



Teacher, Writer

Summer Institute Fellows and Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest winners 2009

Connecticut Writing Project

University of Connecticut, Storrs

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MOTHER TO SON IN IRAQ

Lynn Hoffman

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Winner in Poetry

1

MIRACLE

Looking out from your compound:
a passel of sand the color of sawdust;
an exaltation of sunlight
that could drain the sight right out of your eyes;
shadows that stretch like spandex;
nothing on the horizon nothing
except the scuttle of scorpions,
the susurrations of snakes, and sand.
No trees to measure wind by.
No birds to celebrate sky.
Just a fine film of sand
everywhere. Winding itself around your face,
your hair, your hands, your once-black boots
like a bandage.

Somehow a dog –
in the middle of a war, in the middle
of the desert, in the middle of the middle East –
appears in your barracks.
Without a second thought –
Only men, women, and children wear –
you stroke its fur, wrap your arms around its girth,
listen to its ticking
heart. You're so busy scratching its ears,
you forget that its underbelly beats
like the wired enemies
you hunt at night.
When you look out at the sand,
you're certain you see palm trees
waltzing a breeze.

2

to bury Your

In April, I sifted sand from the beach
at Normandy into a Ziploc bag,
carried it back to the states sixty-three
years after your grandfather placed the flag
on the same shore with his platoon. I hid
the pouch in a sack of dirty laundry,
certain customs would find it and forbid
me to keep half for your empty jelly
jar, half for your grandfather's. You'll bring back
sand that swallowed caravans of traders,
buried pyramids of old secrets locked
in its dunes. You'll keep half, take half to your
grandfather, and in the mixing of sand
and tears, try again to bury your dead.

Mother to Son in Iraq

Sometimes
in the middle of Mass
when I'm holding the missalette
in the palm of my hands
you are here
like sound in silence
or the afterglow
of a setting sun.

Still
it is not enough.
I confess my addiction
to the sensate world.
My shoulder aches
for the weight of your head
to nest on its ridge.
I feel your absence
like the drag of a phantom limb
tugging at my right side
where you no longer sit
where you no longer half-listen
to the priest's homily
drone on.

When I turn in your direction
all I see is the void
in the archway
waiting for you to return.

from Who Wasn't There

Jeanette Zissell

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Winner in Prose Fiction

---Chapter Two---

It was four-forty seven on a Friday. Christmas break had just begun, and there were nearly two weeks to do whatever she wanted—to play in the snow, newly falling, for the very first time all winter. It was like a special gift that had come early, quietly dancing down into her parents' backyard. It was Friday, there was no school for what seemed like forever, and Christmas was on its way. Elsa was standing in her yellow boots, staring up into a sky full of fat, floating snowflakes.

The sky was grey. Grey in an impenetrable cover of clouds, stretching wide as she craned her neck. The pink parka hood tumbled down over her shoulders. The one her mother had brought her as a hand-me-down from some cousin who was already in high school. So it smelled like mothballs as her ears were flooded with frosty air.

Her knuckles were numb from clinging to the rusty metal of the jungle gym, where she was leaning back on her heels, clinging tight to the support poles and throwing her face skyward.

It was exhilarating, watching the soft progress of the flakes, barely visible against the matte, grey sky. It was like rushing past stars, like flying—or falling—like she was moving, and the rest was standing still.

Twilight settled in among trees that clustered behind her. Their arms rattled in the wind, a mass of dry, grey spider shapes. Through the trees, there was a winking porch light from a neighboring street.

Elsa leapt softly onto the snow, and the sound as she landed sounded far away. Dry flakes flew up in the bitter wind and struck her face.

She was outside—outside everything. Outside her house, where the flickering light from the television blinked at her through the window, as her father settled in to watch the early news. Outside of her routine—school over until the Christmas tree came down. Outside with the snow and the trees and the blue light, which was fading and failing by the minute around her.

A car passed by the front yard and she heard it break the silence—the wheels whispering over the snow. It floated through the cold, encased and warm, radio blaring. It wasn't really part of this outside world. It wasn't silent with the air and wind and the tired, New England maples that were asleep with December.

She trailed quietly up the slope of the hill, where her mother grew blackberries in the summertime. She watched where her shoes disrupted the smooth surface of the snow. And as she wandered into the front yard, the darkness began to settle in. The trees were black silhouettes against the night.

It was still snowing. She could see it in the streetlights, in the headlights of the passing cars, creeping by slowly, tires rasping against the road ice.

The wind welled about her, pulling at her hair, damp with snowflakes. And the familiar sound came from the neighbor's oak tree.

Fabric, sailing quietly in the open air. Red and white stripes, faded with age and misuse into a mottled pink. Blue dye ran down from the field of stars, mixing in with the rest and staining the corners purple.

The flag rolled gently forward with the breezes, slowly, with the weight of remembered summers since their neighbor, Mrs. Whately, had tied it to the arm of her oak tree. In the memory of summer afternoons, it had been crisp and bright and smelled like fresh sheets on the line. Stiff and proud in its scarlet and blue.

But age had softened it, worn at it so the fibers frayed and the dyes ran off, and the sun and rain got in it where it hung. Elsa walked across her driveway to it, and reached to pull off her glove. It fell to the snow without a sound, making a little handprint there in the powder.

The fabric's frayed edge rose up as if it were reaching out to meet her fingertips. It was soft, like feathers, or the muzzles of the horses on the University farm, down the bend in the road where her father took her on walks in the springtime.

She stroked the surface where it swept up and down on the swells.

Shadows moved around her, growing into darkness.

Then something else moved behind the oak tree, half obscured by the flag's swaying motions in the frosty wind.

It was the neighbor boy. Eli. She saw him at school, sometimes. Sometimes he hid from the other children, drawing in the art room at recess, instead of playing kickball with the boys. Sometimes he just watched them, like he was watching her now, from behind a tree, quietly. He made to retreat, falteringly stepping back, his brown eyes watching her carefully as he did so. He had a ball of snow clutched tightly in his hand, and for a moment she thought that he meant to throw it at her.

But he simply backed away. If he was ashamed to be caught watching her, it wasn't in his face. He simply looked up, into the deeper snow of his front yard.

His mother kept a careless house. Behind him, an overturned tire pressed against the porch rail, filled with a frozen puddle of rainwater and last year's autumn leaves.

He dropped the ball, and didn't throw it at her. It landed gently on the snowcover, rolled against it a moment and sank into the powder. He regarded it there, thoughtfully, and dropped to a crouch. He began to add snow to the ball, rolling it carefully across the surface. Elsa watched him from beside the tree.

Something about it—about watching him, about the light fading in the sky—something about it pulled at an unspoken knowledge she couldn't express. It was the same knowledge, felt deep down, barely on the edges of her consciousness—the same knowledge, felt from time to time in quiet moments when she was all alone. Watching him where he knelt, slowly and carefully shaping the snowman, she felt that strong, gut knowledge that there was something else with them, beyond the warm houselights and cold streetlights. There was Something Else in the world, but she didn't know the shape of it.

She didn't understand it, and yet it was so big and omnipresent and real it didn't need her to understand. It slowly permeated the black shadows and grey snowdrifts. It was ever present and painfully distant, and just beyond her reach. Like a woman's perfume hanging breathless in the air the moment after she walked away.

And she wanted to chase that spirit down to its source, but it was impossible. It wouldn't be hunted, and the effort brought her back to reality again, and the boy in the snow in front of her.

So she knelt beside the boy. He looked up with those dark eyes that hinted of some distant, alien inner life. A stray tuft of hair stuck out at an odd angle on his forehead haphazardly.

He plunged a hand into the snow and came out with a fistful of powder, melting in the heat of his palm and sticking together. His hand shook, trembling with the cold. He bowed his head away from her, silent in the misty gales of his breath, and reached out after the snowball without looking up at her. His hand stuck in the air, waiting with quiet patience that could have lasted forever.

She reached out and took the ball gingerly, and pushed it down into the snow again, gathering more and making it grow.

The light failed and darkness settled in over them both, and a small, squat little snowman took shape in the shadows. The two children who gave it form were silent. They both knew that they had nothing to talk about.

It went on for a while, as they shaped the snowman carefully, avoiding each others' gaze. The snow fell. "Elsa!"

The voice was affectionate, and called from her porch. Warmth spilled from the open door, and with it the smell of a casserole and the chatter of her father's evening news blaring.

"Elsa! It's dark, come on inside!"

She darted up, the yellow glowing doorway growing larger and larger as she clumsily ran towards it through snowdrifts too deep for young legs. The sense of quiet faded to Tom Brokaw and shepherd's pie, and the outside was forgotten, gone like a thief in the night. Faded to wordless emptiness where the warmth from the heat vents and her mother's face took its place without a single trace of what had come before.

The boy, whose mother did not call him, sat silent in the snow, watching as she darted away, his hands deep in the drifts and clutching the snow there, letting the cold work into his fingers until they were numb. She had left a mitten on the snow by the flag, and it was slowly drowning with white powder. She never looked back, even as the door closed, and he sat alone in the blooming darkness.

Bing Crosby's voice was grainy as it skipped across her parents' turntable. Jingling bells and candy and the wonder at the birth of the living God melted together in a confused jumble with the big band strings. And the sound mixed with adult laughter, polite in its after dinner civility, and the clattering of dishes as her mother cleared the dining room table.

Elsa was in the living room, though, in the dark. She'd shut the lights off, and the sofa and armchairs were swathed in a cold, withered gloom. The French doors that separated them muted the adult sounds a little bit as she lay on the floor. She had her head under the Christmas tree.

Her skull rested on the soft felt of the tree skirt. Her hair tangled in the silvery tinsel that had crumbled onto the floor. Opened presents crowded at either side, and, ignoring them, she gazed up into the light of another world.

Plastic needles, carefully shaped, crowded together in the semi-gloom of the fairy lights. The vent on the wall grumbled and coughed warm air into the tree, and it made the tinsel dance and spin, casting different colors onto the ancient ornaments. The red of the Christmas balls had muted to pale rose, with shots of silver where the coating had worn through. There were ribbons of dried out wax on the larger ornaments, which were scattered around the others like huge planets in a sea of surrounding moons. The ornaments lent the plastic tree the scent of pine, borrowed from other, long dead branches.

Elsa loved them, with their warmly ancient, glass glow. She loved the other ornaments too, the old German pine cones and children's faces, smiling with bloated Victorian cheeks down at her.

She loved them, but there was Something Else too. The decay and dirt in the molded glass. The chips from where they'd been broken, creating sharp edges. The dead, dirty corners of the children's eyes. It made her stomach feel a little knotted, thinking of the tattered leather cases where the ornaments were stored over the years, and the yellowed, over-worn tissue paper they sat in. She loved them, but they reminded her a little of old bones, or of the crushed squirrels she'd see sometimes on the pavement when her parents took her walking.

Misshapen, wrong. So she loved them, but she feared them a little also. And it was the fear more than the love that made her stare up into them now, as if she expected them to let loose the rotten old secrets of the Christmases they'd seen in the long decades before she'd been born.

The laughter of her parents and their guest floated again through the other room to her. Margery Hand had come for Christmas dinner. This was unusual, as they almost always had Christmas alone. Occasionally her mother's graduate students would come, if there was no where for them to go home to, and they were nervously polite and quiet for the most part. But not this year. Margery Hand, whose mother died last year after a long illness was, Elsa's mother told her, very lonely, and should be treated *very* sweetly tonight.

Right now, her urbane, careful voice was relating a joke Elsa didn't understand to her father. She didn't sound lonely at all. The honeyed, vanilla scent of their brandy crept into the scent of the dead, musty pine around her. She must be very old, Elsa thought, but Margery seemed glamorous in a staid, dignified, educated way. She'd been a Smith graduate, and painted semi-professionally. She had danced ballet—had been Clara in the Nutcracker suite, and, for Christmas, had given Elsa a storybook with ballet pictures—pictures of what she must have looked like when she had done it. She wore a fur stole when she came in, and fitted leather gloves that showed off her long fingers.

She thought, staring into the glowing, gentle lights on the pine, that she might like to be someone like Margery when she grew up.

Her father's voice became more clearly audible, as he stepped closer to the doors.

“—I don't know why you'd ask, but we haven't really talked to them since they moved—but that was years ago. Lovely couple really . . . I think they have twins girls at Vassar now . . .”

Elsa pushed out on her palms from underneath the tree. She thought he might open the doors at any moment. They might not be angry with her, if they saw her, but they'd at least laugh. They wouldn't understand, and they'd laugh at her. And she wouldn't be able to accept that. They shouldn't see the things that caught her attention when they weren't looking.

As she darted upright in the darkly shadowed room, she could see the big side window as she ran over next to it for the light switch. Fat old Christmas lights glowed on the outside of the window where her father draped them each year. Beyond this, she could see that all the windows in Mrs. Whatley's house were dark, except for the flicker of a television from an upstairs bedroom. The television's light looked lonely, flashing there alone on a Christmas evening.

The familiar creak of the French doors on their runner made Elsa spin around so they wouldn't see she'd been staring out the window.

"I think it's time to give it to her," her mother said. "Careful with the box . . ."

She looked back to the tree, to the pile of presents there, and grabbed the Nutcracker storybook. She jumped onto the sofa, opening it to a random page and looking into it intently, as if she had been reading. From its pages, the Rat King smiled back at her with a toothy grin.

"Sweetie, we have something for you, come away from your book now," said her father.

"She always has her head in a book. Very smart with them, gets gold stars on her reports every time," said her mother, turning to Margery with the smothering, embarrassing pride in Elsa that made her cheeks burn. Margery nodded politely, and turned to Elsa as her father opened the book. She bent down on her knees to speak to her like an adult, face to face.

"It seems you get another present tonight, Miss Holmes. You must have been a very good girl to deserve it."

Elsa felt shy, suddenly, with the adult face staring at her, and dropped to the ground without responding, to look into the box. It was large, and white, and had holes punched through it in neat circles.

Something moved inside, and the sound of something scabbling on the cardboard made Elsa smile.

"Is it a kitten?" she asked, looking up to her parents uncertainly.

"Open and see," her father said, smiling back so she knew the answer.

The tabby head popped out as she loosed the cardboard top. Elsa smiled at it, reaching out with both hands. It leaned forward, and licked her finger with a scratchy tongue.

"I get to keep it?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"If you take care of it," her father said. "You'll have to feed it if you want to keep it. And clean its litter."

"I will," Elsa said.

"What's her name?" asked Margery.

"I don't know," Elsa said, pulling the cat out of the box and cradling it in her arms. It sat a moment and then began to wriggle and squirm to get to the floor.

"How can you not know her name?" Margery asked, and her tone was mild. And yet Elsa thought it was somehow reproachful, in a way she didn't understand.

"Everything should have a name, Miss Holmes. Adam spent the sixth day making sure of that."

"I . . . I still don't know."

Elsa didn't know what she did wrong, but felt the disapproval beneath the gentle voice. It made her uncomfortable. It wouldn't be the last time.

“There’s time for that later,” Elsa’s mother said cheerfully, breaking in as she saw Elsa struggle for a response.

The cat darted out of Elsa’s reach and ran under the sofa. The little eyes shone out from under it, and Elsa lay flat on her stomach to watch them, staring back at her.

And the adults laughed, and turned to each other, and forgot about her again. She was glad of it, and watched the kitten dart about behind the furniture. She liked the kitten, that didn't have a name. It was shy, and that suited her just fine.

She Builds: A Photograph

Hannah Magnan

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Winner in Prose Nonfiction

They are almost indistinguishable: the two blue-pale little girls captured breaking ground for their sand palaces. The child on the left hunches like an old woman kneading bread, her skinny chest concave, her childish muscles bow-string taut. She's not smiling yet, but it appears as if the potential is there, a placid optimism framed by wind-whipped orange child hair.

I know this girl. I am she.

I know this practiced expression, not optimistic (if we are being really honest), but self-satisfied and content, having squalled her way out of the father-mandated wade in the angry-cold surf. I know too that she secretly feels beautiful in that bathing suit, a hand-me-down covering the bony backside of its third owner, pilled and frayed around the leg openings, but still vibrant and geometrical, as if clothing the wearer in stained glass.

I know that she, even at five years old, feels naked without a plastic headband, hates being dirty, and only began construction to avoid the wrath of the hairy blue-veined leg balefully trespassing in the lower right foreground of the photo. She hates the beach. She hates the sand. She quickly forms a grimy hump of a castle, a sand-cyst that passes for the requisite young fantasy, then digs the grit from beneath her fingernails and slips off to play princess alone.

I am this girl. She is lucky, I am told.

To the right of this girl is Sarah, my sister, wearing a pink-skirted suit that I, though three years younger, have already outgrown. Sarah is spindly and goose-pimpled, strawberry blond movie star tresses (far too thick for an eight year old) whipping dramatically against an enormous pair of plastic upside-down glasses.

