keys weigh a finger into pointing,

into drop, into splash. Like the selfish painter
he could not decide on which side to put the door,

so everyone left. Before canvas there was a notion of scale
where he involved his arm in a shade to the elbow

He put a house on the prairie. He put an apple
on the table, a gem spectacle with a microscope

attached. Like a virus critics dazzle in the cell
of exposition, in the cosmic ring

around the jeweler's eye. He turns to Christine
under a light-bulb. *I think it's an emerald*

says Christine, when in fact it's an algae. Carpeting
lends to shoes a softness, and there is carpeting

in the workshop where they stand.
And anyone can be lied to—just think:

a literal-mindedness we hold up to clouds.



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Francine Rubin



Francine Rubin's chapbook, *Geometries*, was recently published by Finishing Line Press; her poetry has also appeared in *Anomalous Press*, *Fringe Magazine*, *Ozone Park Journal*, *Park*, and *Rougarou*, among others. Growing up in New York, she trained at the School of American Ballet, occasionally performed as a freelance dancer, and taught ballet to children and adults for five years. She now works as the Associate Director of the Learning Center at SUNY Purchase College, where she also teaches writing. Online, she is at francinerubin.tumblr.com.

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Reverie

[Francine Rubin](#)

I stand outside the studio
in pale light, the dancers flickering

behind glass. As the teacher demonstrates,
I envision my arms and legs, phantom

limbs, forming the steps. The pianist plays
the notes of my former body ð Stravinsky,

Firebird ð when my body was a bird,
igniting with each ecstatic beat of wing.

She and I know the fading
rhythm, but each day she sounds

the exuberance of youth, flash
of red against sky. Each day

the space between notes widens,
until the music is only in the body's

memory, unable to sound.



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Kristina McDonald



Kristina McDonald received her MFA from Eastern Washington University, where she was the poetry editor of *Willow Springs*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Narrative*, *New Guard Review*, and *Sugar House Review*. She has worked for literary non-profits Writers in the Schools and Get Lit! Programs, and she currently works at Rice University.

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Something Other Than Whole

[Kristina McDonald](#)

I.

In the picture, her feet are cut off and even now
I imagine her falling.

II.

Everything happens for a reason, says the wolf
with a dove in his claw. If it were up to me,
we would leave all our children in the woods with a blindfold
so they can learn how to really hunt.

III.

Hunger, too, has its benefits. Just look how skinny you are.
And when the men come to raid this village, keep in mind
that empty cupboards are a good place to hide.

IV.

If a broken bottle can still hold water,
it isn't broken yet.

V.

These days I'm light enough to balance in a pail,
lower myself to the bottom of the wishing well.

VI.

Every night is a dream. Every morning
starts with the same vision: a sure-footed woman
dancing in the fountain, dropping apples
everyone will eat.



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Susie Berg



Susie Berg is a Toronto writer and editor. She spends part of every day in what Stephen King calls the 'writing coma' and also takes his advice to read as much as possible. To support this decadence, she is a freelance editor. She is also a mother to two teenagers, and although that is neither a paying gig nor decadent, it has more than its share of moments. Her work has most recently appeared in the anthologies *Desperately Seeking Susans*, *Seek It: Writers and Artists Do Sleep*, and *Body and Soul*. She has been a feature reader at *Plasticine Poetry*, *the Art Bar*, and *Hot-Sauced Words*.

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Poetry

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The Remains

[Susie Berg](#)

Ⓔ after Mark Strand

He empties himself of the dreams of others. He empties the gas tank.
He leaves the car at the shopping mall.
He dreams of farmers at dawn.
They look back. They become pillars of salt.

Goodbye, he says, to the street signs.
Goodbye, he says, to a name he never liked.
They will smell his name when the wind blows.
It will make sense.

The fridge is full in their kitchen,
a room clouded with song.
The notes tell what he was.
There are no photographs.



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Laura Read



Laura Read has published poems in a variety of journals, most recently in *Willow Springs* and *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Her chapbook, *The Chewbacca on Hollywood Boulevard Reminds Me of You*, was the 2010 winner of the Floating Bridge Chapbook Award, and her collection, *Instructions for My Mother's Funeral*, was the 2011 winner of the AWP Donald Hall Prize for Poetry and was published in 2012 by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

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Scarecrow

[Laura Read](#)

The boy who bent down to tie my son's shoe,
who zipped his coat, who opened his granola bar

every day of first grade, is moving to Wyoming,
state of bison and sunsets, state where

two older boys pistol-whipped a third
because he was gay, because they could see

his collarbone, because his eyes were the color
of washed chalkboards, his hair thin as feathers.

They hung him on a fence where he died
for eighteen hours until a cyclist found him,

thinking at first he was a scarecrow.
It was hot the day your father

drove us through Spokane, looking for your name.
We bought ice cream cones from a drive-thru

and licked the cold sugar slow,
leaned our arms out the windows.

We crossed the bridge and the river where boys
stay out late, turn to straw under the hard stars.

We drove until *Matthew* fixed itself to you
like death entering his body that night

on that fence, until the sky turned pink
like Wyoming's.



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Ralph

[Laura Read](#)

The pond in Cannon Park is beginning its slow cracking, its eye flashing you back to you like a carousel's mirrors. You slosh in your small boots at the edge, and I think of how once I skated across this water and then stood by a fire with Ralph, the boy who sat next to me that winter of first grade, who saw when I stole the Dick and Jane reader, who watched when Mrs. McCollough pulled me out in the hall to say she was sorry about my father.

Ralph must have been standing too close because the fire burned a hole in his coat. Ralph smelled bad like a house with its curtains closed and thin cats and pears rotting in a bowl. When he went home, he hung up his ruined coat. His mother asked if the ice was strong enough in the middle, and Ralph said yes, but he thought of falling through, the bright needles of sun in the water.



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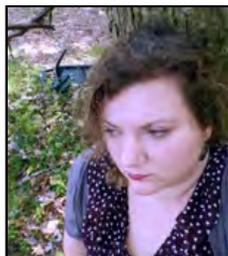


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Natalie Sypolt



Natalie Sypolt lives and writes in West Virginia. She received her MFA in fiction from West Virginia University and currently teaches creative writing, literature, and composition. Her fiction and book reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *Superstition Review*, *Paste*, *Willow Springs Review*, and *The Kenyon Review Online*, among others. Natalie is the winner of the Glimmer Train New Writers Contest and the Betty Gabehart Prize. She also serves as a literary editor for the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers* and is co-host of *SummerBooks*, a literary podcast. www.natalesypolt.weebly.com.

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Careful Negotiations

[Natalie Sypolt](#)

Bassett hounds are good for hugging. They're the right size and their soulful eyes say that they know how you feel. Unfortunately, they are not good guard dogs. Your own—Hester and Dimsdale (Dim for short)—bark at new smells, birds, rumbling trucks, each other, but when a strange man comes into your yard (invited, yes, but how could they know?) suddenly the deep woof and the bay are gone. The tails are wagging. They are *smiling* in that tongue lolling doggy way. Hester, that slut, has flopped over on her back and offered her flabby belly up to him.

Lesson 1: Understand that your dogs cannot be trusted.

Before the man was in your yard, he was at the Golden Egg, drinking with two of his buddies. They were all dressed alike, wearing those neon yellow shirts that a lot of the construction or road crew guys wear. You were with Luann and your sister Corrine. When you saw him, you were so shocked that you almost dropped the bottle you'd been holding. The heat that welled up in your chest was painful, crushing, and you grabbed at your heart.

"Hazel, you okay?" Luann asked.

How can you be okay when a dead man is doing shots in the Golden Egg?

Lesson 2: Dead men drink whiskey straight, no chaser.

Luann followed your gaze and also saw the dead man, who was now moving with his friends to the dart board.

"Oh, Hazy," she said, and patted you in that familiar way she'd been doing for months, ever since Walker died.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Corrine said. She'd not had much sympathy for your situation and had warned against seeing a married man—Na married Crystal especially—because those boys had never been anything but trouble. And Walker had a history, had spent a little time in jail. You'd known all that, but you'd remembered the boy he was too, and that had made up for a lot. You broke it off long before he got sick, but that hadn't made his death any easier.

"You know who that is, right? You don't think?" Corrine said and laughed a little, meanly. Then you heard someone say "Sam" from over near the dart board and realized how stupid you'd just been. Not a dead man. A dead man's twin brother.

Maybe you'd heard someone say that Sam Crystal was back from Afghanistan, back from wherever he'd been living since he'd left Warm after high school, but it hadn't registered, or you'd stored it away in that part of your head where you put painful things to deal with later. You could clearly see that this wasn't Walker. This man looked healthier, a bit thicker, tanned a golden brown from working outside. Irony. You'd just mistaken Sam for Walker; the first time you talked to Walker in the Egg, you'd mistaken him for Sam.

Lesson 3: Dead men don't play darts.

In high school, you were the chubby girl who wore oversized t-shirts and leggings and sometimes leg warmers. Your sneakers were knock-off Reeboks; you'd taken out the plain white laces and replaced them with rainbow ones. You had frizzy red hair and never could get the bang poof exactly right. You were the girl with the ugly name, the ugly hair, and the ugly clothes. Luann was your best friend by default because—like you—she had a

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beautiful sister but was not beautiful herself. She was also on the IQ Squad, and had once ripped her worn-through jeans right down the back seam, but didn't know it, and went to all her classes with her dingy underwear showing.

The Crystals were two grades ahead of you and Luanne in school. Those boys were beautiful with their thick, wavy, honeyed hair and stormy eyes. One was a little taller than the other, and had a moon shaped scar on his jaw, but other than that, they were identical. Everybody knew them because they were twins and because they were Crystals. Some people were scared of them that family had a reputation that went back past all your grandfathers. But they were popular, too, and were friends with town kids. Most holler kids kept to themselves; Walker and Sam seemed the two that could bridge the gap between the have-nots and the have-even-lesses. That's about all there was, though your family had it better than most because your mom was a teacher at the elementary school and your dad drove the school bus.

Corrine would have never officially dated a Crystal, but sometimes she snuck out to meet Walker. He'd pick her up at the end of your block, driving his daddy's falling-to-pieces pickup truck. When you'd hear Corrine creeping out of the bedroom you shared, you'd wait a few minutes, and then sneak out behind her. Usually, you'd get to the end of your driveway just in time to see the lights of Walker's truck and hear it rattle away.

Lesson 4: Sisters keep secrets.

Lesson 5: You can never really get over high school. Don't try.

You'd been living in the little house on Back Road for a few months when you ran into Walker in the Egg. You'd only been a county away, first going to college at WWU and then substitute teaching until you got a full-time job at your old elementary school.

You recognized Walker right away. You'd seen him maybe a few times over the years when you'd been home to visit or for summers, but you'd never talked. You knew he'd eventually married Janey Murray, the girl he'd gotten pregnant in high school.

When you saw him look you over, some switch flipped.

He turned a chair around and straddled it, resting his chin on the top as he watched you down another shot. His eyes were twinkling and you knew that he was drunk, but so were you, and you hardly noticed when Luann got up to leave.

He liked that you remembered him; he was one of those guys who felt his life had all been downhill after graduation. So you told him how you'd watched him in the hallways, how jealous you'd always been when he'd come and pick up your sister. There was a slight glimmer of recognition then he remembered Corrine but didn't even know that she had a sister.

Don't that beat all, he said, getting closer to you. His face was the north pole of a magnet and yours was the south. How come I never knew you before?

When you let him into your front door, you were thinking about the high school Walker, not this man who was only two years your senior, but looked so much older. He'd lived hard, isn't that how your mom would have said it? Smoking, drinking, drugs, and late nights had made twenty-eight look at least ten-years older.

The dogs didn't like him. They barked and grumbled and Hester nipped at the back of his pant leg. You had to push them into the guest room, feeling guilty because you knew deep down that they were probably right and this was a man to growl at and bite, not one to let into your bed.

You'd almost changed your mind until Walker grabbed you around the waist, pressed his lips to your neck and walked you backwards into the bedroom. He pushed you down. When Walker reached for the light, you stopped him. In the moonlight from the window, you watched him pull his shirt over his head and undo his belt.

High school. That day in the cafeteria someone had dumped a lunch tray down Luann's back and you'd stood up to defend her, only to slip in the mess on the floor and fall flat on your back. Everyone in the cafeteria laughed and when you tried to push yourself up, you just slid again, eliciting another round of hoots. Finally, you felt a hand wrap around your wrist and hoist you to your feet as though you weighed nothing at all. Wavy hair, stormy eyes, and no laughing mouth. You loved him from then on, made stupid over that small act of kindness.

This is what you were thinking about as Walker moved over you, his head thrown back to the ceiling. You

watched his face, raised your hands to him. As you ran your thumb across his chin, over his lips, up his jawline, you stopped at the moon shaped scar that Walker'd had ever since he was a kid. It was the thing teachers had always used to tell him apart from his brother. You shut your eyes and pictured the cafeteria scene again, like you had so many times over the years. You had captured every inch of his face like a photograph. There was no scar.

A wave of sick came over you just as Walker let out a howl then collapsed on to the bed. How could you have been so stupid? It was Sam Crystal, all those years ago, not Walker. It was Sam who you'd watched in the hallways, who'd smiled those times he'd caught you looking.

Walker's arm was still draped across your chest and he squeezed your breast.

"You really do got great tits, Holy," he said, and gave it another squeeze, like he was testing the ripeness. Through the wall, you could hear your dogs, making the saddest, most lonesome sounds you'd ever heard.

Lesson 6: Memory is a son of a bitch.

Lesson 7: If you're going to sleep with a married man, first check for facial scars.

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Careful Negotiations

[Natalie Sypolt](#)

You hadn't meant for it to happen the first time, and you certainly hadn't meant for it to happen the next two, three. He would show up in your yard, sometimes holding a bottle of cheap wine from the Gas-and-Go, always with a crooked smile on his face. He was just there and you couldn't say no, so you'd push the dogs into the spare room and let him come in. Even when he lit up a joint in your bedroom and you had to leave because of your asthma. Even when he drank too much. Even though you saw his kids in school nearly every day.

“Everyone knows,” Corrine said to you one night, months later, after she'd had too many drinks at the Egg. “You're a god-damned fool.”

“I know,” you said. This was not the kind of woman you were, but when Walker came into your yard, none of that mattered.

Lesson 8: Make it matter.

