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“George, George, wake up!”

The first thing to spring into my torpid mind is – not now, love – I’m asleep.

Pretty stupid when you come to think of it. She wouldn’t be telling me to wake up if I wasn’t asleep, but then again, this is Christmas afternoon I’ve just packed away about eight pounds of turkey, stuffing, potatoes, veggies and all the trimmings – not to mention Mum’s specialty, plum pudding with gallons of rum sauce, so a little disorientation is to be expected.

Say what you like about Anna, she’s a hell of a cook, and the best thing that ever happened to me - even if she does whisper in my ear with all the delicacy of a company sergeant major.

After a violent shaking, and a couple of non too gentle prods in my distended stomach, my level of awareness rises to the point where I can reply with my razor sharp intellect – “Wha’?”

I spent fifteen years in the army – most of it in the SAS, Britain’s Special Air Service (no planes – lots of mud ), and time was when the slightest noise would have me wide awake and on my feet in zero flat. I’d been out just over five years now and my reactions had slowed quite a bit. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking the urgency in Anna’s voice

“What’s up, love? I was well away.”

“ I know,” she replied. “It took me ages to wake you, but it’s serious. Come in the kitchen.”

I slowly rose from the couch, being careful not to disturb Carolyn, our nine year old. Long auburn hair framed her sleeping face, thumb by her mouth and favorite doll tucked under her arm. My heart swelled as I looked down on her.

There’s something so pure about a sleeping child – it always gets me.

Walking quietly into the kitchen, I looked at Anna, a question on my raised eyebrows.

“Look” she said, pointing out of the window at the meadow which runs down to the stream at the end of the property.
It didn’t take me long to see what she was getting at. Over by the fence I could see the horse.

It’s Carolyn’s, of course. Both Anna and I hate the things, but Carolyn had begged and begged for a horse when we moved into the place a couple of years ago. Our previous house had been really cramped and right in the middle of suburbia, so when I came into a bit of money, we decided to move to the country.

My buddy, Ted, from the Regiment, told me about a sizeable cottage with about five or six acres of pasture near his place, just outside Chelmsford in Essex, about forty miles or so from London. All three of us fell in love with it at first sight, and Carolyn, in an exuberance of childhood fantasies, never stopped chattering about it all the way back in the car. By the time we arrived home we were committed, and part of the commitment was, of course – sure we can have a horse.

How many parents have made that promise - fingers crossed in the hope that some less troublesome and, please God, smaller obsession will replace it?

Well it didn’t, and a promise is a promise – especially to a small daughter – so we acquired Neddy.

I know, it’s a dumb name for a princely steed, but that’s what Carolyn wanted to call him, and anyway, he wasn’t all that princely. The fact is, he was a scruffy old nag, but my daughter fell in love with him at first sight and the farmer who sold him to us assured me he was great with kids. Besides, he was cheap, and as we were pretty well tapped out after buying the house, he was all I could afford.

For the first year or so after Neddy joined us, Carolyn had the time of her life learning to groom him and take care of him, as well as learning to ride. Neddy seemed to love the attention, and before the first week was out he and Carolyn were the firmest of friends.

Over the past year or so however, I had begun to notice Neddy was not quite as enthusiastic as he had been about trotting around the paddock with Carolyn on board. A brisk walk was about all he could manage, and it was obvious to me that Neddy was just getting old.

I talked to the farmer and he confirmed the horse was probably about thirty years old so we should to be prepared for the worst.

Well, it looked as if the worst had finally happened – and on Christmas Day, of all days. Carolyn would be devastated. There had developed a deep rapport between the horse and my daughter; a connection neither Anna nor I could feel or see, but it was so obviously real to Carolyn.

I couldn’t let her wake up and see Neddy like this. I had to do some-
Fortunately, it was almost dark. It was nearly four o’clock in the midst of an English winter. The forecast called for snow and the sky – what I could still see of it, seemed to confirm this prediction.

Echoing my thoughts, Anna said “We’ve got to move it before Carolyn sees it. She’ll die.”

“I know, but it’s easier said than done. The bloody thing must weigh a ton.”

“Tell you what. When it’s really dark, wake her up and tell her we’re going over to Grannies’ tonight. We were going tomorrow, anyway, and mum won’t mind. It’ll give her another chance to spoil her only grandchild. That’ll give me a chance to figure something out. I’ll get Ted to give me a hand.”

“Tell Carolyn I’ve had an emergency at the office and I’ll come over later if I can. I don’t know how long this will take though, so don’t be surprised if I don’t make it.”

Ted, apart from being my best pal from the army, was also my partner in a small private security firm we had set up. We specialized in advising the rich and famous on ways to protect their riches and hide their fame. Sometimes the other way round too. We had been moderately successful. In fact, our success had provided the funds to buy the place in Chelmsford.

Half an hour later, Anna and Carolyn were on their way to Grandmother’s house – which is not through the woods – with my daughter round eyed and chattery over the prospect of tearing Christmas wrapping paper off the inevitably excessive number of presents from Granny & Gramps.

Fortunately, the driveway doesn’t run close to the meadow, so there was no chance of her seeing the deceased, but I’d have to fix that before she returned in daylight, tomorrow. One way or another, Carolyn would insist on seeing Nedly.

After only a couple of rings, Ted picked up the phone. “Merry bloody Christmas – whoever you are.”

“Good job it wasn’t your mother-in-law calling. She’d have your guts for garters,” I said, knowing full well he had caller ID and would have known it was me.

“I need your help Ted – F.E.”

F.E. was our private code for “Friggin’ Emergency.” It was something we had developed during our time in the SAS and it meant - drop everything – come now.

“Christ, George. What kind of F.E. can you have on Christmas Day?”

Even as he said this, I knew he would be putting shoes on and generally getting ready for action.
“Look, I’m really sorry to bust up your Christmas like this, but Carolyn’s horse croaked and I’ve got to hide it or something before she sees it.”

“Don’t worry, Georgie. I was looking for an excuse to get out. The house is full of Mary’s relatives and I’m going bonkers listening to all the gory details of Uncle Herbert’s prostate operation. I think I’d rather have it cut off than go through that kind of shit.”

“Look Ted, we’re going to have to lift it and then find somewhere to bury the damn thing. Any ideas on how to move it?”

“God knows mate,” I’ll think of something on the way over – be there in ten.”

With that said, he put down the phone, no doubt elaborating on the dire emergency as he made his regretful farewell to his in-laws.

True to his word, I soon saw the lights of his truck turn into our driveway. I grabbed my jacket and met him just outside the side door of the house.

“Thanks, Ted. He’s over here.” We trudged across the soggy field toward the unmoving mass over by the barn.

Soon after acquiring the horse, Ted and I had built a small barn over by the fence. Room enough for Neddy and all his tackle, dry storage for hay and other horse stuff. I’d designed it with the main roof beam extending outside the framework of the building. The beam was equipped with a block and tackle so that I could lift bales of hay and other heavy items directly out of my truck and then push them into the barn.

Neddy had taken to hanging around the barn in recent months, not venturing too far away from his stall, and this was where he met his final demise.

It was too soon for any decomposition to have started, but rigor mortis had set in. Along with the near freezing temperatures, poor old Neddy was pretty well stiffed out.

He was laid out on his side, of course, with his legs sticking straight out, like eighty-eight millimeter howitzers.

“Yes George, I’d say you called this one right. He’s definitely not living.”

Ted is a master of understatement.

“Reminds me of Goose Green,” he said.

“The sheep, you mean? Hell yes, I was just thinking that, myself.”

Goose Green was one of the landing zones used by the SAS in the Falklands war of 1982.

Argentina had decided that, in order to divert the people’s attention from the perilous state of their economy, they would resurrect a centuries-old disagreement with Her Majesty’s Government and invade the Malvinas –
their name for the Falkland Islands. As the total population of the islands was less than three hundred plus about eighty thousand sheep, the invasion was a resounding success.

Those two fine English ladies – Queen Liz and Maggie Thatcher were, of course, severely pissed off by this attempt to eviscerate what remained of the British Empire. Actually, by 1982, I think the Falklands were the British Empire.

Anyway, the Iron Lady, being who she was, promptly commandeered the QE2, polished the rust off a couple of aircraft carriers, borrowed half a dozen large helicopters from the Yanks, and set off to see the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

Strictly speaking, the leader of the British Government can’t declare war without the permission of the monarch, hence the visit to the palace.

Liz, of course, was all in favor. If we lose the Falklands she said, I’ll have nowhere to go in the Royal Yacht, so by all means Maggie, do go and show those Argies what for.

It had been a while since the Brits had been at war, so it took about another couple of months before the armada set sail. By that time, General Galtieri’s guys were very well dug in.

The SAS, being the elite troops, are the first to land and secure key positions.

We were dropped into the south Atlantic in our rubber rafts after a very quick, totally submerged run from Southampton on HMS Sovereign – one of HMG’s ballistic missile subs.

We made landfall on the rocky southern coast of the main island – the end furthest away from the capital, Stanley. The theory being, that the capital would be the most heavily guarded, so we could just nip across the soft underbelly of occupied land, quietly slit a few throats, raise the Union Jack, and welcome the remainder of the force as they sailed triumphantly into the harbor.

The weather was totally, bloody abysmal — cold, windy and wet with rain turning to sleet. After regrouping at the L.Z., we set off over the springy turf of Goose Green toward the capital. Not long into our trek, we came across a disemboweled sheep. Judging by the extent of the damage, it was obvious the hapless animal had stepped on a land mine and literally blown it’s chances of ever being used in cloning experiments.

Ted and I, with the other members of the platoon, looked at each other with the same thought – “Oh shit!”

There’s nothing like the feeling that, with every step, you could become a study model for the big-bang theory to sharpen your wits.

The British army, unlike it’s American counterparts, does not have
access to zillions of dollars worth of high tech equipment, so we had to rely on our ingenuity to get the job done.

Seeing the state of the butchered sheep, Ted and I had the brilliant idea to round up a couple of dozen or so of its friends and drive them in front of us to clear the way, so to speak. One of our slightly religious platoon members immediately christened this, “The Sacrificial Lamb Technique.”

The point is, it worked very well. For us, that is. As for the sheep – well, let’s just say we had a couple of lovely meals in the course of the three or so days it took us to slog our way from Goose Green to Stanley.

Getting back to the Neddy problem, Ted, always the creative one said, “I think he’s near enough to get the block and tackle on him. We’ll have to dig a shallow trench under him so we can get a sling underneath. Then we can lift him and push him into the barn.”

I went in search of the necessary materials while Ted set to, digging under the horse from both sides. Finding a wide canvas strap and some one-inch chain, I returned to find Ted on his stomach finishing off the trench. Lying down beside him, I pushed the strap under Neddy’s belly to the extent of my arm. Going around to the other side to the horse’s back, I reached under as far as I could, my fingers scrabbling in the dirt and broken roots of the shallow trench.

I never realized how big a horse is.

My arm was at full stretch with my cheek pressed hard against Neddy’s cold, still flesh. I smelt the damp leather odor of horsehair and wondered at the multitude of tiny creatures, which undoubtedly inhabited Neddy’s hide and were even now moving to warmer climes; namely – me.

Eventually my finger tips felt the rough texture of the canvas, and with a helping push from Ted at the other side, I pulled the strap through.

Getting to our feet, we brushed mud and straw from our clothes. “Starting to snow,” I said, looking at the big fluffy flakes drifting down like the aftermath of a pillow fight. “Could be a good one too judging by the size of those flakes.”

“O.K., Let’s hoist him up and get out of the weather,” said Ted, linking the chain to the hooks on the tackle and the canvas strap. “Hoist away.”

I pulled on the chain fall and the block started to take up the slack in the ropes. This was a compound block, so the effort I put into pulling the chain was multiplied by a factor of four. Even so, when all the slack was taken up, I found myself gasping with the effort. At a four-to-one ratio, I was still trying to lift at least two hundred pounds.

“Give me a hand, Ted, I won’t be able to get him all the way up.”

“Always been a problem with you, if I remember correctly, old chap,” he replied.
Thanks, Teddy boy – just pull.

Slowly, the carcass rose from the ground, pivoting on two legs, one each at front and back. Just as we felt that our backs wouldn’t take any more, he reached the point of equilibrium and good old Neddy flipped to the vertical position.

He looked almost normal again with all four feet on the ground – if you ignored the strap under his belly and the fact that his nose was pressed firmly onto the ground.

“Alright, phase one accomplished,” said Ted. “Now to move him into the barn.”

It was a good job Neddy was no bigger. The block was at its uppermost position and we could lift him no further.

“O.K.,” I said. “Round the front and push him back into the barn.”

We both put our shoulders to the horse’s breast and pushed — hard. Nothing.

Neddy just swayed back on his legs when we pushed and then swung back to the original position when we stopped. After a futile fifteen minutes or so trying to move the horse, I said, “Screw this. We need something to roll him in with. Wait here. I’ve got an idea.”

I schlepped across the whitening grass, back to the house. Carolyn and Anna had been into a roller skating fad a while back. I hadn’t seen the skates recently so I guessed they had moved onto some new pastime.

I found the skates in the hall closet. Grabbing both pairs, I headed back to the barn.

“Wrong kind of skates for this weather, mate,” I heard as Ted saw what I had returned with.

“Not for us, twit – for the horse. Lift up his leg.” I said, pointing at the foreleg. With Ted holding the stiff leg off the ground, I forced the horse’s hoof into the boot of the roller skate. Tying the laces as tightly as possible, I let the foot back onto the ground. Repeating the process with the other three feet, Neddy was soon standing on two pairs of roller skates.

“You’re a bloody genius, George,” said Ted admiringly as we again put our shoulders to the beast. This time, with some of the load relieved from the tackle, Neddy began slowly, and with much re-alignment of the individual skates, to roll backwards into his stall.

“O.K., what now?” asked Ted in between ragged intakes of breath. Even on wheels, Neddy had taken all our strength to move. “When do you expect them back?”

“I’m sure Anna won’t want to be driving much in the snow, so she won’t leave too late. The way it’s coming down she may turn up any time. We won’t have enough time to bury him. We’ll just have to make him look...
normal, and take care of the rest when Carolyn’s in bed,” I said, wondering how to make a horse in roller skates look anything like normal.

“If we close the bottom half of the barn door, we can let his head rest on it and he’ll look O.K. from the house.”

Easier said than done.

We pushed and rolled Neddy back and forth on his skates, and I couldn’t help but notice that I was the one doing the pushing from the rear – not a pleasant thought. What with all the rolling around, we had to re-position each leg as it slipped out of alignment, while at the same time hoisting the horse’s limp head over the top edge of the door.

Eventually, we had him in position, but the head looked totally unnatural, laid sideways as it was. We would have to fix that. We needed something to hold the head upright. With a growing sense of time passing at an accelerated pace, I rummaged through the pile of horse tackle in the barn. I spotted one of those balaclava helmet type things you see on racehorses, sometimes. Neddy had never been anywhere near a race, but in the initial euphoria of getting the horse, Anna and Carolyn had bought all kinds of horsy stuff. The helmet was just one of those items which had never been used. Well, as my mother used to say – *If you keep something long enough, it’ll come in useful* - the day of the balaclava had arrived!

Without any horse muscles helping, a horse’s head is a bloody heavy piece of meat, but between us, Ted and I wrestled the helmet into position and tied the leather straps beneath Neddy’s chin. The final step was to attach a rope to each side of the helmet and secure the ropes to the end wall of the barn.

With a little adjustment of the tension in the ropes, the strap beneath his belly, and the positioning of the skates, we finally had Neddy in a convincing pose.

Not before time, either. Just as we finished admiring our handiwork from outside the barn, we saw the lights of Anna’s car turn into the lane leading toward our house.

With a last look, we hot-footed it back to the house, threw off our filthy coats, popped the tops on a couple of beers, and sat at the kitchen table, for all the world as if we had been there for hours.

“Guess what Granny and Gramps got me for Christmas, Dad.” Carolyn proceeded to recite a seemingly endless list of goodies while Anna raised an inquiring eyebrow at me. I gave her a slight nod, to indicate that Neddy was taken care of – for now, at least.

Finished with her list of Christmas presents, to which I had paid scant attention, Carolyn said “I’ll need to go feed Neddy before bedtime.”

A look of panic crossed Anna’s face.
“No need, sweetheart. When it started snowing, Ted and I went down and fed him – even put that helmet thing on his head to keep him warm in this weather.

In fact, you can see him looking out from his stall.” A real twinge of guilt overcame me as I pointed to the invisibly suspended Neddy, apparently watching the falling snow from the comfort of his barn.

“Oh, Daddy, thanks. I love you. You’re such a cool Daddy.” Now I really felt like a total shit.

She must have been feeling tired, because she soon gathered together her latest presents and went up to bed. Anna tucked her in and, on returning to the kitchen, inquired. “What did you do – resurrect the thing?”

“No exactly dear,” and we proceeded to give her the gist of our evening’s activities. “We still have to dispose of the corpse before morning,” I said.

“We can take him over to my place. I’ve got tons of places to bury him down by the trees. I can borrow Stan Walker’s backhoe and we’ll have old Neddy stashed away in no time. That way, you won’t have to explain a fresh pile of earth in your meadow,” Ted offered, as we finished off our second beer. He had brought over his low loader trailer and with the winch attachment on the bed of his truck, we figured we could haul the horse out of the barn and up on to the trailer with no problem.

As far as I remember, it wasn’t much of a problem. By the time we were sure Carolyn was asleep, Ted and I had consumed the remainder of a twelve pack, and together with the liquor I’d had with Christmas lunch, I wasn’t feeling much of anything.

Later, Anna told me that all three of us struggled and giggled our way through the Neddy loading process for about an hour. I can only imagine the contortions as we winched him aboard the trailer trying to keep four roller skated legs going in roughly the same direction. Somehow, we got him on the platform and propped him up against the stake sides of the trailer, chocking his wheels to prevent him sliding out as we carefully drove him to his final resting place on Ted’s farm.

Stan Walker was the old farmer I had originally bought the horse from and, distressed as he was to hear of our loss, he was quite happy to bring his backhoe over, and, in fact, dig the final resting place himself for Neddy. I thought this was jolly decent of the old guy, as it was by this time, about ten at night. Anna pointed out the next day, that old Stan figured allowing either of us to operate a backhoe in our somewhat inebriated condition would be, to say the least, counter-productive.

Like I said, Stan was a bit upset that the horse had died – mainly, I think because he had a soft spot for Carolyn. He told us his mare had just
recently foaled, and within a month or two, the foal would be able to leave its mother. If I would like, he would let me have the horse for a song. Both Anna and I accepted immediately, totally ignoring those - never again after this one’s gone – promises to ourselves.

I was still left with the thorny issue of what to tell Carolyn when she found that Neddy was missing.

After hours of discussion with Anna, Ted having trolled off home for a well earned rest, we decided there was only one thing for it — make something up!

The thought of actually telling Carolyn the whole truth never occurred to either of us, so convinced were we that she would be inconsolable. Some day, I’m sure we will look back and wonder how we could have convinced ourselves this was the only available option. Children really are so much more resilient than we ever give them credit for.

When Carolyn came bounding downstairs the morning after, both Anna and I were sitting at the kitchen table.

“Sleep well, sweetheart?” Anna asked.

“Yes. I had Gwendolyn and Teddy with me. We all slept very well, thank you.” Gwendolyn was – in my opinion – an extremely ugly Cabbage Patch kind of doll. One of Grannie’s multitude of presents.

“Look darling, we’ve got something to tell you about Neddy,” I said, beginning somewhat nervously.

“He’s alright isn’t he?” her eyes growing big and deep with concern.

“I think so. I’m not sure really. The thing is, he’s disappeared.”

“How? How connected? Mr. Walker’s place is miles from here.”

“Well, you remember Neddy used to live at Mr. Walker’s farm before he came to live with us,” I said. “Mr. Walker thinks that Neddy and Ballerina – his lady horse – might have run away together. They used to be such good friends when they shared the same barn. He’s not sure, but he thinks he saw two sets of horse tracks in the snow going towards the woods.”

“You mean they’ve eloped?” said Carolyn, her eyes bigger than ever and
her mouth open in awe. “Like when people run away to get married and live happily ever after?”

“Something like that, maybe,” I replied “I don’t know when we’ll ever see him again.”

“Oh, we will, you’ll see.”

The faith of little children is endless, and sometimes rewarded. As the weeks passed, Carolyn cleaned up the barn, ready for the impending return. Even so, after two months, she seemed to have lost all hope of seeing her beloved Neddy again, her usually cheerful self often quiet and lonesome.

One morning in early spring, I went into Carolyn’s bedroom.

“Wake up! You have to see!”

“What is it, Daddy? Is it Neddy?”

“I don’t think so, but there’s something in the barn. Quick, get dressed. Let’s go and find out.”

Jumping out of bed, and dressing quicker than I had ever seen a nine year old, even down to the boots – wrong feet, but who cares? – she ran down the stairs, over to the barn where she jumped up onto the half door, where, not long before, good Neddy’s head had rested, her legs swinging off the ground as she stared at the new inhabitant.

There, on legs as slender as saplings, stood the most delicate and beautiful foal she had ever seen.

“Daddy, Daddy, come here. Look what’s here. She’s beautiful.”

Carefully opening the door, we slipped inside the stall. The horse whinnied gently, brushing her soft velvet muzzle against Carolyn’s cheek. It was love at first sight – for both of them.
A Place to Dream

Angela Thompson

As the van twists and turns its way along the steep gravel road, fenced in by trees on both sides, I tingle. If the brakes give out or the engine stalls, the van, and my entire family, could crash into a tree or plummet into the lake. When I get out at the top of the hill, I have the strange feeling that if I tripped, I could stumble straight into the water. But the van ride excitement only begins the adventure I'll have this week at the cabin.

Set on Lake Odessa in Iowa, the cabin belongs to my grandparents, and has been a family vacation spot for years. With an atmosphere all its own, the cabin is full of memories of past summers, beckoning towards new places to explore and enjoy — places that are not found in the cabin or the surrounding woods, but in my imagination.

Slowly, I climb the slightly weathered wooden stairs to the outside porch. On the porch rail sits an old, black dinner bell. As children, we found out that pulling the string would make a wonderfully loud, deep sound that you could hear even down at the beach. Standing on the porch, I am no longer a twenty-first century teenager on vacation — I am a nineteenth-century pioneer, calling my family in from the fields for supper. I stand there for a moment, letting the breeze blow my skirt and my sunbonnet.

Opening the door, I enter the long indoor porch that runs the length of the cabin. The oversized chairs and long couches fill it with plenty of corners to curl up in — places to read, think, imagine, pretend. This is the place where I can read all the books I left last year, and maybe find a new one to enjoy. I know they will still be there, in the old wooden dresser in the hallway, on a shelf under a table. Sitting on the squeaky metal porch swing, with its green and white flowered vinyl mattress, I become the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, fanning and rocking gently as I read. I lean back against the swing and remember last night's ball.