Sarah faces away from me as she builds, likely the recent recipient of some of my sibling brutality, resulting from irritation at her awkward lisp, her shaky hands, her sour breath. By now, my fury has chastened her and her position is intentional, trained—her back to me, our structures identical, but isolated, private.

I know Sarah too.

I know that to endure these years, Sarah has strategized: tattling, weeping, preemptively “oww oww owwing” as soon as I slip on the face that shows I'll hit her. Naturally, her distress, her fear, only provokes me further, and I sink my sharp young nails into her soft child skin. I dig, giving Sarah her first scars. She wails and I am scolded, reminded that I should be grateful for my lot, should be nicer to sweet Sarah.

The truth is this: I hate her. I hate the way she ruins a story by clumsily sounding out the big words (but we have to be nice and let her read it to us anyway), the way she always has a toy on her way home from the hospital (sometimes even the Barbie that the rest of us aren't allowed to have, for fear we'll become too stimulated and confused by the tanned plastic breasts), her tears at her easy-to-come, slow-to-go pain (which, I am sure, she fakes).

Preemptively embittered, I anticipate the years of being dressed in matching outfits, the games held up so she can play, the delight in my mother's eyes as we celebrate another Sarah-birth. "She made it!" my mother will crow joyfully, tears in her eyes, and I'll sulk, tired of the obligatory sympathy I must show to the one who is loved the best.

The next several years will be spent developing the sweet-and-easy expression of contentment, a face to hide the brooding reality of this implacable creature. I will press myself into the pleasant shape of one filled, not with rage, but with compassion for the weak, for the Sarah. I will press and I will press and I will become that girl.

"She made it!" I'll crow joyfully, with tears in my eyes.

And I'll only be lying a little.

Framed in surf, Sarah's expression is deliberate, focused, gorgeously contradicting years of teachers criticizing her lack of effort, her inability to concentrate. She sees something in the sand, some future metropolis waiting to be constructed by her hands alone. She digs. Her biceps shiver as she drags her nails through the sand. She presses. A tiny shell-pink tongue pokes shyly from the corner of her mouth and she tamps, tamps. Mouth breathing maddeningly, she brushes her woman hair out of her eyes, a grubby smudge blotting her wide smooth forehead. She builds. The sand slides down the sides of her modest pile, her lump of attempted fairy tale, and she digs, fingers scrabbling like surprised spiders. She presses, confident that this time it will stick. She builds.

Today, at least, this instant, at least, we have survived my father's family outing and created the photo-worthy moment he's been after, the proof that we love each other, that we are not afraid of that hairy blue-veined leg, that we don't hate the grime of the sand in our suits and the icy fingers of the surf on our legs.

We dig. We press.

If only we could know the futures we'd create, mine, full of continued tantrums that entreat adults to shield me from even the most minimal discomfort; hers, full of stubborn survival even in the face of the agony (physical, emotional, social) of a body covered in scars. One day, I will replace my headband with make-up, my tantrums with manipulative half-truths, my adult protectors with unsuitable boys. Sarah will replace nothing, excepting an organ here and there.

Again and again, this spindly child will be toppled. Her sour breath will serve as an early herald of a body in revolt, and she'll slip away from us and into wards with her partners in renal failure and MRSA colonization, her Crohn's comrades, her septic sympathizers. She'll compare scars and stories of operations assisted by robots, of blood pressure so high she can hear her heart slam when awaking from a calm sleep, of skin stretched and cracking after abruptly retaining half her weight in fluid. She'll hold court among a harem of nurses, negotiate truces with surgeons, offer sanctuary to wild-eyed newcomers.

Surely, if she knew then what she faced, this picture would not show such resolve, such stoic resilience. Surely she'd be fearful, tearful, out of the wind and in something warm, out of my father's violent gaze and in the lap of someone soft, someone who actually is the person I will pretend to be.

And yet.

Years later, from her hospital bed, she will cry when she misses a quiz for a class she knows she'll never attend often enough to pass. She will dig. From the dialysis lab, she will complete a phone interview for another temp job she'll lose the next time she almost leaves us forever again. She will press. From her bed at home she will compose heart-wrenchingly hopeful tales of first love, of alliance and safety. I will watch her hurt and I will beg her to forgive my old, aching hate, but she will turn from me, concentrating, building.

Her sand hump will crumble again and again, but still she will squint at her tiny future city.

Dig. Press. Build.

ABERCROMBIE

Denise Abercrombie

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Poetry

Aber, beyond.

Crombie, the bend or crook. Curved confluence,
the place where two rivers meet.

Long before the castle went to ruins,
my clan wore deep blue and green tartans.
Today, girls with little 75 dollar tank tops bear

my name across their chests.
Genuine Abercrombie Quality—
elite, overpriced clothing I can't afford.

Do they pretend to be kin? They don't
even know our crest, our coat of arms—the boar's head—
or our motto: *Mercy is My Desire*.

On the black and white shopping bag models pose
as strung-out rich kids. Their heroin-chic, high cheekboned ennui
draped in sweaters and jeans sporting the family name.

Picture my real kin on the bag—
my sisters and me—our thick bodies,
and overbites—my father's bad posture, his crooked teeth,

wrinkled aunts, unshaven uncles,
our dark circled eyes and double chins,
the pig's head, our plea for mercy.

Imagine us
from the other side of the tracks,
beyond the bend.

Write What You Know

Jon Andersen

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Poetry

I haven't coasted through the universe
ooing and *ahing* at this or that sun
exploding or imploding, this or that
spinning finale of eons

but I'm a skin-bag of chemical energy—
my grampa taught me an impressively
painful handshake. Hello.

I was only four and playing in a sand pile
pushing sticks into a groundhog hole
and missed a woman named Angela
standing on the other edge of the continent
in a red wide-collar shirt, casting
her beatific voice into a sweltering crowd

only ten when my wiry out-of-work
uncle with a junior high education
stood shirtless in the car-cluttered woods
firing his homemade musket, shattering windshields

twenty by the time I stood
at the demonstration turning and
turning, yelling "Who's with me? Who's with me?"

I was minus 112 years old when the Hudson Valley farmers
rode bareback clutching pitchforks and torches
to drive the patroons from the mansions

No, I wasn't born in the back
of a '64 Camaro skidded off the road
in a snowstorm on February 11, 1970
headlights in slantwise snow
my father in his t-shirt clambering up the embankment
to flag down some help
 but from what I hear
came awful close.

On Ogunquit Beach

Barbara A. Campbell

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Poetry

Sun in the cloudless sky,

October wind blowing.

Breaker rolled into breaker

 sending plumes of spray

 into the air.

Seagulls landed

 and sat there

necks pulled back into feathers.

Upside down seagulls

 reflected in the blue mirror of

 shallow water.

Sandpipers' toes twittered

 ahead of the incoming wave,

and along the Marginal Way,

 stones,

 rolling back in the undertow,

 applauded.

The Language of Trees

Steve Straight

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Poetry

Supposedly, a special plant flowers
only on Midsummer Eve, and the person
who picks it can understand the language of trees.

When I discovered it in my flashlight's beam
deep in the island's woods at the base of a giant white pine,
an impossible orchid that had to be the cure to something,
I heard with the first whiff of its earthy perfume
what sounded like the chatter of saplings nearby,
and when I held it to my nose came the awareness
of an invisible music that has been playing all along.

I realized then that we have all heard hints before,
like foreign words that come from similar roots,
the quaking aspen in a breeze like a flock
of Japanese women giggling behind their hands
of pale leaves, the sharp cry of an old limb
being amputated by a gust of wind,
the sighs of spruces sagging under the weight of snow.

As I inhaled my comprehension sharpened,
and I could make out discussions of climate
and weather, the sacred work of squirrels,
and what seemed to be a kind of religion
based on lightning. A cedar told the story
of being astonished by the texture of a bear,
a birch at the edge of the water described the moonlit view.
The dead at their feet were cherished as if alive,
ants and beetles slowly working them
into mulch and then to soil.

I can't say I really understood all I could hear,
perhaps because human evolution is in the teething stage,
or I was just getting used to sixty-seven words for bark,
but even with all the trees around me the woods
were quieter, the conversation gentler
than you might expect, and I noticed the older,
taller trees, their bark darkened and thickened,
said hardly a word, as if they understood
how language fails us
and spent their days listening to the wind.

There Was a Boy

Jeanette Zissell

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Poetry

There was a boy
who put the wings back on butterflies
and sent them flying away.

He made Valentines out of newspapers
Stock-ticker-sports-page, obituary.
He left them under rocks,
tucked them into tree hollows
and folded them into the books at the library.

And I found one there
between “elation” and “euthanasia” in the dictionary
it fluttered to the floor, face down.

It was only when I turned it over
that I realized my name was written there
and that a pair of eyes were watching me
from the tinted glass of a nearby window.

After that I saw him often,
where he had always been,
but gone unnoticed.

He confessed to me that he was a prehensile soul.
He reached out with it often
to playfully pull on my hair in class,
braiding strands during algebra tests,
untangling in geometry—
all while sitting across the room,
intent on an equation, pencil in hand.

He reminded me that my feet can hover
a few inches off the ground
when no one is looking.

He reminded me of who I am
when I am asleep, or singing to myself
over dishes or walking
through empty playgrounds,
silent streets.

In December, he wrote messages
with the frost on my window panes
You know who you are they always read,
and he signed them with my name.

And I found a bird beneath the window glass
one December day
I knitted its bones within my hands
and sent it flying away.

Bad Sentences

Jennifer Shaff

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Prose Fiction

Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski squatted on the metal heater in the corner of her classroom, leaned out the tall, open window and shouted, “I just need a Goddamn thesis!” She appeared to listen for a response, but there was no reply from the empty, student parking lot or the bare, grassy hill where most students had rushed to catch their buses as soon as the 2:15 PM bell sounded. As Mrs. Trapowski pulled her knees tightly to her chest, she held onto her legs for a moment before placing one hand on each side of the window. Then she leaned slightly backwards and tilted her head as if she were considering how to teach essay writing to high school freshmen or gathering powerful language to explain, once again, why students should take time developing a quality thesis statement. But she didn’t appear to notice her three terrified students, seated in the first row, who had come after school for extra help on their *Romeo and Juliet* essays or the four members of the school’s Security Team who were huddled in the doorway. Instead, Mrs. Trapowski turned and shouted, “A Goddamn thesis!” at her bulletin board covered with fliers for the big Thanksgiving game, the Homecoming Dance, a school production of *Brigadoon*, the fall soccer schedule, and a poster with smiling punctuation marks. “One sentence! One fucking, clear sentence!” Her voice broke on the word “clear,” and it almost sounded as if she would cry. Her fingers—gripping the open window frame—flushed as red as her nail polish, except for the naked, pale strip of skin that her wedding band usually covered. Unused to seeing sunlight for seventeen years, that patch could only muster a peach color through the thin, finger skin. “A fucking thesis statement!” she reiterated as her once graceful, beige, A-line skirt bunched around her thighs and she began to sway unconsciously, revealing glimpses of her slip and panties. Her students tried to look away.

Gradually, Mrs. Trapowski became aware of the four Security Team members slowly walking into the classroom, spreading their arms out to signify safety or peace or an absence of weapons. She glared at the Security Team as if they had forgotten to put their names on their homework, while they silently cursed the principal for insisting that Mrs. Trapowski on a window ledge was an internal matter. After all, Mr. Arnolds had said to them through their new walkie-talkies, Mrs. T.’s only on the second floor. Still, the Security Team’s training had been in breaking up fights, catching students who attempted to leave school grounds without parental permission, identifying intoxicated or chemically altered students as they ambled through the hallways, and even how to initiate a series of lockdown procedures designed to ensure student safety in the case of geophysical or terrorist threat. They were not trained to stop a teacher who was threatening suicide over a rhetorical strategy and were all hoping someone soon would have the sense to call the police. Had this been a hostage situation, someone from the English Department would probably have produced a thesis statement to resolve the dispute, but the attempt to harm herself caused everyone around Mrs. Trapowski to become so confused, it was as if she assigned a research paper with no topic, no due date, and no rubric. No one knew where to begin. No one understood why things changed so quickly.

Farther down the hallway, Miss Debbie Delfrino, the young art teacher, tried to hold her breasts down as she ran from the Fine Arts Wing to Mrs. Trapowski’s room. She had heard Mrs. T. flipped and was going to jump out the window from Bud the Security Team member who often stopped by her room after school to “check in,”

which meant try to pick her up. She watched Bud flex his biceps and converse with her breasts every week, which she could have stopped earlier in the year if she hadn't been both flattered to receive the attention and exhausted from assisting students on their creative journeys with limited supplies of tempera, rag wash, and Ritalin. Miss Delfrino tried to make herself busy stocking the Craft Cart and pinning student mobiles to the ceiling whenever Bud strolled into her classroom. On this day, Bud had just leaned over the counter to help deconstruct last month's crumbling decoupage when his walkie-talkie beeped and Mr. Arnolds' voice ordered the Security Team to room 212 immediately. One of the Security Team members who reached the scene first called back through the walkie-talkies and labeled the situation a "suicide attempt" and added the words, "Mrs. T. has flipped out" to emphasize the danger. Bud took off faster than Miss Delfrino, whose own hands froze over the glittered cigar boxes as she tried to figure out what to do. It took her an extra minute to find her cell-phone in her purse, but she knew other people in the building didn't always know when to call for help.

As she bounced down the hallway, Miss Delfrino thought to herself, at least it was after school and most of the James Fennimore Cooper High School students were gone. The emotional casualties would be smaller that way. When she reached the doorway, peeked through the beefy arms of the Security Team, and heard her colleague's cry for verbal clarity, she actually had a moment of what she liked to call imaginative detachment. Miss Delfrino stopped to wonder why an English teacher would threaten suicide over such a specific aspect of writing instead of something more overarching, like spelling or punctuation. But Mrs. Trapowski was not being reasonable and Miss Delfrino knew her own romantic entanglements with Mr. Trapowski, who was on a sabbatical this year, were probably the real cause. After she called 911 and told the dispatch operator that an English teacher at JFCHS was going to throw herself out a window, she knew enough to remove herself from the scene, slide past the English teachers gathered in the hallway—chewing on the ends of their reading glasses—and slink into the teachers' lavatory to call Dan Trapowski. "You didn't say you were going to tell her *now*. What did you *say* to her? She's flipping out!"

The three students trapped in Room 212 who had come for extra help with their essays and only knew their first paragraphs lacked clarity, had no initial insight into Mrs. Trapowski's marital quandaries and were simply more terrified of their English teacher than usual. They struggled to comprehend how Mrs. T. could be at her desk one minute tapping a pencil as Mike Fenneren read his Introductory Paragraph aloud, and at the window shouting obscenities the next.

As Mrs. Trapowski gripped the window frame tightly, her red nail polish made her fingers almost appear bloody. "Am I asking that much?" She moaned and tears came out of her eyes. Then Mrs. Trapowski actually focused on her students, stared at each one in turn, and asked, "Really?" in a way that made Suzy Appleton sob.

Suddenly, Mrs. Trapowski was distracted by noise from the football team gathering outside while they loaded onto the bus for their big game in Joliet. She leaned further out the window to evaluate the commotion, which made the Security Team members even more nervous. Perhaps because of the rarity of someone leaning out of a second floor window, or the flash of Mrs. Trapowski's pale hair against the dark brick of the building, or the

tendency of adolescents to be easily distracted, Johnny Masters, who was at the edge of the group waiting to get on the bus, actually noticed his English teacher peering down at the football team. He brought his hand to his forehead to shield the sun from his eyes, just like his father did, and stepped away from the noisy hive of football players carrying huge duffle bags filled with helmets, pads, uniforms, jock straps, and powders for new itches. He waved. “Hiya, Mrs. T.!”

“A fucking thesis!” she shouted and he stopped there on the matted grass next to the building. “You piece of shit!” she added. Johnny, still a novice at adult communication, was startled by the harsh language from a woman who normally wouldn’t let them use contractions in their writing. Although anyone with more advanced interpersonal skills would understand that Mrs. Trapowski wasn’t yelling at Johnny and was lost in some delusional, suicidal, expository funk, he still became confused. And Mrs. Trapowski was loud, so those remaining football players who had not yet boarded the bus looked up to the second floor window as she continued to rail. “I don’t ask for much! A thesis! One clear sentence! Fucking bastards can’t write! Can’t follow directions! Can’t think! Can’t love! Can’t appreciate sacrifice!” She stopped at that moment and her head dropped surprisingly into the one hand that was no longer clutching the window frame. While the three students in her room were still wondering why their essays were so bad and Johnny was wondering if Mrs. T. hated him, the Security Team took advantage of the moment and rushed through the room to pull her quickly, succinctly, directly from the window ledge to the floor, which was imminently safer, but not more comfortable for Mrs. Trapowski. Her needs had not been met.