It's hard to say how long you would have let it go on if not for the explosion—not some external blast, but an internal wake-up call in the form of a cyst, bursting. You'd been having some discomfort, but thought it was just cramps, until the ache turned to pains and the blood came, not a lot, but spots on the sheets and Walker jumped up as though you were infectious. The pain was so strong that your breath caught and he thought you'd stopped breathing. He was grabbing for his clothes and when you reached for him, he screamed.

He helped you dress and put you in his truck. You let your head fall onto his shoulder as he drove, ran every stop sign. “Jesus,” he kept saying under his breath. “Jesus Christ almighty.”

He carried you into the Emergency Room, yelling for someone to get the fuck out there, to do their god-damned jobs. It was like a scene from a movie, and you let the pain pour over you. The nurse brought a wheelchair and tried to hand Walker a clipboard of forms.

“I can't,” you heard him say as they wheeled you away. “I don't know nothing.”

He didn't stay.

Your problem was common really. Most women, it turns out, have the little pea-sized invaders growing on their ovaries and they never cause any problems. Sometimes they twist, the doctors told you, and sometimes they burst. They were not impressed by your condition. It was nothing particularly exotic or bloody or, as it turns out, even life-threatening. They gave you nice pain medication through an IV and looked at your insides with a sonogram, not searching for a baby, but for internal bleeding, more cysts, maybe other things that they didn't explain.

You were moved to a real room. Your parents came, and Corrine, and later Luann. You only stayed overnight. Your father kept asking if you could still have children. That's when you realized why Walker ran. He'd thought you'd been losing a baby, his baby. If you *had* been losing a baby, you wouldn't have wanted to have been losing it alone. That was when you were done.

Lesson 9: Dreams are nice, but real men are necessary in times of emergency.

After the hospital, you didn't see Walker for two weeks, and then he appeared on your front step, empty-handed, completely sober.

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“You okay?” he asked. You looked at one another through the screen door.

“I am.”

“You scared me real good,” he said. “And the thing is, Hazel, you’ve always been too good for me.

You’re a good girl.”

“Am I?” you asked.

He nodded. “You are, and I ain’t no good for anybody. I’d kiss you goodbye, but then I might not ever leave.” He turned to leave, face like a hound dog.

“I’m not sorry,” you said, quickly.

He stopped, so you knew that he’d heard you, but he didn’t turn around. He just raised his arm in a sort of wave and walked out the gate.

When he was in his truck and pulling away, you let your dogs out. They’d been barking and pushing at your legs the whole time. They went right to where Walker had been standing and traced his path to the gate, noses to the ground, tails in the air and alert. Then they trotted back to you, happy, as though they’d finally treed their prey, chased the threat away.

Lesson 10: Things that start easy rarely end that way. Be prepared for breakage.

Sam Crystal, in the Egg, tanned so brown and hair bleached from the sun. He looks better than Walker ever did, even with the scars on his neck and chest from the war. Especially with the scars. You wait until your friends leave, and he’s sitting alone at the bar. You buy him a beer, and push yourself up onto the stool.

“You probably don’t remember me,” you say. He smiles and says that sure he does. You think it’s just a line, until he says your name.

“You look good,” he says. Later he’ll tell you that all he really remembers about you from high school is that you had crazy red hair that stuck up in all directions.

When Sam says to you that he doesn’t cheat on his wife, nod. The next time you see him, he’ll say it again, and you’ll nod again, but he won’t sound as sure. And then one day when you’re sitting on your front porch, his truck drives past. On the way back by, he stops in front of your gate. He sits there for five minutes before getting out and letting the gate swing open.

“Make sure to shut that,” you say. “Don’t want the dogs to get out.” You expect barking, growling, maybe even an ankle nip as they did with Walker, but with Sam, they both trot up to him, tails wagging. He bends down to scratch them and Hester presents her belly. Dim licks his hand.

You only know that Sam is like a firefly and he’s calling for you. His light is beautiful and tragic and you are drawn to it, like you always were. Things that were wrong before are being made right now. He seems surprised every time he comes to you, like he doesn’t understand why he’s there, but you’ve been waiting all along.

Lesson 11: Learn from the first time. Do it better.

Keep it quiet. Sam comes to your house or you drive out of the county to meet at a motel. Make sure no one knows. Don’t tell Luann. Don’t tell your sister. Don’t give anyone reason to tell Sam about your time with Walker, years before. Learn Sam’s wife’s hours at the hospital where she works. Make yourself available when he can be available. Make things as easy as you can.

One evening at the Tally Ho-tel, Sam asks if you knew Walker in the years since high school. He’s worn out from work, lying in bed beside you. The only light is coming through the windows, a strange yellow-orange after-thunderstorm glow.

“Not really,” you say. Sam couldn’t forgive himself for not seeing Walker before he died, for missing his funeral, even though he’d been a world away in Afghanistan when Walker got sick.

Don’t tell him that before Walker had died, you’d driven your car to the mouth of Crystal Holer and parked in a pull-off spot. You’d walked the rest of the way down, following the dirt road. It was early in the day off-so most of those who worked were gone and those who didn’t were still asleep. Andy and Solomon, Walker’s boys, were at school. As you neared the brown and white trailer you knew was his, you slowed down and waited to see if there was any movement before creeping around the side to where Walker’s old red truck

was parked. The little blue compact Janey's car was gone. You thought she still worked in the cafeteria at the nursing home, but it had been so long, you weren't sure.

A scraggly tabby cat came shooting out the door as you creaked it open. The room was dark and the whole place had a sour smell, like old food and sweat. Bedrooms were always at the ends of trailers, so you made your way through the cluttered living room and down the narrow hallway. Even in full morning, not much light reached the holler, and even less into this trailer. You banged your leg on something, a little stand with a white vase on top, and the vase toppled over.

"Who's there?" Walker's voice, only weaker, thinner, came from the end of the hallway.

You didn't answer, but when he saw you push open the bedroom door, he didn't look surprised. "Hey, Holly," he said, smiling. You'd never known that he'd realized his mistake that first night you were together. "Nice tits."

"Thanks, asshole," you said and made your way to the bed. As cluttered as the rest of the house was, this room was surprisingly clean and tidy. Walker lay in the bed, small inside the pillows and blankets. An artificially sweet smell, one of those plug-in air fresheners, had gotten stronger closer to the bed. "You look like hell," you said and he laughed.

"Yeah, well, still better looking than them ugly sons of bitches you been seeing. Clay Stone? His mama don't even think he's pretty." You raised your eyebrows.

You sat down on the edge of his bed, easy.

"I guess I probably shouldn't have come here," you said. "I don't know why I did." Walker grabbed your hand, tight. His skin was clammy, and your hand slipped in his when he tried to pull you closer to him. You saw him then, really saw him, and your breath caught at the look of his face. Paper-thin skin and dark under his eyes. You'd heard people talk about the shadow of death, but hadn't known what they meant until right then.

"You came to say good-bye," he said, his voice a husky whisper. His eyes were intense, boring into you.

"I thought maybe I'd come and pick up a little," you said. "But it looks good in here. I guess Janey is taking good care of you."

"Shit," he said. "My boys take care of me." You were surprised. You saw the boys at school sometimes, knew that they both often skipped. They always looked tough, angry. "It's a hell of a thing," Walker says. "Having to rely on your boys like that. I can't even wash myself."

"Walker, maybe I should go. I don't want to cause trouble. If somebody saw me here—" You started to move, suddenly feeling like the air in the trailer was too thick to breathe, wanting only to get out.

"Getting too real for you, Hazel?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and me, we ain't really that different. Running and standing still. That's us. Afraid of our own shadow."

"You're talking out of your head, Walker," you said, but goosebumps rose up all over your arms.

Walker shrugged. "Maybe. It don't matter, Hazel." Walker touched your hand again, flicked his eyes from the ceiling, to your face, and back. "I'm sorry I left you in the hospital that night. I never told you that."

"It's okay," you said. You leaned down and gently kissed his dry, dry lips. "Can I stay for a while?"

You went to the little bathroom and found the plastic pan and sponge. You filled it with warm water and carried it into the bedroom. You pulled the comforter from the bed and helped Walker push himself up so you could rub the sponge over his naked chest, arms, shoulders. When your grandmother had been dying, the only thing she said gave her any relief was being rubbed with warm water.

You draped a towel over his lap and pulled off his pajama pants. As you dragged the sponge up and down his legs, you talked about high school, how beautiful he'd been, how jealous you'd been when he would pick up Corrine and take her parking down by the river.

This body was so different from the one you had known. So thin and pale. If you talked enough, you could make yourself believe that this was any man who you were helping and not a man you'd had in your bed, who maybe you'd loved.

When you were done, you helped Walker into a chair. As you stripped the bed, you saw the weariness in his face, not just from the movement to the chair, but a deeper, longer look of tired.

When Walker was back in the bed, looking tired, but peaceful, you started to leave. "Stay," he said. "Just for a little bit?" He opened his arms to you. You kicked off your shoes, crawled into the bed beside him. You laid your head on his chest and he sighed. Long after his breathing had become regular and you knew he was asleep, you lay there, your ear pressed to him, listening to the continuing beat of his heart.

Lesson 12: A heart is a fragile, failing thing. A heart cannot be trusted or relied upon. When Sam tells you that you've got his heart, tell him that it's not his heart you want.

Life is a series of careful negotiations. No one wants to be alone. This, really, is what you're afraid of. Life is deciding how much you'll give to get, what you'll do, what you'll sacrifice for mother, sister, child, friend, lover, so that they'll agree to stay. Some people are better at these negotiations than others. You're learning.

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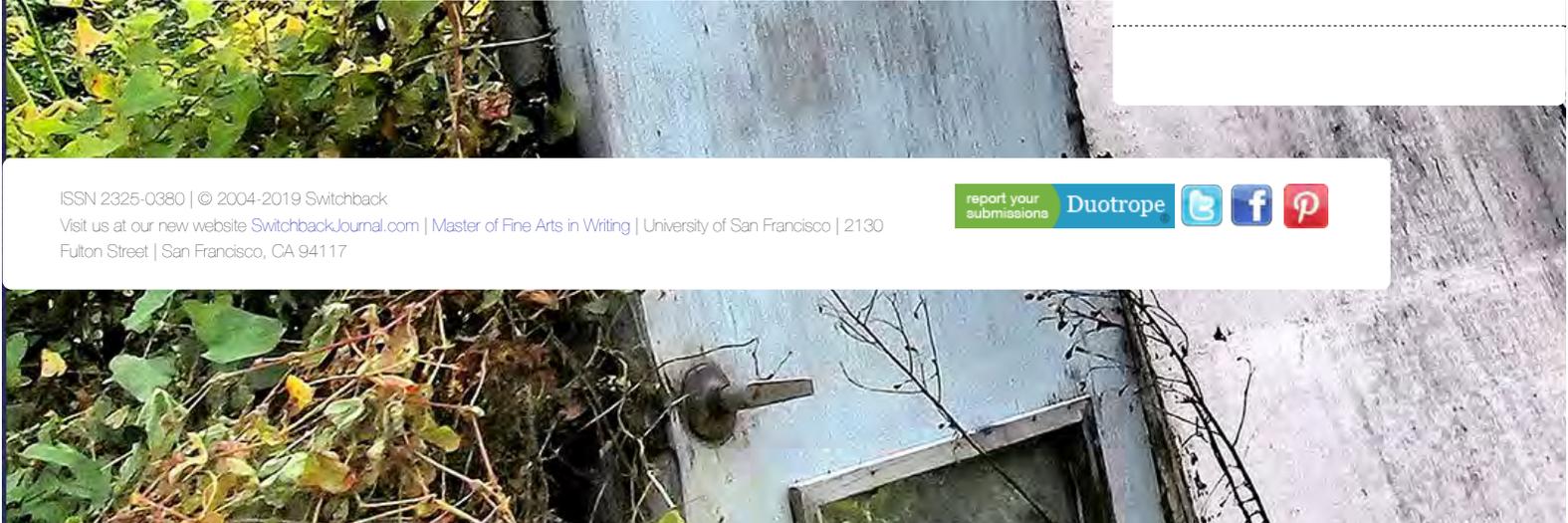
Ashley Robertson

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Issue 17: Broken

Two Deserts
Fiction



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Two Deserts

[Ashley Robertson](#)

Carol is my neighbour, my best friend and a pain in my arse. She knows I'll have told her husband to tell her that if there is a red Christmas ribbon on my doorknob she is not to come in. She is not, if it can be helped, to get out of her truck. I would have told her this myself, but she has never let me finish the thought. Glen listened. Perhaps he's more sympathetic to the realities of not being able to piss in a straight line any longer. He can make enough sense of that shorthand to see the full list of the ways in which I am being betrayed. But he still has to ask.

No fooling?

I ken that he has, in fact, told Carol, because when she visits next the ribbon disappears from its place by the door. It appears again in the back of the freezer, behind a brick of spinach. She has put them both there, the bow and the spinach. Then it was the kitchen rubbish. It is not anything that I would bin. She is telling me what she thinks of my plans. When I show her the evidence, she asks why she should make it easy for me. She has brought my mail in. To save me the bother, she says.

It isn't the words on the postcards. It's the pictures; the grey and purple expanses, the soldier's leap at Killicrankie, the view of Schiehallion from the train station at the other end of Loch Rannoch, the King's House at the edge of Rannoch Moor. Every time is alive in them at once. They come with a smell of burning heather, with the billowing black smokes of autumn. They come with the silence of the hillside above the loch, the only sound the constant churning of the hydro dam. They come with yellow gorse, flowering through the spring snow. Do you remember this place, my sister writes, and I do mind it. I suspect she thinks that all those places have disappeared into haer for me, but they are clearer than she knows. They are making flats out of Slains Castle, she writes and I can mind the claggy mud of the path through the woods that leads out to the cliffs. I do not want to remember these cliffs. But I feel the soft earth of the edge beneath my feet. There are other cliffs, other places, ones that she wouldn't ken at all. When I collect them from the post office, Rhona's postcards are swollen with the damp. The ones that Carol brings are dry. The smell is gone out of them.

Snow falls on the cobbles streets, on the crown of King's College and on the prostrate figure of Bishop Elphinstone himself. In the quiet of the morning every flake seems to make a sound. We walk home from the pub. I stop to scoop a handful of snow from the bonnet of a car.