From the airy porch, two doors lead to the kitchen, which is really a combination of rooms. On the left is a sitting room with a chair, a tiny television, and a pull-out couch, which most of us manage to squeeze onto to watch cartoons on a rainy morning. Overhead is a peaked ceiling, made
of mahogany-finished wood and crossed at intervals with heavy-looking timbers. To me, it has the look of an old time log cabin. Sleeping under this ceiling on the pull-out couch, I become a pioneer girl in a cabin on the frontier. I lay awake listening to the wail of the prairie blizzard, hearing the eerie howl of wolves, or waiting for an Indian war whoop. They make an attack at dawn.

On the other side of the room, the atmosphere is different. This side holds the tiny kitchen. The kitchen has everything — the refrigerator, stove, sink, and dishwasher are all there — but no more than two people can work in it at a time without getting in each others’ way. Working in the kitchen with my hands in the soapy dishwater, I am in a busy nineteenth-century boardinghouse or a colonial inn, working to get the dishes clean to keep up with the customers. As I wash down the counter, the rush is over, and I smile with satisfaction.

On the other side of the counter sits the tall breakfast bar with five bar stools under it. From here, I have a great view of the walls above the stove and sink, which are lined with an amazing array of plaques and signs, giving anything from proverbs to menu prices. The barstool’s top is loose — enough to make really great spins, which Mom and Grandma banned long ago. So I content myself with twirling gently, side to side, as I drink out of the fat plastic cups that display golfing greens, cards, and fishing flies. Now I imagine that I am a Victorian girl dressed in lace and frills, eating a chocolate ice cream cone. Or, I am a customer at an old-fashioned diner, sharing a milkshake with my best friend.

At the end of the day, we pull out our pillows and blankets and head for bed. Some sleep on the pull-out couch in the sitting room, others sleep on the porch. Mom and Dad get the bedroom with the big bed. Tonight, I head for the tiny bunk-room at the very end of the cabin. Blue-carpeted steps lead down to it. It is nearly filled by two sets of bunks, stacked three high. The beds are spread with thin-looking blue or tan blankets, which are surprisingly warm and heavy. After saying goodnights, all is quiet, except for Grandpa’s snores. The night is filled with possibilities. I am a nurse in an army hospital during the Civil War, comforting some poor wounded soldier who has just come in. I am a captive on a pirate ship planning my escape. I am a lost hiker, trapped in a downpour or a snowstorm. I curl up tightly under the blankets and smile.

Tomorrow there will be new excitement and possibilities. There will be new things to do, new adventures to have, and new people to become. There are no boundaries to what I can imagine. The cabin is a place where my mind can run free.

It is a place to dream.
They gather behind whispering hands, 
in 5th grade, the Circular Groups of Girls. 
At recess, the playground dotted. 
Boys burn like roman candles—
oblivious to the smoldering circles.

I stand in the dirt, all skinny legs and pigtails. 
The girl-groups
remind me of buffalo on the Great Western Plain
circling their young.
Protecting . . . what?

Relegated to the boys.
Running and shouting, the simple
and only prerequisites.
Mean questions . . . “Is that the same dress you wore yesterday?”
breezy talk of make-up and bras,
sidelong, carefully disinterested glances,
roll and vaporize in the wake
of us wild-eyed, gleeful,
uncomplicated puppy-boys.

In 1971, the girls in the circles
became women before me.

…..

Invitation in hand, I ask Andrew
what Ariella, who he sits by in 5th grade,
would like for her birthday.
“I don’t know,” not looking up.
“What does she like to do?”
“Well . . . at recess,
she goes to those Circular Groups of Girls,”
looking up, hopeful.
“Does that help?”

“No, not really,” I smile.
A Sweater

Michael St. Germaine

She graduated in May, nineteen years of school, a doctorate in English. She was full of purpose and poise. A job waited in the fall, associate editor for a publishing house in New York. Life was turning out exactly as she wanted, as she had planned. First though, a summer in Maine. She had grown up in the South, had been schooled there. She figured that a few months in a Yankee stronghold like Maine would prepare her for anything New Yorkers had to offer.

Car loaded with her things, she didn't look back as she drove away from her parents' home. The trip to Maine was uneventful, and she found herself in a small town on the coast; Saco, “sawk-oh” she was corrected when she first tried to pronounce it, not “sack-o.” It was atypical of every fishing town in Maine, and she found a motel, a remnant, it seemed of the fifties, and moved in. A small cottage on the beach, though more appealing, was out of her price range during the summer season.

She wandered around the town the next day, a stranger, yet warmly greeted by everyone she met. So much for the mistaken idea that these folks were stand-off-isch. Her wanderings found her by late afternoon at the town pier. A large lobster pound, Bayleys, was located at the end, and the buyer greeted each waterman as he pulled up. Boats and winches, cordage and lobster traps, small talk about things in these men's lives on the water. The lobsters were unloaded, weighed and receipted. A busy place, each movement purposeful. The sounds of men working, gulls wheeled overhead looking for scraps. Their shouts and cries filled the air. A symphony of working life — she took it all in.

She watched one young lobsterman, about her age, inserting wooden pegs in the claws of his catch. He worked quickly, paying little heed to what was going on around him. Curious, she approached him. “Excuse me,” she spoke, too low to be heard above the din.

“Excuse me,” too loud this time, she realized. The young man jumped back, startled from his task, he nearly fell off the pier.

“Damn woman are ya trying to kill me, I near fell in,” he shot at her.

“I'm sorry, I was just curious as to why you were doing that, and you
could just swim over to that ladder if you did,” came back from her.

“No I couldn’t, there isn’t a waterman on this coast that can swim a stroke, ya fall in out there, swimming just delays the inevitable. The wooden pegs keep them from getting you with their claws. Usually we put them in as we pull them from the traps, but I had a big catch today, and didn’t get them all done,” he said, his voice becoming less angry. “Most folk are using big rubber bands now, but scrap wood is free, so I cut my own during days I can’t go out. Save money that way,” he said in a friendlier tone. He went back to work and she watched him. Deliberate, no wasted movement, skills honed from seasons of doing it.

She walked farther out on the pier now, watching others engaged in the many tasks demanded of this life. The sounds and smells filled her mind. Given the homes she had seen, the cars in the town, it was a “close to the bone” life. Few frills, no luxuries, yet no sad faces, either. These folk had somehow found a secret in this existence. Some contentment that theirs was a good life, rich in a way she could not see.

“Suppa?” a voice asked, in that distinct Maine accent. She turned and he was there. Smiling at her. “Sure, why not,” the words tumbled out of her. Amazed she had so readily agreed, she allowed him to lead her from the pier. He walked her up into the town. The restaurant he took her to was a simple place, vinyl table cloths on small tables. Stainless steel napkin dispensers, paper place mats. The walls, though once white, had turned the color of an old newspaper. The food was working class and hot, hearty and abundant. Like the town, it was purposeful — fill the belly, warm the body. They talked, and talked, for hours. Why, she could not fathom, yet the longer she spent with him, the longer she wanted to stay. It was late when the waitress told them it was closing time. Both arrived back into this world at her interruption. They left holding hands. Hers just ended up in his. It was supposed to be there, she thought. Walking through the now quiet town, he pointed out this and that. Through his words she could see the beauty in the simple place. They ended up at his home, not his house; this place had always been a home. Plain like the man and the town, she felt warm there, and safe. She never did things like this, yet found herself kissing him.

He reached down and she watched as his hands undid her blouse. His fingers cautiously pushed aside the material, as one would do to curtains when hearing a strange sound outside. Then at the sight of her modest breasts a sigh, one of contentment. He pulled her to him now, her face and breasts against the bulky sweater he had worn all day, she inhaled his scent. It was the sea and him, and something else, a new scent, security. They made love till just before dawn.
“Hav’ ta go to work,” he told her. She smiled at him and watched him dress. She rolled from the bed to kiss him goodbye, but as soon as she did, discovered that even summer mornings in Maine could be cold. “Heya, put this on,” he whispered and handed her the bulky sweater he had worn the previous day. She pulled it on quickly and was filled with warmth, as if he was holding her. It covered her modestly, though most of her well-shaped legs were still exposed. She followed him out to the porch and stood on the grey salt pine boards and watched him walk into the town headed for his boat.

She spent most of the day in that sweater. She was not sure why, yet to take it off felt somehow wrong. She was waiting for him on the porch of his house when he returned from his labors. He had not asked her to be, nor had she asked, it was just supposed to be that way. They both knew it.

The summer, as it does in Maine, passed quickly. What was between them grew as fast, and as the fall approached she made two calls, one to a publishing house in New York, the other to a different house in Virginia. “I PAID $140,000 DOLLARS FOR MY DAUGHTER TO CLEAN FISH IN MAINE!” Her mothers’ comment was not as loud or as direct, but the disappointment was there none-the-less.

They married soon after. Each morning she would stand upon the porch of the simple home and watch him go off to the sea, clad only in the sweater, usually all she wore that early. Days passed, then months. Every night he kept her warm and safe, every day the sweater did the same. The first baby came and then another. They grew, all of them. The sweater still warmed her, and the children too. Money was always tight, there are no rich “Lobsta’ men.” She began to write about the life in that town. The publishing house in New York hadn’t forgotten about her, and the stories found their way to magazines. The money helped. The writings were filled with the simple truth that life, though hard upon the waters off the Maine coast, was satisfying in a way that some accountant in Ohio could never know.

He was always there, like that sweater. Worn now and patched several times, the color faded from the hard life, both of them. But always there; it was the constant in her life. Eventually even her family had come around to him and the life she had chosen.

In April she heard them on the porch, two other watermen with their wives. His boat was found drifting; he wasn’t aboard. She thanked them quietly and closed the door, went to her bedroom and put on the sweater. She could smell him, after all those years and washings the smell of him was still there. She cried softly knowing, knowing that “there wasn’t a waterman on that coast that could swim.”
Four days later, his body washed up on the beach near the town of Old Orchard. The cold water makes a body bluish in death and as cold as the oceans’ heart. Hell was cold she knew, she knew it then, a place where a body couldn’t get warm. A place where one would wish for the fires of the gospels.

The man from the funeral home called. A suit to bury him in. “No, she said, he’ll be laid out as he lived.” She got his extra set of yellow rain bibs from the shed, like a farmer’s overalls, a sign of his trade. She carried them down to Atkinsons Funeral Home and gave them to the undertaker. “We’ll be needing a shirt for him,” the man said. “No, take this,” a whisper her answer. She pulled off the old sweater she had worn there, his sweater. The sweater which had kept her safe all those years. She held it to her face, felt him in it, smelled him in it. Then slowly handed it over.

Folks were kind of surprised she didn’t show up for his funeral. Both families were there, his two kids were there, but she was absent. “Too overcome with grief,” some said or thought to themselves. “Such a hard thing to lose a man,” others answered. The truth was she had said goodbye that day at the funeral home. The sweater would keep him warm and safe, the smell of her and the sea on it, until she joined him to take it back.
Suddenly
a path not taken
in 22 years
is there
ahead of me.

I walk, almost run
to wrap it around
my shoulders.
To wear its familiarity
after so long.
To live in my childhood.
A cool, welcome respite, for awhile.

O joy!
Stunningly present.
Older, graying, heavier.
But their voices . . .
etched on my brain and engraved in my heart
float to me on the draft.
Melt over me like soothing balm
on anxious skin.

Touchstones are there.
Scattered along the paths
of my life.
Smooth, worn
from years of hands
touching as they go by.
Solid, warm.
Savor rare moments from long ago paths. Hold the embrace tightly. Ignore nudging time. Lay cheek to stone, priceless warm exchange.

Gushing relief, later invites unbidden, heavy dread . . . Whatever will I do when the touchstones are gone?
It was almost 2:30 in the morning and Avril was far from sleep, but she hadn’t planned on being able to rest, anyway. The arrival to a new place always robbed her of it. Whenever she would reach her current destination, exploring was always the first thing on her list – or rather the second. Most of the time, the first thing was to get high. It never really mattered to her what she took, just whatever she happened to have handy at the time, although she preferred cocaine.

It had been difficult finding a place to park with the tourist season being in full swing, but she finally got a metered space just off the strip. Three uninterrupted hours before she would have to come up with more coins to pay the metal sentry was plenty of time. Enough to satisfy her few needs, which at the moment were topped with the finishing off of an eight ball.

She scraped the fine snow into two white lines and in a split second the mirror was clean. She put her tools away and composed herself before stepping out of the cramped car. Her lungs inflated like virgin balloons with the salty sea air and she closed her gray eyes. The rush to her head consumed her and she set off.

Avril awoke to the taste of sand in her mouth.

“Hey! Watch it!” her shout was lost on the backside of the fast retreating child perpetrator. She shaded her sleepy eyes with one hand and glanced towards the sun. It was probably somewhere around two o’clock in the afternoon. The beach chair held the imprint of her thin frame as though it were the mold she was cast from. Yawning, she looked around. The sand was almost indistinguishable with the onslaught of tourists scurrying about. She wondered why people always seemed to feel the need to cram more into their vacations than possible for enjoyment.

She stretched and reached for the pop that she had propped up in the sand next to her the night before. Thirstier than normal, she gulped it, but spat it out almost as quickly as it had been taken in, except much more violently.
“That’s what happens when sun and soda interact, you know. It has a tendency to get pretty warm.” She shielded her eyes and, squinting, turned to pick out the emitter of the unusually deep voice. “Don’t worry though, common chemistry is easy to forget when no one is testing you on it. Besides, I was just about to go swimming anyway,” the guy next to her said as he wiped her used pop from his stubbly face with a corner of his towel.

“Shit! Did I do that? I’m sorry. I’m not exactly used to this weather yet.” She blushed uncontrollably; a criticism she had about herself that occurred whether she was actually embarrassed or not.

He grinned. “I’m over it. I’ve had worse bodily fluids on me than a bit of your backwash.”

She couldn’t decide if it was his smile that was charming or the good-natured sarcasm that backed it up. And his tanned skin definitely did not house an ounce of scrawniness. She briefly wondered what those muscles would feel like wrapped around her, but she let the thought slip from her mind without looking back, – method of control that she had perfected over time. The flash of his eyes told her what was coming next.

“So, where’re you from?” he pursued, feigning situational boredom.

“Not around here. I’m just passing through.” She got up and started packing her few belongings as she answered. Her tone changed slightly. Impersonal. He got the picture.

“Well, have a good vacation. Not many places are as nice as Virginia Beach is in the summer.” He gestured at the mob around them. “And all these fools know it, too. But who am I to talk? I’m taking up space here just as they are.” He made a point of showing all his teeth this time trying to be casual about the silent hint. A last chance take-it-or-leave-it smile.

Avril put on her sunglasses and picked up the beach chair. “Sayonara. Sorry about the pop.” She grinned and then turned and walked away.

As she made her way to the car, she went over inventory in her head. Last night had been a success as far as getting the essentials done. She had walked the strip in search of only a few things and had easily found them all. First and foremost there had been Ben, her new connection. He was a skinny, shifty looking, twenty-something-year-old with a nose just large enough to draw attention. She had no way of knowing if Ben was his real name, but she didn’t care. This was not someone Avril wanted to get up close and personal with. She had the info that she needed: a pager number that she could reach him at and an idea of what he could get his hands on, which he claimed to be anything her “little heart desired.” She was just glad to have a resource. Other than that, cheap hotels and restaurants with under-priced yet actually edible food seemed to come in an over abundance.
Reaching her car she stashed the chair in the trunk. She had come to the conclusion long ago that compact foldy chairs were one of a drifter's essentials. She popped a couple of vicodin and grabbed her towel before zoning in on what looked to be one of the fancier hotels. She needed to keep up with her hygiene, and there was quite a selection of indoor pools with saunas and showers that were unpatrolled to choose from. She smiled to herself. So many luxuries were free if you just knew what to look for.

The tightly rolled twenty tasted the small pile of white powder only a split second before it coated the inside of Avril's nose.

"Hey! There's a line, you know!" the irritated voice directly followed a loud bang on the door. "Not anymore," Avril thought with a grin, as she took her time cleaning up.

"I'm so sorry! Were you waiting long?" Avril asked sweetly as she closed the stall door behind her. Without waiting for an answer from the drunk and pissed off face that greeted her, Avril made her way towards the sink.

"What the – it's locked! That bitch locked the door behind her!" she heard her opponent inform the short line. "Hey! Get back here! I'm gonna fuck you up, bitch!"

"Cool down, Kim. There are other stalls," the hothead's friend informed her. Avril laughed heartily and let the bathroom door slam behind her. Soon she was lost not only in the crowd, but in the music as well.

Strobe lights in every color of the rainbow flashed epileptic seizure warnings all around her as she made her way past one of the clubs' three bars. The packed dance floor moved as though it was one big mass instead of many smaller ones, the room alive in itself. Rhythm engulfed her throughout. With eyes closed, she let it take her small body over. Arms, legs, hips – they all seemed to take on lives of their own, moving in unison to the beat that swirled around her like a thick fog. She was lost in it in no time, and she never wanted to find her way out. Slowly everything that ever had been or ever would be bad in the world melted away, leaving only the moment in its place. This was her time and she was a goddess.

For what seemed like only minutes dance partners came and went making their rounds across the floor. Both guys and girls took their turns moving with her, and she accepted each of them. She wasn't picky as long as they kept their hands to themselves. Anyone trying to hump her leg was sent away like a queen dismissing a disloyal subject, all while still keeping the beat. Her head swam and she was free. She flowed as though the next day would never come.

"What's your name?" Avril's eyes snapped open to a face that was too much too close for comfort, and she almost fell backwards in surprise. He caught and pulled her back up in one smooth motion. "What's your name?"
He attempted to shout over the music, his breath tickling her inner ear.

“What?” she mouthed the words to emphasize the point, “I can’t hear you!” His facial expression and following wink proved that despite his obvious drunkenness he understood enough to abandon the question.

As they danced, Avril felt herself start drifting into her trance, but she found that she couldn’t take her eyes off him. He seemed to be different than anyone else she had been with so far that night. He had a style all his own. His presence demanded attention. His green eyes swam under the blacklights – the only tings more fluid than his movements. Taking her in, drinking her, he seemed to never break gaze. She felt eerily entranced and yet strangely secure, as though this stranger was protecting her.

Avril was amazed at the way he commanded the space around him. He took up the entire dance floor and none of it all at the same time. With her head still spinning, Avril couldn’t help but let a smile melt across her lips. Almost a combination of straight trance and some sort of ninjitsu, his movements were like nothing she had ever seen before, and if he cared at all about the dirty looks he was getting from all the people he kept bumping into, he didn’t show it. His overflow of confidence shattered the presence of the glares they were getting. And, without realizing it, she moved with him. Entwined together, naturally they worked as one, as though they had been doing this dance all their lives. Soon everyone else disappeared all together. She could feel herself drowning until the only things left were him and the rhythm.

“Last song of the night!” the DJ shouted from his booth shrouded in shadows to the already dispersing dance floor. It took Avril’s eyes a second to adjust to the slowly brightening house lights. She ran her fingers through her long hair that now hung in thick strands twisted with the heat of a hundred bodies in motion. A minute later the music died down and so did her movements. She cringed as she got her first taste of the ache in her legs that she knew would be lingering for at least a day or two, but it was worth it. It was always worth it. She never felt more alive than when she danced.

“So, what’s your name?” he tried again still shouting over the ringing in his ears. Not much taller than she herself was, she could now see clearer they shared the same thin build. He leaned towards her and she could smell the jack and coke on his breath with all the ambiance of the bar.

“Just a tip – when the music is on it is virtually impossible to hear anything else. You should save the conversation for a time when your breath isn’t wasted.” She smiled and started to turn away. “Thanks for a good time!”

“Hey!” he reached out and caught her arm. “So after all that dancing you still won’t tell me who I was dancing with?” he laughed.

“Why do you feel like you need to know?”

“Because you are a great dancer and you have an amazing body.” He
looked at her slyly; just oozing with what she figured he probably thought was charm. Except to her he only looked goofy and she couldn’t help but giggle under her breath. She rolled her eyes at the obviousness of the situation.

“Look, you’re cute and I had fun, but I’m not looking to start anything right now.” She went to head for the door again.

“A-s-s-u-m-e makes and ass out of you and me, you know. I think you’re jumping to conclusions. Besides, who says I was trying to start anything beyond friendship?”

“You have an amazing body,” she mocked his voice.

“A good impression. Okay, so you got me. I’m probably not hard to see through in this state. But, from now on my intentions will remain decent. Besides, I do feel that compliments should be given when they’re due. If you want I can take it back.” His smile portrayed every ounce of the confidence that his movements on the dance floor had held. Although he looked young she knew he couldn’t be much less than her own twenty-two years, and the paper wristband that he sported confirmed that he was at least twenty-one.

“No, that’s okay.”

“Hey, are you hungry? We usually go to this twenty-four-hour waffle place that’s about a block away. It’s not gourmet, but I’ve definitely had worse.” He cut her off before she could try and leave again.

“Who’s we?”

“What? Oh, the guys I came here with. I think most of them have gone back to the barracks by now. I know at least Joe has duty tomorrow, but I think Shane is still here somewhere.” He started looking around. “Well, he has to be here. I’m his ride.”

She briefly considered this new option; she had been planning on getting something to eat anyway. Her stomach growled loudly.

“I think I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.” He grinned. “There’s no backing out now!”

“You seem pretty sure of yourself.” She toyed with him, mirroring his smile.

“Well, you can’t use the excuse that you’re not hungry.”

“Avril.” She held out her hand.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Avril. I’m …”

“Dylan! You coming or what? Let’s go!” the rather annoyed deep voice echoed from the exit hall and was quickly followed by large guy packing his cigarettes vehemently. “C’mon man, I’m starving!”

“Avril, Shane. Shane, Avril.” Dylan said as he made his way over to his impatient friend.