After the ambulance arrived and packed up Mrs. Trapowski, Suzy Appleton had to speak to the policeman who had pulled in with the other emergency vehicles. Mr. Arnolds told her to give an honest account of what happened in Room 212 before he allowed her to wait at the front of the school for her ride home. Even though Suzy had the presence of mind to observe the policeman’s rugged jaw and beautiful, hazel eyes as he scribbled her words quickly on a thin pad of paper, she was still upset over Mrs. Trapowski’s escapade and had real tears in her eyes when her father pulled up in his Range Rover.

“What happened, Baby?” One of her father’s hands gripped the leather wrapped steering wheel while the other reached for her shoulder as Suzy leaned to grab the door handle and slam it shut.

“Mrs. Trapowski” Suzy gulped, pulled on her seatbelt, wiped her face with her sleeve, and tried to take deep, comforting breaths—inhaling the almost chocolate smell of the leather interior.

“Here,” her father said as he opened the compartment between the seats that held tissues, spare change, sunglasses, and the new key to his secretary’s apartment—handed over after another annual, passionate, intimate, and secret week at the Cheltham and Frank Insurance Convention in Phoenix. “Use this.” Mr. Appleton offered his daughter tissues, which she pressed to her face. He put his hand back into the compartment between the seats and, for a moment, fingered the cursive “L” of the keychain and remembered his own voice whispering, “Lorraine, Lorraine, Lorraine” He remembered the strawberry smell of his secretary’s dark hair and her lyrical intakes of breath as he slid his tongue from her ear, down her firm neck, to her collarbone.

“They took Mrs. Trapowski away!” Suzy pulled the tissue from her face. “She just lost it and almost jumped out the window!”

“What?” Suzy’s father asked. “Your math teacher?”

“English, Daddy! I stayed after for help in English! You know I have an A in math!”

“I knew that,” he said. “What happened?” Suzy turned from her father and stared out the passenger side window that gave her a view of the Main Entrance where some of the Student Council members were lounging on benches and digging in their backpacks to compare their daily calendars. Suzy rubbed the tissue under her nose. “Baby, c’mon,” her father said.

“Oh, just drive, Daddy.” She slouched in her seat, hoping no one from the Student Council saw her crying.

“Sure, Baby.” Her father started the car and drove slowly out of the James Fennimore Cooper High School parking lot. He drove five blocks through the neighborhood, passing piles of leaves on the curb waiting for the annual November pick up, past the highway ramp the football bus took thirty minutes earlier, before again asking what happened with Mrs. Trapowski.

“She almost jumped out the window!” Suzy turned back to her father with her full voice that surprisingly wasn’t enough to get her onto the junior varsity cheerleading squad. “She was swearing at us and everything.”

“She was swearing?”

“Yeah. Mike Fenneren was reading his Introductory Paragraph and I had just read mine and Joe Arienciata was there too—he’s such an idiot. Mrs. Trapowski was just sitting at her desk listening to us and the next thing we knew, she was screaming and jumping up to the window. Someone must have seen her because security guards ran in the room and tackled her and, oh, Daddy, it was horrible.” Suzy paused in her narrative to sop up the tears from her cheeks. “And I had a thesis statement anyway!”

“Oh, Baby!”

“Then Mr. Arnolds made me talk to the police right away!”

“They had you speak to the police without a parent present?”

“Well, the principal was there and—“

“They didn’t call me?” Her father’s voice sounded angry, so Suzy looked out the window again and frowned. They were still driving slowly past the endless, boring houses with their flat, square front lawns, dried out flower beds, and leafless trees. “What were they thinking?” Mr. Appleton asked, in his mind already imagining his speech at the next Board of Education meeting. “Subjecting my daughter to a police inquiry without a parent present? That Arnolds! He’s not getting away with this.” And with that warning to the world, Suzy’s father turned left at the next stop sign, pulled a U-turn on the quiet, suburban side street, and headed back to James Fennimore Cooper High School. Suzy’s eyes widened in horror and then she sighed dramatically when her father didn’t notice her expression.

After the football game had ended and long after Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski had been admitted to the mental ward at Joliet County General, Coach Jeffers drove Johnny Masters home to make sure he understood Mrs. T. wasn't angry with him. "She's just angry in general, you know." Coach Jeffers pulled into the short, gravel driveway next to the house Johnny's mother had recently rented, put his truck in park, and turned to look at Johnny. "Sometimes," he said, "women are like that." Johnny nodded his head in agreement, even though he wasn't sure what "like that" meant. "That's why I wasn't with you guys when you went to load the bus. I seen Mrs. T. earlier and was talking to the principal to get her some help. If I knew you were all gonna leave the locker room, well . . . I just didn't want you to see that."

"But she seemed really crazy."

"Mrs. Trapowski was upset. But like I told you, she's getting the help she needs now. She's not a bad lady." Johnny nodded again as he saw the older boys do when Coach Jeffers gave instructions to the offensive line, then unbuckled his seat belt and climbed down from the truck. He stood in the driveway as Coach Jeffers backed out and raised his hand when Coach Jeffers waved at him through the window.

As soon as Johnny opened the side door to the mudroom and dropped his duffle bag, his mother shouted from the kitchen, "Missy called!" He stomped each foot twice on the mat as his father always did, then leaned over to untie his sneakers, hoping his mother wouldn't use the word "girlfriend" next time she spoke and then start on her lecture that sounded like a health class video. When he opened the over-painted door from the mudroom to the kitchen he saw his mother stretching the old phone cord from the wall above the counter to their new pressboard table where she sat with her shoulder hunched to hold the phone, nodding and trying to interrupt one of his aunts—probably Selena. She lifted the cord with her right hand as a token of helpfulness and Johnny lifted the cord higher over his head to get to the refrigerator. "Pizza," his mother said. "No soda. Caffeine . . . Yes, I'm listening." She pointed at Johnny and mouthed the words, "Your girlfriend called," then said into the phone, "Hey, I gotta talk to Johnny. His father called today." As she tilted her head to listen to one of his aunts, her right hand reached out for the basket of mail and she began removing some bills and placing them on the table. "Well, I'm not going now because Johnny's home this weekend." She pressed her lips together tight like she was mad, but Johnny knew she wasn't mad at one of her sisters. It was probably his dad again. "Yes, Bill was supposed to take him . . . No Selena, he's not old enough to stay alone . . . just a freshman . . . Plus, he's got a girlfriend now."

Since his mother didn't seem to really be getting off the phone soon, Johnny took the pizza box out of the refrigerator, grabbed one of his mother's special bottles of water, and slipped into the family room where the television was running on mute. On the screen a game show host was smiling and shaking hands with a tiny, pale woman who stood behind a podium. For a moment, she reminded Johnny of Mrs. Trapowski because she had the same sort of thin, powerful, know-more-than-anybody kind of look that Mrs. T. had when she handed out new books and asked if anyone had ever heard of the author. Suzy Appleton usually raised her hand at those moments because her mother was a librarian and her father was on the Board of Education, so she knew a lot of important stuff and always had a, "Why yes, Mrs. Trapowski. My mother reads me *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens every December," or a "Why yes, Mrs. Trapowski, we saw a play by Shakespeare last year." But those comments from

Suzy never broke Mrs. T.'s demeanor, although they usually made Johnny wonder if his parents were doing things right. After Suzy's comments, Mrs. T. would nod and thank her for sharing and then give them notes on the author—more notes than even Suzy knew about. Sometimes Mrs. Trapowski would stop in the middle of a lecture on Shakespeare's artistic sponsor who was a man, or Dickens' love of the theater and his close friendship with a famous actress of the time, and look down at Suzy's neat handwriting slipping from left to right in her English notebook. Johnny could tell Mrs. T. stopped right where the story got interesting because of the way she set the chalk back in the tray, like she dropped something mysterious for a spy to pick up later. Then she would smile and switch topics like his mother always did when she talked about his father—keeping the important facts to herself.

On the television, the tiny lady started jumping as the numbers on her podium blinked and increased rapidly. Johnny set the pizza box on the coffee table, pulled a cold piece of pizza to his mouth, and thought back to his coach trying to explain why Mrs. Trapowski was shouting out curse words. Coach Jeffers had said she wasn't shouting those things at the students, but just in general because of her mind problems. Johnny had asked if she was trying to kill herself, and his coach assured him Mrs. Trapowski wasn't a crazy lady. She was just upset emotionally and mentally, but Johnny couldn't help feeling sorry for someone who wanted to die and couldn't think clearly enough to find a taller building. And why was she shouting curse words? Coach Jeffers couldn't answer real well, but sitting in his family room, Johnny began to wonder if Mrs. Trapowski was finally shouting some of the things she never said in class because she was afraid to see them repeated in Suzy's neat penmanship.

Earlier that afternoon, right after the Security Team had tackled her, Mrs. Trapowski was in the back of the ambulance, enjoying the strange ride to the hospital, strapped on her back to a secure stretcher with wheels and legs that somehow folded up neatly into the back of the vehicle. She had expected some jerky movements once inside the ambulance because she couldn't imagine how the EMTs would stop those creaky wheels, but she heard mysterious snaps and Velcro ripping and settled in for her ride, gradually realizing that if they could send men to the Moon, they could secure another mad woman in the attic. Too bad she hadn't taken up drinking.

In the ambulance Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski felt like herself again, as if finally making it to the ground was all she needed to still her restive spirit, but she couldn't remember why she had come into work that morning, or how she had made it through seven 44-minute periods, or why she hadn't starting screaming expletives in the middle of cafeteria duty. Why did she agree to see students after school instead of going home immediately to hammer her husband's computer into fragments or burn all his notebooks and novel drafts like a normal soon-to-be-ex-wife? What was it about those thesis statements that had disturbed her so? She had experienced so many poorly constructed sentences in her life, a few more shouldn't have hurt much, but they did. "I think Romeo is confused." "I think I'm confused." "Pining first for Rosaline." "I need a break." "Because Romeo loved Rosaline first then Juliet." "I've found someone else." "When he ran after Juliet, he was just being shallow." "My art is suffering because of this relationship. You think you're being supportive, but you're not." The sentences rang in her head—choppy, boring, incomplete, and cliché. She was really sick of bad sentences.

When the ambulance moved, her strange little wheeled bench didn't, and her body, covered in a light

cotton blanket and overlaid with dark, nylon straps, was perfectly still. No movement within a moving vehicle. Mrs. Trapowski looked over at the EMT who was sitting on a bench reading his clipboard, then up at the ceiling of the ambulance and repeated quietly to herself as if reading, “No more bad sentences, no more bad sentences, no more . . .”

While Mrs. Trapowski was still experiencing her smooth ride to the hospital, Suzy’s father parked in the front of the school again before explaining his actions to his daughter. “Now, Baby, Mr. Arnolds shouldn’t have let you talk to the police without your mother or me present because you’re a minor. They should have called us immediately when this situation developed because you must have been under extreme, emotional duress.”

“But it all happened so fast. Mrs. Trapowski was so messed up and then the police were asking me questions and I don’t even know where they took her.”

“Suzy, you don’t have to worry about that. In fact, you stay right here and I’ll be back in a minute. I’m just going to speak to the principal.”

Suzy would have complained, but her father was already out the door, so she sniffed back the next set of tears, looked out the window, and then realized her father hadn’t even left the keys so she could turn on the radio. Since the view of the school parking lot was not stimulating enough for an active mind like Suzy’s, she went back through the afternoon’s events, wondering if she had acted appropriately when Mrs. Trapowski flipped out. Suzy had only gone for extra help after school because she was not satisfied with the B+ she received on her first essay and wanted to know what she could do to improve. When Mrs. Trapowski started screaming about thesis statements, Suzy immediately felt tears of guilt run down her face, even though she was pretty sure her thesis statement was concise and in the first paragraph. What she read to Mrs. Trapowski had the correct form with three points she would use to structure the body of her essay. But if Suzy had done the writing she was supposed to do, why did she feel so guilty? Even at that moment, sitting in her father’s Range Rover, Suzy felt ashamed. What had she written that could make her English teacher try to jump out a window? She began to cry again, even though no one was watching. Maybe, Suzy told herself, it was really Mike Fenneren’s Introductory Paragraph that had been so upsetting to Mrs. Trapowski. She pulled more tissues from the storage compartment between the seats, pushing away the keychain she assumed held the new house key her parents were going to give her, now that her mother’s hours changed to afternoons at the library.

As she pressed tissue gently under her eyes to avoid smearing her eyeliner, she kept thinking about the scene in Mrs. Trapowski’s room, trying to understand what had happened. She tried to recall the details—the slanted writing on the chalkboard explaining a complex homework assignment for Period 7 with no specified due date, a pile of dictionaries left on the floor, the old metal heater by the window humming gently despite the unseasonably warm November day, and Mrs. Trapowski’s fingers with that old style red nail polish, clutching the window frame. But Suzy had never seen her English teacher even wear a neutral shade of polish, and Suzy always noticed nails. It seemed odd for Mrs. Trapowski, the reposit of taupe skirts and beige blouses, to wear such a flashy

color. Mrs. T. was never flashy, only wore red on Spirit Day when she put a red and white JFCHS sweatshirt over her regular bland clothes, and the only jewelry Suzy ever saw her wear was that huge rock of a wedding ring she always twisted back and forth on her finger. And Suzy remembered those fingers—red-tipped and desperately clawing first the dusty blinds, then the window handle, then the window frame itself as if trying to pull the body through to some other side—some safe place. Then she realized Mrs. Trapowski hadn't been wearing her wedding ring and that had to be the real problem.

When the ambulance turned onto the highway and headed north to Joliet County General, Mrs. Trapowski fell silent and for a moment enjoyed the sensations of riding in a vehicle with really good shock absorbers, but then she remembered she was strapped down so she couldn't harm herself. That was troubling. Even more troubling were the scenes that started flashing through her mind like a bad film adaptation of a stream of consciousness novel—the fully stacked mug tree on the kitchen counter, her office nook with a neat “in” tray and “out” tray for bills and another set for student papers she brought home, the third bedroom painted pale yellow in preparation for a child, then converted awkwardly to her husband's writing office with a computer, cinderblock bookshelves and stacks of drafts arranged haphazardly on the floor, the view of their cream painted house with chocolate brown shutters as she walked up the driveway after getting the mail, her husband standing quietly at the screen door with the strangest expression on his face. Then she saw him standing in front of their bay window as she sat on the couch, and heard him say “a trial separation . . . because I need to focus on my art . . .” Mrs. Trapowski couldn't hear anything else he was saying, although the scene playing through her mind felt like the one from the day before when he was telling her how he couldn't imagine teaching at JFCHS again, how he needed to find himself, how his art was suffering, and how he needed a new muse. But that image didn't stay long. Instead, she saw her husband as he was in college, when they had just met in their Existential Literature class and he was always sitting by the pond next to his dormitory, frowning and writing his thoughts in his notebook, even in winter when the pond iced over and the geese left. And she saw her own hand reaching out one of those blizzardy days when he looked so angry, perched on his rock in the snow with his pen scratching, oblivious to the wet flakes falling on his black hair and open notebook, smearing the ink on his paper. And she heard her own words, although they sounded different, tossed as they were through the ages—revised through memory to be more concise—“Come inside. I'll keep you warm and give you feedback,” and there was his hand, cold as an omen of doom, reaching, clasping, grabbing her own as he stood up from his wintery seat.

In the ambulance, Mrs. Trapowski began speaking softly again, hoping her own voice would drown out these scenes. “No more bad sentences, no more . . .,” but she noticed the EMT glance her way, so she pressed her lips together to make herself stop talking again and appear sensible. Unfortunately, as soon as her lips stopped moving, more memories rushed through her mind—digging under the sink for the red nail polish, the disappointing pile of student writing on her desk at school, the garbage disposal spitting her ring back into the kitchen instead of grinding it to pieces, the sound of a boy's voice not yet changed by hormones reading the sentence, “I think Romeo is confused,” over and over, the screen door slapping shut, the upside-down view of a student notebook with round,

girlish handwriting, “William Shakespeare (b. 1564—d. 1616).” But when she tried to recall what had prompted this secure ride, with straps across her chest, thighs, and shins, she suddenly found part of the plot was missing. What got her into the ambulance? As she twisted her head to look at the walls instead of the ceiling or the EMT, all memories from the previous hour completely vanished and her mind felt as gloriously empty as a school hallway on that first quiet moment in June after all the students have scattered for the summer. She no longer recalled even the name of the vehicle she was in or who that small man in white pants was, folded over himself on the bench who seemed to be reading a clipboard. What could be written there?