This is not a place or a time that Rhona knows herself, though she has sent me a card with this crown on it. It is the Scottish Imperial crown, she notes on the back, not the British one. It signifies a desire for reclaimed independence.

Dan throws his own handful of snow up at it, but it smashes against the clock face, instead. This is the sort of thing that is a good idea after a night of hauf and a haufs. The two of us, we are funny, we are dashing in wool coats and long scarves. It does not matter that mine are second-hand. We are blazing.

Will you go home for Christmas? he says, and his voice bounces all around the arches and stone.

Dinnae ken.

I simply haven't thought about leaving at all. I do not want to go home. If I do, I don't know that I will get back out again. My fingers are going numb and red. My handful goes squint and hits nothing at all.

He's not afraid to use his nice, round, English voice. It's his way that makes people look past it here. Next to his voice, mine sounds glaikit. A thing to laugh at, not listen to. Dan, he is nobody's fool. He looks and talks like the movies. The Texans, who don't like anyone here, like him. They buy him drinks. He says that if

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they're buying him a drink, they have to buy for his friends.

Is your friend English, too?

No. He's one of the locals.

One of the locals has no standing here, not with the roughnecks and not with the Russian sailors who come in off the freighters. They buy us whiskies and half pints and tell him about the girls in Houston, the girls in Dallas and the pussy in Vladivostok that has to be thawed out first. They ask him about the women here. The Texans told him about a hurricane that leveled an island, blew away a hundred orphans. Bet you've never seen anything like that, they say. I haven't.

We decide not to go inside, not yet. Instead we walk across the golf course to the sea. There is snow on the beach, covering the sand and rocks. He thinks he will stay the winter, he says. Find a job and do something instead of heading South. The Beach Ballroom is empty, deserted. Someday, they say, it will wash into the sea and I am still waiting for the day. There is a postcard of this, too, and the disappeared red brick baths. These printed places, they are not the ones in my memory. The buildings there are dark and silent, peaked with frost. They glitter, hard and cold.

How did it go with Michelle?

Nae bad.

Asking me is just a courtesy. She will have told him already. She has already said where we went and what we did there and what we did not do there. It is only fair. She was his lassie first. She is Northern Irish, but deadens her accent the way I do now. No one here would give her a row for it, but she does anyway. No, we give her plenty of rows for it and plenty more when she doesn't. I see her run howling from the refectory. If I were to see her again, if she were to find her way to this desert, if she appeared before me undimmed I am quite sure that she would not know me. But I would know every inch of her, her red tam and long black hair, her mittens and her soft lower lip. I would tell her that I know, that I understand. Thirty years late and only just a few minutes ago. I couldn't then.

We take the bus to Cove. She tells me that I must go to Seaton Park in the spring to see all the daffodils there beside the cathedral and she rests her head on my shoulder, her arm hooked through mine. We ride out like this. I have two bottles of stout, one in each coat pocket and in her straw bag she has sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper. We aren't dressed for the walk, not in her light shoes and skirt. Her black hair hangs loose. It isn't quite black, but such a deep shade of brown that it looks black in all but the light that comes through the bus windows. In this light, her eyes are blue. Inside, they are as grey as granite.

Dan has said that Michelle and I will get on like a burning house. He tells me to take her and he tells her to go. We walk to the cliff path. There's no bus back now and we will have to walk the whole way back to town. She swings her bag out wide and I whistle. I am good at whistling and I sing in the kirk as well as anyone else at Christmas.

Do you like it? The view?

Let's find a place to have our picnic.

I might as well not ask her a thing. She bolts ahead, down the path, sure as a goat in her little brown shoes. When I speak again, the sea takes the sound so that I can't even hear my own voice.

We find a place in the mossy rocks, down off the path. I open the stout and give her a bottle. Now it is the water that she looks over, not me. The sandwiches are stale, the bread and ham curling up at the corners. I wash down my own and half of hers. She wipes the butter from her fingers into the wax paper and settles in.

The sandwiches were good.

She isn't listening to me, but she puts her head back against my shoulder. I wonder what we must look like to the people that can see, wonder if we can be seen. Who is there to see us? No one, but she seems to expect an audience. Rhona has sent a card for this, too, though she doesn't know it. These are the boys who used to climb the cliffs to collect gull eggs, her tiny letters proclaim, since their demise the gull population has exploded. There is no place name, not on her card, but I ken it's the cliffs at Cove Bay. And the gulls, the hover up, lifted on drafts and invisible currents. There are the cold yellow eyes on us, on me. One laughs and then they

all do.

Michelle slides her skirt up. Here are the Outspan orange tops of her stockings, the elastic and metal of her suspenders. She takes my hand and puts it on her leg, just where her stockings end. Her skin is stark white here, blue veins running just under. I hold my hand where she has left it until she sighs and then I slip it up further, under her skirt. As I feel the slight hollow on the inside of her leg and soft hair, she turns her face into my coat. She guides my hand again, pushing aside her pants, because I am doing something not quite right. Her breathing has changed. It isn't my coat that she burrows into, but the argyle jersey I have borrowed to go with the flares that I have saved for. I remember now that I did not ask for the jersey, but Dan has told me to wear it. Her hand moves to me, to unfasten my flies. She keeps her eyes closed, smelling him and sighing. I, too, close my eyes.

~

Later she is hipling long before we make Torry. Her silly shoes. I walk ahead now, sometimes waiting for her. By the Victoria Bridge she has to take her shoes and stockings off. There are red and raw patches on both heels, on her toes. The ends of my trousers are heavy with wet sand. Nothing is left to be said, so we walk without saying anything, past the harbour and the fish market. I walk her back to the Victoria restaurant. She lives above it with other lassies who work there. She waits at her door for a moment, as if waiting for a kiss. But then she remembers who I am and who I am not and goes in without a word. Dan has told me there are miles of dark-carpeted hallway up there. A couthy rabbit's warren with a lass behind every door. I will never see it. He's opened every last one.

~

Dan balls a handful of snow and sand and throws it far out into the black water and the waves. It is too cold now for me to do the same. He has wool gloves. I have lost mine and can't afford new. If there is any money left after Christmas, it will need to go for books. The snow is heavy enough that we can't make out the lights of the ships anymore, only the broad sweep of the lighthouse.

I'm sorry, mate. I really thought the two of you would get on.

It wisnae her.

I have to say this, because he knows that it wasn't Michelle's fault at all; she has cried me down to him, told him how it wasn't worth a damned penny let alone her time. We are still friends, Dan and I. This hasn't put an end to it. He hadn't given her up just for me.

We'll find you someone nicer. One of the girls from Gray's. Margie knows lots of them. We'll get you one that's not up herself.

Aye. One fae Gray's. That will do me.

Margie is his new lassie, a Divinity lecturer's daughter and at art school. She is far too important to be passed on to me, in her smart tweed skirts and merino jumpers. Margaret will be married and taken South, some day. She will not be accused by his mother of planting bombs in pillar boxes. He will teach her the right vowels, the right sounds.

To prove to me that we are still friends, the very best of mates, he throws himself into every hedge on the way back. He springs away out of each of them, laughing and dotted with bits of green. Every hit sends up an explosion of snow and ice shimmers on his coat, bright as metal spangles. He comes away out of one hedge to find his watch is gone. We cannot find it again. It's nothing to him, a sacrifice to friendship. I dive into a hedge to prove myself and he pulls me out again. He thumps me on the back and the snow comes off me in sheets. I smell the whisky on him, the pints of eighty. He wraps his long green scarf around my head and I give him my red one. Early Christmas, we say. My ears are burning, my hair sleek it and dripping, and I do not want to go. I want to stay out here 'till night, all winter long.

~

I stamp my feet to keep them warm. The train runs along the coast for a while, past Stonehaven. Seagulls chase us along, still laughing. We drink tea from flasks and eat cold rowies until our fingers shine with lard. We are all going home. Some of the others are familiar, at least until I must change trains. After that, I don't ken anyone. I wind my fingers into the fringe of the scarf and watch my breath steam against the cold air. The train is late 'till they must stop it to clear the line. Rhona is at the station, waiting for me. She's only just come, she claims, but she's

been there for hours. Snow is collecting on her umbrella and falling into the tops of her boots. They aren't hers, but our father's. She's made up the difference in size with a pair of socks in each toe. I've never seen her look so wee as she does in her man's boots and coat.

~

I come back to university late. It is unclear, to the very last, if I will be delivered to the station to make the journey. In the end, I go. It is Rhona who bullies our father into it, though I do not know how. I am more use gone away than on the farm, she says. And there is a truth in that. It is also Rhona who tells me that I shouldn't wear a green scarf. Green is a fairy colour and they have the rights to anything wrapped in it. I put it back on after she leaves me on the platform with my case. The holes in my coat pockets are big enough for my hands to come through. Michelle's voice follows me up Guild Street, down Union Street and down King Street. It follows me home and sits on my sagging bed. You're going to be a doctor, she says, but you don't even know what to do with a girl. I have missed the three days of the new term. I must plead to be allowed back.

She meets me outside the Machar, where she stands between me and my first pint. Her eyes and nose are pink. Her hands in their grey mittens will be pink, too, and swollen at the joints from the cold. She points at the scarf, where it hangs over my heart. It is obvious it did not begin as mine.

You weren't here.

I missed my train, Michelle. Couldn't get a lift.

There is thick ice in places and she is unsteady on the cobbles. Her feet slip and her knees shake. For the first time, I look at her face, not just her red tam and her dark hair. Her lips are bloodless, her face all peely-wally and I know only that there is something I have missed.

It was in the papers.

We don't get the P+J, I say. We do not get the papers at all, unless it is to look at the livestock auctions and for those we need the Courier or the Advertiser out of Perth, not Aberdeen. If we do get them, I do not read them. It would mean asking my father. She doesn't bother to change her voice now and I don't, either. We are not pretending anymore.

You do know?

I hold her shoulders so she doesn't go over on the ice. So I do not. There is the sweet smell of cider and smoke from inside when the door opens. The snow starts again, big and light as feathers. Or I imagine it does. I do not know what she means. But I must know because I am already greeting, the tears thawing my face in stripes, scalding the skin. Michelle would never have anything else to say to me. The first day back his parents had come up for the service at King's Chapel. He was pulled out of the water with no coat, no shoes. Not even my scarf. There is no telling if it was himself or the sea that undressed him. I have to crouch in the vennel between the pub and the next house, with the bins, my back against the wall. Everyone else has gone and the barman comes out the side in his apron to tell me that I cannae stay here.

~

Carol tells me that it's snowing in Flagstaff, that she stopped and watched it for a while. She says she knows that I don't like it, and holds up her hands to flex all her fingers. Arthritis, she means. She missed the snow all the years that she lived in LA, though, and always stops. The red bow is exactly where I saw it last. Carol has left off fighting. A policeman's exit, as I have heard it called, is to do it in the bath or shower. Nae mess, nae disorder. I tell her this. All I will want for then is someone to turn on the water. It should not be her.

Do it right, when you do it.

I promise her that I will.

The postcards Rhona sends, they still come and Carol picks up my post for me when I can't make it into town. Sometimes they arrive in trickles and sometimes in a great spate. There is General Wade's brig at Aberfeldy, Ben Lawers and the place near Loch Tay where all my people are buried and where I will not be. Carol says that it looks like the loneliest place on earth. That's what Rhona says about Arizona, I tell her. My two deserts.

Whatever Rhona may think of my memory, there are things that have not been lost. These are the hard and crumbling cliffs of Aberdeenshire, one where I had died a death and walked back to town empty-pocketed

and one where he had come too close to the soft edge or simply stepped off. Rhona's cards and cramped writing add no order. But the letters advance row on row in that tiny script that she was taught because of the paper rationing: This is the famous Slains Castle, she writes, which inspired Bram Stoker's masterpiece. Boswell and Johnson stayed there when there was still a roof on it. There is nothing to say that while I sat in my kirk, in my pew, and sang The Holly and the Ivy to my jealous and greedy God, the lifeboats were searching the jagged granite below.



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A Very Small Stain

[Danny Lalonde](#)

The sofa has been here almost since the beginning. I pull my knees up, hug them close to me, and listen to my father apologize before he shoves the end of a dull, black handgun into his mouth. I don't hear the blast. Instead, it is my mother's voice as she comes rushing in from the kitchen *Why? Why? Why?* louder every time; her olive skin turns nearly purple from screaming.

The very next week, we empty the apartment because she can't afford this one anymore. That's what she tells me. But we only load our belongings onto the elevator and move down from the fourteenth floor to the sixth. Of course, I don't ask her about it, nor do I point out that the new apartment is exactly the same as the old one except that I can't see the lake from the balcony. It's the first thing I find missing. We make more than a dozen trips up and down the elevator carrying garbage bags full of belongings, mattresses, chairs, tables, armfuls of dishes and Tupperware, then a grocery cart *the one from the lobby* full of food. The landlord and his son are the only help we have since Mom's family lives out of town and Dad's family is grieving so hard they can't make the ten minutes to come over and help.

I stand in the doorway of the apartment and I look into the little hole where the bolt from the door lands. This one time, before I was tall enough to see inside the cavity, I dropped my chewing gum down inside the hole. I wonder how many little boys before me dropped chewing gum or candy or army men or bits of eraser down inside the metal door frame, if only to imagine where the object might land, if it lands at all. I think that there is probably a time capsule's worth of debris down there: the secret stash of curious children stranded in this doorway, pondering, waiting, worrying.

There's only one thing left in the apartment and it's the sofa. Mom tugs at my arm and tells me it's time to go.

What about the sofa?

We're leaving it here.

But we have to bring it with us. It's ours.

It's dirty, she says. Now, come on. We have to unpack downstairs.

I tell myself that there is nothing really packed, so I don't know what the big deal is. The big deal here is that the sofa is alone and needs to come with us.

It's not that dirty.

We're leaving it. Now come on.

I'm going to stay here a while, then. If that's okay.

There is a moment, before she loosens the tension on my arm, when I think she won't let me stay. I can't look at her because I know that we will have to say more things to each other and I'm not ready for that yet. I'm still only seven years old.

Don't be long, she says, and I watch her from behind as she moves down toward the elevator carrying our electric frying pan under her arm and smoking a cigarette.