“Hey-hows-it-goin.” Shane pulled out a smoke and lit it. “Can we eat now?”
Through sapphire windows gleaming —
Hidden behind your shimmering eyes
A fractured soul resides.
What lies beneath your fragile skin?
Your struggle obscures what is real,
So like the sparrow on a summer's breeze
Take flight and be free.
Notice the delicate artistry of your smile
As you gaze into the mirrored pool,
And love the face looking back at you.
Shed your skin and emerge from sleep
Like the butterfly from the cocoon.
When it has become too painful
To remain as a bud
Deep within you a flower will bloom.
Know that yesterday is not today,
And tomorrow has yet to come,
So to hold the past in contempt
The future dies and crumbles to dust.
Seize the moment.
There is only now.
Discover peace and be filled with its warmth.
Surround yourself in golden light,
And see that you are truly amazing
Through sapphire windows gleaming.
In the trash,
envelopes, gum, and snot rags.
Don’t get a rash
while searching in the trash
for an earring, for a sparkling,
for an inkling, for a feeling.
What about the mystery;
there is no misery
while searching for a lost piece of trash.
Make a dash
to run and find that sash.
Would it be trash or just a lost item?
While your hand reaches,
hope there are no screeches,
in the trash can,
there is a tall man.
He appears and jumps out,
never wanting to shout.
Puzzled how a man finds a home
in the midnight roam,
in the trash.
The Man I Call My Daddy

Angela L. Keesee

“Angela, go get me a brrr.”
“A what?”
“A brrr.”
“What is that?”
“A beer, go get me a beer.” He would say with his devilish grin. So I would go into the kitchen and take the white can with the blue writing out of the refrigerator and take it to my daddy. Then I would climb into his lap as we watched T.V. We would watch Sanford and Son or Married with Children. He’d always give me some of his beer and tell me it was good for me. My mom would yell and tell him not to do that. Sometimes when we’d watch T.V., we’d share a bag of chips. My hand was so small and his was so big, I barely got any chips.

My daddy is 6’5”, so when he’d pick me up I could touch the ceiling. Sometimes when we would walk under a doorframe he would stand on his tip toes so I’d barely bump my head. Other times I would sit in the palm of his hand and he’d lift me up that way.

Sometimes he’d come home from work and we’d head bang to Van Halen, other times he’d come home drunk. I had just started kindergarten, and had laid my homework on the coffee table and went to my room to play. “What’s this on the table? Take it out of here.”
“But daddy it’s my homework. I need it tomorrow.”
“Take it out of here, now!”
“But I need it tomorrow.” He picked up the paper, ripped it into pieces, and threw it in the garbage can. I began to cry.

“Stop crying, now.” As I continued to cry he said, “Go to my room.” I went to his room and laid on my parent’s waterbed. As I was still crying, he got up and walked into their room and said, “Stop crying or I’ll whip you with my belt, young lady.” I cried harder. So, he unbuckled his belt and pulled it off his waist. Being so he drunk, he could barely hit me. Not long, after my parents separated, and I moved in with my grandparents.

After that, I didn’t see much of my dad. Occasionally my baby sister
and I would stay the weekend with him. He would leave us there alone so he could go get beer and cigarettes. After a while, years would go by before I saw him again. Then it became a regular routine to see my dad every couple of years. Right before my thirteenth birthday I told my grandmother that I wanted to see my dad, so she got in touch with his parents and I visited with him one Sunday afternoon. After that we just talked on the phone, but I felt like he was smothering me, so I wouldn’t answer his calls. He finally got the picture and stopped calling. On Christmas Day, I had just come home from visiting other family and there was a message from my dad. I had not spoken to him in a couple of months, but since it was Christmas, I decided to call him. He was drunk, as usual, and he thought I was his girlfriend, so I hung up on him. I never saw or heard from him again until my high school graduation. I didn’t keep in contact with him after my graduation because I didn’t want to.

A few days ago his mother, my MeMa, died. I wasn’t close to her. Luckily I did get to see her one month before she died. I went to the viewing and the funeral only out of respect for my father. When I saw my dad, he hugged me and repeatedly told everyone “This is MY daughter.” Every time I see him, he tells me things from when I was little, over and over. He blames other people for the problems in his life; he blames my grandparents for ruing our “father-daughter” relationship. I’m not ignorant. I know that it’s his and my mother’s fault. And no one has told me otherwise. I can see for myself. He tells me he wants to make it up to me, that he wants us to have that relationship a father and daughter are supposed to have. A big part of me wants to; the other part doesn’t. There’s so much resentment, hurt, and anger that I have towards my daddy.

Each year on Father’s Day, two women from my church sing a song titled “Daddy’s Hands.” It talks about a little girl growing up and having the comfort and support of her daddy’s hands, and sometimes getting spankings when she had done something wrong. I have never had the ability to feel such things. Almost every time I hear the song I begin to cry.

A father plays a vital role in his daughter’s life. Not having one in mine has deeply effected me, in more ways than one. It has caused me to be very insecure about the way I look, feel, and act. But it has also taught me to depend on one person: me.

I want to forgive my father, and maybe someday I will, but for now, he will just remain the man I call my daddy.
Fade

Jennifer Cabral

When leaves waltz down, down to the ground
When puddles dry up,
When we out grow those carnival merry go rounds
When pipes rust,
And balloons bust
When the plane takes off, when those engines thrust
Yes, when beauty fades
When things start to change,
Will feelings still remain
Will you still, still love the same?
When beauty fades …
When the alarm ends sleep, peaceful, dreamy sleep
When the curtain goes down,
When the fields have all been reaped
When the plate is clean,
An empty canteen
When the headless kneel before the guillotine
Yes, when money fades
When bills go unpaid,
Will passion still prevail
Will you still, still want to sail?
Oh, when the money fades …
When beauty changes …
As years increase,
With every breath released
When all the stars fall,
And, mountains cease to be
When air is scarce
And the water is too deep
When the laughter ends,
And the sun descends
When they blow the whistle on the magic,
When the climax turns oh, too tragic
When the paper is signed,
And there is no one behind...
Will you still be mine?
When beauty fades, when things all change
Will feelings still remain, can and will, you still love the same
When sunny days turn to a chill,
When money pays not enough of the bills
When time, when time, time fades …
Will you still love the same, the same?
This was either a master stroke that would irrevocably project him to the forefront of his profession or the final nail in the coffin of his demise. The risk was immense, but the potential rewards were staggering. To say that his job performance over the past six months had been less than stellar was like saying that falling into a snow blower could be a chilling experience, so failure was not an option.

As program director for the “Today in Washington” show it was his job to procure controversial, topical guests each day to be interviewed - grilled would be a better description - by the star of the show- Edward Buchanan.

Buchanan had initiated the style of probing, in your face television interviewing, which had quickly made him a celebrity the viewers loved to watch as he systematically dismembered his guests, accusing them of conspiracy, treachery and loathsome practices of many stripes. His guests, on the other hand, dreaded receiving an invitation to appear on the show but were in no position to refuse. Buchanan had no qualms about announcing that an invited guest had declined to appear. This ruse inevitably resulted in the poor unfortunate guest appearing at a later date to refute what had never actually been categorically stated in the first place.

Inevitably, a desire for vengeance was building. In the guise of a crusader after the truth, Buchanan had accused a senator of evasion of, not only taxes, but also his familial fidelity. As a result, the senator in question found it best not to seek re-election when his term ended just a few months later. Few of his constituents were dismayed at his passing, figuring that where there’s smoke, fire most likely will eventually be found. The intoxicating power soon went to Buchanan’s head making him a master of innuendo, universally hated by all who worked with him, but nevertheless, the one man in prime time TV to be associated with. His show routinely topped the ratings charts and his chain smoking image had become as famous as any of the celebrities and politicians who were unfortunate enough to appear with him.

Tom Brooke had been with Buchanan since the beginning, first as one of three background researchers, then as the show became ever more
popular, as the program director. At first he had considered it almost a privilege to participate in the exposing of those in the public eye who had come to abuse the trust of those who brought them to power or celebrity. To watch a once proud but crooked politician folding under the piercing gaze and searching questions of the master, or the soft spoken, older character actor exposed as a child molester was justification enough.

As time went on however, it became more and more difficult to supply the needs of a rapacious public intent on seeing the metaphorical shedding of blood on a daily basis.

Tom was reduced to scanning the gossip columns for sightings of aged actresses caught in the wrong place with the wrong man - or woman. The show was reduced to the level of a Daily Enquirer expose where mediocrities were, apparently anxious to renounce their tawdry affairs in a public forum.

The show’s ratings had dropped to such a level there was talk, for the first time since it’s inception, of demoting it to a morning TV slot. Tom, of course, was the object of Buchanan’s rage. In his forcibly stated opinion, the fall in popularity was entirely Tom’s fault, and if he couldn’t find suitable guests for the slaughter, then by God, Buchanan would find someone else who could.

What Buchanan failed to realize, of course was that most fickle of entities - the viewing public - had grown tired of the format. After all, even the ancient Romans had eventually become bored with lions versus Christians and turned to more idyllic pursuits.

The stunning realization had come to Tom one morning in the shower. The party’s over, he thought. Buchanan’s day is over, and if he goes down, I go with him - unless. ...

The basic theory behind the initial success of “Today in Washington” had been that the public loves to see the mighty fall - especially if the mighty are a little bit shady.

Buchanan had always been careful to stay away from the true idols of today’s society - the Michael Jordans who everyone loves despite, or perhaps because of, an occasional chink in the shining armor, but a recent change in government had prompted a return to a more honest, reasoned treatment of our public figures. Certainly the resurgence of ethical values had signaled a radical change in public thinking, and the muck-raking genus of Buchanan's show had become the antithesis of public thinking in this newly enlightened era.

Why not, thought Tom - why not reverse the roles. One final, orgiastic revelation of the truth behind one of today’s most public figures. The show
was destined to be cut very soon anyway - might as well go out with a bang rather than a whimper. Keep the guest’s name secret right up to the last moment - build the tension until the audience was drooling in anticipation. Bill it as the last performance of the show - one you wouldn’t want to miss, one you could tell the kids about - one day.

The more he thought about it, the more Tom felt this was his chance to redeem his recent poor performance - to make a name for himself that the network chiefs would not want to forget - they may even want to fight over him some day soon. Thoughts of fame and fortune filled his head as he drove to the studio that day. A long meeting with the head of Current Affairs programming, follow up meetings with his assistants, then almost a week of intensive research. Finally the day of the show arrived.

Buchanan, as usual only arrived a couple of hours before show time, when all the questions and anticipated answers had been prepared for him. He claimed that he liked to go into action with everything fresh in his mind - not stale after mulling it over for a week. The formula usually worked. His opening comments to his guest generally designed to cause the maximum of discomfort with the minimum of delay.

As show time approached, no sign of the guest. Last minute arrivals were not unusual, given the unwillingness with which most of his guests accepted the invitation. Buchanan was prowling around the stage rearranging chairs, ashtrays and notes exactly to his liking.

“One minute to go”

“Where the hell is he?” shouted Buchanan.

“It’s OK” yelled Tom from the far side of the set, “he’s here - just get seated, we’ll wheel him in right after the opening credits.”

Signature music for “Today in Washington II” begins.

Voice over of the announcer who’s been doing this job since day one, over seven years earlier ...

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the last edition of ‘Today in Washington’, and now to introduce our very special guest, here is Tom Brooke. “

Sitting in the interviewers chair, Buchanan leans forward - eyes bulging from his suddenly pasty face. Tom Brooke strides across the set. Sits down opposite ...

“Mr. Buchanan, - may I call you Edward?

Edward is it not true that …
Is truth, truth because it's found in a particular religion or culture or is it true because it's true? The truth is true because it can stand alone without the assistance of man-made culture or religion to be its crutches. The truth can be hard to find in a single religion or culture because the truth is perceived differently in individuals’ minds. Some may say that religion is nothing more than a large gang with all sides thinking they’re superior to the other’s system thinking and lifestyles. Many people may view this statement as being the truth while others may disagree, so which side is wrong, which side is right? The truth is that if enough people believe a lie, that lie then becomes that person’s truth, so then is the truth an opinion? Which in my opinion most religions are! Is there truth in Michanglo’s depiction of a European Jesus with blazing blue eyes, or are these images lies with feet of bronze, with hair of wool pulled over our eyes? The words and the pictures just don’t add up, so who’s to blame for the confusion — religion or culture? Religion and culture are nothing more than mind games, while the truth on the other hand, the truth is the second coming, to some the first. The truth is things could always be worst, no the truth is we know that situation must get better for the survival of human race. Religion has radical Islamic suicide bombers who submit to the will of God, but die on command listening to a man with a Koran in his hand. The truth is that in a single religion or culture, the truth doesn’t exist. Its purpose — control of the masses who refuse to wear their thinking glasses and see the truth for what the truth should be. Even though speakers of the truth are hung from a tree, assassinated, crucified — thus meaning finders of the truth have committed suicide. Preachers holding crosses while perpetrating genocide. The truth is, no man can own land but they do, Native Americans stripped of their gods, pride, and dignity, too. It’s a shame that everyone can feel the rays of the rising sun, but when it comes to religion he’s confined to only one. God bless America, what about the rest of the world, what about that striving Sudanese girl? Must be, to some the savior doesn’t reply, in a world where the good die and the wicked are left to lie, get rich and make more
poor people cry, only God knows why. God is the truth not religion or culture. The truth is, all religion should be one, or is that the talk of Lucifer's son? Greek names on Hebrew, Messiah, and the devil is supposed to be contained in a lake of fire, isn't he the father of all liars? The truth is what ever you want it to be, the truth is everything and nothing; the truth is today and tomorrow. The truth is things are not always as they are seen on T.V. screens, a.k.a. propaganda machine. The truth is like love, an unseen emotion, with the power to put the stars in the heaven in motion. Is there truth in reality or is reality realer than me, and the thing I see, locked away like sweet memories? The truth is, the truth hurts, it's as painful as Jesse Jackson watching Dr. King's assassin, walking and still being free destroying in his young mind any real chance of equality. The truth is a powerful force that can move mountains and minds all at the same time, while saving mankind from making this heaven a living hell because to some—that's where we happen to dwell. The truth is, the after life makes a person lose focus on the task at hand, which is better the praying lips or the helping hands? The truth is the truth because it is true, not because it is found in the hearts of man. The truth is, the truth will stand tall through it all and never fall. The real truth is I know nothing at all.
“Say now, Stella, that lunch was a real humdinger! ‘Today some special occasion? Not your birthday, is it?’ (Don’t think it’s mine.) ‘Did I miss something?’

“No, Bruno, you didn’t miss anything. ‘Store had a good sale on that sliced ham. Glad you liked it.’

Satisfied, Bruno leaned back in his chair, patted his ample girth and proceeded to wipe the remains of lunch from his upper lip. His thoughts drifted absentmindedly while Stella cleared plates off the checkered-green vinyl tablecloth. Placing dishes and silverware in the dishpan—she ran hot water, measuring an exact capful of detergent. Bruno was about to speak, when interrupted by the phone.

“I’ll get it, Stella. Hello? “Oh, hi there, Clara—how are ya? Oh, I’m fair to middlin. Yep, she’s here—hang on a minute.” Covering the mouthpiece, he whispered to Stella, “It’s Clara. Wants to talk to you.”

“Oh, all right.” Stella pulled her hands from the sudsy water, hastily drying with the dishtowel flung over her shoulder. “Yes, Clara. Yes, I’m fine, and you? That’s good. Ah huh....ah huh...I see Today?! Well, I suppose so—what time? OK, I’ll be ready.” Wearing a clouded expression, she hung up the phone.

“What’s up with Clara?”

“Oh, she wants me to go with her to the Decorator Shoppe . . . needs to pick out some new curtains and slipcovers for her winter decor. I swear, that woman has more time and money . . .! Imagine, changing your house around for every season. What she needs is more work. Get rid of her cook and maid.”

“She’s got a good heart, Stella. You’re just jealous. What time do you have to go?”

“One-thirty. You’ll have to finish dishes. Uummm, Bruno? I need a favor.”

“Go ahead.”
“My soap will be crucial today, being Friday and all. I need you to watch and write down all the interesting stuff. It comes on at two o’clock, channel four, *Maze of our Lives*.”

“Oh, good grief, Stella! How can I tell what’s important? Geez!”

“You can tell—it gets louder an’ the music leads up to it. You’ll know! If you’re not sure, just write down each scene, I’ll figure it out. Mainly, it’s the stuff between Dana and Ralph. Here’s paper and a pencil. I have to get changed, before she comes.”

Bruno trudged over to the sink, none too pleased about his assignment. As usual, he accepted it— just as he did his role in life. Figured it made things less complicated that way. He liked his life uncomplicated.

About five minutes before two, he washed the last dish. Dripping soapy water along the way, he reached for a towel on the oven door. With pencil and pad, Bruno settled in the recliner and turned his attention to channel four.

“God, this is dribble. Sooo boring! How on earth am I gonna figure out what's interesting?” Popping open a fresh can of peanuts, an enlightened smile spread across his face. The remaining forty-five minutes found him earnestly scribbling notes at fixed intervals.

“Bruno, wake up! Don’t *tell* me you fell asleep and missed *Maze of Our Lives*!”

“Oh, hi Stella. Noooo—M’aam, I was awake. Put down all the interesting parts!” Like an energized child producing an A-plus paper, he handed his notes to her.

Stella focused intently, eyes dancing across the page. As she flipped the page her brows slid together in deepening furrows—her skin flushed scarlet with engorged vessels pulsating on her neck. Aghast, her mouth hung open for a long silent moment . . . then closed. She glowered at Bruno with eyes like blue-hot coals. Stella was speechless. Sputtering like an overheated tea-kettle!

“No, Stella . . . you told me to write down the interesting parts. I can’t help if I thought those were the most interesting, can I? I mean, they were the best parts!” Bruno thought it prudent to retreat a few steps while explaining.

“OOOHHHH! Three pages of commercials!!” (Stella had her voice back.) Flapping like a chicken, she threw both hands to her head. Wrapping her head repeatedly in her hands, Stella muttered and shrieked down the hall.

Bruno was utterly befuddled by her reaction. He thought his idea quite amusing and rather clever at that! “Never will understand them damn women, especially Stella. No sense of humor.” he reflected, attempting self-justification. His *moment of brilliance*—spoiled by ballooning guilt.
Pain raging from the aspiration of hope.
Hopelessness of the soul whirling,
striving for existence.

Nourishment for my offspring,
the future of tomorrow.
Stress of today
rage: love

Sanity a dream
Anxiety now purpose
Unsuitability a reality

The pharmacy of the streets
highs only food stamps away.
Numbing

fear of success: failure

A forty is a trick away, while
thoughts of tomorrow,
a blur.

Black man screaming from the bowels of her soul
Equality is demanded.
Approach denied
Distrust

Souls sinking into the tar pits.
No strength to survive.
No strength of self.
Mary Elizabeth Mudd was born August 23, 1901, a good little Irish-Catholic baby. My Great Aunt Mary never saved the world. She never even made a name for herself in her hometown. She never had children, though I am convinced she wanted them. As women have done for centuries, and still do, Aunt Mary lived in the shadows of life, unseen and unheard but surviving whatever life threw at her. Her legacy is one of a caregiver and bathtub gin!

Not much is known about my Aunt Mary’s childhood. Whether she was a happy or unhappy child. In those days, it really didn’t matter—especially if you were from a poor family. Aunt Mary survived all the potential threats of being a child in the 1900’s: polio, smallpox, tuberculosis, diseases we of today don’t give a second thought.

At the “old” age of eighteen, she did what all girls were expected to do: she married. (Many girls were married by the time they were sixteen.) Unfortunately, as is the case with many of us today, the marriage didn’t work out and after two years they were separated. Being a good Catholic girl, she never divorced. (Even if she were divorced, a second marriage would never be recognized. She would, in essence, always be “living in sin.”) And so, a door was shut.

This was the age of prohibition. Imagine, you couldn’t even buy a beer! Many people came up with ways to get around this. Some made “bootleg” in the woods and trucked it in to illegal “speakeasys” (nightclubs to us). Others were more creative, made liquor at home (“bathtub gin”) and sold it by the drink (“nipjoints”). Aunt Mary was one of these. Now, some would be horrified, and some would be very righteous and shout how illegal it was, but I think it was pretty gutsy for a woman (and a single woman, at that!) As a consequence of this, Aunt Mary was denied access to her sister. And so, a door was shut.

Aunt Mary never talked about how she spent her life between the thirties and the forties, but I do know that it was during this time that she took on the responsibility of taking care of her mother, my great-grandmother.
World War II had erupted and women were needed to work. Aunt Mary got a “good” job with the Federal government. This was to be temporary though, for by now Aunt Mary was in her forties and when the War ended, and the men came home, Aunt Mary’s job did too. And so, a door was shut.

Sometime in the next five years, she (gasp!) moved in with a man. She no longer even tried to work. She smoked heavily. She drank too much. She took care of the man’s adult son, who had tuberculosis, who lived with them until he went into a sanitorium. She also had her elderly aunt and her aunt’s husband living with them. She loved animals, always having at least one pet. She invariably had time for her great-nieces and nephews. My brothers and I were always comfortable in her home. But, the “important thing” is she drank, smoked, and lived with a man. (Not at all a proper way for a middle aged woman to live in the 1950’s.) For fifteen years she lived with him. Then, he died. She grieved, lived in peace, and was rewarded in some way for all the good she did, RIGHT? WRONG. There is no happy ending here. Since she was not married to him, she had nothing to inherit. The man’s surviving son paid her a visit and threw everything she owned onto the street. Well meaning “friends” took her furniture to “keep” for her. She did not even have social security. (The Federal government did not start withholding social security from their employees until the early 1980’s. Unless you were with them long enough to qualify for Federal retirement, you received nothing.) And so, another door was shut.

Eventually, Aunt Mary received welfare but not before receiving a divorce from her long ago marriage. Wondering why, after all this time, she got a divorce? Even though she had not lived or received any support from her husband in forty years, she could not qualify for any assistance as long as she was married.

Aunt Mary lived, (and survived!) for another twenty years. She was visited often by her great-nieces and nephews; but when she became ill and went into the hospital at 81 years of age, she died, alone. And so, the final door was shut.
There Is No Substitute

Cassandra Hardy

The splashing sound of raindrops
Talking and laughing with me
The gentle, velvety breezes
Whispering in my ear
The mesmerizing full moon
Staring into my eyes
The red, flaring summer dress
Telling me that I'm sexy
The crisp, clean sheets
Stroking my smoothly shaven legs
The hot, pulsating shower
Massaging my entire body
The comfort of the pillows
Nestling me as I sleep
The sun's blinding rays
Closing my eyes and kissing my lips
The intensely vivid dream
Making love to my mental and physical
Although my mind does amazing things, it knows that
There is no substitute for the affection of a Good Man.
Majestically anchored in the calm, crystal-clear Caribbean Sea lays a white-sanded, palm-covered, post-card-perfect paradise. As we embarked upon this secluded paradise in the early morning sun, my husband and I, engulfed by warm ocean winds, misted by salty sea spray. Overwhelmed by the island’s beauty, we stood awestruck on our balcony. It was perfect.

Although the memory of this moment seems timeless, we savored it briefly. Instead, we quickly gathered our island necessities—sunglasses, snorkels, and towels—then hurried to the dock to begin exploring our newly found land.