The walls around her appeared to be covered with clear, plastic drawers filled with colorful strips of . . . what? She couldn’t decipher, but layers of colorful stacks and tubes covered the walls in organized zones of color and shape. It seemed as if the drawers were filled with jars of paint and colored construction paper, ribbons and tubs of paste. There were crayons and safety scissors and charcoal pencils. Everything in its place, she thought and was almost pleased, until she reasoned that the only tightly organized art supply station she knew of was the Craft Cart created by that young art teacher, Delfrino, and used so often by those brand new English teachers who wanted literature to be more fun and creative, as if it weren’t already. They would wheel the plastic, drawer-stacked cart out of the Art Supply Closet and into their classrooms whenever they wanted their students to respond to reading in alternate ways like drawing or cutting funny pictures out of magazines and taping them to paper to represent a character’s feelings—silly things like that—projects. Delfrino was a bossy bitch anyway and Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski even said the word aloud, “Bitch,” then couldn’t remember why she was thinking about Miss Debbie Delfrino or why she hated that woman so much.

As she looked back at the clear drawers on the walls, she spoke aloud again to see if what she heard from her own voice would make sense. “I’m in the Craft Cart,” she said, ignoring the white-panted man as the sentence left her mouth and floated through the dim, warm, rectangular space that now seemed to be humming and letting in noises from outside like car horns and brake sighs from trucks.

Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski realized that if she were truly in the Craft Cart, something would be terribly wrong. So she tried to piece the available information together to come to an understanding—a conclusion as it were—concerning her whereabouts. First of all, Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski reasoned, the Craft Cart shouldn’t be outside on the highway stuck in traffic. Secondly, the Craft Cart was a smallish thing filled with art supplies and so unable to accommodate herself and the white-panted man. Thirdly, Debbie Delfrino was a large-breasted bitch, who was nasty, but wouldn’t try to get rid of Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski by shoving her in the Craft Cart and wheeling her away. That wouldn’t be professional, and Delfrino was always professional in her emotionally conscious way. Fourthly, apart from being too large to fit comfortably in a drawer, Mrs. Trapowski was never an advocate of the Craft Cart and had argued strenuously at English Department meetings for the benefits of responding to literature with writing. When her colleagues, swayed by Miss Delfino’s PowerPoint presentation, agreed that new research in brain functions showed how visual or motor skilled learners needed to be able to explore alternate routes of expression, Mrs. Trapowski had responded with what she felt was a heart-rending question. “What else do we have to express ourselves with in the field of literature besides words?” She felt her voice raise dramatically at the end of

her question and had wondered, even at that moment, if she should not have left so much rhetorical room for others to reason faultily and had taken her own advice she so often wrote on her students' papers—"Instead of asking these questions, write your answers to them. That's why it is called interpretation."

But this environment really felt like the inside of the Craft Cart. How ironic then, Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski thought as she strained her neck to see what drawer she was in, that she—the bastion of verbal exercises—should be riding in the Craft Cart. She laughed aloud at the thought and the white-panted man looked up from his clipboard. "How ironic," Mrs. Trapowski said to him and he nodded. Suddenly, she felt almost tilted to the side as if someone were pushing the Craft Cart very quickly down the English Wing and taking the tight corner into the Social Studies Hallway and then somehow rushing downhill. "Whee!" Mrs. Yvonne Trapowski said. "How fun!" When the white-panted man actually smiled at her, she added, quite honestly, "I never realized how fun irony could be."

Sitting in the passenger side of her father's Range Rover with the knowledge that Mrs. Trapowski was not wearing her wedding ring and was probably in the middle of a divorce, Suzy almost put her hand to her mouth in surprise, but with no one to observe her shock, she allowed herself to experience this emotional moment without having to add a physical manifestation. "Poor Mrs. Trapowski," she said aloud with the conviction of a girl who had watched enough Lifetime TV when her parents weren't home to know how truly devastating marital problems could be. Mrs. Trapowski had actually mentioned her husband a few times as someone who used to teach Senior English at JFCHS, but was now writing his own books—an author, a creative person—but he didn't have a real book yet because it was a long road to publishing or something. Poor Mrs. Trapowski. And Suzy's own father, instead of being understanding, as he always urged her to be, was in the principal's office with his red-face-voice yelling about Suzy's safety. He was worried about his daughter when poor Mrs. Trapowski was probably getting a divorce, which didn't make him compassionate or understanding.

The Appletons actually had a Family Meeting the previous week to discuss being compassionate and understanding because of Suzy's fight with her mother over having to take the late bus home after her Future Business Leaders of America meetings. Suzy tried to make her mother understand how horrifying it was to wait for the late bus with people she didn't even know, who probably stayed after school for Principal Detentions because they were future reprobates caught smoking in the bathroom. Plus, it took an extra hour to get home on the late bus, and that was an hour she could be spending on her homework, but she couldn't do homework while she *waited* for the late bus or the detention kids would make fun of her, and she couldn't do homework *on* the late bus or she would get carsick and throw up, and why wasn't her own mother trying to help when she was her one and only child? All of her FBLA friends had mothers who picked them up after school.

After that pout fest, her mother sent Suzy to her room to wait for her father, and when he came home, they had a Family Meeting about being compassionate and understanding. Her mother was crying and her father was sitting at the kitchen table handing her tissues. "Do you see you've made your mother cry?" he had asked Suzy in his soft, serious voice that made her not want to comment on her own obvious ability to see her mother crying. "Do you think she wants you to come home to an empty house while she's at work? Do you think she has stopped taking

care of you—her only child? You need to think about your mother’s position. She didn’t even go back to work till you were twelve because she always wanted to be here when you came home from school. How do you think she feels now that they’ve changed her hours at the library, knowing that she wants to be here for you, but also wants to save money for your college education? Do you think money grows on trees?” Suzy didn’t even laugh at her father’s use of a cliché to make his point because her mother was sniffing too much and Suzy felt tears in her own eyes when her father added, “You have to think about the other person, Suzy. You have to be compassionate. You have to be more understanding.” He paused there to consider his wife’s hand in his own before he offered to leave work early and pick up Suzy the next time she stayed after school.

Compassion and understanding—those were her father’s very words and yet there he was complaining without even trying to understand what poor Mrs. Trapowski was going through. Mrs. Trapowski was obviously upset and any fool could figure out that it wasn’t really about writing. To Suzy, her father had gone beyond the level of hypocrisy most teenagers allowed for their parents. She turned for one more glance back at the entrance and when she didn’t see her father, smashed her hand on the dashboard to truly experience her anger at his lack of understanding. After unbuckling her seatbelt, Suzy opened the storage compartment for another tissue, and noticing the spare key, decided to grab it and walk home. That would show him. She didn’t care that her house was almost three miles away or that her mother was still at work. If she took the spare key, she could let herself in. Suzy left her book bag in the backseat because it was heavy, grabbed the key, jumped out of the car, and slammed the door. Since there was still no sign of her inconsiderate father who couldn’t realize that something really painful was happening with Mrs. Trapowski, she walked to the back of the car and wrote, “Fuck you, Daddy!” in the light film of dirt the wiper didn’t reach on the rear window, turned confidently away from the school, and began walking home.

Suzy flipped the key chain around her finger as she walked out of the school parking lot and onto the sidewalk. The funny thing was, when she looked at the keychain, it was the initial “L” in pink enamel and had the words “Hot Times in Phoenix” right below the letter. And no one in her family had a name that began with an “L.”

By Johnny Masters’ junior year, Mrs. Trapowski was back in school teaching full time. He saw her at football games, sitting in the bleachers with blankets piled all over and a big, red scarf tied around her thin neck. She was always waving at Coach Jeffers when he turned to look in the stands, and Johnny always saw his coach smile back. He assumed the rumors were true—Mrs. T. was divorced and now dating Coach Jeffers, which Johnny found difficult to fathom considering Coach Jeffers’ language. “You boys ain’t even working yet! You ain’t even sweating! I wanna see ya sweat!” he would sometimes shout at practices when he got really angry. It didn’t make sense that Mrs. T. would even like him. Adults were crazy that way, Johnny thought. Nothing seemed to bother them for long.

U-Turns

Joe Anastasio

Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2009 Honorable Mention in Prose Nonfiction

I realize I am turning into my father the moment I swing a hard left, hand-over-hand, and the under-inflated tires on the Grand Caravan squeal under the sheer force of the u-turn.

My eight-year-old son laughs excitedly, obviously impressed with the adept driving skills of his old man.

My wife, on the other hand, she has other ideas stealing through her head.

“We’ll miss the movie,” she threatens, settling back into the passenger seat, as the Dodge corrects itself along Route 205.

“Naw, we’re just a few miles from the house.” I utter this as an attempt to pacify her tapping fingers as they steadfastly drum the arm rest.

“I just have to check. Have to be sure,” I reluctantly add, more for me than her.

The fingers amplify into machine gun pitch as they fire against the faux-leather padding.

My wife, usually a statue of the epitome of patience, lets out an audible, purposeful sigh. “It’s off, I’m telling you,” she insists.

And for the second time I feel the crazy *déjà vu* take hold.

I am my father.

I sneak a quick glance in the rearview mirror.

The eight-year-old grips an invisible steering wheel, whipping it violently round and round, his face crazed like a Nascar driver entering the final lap.

My eyes shift back to the mirror, and for a brief second, I see it.

Gray hair? More of it? I swear that wasn’t there last week.

Opening my mouth, the setting sun glints off the gold crowns lining the back.

Soft teeth, just like his.

My wife’s voice calls me back.

“It’s off, I’m telling you,” she insists again.

I can’t decide which would be better . . . it’s off, no chance of a fire, no higher electric bill, just her I-told-you-so look . . . or the satisfaction that I’m right, for once.

“I dunno,” I utter, as I wheel onto Franklin Drive.

And then she says it.

“Okay, *Ed*,” she teases.

Ed, my father’s name, my middle name.

Calling me my father’s name brings it all back to me.

And as I hit the driveway, it’s 1978 all over again . . .

We must have been more than twenty miles away from home, headed north to Bradley airport. The Ford Fairlane 500 barreling down Route 2, my sister and me seated in the backseat playing the license plate game, when suddenly the car slowed, my father applying the brakes and edging toward the shoulder of the highway.

“What’s the matter, Daddy?” my sister asked.

“Got a flat?” I added.

Then the verbal sparring of parent-talk consumed the car.

I tried to focus on the traffic as it blurred by. Who knew so many people thought we were number one? They extended their fingers, blared their horns.

“I’m pretty sure I left it on,” my father said.

“How sure?” my mother asked.

“Well, pretty sure.”

“Like fifty percent, seventy percent, ninety?”

A man in a passing truck shouted a word I didn’t understand.

My sister smiled and waved at him.

“We need to get to the airport, Ed,” my mother insisted. “We’ll miss the damn flight.”

The turn signal clicked to life, and the Ford cautiously edged back onto the highway.

Silence.

And after a mile my father spoke again, very quietly, almost soothingly.

“It’s on.”

“JESUS CHRIST!” My mother imploded.

“I’m just saying.”

“It’s on, it’s not on, it’s on, maybe it’s on, which is it, Ed? Which is it? Last time it was the water. The other time the toilet.”

“I have to check.”

The car lurched to the right and down the exit for the inevitable trip back home.

“Oh,” my mother began in her mock-daddy voice, “can’t leave the toilet running, God forbid, what if it overflows, what if the whole house floods? First family vacation we’ve ever had and we’re going to miss our damn flight.”

My father’s head sunk lower as the car crawled home.

We missed our flight.

The stove; cold like my mother’s stare as she dialed the airport.

So now, thirty years later, I sit in the driveway, the headlights projecting against the garage door.

“Well, aren’t you going to check?” my wife asks.

I wait for her to add the clincher, to call me Ed again.

But she doesn’t, instead she turns to our son and asks him to sing a song.

I stand at the door, sliding the key into the lock, and like a character from a novel read years ago, I've become unstuck in time.

The son becomes the father, becomes the son.

I know the stove is off before I even reach the kitchen.

It's like a Greek tragedy and the gods dangle my arms and legs on suspended puppet strings. The script, all mapped out on this vast landscape of genetic code. Because I am his son, I have to check that the water is off wherever I go. I have his laugh, his voice, his need to make two-page checklists for the people watching the house when we leave for vacation. I wish I had his patience.

As I reach the kitchen, I catch a brief shadow of myself in the mirror. I squint my eyes like I did as a small child, when I would try to see myself as an older man, a man like my father, what I wanted to be, the shade of what I am now. But instead of an old man I see a child, my child, and he's gripping an imaginary steering wheel, racing forward through life.

I stand in front of the stove, but instead of looking down, I peer out the window. Two figures are laughing and singing beyond the window. They resemble shadow puppets on a screen.

I blindly reach down, brushing the burners with the tips of my fingers.

The stove is off.

Cold and silent.

I notice the clock. It blinks 7:47.

We missed the movie.

I drift from the kitchen back out into the early evening air, *twice* making sure the lock is secure behind me. Somewhere, high above, I hear a jet flying to an unknown destination.

The sound of voices and laughter emanate from the van.

Maybe, just maybe, we can still make the 9 o'clock show.

Mother Calls, from *Rage for Me*

Jon Andersen

Note: Seventeen year-old Jim's mother died of a drug overdose when he was five.

“Jimmy . . . honey.”

It was like an electric shock, that weird caught-between-worlds pulse that goes through you when you've screwed up replacing an outlet and got yourself between a black wire and a white wire. Then a full body smack: I was up kneeling on my bed in the pitch black, taut and ready.

I listened.

Just me quick-breathing and my pulse chugging in my head. My eyes strained for light and my ears strained to hear my mother's voice again, or maybe her step on the stairs. There was the sound of my fan on low, turning and clicking, turning and clicking. Over maybe like the next hour I just really slowly uncoiled, listening, and looking the whole time. The window was open but there wasn't even a breeze. An occasional bug knocked itself against the screen, then back into the night. The neighbors' house was dark and quiet and looked plunked down there under the stars. Their kids' bikes and toys were scattered around the driveway. They looked like echoes, I thought. Can something look like an echo?

Eventually, I was laying there again, but I didn't go back to sleep. I rolled and sat on the edge of the bed, pushed myself up. When I stood my legs were shaky! I walked toward the hall. I didn't want to wake Sis or Dad or the baby, and I just tried to creak along as softly as I could, avoiding the noisiest boards. Sis's room was next to mine on the right. I stopped there for a couple minutes outside her closed door. Nothing. I knew that she was sleeping in her single bed with the baby on her chest. They were in love like nothing I knew. At the end of the hall, I stopped at the top of the stairwell and could see Dad's foot at the end of the couch down in the den, in blue, flickering light. He was in his usual spot—asleep on the couch in front of the TV with the sound off.

I knew it then and I'll say it now: it wasn't a dream. It wasn't the fan, it wasn't the woman or the kids next door, it wasn't Sis talking in her sleep or the baby crying out, and it sure as hell wasn't my father. My mother had called to me. Gently. But now she had my attention, she didn't have anything else to say, and I haven't heard her since.

Splinters, from *Polarities*
Ricki Berg

Everyone has a story. I can tell you my story, but I can't promise you'll truly understand.

You might judge me for the way I treated my mom or my girlfriend, or you may get frustrated and tell me to get over myself. I can't tell you what it's like to have bipolar disorder because I don't think you can ever truly understand, but if you have a good imagination, let me take you to the place inside my head.

I invite you to turn off the lights of your room and sit on your bed. Pull down the shades so it's as dark as possible. Don't get under the covers though because I don't want this to be comfortable for you. Cross your legs and sit up straight. You aren't allowed to get off of the bed. Outside, you hear the voices of your friends. The sun peeks through the shades, and you sense the possibility of brightness, but you aren't allowed to leave the bed. As you're trapped there, you hear the music playing outside, and they laugh. They laugh and laugh. They laugh. You can try laughing, but it won't feel good.

Days pass, and you sit in the bed. Utter darkness. You hope it won't be this way forever. Sure, you have the ability to leave. The door isn't locked or anything, but you don't want to go outside. The bed doesn't feel comfortable, and you wish you could go outside with your friends, but it won't feel good out there. They will laugh and laugh, and you will laugh. But your laugh will be different from theirs, and they will know it. Their eyes will flicker toward you, and they'll think you don't appreciate spending time with them. If you go outside, all you'll think about is that bed. Because while the bed isn't comfortable, it is safe. No one will judge you in that room where you hide, and you won't have to pretend. You can be sad in your dark room because the only person who knows you're sad is yourself. You hope they'll all think you're just sleeping.

Bipolar disorder isn't only about those times though. If it was, it would be called depression. And if they'd diagnosed me correctly the first time, then I wouldn't have pulled all of the shit that got me into so much trouble. But that's part of my story, and you can't understand my story until you understand me.

