

Segue

online literary journal



issue 10 fall 2011

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Issue 10 Fall 2011

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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions via email of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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VANESSA BLAKESLEE

Ed Dyess, Hero of Agoloma Point, April 22nd, 1942

We had been fighting the Japanese since February 8th, 1942, when we set out through the jungle with our mobile reserve unit to wipe out the Bataan Peninsula. With no planes left to fly, our commanding officer Ed Dyess trained with those of us remaining in the 21st Pursuit Squadron for infantry combat. In the entire 24th Pursuit Group, fighter pilots were put right into the front lines, air crews added wherever they needed men capable of fighting. Other grounded squadrons, we heard, had fallen into disorder and bad morale. But those of us who flew under Ed's command followed him without complaint even into the doom of earthly combat. For the past two weeks, we had held off the Japanese invaders on Agoloma Bay, stumbling on weary legs, our bodies weak from dysentery and a diet of rice accompanied by the occasional monkey or lizard that we shot in the jungle. Dates had evaporated into meaninglessness and only the faintest of realizations, that it was around Easter, marked time.

Then one night, Captain Dyess called for twenty volunteers to mop up the Japanese still holding out on Agoloma Point. All we had to fight them with were some battered Lewis guns, and we'd have to strike from behind enemy lines to have any chance in hell: land on the beach, surround their headquarters cave and blast them out; this was no milk run. Only three of us pilots signed up. A wingman never abandons his leader.

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Before daybreak, twenty-two of us were split between the two rowboats—ten soldiers under each of our commands, four Air Corps fighter pilots, some infantrymen and artillerymen, half a dozen Filipino scouts and some naval raiders who had come along the day before from the base at Mariveles for the action. In the hour before dawn, two naval whaleboats brought us from Mariveles to Agoloma Point on the western rim of Manila Bay. We had cleaned out the west coast of the Bataan Peninsula; the Japanese had been trying to clean us out across the neck of the peninsula by sending invasion barges along the China Sea coast and Manila Bay coast at night, which were coming closer to cracking our front lines every hour.

The Japanese left cornered on Agoloma Point were marine troops with plenty of snipers to boot, as we had discovered over the past two weeks of mixing it up with them in the stinking jungle. Even with our many pairs of keen eyes, the dense vegetation made visibility poor. They had special green uniforms and green nets and special rubber shoes they used to climb trees, which camouflaged them in the dark. As pilots we did not know the exact names of such sophisticated

infantry equipment, and this unnerved us as we were masters of precision. Some wore polished sabers hung at their waists. About fifty were still holed up there, or so we had estimated the day before.

Each of us had rigged up our old Lewis guns from the First World War on leather shoulder harnesses so we could fire them from the hip. And because the guns got too hot, each of us also had an oven mitt which we'd scrounged up at Mariveles the night before. The Lewis guns worked but we'd still need divine intervention.

Now we waited in the rowboats about two hundred yards offshore, a clear early morning sky overhead and a faint sea breeze rippling our parched skin. We made things worse by picturing the bandits hidden in the steep jungle terrain of the point, invisible as the sounds of their guns, amorphous green men who stopped to gawk through field glasses or to spy on radios while they awaited us. Other Japanese fanned out in the jungle and plastered leaves all over their bodies up in the trees, tied themselves into position, and overlooked the paths from the beach to the point, with short, stubby sniper rifles at their sides. In the rowboats we exchanged glances fleeting as contrails that disclosed our collective imagination.

Captain Dyess (his surname used to be "Dyes" but he thought it bad luck) sat in the first rowboat slightly closer to shore at two o'clock, watching the Japanese headquarters on the end of the peninsula with badly scratched field glasses, his tan pilot's shirt untucked from his belt. We knew him as Ed, Eddie mostly. He'd been in every kind of land and air operation that can be fought and living on rice and lizards for so long that when you caught a glimpse of him from the side you wondered how he could even stand upright with a Lewis gun. His thinness made him a walking reminder of the close proximity of death, which couldn't be ignored by any of the men in the boats. Ed had a talent for bringing together unusual elements to forge a path where one didn't exist, and fast—today's armaments, for example. Like a holy man in a crowd, Ed fueled our desire (wavering on land but always naturally relentless to the very best who flew P-40s) to seek the action rather than cower and allow it to seek us.

A Japanese dive bomber flew over the beach below the cliff, where there was a big rock painted white. He opened his belly over the beach, where a large cardboard box full of supplies fell out and landed close to the sharp white rock. He tipped his wing, and a few Japanese ran down the cliff to the beach to bring the supply box back up. The Japanese showed no fear in running out to the open beach. They made their way down the cliff face quick and sure, without rifles, as if to taunt us to doubt their confidence, as though they knew something we didn't about the whole invasion and so didn't have to worry about us coming to wipe them off this peninsula.

The men in the rowboats shifted in their seats and prayed.

One of the Filipinos said, "Mother of God, there better only be fifty of them and not a hundred."

We felt as if we were at the edge of something galactic, rising from all sides like a tidal wave. In quieter moments we were aware of the other side of the world where brothers and sisters still set out the empty bottles for the milkman and gathered around the radio like a warm fire. We could not let this tide of starvation and filth, the rice that tasted like boiled straw and the constant coat of dirty sweat, to touch them.

The two naval whale boats, armed with thirty-seven millimeter cannons and twin fifty-caliber machine guns, led us in first. Ed signaled to our boat and shouted at us to get ready.

The whale boats cut us loose offshore and all of us let go with everything we had toward their headquarters cave along the cliff at the end of Agoloma Point. We did fine with the Lewis guns until nine dive bombers came along, and they sank one of the whale boats, diving and firing down at us. Our men left the rowboats and headed in for shore, the Filipinos firing back at the bombers low overhead, like they could bring down all of them.

One of the other pilots, the First Lieutenant said, "I knew this would be tough but Eddie wasn't kidding when he called it a goddamn suicide mission."

The gunfire blasted huge sprays of sand up into our faces.

A Filipino scout was hit climbing out of our boat. One of the naval raiders ran back for him. As the raider dragged the scout over the side, a bomber came along real low and strafed them dead. The rest of the men kept going in.

Phist, phist went the sand. Daylight began to shine, illuminating little sections of jungle along the beach. Smoke from the Japanese machine gunners wafted out from the brush along the cliff and drifted up through the trees.

Ed Dyess went for the right side of the beach with his men, sprinting ahead on that skinny frame of his and the old Lewis gun in his hands, shooting it from his hip, the oven mitt pressed against the barrel.

He yelled, "Come on out, you pillaging lizards! Remember how we came knocking real nice yesterday and offered all the honors of war? Now we're back! We're sure sick of eating rice. We want to go home to our land of beef steaks."

We veered off to the left to head for the cave up the cliff from the other side, but one of the men with us blocked the path and said, "The Captain needs us." A bullet nabbed him in the neck and he sunk to the ground. The scout behind us checked but he was gone, a red spurt of blood spraying up in an arc.

In moments like this, we could envision the world before us only as breathing or bleeding, the jungle turned into a prison of death.

A Japanese sniper could hide so well in the canopy that you could look straight at him and never see him. A few weeks back, a Filipino soldier on the path near our camp got shot and the Doc called some of us over, and we all went to the place where the Filipino went down and searched for two and half hours without finding the sniper. In less than five minutes, only seven of us remained from the eleven we had started out with this morning in our rowboat.

I said to the second lieutenant pilot, "Better go back and follow Ed 'cause he's got the match to my oven mitt, and if I'm going to die today with an oven mitt it's at least got to have a matching one. Won't look right showing up at Heaven all mismatched."

The lieutenant replied, "You know the trouble the two of you got me into with this? I had to wrestle it from a Filipino cook and then she jumped all over me. She left me in the alleyway with my dick hard and holding onto this goddamn stupid mitt."

I said, "Told you to watch out for the cooks. They don't know what to do, what with only rice to prepare."

Fatigue along with a steady rice and feral protein diet made us half-crazy.

We hacked through the jungle, heading for our friends, seeking camaraderie in death's labyrinth, trembling in the heat with our bolo knives. The Japanese seemed like ghosts in the jungle, any noise they made moving chased by chugging bursts of gunfire. Any pilot who had seen

flying as a game even remotely, hadn't made it this far but was back in Mariveles. The last weeks' assignment in the jungle had left those cocky types stripped, broken, because all of a sudden, we were back on land like we were hunting back home and without our steeds; beyond medieval, it was primeval. Other flyers like Dyess who didn't break down, arose like mythical creatures now shape-shifted to land. Dyess didn't see the land business as a game but played his own role with a certain upbeat attitude of mockery—whether for himself or for us, it was impossible to tell. All the enthusiasm of sport with none of the delusions of pride, like he knew the fighting was serious yet absurd at the same time. This balled up in his spirit; we had never seen anything like it. We were under his spell; we would follow him to the ends of the earth and even into hell which was how we found ourselves here. During those weeks in this jungle on Agoloma Bay, he became half man, half God. One pilot even coined him Aeneas.

Two other men from our rowboat were eaten up by gunfire. No one doubted that if Ed got killed, we wouldn't make it off Agoloma Point alive.

Eddie alone met us and said thank God, that the Japanese held up were hunkered in the brush by the cave that the five of us had to circle around. As he said this, the second lieutenant gasped and dropped. The four of us hit the ground, rolled into the brush and dragged the lieutenant over by his feet. No use; the bullet hole stared out of his forehead like a third eye. The Filipino made a quick sign of the cross over the dead lieutenant's chest; Ed swiped the oven mitt and stuffed it down the back of his pants' waist.

"For good luck?" I asked. "Not like we need any extra."

"Seat cushion," he muttered.

The Filipino caught a snort of laughter.

We circled around, our hips sore from the weight of the Lewis guns. Outnumbered in that jungle, pressing ahead for the enemy to swarm out shouting and firing from the cave, we traveled in a zone ensnared by darkness and vines and thorns like fishhooks. Light came down in patches.

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Everything seemed certain and tangled. We had made it to this same spot at Agoloma Point the day before. At noon yesterday, we had yelled over the cliff toward their cave and promised them an admirable surrender with all the honors of battle. In return we received a hail of gunfire, and the raising of flags showing these crack marine troops had been in every Japanese campaign in China since the last world war. Obviously, the Japanese are not soldiers taught to surrender but to die. Today they fired into the brush over the side of the cliff (*phist, phist* against the sandy rock), making us split up and approach from different sides toward the cave.

Wielding our Lewis guns with our oven mitts, we turned loose and kept at them for four hours, firing at any movement in the brush. A ledge, too steep to climb, covered us on the left side. The Japanese bullets bounced off the ledge and towards the sea, thankfully. Ed was using an uprooted stump for cover on the flank. The gunners kept missing him.

"Think this might end like some Greek tragedy?" I asked between hails of gunfire.

"Why?" Ed answered, huffing. "That how you want it to end?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just want it to end."

Ed returned with a burst of gunfire, wielding his gun like a fireman's hose, as if by visualization alone he was able to implant each bullet into its target. Then, panting and weak, he said, "You know you could have invented some disease. A brittle bone disorder or eyesight like a fruit bat would've kept you at home, roasting chestnuts with your chin between your girl's tits right now. Bullshit if you tell yourself any different."

Because we were certain we knew our commander like our fathers and older brothers, we had no doubt that what he said was true. Although something in his delivery sounded unusual, doubtful.

Suddenly, the first lieutenant got hit three times in the spine, *pow, pow, pow!* We noticed one of the Japanese bodies move—they are famous for playing dead to trap unwary enemies—and this one had a leaf over his face for courtesy while his stomach was moving, drawing in air. The Filipino nodded and aimed. We blew his head off.

The first lieutenant didn't stir. Only three of us remained.

"What'd you rather be doing?" I asked Ed.

"You mean rather than starving and stinking and killing?" he said. "I wouldn't mind being a Hollywood actor."

"You've got the swashbuckling part down," I said.

"Do I?" he said with a scoff, as if he didn't believe it. "Every role has its perks, once you figure out your angle. Only one role I would flat-out refuse."

Gunfire bit the ground a few feet in front of us.

"Jesus," Dyess said.

"Damn right," I answered. "Too close."

"Never could pull that one off," he went on. "But until I land the opportunity, I've got to make the best out of this war. Save the world? Better to save yourself."

This rippled through us like a tsumani, especially the Filipino who clutched his crucifix and eyed the Captain as if he's just announced that he'd like to hop the first bomber to the underworld. Somehow it had never occurred to us that Ed might not, did not, want to be there just like we didn't and kept such desires hidden. Before this we'd only believed Dyess loved every minute of the fight—land or sea or air. But now we glimpsed the true Dyess—a man we didn't know at all. Did any one of us fighting over those long weeks even come close to seeing each other's souls, these men we'd crouched alongside and shuddered shaky breaths, whose asses we'd covered from death while they tromped off to shit in a jungle thicket?

How spirited and primitive we were, in the roles we'd cast ourselves.

The three of us gawked in silence: green uniformed bodies dead at the thirty-seven millimeter cannons, slumped officers cradling army cameras, and dying soldiers moaning with sabers drawn, their guts spilling out onto their knees.

The Filipino said, "Let's get the rest of them," showed his face over the ledge and got blown away, staring. He scrolled down the cliff, limbs askew. At the bottom, his body looked like a piece of driftwood propped against the white rock they used as a drop zone marker. The Japanese were blasting the ledge with everything they had.

Ed signaled that he saw three in the cave, then motioned that we move in. The Japanese had stopped shooting. We lifted our guns, the hot, blackened mitts over our hands cramped from the firing. Ed Dyess charged, shouting, "Surrender to your new emperor, boys!"

The one Japanese gave up. His fellow comrades ignored him and aimed their guns, which the traitor among them didn't like too much because he took his sidearm and shot them each in the back then surrendered himself. He was the only Japanese to surrender in the whole lot.

Our POW had a saber at his waist which we tossed into the brush and a pair of nice field glasses Ed took and slung around his neck. Ed kept him outside the cave and searched his little green uniform with one hand and kept the other in the oven mitt. The POW stared at Ed's oven mitt as if he maybe had a stump for a hand, some reason for a strange disguise. We went through the cave, going through the intelligence, and grabbed maps that proved they knew every detail of our rear air defense. Ed, ready to black out from hunger and heat, found some pans of cooked rice and fish and took the mitt off to shove a handful into his mouth. The POW made some protest, and Ed nudged him with the Lewis gun between swallows.

On land as in the air, we had been proud of our kills, felt a certain satisfaction and buried the rest, until today. Burying had not factored so much in the kills of the skies. But on land we'd spilled so much blood, we got used to burying more of ourselves with each death, ally or enemy, because Ed had seemed to and we aspired to be like him in everything. He had played his role so convincingly, with such spirit. Is there shame in playing war when the stakes are death? Or is the only shame in forgetting the play and believing the war?

Ed Dyess, making his way back onto the beach with the POW out in front, said, "They got everything prepared to the last tiny detail, but I don't think they expected to be jumped by two skinny cats with Lewis guns and oven mitts."

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Three weeks later, all of us Air Corps fighter pilots back flying, the Japanese busted our lines clean open and Bataan fell. Ed Dyess was our commanding officer. The Japanese swept through and soon fighting broke out on the edge of our aerodrome. Trucks burned along the roads. We ran to our planes in the field, eyes watering from the smoke and fumes. (*Phist, phist, scheew, schoom* went the shots). We were scheduled to fly a mission, but Ed Dyess met us at the planes. Our worn-out men rushed with leaden steps. Without a helmet and armed only with a .45, Ed surveyed us from his jeep below with sunken eyes.