At first, I can't just walk into the apartment. Empty like this, it's a place I'm not used to. I focus on the sofa and suddenly I can imagine the table to one side of it, with a lamp, and in front of it there once was a rug. But that disappeared right away. There is a painting on the wall, a landscape from K-Mart; the shapes and colours in the painting match the mottled pattern on the sofa. I can't accurately decipher for myself its complex swirls and

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Art

shapes, sometimes fruit, sometimes vessels wrapped and scrolled with vines and intersecting vegetation. Orange. Brown. Orange. Red. Brown. Black. Yellow. And then orange again. It's like that story about the illustrated man where his tattoos, his markings, tell you something different each time you look. The sofa is not defined by the pattern or even the colours so much as just an impression of itself, it introduces itself: furniture overwhelmed by confusion. When the room presents itself full like this, I cross the hollowness of it and land on the sofa. I'm wearing shorts so that the rough, dry fabric is scratchy against my skin. I pull my legs up and hug them to me. Mom isn't really concerned with the dirt. Not the crusty place where my sister spilled her macaroni and cheese. Not the places where someone fell asleep and drooled. She isn't even worried about the ratty patch where our butts have worn one cushion nearly bare. There are tiny flecks of him spattered along the front of the sofa. I know this because I had to wash some of the flecks off of my skin.

It isn't very long before she's in the doorway calling me to her.

It's time, she says. I need your help.

We can't leave it, I tell her.

It's not coming.

I don't know how to argue with her because she says everything so *finally*.

But, we can't leave it.

Come on, Frank.

No.

I am not bringing that thing into our new home.

We can't sit on the floor.

We'll get a new one.

I thought you didn't have any money.

It's old.

When I am old, will you leave me behind?

Come now. Please, Frank. Please.

I like *this* one.

Before she says anything else, I hear the elevator ding and then open. The landlord and his son are in the hallway, their voices echo like they might in a hospital or an asylum. He talks to Mom who finally lowers her head. He wants to charge her to throw the sofa into the dumpster, but he'll move it down to the new place for free. I should have never tried to argue with her because I know it has only made this worse.

As the elevator closes with the landlord and his son tucked in there neatly with the sofa, Mom and I wait for the next one. I'm sorry, I tell her, but she only squeezes my hand sadly.

We could put plastic on it, like on Grandma's sofa, I say, so that it doesn't get any dirtier.

We never cover it, not even with a blanket. For the longest time, the furniture, even the painting, occupy the new apartment in the same exact layout as in the old place. Only the carpet and the view of the lake are missing. Either Mom doesn't notice, or it doesn't matter anymore.

Mom is close and she has an arm around me. I think I'm eleven. There's a small ceramic ashtray on the arm of the sofa. It's full, but she's still smoking. When she exhales, I draw short convulsive breaths so that I can share the disease. I think we will be closer because of it. I think she mistakes my stilted, erratic breathing for crying, so she draws her body down the length of the sofa and holds me tighter, closer, so that I won't fall off. I feel the softness of her breast, the warmth of her belly, and the steady rhythm of her diaphragm lifting and falling. I hear the unsteady drumming of her heart and see the sweat dampening her neck. She bends one leg, draws her knee up, and the bottom of me rests in the space she creates. I begin to tremble. Her breath, the smell of cigarettes, is hot on my face and she grips me so tightly I think that if I do not breathe, then the trembling will go away. This is a moment my body never forgets.

It's okay to be lonely, she says. Everybody is lonely.

Does it go away?

I don't think it ever does, she says. I think about finding another man, but I don't think I would stop being

empty.

I'm thirteen and Mom is at one end and I'm at the other. She hands me a cigarette. I have my own ashtray. I have one of her glasses and I am chewing the ice cubes. The little bit of liquid in the glass tastes like the smell of old leaves. It's warm in my throat, hot in my belly. My one hand is down between the cushion and the arm of the sofa. There's something down there, a string, or a necklace maybe. I leave it there. I think of the opening in Dad's skull, the scar I dream about so often. I think about the dripping from the ceiling and rushing to him in dream-speed, trying to hold it closed, trying to wrap the cotton rug around his head so that he'll stop bleeding. Squeezing and squeezing so that he'll be okay. It didn't really happen that way. I just sat there holding my legs, swaying, trying to stay focused on the TV. Mom hands me leftover ice cubes all the time and sometimes there's more than enough of the old leaves to warm my belly and cloud my head.

Hold me, she says, and I slide across the rough fabric and she rocks me against her and I feel ashamed because of what my body does and how sick I feel in her arms.

He's going to hell, you know. She whispers.

How can you know that?

It's where people go who can't be redeemed.

Can I go with him?

She doesn't answer me; we never talk about him again.

My sister is too young to remember. I think that she pissed her pants when it happened. She was sitting right beside me at the time. When she is fifteen, I come home and find Karen and her boyfriend on the sofa. He turns towards me and I see his penis dangling there, over her. He looks at me stupidly, an animal suddenly stranded in headlights. I'm captivated by the hollow her buttocks makes in the cushion, a dark, forbidden depression. Suddenly, like kites, they fly off to the bedroom where I hear her swearing and him laughing. Not long after that, she moves out, pregnant, to the boyfriend's apartment.

There are things that I remember, but more that I forget. I haven't seen either of them, Mom or Karen, in such a long time. Mom disappeared, and Karen just never calls anymore. I know where she is; she and the boyfriend rent a trailer down there next to the lake. The summers might be pleasant, but I'm sure the winters are hell. Mom never stops drinking. She held enough ice cubes out to me so that the lines blurred into nothing I can recognize. When I move out of the sixth floor apartment, I'm the only one left. The one thing I take with me is the sofa.

From the basement where I rent now, I can't see the lake, or any of the buildings that sprawl the city. I can see a bit of grass and it makes me smile to think I am almost half buried, closer than I might otherwise get while I'm still conscious. When Mom came unglued, I don't think she knew anything. She's not dead. I don't think so. But, I think she's with Dad in a lot of ways. I have trouble explaining it. I'm done. I have trouble explaining that one too. Fortunately, there's nobody to explain it to. I'm not sure what my sister tells her kid. Maybe he's not old enough yet. I wonder if he's eight or nine now. I don't remember meeting him.

Outside of my door, there's a concrete well, a sort of landing where I might keep a bicycle or a hibachi. I have neither. The stairs go up and out into the yard. I stand in the doorway and stick my finger into the little hole where the door bolts tight. I touch something soft and that makes me smile too. There's nothing left in the apartment except the sofa; I've pawned everything else. That's what you do when you're desperate. I saw it on TV.

You can tell me, I expect: this is the lunatic fringe, right? The place people go to when they figure out there's no such thing as heaven, no such thing as hell, and redemption is the lie that revenge tries to tell you. There isn't a lot that makes sense to me anymore. Mom was right about one thing, though: lonely never goes away. It just grows and grows until it's tight on you like a tourniquet and I can only suck little breaths through the jaundiced filter of half-smoked cigarettes.

I drag the old sofa, heavy as an anchor, up the stairs and into the yard. I can see a few people already out on their balconies looking down at me. I have a flask of rye and I pour it all over the fabric. People have been burning their important things forever, right? Making sacrifices of one kind or another. This is the only thing I have left, so here it is, stains and all. The first match doesn't catch and someone up there laughs and I hear beer bottles clink against a metal railing. The second match keeps and I drop it onto the cushion. The flash of light shoves me back and the thing woofs like a big, bad dog and the breath of it steals the air from all around the blaze. There are so many faces in the smoke and the flames: most of them I don't recognize, but my father smiles at me. The sirens draw more people outside onto their balconies. Some of the children sneak onto the fire escape to get closer. I drop back into the shadows, down the concrete well, and into my small room. I have no furniture now, so I just stand here looking down at the place where the boy in me used to sit. I suppose that something in the burning says that I am a man now, the glass having gone all dark instead of clear.

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Carole Glasser Langille



Carole Glasser Langille's fourth book of poetry, *Church of the Exquisite Panic: The Ophelia Poems* was published in the fall of 2012. She is also the author of a collection of short stories, *When I Always Wanted Something*. Originally from New York, she lives in Nova Scotia and teaches Creative Writing: Poetry at Dalhousie University.

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Valentin in Trouble

[Carole Glasser Langille](#)

Valentin is not answering his phone, and friends haven't seen him for days. I tell my husband I'm going over. Sean isn't interested in coming; he's seen Valentin drunk too many times. We both knew Valentin in the heady days when famous bands were doing his songs and he was rich and too much was never enough.

I'm shivering as I pound the door, wind razoring my winter jacket. When Valentin doesn't answer, I let myself in with a key. Of course I'm afraid I'll find him dead. The house smells of wet dog, though Valentin doesn't own a dog. Dirty dishes cover the counter. It's cold in the kitchen.

Valentin, I call, but my voice doesn't carry. When I go into the bedroom and see him sitting in bed cutting his toenails, I'm relieved. I'm even glad when he snarls, "Hell, you're breaking into my house?" He's forgotten he gave me the key. He's skinnier than usual, his blonde hair tangled and oily, but drinking hasn't damaged his high cheekbones, his narrow steel-blue eyes.

It's almost impossible to convince him to stay with Sean and me. But I won't leave him like this. Valentin may be self-destructive, unable to navigate simple tasks from day to day, but he has gifts few people have. He'll sing a song he's written and joy blazes in me.

Sienna left, he says finally. Sienna had only been living with him for a few months, but it seemed inevitable she would go. They were both so unhappy.

She was beautiful, he moans.

I nod. Beautiful if someone skinny as a stick and always on the verge of tears can be beautiful. Look, I say, stay with us for a few days. I'll cook moussaka. Do you want me to invite Sienna? He looks at me as if I am an undesirable alien.

She's in Italy.

I don't ask for details. I use my last strategy. Sean has money for you.

Sean isn't home when we get back, but that's okay because Valentin hasn't slept for days and now, after I convince him to take a bath, he goes to the guest room to sleep and doesn't get up until stars are burning in the cold sky. It's snowing. The fire is burning. I've made bean soup and quiche. Food for heartache.

But Valentin won't eat. He tells us some German guy Sienna used to go with sent her a ticket to Florence. She only told Valentin the day before she left. He's speedy as he talks, and then he starts crying.

I don't mind the snow, Sean says the next morning as we're eating breakfast. But when I walk to the car, it hurts to breathe.

Later we watch a documentary Sean brought from the library about British guys who kayak a river in the Himalayas. Not only do they make the poor Sherpas carry their kayaks and supplies up the mountain, but they only pay them \$150 a day and out of this the Sherpas must pay for food.

Why did you get this Sean? I ask. Are you planning to kayak in the Himalayas? Sean ignores my question. I hate this film.

A postcard arrives from Sienna with the statue of David on the front. She writes about a museum she's been to, meals she's eaten. I never thought of Sienna as cruel, but she does not ask about Valentin, or even mention him. Luckily he is still asleep when the mail comes and I tear the card into pieces before he gets up.

I've brought Valentin's electric guitar from his place, and when he finally picks it up, I think things have shifted. That evening he plays a Grateful Dead song, and Sean and I get up and dance. I remember Valentin's

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early songs. I used to learn them as soon as I heard them, sing them alone in the shower. Dancing now, I feel as happy as I used to feel when I was young and pretended to sing in front of a huge crowd.

When Sean complains about the cold, (our house has lousy insulation) Valentin tells us about life on the islands where he lived for a few months, jamming with local musicians before he'd made it big. "I was driving taxi then," he says. "I picked up this Samoan chick in Anahola. She was a huge chick wearing a muumuu. She must have weighed 250 pounds. And with her is this Marine dude, a big black guy, weight all in his chest. I'm driving and they start going at it. She's bending over him giving him head. I try ignoring the situation, as if nothing's happening. This is not the usual thing that goes on in cabs. She asks if it's okay and he's saying yeah and then he grabs at her and he gets his hand on her crotch, and whoa, he's not happy. She's fucking mahu. He feels cock underneath the muumuu and this big fucking black Marine is not expecting cock. He gets angry and starts beating the guy up, but the big Samoan is fighting back. I don't know what to do. Finally I park the cab and run away. I wasn't going to hang around for that." It is the most Valentin has spoken since he's been with us. I have to smile. Valentin is always running away.

And then, as if things have shifted and good luck is finally coming through like the sun on that warm island, Valentin gets a letter from his agent. He hasn't heard from this guy in years. It turns out a song from Valentin's first album has been picked up by a country band. Sean and I make a bet on how much his royalty check will be.

We wonder why Valentin doesn't move back to his place. But he must still be on shaky ground because a few days later he doesn't get out of bed until almost dinner time.

Sean has brought home another documentary. "It's filmed in Kauai," he tells Valentin. After dinner Valentin stays on the couch eating popcorn as the movie begins. It's about young people who lived in a sort of hippy paradise. One woman said, "I had a hole in my heart that was so big, a freezing wind kept blowing through it. I thought drugs or alcohol or sex would fill it." Some days she left the commune, put some food in a plastic bottle, tied it to her foot, and swam six hours to the next town. "Swimming was meditative," she said, "like going to a recovery center." In the documentary the re-enactment of her swimming was done by her granddaughter.

"Yeah, a hole in the heart," Valentin says. Then he starts to cry. It's obvious the latest bit of good news has not lifted his depression. We keep watching the movie as if Valentin sobbing were a normal occurrence. When the grandmother introduces her granddaughter, Valentin says, "Isn't that beautiful." He loves the idea of family. But then, out of nowhere, he says, "I'm through with songs. It's bullshit. I don't even like the song they took; I wrote it when I was a teenager for Christ's sake."

Sean thinks Valentin is hopeless. He tells me it's time Valentin moved out. I try to explain that any success Valentin has makes him feel like a fraud. Sean is able to make a living selling guitars and banjos in a business where many of his competitors have gone under. But he used to play. And he doesn't anymore. He thinks Valentin should count his blessings. But who actually does count their blessings?

When I tell Valentin I should be working, I haven't had a steady job in years, he says, "You are working." Does he mean the collages I made on the wall? "You work hard," Valentin says. "You're inspired." I don't tell him that lately I haven't been focused enough to make anything. Perhaps Sean is right when he says I plunge into rescue mode when I can't concentrate on my own work.

But Valentin doesn't want to talk about collage. He wants to talk about Sienna. "Such a beautiful mouth. She's so damn graceful." I nod. "Once, when my shoulder hurt like hell, she massaged me using some kind of oil that smelled like olives. She has amazing hands."