Suddenly, you want the lights on. Everything feels different. You aren't sure what has happened, but you feel invincible. Turn on the lights, open the shades, and pull back the covers. You climb on top of the bed and start jumping, and it feels incredible. You turn on your favorite song and sing so loudly that your throat burns. But you sing and sing, and this feels real. The music reverberates through you because you can do anything. You draw open the shades and the blinding light feels good. Call your friends inside because you want them to see you this way. You know you aren't letting them talk, and you constantly interrupt them, but you just can't stop talking. They don't want to be around you anymore—you can tell by the faraway looks in their eyes. Now, you're rambling about nothing now, and you can tell they aren't listening, but you keep chattering away.

Sure, you don't have to tell them how you were just feeling those last few days. They don't have to know because they won't understand. But you aren't even thinking about those times now because you feel like a whole different person.

Now I'm sorry to do this to you, but you can't feel like this forever. It hits you like a baseball bat to the face because suddenly, you have fallen backward on that bed. The music is blasting around you, but it doesn't feel good anymore. You lay flat on the bed as your friends still jump around you, and as the bed bounces, your head

continually slams into it as they jump and jump. And they laugh and laugh. But you can't even pretend to laugh anymore.

"Turn it off!" the voice inside your head screams, but you can't show them how quickly you've fallen. You don't want them to know that you can't be that happy person all of the time. So, instead, you tell them that all of a sudden you don't feel well, or maybe you lie and say you're suddenly feeling very tired. You hint that you want them to go away, but they just laugh and laugh. They're having fun, and they don't understand why you aren't. You try to laugh, but it comes out in chokes. You just want them to go away, so you can sit in the dark, on your bed, where it's safe. There, you can stare into the blackness and hope that you might get that surge of greatness again. It's okay, though, because no one can see you in your dark room. Your friends are gone.

I don't want you to see me in my dark room because I am embarrassed. That's why I sit in the dark away from you.

I don't want to show you my room when the shades are up because now you know it's all just a lie. You've seen me in the dark.

Everyone has a story. I can tell you my story, but I can't promise you'll truly understand.

A Silent Legacy

Kelly Brooks

July 21, 2009

Dear Avery,

Being a mother is not something I always pictured myself being, but when you were born you changed my life. And being able to witness your emergence as your own little lady has changed me. You make me want to be a better person. You amaze me every day and you help me see my life differently. I'm not sure I will ever be able to repay you for all you've given me already. What I can do is offer you some of the things I've learned from my own childhood.

1. All children are born perfect. (It's adults and society that mar their perfection).
2. The world is enchanting from atop your Dad's shoulders. (He will always be willing to carry you).
3. Trust your parents with the truth. (They will always be your biggest defenders).
4. No one will ever put more pressure on you than you will put on yourself. (Remember, you are not expected to be perfect).
5. Death is not your fault. (You don't have the power to kill your mother's unborn child).
6. The candy on the top shelf in the pantry will always taste sweeter than any other. (Mary Janes, Milk Maid Caramels).
7. Your mom's shoes are always better than your own. (And you'll instinctively know how to walk in them).
8. Wedding-night negligees make the most beautiful Cinderella gowns. (You'll instantly become a princess).
9. Late night cuddling on the couch after waking from a bad dream is the safest place in the world. (Even if it's just for a few minutes).
10. Television won't rot your brain. It will become some of your happiest memories. (The Sound of Music, The Wizard of Oz, The Muppet Show, Solid Gold).
11. Boiled hotdogs are the best dinner ever. (When they're eaten at the coffee table with your dad and Buck Rogers while the rest of the house is sleeping).
12. Children have healing powers. (A back scratch from a child will cure all ailments).
13. You'll never laugh so hard as you will during Family Game Nights. (Uno, Pokemo, Pictionary).
14. It's okay to eat on the floor with your fingers if you're watching TV with the family on Friday night. (Quality time is priceless).
15. Girls Day Out is good for the soul. (No boys allowed).
16. Nanas will always make you feel special. (Even at times when you may not deserve it).
17. Meeting your Dad for lunch is the best date you will go on. (And he'll always be your first love).
18. Don't be afraid to fail. (Sometimes you only get one chance).
19. Love yourself. (Don't ever compromise who you are for anyone).
20. Thunder cannot hurt you. (If you sleep on the floor next to your parents' bed).
21. Your siblings will be your best friends. (And yes, you can talk through a wall).
22. Hugs are the greatest security blankets. (Don't ever underestimate their power).
23. Use make-up sparingly. (True beauty cannot be manufactured).
24. Front porches make the perfect stages. (And the world is your audience).

Your stage has been erected and is now being set. Sooner than I care to admit, your audience will be calling for you and you'll confidently walk to center stage. And long after the lights are dimmed and the curtain is closed, I'll still be your biggest fan, sitting front row, center.

With Infinite Love,
—Mommy

My Husbands (Then and Now)

Vicky Clifford

“Let’s go or we are going to be late,” (I am always late to something) I heard Larry saying as I put on the last coat of red lipstick (grandma always just wore red lipstick) that I got that morning at Macys. We were on our way to the Prom (I love hosting parties). Third one that I sponsored (I am a good coordinator) that I’m going to be late to. Larry does not particularly like going (he never went to his own) but has gone with me every year (because he loves me) to make me happy (that’s what he does).

“Hurry up, you don’t want Lois (my pain in the ass principal) calling asking why we are late,” (I should have never given her my cell number) Larry was saying as he got the keys to the Mini (my new car). As I came down the stairs (all thirteen of them) he was telling me to stop and slow down (I am a bit clumsy) before I fell off my four inch heels (love shoes). When I got to the bottom step (without falling) he took my hand and said, “You look so beautiful” (he’s the romantic one). As he said those words (they always make me cry) I remembered it’s one of the reasons we have been together (it is our twentieth anniversary tonight) all these years (never thought I would have made it this long with husband number two).

As I stood there (in the four inch heels) the older Larry (balding, grey mustache) before me, I was back in London, June 21, 1986, the night we met (I was 25 married, he was 21 single). In his tight white Levis 504 and black Reebok sneakers (a staple in the 80’s) he was so not my type (a non puertorriqueño, a gringo) but at the same time (he is not husband number one) cute and interesting. As we started talking (not yelling at each other) he was kind and funny (opposite of my typical daily encounters), just there to have a good time (never have those anymore), just having a good time with someone new (not wishing I was someplace else), laughing and forgetting all (even my four year old son). I was sexually alive again (not a sexual pawn). Happy go lucky (not thinking of my duties as a spouse). Free to do and meet whom I want (and I wanted) and feel like he does (the adulteress husband) every time he beds someone else (there have been many) and I’m home (the good navy wife) waiting for his letters and calls. This time he could wait (this will be a one-time thing) and let him wonder what I was doing (he *knew* that I would not do anything because I am the good navy wife, dutiful, not in love) but as I sat at the bar at the Hard Rock Café (with all these strangers) there’s that good guy (Larry). At this moment (I need to do this for myself) I was free, happy, even if it was a fantasy, it was mine (haven’t had anything of my own in a long time).

Night progresses and daylight nears (why do the good times end so fast?). I invite him (is this how my husband does it?) to spend the night with me (what am I doing, this is not me, virgin wife). We stand in the room together (scared shitless) I’ve never done this before especially not with a complete stranger (a younger man on his birthday) and we don’t. He holds me all night long and we talk (I weep) about life and all my choices (he is a great listener) and we become friends, real friends (not like my “friends” the navy wives who love to go and tattle to their husbands everything they see and hear. If only they knew what their husbands were doing). The new day is dawning (wish it did not have to end) and as we lie there in each other’s arms (never knew it could be this sweet, joyful, not, “ok, no more, we are done”) I am a new person (defiant).

Before we got into the car (off to the prom) he whispered into my ear (I love you) and I got those same goose bumps I did twenty years ago (not bruises). “Let’s go and celebrate these twenty years with all 200 of your students” (not with drunken people I do not know or like) as we pulled away from the driveway. Driving, leaving to go (as I did so long ago) to have fun, to make sure my students were safe (as I did for my son) it was a new life I was leaving to (as my seniors are doing, with graduating) enjoy. These twenty years of marriage (it does not seem like twenty years) have been not without some ups and downs (never was afraid to go home as I was with husband number one) and disappointments (not getting spaghetti sauce thrown at me, because I don’t cook like his mother) but they have been loving years (something he never knew how to do) and happy ones (something I am grateful for).

As we arrived at the prom (together, hand in hand) I noticed a sign on the door, “Happy Anniversary Sr. and Sra. Clifford” (she remembered, the class president) something I told her many months before (she is going to do well in the world). We both were so very touched by this token of consideration (sometimes it is just the little things) that he squeezed my hand (not to hurt me) to let me know that he was moved by this gesture (the little things get to him). I thought to myself, I am one of the lucky ones (so many abused women out there) to be here and experience happiness (peacefulness) and again, I was grateful. “Last call for pictures,” the DJ announced over the microphone (he is making \$900 for this gig). Larry and I went to take our picture (it is the same pose) as we have done at every prom for the last twelve years, and we smiled (say cheese). It’s a genuine smile (just as the smile I had as the judge said I was a free woman to do as I pleased). A smile that says we will do this year after year for the next twenty years (I hope it will be more than that).

The Tooth Fairy

Lynn Frazier

Carlie is seven in this picture and has finally fallen asleep, having waited anxiously for the Tooth Fairy to come (yes Virginia, I am the Tooth Fairy). This moment when all was right in the world needed—no, demanded—to be captured and treasured, to remind me that magic could exist even when life is not so kind. Carlie is covered in glitter from the Tooth Fairy's dress (sprinkled from a bottle as I clutched my robe). Her soft angel cheek pressed with the Ruby Red lip imprint (from the only lipstick I owned), a remnant of the Tooth Fairy's love for her. Carlie's note to the Tooth Fairy is crumpled under her pillow.

Dear Mrs. Totth Fairy, Here is a picture I mack for you. I hope you enjoy them. Last time you left glitter on the sile (the window sile) I like it there. I love when you leave clues. Carlie Lynn PS magic says hi thats my bird. pps whach out for jazzie and chase (the dogs) they might bite you. if you hear a scary woof that chase. Just hide and he will calm down. ppps here is a snak in cas you get hungry like santa clause.

Along with her note is a little tooth wrapped in toilet paper, her hair set in pink and red rollers to look pretty for the visit she was anxiously anticipating. Her face reflects that innocence that only a child sleeping dreamlessly is privy to.

We had just moved recently, and Carlie was worried that the Tooth Fairy had not been informed of the change in address. She was so excited, she couldn't fall asleep. I waited. Tired and dying to go to bed, I peeked in Carlie's room for the third time, desperately hoping she would be asleep (please God, let her be asleep. I have to work tomorrow).

Hi Mom, are you sure the Tooth Fairy will find my note? I checked my tooth again and it's still there. What if I knock it off the bed when I'm asleep? What if she can't find it? I hope she will like my hair. How will she know I moved here? What if she can't find me? What if she doesn't come?

I sighed, told her the same thing I told her the first three times, and reminded her the Tooth Fairy would never come if she didn't fall asleep (or the Tooth Fairy may have to knock her out).

I went back to my bedroom and stared at the wooden box on my dresser (this box was filled with the magical needs of not only the Tooth Fairy, but Santa and the Easter Bunny as well). I was *wishing* Carlie to sleep. My biggest fear was that someday I would fall asleep and fail at my magical duty. There had been far too many disappointments in Carlie's life already; too many times sitting on the steps, dressed in a favorite dress, waiting for a visit that never happened. On nights like this I needed to sweep my sadness under the rug. I went out to the kitchen for another cup

of tea, hoping it would keep me awake, and I waited.

One more stealthy trip down the hall, quietly turning the door knob and, yes, Carlie was asleep. The simple beauty of this child took my breath away (yes, even a Tooth Fairy can be taken by surprise).

Finally, the moment I too was waiting for. I went to the bedroom to gather the magical tools of a Tooth Fairy's trade—jars of glitter, paper lace doily, and gold pen (after all, a Fairy has to have glitter and gold). I climbed carefully out onto the roof outside Carlie's window (praying to God that the neighbors would not see me, afraid of heights, clutching the eaves in my nightgown) throwing handfuls of glitter to show where the Tooth Fairy landed (hoping I did not fall ass first in the bushes). Then I trailed glitter to the window, scattering magic on the floor; it finally dusted Carlie's head, face, and bed. Then gently, lips painted with Ruby Red lipstick, carefully placed a kiss on her cheek. I wrote a note to Carlie on the paper lace doily, in gold ink.

Dear Carlie, You are a very good girl. Keep your teeth nice and clean. I Love You, signed The Tooth Fairy.

I slipped the new dollar bills (the banker did not understand my need for new bills) along with the lace doily under her pillow in exchange for the little tooth wrapped in toilet paper and crumpled note written with love. I stood in her moonlit room, surrounded by glitter, listening to the quiet breathing of this child who after all of the disappointments in life knew the Tooth Fairy would find her, and so I too believed.

Abuelita

Monica Giglio

Abuelita sewed dolls and
Told stories of romance and
Gardenias thrown by beautiful and
Dangerous men on horseback to
The women who surrendered their memories
To them
Forever

On her island
Moonlight danced on
Mangoes and
Children laughed at the chicken tree
When the silly birds hopped into
Low hanging branches
Like some mysterious
Feathered fruit

Choruses of coquís
Filled her ears and
She tried to make the sound for us
But we would never understand
Unless we heard them
For ourselves

She smiled as she sang of
Arriving in New York
To help Tía with the children
Staying safe at home, but
Bringing some forgotten thread
To the factory one day
Meeting the manager who
Loved and
Married her

“Mija,” she whispered when
She forgot our names
As the island reverie
Replaced the din of traffic
And the sirens of Spanish Harlem
And English

She disappeared into
Long conversations with mirrors
And tears for the faraway dead

The Mountain and Man: Unlikely Bedfellows—Companion Poems

Julie Kieras

To a Mountain:

Everest¹, Chomolungma:²

“Goddess Mother of the world”

You are no mother—

You fling your offspring

From the hem of your garment

And hold yourself high in disdain.

Pilgrimages in vain

To gain your grace

But you play favorites,

Acting the coquette.

Hiding behind your white scarf.

Seeking only worship,

But denying blessing to most

Who come to pay homage

At your throne, but find only

Icy rock, airless space.

Suffocating your children

So they cannot see your face.

You bury your young beneath your dress,

Your cold gaze ignores

The dead ones at your feet.

¹ Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world at 29,029 ft.

² Chomolungma is the Sherpa name for Everest. It means “Mother Goddess of the World”

This is the place where hell freezes over
And like the ancient god Molech³
Who demanded child sacrifices to the flame,
Your children throw themselves instead
Down ice crevasses,
To be buried in your stony heart.

To a Seeker:

You are right to say,
I am no mother.
I do not take away the sins of the world.
You who grovel at my feet
And clamor at my hips
Yellow and red hovels clinging
Like sucklings to a mother pig.

You call me mother,
Then entreat me with
Oedipelian⁴ desires, each hungry
To consume their self-proclaimed mother
To assuage their lust for glory.

These are not my children who ravel
Their ropes to force me down.
And each spring repeat their incessant
Building of their Babel⁵ on my flanks.
You worship to ensure your own glory.

³ Can refer to a god or type of worship which demands costly sacrifice.

⁴ Mythical Greek king who unknowingly fulfilled a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

⁵ Refers to the tower built at the city of Babel, intended to reach to heaven and glorify mankind's power and ability; however, God confounded the once-unified languages of the people, making it impossible for them to finish building the tower. On Everest, people from all over the world, speaking different languages attempt to climb the mountain but often find themselves unable to communicate with each other when life depends on it.

You wave your flags like rags
Of victory, while excrement
Runs like rivers soiling
My snowy skirts.

Who said I wanted sacrifice?
I used to honor those who came alone,
Without the trappings of an army,
True worshippers who knew
How to step with caution
and breathe with reverence.

I would not claim you for mine own
No child of mine
Steps over outstretch hands to gain a crown
Or walks by frozen eyes that still see
One last chance at life.

Fair warning that I have grown lower
In your estimation,
By naught but your own trammeling
And scraping
At my very bones.

The Little Gray House They Shared

Betsy Kowal

Francine was born in July of 1955 in Providence, Rhode Island, into a small but close-knit Italian family. Joe and Ida welcomed their only child with much joy in the midst of a recent family tragedy. Joe's older brother died in a freak accident two months before. He was a window washer; the scaffolding snapped and Francis plummeted six stories to his death. Christine, the name Ida had chosen should she give birth to a daughter, was now Francine. Joe and Ida had no idea this loving tribute was to become a painful legacy for *them*.

Betsy was born on Palm Sunday in March of 1956 in Brockton, Massachusetts, into a very large French-Irish Catholic family. The first child of Sweeney and Bea, she would welcome six siblings into her life. Christened Elizabeth Anne, a strong name for such a small, helpless baby, Sweeney thought, she became Betsy.