The crew worked fast, taking cover from explosions every couple of minutes. The chaplain pulling double-duty as maintenance mechanic prayed for us aloud as he worked and promised we would be absolved of our sins by the time they pulled chocks. Ed Dyess climbed onto the wing and leaned over the cockpit with his oven mitt tucked into his waist.

"Fly like hell, I think it won't be as easy as wiping them off that rock but good luck."

"I forgot my mitt but it might give me trouble at the controls—"

On the edge of the aerodrome, a huge explosion blasted flames and dirt high over the trees. Ed Dyess clutched the side of the cockpit, his sunken face and chest framed against the lit up evening sky and the black artillery smoke. The chaplain came up and shouted for him to get off the wing, thumping the side of the plane that it was time to go.

On the ground Dyess held the oven mitt overhead as he sent us off; the loon was probably grinning.

The Japanese had fought us for four-and-a-half months. Every day, Ed and the rest of us had fought back. We had killed snipers in the jungle of Agoloma Point without knowing it. When we returned a few days later to remove the remaining maps and intelligence from the cave, the treetops above us stank of rotting flesh, and flies clustered thick on the leaves. Now in a few minutes, their fellow soldiers would swarm the aerodrome, killing and maiming and taking the Filipinos and Americans who were left prisoner.

As a captain, Ed could have easily taken the mission himself, and nobody would have blamed him. Instead he told us to drop our fragmentation bombs on the Japanese, strafe them and then head south and not come back.

What part of Dyess wanted to play savior and stay behind to burn and starve with the rest of our men? Yet he was devoted to himself, the part he let roam free to humor us along the way.

Only then did we fire not out of revenge for lost buddies or mere survival but something else. The enemy shot away our landing gears and hydraulic systems as we lifted over their heads at the edge of the field. We dropped our bombs on a Japanese concentration coming across a bridge farther north and emptied our machine guns on them in low-level strafing. Our guns emptied quickly and our desire opened up like a gulf into the sea. We fought because more than anything, we didn't want to shoot and kill Japanese, strangers who had meant nothing to us before and still don't. But the better we performed our roles, the closer we came to waking up the next morning as Hollywood actors and newspaper editors and ranchers. We hoped that we killed many, which was all we could do. We got away to the south and hitched a ride out of Ilo Ilo on General Royce's bombers to Darwin. Because we have ourselves to gain and nothing but our skins to shed, for sure we'll be back soon to strafe and bomb, and to kill.

JEANNIE GALEAZZI

Fan Club

Saturday afternoon at bustling Café Thalassa Java overlooking San Francisco Bay, Alexander “Sasha” Smith, forty-two, was cleaning up the tabletop mess his son Dmitri had made with the *loukamades*—fried doughballs drizzled with honey—and doing his best to ignore the way Dmitri was squinting up at him through eyes like black tacks anchoring an onion-dome nose. The boy had broadened and squared over the past fifteen years to resemble a steam roller, not quite the image that Sasha’s late-lamented wife had put forward (two years into their lovely uncomplicated marriage) when she’d broached the subject of adoption. Uxorious to the end and unable to say no, Sasha had let himself be shanghaied into fatherhood, and now saw no way out.

And, as he grimly wiped his son’s slack lips, he really didn’t appreciate hearing their tablemate, Regina Maria Rinaldi, say, “*Yuck.*” Reggie was a window-washer on her brother’s crew at Rinaldi Sure Shine, and she looked the part with her tousle of black curls sprouting red at the roots, her blunt nose and wind-scoured cheekbones framing keen eyes colored a laundered blue. Sasha had been seeing her for about a month now, the shaky result of a blind date. After his wife’s death six years ago, it had taken him three years to start dating, and by now he’d nearly given up on finding a companion for himself who stood any chance of doubling as a mother for his challenging son. But Reggie hung on, as desperate as Sasha yet plainly all wrong for him just as he was all wrong for her and Dmitri was all wrong for the world. For days now, Sasha had been agonizing over how best—how soon—to let her down gently. “*Yuck indeed,*” he replied, still plying the napkin. “You know, Reggie, it might be a good idea—”

“*What,*” she said, startling him with one of her abrupt utterances. She’d been straightforward about her problem, about rehab and recovery, and not once in the past month had she sounded, acted, looked, or smelled under-the-influence. “*What,*” she said.

Sasha continued, “For you and Dmitri to get your afternoon under way before Nuccia and Xari arrive for their interview.”

“*Nuh!*” said Dmitri, getting his face mopped.

“*Too late,*” said Reggie. “*Here’s Noochie now.*”

Sasha glanced perhaps too rapturously toward the bright doorway and saw Nuccia Rinaldi, thirty-five to Reggie’s thirty-nine, threading toward them between the tables with her portfolio under her arm, her voluminous red curls backlit in a fiery haze. Sasha rose from his chair but hung back as the sisters exchanged a hug, Reggie in the usual jeans and sweatshirt, Nuccia in a bronze 1920s-style tea dress with a black velvet sash, doubtless one of her own designs. Sasha, resuming his seat in his coffee slacks and cinnabar pullover, felt overdressed for one Rinaldi and underdressed for the other. Reggie sat her sister down in the chair next to her own, opposite Dmitri.

At whom Nuccia did not glance; she nodded at Sasha. “*Hello again,*” she said. They’d met last weekend at an ill-fated family birthday party. “*Thanks so much for arranging this meeting with Xari LaVraïette. I’ve always wanted to try my hand at theater costuming.*”

“*You’re most welcome,*” said Sasha, admiring the sisters side by side, tracing their shared

bone structure under the filigree lyricism of Nuccia's features and the armored epic cast of Reggie's (Reggie, no second fiddle, led the brass). He'd been amazed to learn that Nuccia was single. "But it's Reggie who deserves the thanks. It was her idea."

Reggie nudged her sister. "Anything to jump-start your fashion career."

Nuccia nudged her back. "And to get a look at this old flame of your beau's."

"Whatever."

Sasha ignored this reference to Anaxàrete "Xari" LaVraïette, a longtime friend with whom Sasha, since Vera's death, had spent the occasional recreational night according to the ebb and flow of men in Xari's life and to the trickle of women in Sasha's.

An Aztec-looking gal in a blue apron whisked up to their table with three espressos on a tray. "Compliments of Ms. LaVraïette," she said and, with a flourish that showed off the words "Fractal Queen" tattooed in Gothic script across her wrist, set a coffee at every place but Dmitri's. "Ms. LaVraïette called, stuck in traffic, ten more minutes."

Sasha smiled up at the girl; ten Xari-minutes meant twenty. "Thank you."

The Fractal Queen blushed at him and scurried back to the counter.

Nuccia leaned teasingly toward Reggie. "Better hang on tight to this lanky, luscious man of yours, Sis. *Someone* sure developed a lightning crush on him."

"Huh," said Reggie. "I could take her."

Sasha pretended not to have heard. Dmitri engulfed another doughball with an obscene smack of lips. Sasha sent the sisters a tense smile; tensely, they smiled back.

Sasha turned in quiet despair toward the window and feigned absorption in the tugboat traffic out on the bay. Vera and her obsession with adopting. At the outset of the application ordeal, Sasha had suggested they seek an Asian child, preferably Korean and of school age, but Vera had insisted on Russian—"a baby boy," she said, "a little Sasha *for* Sasha"—since she herself was blessed with so much Kim family nearby, and since Sasha had no one.

And at the airport fifteen years ago, standing breathless at the gate, Vera had hugged Sasha's arm as they'd watched the zombified passengers disembarking from their flight. Any minute now, surely, a matronly Russian flight attendant would emerge from that tunnel, all fond smiles, with a sweet-dreams infant swaddled in the downiest of blankets. But the passenger stream dwindled and ceased. No flight attendant. No downy bundle. Sasha looked at Vera; Vera looked at Sasha. Next moment, from the bowels of the tunnel, there rose an exorcistic shrieking and a deluge of guttural epithets that Sasha did *not* translate for his wife. A ruddy-faced man in a captain's cap came barging out at them, thrust into their arms a foul-smelling buzz-saw, and marched back down the tunnel. No papers. Nothing. That was their introduction to Dmitri.

Despite the harrowing assessments from doctors and psychologists, despite the child's utter intractability and the horror-show dawning of his physical abnormalities, Vera swore to mold Dmitri into a citizen. Years later, in dropping dead from food poisoning (her system weakened, Sasha believed, by Dmitri-induced stress), Vera had been spared the latest expulsions from schools and ejections from restaurants, the banishments from play groups and boycotts by babysitters, the retreat of the Kim family. Countless times, around other people, Sasha had intuited the unspoken refrain, "Put the kid in a home," or its variant, spoken firmly by pamphlet-proffering administrators, "There are 'places' for people like your son." Sasha still had the pamphlets.

Now, staring out at the tugboats schlepping their barges across the bay, he riffed his thumb over the pages of *War and Peace*, the new translation, a chunk of which he still needed to prepare for next week's recording sessions. He was banking on prep time this afternoon while Nuccia had her interview and while Reggie and Dmitri went off together to Fisherman's Wharf in yet another attempt (at least on Reggie's part) to bond. Overhead, hidden speakers wafted forth the strum of a bouzouki and the *chik-ching* of a tambourine, the placid tune mingling with aromas of coffee beans and honeyed pastries but doing little to mitigate the silence shrouding their table. Was there nothing to say?

Nuccia perked up. "This place is a dream," she said, gesturing at the whitewashed chairs and tables, the walls painted an Aegean sapphire glittering with swirls of mirrored tiles, blue ceiling fans to match. "Xari's the cash behind it all?"

"And the brains and soul," said Sasha. "Xari's quite proud of her Greek-Tunisian heritage, as she'll be the first to tell you in her New Jersey Franglais."

"Can't wait to meet her," said Nuccia, and reached for her espresso. Dmitri leaned across the table toward Reggie and, with great purpose, belched. Reggie simmered at him. Nuccia sipped her espresso, made a fleeting face, and set the cup down. "So," she said, "a café and a theater company. Any danger Xari's spreading herself too thin?"

"Xari has a knack," said Sasha, treading cautiously, aiming to present his glamorous associate in a light that was positive (for Nuccia's ears) but not too positive (for Reggie's), "a gift for hiring talent capable of managing itself."

"Nuh!" said Dmitri, his eyelashes caked with crumbs. Patrons at neighboring tables had turned their chairs away from the spectacle, fed up with being broad-minded, all-embracing, anything-goes San Franciscans. Two couples with kids had already decamped. Sasha couldn't blame them, though he did wonder if those parents had any inkling what luck they'd enjoyed in the breeding lottery, how narrow had been their escape: one false chromosome, and everyone's life in shambles. He doubled up on napkins and tackled Dmitri's latest mess.

The Fractal Queen breezed by their table. "Still stuck. Ten more minutes. Sorry."

Sasha nodded thanks, and the girl scuttled off.

Nuccia rolled her neck. "Oof. Stress *me* out."

Reggie scooted her chair back and stood up. "Okay, Dmitri. If you're done staring at my sister's tits, let's go. Sasha? Keys."

Nuccia frowned. "Go where? Keys to what?"

Sasha fished the keys to the Volvo out of his pocket and handed them over to Reggie. To Nuccia, he said, "Dmitri doesn't 'walk,' and he doesn't 'do' public transportation."

"Wait," said Nuccia. "Reggie's driving? But—"

And here Sasha glimpsed, if he wasn't mistaken, a rapid-fire exchange of eye signals: flash—*flare*—FLASH. "Of course I'm driving," said Reggie, looking hard at her sister. "I've been *driving* since I was thirteen, tootling around in Pops's window-washing vans."

Nuccia bit her lip and shook her head.

"The main thing is, Reggie," said Sasha, baffled by the to-do about the keys, but acutely wishing Dmitri gone before the arrival of Xari LaVraïette, a disdainer of children of all stripes, "Dmitri *must* ride in the back seat, away from the controls."

"Aye aye, Cap'n," said Reggie.

“And please be extra-vigilant around other children,” said Sasha. No question, Reggie would know what he meant. Just last night they’d quarreled over the latest incident, an arrested bout of grappling between Dmitri and a young lady in his motor-skills group. Sasha had said, “*I am not going to cloister the boy away for my own convenience,*” to which Reggie had said, “*What are you waiting for, a rape?*”

“*Extra-vigilant. Right,*” said Reggie now, and faced Dmitri. “Ready?”

Dmitri blinked up at her and lugged himself compliantly enough to his feet, but then sank into a crouch and backed away, a wicked leer contorting his features.

Reggie twitched her lips, clearly unimpressed. “All right, I’m off to the Wharf,” she said, and pivoted toward the exit as, over her shoulder, she added, “but whatever you do, Dmitri, *don’t follow me.*” With that, she sauntered off.

Dmitri hesitated, visibly befuddled, then grabbed his windbreaker off his chair and went lumbering after her. The relief at nearby tables was palpable. Sasha turned to Nuccia in mute wonder.

Nuccia shook her head. “Boy,” she said, “I don’t know who’s braver, you or Reg.”

“Reggie. No contest.” Sasha busied himself piling the soiled napkins onto his son’s plate, all too conscious of being alone with this knockout of a woman at whom (because of Dmitri and, to some extent, because of Reggie) he had no chance. “Sorry about the delay,” he said. “Xari runs on Xari Time.”

Nuccia fluttered her fingers at the espressos. “Aren’t you having any?”

“Oh, I’m jittery enough already with Reggie and Dmitri off together in the car for the first time, and—”

“And *me* sizing you up for my report to the famiglia,” said Nuccia with a laugh, her eyes glinting green like shards of glass at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Not much point in that, alas. Dmitri and I wore out our welcome in record time.”

“What, the birthday cake? Pff! An accident.”

“Nuccia.”

“Okay, no accident.”

Sasha winced at the memory of the birthday party for Reggie’s little nephew over at her brother Lolo’s house, at the memory of Nuccia, stationed at a card table in her jade chiffon party dress, slicing a gigantic frilly-white coconut cake; standing next to her was Lolo’s wife Trish, party-clad as well and manning a punch bowl brimming with a liquid of radioactive pinkness. Nuccia had just offered a towering slice to Dmitri, but Sasha, wary of sugar, had stepped in and said, “*No, thank you, we’ll have to pass,*” upon which Nuccia had retracted the plate, and Dmitri—with zero warning—rammed the card table. The table flipped. The party guests squealed and scampered, and Reggie shouted “*No!*” just as Lolo dove, too late, to save the punch bowl. Nuccia and Trish were wearing the cake. Sasha had staggered back from the wreckage, longing for sudden death.

Across from him now, Nuccia tucked a strawberry-ginger curl behind her ear. “Lolo and I were cracking up about it later, after the clean-up. Trish wasn’t amused, but that’s Trish. It’s from growing up ignored around her mother’s show dogs.”

Sasha mustered a rueful smile.

“Gotta hand it to her, though,” Nuccia went on, “she’s got guts to have kids at all. Me, I could never. I mean, there’s the outside world, all the bullies and sickos and predators...” She paused. “And then there’s the inside world, all that bad programming.”

Sasha sensed a shift to a darker tone. “Programming?”

Nuccia rested her fingertips on the rim of her espresso cup, her gaze on her hand. “Genetics, patterns. Nature versus, um, nurture. Our loudmouth lush of a dad was kinda slap-happy—you know?—belt-happy.” Nuccia locked eyes with Sasha. “Let’s just say, if that was *my* kid who’d capsized that cake, there’d be nothing left of his ass. And Reggie was brought up the same as me.”