Crusoe and I spent the morning lounging in the baking-hot sun, splashing in the sparkling turquoise water, and lounging in the baking-hot sun some more. Early afternoon buffets, situated on the water’s edge, began filling the air with mouth-watering aromas. With warm sand between our toes and cold margaritas between our fingers, we ventured from our towels to see what was on the menu. We were greeted by a vast array of food: pork, chicken, turkey, burgers, hot dogs, potato chips, potato salad, pasta salad—just to mention a few. Overtaken by hunger, we allowed our pallets to pile our plates high, and then found a quiet, shaded picnic table.

As we sat at the water’s edge, enjoying our lunch and listening to the waves, I could not have imagined a more perfect moment in a more perfect place.

“Can we stay here?” I asked my husband.

“Sure,” he replied.

Then I saw him.

A frail teenage Haitian boy—his clothes barley clinging to his skeleton—had just swiped a half eaten turkey leg from a trash can, and now stood, almost camouflaged behind a palm tree, eating it in a very nervous and hurried manner. Within seconds, he dropped it and ran back to his post at the beverage table before he could be missed.

We later learned, through speaking to some of the locals, that the food was only for the island’s guests. “Dis is good work, yes,” one of the elderly
native women told us. To have a job on this side of the island was a good, respectable, well-paid (almost one American dollar a day) privilege not to be taken lightly. Eating the food could not only result in unemployment, but severe punishment as well.

Standing on my balcony that evening, under a cloudless sky, I could see the dark shadow that hung above my perfect paradise. Its outer beauty was no longer enough to make me want to stay. All I could see was that boy. All I can see now is that boy.
Strong By Design

Sharon Taylor

Read my body, Read my mind
As you can see, I'm strong by design
Strong by nature
Strong in thought
By a strong woman, I was taught
To love myself before loving another
Then I will be respected by my
Black Brothers
Respected by people
Respected by all
I have goals and dreams
I shall not stall
I am claiming my success in this life
I am guaranteed trails, and expected some
Strife
But in the end I know I'll win
And stand the test
Of time
Because I'm a strong black woman by
Design.
Settling into a soft, pale-blue stuffed chair, I noticed the impressionistic paintings in the waiting area of my doctor’s office. His office is decorated in a homey but elegant style. Memories of my first doctor’s office visit surfaced—at least the first I remember.

I was probably about four or five years old, with a stubborn bout of tonsillitis unresponsive to my mother’s home remedy. Her trustworthy cure for sore throat was a dreadful whiskey gargle. It tasted horrible, burned and rendered my entire mouth and throat numb, with a lingering aftertaste. Aaargh! (Is it any wonder none of her children became alcohol aficionados?) We never informed her of sore throats, but somehow she always knew. She followed the spirited gargle with several squirts of atomized argyrol. This antiseptic, used to treat eye, nose and throat infections—was a twenty-percent silver solution and stained everything dark brown. We were then confined to bed, with regular whiskey and argyrol therapy until she judged us healed. I didn’t heal, so we paid a visit to Dr. R.H. Proud, M.D.

So, we headed to Flat Rock, a nearby village considered a big town to my young mind. Flat Rock had a Movie Theater and dime-store — plus a bowling alley, dress and shoe shops, two grocery stores, and a high school! His office was on East Huron River Drive at Gibraltar Road, a stone’s throw from Flat Rock High. Jumping off the running board of our old thirty-three Ford, I gaped at the gigantic structure facing us. It was taller, narrower than anything I had seen and spread back at least a mile. (The majestic four story row houses in Baltimore’s Bolton Hill reminded me of it, many years later.) Constructed in the Victorian era of speckled red-brown brick, an overgrown thatch of ivy climbed the entire north wall. I wondered how anyone could have planted it that far up.

We entered through massive double mahogany doors. Inside was quite dark. Two narrow front windows on spacious marble sills admitted natural light. Ornate floor-lamps emitted a soft golden glow from each corner. Highly polished black and white foot-squared tiles covered the floor and the walls were paneled with satiny dark wood.
I took my mother’s hand and sat with her on the soft, tan, crunchy leather sofa. I was lucky to have a seat next to her, as the waiting room was crowded with adults and a few babies. I loved babies and studied them as they sat in their mother’s laps.

Then, I happened to look upward and saw it. I was familiar with horses, cows, and even bulls since we lived on a small farm . . . but this was a monstrous animal! Its head and neck jutted out from the far wall, floating over a third of the room. I was afraid to ask where the rest of its body was! I reasoned the huge horn-like things coming out of the sides of its head must be antlers. (I had seen them on Bambi’s father in the movies.) But these antlers were thicker and broader, like a collection of platters going in different directions. It peered down at me with baseball-sized deep brown eyes. Its eyes looked kindly, but I wasn’t so sure.

I cuddled up closely to my mother. She smiled and asked, “did you see the moose?”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Yes, Dr. Proud caught it in Canada where he grew up.”

“Why did he bring it here?” My mother just smiled and gave me a hug. She sat calmly flipping through pages of Look magazine. She pointed out a table with children’s picture-story books for me. I declined her suggestion. I would have had to pass in front of the moose to get to them.
She gathered me up on the old rocking chair. I snuggled up close to feel her warmth.

Her simple frock of green and white cotton, had a pocket sewn for her handkerchief.

The flesh colored corset she wore underneath, concealed her softness along with her girth.

She liked to sing some silly songs and repeat nursery rhymes we knew.

Thick auburn hair, my father's delight, she wore brushed back, then coiled in a rat.

We found a curl snipped from her hair, safe in a box among things in her drawer.
I would recognize him first in their voice. The slow flatness of their pronunciation, their uneventful words and lives. Not uneventful for a lack of being, but for a lack of feeling. They were not unfeeling but rather weighed down so heavily by him that soon they could not do anything. They would not move or feel. Life would pass before them, as it would pass before the eyes of an artificial mannequin. Cold eyes, frozen smile, slowly they would emotionally die or stunt underneath their burden. Often I wondered what I could do to help them with theirs, as I silently struggled with mine.

Depression runs in my family like an underground river, felt but never seen. I’ve never talked to my sister or mother about it, but I know of the life it lives in them by the weight of their slow sad words. I don’t live close to them anymore so words are largely all I have to go by, that and my own symptoms. I have created the impression of non depression by altering my voice to a bright chipper brittleness, that fools the public, as it pleases my bosses. It is depressing for customers to hear the unending weight of limitless tears in your voice when calling for directory assistance. In this strange city in this strange state I have no friends, that I would claim as my own, and so no one to really talk to except for the sad voices of my sister and mother coming at me on a wire from across a long distance. Though we do not really talk so much as talk around. Like a crazy slow unending yet unmoving waltz.

“How is Dad?”

“Fine, though last night he passed out on the couch again. You would think that once in a while he could make it to bed with his wife.” I do not talk to my Dad, although he is my original dad, and mom is my original mom. It’s just simply that I’ve never talked to dad. What would I say besides hello, I’m doing well, school is fine. Sitting here typing and thinking about having a real conversation with my father is embarrassing in itself, with no actual effort towards fulfillment. My mother once said that he was a good provider, but old fashioned. Meaning, he did not expect to have a conversa-
tion with his children about anything more than he could comfortably discuss with a stranger. Dad is also a functioning alcoholic, and has been since around my second year in high school. By functioning I do not mean that he always maintains the polite politically correct façade of someone that enjoys a drink. What I mean is, although that Dad is a fall down drunk every night of the week, that fact does not affect his work ethic. He shows up, does the task, and ends the day. So is life, I assume, for my father. Is there more? Is there a dark secret or a hidden family weakness that leads him to end his days in this way? I don’t know, but he does enjoy fishing, and watching sports.

“How’s work going?”

“Good.” And then would follow a long conversation about what was not so good about work. Of course, the divine right to bitch is not ignored in any family. After that the conversation would swing around to me. It would be my turn, if there was time, and I did not have to rush off. Often I would rush off. The great weight of the stilted words the unending conversation about anything that did not really matter to preserve the illusion that all was well swallowed my words and made me sweat. With us as with the world, it was all alright? I don’t think I felt so even as a child, our dark visitor courted me even then. The memories of my youth are spotted, but I remember at around twelve picturing everyone I loved dead. In my imagination I would attend their funerals addressed in the appropriate black. Tell stories that remembered them fondly. Crying and grieving for them, then recovering. All this with in the space of an hour though they still lived. At sixteen I did not want to move for about a month and a half, hoping God would take me since I did not have the energy to off myself.

“Schools going well, I think I’ll get all A’s this semester.” I detest school, it seems to me that I rent out my brain and my thoughts to my professors, and pay them for the service. I never get straight A’s. I always manage to piss a professor off or skip too many classes.

“That’s good, have you met anyone yet, you know your not getting any younger.” My mom never says the last part although I always imagine her adding it mentally. It’s true I am not getting any younger, in fact I am almost thirty. I’ve never had a serious boyfriend, I push them away before they push first.

“How’s George doing?” George is my sister’s husband, they do not have any children, my sister has “female problems.”

“He is doing well, he’s having problems at work though their not giving him enough hours.” George, like most of us on the bottom layer of the unspecified, and unskilled job market, is having problems paying the bills.
My sister’s voice always either sounds like it is on the edge of tears and filtered through a cavern where no light escapes, or as though she has deeply inhaled an illegal substance. She calls it self medication, and I am inclined to agree, and tempted to succumb.

My sister is always doing fine, not matter what stories she tells me, they usually involve her crying, and someone yelling. I too can not bear to be yelled at, though I do not cry, I yell back. Yelling back has cost me several jobs, where crying seems to be working well for her. We are both hard workers, organized, at least at work, and conscientious of our jobs. We both always seem to be working for bosses that are looking for a reason to go off. Are we easy targets, do we have secret signs that say victim on us? My parents never yelled at us, but they were briefly separated when my mom met Ned. I do not remember Ned, but I heard stories about him. The stories scare, and I assume this is the reason why I am afraid of a memory I do not have, and why I can not handle being yelled at.

Home for the holidays. There is snow on the ground which solely surely means we are really and truly trapped in this house together. Story time, after a few legal, with applicable age, beverages.

“People must think you’re from a bad home the way you feel about men.”

What does that have to do with it.”

You don’t even believe in marriage.”

Well, I don’t believe in birthdays. Does that mean I was never born?” he slow deep voice rumbling from my father as he awakens from his stupor at the dining table. “Now don’t argue with her, she’s your mother.”

I can’t argue about my own opinions.” I fume silently, but say nothing. My mom says aloud what I must agree to.

You come from I nice home, you always were picky.”

Nicky, Nicky Picky, Picky Nicky, too Picky to pick any dicky. Sometimes I think they would rather I be gay so they could have a reason, something to point to. The white elephant my fear of men and hatred of my fellow man. I can’t remember. I can’t remember the first six, seven, ten years of my life. Twelve in the end when there are no long spots of blackness in my skimpy childhood memories. Memories from those years. My mother holding me in her arms, the world swirled by, dancing high above. Being small and feeling safe. Pissing myself in the theater, and Ned taking me to the bathroom. I just remember the cold steel bands wrapping their arms around my heart to protect me. There they stayed. I need them still today.

The funeral of my grandfather, a known pedophile. Suddenly after the mannequin woke up, I batted my eyelashes and tried to make a living in battered garments with broken wings, I’m still limping today. My mother's
hell is worse than mine. She perpetuated the cycle. The downward spiral that kills us all, slowly choking us with futile tears. My sister remembers the abuse, but everything's fine, everything's good, there is nothing real to talk about. Nothing left to say, silence reigns.
Plastic smiles wore paper-thin
Struggle to remember the last time you could
... with meaning
all you thought you could leave behind
hold it the furthest length from fingertips
blink at last light having sacrificed the ending
traverse to waking sky
for a second chance to forget
the best day you can ever remember
I remember it like it was yesterday. Two burning crosses stuck deep into our soil. Screams of “nigga, you a dead man” reeked through the air. Tears of anger fell from my father’s eyes, as he stood yelling from our front window with his shotgun in hand. Firing two shots he shouted louder, “This is my land.” All of a sudden there was only the sound of burning wood and rattled farm animals. This behavior was sort of average in these parts of Jamestown VA, but was only the beginning of what was next to come.

Father was raised on a plantation where his slave master in many ways cared for his slaves. He and my mother, who died giving birth to me, were educated. They received their education from their slave master, who had the belief that a house slave who is educated would be a better asset than an un-educated one. This infuriated the majority of the field slaves, who were not allowed to read or write. They were treated fairly, for field slaves, but father said that the master thought if the field slaves were allowed an education, they would be more apt to learn more than working the fields.

After the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, father received land, a house, and some farm animals. The land was on the same land as master’s plantation, just further in the wooded area. This was master’s way of keeping my father around. Also, he thought that Father could employ some of the workers and some way also convince them to continue to help master.

One field slave in particular, “Mr. Joppy Fuqua,” was not happy with Father. He felt since both of them were colored men, Father should divide the land amongst the people. Father would always tell Mr. Fuqua that he may leave if he was not happy, because now he was a free man. One day Mr. Fuqua did just that and vowed that Father would be sorry.

The next day panic had set in because of wide spread terror from the white hoods. They were retaliating because they had heard accusations that the well-off colored folk were planning to buy twenty acres of land. That night was the beginning of a night I’ll never forget.
Father and I had just finished the dinner dishes when we heard the sound of rumbling earth created from the pounding of horse hooves quickly approaching. Father looked out the window, and hastily rushed back to me telling me, “Anna, get in the cellar and don't make a sound.” I heard him run to the cabinet where his shotgun was stored. Then I heard a voice scream out, “We let ya'll niggas live long enough.” Rumbling began throughout the house followed by the abundance of gunfire. I irresponsibly ran out of the cellar to see five men with potato bag faces drag Father off to our sycamore tree. I watched in horror as they put a noose around his neck and beat him furiously with an axe handle. Something was very familiar about one of the brute's voices. I listened to him scream vulgarities toward Father. I also watched them pull the rope over the branch as they hoisted my Father in the air.

As I followed my tears, which were flowing towards the ground, I saw Father's shotgun; he must have dropped it during the tussle. Without any hesitation, I racked a shell into the chamber. By this time, four of the five men were running off. One just stood and watched Father dangle like he was enjoying what he saw. After he was obviously amused enough, he proceeded to mount his horse. In anger, I pointed the shotgun toward him and like Father taught me, and fired a single shot. The blast knocked my small 120-pound frame back at least five yards. Shaken from the blast, I slowly rose and walked back to the shotgun and once again racked another round. I looked off the porch and saw the murderer lying badly wounded with a shot to his chest. He wasn't dead, but he was kicking with that dead man's twitch. It seemed that the shot had knocked the gun out of his hand. I approached the body with anger and caution. As I stood over his almost lifeless body, he muttered, “I'm sorry.” He gargled on blood like he was fighting his lungs for air and then suddenly stopped moving. The potato sack was still on his head, so I decided to remove it so I could see the face of the one who murdered Father. I slowly unveiled the covering, and looked in awe at the face of Mr. Fuqua. All I could do then was scream out to the moon.

A few of days later, I buried Father and gathered all my belongings. I set off to live with my aunt. As I sat on the back of my auntie's wagon, I knew that out of all the memories I would have of this land, out of all the good times Father and I shared, what I would remember of this land the most would be, the fact that the devil — once lived there.
It’s raining
but the downpour can’t hide the tears this time
pictures of us in the car…
chasing away the dashed white lines
the street signs—our only direction
when we used to smile at each other
and I had learned to ignore the obvious

time stands still in a bedroom full of memories
and tapes with our songs playing
where every note and lyric reminds me of love lost
and tender wounds that are still fresh

my heart beats with the rhythm of traffic
and I can’t wait to hate myself
for having agreed to another night of being with you—
but without you,
next to you,
with barely the strength not to hold you one last time

Keeping the bricks warm,
I watch the paint-by-number-scenery change seasons
on this front porch it all becomes clear to me
it’s just another intersection
with blinking traffic lights
where the lanes never end
just pass under the red glowing dyes
and sometimes it feels like the light never changes,
but then you remember you blinked
and suddenly missed it…
The phone jangled, splitting Ruth's silence with each jagged ring. Startled, she made her way to the noisy offender and picked up the receiver. The young, male voice speaking to her was unfamiliar and spilled words into her ear like water spills over the lip of a pitcher left under the faucet.

“I beg your pardon?” Ruth finally interjected.
“You do have a flatbed, Mrs. Johns, don’t you?” said the voice.
“Well, y-e-s” Ruth said. “Why do you ask?”

The young voice tried to explain. “My sister’s horse is dead, in the field between your house and ours. She doesn’t know yet. Dad told me to call you to see if we could borrow your truck?”

“For what?” Ruth said.
“To get rid of the horse!” said the boy.

It took a minute for Ruth to think. She had seen her neighbors before, of course. But she had never spoken to any of them beyond a wave or a hurried “hello” through the open car window as she drove by. There was a girl, around ten, that she’d seen many times on the horse in question. And a boy, older, like seventeen, or so. She had noticed, last fall, that he was a football player. In the mornings, he would wait for the school bus at the end of her driveway, sitting on his books and lugging gigantic, football-player shoulder pads under his arm. This must be the boy she was talking to now.

“I don’t know if it’s big enough,” she finally said to him.
“My Dad thinks it is. He’s seen you driving it,” he added hopefully.
“Does your Dad know how to drive a column shift?” she asked.
“He won’t be driving it. He’s not here . . .”
“Well, who’s gonna be driving it?” Ruth pressed, shifting her weight to her other foot.
“I am. I guess . . .” said the boy.
“Do you know how to shift from the column?”
“I know how to shift from the floor.”
“It’s a lot different,” Ruth said, realizing that she hadn’t driven the truck since Art had died. God knows if it would even start. If it even had gas in the tank?
“Well, come on over,” she sighed. “We’ll see what we can do. But, don’t get your hopes up. I don’t even know if it works anymore.”

Two minutes later, she looked out to see him running down the gravel driveway toward her house. It was, of all nights, Christmas Eve. His sprinting form was illuminated by the moon and framed perfectly by the colorful lights she’d put up around the front window. He was out of breath when she opened the door. Up close, she realized that she’d been right about his age. But football? He was tall enough, but very thin.

“I’m sorry to bother you about this, Ma’am, on Christmas Eve and all,” he said. “We just don’t want her to have to see him. It’s gonna be bad enough as it is . . . on Christmas Day.”

Ruth wanted to grouse a bit about the intrusion. Especially on this night. But the earnest look on his young face and the empty house behind her made her grousing ridiculous. What else did she have to do? As they made their way to the barn where the flatbed was parked, picking their way with flashlights supplied by Ruth, she asked him about the horse.

“Was it an old horse?”

“I don’t think it was that old. I think it ate something bad. Probably pig weed. It’s all foamy around the mouth. You can tell he had convulsions or something—the grass is all tore up around him. Diane made me go out to feed him while she and Sarah decorated the tree. That’s when I found him. It was almost dark.”

“My step-mom.”

“Is Sarah your sister?”

“Yea, my step-sister.”

The hinges on the barn were rusty and groaned loudly as Ruth and the boy pulled the door open. There was the truck. It looked better than she thought it would. It was wearing a thin, flawless veil of dust. Ruth wiped the driver window clear and shone her light through to see if the keys were still in the ignition. They were. It suddenly occurred to her that the last person to touch those keys had been Art. Here she was, on Christmas Eve, about to drag a dead horse onto Art’s pride and joy.

“Do you have chains?” said the boy.

“I think they’re on the back.”

They both aimed their flashlights to the rear of the truck and found the dusty chains, neat, and serenely solid, while wild dust motes danced above them in the flashlight beams.

“What’s your name anyway?” she asked him.

“Brian.”

“How old are you?”
“Seventeen.”

“OK, Brian. Get in. Let’s see if we can start this baby up,” said Ruth.

Brian went around to the passenger side and Ruth, who at sixty, was still lithe and strong, wrenched open the driver’s door. She slid in and grabbed the keys before she had any more time to think. Brian got in on his side, more gingerly, coughing at the dust they both stirred up. Expecting to hear nothing more than a lifeless click, Ruth turned the key. Surprisingly, the motor attempted to turn over, giving hope to a second attempt. Even more surprisingly, at the second turn of the key, the truck miraculously sputtered to life as if to say, “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Go open the other door,” Ruth gestured over the commotion to Brian, pointing to the too-narrow barn opening. He sprung out and dragged open the other of the barn’s twin doors. Ruth found the headlights, catching him in their beams. She thought again about how frail he looked. And about how in the hell, between the two of them, they would get a dead horse onto the back? She guessed with the chains and the winch. Jesus! What a horrible thing to have to do on Christmas Eve! Where was the dad anyway?

“Where’s your Dad?” she yelled, once Brian had gotten back in.

“Atlanta,” he yelled back.

“On Christmas Eve?”

“They had that ice storm a couple of days ago. He’s stuck there.”

“What about your step-mom?” she asked as the truck noisily nosed through the doors and bumped over the ruts in the little used farm yard.

“She’s home with Sarah. I think they finished the tree.”

Ruth glanced over at the young man. For the first time, it occurred to her that maybe he wasn’t your average self-obsessed high school kid.

“So, you’re the man of the house these days?” she said as the road smoothed out.

“Yea, I guess,” he mumbled.

A few minutes later, after rumbling over to the middle of the dark field, they came upon the horse. The foam at its mouth and the circle of torn up grass around the body made it obvious that the horse had died horrifically.

“Yep, it looks like pig weed,” Ruth said.

“His name is Spirit,” said Brian.

She and the boy looked down sadly at the beautiful animal. The moon gleamed off his haunches and was reflected in perfect, tiny replica in his unblinking eye. Standing now, as they were, in front of the dead body, Ruth realized the boy had been right. It could not be left for Christmas morning.

The winch worked. It must have been a Christmas miracle. The chains worked too. The thin boy and the old woman managed it all and got the
gorgeous, foamy-mouthed, stiff creature, miraculously, onto the back of the flatbed. They decided to drive it to the local farm vet whose dispensary was only a couple of miles down the road.

“Will Diane be worried about you?” Ruth asked on the way to the vet.

“Yea, maybe a little. She’s probably more worried about Sarah. When Sarah finds out and all.”

“Hmm, yea, I guess so.” Ruth peered through the grubby windshield trying to spot the road that turns off to the dispensary.

“Here it is,” Brian pointed to a sign and a turn off. “What will we do with it when we get there?”

Ruth slowed down as they neared the house. The vet and his family lived on one side and the dispensary took up the other side. She supposed that it wasn’t too unusual for him to wake up to all kinds of dead animals left overnight. All the lights were out.