Francine grew up in the working class neighborhood of Providence known as Mount Pleasant. Her father, a trucker, worked long hours while her mother stayed at home. Summers were spent in the little gray summer home in the woods of northern Rhode Island; Francine brought friends from school so she wouldn't be lonely. In school, Francine struggled and battled a lazy eye. The doctor treated the eye problem, but her mother, who had never finished high school, lacked the skills to help Francine be successful in school. Her graduation from high school was a relief as much as a celebration for both her and her parents. Employed after graduation, Francine met John; she became engaged just before her twenty-first birthday.

Growing up in a small town in Massachusetts, Betsy and her siblings built tree forts in the woods and rode bikes on the quiet summer streets. They skated on their backyard pond in winter. A business owner, her father worked long hours; her mother left her position as a clinical nursing instructor and stayed home to raise their large brood. With her mother's direction and the strong expectations set by her father, Betsy did well in school, excelling academically and athletically. Her months before graduation focused on plans for the future and scholarships for college.

Just six months after her engagement, Francine was buried next to her uncle a few days after Christmas in 1976, struck down by a brain aneurysm. John, Joe, and Ida were left with memories and thoughts of what might have been. After time, John, the fiancé, stopped visiting the devastated couple. Joe and Ida tried desperately to hang onto their daughter. Her bedroom remained untouched for years, becoming a shrine of sorts.

In 1976 Betsy completed her sophomore year in college; her boyfriend Chris graduated from URI. They planned to marry upon Betsy's graduation. Chris secured a job in the insurance industry and bought a two-family house in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. When they married in 1979, they lived in one of the three apartment houses they owned. Betsy commuted to her job outside of Boston. They worked hard to build a comfortable life.

Without Francine, it was hard for Joe and Ida to find peace. The house in the country provided an escape from the memories which stifled their city home. Joe spent long hours raking the fallen leaves, moving the many boulders which dotted his haven in the woods. Ida cooked, cleaned, or sat in the sun and mended Joe's work clothes. But the emptiness of the little summer house without Francine remained, and after almost ten years Joe and Ida struggled over the decision to sell their country retreat.

Betsy was not happy when Chris announced he might buy a summer house in the woods of northern Rhode Island. A stay-at-home mother of two daughters—a newborn and a three year old—she worried about the five mortgages they already had. After a ride to the shack in the middle of nowhere, she found she could not say no to her hard-working husband's dream. Eventually the summer house on the lake in the woods provided an escape for the young couple—Betsy from the city she had grown to hate and Chris from a mentally-ill mother and dysfunctional siblings.

Ida and Joe watched as the young couple, each carrying a small child, walked to the white cottage across the street from their summer place. They hoped these were the new owners of the old Spada place. Ida wanted to rush over to welcome them, but Joe told her to mind her own business. "Give them time," he'd said.

Betsy and Chris met the older couple across the street the first weekend they spent at their newly purchased cottage. Betsy thought Ida rough yet kind, and Joe a man of few words. Though they stayed less than a few minutes, both seemed reluctant to leave the chaos involved in the unpacking and settling in of the young family.

That year Joe and Ida decided not to sell the little gray house on the dirt road in the wooded country. Instead, they spent more time there, and Joe wished to sell the house in the city. Ida refused; to sell the house in the city was to let go of everything that was Francine.

Betsy and Chris decided to sell their house in the city and move permanently to the lake. They added onto the cottage to make more space for their family, content in their decision to raise their family in the quiet and peace of the country, away from the struggles of the city.

Betsy was not Francine, but Joe and Ida welcomed her into their family. In turn, she adopted them as the in-laws she lacked, her daughters accepting them as grandparents. Betsy's large extended family encircled them as well, inviting them to celebrations and gatherings. Uncle Joe and Chris worked side by side on their dream homes in the woods, forging a quiet but strong friendship. Auntie Ida taught Betsy to make braciolo and gravy, vinegar peppers, and pepper biscuits, to swear in Italian, to play High-Low-Jack, and to accept the pain and disappointments in life. She imparted her wisdom on the two girls who respected her sometimes out-of-date ideas, ideas that might have been shared with Francine long ago.

Each year, when summer came to a close, Joe and Ida reluctantly left the little gray house and returned to the city. For Betsy's family, this signaled the start of a new school year and brought frequent trips to visit Joe and Ida in Providence. What had started as a summer friendship became a life-line of sorts for both families as both contended with serious illnesses and loss. But above all, they laughed and loved each other as a family. They shared the joys found in the life passages of Betsy's children, just as every July they celebrated together the bittersweet anniversary of Francine's birth. Betsy was not Francine, but over the next twenty-four years that line became blurred by the power of love and acceptance. The strength of this relationship filled the little gray house with the fullness of life which brought Joe and Ida a sense of what might have been.

Auntie Ida was buried next to Francine in early June, 2009. Ida is with her beloved daughter, at peace, while her adoptive family struggles with the loss of a woman much loved, a woman who became a friend, mother-in-law, and grandmother not by birth but by chance, by choice. Uncle Joe laments her passing. He cannot bear to be in the house in Providence, one room filled with fading reminiscences of Francine, another brimming with the strong memory of his wife of fifty-five years. Uncle Joe has decided to sell the house in the city to live at the lake, with Betsy, who is not Francine, but who is honored to be loved as such.

Dangerous, Even

Hannah Magnan

Faded script crawls diagonally across the back of the photo. The handwriting is thin, hurried, as if having dated just one in a series: “January 8, 1975.”

The couple is seated in front of a hearth in a sepia world: warm, yellow. Behind them, a golden fire rustles in the grate. Neither looks at the camera; both stare off to the right at some other observer, another photographer perhaps, come to document this domesticity, to submit proof to the world that these perfect moments do exist.

Seated Indian-style on the left, the man looks like the gentlest kind of man. He has a sort of half smile on his face and confident, engaged eyes that say, kindly, softly, “I understand you. I will take care of it.” He wears a soft full beard, dark and precise, and shiny just-combed hair. His right hand rests casually on his thigh. His left grasps his companion’s wrist protectively.

His companion, a woman, sweetly bares her teeth. Her expression is practiced, demure. Someone has obviously told her to smile and she plainly intends to comply. Long bangs frame a mild face, and soft waves culminate in giant roller curls, bouncy but neat. Her elbow rests on the hearth ledge behind her, stabilizing her modest sitting position: legs together, bent partially underneath her, hips raised at what appears to be a slightly uncomfortable angle.

In the center of the photo, a miniature schnauzer puppy rests in the space made by the man’s crossed legs, his puppy neck stretched towards the woman so that she can bury her hands in his soft beard. Along with the hearth and fire, he completes the trifecta of an image of comfort, security.

Many years later, the woman will tell stories of how she hated that little dog. Benny was a digger, a barker, an all-around demanding pet who vacillated wildly between affection-getting schemes—rooting madly under blankets and pillows to find a hand to scratch him—and violent outbursts—sitting quietly in a lap for an hour, then suddenly locking his small powerful jaws around the fingers of his absent-minded handler. Occasionally, Benny could even be found snarling at the occupied crib in the nursery.

When he, usually quick and fearful of rumbling engines, is accidentally backed over by the family station wagon in 1978, the woman does not cry.

This tableau, obviously staged, presents a man and woman who seem undeniably meant for one another. Clearly, for the universe to be fair, it must cup its hands around these two like a flame, to protect, prolong, to ensure that they can always be together, that this moment will never end.

This photo rests on my mother's dresser. She is the woman on the right, the lovely woman whose appearance belies the quiet loathing she has already begun to feel for the man seated next to her. We will credit my mother's vanity with the photo's prominent placement until we learn prenatal math and realize that there are actually three people in the picture. The third, my brother Jonah, is as yet invisible. Without his tiny intrusion, we would never have come to be. In the years to come, we will show him, alternately, gratitude and resentment for our existence.

My mother stayed, for him. She will speak of her sacrifice to him often until he reaches an age of understanding, and then she will stop. The two will have a terse relationship—she will perform all of her maternal duties without complaint—but Jonah will never feel tenderness in my mother's practiced gestures, changing, feeding, burping. He will know only teeth-clenched duty.

He will never forgive her for this.

Next to my mother, my father practices the expression he will use to paint himself favorably, reasonably, both to his congregation and to his mistresses. It will become the gentle leer of the one who hurts us for our own good, of one who repeats violent child-rearing clichés as if they were favorite family anecdotes. He will dump dinners in our laps to teach us napkin etiquette and push us suddenly from behind to test how well we grip the stair banister. Other times, his appearance of empathy forgotten, his love will flare too brightly and suddenly he will crush us against him and remind us to “be *so* careful, baby,” our lanky child-frames creaking, ribs moaning. If we cry out or struggle, he will teach us to honor our father, as God intends.

During these lessons, my mother will plead with him and cry. She will distract him with dinners and he will grow fat, but otherwise unchanged. She will put herself between him and us, but he will save his schooling for the intended students. She will offer to discipline us for him, and this will work, briefly, until he realizes the bare-bottomed slaps he has been listening for have been coming from her hand on her own thigh. For this, he will punish us severely, all the time explaining in his reasonable voice, “Your mama did this, honey.” We will believe him and glare at her, red bottoms flinching involuntarily as the belt whistles.

Eventually, she will just grow sad, and quiet, and small. She will stop eating until he threatens us, and then she will eat.

Amazingly, we four children will thrive, especially as he gains success, and we spend more time in public. As his flock grows, he will develop and lead a series of parenting and marriage seminars. Wealthy parishioners will donate time at sprawling vacation homes in lieu of tithing, and he will accept them graciously. We will learn to sail, to fish when people watch; to whisper, to tiptoe when they don't. We will learn always to stand in front of windows, where we can be safe.

There will be no doubt of our father's devotion to cultivating successful children, and for this we will develop a sort of god-fearing respect. We will understand the law: when we do not commit infractions against one of the constantly changing rules, we will not be punished. Simple. Easy.

Within these gradually closing walls, we will manage to find freedom, room to play. Sometimes, we will even be happy. The world will see a tow-headed line of ducklings bobbing blithely behind their father-mallard. He will take us on our first roller coasters, and my mother will wait by the exit, cowering, fearing that the ride will kill us all. We will return, triumphant and flushed and full of words and smiles, exultant in the wake of a safer adventure than we're used to.

One day, something will change.

My four-year-old brother Amos, will run screaming down the hall, inches in front of my father's stampeding bulk. Locking himself in my room, he will sit on the floor with his back to the wall, drop his head into his small hands, and weep.

I, older and wiser, will watch him cry from my desk, where I have just finished a letter to a friend, signing it "In Christ, Mari." Setting my pen down softly, I will stand and walk to the door, patting Amos not unkindly on the head as I pass. Calmly, deliberately, I will open the door to my father's angry arms.

My mother will watch from the laundry room with her hand over her mouth.

Three days after this, fourteen years to the day from the date of this photo, my father will be found slumped against his car in the church parking lot. He will survive seven gunshot wounds from a Colt 1911 pistol, three to his left arm, four to his right, but will never have full use of either hand again.

His assailant will never be identified.

By the time he leaves the hospital, my mother will have filed for divorce, and we will have fled 3,000 miles to stay with my grandmother in Gulfport, Mississippi. My mother will quickly develop a mouth that frightens away the local navy boys (she won't consider dating for years). She'll grow stringy muscles that quiver when she pulls out our ancient oven to rewire the plug hidden behind. She'll give us a hard, vibrant life—hungry, but rich.

She will be lovely, rough, smart, vain.

Dangerous, even.

It is amazing the number of changes that can occur in a person's life in the span of one year. I have spent the last twelve months figuring out my life. I guess it all really started three years ago, when I met John, a time that feels as if it were both ages ago and yesterday.

My name is Grace Pearson. I am a twenty-three-year-old graduate student in Education and I haven't dated anyone, since I was with John Dole, my last boyfriend. Nor have I even really thought about jumping into the dating pool again. This is mostly because I was in college when John and I were together, and dating was far less serious. I had no intention of earning my MRS degree; success then wasn't marked by marriage. In the real world, however, dating is far scarier. I figure it is better to focus on getting my life on track and leave the whole dating scene for later. My last relationship was a disaster and I just don't want to chance dealing with something like that right now.

John and I met at a party in New York. We shared a mutual friend who had a party in her Upper East Side shoebox of an apartment. John was funny and easy to talk to and we ended up chatting until the wee hours of the morning. Initially, he seemed perfect: a six foot tall, sandy-haired, Columbia student, one of the top singles players on the tennis team, and a microbiology hotshot who was eventually hired by Pfizer months before his graduation.

I was interning at the New York City Law Department, working with an attorney who was representing the City in civil cases. I had scored the internship through a program I was enrolled in at New York University. In addition to my internship, I took a seminar in law and planned on applying to law school the following year. Since I was in elementary school I had always wanted to be a lawyer. I am not sure why. None of my family members practiced law and I had never even stepped foot in a courthouse, but I was dead set on having my chance to uphold justice. I had a completely clear vision of where I wanted to be in life. I had five, ten, and twenty year plans. I knew that I wanted to live on the Upper West Side after graduating from Yale Law, have two kids, and eventually move to Greenwich, Connecticut where I would have a beautiful house with a perfectly manicured lawn. My children would go to private school and we would have a Portuguese Water Dog. I would eventually open my own practice in town and life would be perfect.

I had the direction and drive that John wanted in a woman, and we had fun together, though initially neither of us ever really thought our relationship would be anything more than a few dates that would make the summer more interesting. Our goal was to have fun. We went to parties, had picnics in Central Park, and strolled through the streets of Greenwich Village, where we would stop and eat cupcakes from Magnolia Bakery. On the Fourth of July, while watching fireworks from a friend's rooftop deck, John told me he loved me. Of course, I told John I also loved him, but really, I think we just liked the idea of being in love and we were happy to have a companion for the next month. We were the picture of a summer fling, which of course had to end. Our relationship wasn't practical. Adding something else to our already full plates, while fun, probably was not the best idea.

I clearly remember our last day together during that summer. We were enjoying the sun in Morningside Park. "It really is a shame that we met when we did," John stated matter-of-factly.

"I know. I have thought about it a lot actually. I keep thinking, 'If only . . .'"

“If only what?”

“God, the list is so long. If only you weren’t a senior focused on finding a job. If only I wasn’t leaving in two days for a semester abroad in Ireland. If only you didn’t have matches scheduled every weekend. If only I didn’t care about law school. I could go on. These are the things that make us who we are though. If neither of us cared about succeeding in life, we probably wouldn’t be together.”

“It is almost as if we are too perfect for each other,” he laughed.

“Haha, I know. But we both know that if we try to keep this thing going that it could be a train wreck. As you said, it is better to deal with the situation now and save ourselves the trouble later.” This wasn’t new information; we had been having versions of this conversation for the last couple of weeks.

John looked at me. There was a sad look in his eyes as he bent down to kiss me. My eyes welled with tears and John put his hands on the sides of my face, “Don’t cry, Grace. If we are meant to work, we will. It isn’t as if we won’t talk again. I’ve already given you a bunch of international phone cards as a going-away present. You know I want you to use them on me. Just because we are breaking up now doesn’t mean our friendship has to end.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at this comment, “Wow, thank you, a parting cliché. ‘Let’s still be friends.’ This is how I dreamed our last few hours would play out,” I said sarcastically.

“You know what I mean. Of course that isn’t the case. But almost from the first day we began dating we knew this would have to be limited to a summer romance. You have law school to work towards and I really want to be at a top pharmaceutical company. Throwing an international relationship in the mix could cause us to lose the focus that has gotten us so far. I love you, and if it is meant to be it will be, but it is too big of a risk to take.”

“Hmmm, another cliché. Is that all we are? Seriously though, you’re right. I guess I’m just trying to see some humor in this. I agree we are making the right decision, but that still doesn’t make the whole thing pleasant.”

“I know. Let’s just try to enjoy the last few hours of our short-lived romance.”

And that is what we did. When I think back on that day, I am mad at myself for not realizing what a mess John and I would be in a long-term relationship. But I liked him, possibly loved him. I did not have a crystal ball to see into the future. Even if I did, I probably wouldn’t have used it. I knew what my future would be. I had faith that if John was meant to be part of my future he would be. I couldn’t worry about something that I had no control over.

Focused as I was, that didn’t stop my feelings. In fact, after a month in Ireland, I was homesick not for my friends at Richmond or my family, but for John. We emailed daily and I would sometimes stay up until two in the morning to call him. John would always be in his dorm room by nine, and I knew I could catch him before his strict bedtime of ten. As a superstar athlete and student, he was adamant about getting a full eight hours of sleep and getting into the gym by six in the morning to avoid the crowd of students who hogged machines and didn’t wipe down the equipment thoroughly enough for his standards. I initially thought this a little strange, but figured it was a quirky personality trait.