All at once, over his chest, Sasha felt a spreading bib of frost. He’d suspected some sort of abuse in Reggie’s background—and he could *guess* at the DMV record of a recovering alcoholic—and yet, to clear the kid out for Nuccia’s interview with Xari, he’d entrusted his son and car to Reggie’s care. And he’d done so despite the years that he and his late wife had spent *modeling* good behavior for their son rather than pounding it into the boy, rather than teaching violence to a volatile child. Though Sasha had never shared Vera’s faith that Dmitri’s life would blossom into a tale of heroic disability wherein Society is shown to be more handicapped than the stunted saint in question, he now denied himself this or any excuse. If, today at the Wharf, something were to “happen,” the guilt—in Sasha’s heart, in a jury’s eyes—could only be his own.

Nuccia was looking at him funny. Sasha snapped out of it and said, “Maybe so, but there’s no denying the fine job your brother’s doing of raising your niece and nephew.”

“Lolo and I don’t drink,” said Nuccia. “I don’t go to church, but Lolo won’t even taste communion wine for fear of triggering the family curse.” She bent her elbow in a pantomime of drinking. “You know about the curse?”

“Reggie told me the day we met.”

“Then you also know she’s sober again, doing better than we ever imagined.”

Sasha faltered over the “*again*” and the “*ever imagined*,” but said, “Yes.”

Nuccia nodded. “Oh, Lolo and I have our vices, too. For him, it’s pasta with cream sauce. For me, it’s rock-climbing.” She tossed Sasha a grin. “How ’bout you, any vices?”

“None I’ve had time to cultivate.”

“You should try rock-climbing.”

“I’m not insane.”

“Yet.” Nuccia flicked her gaze toward Dmitri’s chair. “Well, just wanted to give you a heads-up about us Rinaldis. But Reggie’s a great gal, and she won’t go blowing it now when she’s finally snagged herself a real gentleman.” Nuccia tipped her head back with a choked little laugh and added, “Hell, I’d make a play for you myself if it weren’t for, well”—another glance at Dmitri’s chair—“*you* know.” She fanned herself with both hands. “Whew! Okay, disclaimer over.”

Stunned at this confession (if indeed it *was* a confession), Sasha pried his gaze off Nuccia’s face and funneled it up at the spinning ceiling fans, their sapphire-blue blades tipped with chips of mirror to evoke the sun-dappled Aegean, their hum and flutter reminiscent of Vera years ago—and perhaps even now in spirit—hovering with determined cheer over her two “men.” Sasha wondered what Vera would think of him dating bad-ass Reggie and yearning for Reggie’s Pre-Raphaelite corker of a sister. Sasha wondered if it should still matter so much what Vera would think.

The Fractal Queen swept up to their table. “Ms. LaVraïette is parking, two minutes,” she said, and flitted off.

Nuccia pushed the espressos aside and hefted her portfolio onto the table. “Moment of truth,” she said, all brightness as she unzipped the case on a tumble of photos and clippings and sketches and swatches, the spill as kaleidoscopic and merry as a life-with-Nuccia would be. Sasha, unable to take much more, rose from his seat and collected *War and Peace*. Nuccia glanced up in surprise. “Where are *you* going?”

“Off to prep my chapters.”

“Now?”

“I’ll pop back over to make introductions,” said Sasha, and hastened across the café’s bouzouki-addled hubbub to the one table still free. He sat down facing the front door, through which Xari would soon make her grand entrance, and opened his book to Monday’s battle scene. Battle-fatigued himself and weary of scrapping for doomed notions and vain inches of turf, he uncapped his yellow highlighter and set about reading, singling out words and phrases to serve as targets during the recording session, textual geese to perk him up at the microphone, verbal life rafts to save him from drowning if only Tolstoi were *any* match for the sun-drenched view of Nuccia Rinaldi, her gravitational pull subverting the tides.

Sasha redoubled his efforts to read, but all pretence came to a halt when the café’s front door burst open on a piercing yowl to admit—not Xari LaVraïette, but—Reggie, dragging by the hand into the suddenly-silent milieu a balking and bawling Dmitri. Sasha vaulted out of his chair, attracting his son’s notice, and the boy jerked free of Reggie and came barreling over and drilled himself face-first into Sasha’s stomach. Sasha went taut against the impact and felt cold fingers wrap around his heart and squeeze it in an icy fist that would let loose no words of inquiry or gestures of comfort, no dribbles of the fatherly warmth that is any child’s due.

Reggie strode up to them. “We never made it to the Wharf,” she said in a tight voice over Dmitri’s wailing. “Girl Scouts. Selling cookies.”

“Oh, no,” said Sasha.

“Oh, yes,” said Reggie. She swallowed hard and dropped her gaze to her sneakers, and then clamped her hands on her hips and cocked her head back up. “Listen, Sasha, I care for you, and I wish you well, and I really do feel I’ve given it my very best shot,” she said, “but I think the humane thing—humane for *everyone*—is if we part company, like, *now*.”

Sasha took a breath, a moment in which to absorb the shock of her words and their import, and then extended his hand toward her over Dmitri’s hot scalp. “I understand,” he said, admiring her firm grip. “And for all your efforts, Reggie, I’m grateful.”

Supremely grateful. Forever grateful to her for showing him just how it’s done.

DEAN KISLING

Yacht Club

I met her in a guitar shop. I became aware she had been there a while and never got too far away in the big store, that she was actually listening, that we had become aware of each other.

Attention is a strange thing. You can feel it. You can sit in a restaurant full of people with your eyes on your guitar and tell which direction it is coming from. If you look up without thinking about it too much you will find yourself looking right into the eyes of somebody looking back at you. And feel a certainty the music you are playing is being heard for what it is, and so is the joy you take in it. When that happens you know your life and your art are a complete success, at least in that one little perfect moment. You feel lucky you dared to do such a ridiculous thing, being there, doing that.

I was picking Martins out of the hanging racks and trying them out, taking my time, looking for that special one. The one that felt like we already knew and understood each other. The whole this is the one thing may be a delusion, but it seems real enough when it happens. I had already come back to one particular guitar three times. I already knew it was the one and I was going to buy it. I was just trying to be reasonable and rational about it, since I had driven 300 miles to come to this shop and was going to spend over \$1500, on top of my \$1200 trade in.

Which was silly, because I was actually there to correct my own misguided rationality. I had bought the guitar I was trading in as an effort to accommodate my limitations. It had a little wider neck to make a little more room for my lack of precision in the tiny movements of picking the strings. I had been playing it for two years by then and I knew it didn't matter. No amount of tricks or special exercises or hours of practice or a wider neck was ever going to make me any faster or overcome this bit of clumsiness. And because I had sat in restaurants and art galleries and had those perfect moments, I knew it didn't matter. What mattered was that I really meant it, being there, doing that. I didn't have to be a master guitarist, I never would be a master guitarist, I just had to mean it. Fingers doing the best they could. Wood vibrating against flesh and bone. No lies being told.

When I first started playing professionally, a guy I knew told me the secret was just to be yourself. He wasn't a master guitarist either, but he had been playing in bands and in bars for a long time. He was like me, musically competent but nothing special, except for loving it enough that he kept at it all those years. You could see it when he played, that he did it because he loved it. He worked in a grocery store for thirty years and played rock and roll in bars on the weekend. He probably knew when he said it that I didn't have a clue what it really meant, but I might understand some day, and that it was especially important for me because I played solo. Just me and my guitar and mostly my own compositions or arrangements. I didn't sing or tell jokes or wear a funny outfit or have any sort of act. I did like to improvise, and I was even good at it occasionally. But you have to be at ease to do that well. You have to be willing to let things happen and to screw up once in a while. Not get all serious about some imagined thing you have to be or ought to be or wish you were but you aren't or that you think people will demand of you. You have to be yourself, just

being there, doing that, which is harder than any of those other things at first, but easier in the long run.

Four years later I understood that. I understood what it meant performing music, and I was starting to understand better what it meant in life, this mysterious secret of just being there, doing that. So I was in the guitar shop to trade in for a Martin, which had always been the guitar that felt the best in my hands, and the one I really wanted to play.

After about an hour she finally walked up and introduced herself. She said she had promised a friend she would entertain at her wedding reception at the yacht club. She said she sang and had many songs of her own, and played the guitar, but not nearly as well as I did, and a little piano. She said she liked the way I picked up on the guy at the other end of the building, when he was trying out a synthesizer, and jammed along with him. She wondered if I'd be interested in doing the gig with her.

I said I lived three hundred miles away, but it sounded interesting.

She said she couldn't pay me, she wasn't getting paid herself, it was a favor she owed an old friend. But she had a guest room and would feed me and she thought my style of playing would go really well with her songs and that it would be fun. She said she had all the sound equipment we'd need. I could come down and we could rehearse a few days and I could go to the beach and it would be like a vacation.

She was an attractive woman. Not like magazine photo-shoot air-brushed attractive. Like forty year old grown-up real-life woman with no make-up attractive. It mattered that she was a woman and I was a man, but not in an overtly sexual kind of way. The natural affinity of genders was like an extension, some added spice and energy, to the affinity of two people with a musical connection. That was plenty seductive all by itself. And it was novel. And flattering. Nice to be wanted. Nice to get some beach time. Nice to get away from all the usual people and usual things and do something a little weird. And play at a yacht club for people who had no idea how many peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I ate or how many thousands of hours I practiced or that I was fulfilling a childhood dream every time I got up in front of people and played a tune I had written myself, even though I would probably never break even.

Sometimes people who would spend more in a weekend than I made in a year would tell me they enjoyed it and leave me a nice tip. Sometimes people said I made it look easy, one of the best compliments of all. I got a kick out of being around wealthy people, up on a stage while they ate their dinner or looked at paintings and sculpture, making it look easy. It made me feel like a secret agent subverting the powers of darkness. Showing them something money couldn't buy. Being there, doing that.

Oh yes, it was plenty seductive even without any suggestion of sex or promise of money.

We talked about it some more. I said let me think about it. We exchanged contact info. She said she'd send me some samples of lyrics and music. We said we'd be in touch. I bought the Martin and got it set up to my liking and drove three hundred miles back home. I wondered if I was just being stupid, or if her song lyrics would be awful, or if there was really something to the feeling I had that she meant every word she said and we might really do a little art we would be proud of. At a yacht club.

She sent me a tape with a few tunes and some copies of her lyrics with chord changes scribbled in. I liked her poetry a lot. It was moving and honest. It had an understated psychological

power. Some of it was eerie and dark, full of pain without a shred of whining. The sort of thing that made you suddenly realize you had stopped breathing while you read it. It was not awful. It was better than any poetry I ever wrote. Better than most of the poetry I ever read.

One of the songs on the tape was a train song. God knows how many train songs have been written since the steam engine was invented. It's not hard to understand why. What else captures so well the feeling of being swept along by something too powerful to resist? Her song was about losing things she loved, losing all but the sadness and the memories, and still being on that train of hope, because she just couldn't stop it. It made you want to cry and laugh for joy at the same time because you were rolling with her. There wasn't any smoke belching from the stack or any chug-chug or woo-woo. It was just hope barreling down the tracks in your heart and your imagination. Rocking you along to wherever it was going and you were glad to be on it and you never wanted to get off.

I played it about ten times in a row. I was stunned. There was no way I was going to pass this up. I gave up a gig and cancelled some student lessons. I not only would not get paid, I would give up money and buy my own gas. How many chances would a guy like me get to work with someone like this?

The wedding reception was on a Sunday. I told her I could be there late Wednesday afternoon, ten days before the gig, and we'd have plenty of time to get ready. Meanwhile I would work on what she had sent me.

Deal.

I found her house a couple of weeks later on a quiet residential street not far from the university district, a few blocks from the nearest busy boulevard. When I pulled up in front I saw a very big, newish-looking pickup truck parked in the driveway next to a small travel trailer. Behind them was a heavy steel gate on wheels and behind that was a silver Airstream trailer and a two-story detached garage. The house was small and looked like it had been built in the 1940s. The front yard had a few coastal desert plantings, but they and the house looked kind of neglected, like nobody paid much attention to them unless they had to.

She showed me around the place. I would stay in the Airstream. The music studio was in the garage. There were amps and microphones and music stands and stools to sit on, though I had brought my own. There was a half bath. There was a baby grand piano and several acoustic guitars and piles of sheet music and magazines.

Her room was above the garage, one big room she liked better than the house, she said, because it was small. The back yard was surrounded by a wooden fence eight feet tall. All you could see of the neighbors was the roofs of their houses. In the center of the yard was a pond full of tiger lilies and a fountain that didn't work. On the side of the garage was an outdoor shower that did work. It had no walls or curtain around it, but it didn't matter because of the fence.

In the house was a small kitchen. Chipped and cracked formica and linoleum, a stainless steel coffee maker, a stained sink and faucet that dripped, a modern double-door fridge with sprouts and vegetables and fruit and expensive cheeses and organic bread inside. An almost unbearably cramped and uncomfortable built-in nook to sit and eat, with the local underground/punk newspaper spread out on it.

A tiny bathroom off the hall. Another small room with paints, brushes and an empty easel. Art books, baskets, pieces of cloth, pottery, an assortment of things you couldn't tell if they meant something or had just been put down and forgotten.

The living room had a big TV and stereo, a couch and arm chair, bookshelves with books and art objects, a threadbare rug, dusty curtains, a pile of shoes by the front door. An oil painting of her that had all the intensity of her poetry and a van Gogh quality of relentless observation mixed with madness. I didn't ask if she painted it. I thought I knew the answer. If it was by her own hand or someone else's didn't seem to matter. Either way it was her self portrait.

Where the money for all this came from was not apparent, though I did get some clues eventually. What was apparent was that she was an eccentric, intelligent, highly creative person... and fascinated with herself above all, which didn't seem unusual really, I think most people are. So far, I would agree she had more to be fascinated with, and more inner focus to bring to the task, than most. But I was also beginning to think she might be a little crazy and I should be cautious. She never asked me anything about myself the whole time I was there.

After I got moved in we played music till around midnight. She wanted to do some of her own songs and some standards from old musicals and the big band days. She had cheat books. I had cheat books. We talked about what we already knew and what we might learn. She said there would be a piano at the yacht club. She could do a little bit solo. I could do a little bit solo. We ought to be able to fill two or three hours without much trouble.

She sang consistently a little bit flat. Lots of people wouldn't even notice it. I have a good ear for pitch and that sort of thing usually bothers me, but in this case it didn't. It was like it was just enough off to be, like a style, something done deliberately to draw you in more completely. It made everything sound like the blues.

She got a phone call and went up to her room for a long time. I went to bed. The next morning I made myself breakfast and worked by myself for a while. She appeared around noon and asked me if I wanted to go to the beach. She disappeared into her room for another long phone call. When she came back we headed out.

She drove the big pickup with competence and relaxed concentration, changing from one lane to another, one freeway to another, and passing nearly everyone with the smoothness of a limo driver.

I'm not a guy who likes to hang out at the beach. A little bit of people watching and wave watching is all right, but what I want to do is get in the water and swim. It didn't seem like the singer and I were even there together, which I guess we weren't. She brought me because it was part of the deal. I swam straight out to sea until the people were dots and the buildings above the beach were like little boxes. I rested there, rising and falling in the swell. You wanted strange. You got strange. I swam back and sat in the sun drying off.

A young woman came down to the beach from one of the condos on the hillside. She spread a big towel in the sand and started doing some exercises. She had a great tan and long, gleaming black hair. She was about seven months pregnant. She was wearing a thong. Strange but beautiful.