"Olive oil, I want to say. It's not exotic." When he sighs he sounds like something is breaking in him. Like the icebergs we saw in the film about the Himalayas, sensitive to any change in temperature.

We are going stir crazy in this house, and it's too frigid to spend time outdoors. I ask Sean what he thinks about the three of us going on vacation.

"We have to take Valentin? What is it with you two?"

But Sean, my big shaggy lion of a husband whose red hair falls over his eyes each time I sweep it away, knows he doesn't have to worry about anything going on with Valentin and me, that's long gone, and he can see Valentin might as well be in his own house cutting his toenails, for all the difference living here has made. We all need a change. Sean wants to get away from the cold too. The movie about Kauai made him crave warm water.

He has his assistant look after the store. Valentin, like a sleepwalker, goes along with any plan. The three of us safely board a plane to Jamaica. And the holiday saves us.

Or so I think when we first arrive. The water, turquoise and clean, seems to wash away our disappointments. We eat Ackee and curried goat. Sean is charging everything, hoping he'll be able to pay the bills, but the two-bedroom cabin on the beach is not expensive.

For the first time in months, Valentin laughs at jokes Sean and I make. We even go dancing. Sean doesn't like to dance in public, but Valentin is a natural and whirls me around the floor. Because he dances so well, I become a good partner too, confident as he leads. And then, when the lights are low, he pulls me to him and kisses me. Truly, I am surprised. And unnerved. "Sean's in the bathroom," he says, when I look around the room. I walk back to our table.

I'm prepared to forget this little incident. I love Valentin like a brother, but things weren't always that way. When I first met him and Sean, he was the one I wanted to be with. What I wanted, I see now, was not to be with Valentin, but to *be* Valentin. I wanted to write songs and play in a band. I wanted to be as free and wild and full of life as he was. He certainly wasn't interested in me then. I care about Valentin and want to help him. But romance isn't part of the plan.

I'm not keen to have breakfast alone with Valentin next morning. When Sean leaves early to play golf, I stay in bed, then take a long bath, hoping Valentin will leave the cabin, but when I walk into the kitchen he's sitting at the table. I'm putting jam on toast when he says, "I know you felt something last night."

I groan. I didn't think Valentin would be this clumsy.

"I haven't felt this way since Sienna," he continues.

"Oh, come on," I say. I shouldn't be surprised but I don't like being the object of Valentin's most recent hallucination.

"Sean doesn't understand you."

"Actually he does understand me. You're the one who doesn't understand things."

He gets up and leaves the room. For such a good dancer, Valentin is a man who moves one way and then another erratically, as if listening to the clash of different rhythms. I can't help but feel sorry for him. Not because of the strain between us, but because of his failure to make anything in his life prosper. I'm not surprised Valentin is self medicating, whiskey being his current preference.

When Sean comes back, he is amazed I am still in the kitchen having breakfast. "I'm finished," I tell him and we leave together for our usual spot on the beach.

Valentin joins us soon after. Everything feels like slow motion, each of us sitting on our own blanket, no one speaking. Sean lies down to rest. I watch the surfers. They paddle out, then stand on their boards. When they ride the wave, they slide down the crest as if it were glass. The wave curls over them into a tunnel which they slide right through. They swivel back up the approaching wave then fall into the foam as the water crashes on shore. When a surfer tumbles, it still looks like fun. I have to admit that even the wipe-outs in Valentin's life have always seemed glamorous, as if they're connected to some vital creative force. I think of a collage I'd like to make gluing photos of the ocean onto pressboard. I'd use shots of different beaches where waves crash and rise. My plan is to rip away parts of photos, so the one beneath is partially revealed. I have some blue brocade that I'll include in the collage as well.

I watch as Valentin gets up to go for a swim. He stands by the shoreline, his narrow shoulders curved, his frail back already starting to burn. He cautiously puts his foot in the water. It takes him a long time to completely submerge.

Sean asks if I brought the local paper, and I hand it to him. I've finished rubbing lotion on my legs and on Sean's back, and I am just beginning to be absorbed by my book when a dark man in his mid-thirties, a little younger than us, his hair in dreads, walks up, agitated. "That your friend?" he asks, pointing out to sea. We look up. I put my glasses on and look again. I can't believe what I see. Valentin is way past the other surfers.

"The current is pulling him out," I cry. "Is there a lifeguard?"

The man explains there are no lifeguards on duty and tells us to call the police. Then he says he is going to swim out.

“In that current?” Sean asks. “Isn’t that risky?”

“Call the police, Sean, I yell. He’s going to save Valentin.”

Who knew there were men as generous as this Jamaican. We watch as he dives into the water and lets the current carry him. We watch as he gets close to Valentin. They are bobbing in the water for almost twenty minutes before the police and the rescue squad arrive.

Later, after Valentin has slept for hours, he still looks exhausted. He doesn’t want to talk about what happened. It’s days before he says, “You wouldn’t believe how strong the current was. I kept trying to swim back to shore. I thought, if I just pushed harder. But I couldn’t push hard enough.”

He still won’t tell me what the man said to him when they were floating for their lives. Why the mystery? We’re in the kitchen having coffee when I ask him again and finally he answers.

“He told me to stay calm, that the police would be there soon to rescue us. He said we should just go with the current and let it take us with it. He said, eventually the pull would lessen.” Valentin doesn’t look at me as he talks. “I was terrified the current would take us further out, but he said no, soon there would be a break and we would be able to remain where we were.” His voice quivers. “He said as long as we didn’t tire ourselves, we’d be fine. I’d be dead if he hadn’t come out and calmed me.”

Valentin isn’t able to locate the man before we leave, to thank him. “Typical,” Sean says.

When we return home, Valentin goes back to his place. Sean is glad we have the house to ourselves. I’m relieved too. It’s still cold, and the damp wind feels even colder after our holiday in the sun, but with Valentin gone our home is infinitely brighter.

We haven’t been back more than a week when we are surprised by a visit from Sienna. We drink wine she’s brought and listen as she talks about Florence, a city she clearly loves. She’s happy. I ask if she’s with the guy she went to see.

“Yes, Isak came back with me.”

“Valentin is not going to be happy about that,” I say. To my surprise she’s taken aback.

“Valentin and I weren’t a couple.”

“But he wanted to be a couple. You knew, of course?”

“Why do you say that? He never said anything. He never even kissed me.” I let that sink in.

Then Sienna says, “I’ve always liked Valentin. I made it pretty obvious. But I don’t think he felt that way about me.”

When Sienna leaves my impulse is to go over to Valentin’s and talk to him, implore him to take a look at the cave he’s dug himself into. Does he have a clue how he sabotages himself? But I hold back. I know I won’t get through to him.

And then one afternoon Sean comes home and says he just saw Valentin leaving a bookstore, that he was stoned and out of it. The old sympathy drug starts kicking in, and I have the urge to go to his place and see how he is. “I’ll make some soup for him. And then I think, ‘Nah.’”

There are some photos I have of a wild ocean, and a calm ocean slick and smooth. I think I’ll tear them up and see how they fit together.

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Carolyn Abram



Carolyn Abram's short fiction is forthcoming in *the New California Writing Anthology*. She is also the author of *Facebook for Dummies*. She received her MFA from California College of the Arts ('12) and her BA from Stanford University ('06). She currently resides in Seattle, where she is hard at work on her first novel.

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Little Man

[Carolyn Abram](#)

My tiny bedroom was sixty percent bed and thirty percent antique vanity that I took from my grandma. I sat on the little poof of a stool and surveyed myself in the three-panel mirror, trying to catch my best angle. I strongly suspected it was one I ruined merely by turning my eyes towards it. On my shoulder, Little Man was stretching, warming up. "Treat each day like it might be your last," he said, arms dangling. "Brought to you by State Farm Life Insurance. Would you like me to contact your local agent?"

"No." I grimaced as the brush hit a particularly nasty tangle. Instead of unsticking it like you're supposed to, I pulled harder. The snarl gave way and the back of my brush knocked straight into Little Man, sending him flying across the room.

I cursed and rushed over to where he landed, in a pile of laundry. Little Man's body was limp, his eyes blinking rapidly without focusing. I breathed a sigh of relief; he wasn't torqued into the Sad Man position that means he's dead for good. I pinched his little hand between my thumb and forefinger to power him down. I counted to thirty and powered him back on. I cradled him in both my hands to provide additional power.

His body went rigid again, and after a few more seconds he sat up and looked at me. "Ready to begin," he said.

I tried to think of something easy for him to do, just to make sure he was still functional. "Uh, daily schedule." I said.

"You have brunch at 1pm with Annie at Melt. The rest of your day and evening, you are free. No plans at all. Looking for something to fill your weekend? Check out the Bay Area singles meet-up brought to you by eHarmony."

This stung. I finished getting ready and went to meet Annie.

Annie was my most beautiful friend. The one who always seemed to be in the middle of a shampoo commercial shoot. Her life was full of mega-watt smiles and over-emphasized syllables. For a while we were inseparable, the kind of friends who talked every day, had each other's spare keys and knew the other's schedule without needing a Littleman sync. But recently we'd gotten busy. Distant.

"Here, Lars, take our photoooo," Annie said to her Littleman as soon as we sat down. Lars was the Ken doll of my childhood brought to life. Neckerchief sold separately. He scampered nimbly off her shoulder down the rail of her arm to the bar to take our photo. Little Man ambled to the far side of my shoulder where he'd be out of frame. We flung out our hair and pursed our lips.

"Gorgeous," Lars said in an Australian accent. Annie always had nice things.

I went for my mimosa. Little Man said to me, "Lars is posting the photo to the cloud. When your head's in the cloud, make sure your feet are on the ground. Brought to you by Verizon."

Annie looked at me sympathetically. "Ad-vice?"

I got a bit defensive at this. "I'm upgrading soon."

On my shoulder, Little Man shifted his weight back and forth on his little legs. "Best Buy offers a full range of Littlemen colors, styles, and providers. Use code LM382 for a free Littleman raincoat with two year contract." His voice seemed more mechanical than usual.

"He was supposed to be temporary, remember? That's why you didn't bother naming him. What was

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that, two years ago? It pleased me that Annie remembered this. She'd been the one to get me such a good price. "My friend was just fired and they took her Littleman back," she'd said, brow furrowed down and voice pitched up. *Things are rough right now, is there anything you can do to help her out? Like an old model or something just so she's not cut off from the world while she looks for a new job?*

"I'll get around to it," I said. "How have you been?"

On her shoulder, Lars broke out his display and started showing me photos from the past few weeks. "Dinner at Scoop last night. Check out the plating!" he said.

"Stop that," Annie said to Lars. Then to me, "I wanted to talk to you about something." She put her hand on my arm and furrowed her brow really seriously. "Do you think I'm boring?"

I didn't really know how to answer. If Annie's life was boring—with her serious boyfriend and serious lawyer job—what was mine? "I don't think you're boring. Why would you ask that?"

She gulped her drink. "You know, people used to ask me what was going on and I had all this new information. I just went traveling, I just got a new job, I just moved. And now people ask me that and I have nothing to say except—"

"That you went to Scoop for dinner." Little Man finished.

"What?" she and I both said to him. His color changed to pink and he said nothing.

Annie seemed rattled by this. So was I. Littlemen don't usually insert themselves like that. They answer questions and accept commands. They don't finish your sentences. I wrapped my fingers around him and pulled him off my shoulder. Brought up his display. "I knocked him out with my hairbrush," I explained. "Maybe something's broken."

She exhaled heavily, drained her mimosa.

"You're approaching your alcohol limit for the day," Lars told her. "It's 1:23pm."

"What are you her mother?" I said. "Turn Monitor off."

He looked at me without recognition.

"Annie, are you going to let your Littleman boss you around? Turn Monitor off and enjoy yourself." I said.

She nodded sheepishly and repeated the command. Another round arrived, along with a plate of French toast bites. "Sooo lucky I turned off Monitor. I can't even think about what this will do to my calorie count," she said.

I waited for her to continue. The thing with Annie was, she went through friendships. I knew this about her. We'd talked about it, wondered what it was about her that allowed friendships to dissolve so frequently for her. I rarely lost friends. But I also rarely had friends as close as Annie and I once were. I had been thinking that the distance, the boredom, the *nothing* was part of Annie shedding me for someone new. But then, just for a moment, it had seemed like we were going to talk about *something*.

"Babe, you there?" Lars opened his mouth but it was Annie's boyfriend's voice that came out.

She brightened considerably. "Yesss, just give me a minute to get outside, it's so noisy in here."

I looked around the trendy brunch spot as she left. There were large groups of friends crowded around tiny tables. Their Littlemen tended to be uniformly dressed by table, like a junior high cafeteria. There were a couple of twosomes or foursomes. Was I the only one sitting alone?

"Any new messages?" I asked Little Man.

He shook his head. Then, he brightened. "But there are some celebrity updates. Rehab for a promiscuous pop star."

I sighed. He looked a little downtrodden. "How do I describe what I'm feeling?" I said. Not that I expected him to have a definition, but because it needed to be said.

Little Man looked over towards the door. "That's not how friendships are supposed to work."

I waited for the sponsorship, some brilliant Ad-visor who figured out how to target his ads to emotive words better than anyone. Nothing. Just Little Man standing on my shoulder, looking into my eyes and waiting for a command.

"Are you sure you're fully functional?" I asked.

He spun in a circle, processing. Then shook his head to indicate everything was fine. "Ready to begin."

I was still trying to figure out what, exactly was going on with him when the bartender leaned his forearms on the bar across from me and said with a jerk of his chin, "Dig the retro."

"Oh, he's not a retro. He's just old." I explained, face reddening.

The bartender was cute, cut like an aspiring actor with dark thick eyebrows and eyelashes. His Little Man was a newish model, dressed like a nerdy professor, complete with glasses.

"Nice." He nodded, then, in a totally arcane gesture extended his hand over the bar and waited for me to take it. I almost giggled; it was so odd to feel his dry and cracked fingers between mine. "Om Damien," he said. His Littleman looked over at Little Man and held out his fist towards him. Before I could even make up my mind about whether I wanted him to, Little Man held his own fist up in kind. Now the bartender had my number.

Somebody called Damien away and Annie reappeared at my elbow. "Did you just bump with that bartender?"

Little Man tarzanned across my back to sit on my other shoulder, closer to Annie. "Damien Martin," he said. "Age: 29, BA Communications, Syracuse University. Lives in the Mission with three roommates. Drink of choice: Whiskey, 5 shots a night on average. Plays 30 hours of Universe of Warcraft a week."