“They must be all settled down for a long winter’s nap,” observed Ruth.

“Yea, not a creature is stirring, not even a horse.”

The boy smiled at his joke.

“Let’s pull over there on the far side of the dispensary, as quiet as this old diesel will let us,” said Ruth. How about we just leave Spirit on the back of the truck and walk home? It’s only a couple of miles. I’ll come back for the truck tomorrow.

“I guess it would make a big racket trying to get him off,” said Brian slowly. “You don’t mind walking back? It’s probably almost midnight.”

“It’s a strange way to spend Christmas Eve, but I don’t think we have much choice. Besides, maybe we’ll see Ol’ St. Nick,” Ruth smiled at the boy who, suddenly, seemed relieved.

Ruth turned off the engine. They were instantly engulfed in a wide silence that pressed in on them as they got out. Slamming the doors shut sounded disproportionately monumental, as was every pebble loosed by their shoes as they walked away from the dispensary, toward the road. With a backward glance, Ruth noticed Brian giving Spirit a quick, good-bye pat.

As they began the long walk home, their way was lit by the bright, white moon. The only sound, their crunching footsteps on the country road. Ruth asked again about whether Diane would be worried about him.

“Yea, probably,” he agreed again.

Considering the bizarre circumstances, Ruth was emboldened to ask, “Do you like your step-mom?”

“She’s nice to me. She’s just busy with Sarah.”

“What about your Dad?”

“Oh, yea, he’s great, too. He works a lot. He really wanted me to play football this last season. He thought it would be good for me.”

“Was it?”
“I’m not big enough or very fast. I sat on the bench, mostly.”
Their footsteps had settled into a comfortable cadence now. They walked along silently.
“What happened to your husband?” Brian broke the silence.
“He died.”
“When?”
“A year ago.”
“Like in December?”
“Actually, exactly a year ago.”
“You mean on Christmas Eve??”
“Yes . . . it was Christmas Eve, come to think of it.”
“Wow,” breathed Brian.
They walked along in tandem, quiet again. The stars twinkled faintly at them from a backdrop of velvety sky. Ruth realized that it was the most beautiful Christmas Eve that she could ever remember. Who would have thought that on this night, where just a few hours ago she was quiet in her silent house, that a dead-horse-disposal-ordeal with a skinny teenage boy, would bring her here?
At the end of their driveways, Ruth gave Brian a quick hug.
“Your Dad will be proud of you,” she said.
He smiled gratefully. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Johns. Maybe I can come over and help you now and then?”
“I’d like that Brian.”
As she watched him go, Ruth thought about the magic of Christmas. It seemed, before, that it would be lost forever behind an impenetrable cloud of grief. How would she know that the magic would come back, in the image of a teenage boy and a dead horse?
The Morning Concert

Laurie Galbraith Weckstein

The music fills me
as if I’m a void—
a carafe.
I lean toward its source,
helping it to fill me up.
A stupid smile, teeth showing.

My body
keeping time now, by itself—
Not all at once,
but still . . .
not still.

The guitar, its player
and me, as one.
Making love.

Around me sit statues.
Careful eyes look straight ahead.
Backs lean into chair backs.
Arms lay comfortable on armrests.

Crossed legs,
pretty & pointed or square & straight forward.
Still . . .
very still.

What’s wrong with them?

What’s wrong with me?
Am I only a hummingbird
defenseless among ruffled, extravagant,
sweet smelling flowers?

Or perhaps I am a child still
carefully not walking on cracks
in endless, gray slabs?

For now,
when we pass each other
and I look to acknowledge you,
if we’re mere acquaintances or even
if we’re strangers—

just accept it
as a simple beat
to the rhythm of the song
in me.
His sightless eyes wander across the parking lot. As a car approaches his grimy, paper-thin hand, clasping the rim of a rusting cookie tin, reaches out blindly begging for money. From dawn to dusk he is stationed by the Goodwill shack — begging for the slightest pittance of change. When the weather is hot and the sun is scorching, he moves himself under a nearby cherry tree. Sometimes a Goodwill worker will take pity on him and lend him an old metal chair to rest on. Other times he is crouched on the curb. No one stops to speak to him. They just toss their coins out of the window.

He is a sad and disturbing sight to behold. His uniform is always the same. On his hands are fingerless wool gloves — dirty from use. His head sports a black, tweed wool cap, and no matter the temperature, he wears his dingy coat like a shield. His shoes have seen much better days. Hauntingly, his eyes plead with every passerby. There are no dark glasses shading them. He proudly flaunts milky white corneas for all to see. Accompanying those eyes is a smile that is sad, yet disturbing, and perhaps just a tad bit senile. He is old — but seems ancient.

A while back there was an article in the Daily Press about him. As a young man he was enlisted in the Navy. His many ports-of-call led him to Virginia, and he settled in Newport News. He worked odd jobs here and there over the years, never staying at one very long. He never married or had children. As the years went on, times got tough and jobs became fewer and far between, and he became homeless. He claimed that he had a brother in New Jersey that he hadn’t seen in almost fifty years. He wasn’t sure if he was still alive. His goal was to find him before he died. The newspaper gave his age as seventy-four. It also gave him a name — William Daye.

Not too long ago I drove by the Goodwill shack and noticed that he wasn’t there. “Maybe he’s sick,” I thought at first. Expectantly, I waited for his return, but to no avail. As days turned to weeks my hope faded. William never returned to his sentry-post by the old shack. I hoped he had gone on his journey to find his brother — and deep down, I mourned.
Hear the whisper, Lovely Daughter
of the sweet, unfolding flower.
Breathe inside its splendid secret
You are lovely as you are.
The winter that year was particularly harsh, heavy snows falling almost daily. Travel throughout the land had become slow and full of danger. It was into this sea of frozen white that the king rode out one day intending to visit the site of a new and larger fortress he was having built. It was located on a great hill which commanded a valley for miles. Never had such a huge castle been built; it would grow into a busy town one day. The king was a particularly vain man, proud of his accomplishments, which were many. At the borders of the kingdom were tall pillars of stone which declared these lands were his.

The king and twenty of his best men had headed out with the dawn; the journey would take several days to complete. The weather held the first day and they had traveled some way before they set up camp for the night. Huge fires kept them warm as they rolled into their saddle blankets to sleep. At the dawn, as they arose, it was bitterly cold and they had a dusting of snow covering them; snow which had just begun falling. The swirling sea of white picked up in intensity as they rode off.

Quickly the blinding storm wrapped around them and they all struggled mightily to make progress. Some suggested that they hold up and wait for the storm to cease; the king would hear none of that. On they went. It became worse, now the cold was numbing them. Soon men were lost in the storm, stumbling blindly in its rage. Several would later be found where they had fallen and frozen.

Into the day and through the night they went, those left knew that to stop would be to die. Never had so fierce a storm been seen in the kingdom. All, except the king, who never doubted his greatness or ability to survive this, were in mortal fear. The king laughed through the howling storm at them. “No storm would dare try take my life,” he bellowed, I am greater than any storm.” He continued on and then hours later noticed that he journeyed alone. He did not worry that he had gotten lost, rather he thought, “The cowards have run off. I shall make it alone then.”

Now, after two days of struggle against a storm with no sleep even a
king tires. He began to look for a safe place to rest and as he did, he thought he spied through an opening in the swirling snow, the shape of a small cottage. Riding in that direction, he arrived at the dwelling's door. It was a simple home, modest and built stoutly against the weather. The shutters were drawn tight against the howling winds. The snow collecting in a great drift by the entrance. The king tied his horse on the side of the cottage out of the wind and struggled back to the door.

Without so much as a knock, he pushed it and strode into the home, shutting the door behind him.

"Who enters my home without so much as a by-your-leave," a wizened old man wrapped in a blanket by the fire said.

"I am your king and I need shelter from the raging storm; you will provide it," answered the snow covered king.

"Kings come and go, the old man replied. I have seen many, you are but one more. Though as hospitality demands I help out a poor traveler, I will let you stay the night."

The king was enraged at this insolence by one of his subjects, but being cold and tired, let it pass. "There is some stew left in the pot by the fire, you are welcome to it," the old man said matter-of-factly to the king. The king took the stew pot from by the fire and began to eat and warm himself.

"You show little respect for your betters old man, the king said. Another time and place and such an act would lose you your head."

"Such things do not worry me, the old man replied. You are no better than the next man, king.'

Furious, the king shouted, "I am the greatest king this land has ever known. My name is at every road that enters this kingdom. You are nothing old man."

"That is true, I am but an old man. I have lived over ninety years and have done little to make me great. I have seen many kings in this land. You, I believe will be my last. I am no longer able to gather wood for that fire and when what you see there in the corner is gone my fire will go out and I shall freeze. Or the little food I have will run out and I will starve. Either matters little. Come the spring all that will be found here will be my bones. Soon I will be forgotten. It is the world's way."

"Not for me," boasted the king. "I will be remembered forever for my greatness. My fortresses will outlast time."

"You are fool, my lord, answered the old man. "In but a few years, as the world goes, you will be forgotten and missed by none."

Screaming in anger, the king drew his sword; "You call your king a fool. Pray to your gods old man for soon you will meet them."

"Please, make the cut my king," he replied to this threat, "A quick end
is surely more merciful than dying frozen or starving. You would be paying me back handsomely for my hospitality.”

The king looked at the old man, not a trace of fear did he see. If he had seen but a mote of it, he would have killed him. The old man was without fear and never had the king seen such calm in one facing his sword. Curious, he asked the old man, “Why do you speak as you do, fearing nothing?”

“There are many things I fear king, but those things which are inevitable, I ignore. I can do little about them anyway, the old man said. As for your greatness, let me ask you, do you know the name of your father? Where his body lies buried?”

“Yes, of course I do,” answered the king.

“And his father before him?” asked the old man. “Yes, I remember my grandfather,” said the king.

“But what of his father,” the old man next asked? The king thought for a moment, and realized that he did not.

“You see, said the old man, in but a few generations your name and where you lie buried will be forgotten. You are as the footprints you left upon the snow outside my door. The storm or the sun of spring will make them as if they never existed. It is the same with all men, we make our small marks upon this world and when she is done with us the world erases every trace of our passing. Oh, some are remembered a little longer than others, but in the end it is all the same.”

The king, after a few moments of thought, turned to respond but found that the old man had fallen asleep. Moving closer to the fire, the king decided on that wisdom and was soon asleep himself.

With the dawn came an end to the storm, and the king still finding the old man sleeping, left quietly. He found, as he continued on his journey, several of his men who had survived the storm. Although they asked how he had managed it, he spoke little, and thought much on it.

Throughout the rest of that year and for two more, one of the kings men would regularly go to the small cabin in the woods. As ordered, each would bring food and spend some time gathering wood for the cabin’s lone occupant. Finally the day came when the old man was found dead by his fire. The king had him buried in the forest near the cabin. No stone marked the spot.

The king also had the markers at all his borders removed. When finally, years later, it was the king’s turn to pass beyond the veil, his son, following the kings instructions, had him buried in the forest near the remains of an old cottage. The king had asked that no stone mark his grave. Leaving the site, his son paused for a moment to look at the ruins and wondered who had lived there, then turned to ride back to his fortress.
subtle eyes pierce with the determination
of all it can’t afford to loose
fickle butterflies that light the nitefall
just before daybreak
when all the world seems just as we left it …
untouched
unfettered by transactions
that leave us without change in our pockets
and bags that will break on the way home
upon sidewalks unnumbered
and cracks unrecognizable from the next
this is finally where we meet
between crosswalks that become empty rooms
full of scattered pictures
and letters that will fall short of your hands
while mine remain empty
except for these prisms of light
trickling thru plastic orange vials
dancing upon wooden tabletops
blame falls from ceiling tiles to rubber seats
settling to find its home
when I’m so far
from the home I built with you
it lies in ashes
and crumbles with warm embers
through fingers never brave enough to close
Daddy

Jack David, Jr.

My father’s name was Horace Lee David, which after noticing my first name at the top of the page, your curiosity may be aroused. At first thought, one would assume that his name would be Jack David, Sr., but in the second grade he was appointed the nickname “jackrabbit” by his young classmates. That nickname associated him with an animal well known for its leaping ability, because of Daddy’s propensity for jumping out of the school building windows in order to “play hooky.” A short while later, the nickname was shortened to simply, “Jack,” for convenience sake, I guess. That condensed version would stick with him throughout his lifetime. Even into adulthood, he was better known as “Jack” than his real name; why, very few people even knew his given name. Besides, Jack was preferable to “Horace” (of course!), and it was also a simpler, more efficient, “to the point” sort of name. The means by which he came to be dubbed as “jackrabbit” would serve as an omen that hinted at personality traits that would come to describe the man I knew as, just Daddy. Those traits included a fierce independence, and a penchant for disregarding conventions, rules and regulations, and those in position to enforce them.

Daddy’s independence came in tremendously handy, even at an early age, because his own father passed away when Daddy was only ten years old. Even today, that would be a tragedy, but in the 1930’s, the unfortunate, and timely event presented a tragic sword with two dramatically sharp edges. One edge would represent the emotional trauma of a boy losing his father; the other would bring into reality the practical nature of a family having lost its primary provider. Due to the overwhelming poverty and difficulties brought about by the Great Depression, survival for the majority of Americans was a challenge, at best.

Consequently, being the oldest son in the home, my father was suddenly encumbered with the responsibility of becoming a provider, one that his mother, younger brother and baby sister would grow to depend upon. This situation served to extend his resistance to authority figures, for even then, there were child labor ordinances that prevented him from obtaining a real job. Truth be known, he was far too young for a real job, but in his
attempts at bravado aimed at reassuring his family, he insisted that he should be allowed such a job. Such employment would not materialize, however, so Daddy was relegated to performing low paying, menial “odd jobs” to bring about just a few dollars per week into the household.

During those lean and trying years the determination and independence exhibited in those early school years, became even more prevalent in my father’s demeanor and attitudes. As a mere adolescent leading a family through the worst of economic nightmares, he would, for the whole of his teen years, grit his teeth, and keep moving forward, inch by agonizing inch. He believed in his soul that these conditions could not, would not, last forever, and when this living hell did cease, he would never be poor again.

Finally, as the destitute times of the 1930’s were drawing to a close, there was a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Daddy’s younger brother, Buddy, had reached an age that allowed him to contribute to the family’s survival. That time coincided with my father’s arrival at an age that would enable him to enlist in the Army. Even though there were rumblings of war afoot, being in the Army was far more attractive than delivering groceries, shining shoes, and picking up soda bottles for the two-cent deposit. At least in the Army, he would be taken care of, which would decrease the number of hungry mouths at home, enable him to send money back home, and, as a bonus, he would get all those nice, new, clean clothes.

In the later years, Daddy would recount few tales of his days in the Army, what we jokingly refer to as “war stories,” these days. But at that time, they were real war stories, full of sadness, horror, and innocent young men’s disbelief that humankind could display such savagery towards one other. His stories were only occasionally peppered with a bit of proud patriotism, because he chose to keep to keep most of it to himself, in himself. He would humorously boast of what he must have thought was his grandest achievement during the war, that of being a buck private infantryman who walked across the entire continent of Europe. During that walk, he developed an extremely quick gait that would continue, even into his golden years.

Daddy did not win any medals, or stand out in any particular way, as a soldier. I think he simply did his job, performed his duties like so many young men at the time, and then came home. He readily admitted, however, that the Army had been a positive experience for him, especially teaching him to be more disciplined and, at least, to feign respect for authority figures. He would tell me, “The Army taught me that sometimes it’s better to shut up than to stand up, although not too often!”

So back home he came, and to a better home, indeed, did he return. The economic straits of the nation were rapidly healing, jobs were plentiful, and it was time for Daddy to get to the business of achieving his adolescent
goal of avoiding future poverty, at all costs. He had married by this time, so he and my mother began a whirlwind adventure aimed at conquering the business world, or at least, their little corner of it. Daddy moved from one average job to another, selling Coca-Cola, pumping gas, delivering fuel oil, and such.

Within a few years that old relentless independence reared its challenging head, once again. It was not long until he determined that making money for someone else was not “the answer.” Daddy wanted to make money for himself and then keep it or spend it as he wished. Also there was that bugaboo about taking orders from others, something that still presented a wall that he could not seem to climb — or wanted to, for that matter.

He began his foray into self-employment by acquiring a gas station (actually referred to as service stations back then because they actually provided service), working 18-hours per day, at least six days per week. When that first station was self-sufficient, he bought another, then another, and later on, yet another one. Through extremely hard work, determination, and an undying sense of independence, Daddy had created the foundation for his own little entrepreneurial enterprise.

The decade of the 1950’s were prosperous years, as well as foundational ones that served to acquaint my father with the intricacies of business in general, and the potential hazards. He learned to trust a selected few individuals, as well as learned that “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn’t true!” To be sure, there were mistakes made and errors in judgment, but yet another testament to his determination, was that he never repeated a mistake. Even though he was saddled with the detriment of only elementary school education, he possessed a gregarious personality, shrewd negotiation abilities, and the proverbial “memory like an elephant” — all attributes that would counter what he called “book learnin’.”

As the 1950’s eased into the next decade, Daddy tired of the service station business, finding that the challenge had dissipated. He took most of his modest savings and bought into a small trucking company, consisting of the elderly owner/operator, three drivers, and four aging trucks. As in the service station business, his new employees quickly offered him their respect and dedication, for it did not take long for them to learn that he would work as hard as he asked them to, by their sides. He could certainly be a demanding taskmaster, with an intimidating style of management, but he was also very fair when forced into the role of disciplinarian at the workplace. If an employee had done the right thing or at least, tried their very best, my father would be their staunchest ally. If they should make a mistake based on laziness or negligence, then it was time to look out!
Along about this time, my father acquired yet another nickname. Having come from such humble beginnings, he never did like being called “Mr. David,” and even when his subordinates did address him as such, he would quickly growl, “I ain't no mister, I'm a workin’ man, just like you!” In the 1960’s, it was still customary to address one superior, employer, or boss, in a respectful manner, so as his employees felt compelled to come up with some moniker to use that would illustrate their respect. And so the title of “Captain Jack” was bestowed upon Daddy, quickly to be shortened to, “Cap’n Jack.” And that is how he was known and referred to for the remainder of his time in the business world.

After two or three years, Daddy's co-owner in the trucking business retired, so my father seized the opportunity to obtain full ownership in the company. It was not long before his desire to turn it into something special, something with his symbolic signature on it, and, of course, something big rose to the surface. So he bought a couple more trucks, then two or three more, the five more. By the early 1970’s, the company had grown to the largest independent hauling company in the state. My father then was a co-founder of an organization known as The Independent Truckers Association of Virginia. Daddy had finally “made it!” Neither he, nor his loved ones, would ever know the depressing, frustrating poverty that had served to transform this uneducated, dirt poor, Georgia backwoods boy into the solid, self-assured businessman that my father had become.

Though my father was fairly small in physical stature, being only five-feet, seven-inches tall, and weighing only about 150 pounds, what he lacked in physical presence was far exceeded by courage, spirit, will, and determination. Today's “high-tech, non-personal” business world could and should learn volumes about interpersonal relationships from the “little guys” who built businesses from the ground up, like he did.

Having worked for my father for 12 years, I learned a multitude of still valuable lessons from him. Some related to business and trucking, but there was an equal amount about life. One of the more amusing, yet useful, tenants I gleaned from him was that if one is involved in a transportation related company, there are no better investments than fuel, tires, lubricants, and spare parts for your fleet. I must have heard him say a thousand times, “It's better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it!”

When I realized, after 12 years, that I preferred to do something “different,” I left the company. My father carried on for a few more years, then in 1986, he retired. He sold most of the company’s assets, but also gave some away to long-standing who had stuck with him through the growing pains.
There was, in fact, a heart of gold under that tough, barking, growling, demanding taskmaster who asked a lot from people, yet ultimately gave it back with kindness, respect, and a sparkling, humorous twinkle in those old ocean blue eyes of his.

One may think it unusual that an adult male still refers to his father as “Daddy” — may even think it is a bit childish or immature. But that is who he was to me, and always will be. Of course he is gone now, and no matter who would think it strange, I would love to be able to call him up, today, just to say, “Hello, Daddy.”

Although I do not own the company I work for now, I am involved in the same general type of work that I did for my father. I am a supervisor for a private waste hauling company, with the management and supervision of 35 drivers as one of my main responsibilities. A short while back, out of the blue, one of our newer drivers, who knew nothing of me or my past, called me “Cap’n Jack.” God knows I had to swallow hard a couple of times, as I looked upward and whispered, “Thanks, Daddy.”

I do thank God each day that Daddy chose me to be his son. You see, I had been orphaned at the age of six months, actually deserted, left to possibly die. My father and my mother adopted me when I was two, against the advice of doctors, because I wasn’t expected to live, due to neglect and malnutrition.

Daddy never could resist a challenge.
See that rock right there?
It has been there for days now.
The wind brought it here not long ago.
Trucks and cars have bullied it;
A dumb cat that thought the rock would actually play.
It has moved again by a sudden thunderstorm mixed with massive wind.
It is a small rock.
It is dull most of the times.
It is a lazy rock.
It is alone.
It has been shifted to a driveway,
then swept to the street again.
It doesn’t have much of a life.
I would hate to be that rock,
not having the say-so of where I stand or
where I go,
not knowing what will happen next or
if I will get knocked into a puddle.
No, I would want to know where I stand!
I would want to tell everyone where I stand!
Is today your lucky day? Although the office will not open for another half hour, customers form a line that wrap around the side of the building. This daily ritual occurs whether the sky forecasts rain or shine. The line of people grows lengthy, rapidly as if a sign out front displays, “Get Your Free Money Here.” Smiles, pleasantries and conversation simply don’t exist here—it’s every man for himself.

The door opens and the line files in quickly, quietly and tightly. Annoyed by the journey that lies ahead, everyone visits the information desk, explaining his or her unique situation. The representative at the information desk provides answers to questions, forms to complete, and numbers to listen for when your turn for service arrives. Hostility, impatience and disgust saturate the lobby. Every chair has an occupant while others stand, holding up the wall; however, customers continue coming through the doors to join the party and compromise the building’s capacity.

Running wildly around the lobby, weaving throughout the maze of people, a three-year-old girl eludes her chasing mother. They resemble a cheetah attempting to recover his kill from an overbearing hyena. Roaring at her daughter, the mother’s embarrassment is evident as she pleads with the three-year-old to end the escapade. Attentive spectators chuckle and ridicule the mother for allowing such nonsense. Victoriously, the mother catches her daughter, plants her firmly in her seat, and warns her to behave. The three-year-old releases a glass-breaking screech that shocks and amazes everyone in the lobby. “Do I need to call your father,” asks the mother? Horrified, the three-year-old stares at her mother with immediate silence and conformity.