The singer came back wet. She picked up her dress from the pile of our belongings in front of me and pulled it over her head. She squirmed out of her one-piece bathing suit and dropped it on the pile. She got a pair of panties out of her beach bag and pulled them on. The sinuous motions were very sexy. It seemed like a performance just for me. Not for me the person, the man...for me

the audience. The one who, more than any other, at the moment, was paying complete attention and was fascinated. Strange but beautiful.

I had the feeling by now that the only real meeting ground between us was the music, and my fascination. It was disappointing, disturbing, that she had so much awareness of herself and so little awareness of the rest of the world. No, that's not right. Driving the truck, she was aware of everything. Playing music, she was aware of me as a musician. On the beach, she was certainly aware I was sitting six feet away watching her get naked. More than naked. There was just this kind of remove, of isolation, of being untouchable, as though nothing in the world was quite as real as herself. As though all the world was composed of objects to be managed and an audience to be enthralled with her siren song. Strange but beautiful.

When we got back to her house we cleaned up and had something to eat and then worked on music until around midnight again. It was going pretty well, we worked well together. We gave each other a boost and it was all very lively, satisfying and fun. We made some of the choices about particular tunes and put some others on the table for consideration.

The next day, Friday, was much the same, except she told me about being in prison. She was pulling a horse trailer full of marijuana with her previous big pickup truck and got busted and did two years in the women's correctional facility. She said when she was processed into the prison she set two goals for herself—that when she got out she would still be able to walk and still have all her teeth. She said she had even organized her prison mates in a cell-cleaning effort at one point, which got them better privileges. Apparently, her charisma worked with women too.

Saturday was similar, except she said my Speedos were corny and out of style. She was right of course, if looking trendy at the beach was your goal, but I wanted to swim.

During rehearsal we had a disagreement about our repertoire. She suggested a movie tune I really didn't like. Ballrooms and diamonds and champagne and some stupid fake romance. All glitter and no guts. She said she wanted to do the tune because she thought it would please the old folks who would be at the wedding reception. Remind them of the good old days during World War Two I guess. You know, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Guadalcanal, the firebombing of Dresden, death camps, all that. Some fond memories.

I said if you're going to sing you ought to make it mean something real and your own songs are better than that. She looked at me like I was missing the point, and maybe I was.

I began to wonder if I had not completely mistaken everything. I wondered if her songs were just accidental products of a talent she didn't even value herself. The art was just something that happened, it didn't really mean anything, it was all an illusion. It became like a contest of wills between us, but ended before it got out of hand because we had to go to a party.

The party was the second anniversary of the death of an old boyfriend of hers. She said he had been beaten to death in a parking lot late one night. Some kind of drug turf rivalry or something. No one was ever prosecuted for the murder, but she thought she knew who did it. Friends and family would be there.

I'm not anti recreational drugs really, or prescription drugs either for that matter. I think they can all be abused and have casualties and victims and profiteers and so on. I'm less open-minded about physical violence. The psychological violence we all have to contend with every day can be damaging enough, but at least we can still walk and still have our teeth.

On our way to the party she put in a tape of Charles Bukowski reading his poetry. I had never heard Bukowski speak, but I had seen some of his poetry, many years earlier. I didn't recognize the poems so much as recognize the intoxicating bleakness, the dark perception, the drunken humor, the...wastedness. One of those unexpected moments when immediate impressions and long gone memories meet and spit out a name and an image of something you knew was true but not the life you wanted for yourself. Brought to you by this dark woman in a white pickup truck on the way to celebrate death. You wanted weird. You got weird. Way to go.

The party was boring and depressing. A few people were passingly courteous. Most either tried to give me cocaine or ignored me completely. Somebody, somehow, owned a whole hillside of little houses above the beach, an enclave gathered around a long set of stairs. In the little house at the top lived the dead guy's mother, to whom I was introduced because that was how things were done there. You paid your respects to the matriarch. The entire setup had the same dusty, neglected look as the singer's house.

I thought what I guess anyone would think who wandered into a scene like that. Old money, but not vast, liquid amounts of it, and mom still had her hand on the bank book. In all the conversations I overheard, nothing sounded like what people did because they were actually interested, had a career or a vocation or any kind of goal other than amusing themselves and making money. Nobody was talking about the dead guy. I suppose there might be people in the family who were a little more, I hate to use the word, normal. Perhaps they didn't come to the parties. Perhaps they had moved to another state or another country or another universe.

It was almost like it was scripted, her playing the tape on the way over, the opening scene with voice-over that established the mood of the story to come. The tape ends. You get out of the truck and walk right into the smiling black despair.

On the ride back to the singer's house she talked about moving to India. She said she knew some people there who had a little hotel that hippies and other tourists stayed in and she could do her music. What would I think about doing something like that?

I kept my mouth shut because I was no longer in any doubt about her craziness or my stupidity. I did not want to get into an argument while she was driving and end up in a car wreck because the whole thing was already a train wreck and I wanted out. You wanted weird. You got weird. How do you like it buddy? It was not seductive any more. Still fascinating in a way, because it was all so intense and surreal, but way too creepy to be appealing. Like, picture Bukowski looking deep into a murky glass of booze and seeing his face reflected in there and just diving right in it was so goddamn fascinating, and inviting you to join him. No thanks.

And I did not want to say what is wrong with you people? What is wrong with you? You have a great talent and you just use it to further self-destruction? Yeah sure, I have my little fantasy about childhood dreams and being a secret agent and I'll never break even but I'm not trying to be nuts. I'm not courting doom and making pacts with other people so we can be nuts together.

I was mad. I was not doing this...whatever it was.

When we got back to her house I said I was leaving and started packing my stuff. Those were the last words I said to her. I don't want to do this. I'm going home. During the few minutes it took to gather my things and put them in the car I saw one of the most amazing performances of my life.

It's good to have a few friends who know things you don't. Not just think they do, which is very common, but actually know something and tell you about it. I had a friend who told me about the codependency triangle. She drew it on a piece of paper and described it. Victim-Rescuer-Persecutor. I guess she thought it might be helpful to me in some way to know that.

In five minutes the singer worked the possible combinations, trying to find the one that would do the job. Me as Victim, her as Rescuer. Me as Rescuer, her as Victim. Me as Persecutor, her as Victim. I'm sorry, I left one out. Her as Victim becoming Persecutor, me as Rescuer being turned into Victim.

It didn't work because I recognized it. It just made me more determined to get the hell out of there. But it was awesome to behold and utterly pointless to contest. Just get away while you can still walk and still have your teeth.

She reached in fast and snatched the keys out of the ignition. I caught her wrist and started prying her fingers loose. I was holding on hard because I knew it was going to get even weirder if she got away from me. I pictured her tossing my keys away in the dark, up on a neighbor's roof, into a backyard, into her underwear, down a street drain, somewhere I could not go to retrieve them.

I had not and was not getting into a screaming match with her. I was not going to brawl with her, there in the middle of the narrow residential street, in the middle of the night, or anywhere else. I had another key, hidden in the wheel-well. It was the extra time it would give her that worried me, if I had to get out of the car and find it. Time to start grabbing my stuff back out of the car, kicking headlights, whatever crazy thing came into her head. This was my one and only chance to use my strength advantage and I wasn't letting go because I was leaving.

I got the keys away from her, started the car and drove away. I left her standing in the street, being and doing something I wanted no part of.

Close one.

Black String Bikini

Ben and his girlfriend, Rachelle, drove up to the Bay Area for the long Thanksgiving weekend. Ben was twenty-two, in his last year of college, and had been dating Rachelle for a year.

They'd intended to spend a good chunk of the break with Ben's parents, who lived in Palo Alto, but the day after Thanksgiving they got restless and drove to San Francisco where they rode the cable cars, ate in Chinatown, and generally acted like tourists. That night Ben and Rachelle booked a motel room, had sweaty sex, and then slept, entwined. The next day they ran through a similar touristy itinerary.

On Sunday morning they met Ben's parents in the city for brunch. After the check had been paid and Ben and Rachelle were getting ready to leave, Ben's father said, "Ben, before you go, we have something to tell you." He was a software programmer, Ben's father, typically more comfortable interfacing with a computer than relating with people.

"Yeah, sure," Ben said, "but the freeways are going to be jammed." He was antsy to get back to Santa Barbara and his college lifestyle. "Can we make it quick?"

"It's important," said Ben's mother. "We would have told you sooner, but we didn't want to ruin your vacation." Because of her grave tone, Ben settled back in his chair with a sinking feeling and thoughts of cancer, brain tumors.

"I'm going to excuse myself," Rachelle said, and pushed her chair back.

"She doesn't need to leave," Ben said. "Does she?"

"Maybe you could give us a minute," Ben's mother said. She reached over and squeezed Rachelle's hand.

"What's going on," Ben asked, once Rachelle was gone, "is someone sick?"

"No, it's nothing like that," Ben's father said. "We're fine. It's not a big deal."

"What do you mean it's not a big deal?" said Ben's mother. She shot her husband a cross look.

"Of course it's big. I'm just saying that no one is dying."

"Can one of you please tell me what is going on?" Ben asked.

"What your father is trying to tell you is that we're getting a divorce."

His parents summarized years of simmering estrangement. Then the past two years of growing frustration, anger, failed marriage counseling. Ben's mother did most of the talking, although his parents agreed that since Ben was now a man and close to finishing college, it was an ideal time to split.

Just as Ben's mother was wrapping things up, she started to cry. "It's hard, but we're doing what's best for both of us," she said, and reached for a cloth napkin to dab her eyes. Then she and Ben stood up and hugged as a busboy tried to clear away the water glasses and empty plates.

As Ben rubbed his mother's back, he looked over at his father; his mouth was turned down, and he slowly nodded his head.

∴

Ben spent the last weeks of the semester trying to focus on his final exams, but his parent's divorce—which felt so wrong—threw him into funk. He brooded over it, his mind raced in circles. Most nights he would toss and turn in bed. He had always been mastered by his emotions, like his mother, a woman who never questioned the unbending truth of what she felt.

At the start of the semester, Rachelle had moved into Ben's off-campus apartment. Ben, who had grown accustomed to damp bras hanging in the bathroom and the other clutter that Rachelle created, suspected she was the one. They had met at a bookstore, where each of them leafed through books in the self-help section, which later Ben thought odd because Rachelle was the sunniest, most optimistic person he had ever known. She'd confront most setbacks with a smile and a cliché: "Oh, that wasn't meant to be anyway." Although she didn't know it, Ben had had his eye on Rachelle for months before they met. He'd seen her walking around campus – her sun-kissed, surfer girl hair and insouciant stride drawing his attention. For Ben – a hand wringer, nail biter, worrier—Rachelle's breezy personality was magnetic.

"How can they divorce after so many years together?" Ben asked Rachelle one morning as she poured coffee into a to-go mug. "It just doesn't make sense."

Rachelle, commiserative but after days of listening to Ben fret also ready for a change of subject, shrugged and said, "It's unusual, yes, but I read about a couple who divorced in their seventies, after being together for over forty years."

"Forty years—that's got to be like cutting your arm off."

"Or maybe it's like dropping a heavy load," Rachelle said, as she checked her shoulder bag to make sure it held her textbooks. "Besides, does the divorce minimize your parents' time together? Aren't we all just living from moment to moment?" She zipped up her jacket. "Are you coming to the library?"

"Nah."

"Don't worry so much, babes," Rachelle said. "Stuff happens."

"I know, I know," Ben responded. He didn't, though, not really. He hadn't yet seen that life doesn't necessarily follow a predictable script. Ben and Rachelle would spend the next ten years together. After college, they'd move to L.A. and get jobs at prestigious marketing firms. They would buy a loft, frequent trendy restaurants, and vacation in Europe. Ben would be happy. Then Rachelle would push for marriage. "Don't you want a family?" she'd ask. If Ben could be honest, his answer would be no. Though he couldn't explain why – selfishness, perhaps – he'd just know it. Yet, he'd love Rachelle and wouldn't want to lose her. So he'd buy an engagement ring and propose. They would plan a big June wedding, and the invitations would be barely sent out before Ben would get cold feet. As a distraction, he'd take up surfing, although he would mostly just paddle out to calm waters and float on his board. Then, with the wedding just weeks away, Ben would tell Rachelle, "I just can't do it," which would crush her. Ben would plead with her to stay, to return to the way they'd been before, but it wouldn't work, and she'd leave him.

All this was yet to happen. At the time, in the off-campus home he shared with Rachelle, Ben clung to a rigid, happily-ever-after concept of love and marriage.

Rachelle slung her bag over her shoulder, pushed up on her toes, and gave Ben a kiss. “You worry too much,” she said. “Cheer up.” As she stepped through the front door, she gave Ben a quick wave and said, “Tootles.”

∴

Ben’s father moved out of his Palo Alto home and took an apartment in San Francisco. Ben had planned to drive north at the end of the semester and visit his mother and father separately, but his mother, at the end of a long, chatty phone conversation, told him that she’d be spending the week before Christmas at their family’s condo in Maui with a man named Charles.

“Charles?” Ben asked.

“Yes, Charles. He’s a friend of mine. He’s divorced. I’ve known him for years. Since college, actually.”

“A friend?”

“Don’t start! He’s a good friend. Okay? We fell out of touch. Then I joined Facebook. Why aren’t you on Facebook?”

Ben mumbled something in reply. The divorce was one thing, but now Charles.

“Well, you should be,” his mother continued. “I have pictures of you on my profile. Anyway, Charles friended me when things were awful with your father. Charles was really there for me. He listens! He’s so empathetic.” Ben knew this meant that Charles was different than his father. “Why don’t you spend a couple of days in San Francisco with your father, and then you and Rachelle can fly to Hawaii and use the condo. Charles and I leave the day after Christmas.”

One night, as the end of the semester neared, Ben turned off the lights, crawled into bed, and said, “I really don’t want to spend Christmas with some dude who’s doing my mom.”

Rachelle turned so Ben could spoon her. “I know,” she said, “it sucks.” Then she tugged Ben’s arm over her side and said, “Now warm my butt.”

∴

Parking outside Ben’s father’s two-bedroom apartment on Russian Hill was brutal, but after circling for twenty minutes, Ben and Rachelle found a spot. Ben’s father met them at the door, and after the young couple dumped their bags in the guest bedroom, he gave them a tour. The apartment was beautiful: hardwood floors, tastefully decorated, a view of Alcatraz.

“It came furnished,” Ben’s father said over his shoulder as he pulled open the refrigerator. “You guys want a beer?”

The three of them sat on the balcony and drank and appreciated the evening view of the bay. For Ben, it felt strange not seeing his parents together. His father looked out of context. Still, Ben was surprised that his dad – if not seeming happy, exactly – appeared content.

At eight, Ben’s father said, “I don’t have any food, but I know a good restaurant. It’s called Rex. It’s just a short walk.”

It was cold outside, by California standards, with thick wisps of fog.

Rex, in contrast, was warm and bright. Ben's father, after waving off the hostess, led the way to a square bar in the middle of the room, where they each took a seat.

The bartender was a tall, curvy woman, with cropped hair and a round chest. She smiled. "The programmer has returned," she said. She looked about ten years younger than Ben's father. "I see you brought your baby brother," she said, and winked at Ben.

The father, missing the joke, said, "No, this is my son, Benjamin, and his girlfriend, Rachelle. Guys, this is Aubrey." Aubrey gave a two-fingered salute.