I shushed him. "He's right there."

Annie surveyed Damien and then shrugged at me. "If that's what you're into," she said. "Anyway, I've got to get going."

"We're not done." I looked down at our waiting plates.

"I know, it's just, there's this whole thing going on with Porter right now. We'll talk later, okay?" She slid off her seat and grabbed her purse. "So much fun." She hugged me. "Again. Soon."

I smiled and watched her leave, an impossibly golden ray of sunshine illuminating her as she opened the door.

On Wednesday, a fuse blew in my apartment. I was staring at the fuse box wearing rubber gloves, Little Man reciting the operating manual when he paused to inform me I had a call request. "From the bartender."

This fluttered him into my good graces. There is nothing worse than some dude you met snarling into your ear, *Hey babe, remember me?* The handshake, the call request. The guy had manners. "Accept," I said.

"Don't make yourself too available. Brought to you by Cosmopolitan Magazine. Be a Cosmo girl."

"You're lucky I'm too lazy to replace you," I told him.

"I am lucky." He repeated this. And soon the call request had been dropped.

I finished getting the lights back on, called him back, and apologized.

"It's cool. I just wanted to invite you to a party tonight. My roommates and I are having a thing. It's pretty casual."

"On a Wednesday?"

"You have plans?"

I looked over at Little Man, who crossed his arms and said nothing.

"I'd really love to see you again," Damien said. "I know we didn't talk much but you seemed really cool. No pressure, just come to the party and hang out. What's the worst that could happen?"

Little Man paused the call. "Syphilis, Gonorrhea, murder, death, identity theft, loss of property, stalking."

"You're the one who bumped in the first place," I said, before I realized, again, that he wasn't giving me an ad-visor. Before I had time to figure out what to do with him, Little Man spun a lazy circle on one leg, putting Damien back on.

"Where'd you go?" he asked.

"Little Man error," I told him. "I'll be there."

The party was mostly dudes, and they all seemed to know each other; they mostly just stared at me when I walked in. I found Damien in the middle of an argument with one of his friends.

"Nah, man, it's coming." The friend had a beaky nose and red blotches from alcohol across his cheeks. "I'm telling you. We're powering our Littlemen through our *skin* man. It's only a matter of time till

they're in our brains. Then am I me or am I a Littleman? That's why I don't even have one.

You do have one, Damien said. I've seen it.

That's just for emergencies. I don't even keep him on me.

He'll be super useful in emergencies then, won't he, I said. Damien smiled at me and the friend looked at me like I was an idiot. My presence deflated the energy level.

This is Arthur, said Damien. He's always like this when he drinks.

Arthur gestured with his hand, sloshing the contents of his drink onto the floor. Like what? Honest? President? I'm telling you man, on the day you get turned into a fucking battery for the fucking big Littlemen, you're going to remember this conversation and you are going to rue the fucking day you didn't listen to me.

Little Man opened his mouth and Annie's voice screeched out, informing me this was an emergency and she needed to talk to me immediately.

I flushed and looked nervously at Damien.

See? Arthur said, Your Little Man dictates your life, not you.

I rolled my eyes at him and dashed for the bathroom.

Annie? I'm here. I closed the door and sat on the toilet lid.

It took me a minute to get her to speak in sentences instead of sobs. Porter broke up with her. He just said he didn't love me anymore. She gasped. No other girl, nothing to fix, just that I'm unlovable.

I hesitated. I knew I should go rushing to her. She wouldn't have called me if that wasn't what she wanted. But I was somehow annoyed. I didn't believe she would come to me if the tables were turned. I'm so sorry, I said.

I just feel like such an idiot. And all I can think about is the fact that since we live together now I have to find a new place. And find a new boyfriend.

Well, one of those can probably wait.

Do you think this is funny? Do you think my pain is funny?

I couldn't even apologize before she launched into a crying rant. I looked at myself in the mirror and tried to pick a clump of mascara out of my eyelashes. Little Man settled himself into a seated position, leaning against my neck, his core processor sure to leave a mark. He looked bored, an odd combination with the anger spewing out of his mouth. Someone pounded on the door.

Where are you? Annie asked.

I'm at a party, I said. Little Man's map interface flickered across his display and I realized he was sending her my location.

Yes, a party is just what I need. The edge of tears crept out of her voice. I can be there in twenty minutes.

She hung up before I could object. I didn't want her there, at Damien's crowded apartment, judging all of us and feeling superior.

Then I felt his little hands on the soft skin just next to my ear. I froze and looked up. Using both hands and all his arm strength, he pulled a tendril of hair back and over my ear. My skin prickled. I almost started to cry.

Stop that, I said. Instead of it coming out nasty and harsh, like I wanted, it sounded pleading. And what kind of person pleads with her Littleman?

The most difficult of journeys begins with a single step, Little Man said. Brought to you by Sanford and Sons construction. But I figured he was right, so I opened the door and went back out.

I knew Annie would do something awful if she made it to the party, but as I was attempting to say goodbye and intercept her, I fell into Damien's smile and believed him when he said that any friend of mine was welcome.

You must really want to sleep with me, I half-joked.

Is it bad if I say yes? he joked back, leaning towards me.

Which is of course when Annie stomped over, dressed like she was going to a club in Vegas and said, I can't believe you're doing this to me.

The first thing that popped out of my mouth to Annie was "Aren't you cold?"

Lars responded, "Body temperature 98.6 degrees."

Damien turned to face her, "What did she do to you?"

Annie ignored him. "I'm hurting here, and you're just using this as an excuse to hook up with some"

She gestured at Damien's torso. At his head. At his beard scruff. "Some man."

"I'm so sorry," I said to Damien.

He shook his head, above it all. "I'm sorry to hear about your break-up." He tried.

Annie brushed him away with a wave of her hand "exactly the way you brush away a bartender, not someone you see as an actual person. She fixated on me, "We should be someplace so much better than this."

"Like where?" I asked.

This created a chorus of Lars and Damien's Little Man giving us suggestions for places that were better than this and their special promotions. On my shoulder, Little Man was gravely silent.

"It's funny, we were just debating whether or not Little Men are going to take over the world," I said.

"Maybe they'd be a little less emotional in this particular situation. Don't you think?"

Annie crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Well, if we're staying, someone should bring me a drink. And you shouldn't have told me to dress up."

"I didn't."

"Uh, yeah you did. You sent a location and you sent a dress code. It said *formal*."

I turned to look at Little Man. He shrugged and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"You were annoyed," Little Man said. "Annie's a one-way friendship. You give and you give and you get nothing in return."

This stopped us all. Damien started laughing. I looked down at my feet, had I told Little Man that, ever? How could he possibly know any of that? And was he attempting to take revenge on Annie for it? That was when I felt the weight of Little Man being lifted from my shoulder. It was Annie. She'd picked him up by the scruff of his neck, like he was a hamster or a puppy and peered at him. Then she let him drop to the ground.

"You stupid. Little. Men." She tried to stomp him with her heels but he dodged her and took cover.

"You think you know everything. You are just. A bunch. Of wires."

My heart rate shot up, watching him running for his life like that. Lars had disappeared into the waves of Annie's hair, probably hoping to escape her wrath. "Hey," I said. "Calm down." I stepped towards her to grab her arm, but she was mid stomp and trying to shake me away from her. She lost her balance and tumbled to her ass. High heels are always a mistake in San Francisco.

The entire party fell silent.

"You calm down, you Little Man lover," she yelled from the floor. Her heel shot out and slammed into my calf. "Try being a friend for a change."

It was a solid hit. I grabbed my knee to my chest and started hopping, and that was when I heard the crunch.

I froze. It seemed like everyone had frozen. I looked down and there was Little Man, limp and helpless, his body torqued into the sad man position. I scooped him up and dashed into the bathroom.

I could hear the yelling through the bathroom door. Annie was being maneuvered out of the party; Damien was trying to check on me. But I focused on poor Little Man, limp and cradled in my hand. I held my breath and counted to ten. Tapped my toe against the tile ten times.

"Little Man," I tried. "Command: Wake up."

He turned his head towards me and his eyes focused. "Ready to begin."

The rush of happiness was almost too much. "Are you okay?" I asked, "Did I hurt you?"

He stood up and stretched. "Did you stomp me?" he asked, like someone trying to separate dream from reality.

"It was an accident."

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I showed him my leg, already yellowing. “Just bruised.”

He wrapped his arms around my calf, like a little kid trying to get his arms around a redwood. I gulped back a lump in my throat and without really knowing what else to do, kissed the top of his forehead.

“Let’s go home, Little Man.”

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Tyler Sage lives and teaches in Baltimore. He has recent work in *Story Quarterly*, *The L.A. Review of Books*, *New South*, *Barrelhouse*, and *PANK*.

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Shooting Star

[Tyler Sage](#)

We were in a back booth when the poet came in, and she came in like a battleship with no one at the rudder.

Ah, she said when she saw us. May I join you?

She sat before there was a chance to answer.

Hello, she said, looking at each of us in turn. Hello, hello. I'm having a hell of a night. A hell of a night. I've just come from a lecture. In the old foundry? Do you know it? No? Yes? One of my friends lives there with his girlfriend.

Let's see, she said to the waitress, let me have a Jack Daniels, just in a glass. No ice.

Actually, she said to us, a few people live there. Squatting's not really the right term, is it, but I'm not sure if they have heat. But they have a basement, where they have this lecture series that runs the first Wednesday of every month. It's two dollars to get in. It's cold and there's graffiti on the walls and I guess it used to be a derelict building. The lecture series is run by this guy who's really into Transhumanism, and you sit in folding chairs and there's an old music stand for the presenter and a slide projector and a sheet hung against the wall. Have you been?

She did not wait for an answer. Her eyes were hazy and bloodshot.

The lecture tonight was on comic books, she said. I need to tell you about it. What I need to explain was that the man giving the lecture was one of the most entrancing people I've ever seen. I was transfixed. It was forty minutes long and there were no visuals. It was just him, sitting there on the edge of the table, talking. He had this luminousness that is difficult to explain. His talk was about coloring in comic books—inking and shading—and how those reflect the time period they're created in. Or the socio-economics. Or something. All of this stuff, I'm not really sure. But he had this way of moving his hands. They never stopped. They flowed. They made patterns in the air. He talked about how husbands and wives used to write these comic books, and how he would do the drawings and she would ink in the colors. Or maybe it was just this one couple, but it was about the beauty they were able to get into their comic book. It was about love. And I was watching him, and his hands, and I saw that he was in love. That's what they were shaping. His hands, I mean. He was in love with this couple that made the comic books. He was so deeply in love with the books themselves. And yet he'd never been in love himself. With another person, I mean. I could see it just from the way he sat there on the edge of the table, from the way he wove those sad things with his hands.

And it's hard not to fall in love with someone who's so in love and doesn't know it, and who's never been in love himself, you know what I mean? I'm serious, by about halfway through I was in love with him. I was his. Take me anywhere, I wanted to tell him, I'll go with you. You might be tempted to think that I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. I've been lonely in this city. I don't know if I've ever said that, if it's ever been clear. It's not a big thing, I mean, who isn't lonely? It is what it is. So.

For a moment, she paused and went away from us. And then she came rushing back.

Oh yes, she said, and also, I have this thing that I do where when I'm really concentrating, or really blown away? I'll shake my head instead of nodding. Kind of like this.

She opened her eyes wide and pursed her lips and moved her head in small back and forth motions.

And the reason I bring this up is that he had that thing that a lot of charismatic people do, which is that he disdained his audience. On the surface he was just a really stereotypical nerdy Jewish guy, but beneath all of this,

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Art

he reviled us. I bring up the head shake because, right in the middle of his talk, he stopped everything and spoke to me. He stopped the whole lecture in the middle of a sentence. What are you shaking your head for? he asked me. Is there a problem? And before I could say that I didn't know he told me to stop it. He didn't give me a chance to say anything, just stopped and gave me this look of disdain and said, What are you shaking your head for? and then as I started to answer he said, Well, stop it, and then he went on talking. It was phenomenally dismissive. He reviled us. He wanted to be in a position of power over us, and he was. Just because of his persona. And he made us like it. He made me love it.

Oh, she said, here's my drink.

But what I really want to tell you, she said, is about his head. Yes, his head. When the lecture was over I went up to talk to him, of course. I was in love. He reviled me and I wanted to be reviled. He made me love him. And then he took it away. Because when I went up to talk to him after, I looked at his head and I freaked out. It was completely flat on top. Completely flat. Like one of those formations where the rocks go straight up and then it's flat on top?

She made a motion with her hands.

A butte, she said. He had a head like a butte. It was, I don't know, it was monstrous. You couldn't really notice it from a distance, but then I got close and it was all I could do not to stare at it. But, then, when you are introducing yourself to someone, where else do you stare? So I went up to him and put out my hand, and I was set to try to get to know him, or try to get him to ask me for my phone number or something, take me home and defile me, I don't know, anything, and I said my name and he said his and I began staring at his head and I couldn't stand it. It wasn't a human head. It was deeply disturbing. And what had been love, inside me? What had been love turned to revulsion. On a dime. Without stopping. Without passing go. It was monstrous, that head. He was a freak. I immediately hated him. So I said that I had to go, and I left. I came here.

She nodded several times to herself.

Let me draw it for you, she said. It is really shocking.

She took a pen from one of our notebooks and began to draw on a napkin a man with a head like an anvil.

Very shocking, she said. And he parted his hair to emphasize it, so that on the side of his head all the hair was combed down, and it was all short like this, but on the top of his head it was curly and black and all brushed straight forward, like this. And the part ran right along the square rim of his head, on both sides. And why would you do that? Why would you emphasize that hateful part of yourself when all the rest of you is so incredibly beautiful?

She had drawn the hair onto the man's square head. Now she began to draw his eyes and his nose and the line of his jaw. She was a good artist, and the man in the picture, aside from the shape of the top of his head, was handsome.

I was in love, she said. He was brilliant. He was fascinating. I mean this very seriously. I was in love with the way he disdained me. I felt it. But that head. And now I hate him. Now I revile *him*.

She held up the napkin in front of her to look at.