Standing at the center-most customer service window, a young woman begins to make a spectacle of herself. She has bright, red, fake hair glued on her head in an up-do that looks exactly like a rooster. She wears a gold, backless blouse two sizes too small, exhibiting her bulging, jiggling, veiny belly; her mini-skirt, a snug and zebra-printed garment made of fur, squeezes her middle and modifies her breathing into dog-like panting.
Royal blue eye shadow, blood-red lipstick, and three inch, curling, fake fingernails complete the young woman's "ghetto-fabulous" appearance. The manager, an older woman oozing with tact, experience and politeness, is reduced to tears by the young woman's tyrannical tantrum. She waits over an hour just to hear that she doesn't have the necessary forms to receive her identification card. (Due to the State's budget crisis and employee shortage, the average wait time ranges from thirty minutes to two hours.) The young woman shouts obscenities as the deputy escorts her out of the building.

A gentleman, very clean-cut and dressed in a business suit, concentrates on selecting the correct answers to the computerized questions. He swiftly transforms from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde after realizing that he failed his Driver's License exam. He elects to storm out of the building before the Deputy or Special Agent observing gets a chance to assist him. He curses all the way to his car, shoves himself in the driver's seat, and slams the door shut; he speeds away like a racecar in the "Indy 500."

The atmosphere remains hostile, impatient and unfriendly—everyone anticipates the next outburst. The customer service specialists pray for drama-free customer encounters, but the possibility seems highly unlikely. Deep sighs permeate the air. Unbelievable as it may seem, it's a normal day and business as usual at the DMV.
The Drive

Jennifer Cabral

Through black of night, down empty roads
Stars talk to each other, I talk to the wind
This car ... used to be so quiet, my head,
Used to make some sense
I don’t know where I’m going, I’m just driving
Don’t even know which way I’m pointed ...
I got those two companions on my shoulder,
One cloaked in red, one bathed in light
All they do is bicker and make me want to spite (them both)
I thought there had to be something more,
There must be other choices down these corridors
A choice right, and true, that’ll make it all new
That will end my frustration, I only need a destination - a soulful revelation
Angels give me wings for levitation,
I’m so tired of dreaming dreams that can’t come true
So helpless I seem, in all the things I do
Don’t tell me anything is possible - lies don’t look good on you
I’m not that naive - I’m not a fool
I can not have what I want,
Maybe I’ll grow out of it,
But I haven’t grown in years
No I haven’t seen the end of my fears, or my tears
My ears long, for a comfortable silence ...
A never ending peace, so I just keep driving
I’ll end up somewhere, sometime
I pray it’s only better, than what I left behind ...
Behind, in the dust, miles away
Rivers and mountains, shield me from my yesterdays ...
Through the black of night, along these empty roads,
I just talk to the wind, I just talk to myself
This car, used to be so fast,
My head used to make some sense.
Once there was a beautiful place called Bella Island. It was a place where palm trees waved to the blue green ocean and birds of every color sang inside the bushes. And directly in the center of this island was a wonderful golf course that was the pride and joy of all the men who lived there. Every day the rich men sipped their beer outside the towering clubhouse and drove around in their fancy golf carts. Happy clusters of them in bright flowery shirts could be seen all over the greens, whacking away at their golf balls.

Most of them were not good at hitting golf balls and when yet another ball would sail up and then plop into the Lake of Scum, they’d laugh and holler, “Another one for you, Willie Peas!” And from the other side of the lake, Willie Peas, with his greenish tinge, would grin and wave back. Willie was the boy who swam down under the weedy water and scooped up the lost balls. But he didn’t mind, because like all the rest of the un-rich on Bella Island, who worked for the now-rich, he knew his time was coming. Someday he’d sail his own balls into the murky water.

Life was incredibly good. There were lush red flowers along the fare ways, and fluffy white clouds in clear blue skies. Sometimes a dazzled golfer would put his hand across his eyes to shield the brilliant sun and stand amazed at how truly glorious their island really was.

But one night something terrible happened. While everyone was sleeping, a great, ominous mountain arose from the bowels of the earth. It towered, massive and dark inside a choking cloud of smoke. The smoke obscured all vision, so no one could see how high the mountain really was.

The earliest golfers saw it first, for it sprouted straight out of the golf course. Their fine glass clubhouse lay shattered, the magnificent palms were uprooted and smashed on top of their golf carts.

How did this happen? The rich men gasped in wonder. The un-rich men were incredibly angry. They stood with their foreheads knotted and shook their fists at the smoking mountain. Why had it come there, to cloud their beautiful skies? And deep inside, all the men were exactly alike —
scared and horribly shaken — for it sickened them to see their dreams so crumbled.

The rich men offered a million dollars to anyone who would climb the mountain and see what was up there. Then we will know what to do, they said, and they waited breathlessly for someone to volunteer. A hushed and total silence spread upon them. Then all at once a little green hand shot up and Willie Peas pushed to the front. “I’m good at holding my breath and seeing through murk,” Willie cried. “Send me!”

And all the men gasped in relief and nodded. Why, Willie Peas — the perfect choice.

So, they clapped Willie on the back and cheered and his spirits soared as he bounded upward through the smoke. He would climb to the top. He would save his island.

But, the higher he climbed, the cheers of the other men faded, and his tiny bravery sank inside him. The smoke was so thick and choking he could not see or breathe. Huge jagged rocks tripped and cut him. But Willie did what he always did in the Lake of Scum — he just went on.

And at last, he crawled and clawed his way to the top. To his utter amazement, he saw that the mountain was not solid, but was filled with a boiling lake of fire. It raged like a huge storm, spewed over the top, and sent red hot lava scalding down the sides. Willie shook his head in wonder. Never had he seen such anger.

What could stop it? The mountain shook and thundered. Willie knew that soon the sides of the mountain would blast away and all this fire would boil down on his people and on their homes and all the way to the sea. Their beautiful island would become a charred and smoking rubble. Unless . . . unless . . .

Suddenly, Willie had the answer. With lightening speed he whooped and crashed his way back down, and when he emerged from the smoke he was no longer green, but covered black and bleeding. And when the men saw him a great hush fell, and they pointed and waited for his answer. “Water!” Willie cried.

“Water!” the men shouted back. Water from the rivers, the lakes, and the ponds. Water to cool, water to wash away, water to heal and to save. They sent a huge crashing wave of water straight into the ring of fire. From every bucket and fish tank and fire hydrant, and ice cube, water was drained. And when that wasn’t enough, they pumped water from the ocean. Shoulder to shoulder they carried hoses on their backs to the brim of the mountain and sent a great avalanche of water day and night into the lake of fire, until, at last, it turned into a solid, smoking, stone.

And all the men stood silent together with ashen faces and saw that
they had saved their island. A mighty cheer arose from their throats and they hugged each other and cried great tears of relief and thankfulness.

And after awhile, the mountain shriveled inward and died. Although they heard strange rumors that the mountain popped out somewhere else on the other side of the ocean, they did not worry, for now their island was safe. Green grass grew on the mound that was left and the golf course was lovingly restored all around it.

Willie Peas swings his golf club there on a regular basis. Sometimes, he shades his eyes with his hand and smiles as his ball soars through the air and plops itself into the lake where he used to swim.
A new season of northern winds
kiss the innocence of virgin moss hanging
unsuspectingly in the shadows of a gangly old tree.

Branches reach skyward
pointing to the heavens, preserving
life for unsuspecting souls on earth.

Rooted into a firm foundation
standing against the odds of nature
shielded with an armor exterior
which forges itself year after year.

wearing a look of contentment, poised
with the presence of time and giving way
to faint gestures of hello and goodbye.
How The Faeries Got Their Wings

Michael St. Germaine

Many years ago the faeries were not small with wings like a butterfly. No, when first the faeries went upon this earth, they were as tall as a child, and wingless. They had great beauty, and each year, when Ariel the Queen of the faeries awoke from her winter slumber, she would send them forth to bring the world from its cold sleep. The faeries would scurry about whispering to all the plants and the seeds in the ground that it was time to kiss the sky; spring was here. Awakened, the plants would grow, flowers would bloom, and the earth would bring forth its bounty that all might eat from it.

Among the faeries was one named Finndabar. Not as swift a runner as the other faeries, she still ran as hard as she could to help awaken the world. Finndabar was a very clever and artistic faerie, though. When the world had been awakened, Finndabar and the other faeries would spend the rest of the summer playing in the woods and fields. Now Finndabar’s hobby was painting delicate designs on the wings of the butterflies. They would flock to her, each begging for a new and more colorful design. Finndabar would do her best to grant each request and spent many a long day decorating the wings of the butterflies.

Now at this time, there was a cruel god; his name was MacDathos. He ruled the underworld; a cold and dark place, damp and filled with terrible things. MacDathos was jealous of the faeries and of those who walked upon the earth, warm in the summer sun. He set out to destroy the faeries and all the good they did. That year after the festival we call Samhain, when all the earth prepared to sleep, MacDathos went to see Queen Ariel of the faeries. “Ariel, I bring you greetings and a sweet wine made of the first berries of the year,” said MacDathos. Ariel greeted him; she did not care for the dark lord of the underworld but had no reason to fear him.

MacDathos shared the wine with Ariel. He had placed a powerful potion in the wine, which would cause Ariel to sleep well past spring. If the faerie queen overslept Spring, then even waking the earth late would not save it. He knew that as swift as they were the faeries could not possibly awaken all the earth in time. MacDathos knew the plants and crops must
have time enough to grow before winter reappeared or the earth would die. The faeries would be destroyed and all the earth would be as his underworld.

MacDathos drank the same wine as Ariel. He did not care if he slept, for when he awoke the world would be his. Ariel soon fell into a deep slumber, and with her, all the faeries. The earth slept peacefully that long winter, but at the time when Ariel should have awakened, she did not.

When finally she did, she knew something was horribly wrong. It was late in the season, the plants had not been awakened. The other faeries were panicked. They shouted to Ariel, “We cannot awaken all the earth in time, not all the plants will bear fruit, what can we do?” Ariel thought for a moment, but was unable to see a solution. “We must awaken as many as possible, at least part of the earth will survive,” she ordered.

Just then Finndabar had an idea, “What if we had wings and could fly, we could go quicker from place to place and awaken all,” she said. “A truly marvelous idea,” replied Ariel. She set about digging for her book of spells—all faeries are very good at spells you see—and Ariel had a large, dusty old book just full of them. She turned page after page until she found the one she needed. Now, you may not know this, but even the greatest wizard cannot create something from nothing. Ariel cast her spell and the faeries all began to grow wings, but as the wings grew larger the faeries grew smaller. Now, the spell completed, Ariel sent the faeries on their way.

They flew quickly from plant, to hidden seed, to tree, and awakened each and every thing on earth in time to ensure the survival of all.

About this time MacDathos also awoke, and instead of finding the earth lamenting the missing of spring, was angered to see the plants growing and flowers blooming. He saw the faeries flitting about awakening all and knew he had been beaten. He went to the Grove of Ariel but she was gone helping the others. Upon the ground by the Faerie Queen’s throne, he saw the spell book still open. He read the spell and knew how he had been beaten.

MacDathos thought “I may be beaten but I will win one battle yet.”

MacDathos took Queen Ariels spell book and hid it in the underworlds dark depths knowing no faerie may travel there. After they had finished awakening the earth, all the faeries gathered in the Grove of Ariel to be returned to normal. Queen Ariel looked for her spell book, but it was gone. She and the other faeries looked all over for it but could not find it. The faeries were saddened and then angry, shouting, “Finndabar this is your fault, look at what your stupid idea has brought us to. We will never be the same.”

Now Finndabar had another idea, she went to where she kept the paints she used to decorate the butterflies and began to paint the wings of
the closest faerie. When the others saw how wonderful the wings looked, they began to smile and laugh, each wanting to have their wings painted next. It took some time, but Finndabar painted every one of those faeries wings. Soon after that the faeries stopped wishing to be changed back to the way they were, and faeries have had wings ever since.
Whisper On the Wind

Tim “RASTA” Scott

Last night
I dreamt of a strange land
With black sunsets
Our eyes met
While standing
On white sandy shores
You
Whispered my name on the wind
A lovely melody
I could not quite comprehend
Mesmerized
Time stood still
You
Whispered my name on the wind
“We’re meeting him at the Laundromat?” Roger said incredulously, making a face as he spoke into the phone.

“Well, he said to pick someplace near Bill’s house where we could meet. He’ll go over with us how this thing works, then we’ll walk down the street and do it,” Alison explained, trailing off. “Who cares where we meet anyway? This whole thing is bad enough . . .” she added.

“OK, OK . . . what time?”

“6:00 and don’t be late. You’re always late.”

“You’re late!!!” accused Alison, over the hum of washers and dryers as Roger came through the glass door, edging past another 20-something with a duffle bag of clean laundry. Alison stood at the washing machine nearest the door, stuffing quarters into its slot. Roger carried a white paper bag.

“Only ten minutes. I figured we’d needed nourishment if we’re gonna get through this.” He held aloft the bag from Manhattan Bagel. “What are you doing??”

“I can’t just sit here.”

Alison pushed in the flat lever holding the last quarter and the washer sprang to life.

“So, where’s Dr. So-and-so?” Roger sat down on an orange, molded-plastic chair nearby.

“He won’t be here until 6:30. I knew you’d be late, so I told you 6:00.”

Roger shrugged and pointed to the seat next to him.

“That gives us 20 minutes to stew on what we’re about to do to your brother and my best friend. We might as well eat.” He pulled a cinnamon bagel out of the bag and offered it to Alison.

“Is that cinnamon?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that the only kind you got?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t believe you only bought cinnamon bagels! You know I don’t like cinnamon!!”
“I do?? OK . . . I do, but I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. How can you not like cinnamon? Who doesn’t like cinnamon?? Are you sure you don’t like cinnamon, because if you really don’t like cinnamon, then you are probably the only homosapien who has ever lived that doesn’t like cinnamon!!! And plus, I can’t believe you told this guy we’d meet him at a Laundromat. And . . . you’re actually doing laundry!!”

“Fuck you, Roger.”
“Fuck you, Alison.”

They glared at each other. Roger began spreading pink cream cheese on a bagel half. Alison walked over to the washing machine with her laundry and lifted the lid. Her dirty clothes were being mushed back and forth in clean-smelling, soapy water. She stared into the swirl and pretended for a moment that she world fit perfectly in that washing machine.

She went back and sat down next to Roger. They sat in silence. Roger worked on a bite of bagel like a cow chewing a cud. Alison stared morosely through the Laundromat’s plate glass windows at the people passing by outside. Roger swallowed and broke the silence.

“So, where’d you find this guy?”
“My shrink recommended him. He apparently specializes in this kind of thing.”
“What’s his name?” Roger looked at her.
“Dr. Bruzkee.”

Roger stared at Alison.
“What??” she said.

“Are you telling me that we’re about to cart off your brother, the one with the serious drinking problem, against his will to a Betty Ford Center with the aid of a Dr. Brewski???”

Alison looked blank. Then her eyes widened, her expression slowly changing to surprise as Roger’s realization dawned on her.

“Oh, my god,” she said quietly. Then, she said it again louder, “Oh my god!!”

Despite herself, a smile stole across her face as she and Roger gawked at each other. They started to laugh—quietly and under their breath at first. Eventually, they were two hysterical hyenas shaking and falling out of the orange chairs. Neither one could breathe.

Red faced and breathless, they looked at each other again and were quiet.

“Are we doing the right thing?” Alison turned to him.
“Yeah,” Roger said slowly, looking off.

If anyone in the Laundromat at that moment had cared to notice, they would have seen a leggy, young man and a young woman with a dark
ponytail, sitting next to each other in a row of hard orange chairs, clinging to each other in a long embrace.

An hour later, Bill opened his door. There stood Roger and Alison with serious, stricken expressions. Roger held onto a crumpled bag with both hands and Alison balanced a basketful of wet laundry on one hip, her other arm hanging limply by her side, while a pleasant-looking man in a suit stood between them.
Visions fleeting by,
Visions of my past
Some pausing long enough,
To bring me to a
Stop

Memories flashing by,
Memories of a troubled past
Some pausing long enough
To bring me to a
Stop

Alters switching in and out,
Some are young,
Some are old
Some pausing long enough
To bring me to a
Stop

Feelings come,
Feelings go.
Some are good,
Some are bad
Some pausing long enough
To bring me to a
Stop

Desperation hangs nearby,
Holding me by a thread
Sometimes pausing long enough
To bring me to a
Stop

STOP
Sunday Morning Solitude

Steven E. Turner

Entering the empty building, I feel the hallowed halls surround me, the quiet-chairs undisturbed, and the motionless images watching me, as I set up for the day. I walk softly to the sound board and begin to play worship music, which whispers into the sanctuary with soothing melodies. The music is never too loud, just enough so that I can feel the presence of the music with me, as I begin to setup for the congregation. There is no one with me in the morning: it is as peaceful as a lake which has no ripples.

When I am alone in the sanctuary—our center for worship—a strange closeness during this time develops between God and me. His unseen spirit begins to fill the room like as to a storm cloud that starts to cover the warm summer sky. There are no interruptions as I move from room to room cutting lights on, checking temperatures, and cleaning off tables for Sunday school. By now some of our prayer team begins to arrive. I greet them and with a smile ask, “Would you like some coffee?” They always refuse, but I still ask anyway.

While I walk to the front of the church, I see the Pastor as he normally does come in the back door. He gives me a wave as to say, “Hello and thanks for all you do.” Knowing he is here my time of peace and true fellowship with God and His Spirit has come to an end for the day. By now a few members will start to arrive and fill the church with chatter. I begin to make my way to the sound board to dim the music to zero and cut the lights on in the main sanctuary.

I will sit in the back and listen to them go on about their weeks and the latest church gossip. It pains me to know that most are there not to celebrate our Savior, but to let their friends and neighbors see them there. By now, I have lost that feeling of closeness for the day. As more and more people come in, the chairs are moved every which way, the halls are filled with children laughing and those pictures on the walls just don’t know who to look at.

Isn’t it funny how we can be so close while we are alone with someone, but once you have many people trying to get close at the same time it just doesn’t work? How when all the peace in the world is with you, yet in an instance it disappears?
You lie down after putting on another disc. You light up another cigarette. Soon, it’s all smoke and noise to accompany closed eyes and clenched fists in your small bedroom. It’s these long nights alone with nothing but music and thoughts to keep you company that make a young man grow bitter. There have been too many, lately.

Your thoughts drift forward to when you just might be the life of the party on some random Saturday night get together, to when you finally build up the courage to ask out that one pretty girl from school who doesn’t know you exist, to living up to your potential, to the day you let go of your fears. You open your eyes and settle into the knowledge that you’re still the same, but something temporarily takes you from that reality. You see a fine string wafting across your field of vision. The way the light catches it, it glistens with the colors of the spectrum, like a prism. You reach out to touch it in the way a curious child might attempt to touch a rainbow, but this rainbow is within your grasp.

You brush it with your finger. You can’t really feel it, but you know it exists. You follow it with your eyes from there to its end, where you see a large, brown spider resting on the ceiling. You begin to slowly wrap the web around your hand. The spider in the distance reacts to this intrusion. It responds to the every movement of its web, and the dance begins. You eventually stand up after growing bored of children’s games, and decide to show your imagined superiority by crushing your little friend with the nearest flat object capable of ending its life with an audible whack. The two of you could have easily co-existed peacefully. This insect is less harm to you than you are to yourself tonight. It’s too smart, though, and escapes.

You search. Moments later, you realize that it’s still very much nearby, as it begins walking up towards you up the web that is still clinging to you from earlier frolic. Suddenly, the tables have turned, and you are the hunted. You begin to thrash about as the music pulses the soundtrack to the horror film you watched earlier. Anything to get it away. What if it’s venomous? What if it crawls into your ear and lays eggs in your brain? It again eludes your attempts to kill him as you swing wildly, and you’ve lost sight of
it once more. You shed and change your clothing for fear that it has attached itself to them. You leave the room and sleep on the couch for fear of it’s almost inevitable return.

Fear is how the spider has won tonight. Not with venom, but with fear. It could still be there, waiting, hungry to avenge the betrayal. Tonight, you are conquered by, and at the mercy of a harmless insect. In reality, though, the spider is only harmless in the physical sense. Your place of rest is now its domain. Before the battle began, you sat trying to determine the worth of your role in this life, and Mr. Arachnid arrived to show you how insignificant it actually is, and that was its revenge.
if only this stellar lite-brite canopy
would wish upon me
mine always seem to fall short of stellar welcomings
tumbling back to earth
in simple tattered halos of cinders
not unlike the rings in this 7 p.m. diner ashtray
sterile cushioned benches proclaim the vacancy
of friends who have proven where their loyalties are tied
lurid tabletops—lacquer indented with the requiems
of want-to-be poets
all sharing the same narcolepsy
drown inertia
and dispatch the independence of last goodbyes
leave through sighing double doors
with fleeting disregard to the soberness of strangers
refuel for the drive ahead to put it all behind you
watch the first hints of a downpour
skip across the trunk and slide beneath the tires
leaving gasoline pancakes like breadcrumbs of my escape
following the hum of this roadside’s best interstate disclosure
streetlights come on too early
this is dusk in autumn
sense red …
with bells to warn that the bridge is open
crossing seems the longest breath from where you want to be
break lights disappear like dominoes tilting to horizon
sky is lavender beneath this transient sunset
such is the way to the stars
He appeared a hard old man with only two fingers on his right hand. His skin was wrinkled and dry, like a parched grape, as a result of the fire. Though aged, his rugged and scared body was as strong as the John Deere tractor he drove on the farm. He could out-dig, out-build, out-work, and out-last any man half his age; known to many as H.B.

As a boy, I remember staring out the window with an ever-increasing excitedness while anticipating his arrival. I would try to imagine the inconceivable number of, what I considered to be, uncharted miles he would have to travel from Michigan to Texas. Once all the bags were inside and put away, I would beg him to tell me one of his famous stories that was never quite the same.

I would awake the next morning only to find H.B. scavenging around the house eagerly hunting for some kind of project to undertake. “Being lazy will get you nowhere fast,” he would explain. Discovering a stack of salt treated 2x4’s placed him only a days work away from a beautiful deck. I would watch, winded and amazed, as he tirelessly constructed the vision in his never resting head. We would labor all day until the deck was complete. H.B. never failed to finish a job.

On Sunday mornings, we went as a family to church. As soon as we could get situated in the painful hardwood pews, H.B. would dig into his coat pocket for the ever-present bag of chalky, round peppermints that tasted of pepto-bismal. “Pay attention,” he whispered as he settled in with crossed legs and an attentive ear. Every once in a while, he would hand me another peppermint and point at the preacher as if to say, pay attention, again.