"Family for the holidays," said Aubrey. "That calls for a little celebration." She filled three shot glasses with a bright red liquid.

"No, thank you, we're not the shot-drinking types," said the father.

"Really? Well, you are tonight. I insist. One's not going to kill you. They're just watermelon shots anyway. You won't even feel them." She pushed the drinks forward and then stood with her arms akimbo until Rachelle and the two men emptied their glasses.

They ordered quesadillas, chips with guacamole, two beers and a sauvignon blanc. As they ate, Aubrey would come over and ask Ben's father questions. Had he added anything to the apartment? Was he looking forward to the New Year? Did he see that movie she had told him about? It became clear to Ben that his father was already something of a regular.

Once Aubrey leaned across the bar and plucked something out of Ben's father's hair.

As Ben's father was paying the bill, he turned to Ben and Rachelle and said, "So, guys, Aubrey's family lives clear across the county. I've invited her to join us for dinner tomorrow night. Is that okay?"

"That's fine by me," said Rachelle.

"Sure," said Ben.

"Great," said Ben's father and he turned toward Aubrey. "Come by around seven."

∴

The morning before Christmas, Ben woke to find Rachelle wearing sweats and running shoes. "Morning, babes, I'm going for a jog," she said.

Ben sat up in bed. "Do you think it's a weird that that bartender is coming over here tonight?"

"A little," Rachelle said, as she stretched her hands upward and then bent from side to side. "It's weird, it's really weird. Were those boobs real?"

"You're kidding, right? Real breasts don't thrust out that insistently." Rachelle did some knee bends. "It's just one night, Ben. It'll be okay." She grabbed his hand, yanked him out of bed, and gave his butt a little pat. "Come on, your dad is in the kitchen whipping up breakfast."

As Rachelle scooted out the front door, Ben, still wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, walked into the kitchen. "What smells so good?" he asked.

"A ham and cheese omelet," said Ben's father. He had always been the family cook. "Coffee?"

"Sure."

"Cream and sugar?"

“Just half-and-half.”

Ben’s father poured them each a cup. He split the omelet and served it up on two plates. He had made toast and he gave them each a slice. Ben’s father stood and ate in the kitchen while Ben sat on a stool at the counter. They ate and drank their coffee mostly in silence. Ben’s father asked Ben a few questions about school and Rachelle. They talked about the weather.

Ben and his father had never once discussed the divorce. This actually didn’t surprise Ben, because his father wasn’t one to freely share his thoughts, and Ben wasn’t about to pry. Days after he learned of the divorce, Ben assumed that his father would be happy alone, content to spend time with his work and books and computer. In the future, however, it would be Ben’s father who’d remarry within a few years (to a mousy nurse, not Aubrey), and actually start a second family. Ben’s mother would discover she liked the freedom of being single. She’d blossom in a new career as a real estate agent, befriend a group of sassy divorcees who’d call themselves the Margarita Ladies, and over the years would keep a handful of monogamous relationships at arm’s length.

In his San Francisco apartment, Ben’s father cleaned up after breakfast, and told Ben he was going to the grocery store to pick up a few more supplies.

Ben went out and sat on the balcony. The view was like a postcard, with boats on the bay, Alcatraz, and fog seeping under the Golden Gate Bridge. As Ben soaked in the view, his cell phone rang.

It was his mother. “Merry Christmas, Benji,” she said. “I know it’s a day early, but who’s keeping track? We just saw a sea turtle, Charles and I. We went snorkeling yesterday and saw it surfacing. They say seeing a turtle near the New Year bodes good luck for the entire year.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Ben.

“Charles is just so wonderful! We’re drinking a few too many Mai Thais, maybe, but that’s okay. Right? Even if it isn’t, who cares?”

Before Ben could say anything, his mother continued.

“We’re having a great time. But how can you not have fun in Maui? It is paradise here – just paradise. I love it. Did I ever tell you that I had to practically force your father to buy the condo? It’s probably gone up forty percent since we bought it.”

Ben listened to his mother detail her trip for a while longer, before he made an excuse and got off the phone. Then he sent Rachelle a text: I love you. She sent one back: Babes, I love u 2 ;).

∴

Aubrey arrived at the apartment at seven sharp. She gave Ben’s father a kiss on the cheek as he took her coat. She looked elegant, wearing a black skirt and stockings and a low-cut blouse. She had a big jar of caviar wrapped with a little bow that she gave to Ben’s father. Aubrey floated around the room, commented on how handsome both men looked, and ended up next to Rachelle.

“You’re so lucky to live in such a big place,” she said. “Not like my little tin can. Rents are just crazy here. I don’t know how I pull it off with my bartender salary, but I just make it work. And your view, I can’t get enough of it! You can see the lights on the bridge. Ben, it must be awful having your parents divorce, even when you’re an adult.”

Aubrey's directness was strangely comforting to Ben. He exhaled as if he'd been holding in a deep breath. "I'm adjusting," he said.

"Adjusting, huh," Rachele said. The two women exchanged glances. "I see. It's like that," said Aubrey. "I'm sure this beautiful girlfriend of yours is helping out." Aubrey reached an arm around Rachele's shoulder and gave her a little squeeze.

"It's not like anything," said Ben, "I just, you know, didn't see it coming."
"In any event, thanks for allowing a strange woman to join you all on Christmas Eve."

"We're all happy you're here," said Ben's father. "Come on, let's sit down." The four moved a few steps to the living room area where Ben's father popped open a bottle of champagne that had been chilling in a bucket and poured everyone a glass. They added the caviar to a tray of hors d'oeuvres that rested on the coffee table. They drank and munched on finger foods. Then, tipsy from the champagne, Ben's father said, "Let's eat. Ben, can you give me a hand bringing the food to the table?"

Once they were all seated around the dinner table, Ben's father said, "We have cranberries, turnips, scalloped potatoes, stuffing, pumpkin bread, and baked ham," and pointed out each item. "Red or white wine, or more champagne – what's your poison?"

Ben and his father chose red, while Aubrey and Rachele drank more champagne. They passed the food around and loaded up their plates. They all polished off their drinks and then had another. The drinks seemed to loosen up Aubrey, and she started telling stories about the bar, laughing at her own punch lines. Ben's father listened and laughed. Ben noticed that his father smiled throughout the meal. Aubrey also asked Ben a lot of questions. What was his major, how did he meet Rachele, what were his plans after graduation? It felt to Ben that she was trying to win his approval.

"You know, you and your father don't really look that much alike," she said. "Do you agree, Rachele?"

"Uh-huh. Except for the long eyelashes."

"You are both very handsome, of course," said Aubrey and she took a sip of her champagne. "You and Ben must really be looking forward to Maui. What are you planning to do?"

"Mainly lounge on the beach," Rachele said.

"I want to go whale watching," added Ben.

Ben's father pushed back his chair and started to reach for the empty plates, but Aubrey, with a hand on his thigh, said, "Don't you dare. Where I come from, one person cooks and the other cleans."

Ben's father squeezed Aubrey's hand and said, "I like that policy."

Rachele stood up and grabbed some empty glasses. "Let me help," she said.

As Aubrey and Rachele cleared the table, rinsed the dishes, and loaded the dishwasher, Ben's father slipped a Frank Sinatra CD into the stereo. He and Ben then moved over to the living room and drank more wine. When the kitchen was almost cleaned, the song "I Get a Kick out of You" started to play.

"Oh, this is my favorite!" Aubrey said, and hustled into the living room. "I get no kick from a plane, flying too high..." she crooned. With both hands, she tugged Ben's father out of his chair and said, "Come on, let's dance."

Ben watched for a bit as they spun around the room, then he joined Rachelle and helped her dry some wine glasses. Sinatra started to sing “South of the Border.” Rachelle said, “Care to dance, fella?” and she and Ben went to the living room where now both couples danced. When that song ended, “The Way You Look Tonight” came on. As Sinatra sang, Some day, when I’m awfully low...Ben’s father twirled Aubrey and then twisted her in close. She pressed her body against his and he put his hands on her lower back and they started to kiss. The whole scene became a little too much for Ben so he grabbed Rachelle’s hand and led her into the guest bedroom. They closed the door and sat down on the bed.

“Do you think my father is about to get laid?”

“It looks like a possibility.”

“It’s so weird. I mean, the divorce isn’t even final yet.”

“Apparently neither one of your parents is a slow mover.”

“Apparently.”

“She is hot, you have to admit that.”

“Yeah, in a fake boob, come bang my brains out, sex kitten kind of way.”

Rachelle laughed. “Sex kitten – maybe that’s what your dad needs.”

“What! We’re talking about my dad. Just the image creeps me out.”

“Ben, sometimes we just need to get fucked.”

They talked for a little longer and then fell back on the bed. Rachelle rested her cheek on Ben’s chest. He kissed the top of her head and smelled her hair. As they lay there silently, Ben’s mind lingered on the phrase – need to get fucked. Ben had always found Rachelle to be an eager lover. But it wouldn’t be until far in the future, nine years after their engagement dissolved, when Rachelle was divorcing her husband, that Ben would learn she could turn to sex for emotional healing. They’d bump into each other at a trade show in Las Vegas, have cocktails “for old times,” and end up having sex in Ben’s hotel room—Rachelle on top, tears rolling down her cheeks as she climaxed. For a few months, they would meet in different L.A. hotels, Rachelle’s sexual appetite insatiable. She’d seem unable to tap into her normal buoyant personality, her moods alternating between sadness at the end of her marriage and anger that she would now have to share custody of her daughter. Ben, who’d be mourning the sudden death of his mother in a car crash, would also find comfort in their arrangement. Though, with the passing of time, he’d push for more; still a bachelor, he’d grow to regret his inability to commit. Not content with just the physical, he’d want a real relationship, a second chance. But Rachelle, preoccupied with her divorce and wary of getting burned by Ben again, would resist. So they’d split again and fade apart.

“Hey,” Rachelle said now, on the bed, her eyes shut, “we’re going to be in Maui tomorrow. Did I tell you I bought a new bathing suit?” She yawned. “Babes, I’m so tired.” Ben helped her strip down to her underwear and tucked her under the covers.

Restless, Ben listened at the door, didn’t hear anything, so walked out to the living room, which was empty. He grabbed a beer and went out on the balcony. Ben could hear the low rumble of house parties and a foghorn. He sat and sipped his beer. Eventually he went back inside to the fridge to get another bottle, but feeling buzzed thought better of it and decided to join Rachelle. As he made his way down the hallway to his bed, he could see light shining under his father’s bedroom door.

∴

The next morning, Ben and Rachele woke up early, packed their travel bags, and stripped the bed. Rachele went to the shower while Ben made his way to the kitchen. When Ben turned the corner, he saw his dad seated at the counter examining the front page of the newspaper. Aubrey stood behind him, gently rubbing his shoulders. His father had a wide, blissful smile, so different than the thoughtful countenance Ben was used to seeing. The scene and his father's happiness actually gave Ben a jolt of joy.

"Coffee? Eggs? Toast? Breakfast is on me," Aubrey said. She was wearing a pink, woman's robe with matching slippers that perfectly fit her feet. Ben suspected then that this wasn't the first time Aubrey had spent the night.

Ben said yes to all three food items and took the sports page from his dad as he sat down. He and his dad discussed football, the NFL playoffs, and the craziness of the college bowl season.

"You're both such men. Is that all you can talk about?" Aubrey said, already comfortable filling the girlfriend's role of nag. As she served Ben his plate, she looked at him and said, "Thank you for letting me join you last night."

"Don't thank me. Thank my dad."

"Yes—he's been thanked." She leaned over and kissed the father's cheek, which elicited from him an impish smile.

After Ben polished off his breakfast and showered, he and Rachele were ready to leave for the airport. The four of them said their goodbyes at the door; Rachele hugged Ben's father and Aubrey tussled Ben's hair as one might a nephew.

∴

In Maui, Ben's mother and Charles were there to meet Ben and Rachele at the airport. Charles wore a loud Hawaiian shirt and said, "Nice to finally meet you, champ," as he shook Ben's hand.

They drove in a convertible. The rushing wind made small talk a challenge. Ben languorously slumped next to Rachele in the backseat as they sped under an azure sky.

Once they made it to the condo, they unloaded the car and moved inside. Rachele said she was going for a swim and left to change into her bathing suit. Charles and Ben's mother soon bustled about, blending a batch of cocktails, pulling cold shrimp and tartar sauce from the fridge, and arranging flowers on the table where that night the two couples would eat Mahi-Mahi. Ben watched the scene with dread. He felt embarrassed by the childlike animosity he felt toward Charles. It irked him.

After an hour or so, Ben's mother said, "Why don't you check on Rachele?" Ben jumped at the chance to escape. After walking through the condo's sliding backdoors, Ben saw the ocean and heard beachgoers splashing. He tilted his head upward to let the sun beat on his face. Then he shifted his gaze toward the water where Rachele bobbed in the waves, less than fifty yards away. He walked down to the beach, past a group of kids digging in the sand, until he reached the edge of

the water. Ben stood as waves rolled in and soaked his sneakers. He was happy to just stay in this moment, spying on the woman he loved. Rachelle eventually spotted him, smiled, waved, and started toward the shore.

∴

On a crisp fall afternoon Ben would see Rachelle for the last time. They'd bump into each other at an airport terminal, Rachelle with her adult daughter, and Ben, who finally married in his late forties, with his wife. It would be more than two decades since Ben last saw Rachelle. They would chuckle politely, but wouldn't embrace or agree to blend their groups together for a latte at the airport's Starbucks; any flickering passions were long ago extinguished. The four travelers would, however, talk for a few minutes, before Rachelle and her daughter break away to catch a connecting flight. Ben would watch as Rachelle walks away. Her hair would be flecked with grey, and age would force her to move just a little more slowly, but Ben would be able to detect a carefree skip in her step—palpable happiness with just being alive—that came so easily to her as a young woman.

As Rachelle blends into the crowd, what Ben's mind would chose to flash back to is that moment outside his parent's condo in Maui, when Rachelle came out of the ocean, salt water dripping off her hair and black string bikini, her face flush with the glow of youth. When she had embraced him, all the anxiety Ben felt melted away. The memory would be so vivid, it would warm Ben and charge him with such joy that he'd take his wife, twirl her, and laugh. Then they'd slowly dance around the terminal, next to stewardesses and tourists, as the fluorescent lights flicker.

LYNN VEACH SADLER

Full Fathom Flat

Granddaddy Bob is my mentor. No matter the situation, he urges me to “examine all facets, then choose among them—the only way to rise and move on.” In the case in point, I zoomed in on one word in his description of Grandmother Helen’s “physical besetting and heart-*piercing* news.”

Being good hasn’t kept Grandmother Helen from a mountain-load of grief. She’s as disappointed in my druggie father, for example, as Granddaddy Bob is. My Half-Aunt Marlene, Grandmother Helen’s daughter by her first husband, Mr. Moffitt (an alcoholic), has troubles of her own, including three sons she suspects of being gay. The *dénouement* (à la Ms. Ellerby, my favorite teacher) was a lot worse than you’re likely expecting. Bad but not to the extent, Granddaddy Bob and I don’t think, of what happened to Grandmother Helen, who, about two years ago, developed breast cancer. It was sort of like Linda McCartney, and there was so much about hers and about how broken up Paul was that Grandmother Helen went in the opposite direction. She didn’t let on or talk to anybody about it, not even her daughter, Aunt Jobie, who, of all the family, is closest to Grandmother Helen. Everybody in our clan, bears (e.g., Daddy) included, came to the hospital, but she refused to see them. Only Granddaddy Bob and Aunt Jobie (who seems to be to Grandmother Helen as I am to Granddaddy Bob) were allowed in her room. Not even Aunt Jobie’s husband could go in, and he and Half-Aunt Pharris’s and Half-Aunt Marlene’s husbands are special favorites with Grandmother Helen.