Eventually, during one of our transatlantic talks, John stated, “Well, I don’t know why we don’t just agree to date again. We both miss each other and neither wants to date anyone else, so we should just say we are together

and see where things go from here. Maybe we can make the relationship thing work with everything else we have going. What do you think, can you add me into the metaphorical juggling act?"

I was sure he could hear my smile through the phone, "I can't think of a better idea. This is what I have been wanting for a long time. Wow, yes, great idea. Exciting. Wow."

"I have thought about it a lot too. This is a really good thing," he paused. "Well, now that that is decided, I am going to go. It's almost ten and I need to be sure to finish up my article on bacterial pathogenesis. Have a good night, talk to you next week." And he hung up.

Bacterial pathogenesis? I was hoping we could talk a little longer or that I could at least say goodbye. As my last sentence was gibberish, I thought for sure he would break his curfew this once. It was a special day. Then again, part of what I liked about John was his dedication to whatever he did. He didn't excel at school or in tennis because he wasted time or strayed from his schedule. I figured he had a lot of work to do. I knew he was dedicated to me and our new relationship, but he couldn't sacrifice his grades for me. That was part of the deal anyway, and I understood that.

Instead of dwelling on the strange end to our call, I decided to dance in my dorm room and gleefully chant, "I have a boyfriend! I have a boyfriend!" And not just any boyfriend, a hotshot tennis playing, Ivy League attending, beautiful, brilliant science mind. To be fair, I think I loved John more for his resume and what others thought of him, than for who he really was. I admit it was shallow. But I was twenty and wanted to make sure my five, ten and twenty year plans were carried out, and I knew John was a good match for this. In no way do I excuse myself. I was an active participant in the heartbreak that would eventually follow.

First Day of Fishing Season

Eileen McIntyre

The beige vest came up first
from a shelf in the basement
at the end of March.

My father would examine it every year
as if for the first time,
its multiple pockets perfect for
pinning the official license,
hooks and lines,
and other angler gadgets.

Over the coming weeks, my
father would inspect the equipment
carefully: the rods, the reels, the lines.
A few days before the start of the season
we would visit a man named Otto,
a grayed hair man with gnarled hands
and a friendly wife
who sold night crawlers
in a muddy white, round porcelain tub in his dark barn.
I stood on a rickety chair to view
the sea of slimy creatures with my father.

We bought those night crawlers,
but it was hard to use them
because my father said you had to
cut them into small pieces with a pocket knife
to make them appealing to trout.
So, instead, on the night before the first day,
I headed to the garden with a flashlight,
a spade and an old cigar box
to dig for earthworms.
Carefully, I added dirt, wet birch leaves and blades of grass,
hoping a cozy home would make amends
for the steel hook.

The next day, the stream was rushing over rocks
toward the river under the brightening sky
as we pushed through a wall of thorny bushes.
My father opened the cigar box and I noticed
that the hardworking worms had churned up the soil.
Calmly, my father baited our hooks and
together, we cast out the lines into the shallow
water aiming for a deep nook close to the edge
under the roots of a tree,
a hideaway for trout that may be dozing or
hunting for insects on the water's surface.
We stood silently in our boots on the bank,
reeling in and out
quietly capturing the trout's attention
with the translucent earthworms.

If I was unlucky,
there would be a tug
on the line, not a strong pull that meant the hook
was lodged on a branch or rock,
but a frantic twitch
that would shake the calm of the stream as
I reeled in the line slowly,
over rocks and branches until
the luminous olive skin
of a brook trout rose up.
My father would marvel at the beauty of it,
then remove it gently from the hook.

I wondered if this fish with
the gold rimmed eye was seeing
the blue sky for the first time as it lay
on the grass by the stream
on the first day of fishing season.

Ask Me Why I'm Running

Jenn McMunn

Evan and I are attending a party hosted by one of his college buddies. I don't know the other guests well, but they seem open and amiable. We chat about the joys and frustrations of dog ownership and speculate about the future of the Red Sox. Somebody mentions summer plans.

"I'm running a lot, " I volunteer.

Uh oh. These new acquaintances are frowning at me. Suddenly I've shifted from being a nondescript party guest to a runner.

I wait for the inevitable comments.

"Running is so boring—have you considered something fun like joining a soccer league?"

"Running is so taxing—have you considered yoga or swimming?"

To avoid this, I have to offer some rationale as to why I choose to run.

"I'm training for a marathon. I'm running for the American Cancer Society in honor of my father," I explain.

This satisfies most party guests. They can accept running as a sacrificial act for a larger good. They drop the conversation without any idea of how complicated, how passionate yet perilous, my love of running truly is.

I initially became a serious runner simply to increase my fitness and better my health. Running has in fact yielded a cornucopia of benefits. I sleep well at night and I feel strong and energetic during the day. I can help my friends carry boxes into their new apartments without getting winded. I can eat large quantities of food without gaining weight. I use running as a stress-reduction mechanism, which seems a lot healthier than smoking cigarettes or gulping down vodka.

Some people are able to run moderately and be grateful for the health benefits the sport provides. I am not such a runner. I am too analytical and too hard on myself in most aspects of my life, so I naturally transferred these traits to my running. However, since running is seemingly good for you, I noticed that is very difficult for many people—myself included—to ascertain when a runner's goals take her into an obsessive, harmful place.

My detrimental relationship with food and running started slowly, so family members and friends didn't detect it right away. At first, I became a more restrictive eater. I copiously studied women's health magazines, most of which advocated an intake of 1500 calories a day in order to shape up for bikini season. I used these articles to invent stringent rules for myself, rules that I believed would make me a better runner and a more attractive human being—these articles cited scientific research, after all. (Of course, I now realize that the calorie guidelines were written for sedentary women, not women running thirty miles per week).

I coupled these food rules with an increase in my weekly running mileage, which I rationalized by claiming I wanted to train purposefully for an upcoming half-marathon. Really, running became an addiction. Like all addicts I spent an exorbitant amount of time planning my next fix. I had difficulty getting excited about vacations—yes, vacations—unless I knew my hotel was equipped with a treadmill. I ran when I was sick or injured, telling myself that the short jaunt outside would stir up my internal juices and jump-start my immune system.

I lost all kinds of unnecessary weight. Strangers complimented me on my new gaunt look. I was praised for my ambition and willpower. But in my case, my weight loss was a signal that I'd carried my unrealistic expectations too far.

I wish I could say that this dieting made me weak and slow. It didn't. I ran a half marathon in 1:50 and ran a ten and a half mile race in 1:30, earning a trophy by placing second in my age group. But friends and doctors intervened, alarmed at my shrinking self and the compulsiveness of my training. My good-willed quest for self improvement had manifested itself as a relentless need to run, to run away from the complexities and ambiguity of life. The rigidity of my food rules and the incessant running kept me in a perpetual state of anxiety. I expected so much out of myself that my goals were impossible to attain. I no longer felt worthy enough to take up space.

With the coaxing of loved ones and doctors, I begrudgingly began to eat substantial food and adopted a more moderate running regimen. I read books and fitness and body image and came to intellectually understand that my behaviors weren't healthy. Emotionally, I balked at the changes. I hated watching the number on the scale rise, I hated when pants that formerly sagged stretched taught across my hips. Even worse, I hated that being healthier bothered me so much.

One year later and twenty pounds fuller I am training for my first full marathon. Some skeptics see this goal as the latest incarnation of my addiction. I hope it isn't. I hope I'm not running to lose the weight I've gained.

This is certainly the most physically daunting task I've ever undertaken, so improved fitness is inevitable if that is in fact my goal. Some of my training runs take over two hours to complete; my husband has watched a full movie while I'm plugging away on the road. I've learned how to conquer foot cramps, hamstring fatigue, dehydration, and low blood sugar through some ugly experimentation. I've trained for four half marathons before, and I'm stunned by how much more of a commitment training for a full marathon entails.

Even beyond the physical, the greater challenge is that I'm trying to place my love of running in a larger social context and use it as a vehicle to return something to the world. I hope that this will keep me from obsessing over my weight and body as I train. I've seen lots of runners at races broadcasting some larger purpose for running. They use a Sharpie to carefully scrawl the names of friends and family—one for each mile—on the back of their Coolmax jerseys. They train as a team to raise money for leukemia, or juvenile diabetes, or the Humane Society. They don't seem concerned with their weight or their finish time—these runners are joyful, fists in the air, brimming with endorphins and proudly championing their causes. I aspire to be more like this breed of runner.

This is why I am proudly telling party guests this summer that I am running a marathon for charity, running for my father.

My impetus to run for the American Cancer Society came from an exchange between my parents over last Christmas dinner. My father will be celebrating his sixtieth birthday in October, and he expressed a desire for a family party.

"I almost died when I was thirty," he said. "I'm pretty damn happy to see sixty."

My father was diagnosed with testicular cancer in his early thirties. He was healthy and fit at the time, he recalls that he felt immortal. One morning my father found a lump, a lump he was sure was harmless, but he decided to mention it as an afterthought at his annual physical later that week.

It was cancer.

My father was just starting a wonderful life for himself when cancer bludgeoned him. He had a young wife, a two year-old daughter, and an infant son. He was devoted to fitness (or obsessed, according to some) and he—like me—falsely believed his fitness was a panacea that would protect him from horrors such as cancer.

He was told he would die.

He didn't. Did he survive because he was physically fit, or did some larger strength of character help him evict the cancerous demons?

Or did survive because of pure luck, chance? Perhaps our ambition and physical prowess can only protect us to a certain point.

My father was my first running partner. He credits exercise and fitness as being an integral part of his successful recovery from cancer. Therefore, it makes sense to friends and family that I will be running a marathon to honor my father.

I do not tell most people that running for a larger cause is part of my own recovery from the compulsion to run that devoured me like its own brand of cancer. I need to run this marathon for charity so that my running becomes a philanthropic mission as opposed to something I use purely for self-benefit. I need to stop running to purge myself of perceived imperfections. Overcoming my addiction to perfection and low-self worth is the most difficult thing I've ever done, much more so than the physical act of training for the marathon. But now the race about much more than me- I have sponsors and supporters, and if I abuse my body as I did in the past I will not be able to use my race help fund cancer research and awareness programs. Just as Dad has healed I have faith that I too will heal.

For me running has been an experience that has both enriched and atrophied my life. I still struggle with issues of weight and nourishment and worth on a daily basis. However, my father has taught me that health is tenuous and fragile, so I'm doing my best to treat my body with kindness so it will happily carry me through the upcoming twenty-six mile marathon. By racing for a cause I am connecting running to the world, sending the act beyond just me and my body and my insecurities. I need to do this or I risk remaining skinny and isolated and nervous. I know that is not the kind of woman Dad envisioned I'd become.

I'm running for Dad.

A conversation with a mother

Sam Norman

She wants to know
what her son is learning in my class.
I want to say, "Not enough, never enough."

She tells me that I don't know her son.
I want to say, "Your son doesn't know himself."

She admonishes me that I never called
with my concerns.
I want to say "You received quarterly
progress reports and grades."

I want to tell her I was busy
teaching him independence,
self reliance, responsibility.

"I spoke to your son," I say.
"He understands."

Roadblocks

Rebecca Pilver

Every winter Donna, my co-worker, and I love to hike on the variety of trails that dissect the forests in Northeastern Connecticut. This winter was unusual. Snow, followed by freezing rain, and then weeks and weeks of frigid temperatures had left a thick crust of ice over the snow making it impossible to walk.

When a thaw finally did arrive one Saturday, Donna and I seized the opportunity to break away from the dry indoor heat into the fresh winter air. We had been working in our office all morning on our collaborative online projects. Two years earlier, Donna and I had schemed up the idea for these innovative projects. At the time, we felt they were on the track to helping schools break through the new landscape of Web2.0 technologies in a way that would help prepare students for the challenges of the twenty-first century. We had proposed the project concept to Bruce, our boss, hoping that he would see their potential and grant us days of freedom from other work obligations so that we could develop them. Despite our detailed charts we had prepared to illustrate how project development time would eventually lead to profit, Bruce could not justify supporting something that would not quickly bring in money. Donna and I believed strongly in our ideas so we decided to develop them on our own time. We spent countless evenings, weekends, and holidays working on them.

We decided to hike along the Blue Trail in the Natchaug State Forest. We parked my car at the base of Lyon's mountain in Eastford and drove Donna's four miles to the trailhead. The damp air felt cool and refreshing on our cheeks as we began our gentle climb to the top of the small mountain. The geometric patterns left in the soft mush by our hiking boots joined the small prints of deer, rabbits, and birds. Pine trees greeted us with their glistening ice covered limbs. The forest was still except for the percussion of ice hitting the ground as it let go of tree branches.

Donna's voice broke the silence. "I don't know if I can keep working on these projects in my free time. I am tired and frustrated. It seems like every time we make headway, we take two steps back."

"I know," I sighed. "I am so behind in my other work. But a part of me still believes that we are so close to getting funded that we can't give up now."

"If we don't do it, someone else will!" was the motto we frequently used to propel ourselves forward whenever our motivation dwindled. Several big names in the field of education and technology had expressed interest in our projects, energizing us at the prospect that maybe someone would discover us and see that supporting us was a worthwhile investment. It never happened.

"The sun feels so wonderful." I said, taking a long sip of fresh air. "It feels great to get outside."

As we walked and talked, we'd stop occasionally to examine scat or mysterious animal footprints on the trail. We navigated up the path, stepping over fallen birch trees, and shaking snow off of boughs that hung in front of us. As we continued to plod through the woods, our conversation turned back to work.

"Maybe we should give it until the end of this school year." Donna suggested. "We can finish the Nutmeg project and begin the Scientist project."

We fell quiet, contemplating Donna's words. Although we wanted to keep working until spring, we knew we could not possibly continue to manage these projects in addition to our full time jobs.

After steadily climbing for about forty-five minutes we reached the top of the ascent. Through the sparkling treetops we spotted the Natchaug River below us. Donna suggested we take a break. She turned her back to me so that I could access her pack and directed me to find a Ziploc bag containing her healthy version of rice crispy treats. Made out of organic crisped rice cereal, peanut butter, flaxseed and chocolate, the chewy bar satisfied the hunger I felt gnawing at my stomach.

I washed down the last of the treat with a big gulp of water. Wiping my mouth on the back of my glove, I said, "I wish that we could just figure out a way to make money doing these projects."

We capped our water bottles and tucked them into Donna's pack. We removed our jackets, tying them around our waists.

Donna turned to me.

"Rebecca," she said softly. "I think we need face reality. We have to quit. No more new projects."

I nodded in agreement, feeling both disappointed and relieved.

As we began our slow descent down toward the river, the slush was beginning to freeze. We cautiously sidestepped to avoid falling. As we approached the bottom, the trail turned right, running parallel to the river. The river was extremely high and moving fast under the thick ice that had been holding it captive for the last month. Water was erupting out of broken holes in the ice crust. It swirled back under huge chunks of ice, pulling with it any branches or debris that fell victim to it. The riverbank was hidden, leaving no visible line between the edge of the trail and the river. We were thankful that the path had leveled out, reassuring us that we would not slip into the icy river.

As we continued on the footpath, we hit upon a place where the trail had completely eroded due to massive amounts of frozen runoff. The ten-foot wide stream of ice ran down the side of the mountain into the river. We made an attempt to walk across, but our feet were unable to grip the surface. We tried to inch ourselves across on our hands and knees. It was hopeless. There was absolutely no chance of us crossing without careening into the angry river. Our eyes turned upward, searching for the source of the ice flow. The frozen ice slide extended far up the mountain. The end was nowhere in sight.

"I wonder if we can get across there?" Donna pointed to the edge of the river. In the center of the ice flow was an exposed rocky area and a tree.

Getting down on her butt, Donna maneuvered herself onto the ice. Grabbing her walking poles, she used one as an ice pick and the other as a lifeline. As I held firmly onto one end of the pole, she held the other end as she carefully worked her way over to the tree. She slowly stood up, wrapping her arms around the trunk in order to maintain balance on its exposed roots. "Now," she said, "if I can just get to the other side of this tree . . . I should be able to hop over to that rock." She slid her arms down the tree as she got onto her knees. She tried to shuffle herself around the tree but got tangled up in branches.

Donna stood up and said, “These poles are getting in the way.” She tossed one of her walking poles toward the rocks. It missed and it slid down towards the river. Holding onto the tree with her left hand, she leaned over as far as she could, stretching her right toward her stray pole.

“Donna!” I pleaded. “Just leave it! This is not going to work. Get out of there!” I was petrified that Donna was going to slide into the raging river. The image of her getting pulled under the thick ice that still covered much of the river made me shudder.