Many times we would gather around the table for our usual game of canasta. In canasta, H.B. was king. He always had me keep score, “It is important to stay fresh in your math,” he’d say. Lighting a “thinker” (what he called a cigar) and leaning back in his chair as if he had already won, he watched with intent patience as everyone took his turn. As I watched him, I wondered how it felt to own such a clear understanding of life. H.B. was always one hand ahead.
From day to day, I continued to observe H.B. as he encountered new activities. With every glance, I uncovered a new valuable nugget of rare life, experience, and wisdom. The way he worked, the way he played, the way he lived was an example of success for me to apply.

As time passed on, H.B. slowed down. His projects got smaller, his visits became fewer. The last time, as I said good-bye, the bearhug of an embrace wasn’t quite as powerful as I had previously remembered. With a lump in my throat and an unending emptiness in my stomach, I knew this might be the last.

Now, as I undertake projects of my own whether it be building shelves in my garage or cutting down a tree – I grab hold of the many nuggets of wisdom from my beautiful memories. As I remember the stories and games of canasta, I understand the love portrayed, and the example shown by my grandpa, H.B.
The airborne unit makes a final plea
Before pounding into the landscape
Sometimes trees break their falls
They scream loudest when striking homes.
The journey
From the clouds
To the layers of life below
Is one enormous sky dive
Lasting only a matter of instants.
On the rooftops
Frozen for a bit
Suddenly a new life
Allows them to creep to the ledge
Continuing this life-spanning voyage.
Jumping into the duct
These brothers of the heavens
Cling with intensity
Their destiny has ultimately arrived.
The march into the soil begins
Insigned with suicide
They give life to advance all existence
Yes, this trial is brief
But each little drop
Makes a lasting impression.
As she braided a rug, LoLo would tell us WWII stories about the Philippine jungles. My cousins and I would lie on the floor, our mouths wide open, listening. We listened so closely, the sounds of our relative’s conversations were blurred by LoLo’s voice.

LoLo told us of a time when the train she was traveling on broke down in the middle of the jungle. For one week, the only thing she had was a canteen of water and a chocolate bar. When she was hungry, she would go pick a banana to eat. We asked her if she was scared, and her reply was simply, “No, I knew the military would take care of me.” She said this with a smile. We couldn’t believe someone so small could be so brave.

The smile left her face as she told of the not so pleasant times. The extreme heat brought the stench of death from undiscovered bodies in the jungle. At times the smell was so unbearable, someone throwing up or gagging was not an uncommon sight. I guess being an army nurse, you got used to things like that.

I don’t know how she could watch men die in front of her almost everyday. Once a bomb went off in the jungle wounding several men. All of the doctors and nurses were running around trying to do what they could. A bloody and burnt hand grabbed LoLo’s arm; she looked down to see a young man. His bright blue eyes were fixed on her as he gasped his last breath. “It’s memories like that, that never leave you,” she said as a tear rolled down her aged face.

She shivered as she told us of gunshots so loud they’d make your ears ring. So loud, she said, they’d wake you from a much-needed sleep, and bring you back to a reality of death, pain, and sadness. Sometimes the shots were so close you would have thought the person was right outside the tent, and they very well could have been. An attack on their army camp would have been feasible. Yet, she and the rest of the nurses, doctors, and soldiers went on for themselves and for their country.

So we’d listen to her stories, trying to take it all in. I can’t imagine myself in her place. She is such a courageous and strong person. I think you can really learn a lot about history from those who were there.
Television: The Enemy at Home?

Amy Blondell

One Saturday morning I found Julian, my 8 year old son, rolling around on the living room floor in a humor-induced seizure. Spongebob Squarepants, his new favorite cartoon character, had made some characteristically clever remark that threw Julian into hystericis, and although I had no idea what Spongebob had said, watching my son, I had to laugh, too. This was something straight out of a MasterCard commercial: priceless.

But the memory of that moment is marred by the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) belief that I am aiding in the moral disintegration of my son’s young mind. Me? No way. Not me—the mother who visits the library almost weekly, reminds her children to speak politely to adults and makes sure they eat five (well, at least three) servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

Yes, me, according to the Academy’s Committee on Public Education. The Committee’s abstract, “Children, Adolescents and Television” reports “the average child or adolescent watches an average of nearly 3 hours of television per day” which they claim leads to “violent or aggressive behavior . . . obesity, poor body image, and decreased school performance.” Three hours a day is excessive, especially considering the fact that at least seventeen hours a day are spent sleeping, attending school or engaging in school related activities. But the Committee’s study failed to acknowledge one thing about television: it can be beneficial.

For toddlers whose parents work long hours, television can help them make new friends like Big Bird, Barney and Blue and grasp the meaning of vital concepts like sharing, forgiveness and tolerance. For adolescents whose parents cringe at the thought of discussing certain things, television can warn of the perils of substance abuse and premarital sex. For parents, it buys an extra hour of sleep on Saturday morning, a few unmolested minutes to finish preparing dinner in the evening and precious seconds to run to the bathroom without hearing the knock on the door customarily followed by “Mom, can I . . . ?”

While it is true that there is an abundance of questionable and objec-
tionable content on TV, many of the diverse affects the AAP attributes to it could be caused by different sources: violent or aggressive behavior by witnessing acts of domestic violence, obesity by poor eating habits and parental example and decreased school performance by sleep deprivation or illness. And while adults seem eager to place restrictions on TV viewing for children, few surrender the remote and pick up a book themselves, justifying their position by emphasizing their need to relax after working all day.

Ok. Grown-ups need to relax, but the munchkins do, too. Today’s youth are so over-scheduled, over-extended and over-worked, that instead of giving game cubes this Christmas, parents should buy PDAs to help their kids keep track of all their appointments: baseball practice, soccer tournaments, ballet recitals, music lessons, swimming competitions, gymnastic tryouts, scout meetings, play dates and birthday parties. After a whirlwind week of activity, is it any wonder that all little boys and girls want to do when they get home is plop down on the floor and stare at the tube?

These days, enemies far more dangerous than television menace our communities. At a time when images of high-jacked airplanes crashing into twin towers and threats from mystery snipers haunt our children, it’s even more important to allow them to hold onto the friends television introduced them to: Bert, Ernie and Elmo; Tommy, Chuckie, Phil and Lil; Penny Proud, Kim Possible and Lizzie McGuire. Because soon the imaginary monster under the bed will be replaced by a real villain who not even Batman with all his gadgets or Superman with all his strength can conquer.
Excessive toxins easily alter the earth’s frail and aesthetic environment. From these impurities our oxygen, animal life, and fresh water have been contaminated. The threat and proof of this disruption of the eco-equilibrium has drawn the attention of legislators across the U.S. and the globe to stretch their heavy-handed laws, and preserve its natural form.

‘Sherlock’ biologists count twigs and rummage through nests searching for red ragged clues of habitat disturbances. Sentinel-binocular watcher’s spend years learning mating, nurturing and egg-laying patterns. But what of the offspring of man? Who is watching and defining his habitat needs? If man is the keeper, shouldn’t his needs be distinguished and protected?

Mans’ environmental needs have not been well defined. In March 2000, a Congressional Committee addressed home owners’ needs and described housing as priorities of our nation should include... access to affordable housing that is safe, clean and healthy.” That's it; there is no more elaboration in a one hundred and seventy-five page document on the definition of safe, clean and healthy. The clarification is up to the reader. If left to mother-in-laws, most of us would not pass for safe, clean or healthy.

Quality of air, water and food has specific standards, but land-preferential boundaries do not exist. Boundaries are identified for birds, plants and animals; spring geraniums are planted four inches apart, breath taking osprey birds require three miles of snag treetops and ferocious ebony bears need one side of the mountain to themselves. But mortals cannot decide what they need; big city dwellers and quaint town citizens feud over definition of land wants and needs. One side maintains that too much unused land creates long drawn out commutes to work, the other side claims a country gentleman’s livelihood is directly portioned to the size of his property holdings. There is no need to settle differences between these two parties, but rather ask what of the children who live in cities with little or no authentic experience of wild life. This sort of practical experiment takes the place of volumes of textbook study.

In recent years, juvenile rehabilitation has experienced much success in
behavior modification, by plopping troubled youth in wilderness ‘survival’ camps. The camp coordinators claim these methods allow the juveniles space to reconnect with appropriate behavior through nature. We have severely troubled youth in America, who challenge authority, fracture the law and attempt suicide. On the other hand, many youth experience less noticeably disruptive problems such as bulimia, depression and bodily mutilation. Consequently, parents and community leaders are writhing in psychological trauma as they pursue solutions.

Scientific data from Chronobiology proves that humans need the great outdoors. Chronobiology is the medical study of our body cycles such as sleeping, waking, blood pressure and body temperature and so on. On the radio program “Talk of the Nation,” Professor Michael Smolensky, Co-founder of Hermann Hospital Clinical Chronobiology Center and Clinic, sealed the fate of anti-urban sprawling activists:

Humans inherit biological clocks, the most important one being in our brain, the hypothalamus. We’ve inherited a twenty-four hour clock from our ancestors and the environment. Our environment changes each and every day in a predictable way... (this) environment that life (has) to get it’s self together .... These are the reflections of time, energy, genomics and our physiology.

A setting sun, gravitating moon and rushing wind, fixes our bodies rhythms. We are in sync with birds chirping, groundhogs digging, and hummingbirds flying. When we are out of sync, we haven’t been outside enough. Any mother will tell you her solution to a rambunctious child is to “Go outside and play!” Where are these children going? To .35 % of an acre lots. That is the size homes are built on in legislated affordable houses which gradually become ghettos, because the word affordable translates to home builders cutting comers, cramming brick and mortar as close as possible, and chopping all timber down for easy construction access.

I am a city girl, homeowner and land developer who has gone country; therefore, without guile, I propose that every three miles of residential housing have ten luscious acres of uncut timbered lands – “Heritage Park,” cared for by a retired forester, providing children a place to build tree forts, fashion sticks to duel with soaring pine trees, and pitch smooth stones. After school they may chase bluebirds, capture ladybugs and ponder the meaning of the glorious, vast, and beautiful land they, the future keepers, will inherit.
I used to marvel at the prairie grasses—the incessant wind ceaselessly brushing through it as though the whole of South Dakota was a head full of green-yellow shining hair. The bent grass looked so soft and gorgeous. I wanted to touch it, stroke it gently with the flat of my hand. Even though, at nine years old, I knew that if our wooden-sided station wagon stopped by the side of the road and I went out to stand in it, the grass would be scratchy and rough and all around me like a forest of straws. Not at all like the soft, flowing illusion stretched out in all directions that I saw from inside the car as we whizzed by.

We were driving cross-country to our new home in Alabama. This particular cross-country trip was probably the fourth in my life so far. As a military kid, I was a seasoned traveler and knew that a very long, boring trip lay ahead. We were leaving Washington State, driving all the way across to Connecticut for a visit with relatives, and eventually making our way down to the most deeply southern state we had lived in so far.

The routine was down pat. Each morning, when it was early and dark, my parents would pack us into the car, pjs & all. After a few hours, my sister, my brother and I would clumsily pull on shorts and t-shirts in the low-ceilinged back of the station wagon and we would stop for breakfast. We’d go for another few hours; stop for lunch; drive on until two or three in the afternoon, when we would stop at a Holiday Inn or a Sleepy Bear Lodge to splash away the rest of the afternoon in the hotel pool. The cycle was repeated each day. So it was, that we methodically moved our family across the North American continent and then down to the Gulf Coast.

Mom drove the station wagon full of kids and the dog, and dad drove his pick-up truck behind us. It was a 1961 Apache Chevrolet pick-up and was the color of the green crayon in a basic box of 8 Crayolas. His truck was his little sanctuary that he jealously guarded. If we were very good and promised to help with the map, we were allowed to ride one at a time in the truck with him. There was a special spot for everything he needed in the truck: his coffee cup, the map, and his spare sunglasses. They were real
aviator sunglasses. The gold metal kind, roundly squared with clear earpieces that lay flat along each side of his head. Inside the Apache it was always sparse and orderly.

For most of the trip, when we weren't navigating in the cockpit of the pick-up truck, we were in the “woodie” with mom, the Coleman cooler, and the dog. Seatbelts didn't matter so much then. Our sleeping bags were spread out in the back and we could climb over the seats to lie down there if we wanted. At the beginning of the day, on the floor of the front seat beside mom, was a thermos full of juice or kool-aid, a stack of cups, homemade sandwiches, apples, oranges, Twinkies, Ding-Dongs and a box of Nilla Vanilla Wafers. Neatly stored on the middle seat were games—some made for traveling like the beard-making-game with the man's face and the magnetic bits that you could move all around to make crazy facial hair; some games not so wisely brought along with many pieces (who's idea was it to pack dominos?); Hotwheels, books, comic books, and Mexican jumping beans purchased at the Esso station a hundred miles back—anything to keep us occupied. Also, somewhere in the car, was Casey's water bowl, a box of dog biscuits, and his leash.

After an hour, everything was everywhere. We fought and slept and stuck our heads out of the window with the dog. We poked each other, drew pictures and played license plate games. We bounced between the seats getting drinks, switching places, and playing “Authors” in the back. When we stopped at a rest stop, or stopped to admire a spectacular view, dad would peer in the window of the woodie to check on things. Mom's 60's coifed hairdo remained impeccable. Her tortoiseshell, dark shades seemed to keep her demeanor cool and unruffled. After viewing the sticky chaos in the back of the car, he would look at her with great respect and walk away muttering . . . “Yeccccch!”

Through the cowboy state of Wyoming, I watched out for cowboys and, hopefully, Indians. The sage brush strewn countryside and red rock plateaus would be a perfect backdrop to a mysterious native, gazing to the horizon on his tall palomino with waving mane and tail. He would be sitting very straight, holding a long, brightly feathered spear and looking tragically at us as we flew by in the station wagon. I pretended for long stretches that I was a nine year-old Indian girl riding the hot wind on a paint pony, my red-ribboned pigtails traded for leather-thonged Indian braids.

Somewhere in Ohio, the highway ran parallel alongside a river with train tracks running parallel along the other side. Across the river bed, I could see a train station platform, with four pewter-colored grain elevators looking down over it all. Stopped at the platform, over the flat, slow-
moving green water of the Ohio River, was the lion and tiger-painted Barnum & Bailey circus train! We could even see the striped tigers slowly padding around in their car. Muscled stripes rippled in the heat, undulating like a mirage behind the solid iron bars. Just as we stopped to get a longer look, the circus train shrieked a loud warning blast and slowly chugged off. We waved to the tigers wishing them well on the rest of their journey.

When it was time to eat, we rarely stopped right off the highway where it was most convenient to gas up the cars and grab a bite. Almost always instead, we would take the exit and drive into whatever small town was there. Mom and Dad would find the local café that was usually the town’s gathering spot. Often the café was also a bar. We would walk in, mom, dad, plus three towheads, oblivious to the stares of the locals who had never set eyes on us before. It was something we did and I never thought about it until recently.

On a similar occasion, in fact on a whole other trip, we were headed for Prairie City, Oregon for Christmas at my grandparents. It was the morning of Christmas Eve. We stopped for breakfast at a restaurant in a tiny, dusty, western Oregon town. The café was dark and wood-paneled, enveloping us in that early morning, comforting breakfast smell of fried eggs, bacon, and strong, black brewing coffee. We were seated, the only whole family there. Surrounding us, was the hum of café voices, clinking glass, and waitresses hollering food orders through the opening in the wall to the cook. A man about my parents’ age approached our table. I didn’t notice much about the man, but I do remember my parents’ reaction. They stiffened slightly. He seemed extremely friendly to me. His hand was on the top of my head, patting my hair as he told us all about his night spent here in the bar. He pointed and we all looked over to the ancient, wooden bar with many sets of antlers proudly hung on the wall above it. His three friends with sloppy, dog-like expressions waved at us. The friendly man was now patting Lisa’s head telling us that he had three children just like us at home. “And maybe,” he supposed, “he ought to be getting home.” That sounded good to all of us as we agreed with him. Our pancakes came and he went back to his pals at the bar. We never talked much about that man, but I got one of my first, best lessons about parenting that morning in a little Oregon café.

Now, I’m a parent myself with two boys to raise up. We’re about to buy a fancy, new car with a drop-down from the ceiling “theatre system” to keep them occupied in the back seat on long trips. Dan and the boys can’t understand my lukewarm response to the car TV, as compared to their ecstatic, practically manic, excitement over it. They want to play it and put
it on “surround sound” even on trips to the grocery store.

I can only think of that soft, soft grass in South Dakota; the misty-topped craggy mountains in West Virginia; the ancient, mossy stone walls lining almost every road in Connecticut; and long-legged road runners running alongside us on dusty highways in Texas that my headphone-clad, slack-mouthed, blank-eyed children will miss from the back seat of our new, luxurious, technologically-advanced, spotless vehicle.

I’ve come to the conclusion that when I drive the new space vehicle, it will be different. If it means a car full of cracker crumbs, spilled kool-aid, and sticky-mouthed, bickering kids—so be it. When I’m driving, we’re not watching movies. Everyone will just have to look out the windows or maybe even interact with each other. Or they can let their imaginations run free. Furthermore, when I’m driving, we’re not stopping at Burger King. We’re going off the highway into some small town, to some small never-before-seen, and never-before-seen-us, café.
The sound of the wave crash is so powerful. To my senses it is so relaxing and provoking. It ignites my head and heart to converse. It brings about the “me” time. People talk of spending more time with family, and with your friends and loved ones, but I gotta love me first. It takes longer than one Sunday at church, or one bottle of prozac, or a thousand dollar session with a head doctor to get right with yourself. My therapy is free. It’s the sea. It’s the fine sand beneath my feet, the open shore breeze and salty spray. The shore is never silent, the sound is constant, the waves never stop. Back home in the islands, the beaches are blue and green and surrounded by rocks and plant life. Here, there are more people and steel structures dancing around than there are grains of sand. But the music is still the same. The instrument is a vast, wide and deep one, covering more than half the earth, and its voice echoes the same throughout. It sings the same song to everyone, and it is my favorite song of all.
“Who wants to go tobogganing?” inquired Francis. Ideal afternoon for tobogganing it was, too! A dazzling sun shimmered on the virgin snow protecting earth like a velvet blanket. Bough and branch shadows danced with the wind atop the white stage of nature.

“Count me in” Jerry announced, the radio’s vacuum tubes casting a golden glow on his face as he tuned the dial to 760, WJR. Soon Leo, Mary, and I joined the older two, struggling into winter paraphernalia. Scratchy woolen inner and outer garments were the order of the day—followed by high rubber boots with occasionally working metal fasteners. (More often, the clasps were rusted and impossible to latch). A layer of scarves winding around neck, mouth, and nose with a large knot at the nape completed our ensemble. We resembled colorful mummies, but elegance was not an option. Likewise, relieving the eternal wool prickle was not an option. A barrier of wool between them, scratcher and itch never had the pleasure of meeting.

The toboggan’s waxed slats gleamed, gliding atop the sun-glazed snow. Alongside the house, we paused to snap off icicles growing like stalactites from the roof. Clutched in wooly mitts, we saved them for thirst quenchers. Moving on, the toboggan was portaged across narrow Huron River Drive, recognizable by two slushy tracks along its length. We leapt over the ditch, resisting a powerful urge to be swallowed up in drifts. Our target was the extensive hill leading to the Bayou. (How it came to be called the Bayou was anyone’s guess ... it was a Huron River tributary and not at all swamp-like.) Reaching it required a half-mile walk across snow covered cornstalk stubble and frozen furrows. Because of the steady stream of talk and horseplay between the five of us, time passed quickly. Soon joining us were our neighbors, Mick and Gus Yost.

A barbed wire fence, erected to contain grazing summer cattle, blocked passage to the hill. We swiftly defeated it, raising wire and slithering under – shades of Peter Rabbit. Unlike the hapless hare, we retained our coats. This time, Jerry announced his intention to try something different.
Superciliously, he swung his left leg over the barbs. Straddling, he emitted an odd high-pitched yelp before completing the maneuver. (He never tried that again and steadfastly refused further comment.)

Our continual goal was to reach the opposite shore by toboggan. We had to gather enough downhill speed to coast the flats and water—not an easy task with hopscotching trees and thorny shrubs forbidding a straight shot. Francis, Jerry and the Yost boys proceeded to map strategy, as usual. We toadies took our assigned seats and enjoyed a bit of iced refreshment. Jerry methodically studied every angle, applying all known theories of physics, plane geometry and whatever else might contribute to a perfect run. Possessed of a more decisive nature, Francis brought the planning commission to a close: “For crying out loud, Einstein, let’s go before spring thaw!” Holding fast to the boots of the person behind us, we hooted and shoved off, collectively rocking forward.

“Lean Right!” Mary pulled me right and a sheet of snow flew in my face. We cleared the hickory on the left only to find ourselves speeding toward another on the right.

“Lean Left!” Snow flashed and low branches cracked overhead as we sailed past at a ninety-degree angle.

“Oh-Oh! Watch out! Jump!” The bramble bush ahead was approaching rapidly. Rescued by my scarf, I landed face down in a drift. Fortunately, the toboggan was unscathed, tangled in the brush. Wiping ice from our eyes and shaking caps and mittens, we regrouped to start up the hill. Leo was missing. He was sitting near the shrub, blood dripping from his chin.

“What happened?” Francis inquired, helping Leo out of the snarled bush.

“I hit that rock over there, I guess.”

Francis investigated and returned, barely able to stifle an erupting chortle. “Hell, that’s not a rock — it’s a frozen cowpie!” Leo, good sport as always, joined in the laughter. Inspecting the kid’s chin, Francis advised with an air of authority, “Well, just lie down awhile and keep putting snow on it. We’ll take a few more runs and by then the bleeding will stop.”

The sun faded to full moon, revealing solid gray all around. “One more try and we’ll head back!” Frozen scarves and hats nodded and we assembled on board one more time. Leo had rejoined by then, continuing to coagulate with repeated snow packs.

Floppy, our mongrel pooch had found us and also climbed on, his fur clinking with tiny icicles. Like a bobsled team, we soared down the icy track, over the flats and skidded sideways across the solid water! Triumphantly, we cheered on the alien shore like Amundsen’s crew at the Pole.
Years later, my brother, sister and I walked along Huron River Drive on another snowy January afternoon. Now a respectable thoroughfare, flashy cars and SUVs whiz by returning from Ford/GM in Southfield, Dearborn and Detroit. County trucks spew salt to meet flurries scattered by the north wind. “Is the hill still there?” I asked, recognizing the familiar scent of wool from the old scarf around my face. The question initiated a flood of memories resurrected in animated detail as we walked. A cornfield no longer lies across the road. It is replaced by a golf course, little league diamonds, barbecue grills and picnic tables. The metropark in its place is named for Andrew J. Roberts, the lively son of our neighbor, shot down over Vietnam. They say that Andy’s embittered father rarely left their house in the years between Andy’s death and his own. Andy’s mom said that naming the park for their son brought some comfort, at least to her. She now lives up north with her oldest son and his family. Her oldest son and I used to play “shoe-heel” hockey on the frozen Bayou many winters ago.