Grandmother Helen survived, thank goodness, but had to have one breast removed. But she wouldn’t take chemotherapy treatments and still won’t talk about any of it. And she wouldn’t have “reconstructive surgery” or get fitted for “special undergarments.” I mean, this was ultra weird. She wouldn’t talk about her health or discuss it with anyone but her physician, Dr. Mikey, but she went about—still does—with one side of her top parts flat. Anybody can tell something’s wrong. I have to agree with Granddaddy Bob that Grandmother Helen continues to need “therapy,” mental he means, but he doesn’t dare say that to her. We’ve been trying to come up with ideas, but nothing has worked. Grandmother Helen is one stubborn woman from the standpoint of her personal self.

I can tell you one thing, though, after what’s happened to Grandmother Helen and how she lets herself walk around so all unbalanced, I will *never* be a “breast man.” You can take that to the bank. My increasing interest in the breastworks of the female anatomy has plummeted. Ms. Ellerby had us reading *The Tempest* at the time, and, in honor of Grandmother Helen, I “reconstructed” it:

Full fathom flat her poor breast lies;
Its debt to disease now paid;
those are tears that wet her eyes:
That part of her that did fade
Hath suffered such a see-change,
The world finds her passing strange.

Grandmother Helen had always, apparently, been a tall, proud woman. Now she slumps, and people snicker and call her “Ole One Boob.” Even Doak, my best friend, passed me a note in English class, where we had moved on to *Richard III*, with a cartoon of a single-breasted woman (one of those Amazons who cut or burned off a breast to use their weapons better) labeled “Zy Slayter’s one-boobed grandmother.” Only “Slayter’s” didn’t have the apostrophe, Doak not being as fleet in the punctuation department as in football. (Granddaddy Bob, Doak, and I are a threesome.) The woman was saying, in one of those cloud-shaped speech containers cartoonists draw, “A boob! a boob! my kingdom for a boob!” He apologized later when he realized how offensive I found that particular brand of humor. I’m not ordinarily uncool or square, though geekish, but I don’t have any use for stuff that hits where people hurt and can’t help what’s happened to them. Neither should Doak. He’s a Black dude, if I have to spell it out.

Well, things went on like that in the family for quite some time. Grandmother Helen pretending nothing had happened and looking like everything had, I mean. Then something else did. This place came on her tongue. It was sore. It wouldn’t heal. The only person she told was Granddaddy Bob (who told me), but after she’d moped around for a couple of weeks, getting no better, he put his foot down. Which Granddaddy Bob can still do. He may be in his eighties, but he’s no “old dude” or “codger” and won’t ever be. He made Grandmother Helen go to the doctor, who immediately ordered a biopsy.

While the results were “pending,” though, Grandmother Helen insisted upon calling the whole family, my mother (who’s divorced from Daddy) included, in for a dinner. It was not a special occasion like a birthday or a holiday, so everybody was curious. Again Grandmother Helen didn’t give a thing away but was more like her old self than she’d been since before the first cancer struck. Granddaddy Bob took each adult in the family aside, separately, and told her or him the situation. It was like lightning ran through that house hitting everybody.

You see, Granddaddy Bob’s mother married three times, and Granddaddy Bob had one full sibling by her second husband and tons of half-brothers and half-sisters by her first (none by the third; they were both too old, I think). His brother was Thomas, and, if he’d lived, he’d be my, I think, Great Uncle Tom. (Wouldn’t Doak love that?) But he didn’t live because he came down soon after high school and marriage with CANCER OF THE TONGUE. Everybody in the family knew about Granddaddy Bob’s brother’s death by cancer of the tongue, and I suspect some joked about it, as in, “He talked so much, he contracted cancer of the tongue.” or “She talks so much to keep cancer from lighting on her tongue.” or whatever. But it was a frightening thought somehow, and they were surely whistling in the dark. I mean, can you eat anything at all if you suffer from cancer of the tongue? If you *can* eat, does the cancer bleed constantly into your food and beverage? Cancer of the tongue is one hard concept to get your thoughts around.

It was the enormity of the situation, I think. There was Grandmother Helen running around “normal” for the first time since the original cancer struck and having us all together again. There was this impending sort of sentence from Heaven. I mean, we all knew that Grandmother Helen wasn’t even remotely *blood* kin to Granddaddy Bob’s brother Thomas who had died of cancer of the tongue. But we were all gathered together to hear if Grandmother Helen was going to succumb to the same disease. Cancer is bad enough, Lord knows. CANCER OF THE TONGUE has to be thought of in all caps. CANCER OF THE TONGUE revisiting generations of a family, even the in-laws—well, you begin to have to consider that there’s some cursing going on and who’s being

cursed. I think most of the family would agree that Grandmother Helen is the least likely member among it to call down a curse. So it just had to be somebody else. I looked around the room, knowing full well that everybody in there, babies excepted, was thinking who among us the culprit had to be.

I had my own candidates for Chief Weasel in Grandmother Helen's situation. They say the big diseases like cancer are brought on by or at least fed by fretting, stress, and worry. My favorite candidate for flooding Grandmother Helen's life with forty log trucks full of those three (a lumberyard being the main business of the family) was Daddy. He seemed to sense that everybody was looking at him and went all flustery as usual.

What started gnawing at me, though, was the thought that it could be Granddaddy Bob that the Powers of Vengeance—I couldn't think of it as God, certainly not if it was a case of Granddaddy Bob—were coming down on. I mean, it is usually the patriarchal figure who gets gone after in the Bible and all. I almost got pulled aside to wonder and investigate that phenomenon in Judaism, Islam, and Shinto. I expect that, as usual, I would have branched out even more, but it turned out I didn't have to.

That very Sunday afternoon, right after we had eaten *dinner* (the term for the midday meal still used by the elders in Southern families like ours) and were sitting around letting it digest, Dr. Mikey called. Grandmother Helen and Granddaddy Bob are among his best friends, and he had worked hard to get the results back in record time. Aunt Jobie answered the phone and looked so funny when she turned it over to Grandmother Helen that we all sent our *antennae* (as Ms. Ellerby would spell the plural) up. Granddaddy Bob motioned for us to keep talking, and we got his message to pretend everything was copacetic, but we were all watching Grandmother Helen from the edges of our eyes. We saw her mouth twitch and then turn up at the corners. I could swear she started to glow. It was as if her halo, which we couldn't generally see but knew was right there above her head, suddenly got switched on by God to show His defiance of the Powers of Vengeance.

I was thinking, after it was clear to me that Grandmother Helen wasn't under the sword of Damocles any longer, what a good computer game could be made from God versus the Powers of Vengeance. They'd fight every game for a different soul. Sort of like never knowing at the beginning of *Six Feet Under* what person was going to die that night and how. That's another TV show I'm not supposed to watch but do. Granddaddy Bob and I have the greatest appreciation for HBOPlus. Mother does not. I do realize that, in *Devil May Cry* (PlayStation 2), Dante runs a devil-tracking business, but it's centered on combat, not storyline. I admit it has some neat features, like power-ups hidden throughout and a control button dedicated to taunting the enemy.

Grandmother Helen said "thank you" in a high, squeaky voice not at all like her usual one and put the phone receiver down very gently. Then she suddenly went running out of the room. Granddaddy Bob went after her. He can't move that fast any more, of course. It was more like he was slogging through molasses. "Grandma's Molasses"! (That's a well known brand in these parts in case you don't get the pun.) He shuffled on back to us in a short time. It was a case of literal bated breaths, I guess. He reported that the place on Grandmother Helen's tongue was "benign." What a wonderful word *benign* is. Most people don't stop to think how often words carry around their own blessings and loose them like little time-released bits of blessing just by hovering around after we've thought or said them. Like endorphins, is it?, in the brain. Benign is what Grandmother Helen's

affliction was. Benign. I slipped off once Mother and I got home and looked it up in the computer's dictionary. It comes from "Middle English via Old French *benigne* from Latin *benignus*, from *bene* 'well' + *-genus* 'born.'" Well done! For, if my Grandmother Helen isn't, conventionally speaking, "well born," she is as good as people come.

One upshot of the good news was that Grandmother Helen's aborted problem with cancer of the tongue had another preventive effect on me. In the instance of her first cancer, I vowed that I would never be a "breast man." In this second instance, I foreswore tongue studs. Not that Grandmother Helen had ever even considered such an "enhancement." I probably won't get any part of me pierced, for that matter, though piercing is in even this far south. I don't think I could appreciate kissing a girl with a pierced tongue, which would be too much like kissing Grandmother Helen with near-cancer of the tongue. The debate over to pierce or not to pierce is likely another nail in my coffin, for I am an admitted nerdy type. Have you ever seen a pierced nerd?

Given all the tongue and piercing words/thoughts, I remembered that I come from, on Grandmother Helen's side of the family, a line of piercers. There're pirates in our woodpile. A pirate proved his manhood by slitting his ear to receive an iron "earring" that he would, to show his success, eventually replace with a gold one. So, just maybe the scare this time wasn't vengeance. To this day, in North Carolina, men descended from pirates wear a single earring. Now of course, the ears are crowded, the issue clouded (by earrings as identity markers for certain males who are not pirate-descended, though nothing prevents there being.) You have to understand ear language. When Ms. Ellerby asked us to write a poem taking on "an issue," that's the one I chose. Granddaddy Bob and Doak liked it, but I got funny looks from people at school. Even though it had come about, at least indirectly, because of Grandmother Helen, Granddaddy Bob thought it best I didn't show it to her.

An Harangue of Earrings

I know people who know people
by their earring style.
Mostly, the people they know this way,
they say, are quite, quite gay,
though the precise nature
of their gayness, the people
who know these people
will not say.

This conundrum vexed me,
sent me to inquire whence earrings,
what their history. For some time past,
the only males I knew with earring
were piratically descended and were gay
as gay mood took them,
but that's as far as I could see or say.

Now Genesis cites earrings,
and from Time Past,
people holed their ears
to hang rings or hooks for pendants.
Almost all high-born Ancients earringed.
Egyptians favored filigree of gold.
Greeks gorged on studs and pendants;
Romans, simpler precious stones.
Byzantines liked the busy byzantine,
worn long and jeweled.
Pre-Columbian noblemen chose earplugs
or gold and turquoise ornaments.
Mankind (earring wearers being mostly men)
earringed on to pearl drops, diamonds, great gems;
to ivory, jet, cameo; to paste.
Would you believe?—
Victorians mostly pierced.
Even now, however,
some Victorian-descended clip and screw.
We returned to piercing
in the sexy sixties.

From all of which, I do conclude
the earring language Babel,
not Babylonian.
We cannot unravel it today, tomorrow,
though we go to see all the wizards
housed in Sodom and Gomorrah.

I still don't know left from right when it comes to a guy's earrings.

Next, I moved on to the poetry of piercing. Granddaddy Bob gave me "nether parts" as he'd given me the chase after "all facets" in general and *piercing* in particular.

Piercing

Never been pierced
of ears,
much less navel, nose, nether parts,
lips, fore or aft.
Have no real body jewelry.
Bawdy jewelry?
Equally unlikely to succumb
to tattooing,
to body branding,
don't really want something embedded in my skin,
don't really want to bring out something
presumably already there,
even if the pain is soothing.
I *will* evince a certain admiration
for the lady who,
over a three-year period,
endured a two-hundred "strike" project
including a pyramid with sun rays.
The technique is "slash and burn"—
one-second exposure to
white-hot metal
for lasting art scars
and a stencil's pattern.
Usually done on flatter,
fleshier parts of the body.
Does that sound kosher?
Having such a hard-core rite of passage is not for me,
though I do admire the aborigines.

Aside from Granddaddy Bob and Ms. Ellerby, the only person I've discussed earrings and piercing with is Doak. He doesn't personally go in for non-visible piercing but wears an ear stud, though he thinks a ring in a girl's navel could be a genuine turn-on. He hasn't seen one but keeps looking. He's aroused my interest in such, too, but I doubt either of us is going to get too far in our investigations until we go off to college.

I can see it now. Doak and I are at Duke (where my family goes when it goes) for our final interviews. Mine's for academics. The closest I get to sports, not counting hunting and fishing with Granddaddy Bob, is keeping stats for basketball and being "water boy" for football, and Doak's responsible for my having both positions. Doak, a tall, fast dude, is there for basketball. He's a great football player, too, and I intend to point out that he could give Duke a comeback in that sport. (Granddaddy Bob says, "Don't let anybody kid you, Zy Boy, the biggest impact sports has made in America is all the people running around who can pronounce Coach Krzyzewski's name.")

Coach K says, "Is there anything else we can tell you, Mr. Shaw?"

Old Doak thinks to himself, "Now I told Zy I wouldn't, but what the hell?" and lets it out: "Well, Coach, how many coeds are there at Duke with studded navels?" By rights, the panel should be disgusted or burst into laughs, but Doakum Shaw is needed. Coach K scratches his head (where coaches from lesser institutions of higher learning would scratch lower down) and responds, "Mr. Shaw, I don't know the answer to that one, but we'll have a graduate student from the Fuqua School of Business take it in hand. The results will doubtless be of interest to us all."

That fantasy was "pierced" when Grandmother Helen's cancer returned. It was then I felt that I'd maybe "inadvertently" called Vengeance or Calamity down. I remembered Jesus on the Cross being pierced with nails and spear. It was the first time Granddaddy Bob had to hesitate, tears in his eyes, before he could answer me.

Revolving Glass

I pull into the valet line—I always do when I’m driving my mother—show the valet my Friends of the Hospital card, grab my purse, my mother’s purse, my mother’s cane, then step from the car. By the time I reach the passenger’s side, the valet is already helping my mother onto the curb. At the bank of doors, we enter the same revolving cell of glass—each one large enough to accommodate a wheelchair—and step-step together until the glass opens and releases us into the cancer center. We are here for a screening, an MRI of my mother’s chest and lungs, ordered by her oncologist, who wants to make sure the cough my mother can’t shake is only a cough.

“It’s probably just a fire drill,” my mother says hours later, as I pull out of the hospital complex and swing into traffic on John R. Street. “Fire drill” is the term my mother has given to cancer scares. I’ve lost count of how many fire drills she’s had since going into remission in 1996; this is not a number I want to track. I can tell when a fire drill has started because my mother’s voice sounds too high and too cheerful on the phone. When I ask her what’s wrong, she says, “Oh, nothing.” Then a beat of silence. Then, “We’re just starting another fire drill.” There is always a “we.” My mother and I are in this together.

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When my mother’s cancer came, it snuck up on her, burying itself hushed and gentle in the tissue of her right breast. Thin for most of her life, my mother, in her late thirties, had only recently begun to gain weight. Her arms thickened; her belly widened. Her breasts grew larger than they ever had, spreading out over her chest, reshaping themselves. Maybe that was why she didn’t notice the lump right away. Years later, my mother told me that when her fingers finally found it and pressed down to make sure, she shied away from the lump, from the whole idea of it, and did not see a doctor for nearly a year. It is difficult for me to understand this, how she could have felt it and let it go, how she could not have realized that, in cancer, every day matters.