And I don't know what I'm going to do, she said as she stared at it. There are times when it all seems so distant. The future, what comes next and all that. One of my mentors says that he's still always thinking about how he's going to give himself another six months as a writer, just six more months to decide if it's too much. He says he's always six months away from applying to nursing school. Which is a great line. Funny. And it's true, isn't it. He's broke and he doesn't think he can write anymore. And I certainly can't squat in a place like that foundry, like they do. I couldn't live like that. And I like teaching but I don't know if I can get a job, and there's the whole Fulbright thing, but I don't know if I will get that, I mean, we all know what the odds are, and so maybe I'll get a PhD. So much to do, I guess, so many possibilities. But also no possibilities at the same time. And this horrible loneliness. Don't tell me that you all don't feel it too. And what I'd like to do is be in love. Obviously. We all would. But there's nothing. Really, there is nothing. And I'm going to be thirty in six months, did you know that?

She looked around the table at us.

Did you know that?

She put the napkin on the table and finished her drink and stood and pitched and rolled her way back down past the other booths and out the door. And there on the table was the drawing of the man with the strange head. And she never talked about those things when she was sober, and once she was awarded the Fulbright she became insufferable and never came around anymore.



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Heather Frese



Heather Frese received her master's degree in English from Ohio University and her MFA in fiction from West Virginia University. Her work is forthcoming in *The New York Quarterly*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *Rougarou*, and has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Front Porch*, and *The Southeast Review*, among others. Her essay, "Fatigue," received notable mention in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology 2011* and *Best American Essays 2010*. Heather, her husband, and their dog live on Hatteras Island, North Carolina, perched on the wild-eyed edge of the world.

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Postpartum

[Heather Frese](#)

You know you've lost it when you start writing letters to Dear Abby

Dear Abby,

I look at my baby's squalling red face and I want to run away. What do I do?

Horrible in Hatteras

When the paper boy thunks the Outer Banks *Sentinel* against your door at seven in the morning, you go straight to the comics and TV listings, hoping Dear Abby will enlighten you. But she never responds. You have a birth certificate that says you're a mother. *Austin Charles Oden*. You look on the back for instructions, but there are none. You feel like the only horrible, unprepared mother in the universe. Your son cries, and for a minute, you pretend you don't hear him, and scan the page for your horoscope. You're pretty sure you've lost it when you read it and think, legitimately think, that the stars have aligned so you can leave:

Family members could be upset over frustrating events in their lives, and these moods could spill over to you. Today it would be best to leave them alone to work things out in their own way.

For the four days you've been home from the hospital, your mother has left your dad to handle things at the inn and come over to your little white house on Elizabeth Lane every morning. She arrives just after the *Sentinel*, and just after your husband, Stephen, leaves for work at his father's hardware store. She comes begrudgingly, but she comes. She's so efficient it's terrifying, changing your baby's diaper with quick, clean motions, handing him to you to feed. You press the baby to your breast but he won't eat. You poke your nipple into his mouth. He won't take it. He's never taken it without a fight. He cries, his tiny face bunching and crinkling, pink mouth open in a howl that pierces your eardrums. He wails. He screams. He flails his tiny fists. Your incompetence burbles in your chest. You think he senses this and doesn't want to drink incompetent breast milk. You wish it was the 1800s and you could hire a wet nurse. Your mom sighs and takes the baby from you, jiggling him up and down.

You don't know what you're doing. You've never even had a dog.

~

You live on an island. A scrawny, unprotected spit of sand between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pamlico Sound. A flat, sandy, cactus-ridden prison. You'd just escaped to college on the mainland, just fallen in love with biology and Shakespeare and Stephen Oden, who was even cuter in college than he was in high school, when you got pregnant. *Most Likely to Get Knocked Up and Move Back Home* might as well have been written in your high school yearbook. You lived up to your reputation. *Easy Evie*. You say it out loud as you stare down at your sleeping son, at his placid face and twitching baby fingers. His tiny nose encrusted with a fine, translucent rim of dried snot; his patchy, alien-scaled scalp.

What to Expect When You're Expecting never said that motherhood would feel like punishment, like solitary confinement. Your best friend, Charlotte, stayed with you while you were pregnant, but now she's gone back to college. All your friends have. Even the tourists are gone.

The baby wakes up, his eyes blinking and unfocused. He twists, writhes, and then the screaming starts.

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Art

You pick him up. You spend your day bouncing, shushing, swinging, swaying\an odd combination of busyness and tedium. You try to sleep when he sleeps, like all the books say, but every time you close your eyes you see tiny limbs, umbilical stumps, and wide-open, screaming mouths. Empty. Waiting to be fed.

Stephen comes home, and it's as if you're looking at his high cheekbones and pale eyes through a sheer, gray film. He's covered, blurred, like everything else. When he takes over swaying duty, you hunker in the upstairs office and call Charlotte.

I don't recognize myself, you tell her.

I think I'm going to join a sorority, she says.

You write another letter to Dear Abby:

Dear Abby,

I made a mistake. I'm not ready to be a mother. I want things to go back to the way they were. What do I do?

Regretful in Hatteras

You don't mean to, but that night you fall asleep with the baby in bed beside you. You wake up sweating. You are trapped between your husband and your son, unable to move, your body pinned between theirs. You weasel yourself out of the covers and put the baby in his cradle, then go to the bathroom and stare at yourself in the mirror. You weren't kidding when you told Charlotte you didn't recognize yourself. Puffy-faced, eyes dark-circled, greasy-haired. The baby starts to cry, but you sit down to pee anyway. You're still bleeding.

~

Dear Abby counsels a lazy husband, an excessive shopper, and a woman concerned with sneezing etiquette. By the time your mother stops by you know you're required to say *bless you* out of politeness; even if you don't believe that in sneezing, her soul leaves her body and is in danger of getting devil-snatched.

Your mom rocks the baby's cradle, a gift from her and your dad. It's yellow with a pattern of dancing elephants. Some of the elephants carry red umbrellas. *Has he eaten?*

You stare out the window at a lone puff of cloud in the glorious September sky. Even through the haze that films everything, you can tell the sky is stunning. It's the sort of blue-sky day you used to love to be outside in. The whiteness of the little cloud feathers out against the cerulean in a cotton ball puff, its edges ragged. You don't know why, but the cloud makes you teary-eyed. You blame it on sleep deprivation. *All he does is scream*, you say. You've tried to feed him three times this morning. He won't eat.

As if to back you up, the baby stirs and begins to cry, softly and staccato at first, then loud, sustained, throaty wails. Your mom rocks and hushes, pats and sways. *Try to feed him*, she says, handing you the baby.

You unsnap your nursing bra and poke your nipple into his mouth. He roots around and latches on, sucking and smacking. His nose is running, and snot gets on your breast.

He was hungry, your mom says. She leans over and pats the baby's head, her long, dark hair falling into her face like a curtain.

Again, you feel like an idiot. *How did you ever learn to do this?*

I didn't have a choice, she says. She looks up and pushes her hair behind her ear. *I didn't have my mother to teach me.*

You've never really thought about the fact that your mom's mom died before your brother and you were born. You think about it now. You feed the baby and cry.

~

That afternoon you realize that you've run out of milk. Cow milk. Milk for cereal and coffee and macaroni

and cheese. You put on your maternity jeans and load your breasts into a jacket and head out the door to the Burrus Red and White grocery. You start the car and back halfway down the driveway before realizing you forgot the baby. You sit and think about driving away. Up Highway Twelve, across the Bonner Bridge, past Nags Head and Kill Devil Hills and Kitty Hawk to someplace on the mainland, someplace where your breasts could shrink to their normal size; where you could chop off your hair and change your name and start over. You could be a diner waitress, the mysterious woman with a shrouded past who ends up falling in love with the handsome town mechanic.

Dear Abby,

What's the most inconspicuous fake name one can adopt?

Ready to Run in NC

You turn off the car and haul yourself and your breasts back inside. The baby is quiet and you're stabbed with the thought that he died while you were in the driveway. You run to the nursery. He's just sleeping, his tiny chest rising and falling inside his blue onesie. You think about what you'll need to take with you and pack it in a bag. Change of clothes in case he shits himself. Diaper. Wipes. Diaper cream. Changing pad. Powder. Ointment for circumcised baby weenie. Plastic bag to put dirty diaper in. Pacifier. Blanket. Rattle, even though he doesn't care about toys yet. You heft the bag onto your shoulder and head to the car. This time you only make it to the porch before you remember the baby's still inside.

You stand over his cradle, debating whether moving him to his car seat will wake him up. You wonder if you should wrap him in a blanket or put a coat on him, or maybe his onesie is warm enough? You call your mom, but the girl at the desk of your parents' inn, the girl who replaced Charlotte after she went back to school, says your mom is outside tending to an issue with the pool heater, and can you call back later? You hang up, take a deep breath, and scoop up your son. His wobbly head still scares you. You tuck him in your arm and pick up the diaper bag. You make it to the living room before he starts screaming.

He screams all the way to the store. You park at the Red and White, go to the back door, unlatch him from his car seat, pick him up, and go back around to the front. You sit down and begin the process of extricating your breast. The diaper bag with the blanket is in the back, and you don't want to get up and balance the baby again to retrieve it, so you lift your shirt with nothing to cover you. A woman walks by and stares. Patricia Balance, the mother of your high school boyfriend. You look down and try to feed the baby. He cries and writhes. His tiny toes and fingers flex. He won't eat. You bounce and sway the best you can in the front seat of the car. You remember that you haven't put your breast away.

Dear Abby,

My baby won't stop crying. This car is like an echo chamber and I think I'm going to lose my mind. Is it rude to take a crying baby into a grocery store if insanity is the only other option?

Had it in Hatteras

You pull down your shirt and heft yourself, your breasts, and your baby out of the car. You grab the diaper bag and walk up the brick steps to the store. The baby howls. A red-faced banshee. People stare. You try to put him in the cart but realize you need his car seat to do that. The diaper bag slides off your shoulder and smacks the baby on the head. He cries louder. It's then that you notice the smell of fresh shit. You panic. You can't even remember why you came here in the first place. You know the Red and White doesn't have a public restroom. You don't know what to do.

Please stop crying, you whisper to the baby. For a second you contemplate placing the baby in the meat cooler to change his diaper. You could tuck him in next to the bacon and pot roast. At least he wouldn't roll away. You try to take a deep breath but everything smells like shit. This is not calming. Your options are: the floor. The check-out counter conveyor belt. A bench on the front porch. The car.

You decide on the car and are turning around to run back outside when you spot your Aunt May. You've never been so happy to see her grizzled gray head in your life. *I need help*, you say. The baby's shrieking climbs another decibel.

You certainly do. Aunt May looks at you, then at the baby. *Is it supposed to smell like that?* Aunt May has never had children.

She puts her arm around your shoulder, plugs her ear closest to the baby, and walks you outside. Together, you put the baby on a bench, take off his onesie and diaper, wipe and powder him, ointment his baby weenie, and put his clothes back on. You're covered in shit. You clean your hands with wet wipes but there's poop on your shirt. The wipes just smear the shirt shit around.

You suddenly feel like you can't keep your eyes open.

Then the baby turns his head and pukes.

~

That evening you wait by the door for Stephen to come home from work. You hand him the baby before he can put down his keys and you run upstairs. You call Charlotte.

I can't do this, you tell her.

Charlotte says she knows motherhood must be a difficult adjustment, and to give it time. She tells you about the cute professor who teaches her history class, how he puts his hand in his pocket when writing on the chalkboard and all the girls ogle his butt.

You try to tell Charlotte about the Red and White poop debacle, but instead you hear yourself say, *I don't think I love my baby.*

Silence on the other end of the line. *Of course you do, Evie. How could you not?*

You fiddle with the tassel from Stephen's graduation mortarboard that hangs from the edge of the desk. Your breasts hurt. You're so tired. *I guess so.*

Of course you love your son. How could you not?

You hang up and mess around on the Internet. You fall asleep halfway through a game of solitaire.

Stephen wakes you up by banging into the office. The neatness of his polo shirt and khaki pants infuriates you. He doesn't have a speck of shit or vomit or snot on him. *I've been working all day*, Stephen says. He holds the baby out to you. *Why don't we have any milk?*

~

A month passes. Four weeks. Thirty sleepless nights. You feed that baby every two hours, every single two hours of every single day, no matter what. Your nipples crack and bleed. The baby sucks the life out of you. You become intimately acquainted with late night TV. Lifetime, Television for Women from midnight to two; a dead hour where you have a choice between Miami Vice and Matlock—you usually choose Miami Vice; Bill Cosby from three to five; infomercials after that. You know you've lost it when you order a Snuggle, swayed by the inclusion of a free dog Snuggie and \$5.95 shipping. You don't even have a dog, but think you could give it to Aunt May's Yorkie, Walter.

Your mom comes; your mom leaves. The baby eats; the baby cries. The baby poops. A lot. Stephen goes to work; Stephen comes home. You stop making dinner for him. You stop making dinner for yourself. One night, Stephen looks at you like he doesn't even know who you are. *What the fuck, Evie*, is all he says. *What the fuck?* You can't afford a babysitter. You can't afford shit. You call Charlotte whenever you can pawn the baby off on someone else. She doesn't always answer, but when she does, she talks for long stretches, telling you about her classes and her dates and her sorority. Alpha Gamma Delta. Their mascot is a squirrel. If you get her a gift for her birthday, she'd like it to be red, the sorority's signature color, or pearls, the signature jewel. You stop calling. She rarely calls you. Dear Abby still hasn't answered your letters.

Dear Abby,

Fuck you.

Irritated on Elizabeth Lane

The Outer Banks *Sentinel* piles up on your kitchen table, unread. You've even given up on your horoscope. Your mom comes in with three *Sentinels* in her hand and dumps them on the counter. She picks up the baby, holds him in one arm, and scrubs the stove with the other.

He's eaten, you tell her. Your voice echoes dully in your head.

Your mom stops scrubbing. She puts down the sponge and stands beside your chair. *Have you eaten?* she asks. She jiggles the baby up and down.

You poke up some crumbs with your finger. You honestly don't remember. You muster the energy to shrug.

Your mom puts the baby in his cradle and sits at the table beside you. She pats your hand. *It gets easier*, she says.

Your mom is not the sort to pat your hand and comfort you. You look into your mom's dark eyes, which are usually snappish, but they are soft now. *I'm not ready for this*, you say.