Many changes have come to the little town of New Boston, its area now collectively referred to as Huron Township. The Yost family is no longer there, the nine children living in California, Ohio, upper Michigan and other areas. Other old neighbors are gone, although some of the children now live in the updated, remodeled homes of their parents. Small family truck farms are subdivided into three and five-acre plots holding huge homes, the size of castles. Across from Michigan Memorial Park (where my parents lie side by side) is the high school I attended. It now houses an elementary school, part of the Huron School District Complex filling the site. (I wonder where the huge composite of each graduating class that hung in the hallway rests now . . . in the new high school? In the elementary school? In a dusty storeroom?) There is no industry or farming here — Huron Township is a bedroom community serving Metropolitan Detroit and Toledo.

The church of my youth is still there. It has flourished, adding several classrooms, a gymnasium, even a paved parking lot. The convent and rectory remain essentially the same size. Inside, the Church has changed little . . . the stained glass windows In Memory of Frank and Bertha Schultz continue to block the sunlight. The pews seem narrow and the kneelers slant toward the floor. Now, one must hang on to the pew in front to keep from sliding off.

Content with the present, we joined a snowball fight with beckoning neighbor children, gleefully forming winter memories of their own.
The Ladykiller

Rosalyn Barretto

Every time I walk into a room, the panties drop, the thickened saliva hangs from the corner of each mouth. They drool for me. I may not be God’s gift, but I’m the best yet. I dance into them all, grabbing their hips. A little thrust here, a little grind there, making them feel wanted. Then I swoop in for the kill, selecting my prey for tonight. Getting back to my place, my love den, champagne awaits and a lux bubble bath for her. Her eyes dance for me, so excited for what’s coming next. I lean in and kiss her. Then before you know it, She’s drying on my sheets. Smelling the burning incense. I caress her and push myself inside her. They fall for it every time. I’m a ladykiller. Every time I walk into a room, the panties drop unprotected.
Old Butler Days: The Town That Wouldn’t Drown

Gary Blevins

Having a long weekend, my wife and I decided to visit my father, who lives outside Mountain City, Tennessee, on an anonymous Appalachian mountain. Introducing my wife to the people and culture of a rural North-east Tennessee community, our first stop was Mountain City visitor’s center. We noticed a flyer advertising “Old Butler Days: The Town That Wouldn’t Drown,” and a museum.

Butler is located about 15 miles from Mountain City, so we decided to attend the Festival and visit the museum. Entering the museum, an elderly woman with gray hair, glasses and a somber expression collected the three-dollar admission fee. The lobby of the museum has shelves and racks of souvenir caps, flags and shirts. A sign is located near the shirts … In Memory of Charles Dugger. I ask the elderly lady, “Ma’m, who is Charles Dugger?” She replies in a grief-stricken voice, “He was my husband. Just passed.” Tears formed behind her glasses. I respond, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Remorseful about causing her pain, I purchase the shirt and saying “Thank you, ma’m.” We enter the main part of the museum. In the collection of artifacts and pictures in the museum, the history is reveal about the Town of Butler. By 1939, Butler, located adjacent to the Watauga River—an ancient Cherokee Indian word meaning beautiful water, composed of 600 residents, an incorporated town, a thriving community of family owned businesses, with electricity, sidewalks, sewer system, and telephones. The train ran twice a day from Bristol, Tennessee bringing mail, newspapers and new settlers. Having a private school, Mountain Mission School, the students performed summer stock plays during the summer.

The beginning of the end of Butler, the Watauga River starting as a small spring in the upper elevation of the Appalachian mountains — fueled by 15 inches of rain, fed by its overflowing tributaries, gaining speed and momentum, becoming a raging torrent — destroyed homes, businesses, washing-out railroads and roads. The town experienced floods in the past, always rebuilding, but this time there would be no rebuilding.

President Roosevelt signed a bill creating the Tennessee Valley Author-
ity (TVA) mandating the construction of a series of dams to control the flood damage caused by the rivers of Northeast Tennessee. The TVA informed the residents of Butler: a dam was going to be constructed. Main Street would be 100 feet under water, and 761 families had to relocate. Eminent Domain, the right of the government to seize property from a private owner for public use, was the controlling factor. The government paid for the property but offer little in compensation. Required to pay the moving cost and buy the land from Bowers Brother Land Company, 50 families moved their homes to a 200-acre tract of undeveloped farmland.

I called Mrs. Dugger, a life long resident of Butler, asking her to explain the differences in the quality of life between Old Butler and New Butler.

“Life at New Butler was hard,” she explained. “We had no electricity, water, sewer system, telephones, roads, or sidewalks and the ground was red clay. I had to carry two pairs of shoes to church, one for walking, because that red clay would ruin your shoes, I’d change into my good pair at church.” Continuing the conversation, she explained “Butler was the only incorporated town the TVA had ever closed.”

“Did the town folk try to stop the dam?”

“Well, it was the TVA, the government and it was after the war. If we had stuck to our guns, maybe.” She remembered the first phones were pay phones at the store and when phones were installed in the homes, they were pay phones. Rainwater captured in barrels was used for washing clothes. Obtaining drinking water required a 3-mile trip to a mountain spring. She mentioned a man from Knoxville, Sam Yates, brought a book to inform the TVA officials about fifteen Cherokee Indians burial sites and requested that their remains be moved — his request was denied.

In 1983, the lake drained to its lowest point. The Town of Butler resurfaced. Over 1000 people returned, walking in mud up to their knees to visit their homes, school, and churches. The Baptist Church corner stones were reclaimed. The lake refilled and once again, their town disappeared under 100 feet of beautiful forest-green water. During the dam’s construction, aerial footage of the town and surrounding areas was taken from helicopter and airplane. The footage is being turned into a video, “Old Butler: A Town That Wouldn’t Drown.”
The first time I saw the woman was a Friday night at the bar. Another mindless week of hard labor at the plant — over. I could relax, at least for a couple of days before getting back to the grind and making more off-road vehicles for people who would be so screwed if they put one underinflated tire off the Interstate they’d have to go home for a change of underwear, then rush off to their analyst to find out why they bought the damn thing in the first place.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m really glad the men feel they need some way to express their excessive testosterone production, although I can think of other ways that don’t require anything like so much financial outlay. And the women! All I can say is – don’t piss off a woman driver when she’s behind the wheel of two and a half tons of Detroit metal. Anyway, so long as they still want them, I won’t be out of work, and it does pay well even if the job kills off more gray cells than all the booze I may, or may not consume tonight. Which brings me back to the woman. I was sitting on a bar stool talking to Red, the barkeeper, about one thing and another – probably the pro’s and con’s of cold fusion research and how it could affect the average Joe (or Red for that matter) –like most conversations in bars, neither one of us knew what the hell we were talking about, but I find that just makes for livelier conversation. Anyway, there we are yakking away and in walks this WOMAN.

What I mean is – everything about her was in capitals. The walk, the clothes, the figure and, oh yes, the face. Never in my life had I seen such a look. Sure, she was beautiful, but let’s face it there are a lot of good looking women about – almost to the point where you don’t even glance any more (I did say almost) – but she had something extra – she had all the extras, and they somehow all came together in a unique way. I HAD TO meet her. You know what I mean, I just had to get to know this little piece of perfection in this imperfect world. Yes, I know what you’re thinking and, no it wasn’t just the little head. The one on my shoulders wanted to know why such a woman would be on her own in a place like this on a Friday night.
By the time all this has oozed through the remains of my gray matter, she’s sitting at the bar, a couple of stools away, sipping some disgusting pink stuff from one of Red’s best glasses. Those are the clean ones he keeps tucked away under the counter for special occasions, like for instance, when Venus de Milo (complete with arms) pops in from Paris for a quick drink before … before what? Red’s bar is not the kind of place you expect to see an obviously classy woman, especially alone.

Now, I’m not usually backward about coming forward if you know what I mean, but for some reason I just couldn’t take the first step. You would think that, for an accomplished man of the world such as me, getting up from a bar stool and taking two, maybe three steps in a relatively straight line should present little or no problem. I couldn’t move! My mind went blank. You know how the brain is supposed to send messages to the muscles – like “put foot on floor before standing” – well, the brain must have been on a coffee break or something because, next thing I know, I’m giving Red’s carpet a real close inspection.

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As you can imagine, by this time I’m feeling like a total turd looking up past those awesome legs (which from a half inch off the floor seem to go on forever), past various other pieces of gorgeous anatomy to the object of my desire, and lo and behold, she’s smiling. Actually she’s laughing her ass off. Then, you know what, a funny thing happens. All of a sudden she’s not so beautiful anymore. Her laugh is like the tinkling sound you hear when you throw your spare change in the jar at home, no love in it, just a noise that says “look what I made you do, as if you ever had a chance with me.” She’s one of those women who sticks out the little finger of her drinking hand, as if this shows she’s got class. I think it’s really so that you can pick your nose without putting your drink down, but I may be wrong.

By now, I’m back on my feet and ready with a witty riposte – like “gee, I fell.” Anyway, I manage to hold back what I really want to say and wander off in the direction of the john, as if that’s what I was intending to do all the time.

By the time I recover my dignity, dispose of a couple of Mr. Busch’s best and return to the bar, the woman’s gone. I go to reclaim my bar stool and notice that Red is laughing fit to bust a gut and a couple of the regulars are smirking away in my general direction. I’ll admit, falling off a bar stool is somewhat comical, especially if it happens to one of your friends but this was going overboard. I turn to Red to ask what’s so damn funny and he’s still so cracked up he can’t speak – he just hands me this little note folded in two – and manages to squeak out “she left this.”
I unfold the note – “If you're still interested, give me a call — 436-2342 Kelly.” … and you know what? I almost did.

Good job Red finally ‘fessed up. Turns out “Kelly” is a very popular drag queen…. Now there’s a thought to conjure with........
A Lasting Impression

Norman Majors

The forecast had called for scattered showers over the next two days, but we had managed to get through the entire day without a drop of rain. In fact, there were mostly periods of sunshine peeking through the clouds and very mild temperatures not usually associated with an overcast summer sky. For close to a year I had been telling my fiancée, Karen, that there were no better fireworks on the Fourth of July than those held in New York City. This was her first visit to the Big Apple and I wanted to make it a very impressionable one with no disappointments.

Karen had previously mentioned that she had no interest in ever visiting New York City because it was either too cold or had too many people. This coming from a woman who grew up in Miami where it is mostly pleasant year-round and has about half the population. I wanted to show her what my part of the country was like and the day was turning out just fine.

“You know we have to make it over there a few hours early in order to get a decent spot,” I remember telling her. “There’s going to be a lot of people”. We were on our way to the bank of the East River at E42nd St. and FDR Drive, the sight of the Macy’s Fourth of July fireworks display. This has been an annual event going on in the city for as long as I can remember and I would see clips of the event on the late edition of the evening news every year. It is also broadcast on television throughout the country just as the dropping of the ball on Times Square is done on New Year’s Eve. “Yeah, whatever,” she had said as we walked up 5th Ave. towards midtown. “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”. She was used to watching the fireworks either out in some neighborhood park or on television with her daughter, but I wanted to give her the experience of witnessing the best fireworks of the year in person. Soon she would be singing the tune of a very different song before the night was over.

I can reflect how well the day had had turned out up to and after the fireworks. It started with us catching the Staten Island Ferry over to Manhattan. On the ride across New York harbor, she got her first glimpse of
the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in person. I could tell she was impressed. “Wow, honey! That is so pretty,” she said. The ferry let us off at Battery Park, and we began our foot pursuit towards midtown. We walked along Wall St. in the financial district and stopped at a McDonald’s for a quick bite to eat. That particular McDonald’s was different from the others she and I were both used to. There was one of those scrolling marquis banners over the menu board with the current Dow Jones stock figures keeping the businessmen and women in touch with the market even while they ate. There was a piano bar complete with a live pianist playing mellow tunes and even the McDonald's staff all wore black and white tuxedo-looking uniforms complete with bow ties and tails. Needless to say, we were both impressed. From there we continued walking north past the World Trade Center, across Canal St. in Chinatown, and through the neighborhoods of Little Italy and Soho. She was amazed at how suddenly the difference in scenery and people changed in only a matter of a few city blocks. We continued our walk through the Greenwich Village section and stopped for a short rest inside Washington Square Park. This park is usually filled with a variety of sights ranging from street-corner acrobats, to musicians, to kids of all ages running under the water fountain in the center of the park to cool off from the heat. On this early July day, it was no exception. My mini tour of New York City was turning out perfectly. Everything seemed to be falling into place with no misfortunes or setbacks.

After close to an hour, I mentioned we should continue our walk towards midtown. I had planned for us to arrive at the fireworks site a few hours earlier than the scheduled start of the event due to the amount of people that would be there. Along 5th Ave., she got the chance to marvel at many of the high-fashion shops such as Sacks, Ferucci, and Chanel, legendary of 5th Ave., then cut across 32nd St. and made our way up past Madison Square Garden. She began to complain about her feet starting to hurt from all the walking, so we took a short subway ride over to the vicinity of the site of the fireworks. This was also her first time experiencing New York’s famous underground railway system. I could see she was enjoying everything about the city so far just by the way she constantly smiled as I explained how easy it is to go anywhere in the city on a single subway fare.

When we arrived at the site, people had already begun to congregate. We were able to get a good spot on a closed off section of FDR Drive. The media and several television networks were setting up their equipment near a small stage that would be used as a central point from which the fireworks would be broadcast. We sat and waited for approximately two and a half
hours for the festivities to begin. There was a celebrity headliner for the evening’s event and he caused quite a bit of excitement for the spectators sitting in the staged seats. Then the fireworks began.

First there was the sound of suspenseful music leading up to the first rocket being launched, after which came speeches given by the coordinators of the event as more rockets and streamers were set off. As fireworks lit up the New York sky, songs of our nation’s pride played strongly beneath. “The Star Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” and others blared synchronically with the bursts of the fireworks above us. Karen was mesmerized! Over and over her responses to the blasts were “Oh, my God!” or “This is so powerful!” as the fireworks exploded into smiley face-shaped and planetary forms. The big Roman candle fireworks sent shock waves so strong we could actually feel them upon explosion!

The festivities lasted for about 45 minutes before it ended sending cheers and applause from everyone within eye’s view of the fireworks. The city was happy and Karen was crying tears of excitement. I knew then that what I had set out to accomplish had been done.

Can you believe that ever since that evening of the Fourth of July, Karen has been back to New York every year since?
You say you were there
With those people trapped in the stairs.
You say you were there
When I was brushing my hair.

I couldn't help but cry
When all that smoke and dust filled the sky.
I couldn't help but cry
When I saw all that rubble piled high.

I don't understand
Why you let this happen.
I don't understand
It was like you were just nappin.

Were you not watching over us
As those evil men boarded those plains?
Were you not watching over us
When those kids were making change?

You let them
Fly into those buildings
You let them
Kill so many people.

You say you were there
When I was crying my heart out.
You say you were there
Now I have my doubts.

You say you were there.
Kansas sits quiet in the early morning light, her hands sticky from cutting up Sam’s pineapple for breakfast. Maybe he won’t mind having pineapple in his lunchbox too, she thinks, and goes back to the sticky, fragrant pineapple carcass to cut some more. As she expertly slices off the hard, white sections, leaving dripping in her hands, the yellow, juicy parts flecked with brown from the outer husk, she gazes out the window toward the back yard. It already showed every sign of being a typical autumn morning on Whidbey Island—cool, misty, and grey. Sam was her husband. He was upstairs getting ready for work.

“Oh!” she said suddenly, out loud.

“What?” said Sam as he came down the stairs into the kitchen, pulling a sweater over his head.

“I just need to fill the feeders.”

“You and your birds,” he teased.

“Well, you and your skeletons!”

“Speaking of bones,” said Sam, “how would you like to come out to the site today?”

“I don’t know . . .” Kansas trailed off. She was looking through the window again, out toward the back garden where her bird feeders were.

“C’mon, you’ve made friends with every bird on the island. We need you at the site today.”

“Site?” Kansas said absently.

“Y-e-a . . . the place where I work and have been to every day for the past nine months.”

“You know I don’t want to go on any boats” she looked at him, thinking about the boat ride that was required to get to the dig.

“Honestly Kansas, when are you gonna get over this ridiculous fear? You live on an island for Chris’ sakes! C’mon! We’ve gotten down to a new layer. Bridget found three shards from a Salish pot yesterday. Paul is busy with that skeleton we found last week . . . it looks like it might be on the edge of a burial ground. Fascinating stuff!”
It had been eight years since they both graduated from Washington State University. Kansas was a geology student and Sam studied archeology. They were married the day after graduation. Sam’s work in the field had taken them to both American coasts and a stint in Canada, working on a glacial dig. Kansas discovered that banking appealed to her sense of order and paid better than her work in the dirt, so somewhere in all the moving, Kansas had become a banker and Sam was moving up in the field of archeology. They had moved to the island in the Pacific Northwest two years ago when Sam was awarded a grant to excavate a suspected Swinomish site at Cornet Bay.

Dreadfully, on an unusually hot summer day a year ago, her life as she had always known it, ended. Her parents, flying over for a visit from Honolulu, disappeared when their plane fell out of the sky somewhere over the Pacific. There were no survivors. Some wreckage had washed up months later on a beach in Anchorage. Nothing else. The investigation ruled that the cause of the accident had been, apparently, a faulty wing that broke in half, mid-flight.

Kansas was their only child. Once the full truth had sunk in, the accident left her unmoored and adrift, with a paralyzing fear of water. Not the glittering turquoise of chlorinated crystal clear pool water. It was the dark, salty, mysterious depths of the sea that numbed her. Two months after the accident, Kansas quit her job at the bank. She couldn’t focus on the numbers that once fit so well into her ordered and predictable life. Her mystified friends all watched her drifting away from them. None of them had seen or talked to her in over three months. They had tried, but Kansas always had some reason for not being able to make whatever get together was being planned.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” she would say on the phone.

Every day, Sam came home to find her sitting alone out in the back garden with the birds.

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This morning in the kitchen, Sam continued trying to coax her away.

“Come on Kansas, you’re great in the field. Bridget won’t be there today and I don’t have anyone to supervise the sluice.”

The mist hanging outside seemed to echo an unfathomable aloneness. She slowly turned her face toward him and the hollow look in her eyes startled him.

“I can’t,” she said simply.

As he backed out of the driveway, Sam looked up to the big, front
window to see her there waving. Through the glass, he couldn't see how
pale and sad he knew she was. He pretended for a moment that everything
was normal again. Kansas had become an island herself. An island where no
one could reach her. His eyes stung, thinking about her all alone. He drove
fast through the madrona trees that lined the road. Their rusty colored
papery thin bark peeling away in sheets. He wondered if he would ever
again find the girl he had married. Her parent's deaths had washed over
Kansas liked acid. The woman she had been peeled off in sheets, leaving
another person, like the green wood exposed through the bark. Like the
heart of the madrona — exposed, vulnerable, and utterly alone.

Kansas sat back down and finished off the remnants of the pineapple.
She held thoughtfully to her coffee cup, pressing the warm mug to her
cheek in between sips. The warmth on her face seemed to waken some-
thing. She realized that her dad used to sit like that, with his warm coffee
cup pressed to his face. The memory stabbed painfully at an open, festering
wound.

She carefully put her coffee cup in the sink and went to the back door,
grabbing her old Macintosh.

“It looks like it might rain” she thought.

She scooped birdseed into the metal bucket, shaped like watering can
with a plain spout, from the bag in the garage. There was much twittering
and wing rustling as she walked through the mist to the birdfeeders in the
garden. The birds knew that her arrival usually meant food and at the very
least, a quiet, soft presence that was more than acceptable. There was
something different in their chirps today though—an urgency. Kansas
looked instinctively over to the garden bench where she usually sat after
filling the feeders. There was a small, feathered body on the ground. Both
wings were outstretched from the plain little bird and it lay perfectly still on
its back, delicate legs in the air. She dropped the bucket and rushed over to
look. One wing was fine, but the other was broken. The little house finch
was dead.

She stooped to pick it up. The soft bird in her hand, just perfect, except
for its broken wing. Kansas stood in the misty clearing, perfectly still. A
stillness that not even breathing was allowed to break.

The sob started inside like a long, deep wave that had been out at sea
for weeks and was finally close to shore. It threatened to crush her. Breaking
suddenly and violently, it came out of her mouth in a long, anguished cry.
Her chest started heaving. She gulped for air as if it was her very first breath
of life. Tears spilled down her cheeks, her shoulders shook in painful jerks.
She held the little body close and fell to her knees. Finally, crumpling to the
ground, the foggy mist mingled with the tears on her face. The birds were quiet and still while Kansas lay on her beach, gasping for air.

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After she buried the bird in the garden, Kansas went back to the house and changed into her jeans and an old sweatshirt. She packed herself a lunch and made her way to the car. As she drove down Madrona Way, she noticed the startling new green wood—smooth, flawless, fresh—emerging from the underneath the red paper bark.

She was on her way to the Salish site. Her fear of the boat ride had left, inexplicably vanishing as she had lay in the garden, grasping the finch to her breast. She was shaken, but felt suddenly purposeful.

“Didn’t Sam say Bridget wouldn’t be there today? I could take over her section.”

She was breathing again. It felt good.

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“Hey, isn’t that your wife?” Paul said to Sam. Sam looked up to see Kansas striding toward him. It was nearly noon and the mist had almost completely burned off. He could hear a bald eagle screeching, high in the top of one of the tall pacific conifers surrounding the bay. The sun was bright and reflected off the water in shiny winks. It lended a busy look to the charged feel in the air.

“I decided to come out today after all” Kansas said to Sam when she got to him. “I see that,” he looked at her in amazement. “How’d you do in the boat?”

“Fine. I know, it’s weird. I seem to be over it though—the water thing.”

“Wow . . .” breathed Sam. “Well, great! I’m so glad you’re here. We’re hopelessly behind. Would you mind taking over the sifters down on the beach? You know the drill. We’re looking for anything interesting. I’ll take you down there and introduce you to Katelyn and Mark.”

“That’s ok . . . I’ll introduce myself,” she said over her shoulder, making her way already, over the sandy trail leading to the beach.