“I don’t think I’ll fall in the river,” she said, eyeing the distance between her and the pole. “I want that pole.” Donna was very proud of the twenty dollar walking poles she found at Ocean State Job Lot. To her, that wasn’t just a pole, that was a ten dollar bargain she needed to save.

“Donna, don’t you dare!” I screamed. “Don’t you dare try to get your pole. I’ll buy you a new damn pole!”

“Okay, okay” Donna said, giving in to my demands. “I’ll leave the frigin’ pole.” She started to inch her way back toward me.

“Grab my hand,” I demanded. Adrenaline rushing through me, I leaned over from where I was standing and reached for her. She took a hold of my hand and I pulled with all my strength. I hoisted her up and over the ice to safety.

The sun was starting to set. We had to reach my car before dark. It was too far to try to retrace our steps back to Donna’s car. How could we possibly get across this roadblock?

“If we climb up this hill, maybe we can find a spot where the ice either ends or narrows enough for us to cross.” I suggested. “I think it is our only chance.”

We surveyed the mountainside. It looked very different than the sunny evergreen lined side we had hiked up earlier. Disease or weather had left significant damage to the red cedar trees that had once grown here. Fallen twigs and branches stuck out of the snow. Sharp broken tree stumps protruded into the air like wooden spikes in a torture chamber.

Unfortunately, the dropping temperatures had caused the melting slush to refreeze. Unable to secure footing on the slick ground, we began to crawl up the mountain, using branches, logs, and rocks as handgrips and footholds. We clutched at tiny sprigs trapped in the snow as we pulled ourselves up the incline. It was like climbing a rock wall without any equipment. We were terrified we would make a fatal mistake and slide right into the rushing river below or get impaled by the cedar stakes poking out of the snow.

We slowly picked our way, stretching our limbs as we reached for the rocks and tree fragments. Our hands grew stiff and sore from clenching branches, hanging onto them for dear life. Sometimes the available footholds ended, forcing us to backtrack and try a different path. Sometimes we slipped, bruising ourselves on logs or branches that stopped us like balls in a pinball machine. Our pants felt cold and wet on our skin as we slid on our butts and crept on our knees.

Physically and emotionally exhausted, we finally found a place where the ice flow was narrow enough for us to cross. Once we got across the ice, we were disheartened to find that the damaged cedar forest was on the other side, causing us to continue our slow deliberate crawl as we descended back down the slippery slope.

It seemed like forever before we were off of the mountainside. We found the trail again, winding itself along the edge of the river. Hearing the sound of cars filled us with relief. We walked wearily out of the forest and onto the road.

“That was horrible!” I said. “I can’t believe we survived. We were so determined!”

We stopped. We stared at each other, our eyes widening. Donna’s lips quivered and then slowly turned up into a wide smile.

“Soooo . . .” she said. “Do you want to start the Scientist project tomorrow?”

“Yes!” I replied, and we ran to my car.

You Can Never Have Too Many Flowers

Millie Ramsey

“You can never have too many flowers,” Momma sighed,
devouring the glossy pages of her favorite snowbound read.

Magenta.

Blue. The palest Pink.

Red Hot Orange. Yellow or White.

As if hearing the sigh, spindly leaves stretched upward.

Four white pointed petals unfurled—as the snowdrops bowed their heads to the still frozen earth—oblivious to the mounds of snow piled high at the foot of their wintery bed.

“You can never have too many flowers,” friends chuckled.

Just outside the front door the smiling crocus hugged the barren cherry tree that waits patiently to dress herself in cotton candy-pink blossoms.

An explosion of colors.

Orange. White. Purple.

White. Purple. Orange.

Harbingers of renewal. A circle of friends.

A patchwork of colors—eternally there—to say “goodbye” each morning and “welcome home” each night.

“You can never have too many flowers,” Gramma laughed.

Daffodils stood tall and saluted the arrival of spring.

Sunbright Yellow, with orange center cups.

Peach Ruffles surrounded by white.

Yellow Double with centers so frilly.

White. Yellow. Mini, too.

Six varieties are surely enough!

“You can never have too many flowers,” I chuckled.

A bag of narcissus bulbs, promising a new wedding of colors,
will somehow find its way into the garage
in time for fall planting.

“You can never have too many flowers,” deer snorted.

Gone!!! The yearling, lime green tulip cups, with the pointy ruffled petals.

Gone!!! The yellow tulips with red stripes that blossomed at Ciocia’s house so long, long ago.

And the majestic purple, almost black tulips that have danced and multiplied for the past five years?

Will a morning garden walk reveal, yet another, midnight snack?

“You can never have too many flowers,” my sisters shared.

The swelling mounds of Ladys Mantle glistened in the early morning dew.

Droplets of water lie trapped by the tiny hairs that cover her leaves. Frilly. Circular. Chartreuse.

Her playmate, Coral Bells, blushes with tiny pink bells, climbing ever higher, on skyward stretching stems.

A warm summer breeze whistles through the garden as if to say ...

“You can never have too many flowers,” buzzed the busy bees.

Dress up day had arrived for the daylilies.

Beautifully adorned Yellow.

Orange. Mauve. Peach. Cream. Red.

They parade around the yard. One blossom a day, through the sweltering summer sun.

“You can never have too many flowers,” whispered summer’s treasured guests.

Butterfly and Humming bird.

Waving excitedly, the bristly heads of bee balm—Red, Pink, Purple—invited their friends to feast.

Not quite complete is a summer garden without coneflowers—Purple, Butterscotch, or White.

Graceful butterfly bushes with arched flower spikes—Purple, Pink, or Blue.

Don’t forget the Susans—black eyed and strong.

“You can never have too many flowers,” murmured the shadows.

Even the darkest garden corners beckon with their showy hosta leaves.

Heart shaped. Pointy tongued. Ribbed.

Large. Small. Sizes for all.

Green striped with white.

Steely, blue gray.

Yellow edged in green. Green edged in white.

Every hue of green. Every shade of white.

“You can never have too many flowers,” whistled the crisp, cool autumn winds.

Chrysanthemums—Golden Yellow.

Rusty Orange.

Royal Maroon.

Montauk Daisy, whiter than snow. Aster, ever so blue.

Roses—Yellow, Pink, Red—are blooming one last time, perfuming the fading light of day.

“You can never have too many flowers,” crooned Mother Earth as she called her children to rest.

It is time.

Sleep.

Grow strong through the long winter nights.

“You can never have too many flowers,” Momma sighed,
devouring the glossy pages of her favorite snowbound read.

Spring WILL return.

Bringing the promises of new life.

And once again, the snowdrops will bloom.

Paradox

Jenn Todisco

Today, she wakes up and reads the newspaper online.
Emptying her coffee grounds into the compost pile,
That borders her organic garden in the back yard.
Growing what she can and buying locally what she can't.

Tonight, rockets from a distant Asian country will shoot across the sky.

Today, she loads the recyclable cans and bottles into a hybrid car.
Arriving at the grocery store to sort and save, not just the nickels, but also the Earth.
Aluminum, plastic, glass.
Then into the store to shop, filling reusable bags.

Tonight, damaging heavy metals including aluminum, lead, mercury salts, and copper will rain down.

Today, it's business as usual.
Cleaning with homemade vinegar products,
Rags converted from old clothes.
Cooking healthy food and placing it in Rubbermaid containers,
Filling a thermos with sun tea.

Tonight, while smoke clouds the air and children scream out, hot debris and ash will litter her home.

Today, she did her part to save the Earth.
Packing up food, a bedsheet, and her brood.
Not to a bomb shelter, to the park for a picnic.

Tonight, the rules are broken,
The Earth be damned!
Toxic elements spark glittering effects.
The loud booms scare toddlers and pets.
One night a year, she can choose to ignore environmental and social duties,
It's Independence Day,
With fireworks and all their beauty!

Heaven

Jeanette Zissell

In heaven there will be hammocks
and good books
and all my dead pets
and one eternal midsummer afternoon

and Jesus will come by the porch
with some lemonade
and the cookies his mother just took from the oven
and we'll talk about our favorite times
together—
like the time I prayed for a better parking space
or the time when I was sixteen
and he gave me a hundred fireflies
in a cowfield—

and my mother's love
that hovered everywhere
like the fireflies did

Biographies

Teacher-Writers:

Denise Abercrombie (SI 07) teaches English and theatre and co-directs the writing center at E.O. Smith High School. A founding member of *Stage Left Ensemble*, Denise has performed existing and original shows at the Avery Point Playhouse, The Spirit of Broadway, Mystic Seaport, Windham Arts Annex, The Garde Arts Institute, and York Correctional. She has published poems in *Minnesota Review*, *Phoebe*, *Connecticut Review*, *Radiance*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Kalliope*, *Struggle*, *Fireweed*, *Common Ground Review*, *Writing on the Edge* and other journals. She lives in Storrs with her husband, Jon Andersen, and their two boys, Miles and Kit.

Joe Anastasio (SI 08) is an English teacher at Bacon Academy in Colchester, CT. In 2007, Joe received the Susan Bloom PEN Discovery Award for his young adult novel, *The Mist*, now under consideration at several publishing houses. He was also the 2007-08 Teacher of the Year at Bacon. He currently resides in Brooklyn, CT, with his wife, Beth, and three sons.

Jon Andersen (SI 09) lives in Storrs with his wife, fellow teacher and writer Denise Abercrombie, and their two sons, Kit and Miles. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Quinebaug Valley Community College and is the author of a book of poems, *Stomp and Sing* (Curbstone Press 2005), and the editor of *Seeds of Fire: Contemporary Poetry from the Other USA* (Smokestack Books - UK, 2008). Currently, he is working on a creative thesis for his M.A. in English at the University of Connecticut.

Erica “Ricki” Berg (SI 09) is an English teacher at Rockville High School in Vernon, Connecticut. Her passion is Young Adult literature, and she serves on the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award committee. She has published co-authored work in several academic journals. She is currently writing a young adult novel and hopes it will be published someday.

Kelly Brooks (SI 09) has called Montville High School her home for the past nine years, where she teaches English. She received her B.S. in Secondary Education-English from Western Connecticut State University and is currently working toward her MAT from Sacred Heart University. She lives in Lebanon with her high-school sweetheart and husband, Burr, and three-year-old daughter, Avery. Kelly is honored to become the sixth CWP TC at her school.

Barbara A. Campbell (SI 84) teaches at UConn-Hartford where she is both a Writing and Service Learning Fellow. Her book, *Inside the Club: Stories of the Employees of the former Lake Placid Club*, was published in December 2008. Her poetry has been published by Bard College and Seabury Western Theological Seminary. She lives in Farmington and likes snorkeling, knitting, and chocolate.

Victoria A. Galarza-Clifford (SI 09) is a Spanish Teacher at Montville High School. She loves to scrapbook since it helps her remember things that have happened to her and she is able to use those events in her writings. She has two children and a great husband who is a navy veteran. She thinks she was always meant to teach since she loves to hear her students speak their minds in Spanish.

Lynn Frazier (SI 09) lives in Columbia with her husband Rich and daughter Carlie and is currently teaching at Windham High School. She is a Freedom Writer teacher, and co-author of the newly released book, *Teaching Hope*, along with 149 Freedom Writer teachers from across the country and Canada. Currently, Lynn coaches an amazing group of award winning spoken word artists, ages 14-26, who call themselves The Young Poets.

Monica Giglio (SI 09) is the Curriculum Director for Putnam Public Schools. She lives in Manchester with her husband Edward Tyler and their two spoiled Havanese puppies. Since the Summer Institute, she has rediscovered her love of writing, and she owes it all to her incredible response group. Thanks, girls!

Lynn Hoffman's (SI 91) first collection of poetry, *Like Fire Catching Wind*, was published in 2006 by Antrim House Publishing. *True Story* (poem) aired on National Public Radio's "Open Forum." Her short screenplay, *Tic & Tiny*, was accepted at the 2009 CT Film Festival. Lynn is currently working on a feature screenplay. She is the Academic Advisor at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, a public arts magnet high school.

Julie Kieras (SI 09), a seventh grade Language Arts teacher in Windsor Locks, CT, where she was the 2008-09 Teacher of the Year, resides with her husband Matt and soon-to-be baby in East Hartford. Previously, Julie has been published as a freelance writer for several local newspapers as well as in trade and teen magazines. She pursues many interests other than writing such as quilting, baking, long-distance running, and she stays involved in the community by supervising the Newspaper Club and coaching the Cross Country team at her school as well as volunteering at her church.

Betsy Kowal (SI 09) has taught social studies at Griswold High School for the past fourteen years. She is an avid knitter who teaches classes at a shop in her small town. The mother of two grown daughters, she lives in Chepachet, Rhode Island with her husband Chris.

Hannah Magnan (SI 09) recently moved to Amston, CT with her husband Luke, two corgis, and a cat. When she's not vacuuming up animal fur, she is teaching British Literature at Bolton High School. She also enjoys reading, writing, running, and cooking.

Megan Magner (SI 09) is a Social Studies teacher at Edwin O. Smith High School in Storrs, CT, where she also serves as director of the school's writing center and coaches the girls' tennis team. Megan lives in Glastonbury with her husband Seth. In her free time she enjoys playing tennis, sailing, and reading good books.

Eileen McIntyre (SI 09) lives and works in South Glastonbury, CT. She teaches third grade at Nayaug Elementary School. Eileen enjoys reading and writing poetry.

Jennifer Bancroft McMunn (SI 09) teaches language arts and social studies at Mansfield Middle School. She has received both a Fulbright Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. She lives in Tolland with her husband, black lab, and two cats. Jenn also coaches track and cross country and enjoys running, hiking, and traveling.

Sam Norman (SI 09) is happily married to his wife Teri and has three wonderful children, Ben, Rebecca, and Dan. He is a teacher of English at Bacon Academy in Colchester where he is currently setting up a UConn-modeled writing lab. Sam received a B.A. in English Education from Clark University.

Rebecca Pilver (SI 09) currently teaches fourth grade at Hall Memorial School in Willington, CT. She previously taught fourth and second grade in Somers, CT for nine years until becoming a staff development specialist at EASTCONN, a regional educational service center in Willimantic, CT. She loves cycling, yoga, and gardening and lives in Willington, CT.

Millie Ramsey (SI 09) is currently a Reading Teacher at Sweeney Elementary School in Willimantic, CT. Prior to this she was a Special Education, Grade One, and Kindergarten teacher for 20 years in Columbia, CT, where she was Teacher of the Year in 1997 and which she has called her home for the past 30 years. Her passion for gardening spills into her community service projects and classroom each year. Gardening is a lot like teaching: spend a good deal of time readying the soil (children), have patience and persistence, and you will be rewarded with constant joy and beauty.

Jennifer Shaff (SI 95) teaches English at East Hartford High. She got her MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson, and her story "Leave of Absence" was published in *Best New American Voices 2006*, edited by Jane Smiley. One of her short stories has recently been featured in *What If?* by Pamela Painter and Anne Bernays, a book on how to teach fiction writing.

Steve Straight (SI 90) is professor of English and director of the poetry program at Manchester Community College. His first full-length book of poetry, *The Water Carrier*, was published by Curbstone Press in 2002 and is now in a second printing. He has given workshops on writing and teaching throughout the eastern United States and in Ireland.

Jennifer Todisco (SI 09) has worked as an English teacher at Coventry High School since 2004. Prior to teaching in Coventry, she earned a Masters Degree in Education from The University of Connecticut. She is currently The International Travelers Club advisor and has traveled with AP English students to London and Paris in the past, and will be traveling to Italy this spring.

Jeanette Zissell (SI 09) is a doctoral student in Medieval Studies at the University of Connecticut. She was the CWP Graduate Assistant in 2006-07. Despite, or perhaps because of the demands of her studies, she enjoys writing fiction in her spare time, and has nearly completed an unpublished novel, *Who Wasn't There*. Her academic interests include Middle English vernacular theology and literature, and her dissertation will focus on the theme of friendship in *Piers Plowman*.

Readers (along with CWP Director Jason Courtmanche):

Sean Frederick Forbes is the Assistant Director of the Creative Writing Program and a Ph.D. candidate in English at UConn. He is currently writing a creative dissertation, a book of poetry, titled *Providencia*.

Amber West is a poet, playwright and teaching artist with an MFA in Creative Writing from NYU. She is currently a Jacob K. Javits Fellow in UConn's English Ph.D. program and a literacy tutor at the Brooklyn Public Library in New York. She is also co-founder of Alphabet Arts (www.alphabetarts.org) whose puppet play, *City of Hamburgers*, is available for performances in area schools and community centers.

Jennifer Holley is a 2009-10 Graduate Student Dissertation Fellow at the UConn Humanities Institute. She received her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her writing has appeared in *The Yale Alumni Magazine*, *The Best of The Prose Poem*, *Connecticut Review*, and *The Southampton Review*.