Your mom pats you once more, then sits up straight and takes her hand away. Her eyes turn sharp again. *Do you think I was ready for your brother? For you? For your brother and you and your father working such long hours I don't think he even crapped at home anymore? But did losing it help? Did an affair help?*

Your affair certainly didn't help me, you say.

Your mom tightens her mouth. She crosses her arms and stares at you, her gaze pinpricking your face. *What helped was remembering that no one forced me to marry your father; to get pregnant with one kid and then another. What helped was hard work: teaching you to ride a bike and talking Nate through his first break-up and buying that old inn and scraping paint and spackling walls and polishing floors until my knuckles bled. What helped was going to bed so tired I couldn't sleep, but thankful as hell that this was my choice.*

You push your hair behind your ears and cross your arms, a mirror of your mother. *The way it was your choice to leave for four months before you decided you didn't like living in Buffalo?* you ask.

Evelyn, nobody likes living in Buffalo. Your mom grasps your face in her hands. She shakes your cheeks, like she's trying to wake you up. *This was your choice.*

You turn your head away. You don't want to admit that she's right, that it was your choice. Ten months ago you and Stephen had stood on a cold, windswept beach and had The Conversation about What to Do. You'd only been dating for three months, but you'd known each other your whole lives.

Let's not do this, you'd said. *I can't do this.*

Stephen took your hand. *It's your choice*, he said.

You plodded through the sand, the wind in your hair like a wild thing. Waves crashed, spitting up gray-white spume that caught on the shore and blew like the tumbleweed you'd seen on TV. You and Stephen walked without speaking. All the way back to the boardwalk with no words, just the promise between you that together, you wouldn't do this.

That's when you saw them, the tiny footprints in the sand. You stopped, frozen. Stephen stopped, too, and looked down. You closed your eyes and listened to the ocean. You imagined all the swells crashing on all the beaches of all the world; you imagined slipping beneath the undertow, down to where the sunlight doesn't reach. You imagined the thick atmosphere rolling over your body and sucking you down. You imagined the baby inside you, your blood shushing around it like waves, the waters of your body shaking up and settling like snow in a glass globe.

Let's get married, you said.

Okay, said Stephen.

And you did.

It was your choice.

In the kitchen of your little white house on Elizabeth Lane, your mother takes her hands off your face. She goes back to scrubbing the stove. Your cheeks feel warm, like her hands are still there. Ghost imprints of your mother's flesh.

After your mother leaves, you pick up a *Sentinel* from the pile. Your horoscope from last Monday says: *You will feel more alive over the coming twelve months, as if you have woken up after a long sleep, refreshed and renewed and ready to take on the world. Don't waste that feeling. Use it to make real your dream.*

You toss the paper aside. Horoscopes are crap. You haven't slept in a month. *Make real your dream.* The *Sentinel* falls open to Dear Abby's comforting black and white smile.

Dear Abby, the letter reads. It's not one of yours, but you read anyway.

My co-worker microwaves fish and fish byproducts, which, as you can imagine, makes the office smell dreadful. She also uses all of the coffee creamers. How do I deal with this person without making the work environment even more uncomfortable?

Fishy Situation in Newark, NJ

You think if you were Dear Abby, you'd tell Fishy Situation to leave some raw shrimp in her coworker's bottom left drawer to see how she liked dealing with that shit, but Dear Abby is apparently more mature than you. She writes:

Dear Fishy,

You can choose your friends, you can choose your enemies, but you can't choose your coworkers. Sometimes the workplace calls for being graceful in ungraceful situations. In this case, buy some air freshener (consider a plug-in so the whole office can enjoy) and creamer and call it a day. If that doesn't work, speak to the HR department about the situation. But unless there are rules against fish in the microwave, there may be little they can do. Try to make the best out of your fishy situation.

You put down the column and smudge the newspaper ink off your fingers. The October sunlight filters through your kitchen window, streaking the walls golden. Your stove is clean and your kitchen smells like coffee, the only sound's the low thrum of the refrigerator.

You try to imagine what Dear Abby would've said if she'd answered your letters.

Dear Evie,

Buck up and stop bitching. You're not the only person in the world to have a kid at nineteen.

Or maybe,

Dear Evie,

Things could be worse; at least your kitchen doesn't smell like fish byproducts.

Or possibly,

Listen kid, if you really want out, do it now. It's shit or get off the pot time.

You check on the baby. For once, he's asleep. You study his face. You check your hand for newspaper ink, then touch his cheek with your pinky finger. The baby twitches his head like he's trying to get rid of a fly. He opens his mouth then closes it. You look out the window. The sky is a pale, pearly blue. When he wakes up, you decide to take the baby to the beach.

You forget to pack Wet Wipes, and the baby screams all the way down the bumpy access ramp, but you finally park and get out and set up an umbrella and towel. You wrestle the baby and the car seat out and lay them in the shade. Then you sit down. The baby's still crying, shallow rasps of annoyance, thrashing his head side to side. *Hush*, you say to him. *Listen to the waves.* He clenches and unclenches his fists, grabbing baby handfuls of air. You jiggle his car seat back and forth until he quiets down. The breeze is soft and salty on your face, warm with a slight, autumn-cool edge. *Look*, you whisper to him. *Those are seagulls. Don't feed them or they'll never leave you alone.* The baby turns his head toward you and yawns. *I'm tired, too, you little turd.*

You rock the car seat back and forth, creating a shallow ditch in the sand, until he falls asleep. You lie down, and, keeping your hand on the car seat, fall asleep, too. You wake up to the baby's angry howl and jump

to your feet without thinking, terrified the tide had come in. But the beach still stretches out in tan undulation, glassy waves lapping in the distance. The baby shrieks again and flails, and you look down to see the green iridescence of a biting fly on his arm. You swat it away. *Shit*, you say to the baby. You unstrap him from the car seat and pick him up. His head wobbles less than it did a month ago. *I'm sorry. Those flies really hurt.* You rub the spot on his arm. He cries and cries.

You pat his back and pace back and forth, whispering *shush, shush, shush*. You match your whispers to the rhythm of the waves, shushing as the water splashes on the shore. You walk and shush until the baby's cries begin to calm. You walk some more. The baby whimpers, sighs, then jerks his body away from yours, his arms pressed against your chest. He crinkles his mouth, but he doesn't cry. He stares. He looks at you with his big eyes, which are not blue anymore, but brown, like your mother's, like yours. He stares. A rush of breeze courses over you both, and you hold his head and look back at him.

You stand there on the beach in the breeze, you and your baby, looking at each other for a long time. The sun shines and waves *shush* and you and your baby gaze. He opens his mouth in a round *o* and raises his downy eyebrows. He turns his head and blinks and gurgles something that sounds like *gerblah*. You carry him to the towel, sit down and rest him on your lap. The two of you settle into the sand, facing each other. Still looking.

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Derold Sligh



Derold Sligh is currently a member of the English faculty at Daegu University in Daegu, South Korea. He received a BA and MA from Central Michigan University and an MFA from San Diego State University. His work has appeared in journals such as *American Poetry Journal*, *Mythium*, *Chamber Four*, *Status Hat*, *Konundrum Engine*, *Saw Palm*, *Central Review*, *Gemini Magazine*, and *Web del Sol*. He has taught creative writing workshops for San Diego State University, Gear Up and King/Chavez/Parks and was also a guest poet at the Theodore Roethke Memorial where he ran a workshop for African American fathers

and sons.

More of his work can be found at [Chamber Four](#), [Konundrum Engine](#), [Gemini Magazine](#) and [Status Hat](#).

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Main Gate

[Derold Sligh](#)



"We're always too quick to believe people when they say we're somewhere. When they say: You're in a church, we feel: A church, yes indeed, even if it's only a mill, or, let's say, a tavern. And when they say: You're on a hill, we feel: Ah, a hill. Even when, surrounded by a lot of flat country, we're in a hollow. This isn't important, though. The fact is that anywhere we are is where we are."

Gert Holmann, *The Parable of the Blind*



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Lindsay Cahill



Lindsay Cahill runs loose in Niagara, Ontario. her poetry has been featured in such mags as *Otoliths*, *Plenitude*, *Steel Bananas*, and *ditch poetry*. she was the founding and managing editor of *dead gender magazine* from 2010 to 2012. over the last year, she's executed a series of city and region-wide visual poetry projects including *ÖSOMEANTICS: OCCUPY ACMEÖ*, *Öignis fatuus foolish fireÖ*, *ÖZOLTAR SPEAKSÖ*, and *Öa history of breakingÖ*Ñone thousand Scrabble tile visual pieces. her piece *Öthe 1980s: a translationÖ*Ñtwo hundred dice visual poemsÑ will be featured across the 2013 In the Soil

Arts Festival.

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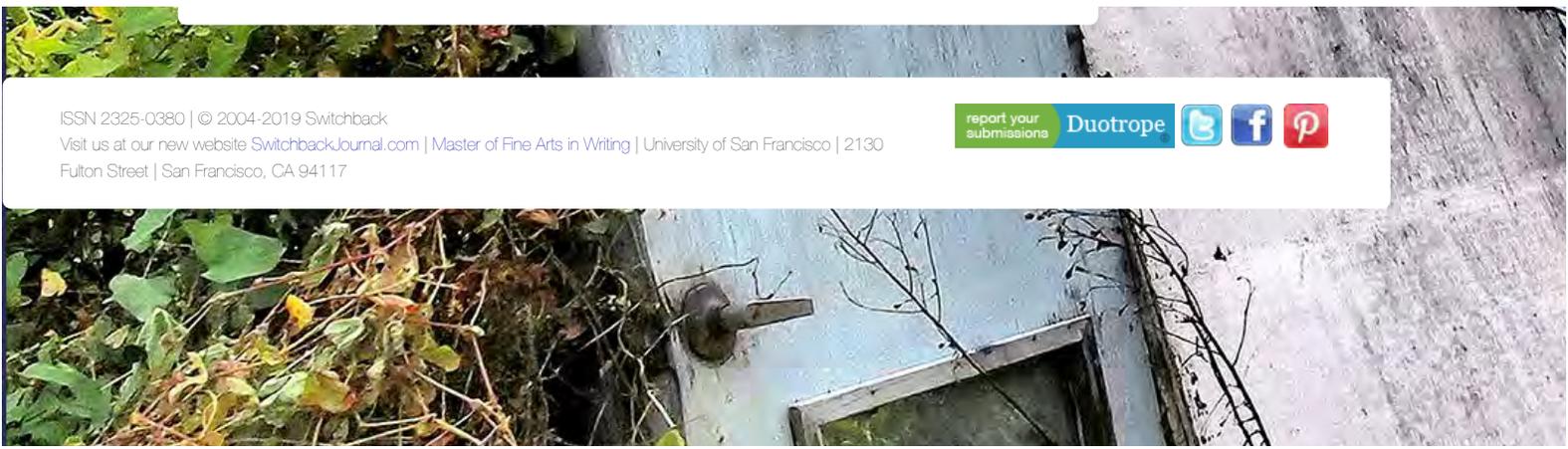


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e hynes

I have an MFA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
My work is informed by issues concerning representation and the queer/female body.
I am also a writer of poetry, short stories, and theory.

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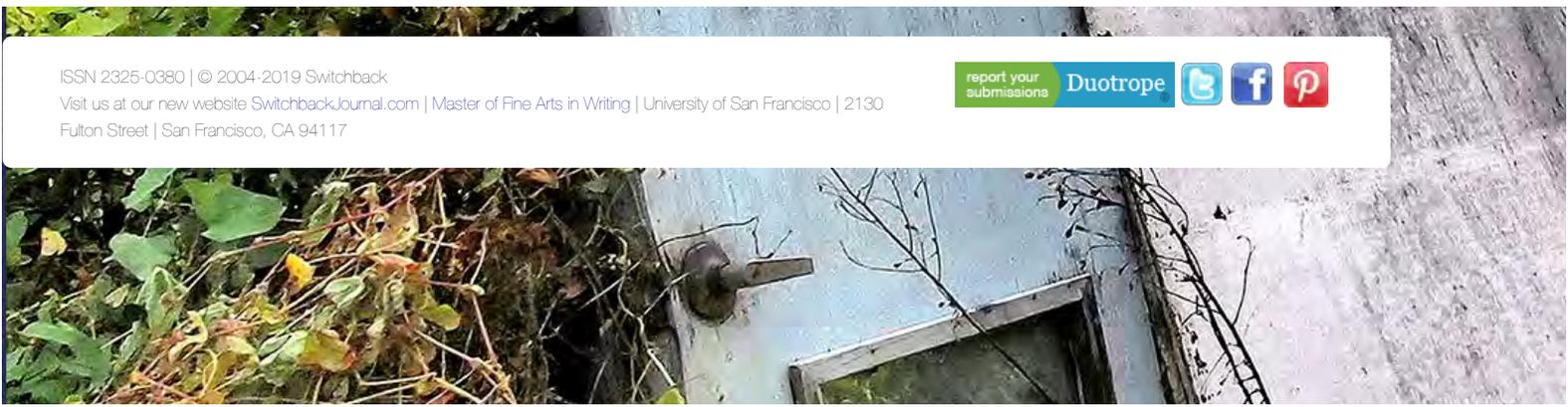
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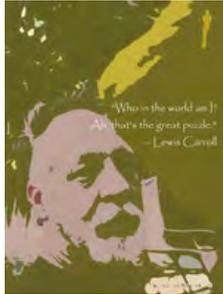
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Robert Lee Haycock



I've been around a good while.
I've seen an awful lot of things.
I can't wait to find out what's next.

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Nicolas Poynter



Nicolas is a high school drop out that became a chemist and now teaches AP physics in ... high school. He is also currently pursuing a MFA in creative writing at Oklahoma City University and he has recently had stories in the *North American Review* and *Citron Review*. When his students answer test questions they don't know with 0420 he secretly counts it right. His stuff is displayed here: <http://dustbowlstudios.com>

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Crisis I

Each visual piece comes from a recently completed street-poetry project called *find me here me out: a history of breaking* which started in November, 2012. The *find me* project consists of one thousand Scrabble tile visual poems that present struggles with mental health and identity, and the failure of being able to communicate those issues publicly. The one thousand tiles have been taken, arranged, broken apart, and rearranged to create a subset of over fifty visual pieces that include the three selections shown in Switchback. This summer, the tiles will be dispersed and hidden randomly in public places like cafés, bookstores, parks, and bus stations across the Greater Toronto Area for anyone to take and interpret on their own.

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