My mother’s diagnosis arrived only three days after her thirty-ninth birthday: Breast Cancer, right breast, Stage III B. The staging system for breast cancer scores the seriousness of the disease from Stage 0, an early, noninvasive cancer, to Stage IV, a cancer that has metastasized to other body parts. Stage III is the only stage that includes A, B, and C distinctions. Because the cancer had grown not only into a large tumor but also into the lymph nodes under her arm and into the tissue of her chest wall, my mother’s cancer landed her in Stage III B, invasive, locally advanced cancer. Stage III B cancer was bad, bad news. But I was thirteen then and didn’t understand that a woman could rack up a cancer score, and the score held a direct correlation to her prognosis for survival.

Only recently has my mother told me how much she worked to hide the enormity of her sickness from my younger brother, Adam, and me. When she grieved for herself, she carried a pillow into her bedroom closet—the old plaster walls were thick and molded into the space below the staircase—and muffled her cries. When she grew ill from the chemotherapy, she ran water in the bathtub, and the noise of the copper pipes and the water splashing into the enameled iron tub covered the sound of her vomiting into the toilet bowl.

Six days after her diagnosis, my mother had a radical mastectomy. The surgeon removed her right breast, the skin covering her breast, her nipple, the muscles beneath her breast, and the surrounding lymph nodes. My mother elected to have breast reconstruction surgery immediately after the mastectomy, a decision her doctors supported because she was young enough to be resilient and because waking with two breasts instead of one was believed to reduce the trauma. But once her body was open on the table, the surgeon decided the cancer was too involved, the surgery too radical to allow for an immediate reconstruction. My mother woke with one breast.

Visiting my mother in the hospital, I was surprised at the new, strange lopsidedness of her body. I tried not to look, but my eyes moved to the flat, almost hollow space on the right side of her chest. Her left hand kept moving, rising, trying to cover the place where her right breast had been.

Where is the rest of this memory? My mother's soft, fleshy arms in the sleeves of her hospital gown? The sheet gathered at her waist? Her feet pushing up the blanket at the foot of her bed? Her face? Did I hug her? Did I, even for an embarrassed second, try to understand what it must have been like for her?

I was steeped in hormones then, self-centered in the way only pubescent girls can be. Most of what I remember is tied to my own body. Perhaps the parts I have forgotten are lodged there, beneath my own skin. My breasts were just starting to emerge, the white flesh feeling a little fatter than it ever had, the darkening nipples poking out. Wearing thin training bras embellished with little white bows, I envied the girls in my class whose breasts were growing more noticeably, pushing out the fronts of their shirts, making tents when they moved their arms to stretch in gym class. At night, I pushed balled-up socks beneath my pajama top and looked in the mirror. Lying in my bed, I imagined what it would feel like to have full, rounded breasts pushing up the sheet as I lay on my back or squishing between my arms when I rolled on my side. Even now I remember—distinctly—the exact words I added to my bedtime prayers: Please let me grow big boobs—this is the language I used, even to speak with God—and let me get my period soon. For I wanted this, too, to bleed, to have a changing body outside and in.

Yet, during the days before and weeks after my mother's surgery, the word "breast" embarrassed me when I heard my mother say it into the phone or to a friend or relative in our kitchen. She said "breast" often and with such specificity, "in my right breast." She said "breast" to many people, even to Pastor Prines and my Uncle Lee, men whom I could not imagine thinking of my mother's breasts. When I sat in a room full of adults and listened to my mother describe her body, her cancer, her treatment plan, I would notice I was sitting with my shoulders pinched forward and my arms thrust down over my own chest. My cheeks burned when I realized how I was covering myself, and each time I was surprised the adults didn't seem to notice what I was

doing. When we were alone, my mother explained breast exams and mammograms, and when I applied the ideas to my own body, they humiliated me—the thought of a doctor’s fingers palpating, of a machine photographing the tissue inside.

During my mother’s hospital stay, I noticed blood on my underpants for the first time. I’d expected an impressive show of red, something bright and definite. My period came more slowly though, leaving brown-red smears for days before turning into real blood. Aunt Claudia, my mother’s sister, stayed with us during my mother’s surgery. I wasn’t sure how to tell my aunt about the dirty little smears, so I said nothing. Mom had not had a period since her hysterectomy years earlier; I didn’t even bother to look for a maxi pad. Instead, I washed the blood out of my underpants the best I could in our tiny upstairs bathroom. I tried hand soap, the bar of Irish Spring, and shampoo. The stains faded but did not go away. I carried each pair of wet underpants down to the laundry room and buried them in the dirty laundry basket. I tried to construct my own pads from folded paper towels and scotch tape. Soon enough, Aunt Claudia asked me if I had, by chance, started my period. When I said “yes,” she drove me to the grocery store.

Elevator music played a song I almost but not quite recognized as we walked down the feminine hygiene aisle, where a wall of maxi pads and tampons faced us on one side, and shelves stacked with diapers, baby bottles, and formula lined the other. I was glad when Aunt Claudia walked past the tampons; I wasn’t sure I wanted to insert anything.

“Do you know what kind you want?” Aunt Claudia asked. The boxes and plastic wrapped packages looked so pretty and sanitized in their greens and blues and pinks: Kotex, Always, Stayfree.

“I don’t know,” I said. But I liked the sleek, green plastic around the Always pads. “Maybe these?”

Aunt Claudia tapped one of her long fingernails on an Always package marked “light.” “Probably this one for you.” Aunt Claudia’s fingers looked just like my mother’s, and I wondered what kind of pads Mom had used.

“Did you get your period while I was gone?” my mother asked a day after she came home from the hospital, during a time when we were alone together in the house.

“Yes.” I looked up at my mother. Her brown bob hung limply around her chin. Her eyes looked tired, but there was keenness in them too.

“Congratulations,” my mother said, opening her arms to me.

I hugged her gingerly because I did not want to hurt her and because I was afraid of what I would feel. When she drew her thick arms around me, my chest moved toward hers, and I felt the hollow place where her right breast had been. When she released me, her eyes were wet.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she almost laughed. “No, Honey. I’m just so happy to be home with you today.” It was years before I understood what made her cry.

After my mother's mastectomy, she bought a prosthetic breast, but I did not see her naked chest for years. She was careful to keep it covered. I know—because she told once, on the way home from a fire drill—she tried herself not to look. The radical mastectomy left not only a flat space but a sunken curve, a hollow place with nothing but bone beneath.

After the surgery, she turned her face away from the mirror in the small bathroom attached to her hospital room. When the nurses came in to change her dressings and her gowns, she closed her eyes. Finally, the day before her discharge, her favorite nurse brought a mirror to the bed. You need to look. My mother held the mirror while the nurse pulled the hospital gown down over my mother's shoulders. Beneath the healing incision, my mother said she saw ribs where her right breast had been.

Sometimes I try to imagine this in detail: my mother opening her left hand to take the mirror, the nurse telling her it was okay, the reflection. But even two decades later, I don't like to think of my mother, one-breasted, concave, disgusted, making herself look.

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I am thirty-two, six years younger than my mother was at her initial diagnosis. Given the advanced stage, the cancer must have been inside her body for years. How old was she when its cells began to grow? Thirty-four? Thirty-three? Younger?

I am careful. I do breast self-exams. Once a month, I stand in the shower, curve one arm behind my head and press the fingers of my other hand into my breast tissue. I use the grid pattern, pressing in small circles, up and down the length of each breast, applying pressure from my collarbone to the tissue below each breast, then feeling the lymph nodes beneath my armpits. My own examinations are usually more thorough than my gynecologist's. The one time I found a lump—left breast, near my nipple—I made an appointment for the following week. My doctor could not feel it. I was twenty-four at the time; she wasn't concerned. Two months later, when the lump had not gone away or gotten smaller, I made another appointment. My doctor still couldn't feel it, but for the sake of what she termed my "peace of mind," she set up an ultrasound at a breast clinic. The technician found the lump. A radiologist came in. He looked at the image on the screen, palpated the lump with three fingers, and ordered a diagnostic mammogram. After that, he ordered a biopsy. Of course I was terrified and angry. I cried. I vacillated between thinking now it is my turn and this is not actually happening.

It was not. The lump was a benign fibroadenoma. The biopsy scar faded. After my breast healed, I went in for a new baseline mammogram. Once a year I drive to the breast center, undress from the waist up, pull on the gown—it's so big I can wrap it around myself twice—and sit on the wooden bench in the curtained changing room until my name is called.

My breasts are small and firm and fit (not even snugly) into an A-cup. The voluptuous breasts I dreamed onto my body as an adolescent never materialized. I can still wear the strapless bra I wore under my prom dress my freshman year of high school, though it fits now. For years I was self-conscious, wanting cleavage and a curving profile. In college, I read the breasts chapter of

Christiane Northrup's *Women's Bodies Women's Wisdom*. Northrup suggests that women with small breasts may have had some experience in adolescence that caused them to think breasts were somehow negative or bad or fearful things.¹ Perhaps I feared breasts, even as I wanted to grow them.

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A few days before my mother's fortieth birthday, Adam and I were loitering around the kitchen, waiting for Mom to get out of the shower. This was usually the time of day Mom gave orders to help set the table, fill glasses with milk, set out a plate of carrots and celery. Mom never took showers at this time of day, and when we heard the shower shut off, we looked toward the bathroom. Mom emerged fully dressed and red-faced. When she noticed me watching her, she smiled, but the smile only touched her lips, and the rest of her face held an expression I could not place.

Her brown hair dried quickly. Though it had grown in since she'd finished her course of chemotherapy in November, it was not yet as long as my father's and didn't begin to cover her ears. Even in Michigan's July humidity, hair that short dries quickly. As it did, the color surprised me. Before the cancer, my mother, father, and I shared the same hair, fine and soft and golden brown. (Adam's hair grew blond but was as fine as the rest of ours.) My mother's post-chemotherapy hair grew in thicker and darker than it had before, like hair belonging to a different family.

A few weeks earlier, she'd put her wigs away, up on the highest shelf of her closet. This detail did not register with me that night, but it sticks now, in memory. It sticks more than the actual evening, which is one of the slipperiest memories I have. I longed, then, to be disconnected from my mother's sickness, for my body to be unrelated to hers. Though I could not have given the feeling words, I wanted to not—not, not—take part in what was happening. Perhaps this is why the memory slips: my refusal to engage fully in this one night with my family. For years, though, I have tried to get back to that evening, as if connecting to it will let me understand the cancer itself, the links between my mother's body and mine. This is what I have:

Mom looked at the kitchen clock and said, "Bill, what are we going to do about dinner?"

"I'll take care of it," Dad said and went out to pick up Chinese, Mom's favorite. The Chinese restaurant was one town over, so Dad was gone for forty minutes—blank time, the July evening, waiting. When he came home with dinner, we sat on our usual stools in our usual order around the countertop island: me, Dad, Mom, Adam. We dished the food onto paper plates—why dirty dishes on this night?—and wiped our mouths with paper napkins. We did not laugh and joke like we usually did during dinner. I must have begun to understand then, and Adam must have realized something too, or maybe he kept quiet because our parents were quiet. Still, Adam and I ate—Adam going back for seconds—and my parents pretended to eat. In the un-air-conditioned warmth of the evening, the ceiling fan spun, moving the air around the four of us and our carryout. The smell of egg rolls wafted. The food cooled quickly on our plates.

After Adam cleaned his second plate, my mother told us what she learned during the appointment with her oncologist.

How did she tell us? I'm sick again. The cancer came back. Did she say "metastatic"? Did she say "right lung"?

The window above the sink stood open to the evening, the noise of the fan and the outside sounds filling in when no one was talking. All whirring and clicking, crickets and shifting tree leaves.

My father tried, started to say something but faltered, his chin and his mustache trembling. He left the table and walked over to the sink, keeping his back to us, so we could only see the fading blue oxford shirt tucked into his jeans, the bump where the fat under his skin rose over the back of his belt, the light over the sink shining on his thinning hair. Then my mother said—clearly and brightly, like a knife hitting a glass to begin a toast—"But I'm going to fight this, and we're all going to be okay."

Almost exactly—and only—one year had passed since my mother's first diagnosis. She hadn't thrown the wigs away; she'd put them away. Now, I wonder—it's not a question I feel I should ask—if she was waiting, if she knew it would come back.

"I'm going to be okay," my mother said a few days after she told us her cancer was back. I believed her—or believed her most of the time—and tried not to think about what "not okay" would mean.

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By 1991, research hospitals around the country were conducting a particular study: the use of autologous bone marrow transplants with high-dose chemotherapy for the treatment of metastatic breast cancer. "Study" is the medical community's term for an experimental treatment; experimental treatments come with risks. In this study, the high dose chemo was so high, it would be fatal to the patient if her own bone marrow were not harvested before the treatment and pumped back into her bloodstream afterward. This was the autologous part. It was not the bone marrow that treated the cancer; it was the chemotherapy. The bone marrow saved the woman's life after—or it attempted to. One of the risks was death, not just later from the cancer but from the treatment itself.

By the turn of the new year, 1992, my mother was enrolled as a participant in one of the studies, four hours away, in Chicago. Her risk of death during the treatment was estimated at ten percent. I understood there was a chance she would not come back.

Gray covered the city in the morning. The possibility of lake-effect snow clung to the forecast as we checked out of the hotel and drove toward the South Side of Chicago. Looking out the window, I could not tell the difference between the clouds and the air. Mom sang the first verse of Leroy Brown: *Well the South Side of Chicago is the baddest part of town. And if you go down there, you better just beware of a man named Leroy Brown. Now Leroy wanted trouble he stand about six foot four. All the downtown ladies call him Treetop Lover all the men just call him Sir.* When her voice shook, I finished the chorus with her. *And it's bad, bad Leroy Brown, the baddest man in the whole damn town...* My father drove the burgundy Taurus toward my mother's bone marrow transplant.

Mom entered the hospital in a wheelchair Dad pushed up a narrow ramp covered by a green awning. Adam and I walked behind. Through Dad's moving legs, I noticed the block letters stamped on the back of the wheelchair: University of Chicago Hospital. Wind gusted under the awning. Dad's thin hair sailed up. Mom put a hand to her head to hold her wig in place. Adam and I held our hands in our coat pockets. Snow hit my face, but I did not wipe it away. Dad took even, determined steps, pushing Mom through the revolving doors. Adam and I stood beside each other to catch the next opening.

Children under sixteen were not allowed into the bone marrow transplant ward. Transplant patients have compromised immune systems, and Adam and I carried the risk of too many germs. We wouldn't be able to go up to our mother's room or see her again until she was discharged—six weeks, eight, depending.

We said goodbye to my mother in a tiny, strange room, where she sat in a blue recliner having something the nurse called "leukapheresis." There were tubes and a centrifuge. Mom's clothing was gone and her prosthetic breast and lipstick. She wore a hospital gown and her wig. I realize now she must have put the wig back on after she changed because she wanted to look as normal as possible for us before we left her. Tubes rose from the neck of the gown and trailed over to the centrifuge and an IV pole. The tubes frightened me, though I knew these must be the port the doctors had installed a few days earlier. A bulge lifted her hospital gown where the tubes entered her body, and I wondered how I hadn't noticed the bulge before. Spinning, the centrifuge separated my mother's bone marrow stem cells from the rest of her blood—leukapheresis. The tubes pulled the blood out of my mother's body and pushed it back in, emptier.

Mom could not move around much; she leaned back in the blue recliner, breathing evenly, talking to us from beneath the tubes. I hung back while Adam leaned over Mom. He seemed not exactly sure where to put his hands, but he managed to hug her anyway.

"It'll be okay," Mom said. "Be positive."

"I know," Adam said. I hoped he believed it.

I put my hands on the back of my mother's shoulders, slipping them between her hospital gown and the recliner's vinyl. Then, I hesitated, afraid of the port.

"It's okay," the nurse said. And as I pressed closer to my mother, I noticed not the flat plane on one side of her chest but the hard knot in the middle. Plastic against skin. I said, "Bye," and "I love you." I was careful not to bump her wig when I pulled away. I turned while my parents said "See you in a couple days," and I heard the quick, soft sound of their lips connecting. It was my father's hand on the back of my shoulder that guided me from the room.

∴

In the oncologist's office a week into the latest fire drill, the films of my mother's lungs illuminate a screen, and we learn the persistent cough is not cancer. More than a cough, probably—my mother will need to see a pulmonary specialist—but not cancer. Without realizing I'd been holding my breath, I exhale. So does my mother. "Thank God," she says, and I know she means it as a prayer. I know a string of doctor's appointments, tests, and procedures will

follow—if not just a cough, then what?—but my relief is not lessened. Only on a scale involving cancer does possible lung disease seem like good news.

It has been nineteen years since my mother's second diagnosis. She was tumor free after her bone marrow transplant, and at her three-month follow-up, and her six-month, and every appointment after, until four years had passed, and the oncologists said she was in remission. At fifty-nine she's been in remission for so long the doctors don't even say "remission" anymore. Still, my mother's cancer is like this: it comes back. Not—thank God—in cellular form but in a way that keeps her—keeps us—looking over our shoulders.

Relatives say I look just like my mother did at my age—the same wide brown eyes and high cheekbones, the same naturally bushy but plucked into high arcs eyebrows, the same thin face framed (now that I've donated a foot of hair to Locks of Love) in the same brown hair cut into a bob. In the mirror I can see the differences. My nose is larger than by mother's, and my hair is wavier.

I know I could get tested for genetic mutations, specifically in BRCA-1 and 2, the breast cancer susceptibility genes. But I don't want to. Two reasons I can name are that inheriting the mutations doesn't mean I'll develop breast cancer, and, if I have a mutation, I'd rather not know, because then I'd be waiting for it to come.

There are also reasons I cannot name.

I was fourteen when my mother gave me a plastic card to hang in the upstairs shower: How to perform a breast self exam. Then, I followed the card's directions and tried not to feel embarrassed. Now, I see the irony: how my mother tried to teach me to protect myself from the disease, even when she had not protected herself. Why didn't my mother go to the doctor with her breast lump right away? Her reasons for waiting must be intricate and nearly impossible to name. When I asked her once why she did not see a doctor more quickly, she said: "I don't know. I was so young. You and Adam were so young."

I'm not sure how many other women think of their breasts as dangerous. The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2011, there will be 288,130 new cases of breast cancer diagnosed in the United States alone². Given this statistic, I know I am not the only one afraid. During my annual mammograms, the technician moves each breast into place and pulls the lever. I look down at my own body as one breast then the other is flattened beneath the plate of glass.

Notes

1. Christaine Northrup, MD. *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994: 377.
2. Breast Cancer Research Foundation. "Frequently Asked Questions & Statistics." The Breast Cancer Research Foundation. http://www.bcrfcure.org/res_faq.html#statistics (accessed July 22, 2011).

DANNY P. BARBARE

The Magnolia

So many times to write about her
Awash in the moonlight
Sweet flowers
She is deeply rooted in Southern
Tradition, the belle of the ball
She is faithfully evergreen
Shuns the yellow
Lets them fall lightly.
She is my wife as we've grown together.

The Jelly Bean

She's a real jelly bean.
She'll bring out the sweetness
In you
Once you bite into her hard shell.
And she'll stick around awhile
All gummy
With her perfume and flavor.

The Beautiful Sun

The sun warmly glows
Lets her yellow
Golden hair down
As everything and everybody is
Astonished at her beauty
Look from the tip of
Their tops saying goodbye
Knowing it
Will be a cool night.

JOSHUA COMYN

The Street of Crocodiles (B.Q.)

for Bella

1

From what heights! This world through glass,
Our minds casting forward and back...
We set eye to detail, the 2D minutiae turning vast depths,
Like an audio track clicking in without sound,
Just the sound of itself without sound,
An empty room, an open cage
The moment when everything goes into slow motion
Then cuts back with fury, your body hurtling:

Plunge aurora air!
Glow the dark clouds!
Solar checkpoint!
To where the winds toss and the weather is.

Can we refuse the fall and destination's streets?
Can we refuse the eye and its odours?
Can we refuse the city that will us refuse?

And the weather hastened after us a bitter gift,
The cold a freeze beyond respite,
And the sheeting rain obscured your face,
And my eyes wandered in darkness,
And my voice, the empty streets.

Spittle is a blood strand paled,
And brighter is the filament that never will repeat

my revenant.

2

of the creak
no one speaks
makes you wonder
(made him pray)
she's a loner
it's no thing
till again felt it suck
phloem like
without effort

mmm

so I said to him I said
'do it again and you'll make me cry'
and he did it again or didn't
and I cried or didn't
because/in spite of
it's all the same again

mmm

smile a measure
weep a cup
that's what I said the vague summer long
like my mother did before me
and her mother did before she did
waiting for a ray
such a thing
blessed wing
blessed wing

3

Do these rooms do and how do they?
This pulsing city, this stertorous heart,
Faces set in every wall.
Do they listen? Do they watch?
Is it a civic art or structural necessity?
I don't ask and they don't say,
But my body soon learns like a dog on the leash:

The fumes will tangle you, the thread still lead you on.
The knot untied will knot again, and by no thought of hand.
Already my fingers tremble like a moth in a lamp.

Sic, kem, mal mal, dumele dumele
Pa pa, pa pa. Gom.
Paper wrap these meat dreams, but will they fit?
This mapped flesh, will it indicate?
Here, every image has its double,
And every part achieves a world.
My body revolts, is not my own.
And so the scarecrow cries again:
'A flame! Aflame!
There goes my home!'
The old world turns and burns again.

4

Peep to the hole get your eye show free, ladies and gentlemen!
Put your eye there, but not too close to the soul snatcher!
Put your eye there see your eye gaze back!
Put your eye there and watch it beg for more!
What you gazing with?
A slobbering eye?
And when your eye gone?
You got a weeping nose and a wailing tongue.

5

What's in the details?
Will it turn back time?
Each division's a composition,
The places switch:
Denominator to numerator

given time.

6

Clockwork(s)...
the metronome fled
moon and back the fragrance now
moon and back and not forgot
bloodleaf, cravensnow

In my new clothes I wait for you
(The museum enacts a frozen time)
In my old time I search for you
Stitching to the seconds' pace

The world grows grey
A faded picture craven cold

But interstice a bursting light
In my new and in my old

CHARLES COTÉ

Shrink's Winter

After Ricardo Reis

Each thing, in its time, has its time
and Shrink feels cold this winter,
 the slush in the streets,
 yellowed patches of dormancy.
All day he sits by a heater
waiting for night to fall, his wife
 to greet him in the evening,
 their uncertain hour together
sitting by the fire, wary of each other
because this is their hour of wariness.
 It's not safe to have this conversation,
 to tell you how I feel.
And if she tells him her secrets
(which is a darkness to his thinking),
 if she speaks them in fits,
 reluctantly,
let him remember his own indiscretion,
the fabrications he told back when
 his stories were omissions
 spoken cruelly,
or of the weeds in his parents' garden,
his desolate raking around the flowers
 while his father, unconscious
 on the couch, watched TV.
And so his love sits now by the fire,
a smoldering pyre of locust, sits like a phoenix
 while Shrink picks at loose threads
 on his sweater,
restless in the rest of this moment,
the inside of this moment,
while he thinks of what
 they once had, and outside
 there's only winter.

Shrink's Math

If two halves make a whole,
then he had to halve her,
to fill the whole of his heart.
But what did they halve
if not each other?
He'd been halving
all he could take;
she'd halve no more
to give. And still, it was
never enough, so he'd halve
a lover too, one he'd hope
would make him
whole again, give him
at least a halve of what
he didn't halve at home.
This only made the whole
much bigger, at least by
one whole halve of itself.
If one plus one is too
much to halve, and one
times one is one
too many halves, then
one divided by one
is a halve over a halve.
They'd halve to halve
each other.

Shrink's Elusive Moon

follows lonely and bored,
envies the condo parking lot
where once he made out with her,
where once she made time
to make out with him, the man
in the moon grown tired
of his years, his seasons of attraction
to the sea, wave upon wave
wearing down a firm resolve
to blame his sorrow on the sun.
Just like the moon to hide
its darker side, to fuse
its grief—a fatal loss of kin,
the orphaned moon—and she
in his car's backseat, him wanting
more than she could give,
eclipsed by a star of his own
making, the moon to soothe
his disillusionment, to prove
that he was up
against it, so condolences
to the moon
with its phases,
its waxing and waning
gibbous or crescent
for its first and last
quarter, the moon, hardly
new and rarely full.

A.B. DATTA

Noumenon

The clouds shook
his head. It rained
over the razed stubs
in a dream. His ribs
aching to pierce out
from needy flesh brushed
the first harvest.

This is where the country could be.

A smile of the bride opening inside a prickly
thatch is a place the moon visits,
like we do the moon.
Something stirs and light dismantles
us, we are *this* and our origins become unspeakable.

What the voice says is:

I am hunting for the voice.

The arm of regret is how far the bird
is now, where it will migrate.
The way, the *way* is happening,
history travels and finds us
thinking through its dark hair, finds
the poor throb in our beds, and how we,
despite pledging a tired stillness, without moving
to know anymore, keep being scattered,
keep happening within.

Homecomings

Charm of observation doesn't stir
much. Sometimes
fog is just fog it only
passes and how
it descends over the dark, its wetness, kinship with our skin;

is not asked.

It could be that what remains of memory is what it is going to be,
not what was.

The return to our own happenings
is exiled.

After twelve years you walk into your favorite park.

The old woman who once chased you isn't there.

You're not sure if you'll run if she came now.

There is no strength to be
amazed even when
your head becomes,
bends grass,
rubs green into green into greener
shocks.

The beetle still scuttles
root to root
with a clarity that could save the universe.

You never touch the undergrowth
without remembering a hairy sickness
in the bedroom probably

eating an ice-cream
naked

waiting

Word

after Franz Wright

Shut eyelids of the house.
Water trickling over them. Follow
the sound into a dark harvest
rearing invisibly night after night.
All my blind fingers
gather at the tap's mouth
reach out
return
to its old house of touch.

Hairy absence
 i bend
as gesture, as prayer
for ones
who burned to weave
an embrace to fit you.

each twitch gushing toward
 night's deep feet
every body wholly
 without
in weeping dark—

we believed we were consolable
when we heard the speechless air whirring
behind the word.

We keep hearing it and
it kills.

Among the dialect of leaves:
note of *almost*,
a drizzle of keys.

In the beginning was the word.

Hold

if i could hold
uttering the word *night*

it might be understood

BRIAN DIAMOND

Number Theory

Gauss watching a pair of foxes slip across the winter ice,
imagines an equation for which there is no answer.
He pores a pint of brandy into a glass, then dreams
integers as shadows crawling up his fireplace. The winter is brutal.
Field mice freeze to water spigots and those foxes
gnaw at their frozen fur.
Gauss, who believes in a perfect math,
distrusts images. Now he draws a two-dimensional grid
upon which infinite points. Who cares if numbers exist, so long as they are
predictable?
In any case, the world is real.

The foxes follow a line of trees off into an implied horizon.
Gauss drags his fingers across a pinewood table, then scribbles
notes for *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae* in broken Latin. Outside,
it has not rained and the earth—hard and unmoving.

Honeymoon

Bees are fucking bees
in Carmel. Gorgeous
mansions on cliffs crowd the ocean while
in restaurants men talk
sports. I envy the rich
for their houses mostly. One
bottle of wine drunk and my wife
points out dolphins past the breakers.
Norman Dubie calls me
to ask about his dream—a vision of Sinai.
We talk about the Tennis Court Oaths
& Nachman. I miss poetry.
The clouds hang on thick through afternoon,
but by night the sky is stunned with clarity.

Technology is Invisible

Internet gleams.
We trust the future will be different
or at least less boring—
Radio outlasted the music video.
The sea cow is extinct. Difficult
is beauty, the rest
a fad. Done with simple arithmetic.
Done with politics.
Done with enlightenment I am
my own appetites struggling
to be clear. River or no river the valley
crowds with houses, street lamps
watch traffic filling and then
un-filling the same freeway.

SEAN HOWARD

shadowgraph 69: *oven with windows*

(poetry detected in donald glaser's nobel physics lecture, 1960)

i

the dear
tracks. random-

inoes. Cosmic—life
size... (the elegant

boils?) dream: 'a
world of our

own'

ii

scattered—star
particles... (inject-

ing liquidity.) psycho
paths. death *mask*?

'the surface ten-
sion vanish-

es'

iii

imagery: magnetic
resonance. (apocal-

ipstick.) 'sure sign'; *bub-*
bles on the surface...

clouds expand-
ing our hori-

zons

iv

'what history shows':
oven with windows... (

mirror; the glass filling
the man.) tracks—ion

horse. 'the great am-
erican bub-

ble'

TIMOTHY KERCHER

Gemini

I'm happy the stars aren't howling tonight—afraid
my wife might be carrying Remus and Romulus in her belly.
I can't take cold medicine! she screams after sneezing,
after ten thousand babies kick inside her, all ancient Rome's
possible offspring dancing. O, Feral children! She cradles
the brunt of her belly that is growling like a she-wolf.
She would rather be on Turkey's Turquoise Coast this moment
without me. But I tell her she is going to be a mother
to a city! How does a city bask on a beach
with babies? she asks. A beach is a knife, a gun, I say,
though I'm already thinking about grapefruits
and their pink insides, the way the juice glows
when I squeeze. If these babies were poems, she offers
as I do the math in my head—first there was a trinity,
but one has been subtracted (did it subtract itself?)
and now there are two, like Cain and Abel,
like the Iroquois right and left handed brothers—¡Dios mío!
Did I say the stars weren't howling? They are,
all of their tiny, distant voices. I saw Baby A wave
to me (I was looking at the machine while my wife was not)
as the doctor probed her with a wand. I saw Baby B's heart pulse
like a tiny nova; I'm now convinced our progeny are constellations:
Castor and Pollux dancing in the sky of a belly, dancing on a screen
in placentas, dancing with the Milky Way, dancing
in a fold belonging to my wife, dancing with a million twinkling heads
of stolen cattle, not dancing in a city but a universe that is growing, growing.

Balance

The month of indecision has come and gone,
going home has been put off again;
new life at the beginning now is growing, dying.

The day I first learned I'd be a father I thought
of the long line of my wife's family passing, our three
embryos somehow sent for balance—three blessings

for three losses since we've been away. When I was ten
I said the three babies my mom was growing
were to make up for the two she lost. Life begins

in the death of others, hope returns when all is gone.
But then one of three has not developed, leaving us
with only two; does this knock my faith's

balance off-kilter? Does this bowl over my sense
of order? Balance, balance, I sing to myself, balance
becomes my mantra: life balance, death balance.

Rain in Paradise

I was reading Paradise Lost when
my wife called from our bed;
I dropped my book and went
wondering if something was wrong
in the bucket of her belly—

upon entering, there were spots
on the sheet which I took for blood
or her water breaking—

in that moment, the sky fell,
our two or three babies expelled
from Eden,

until I realized
it wasn't her leaking but our light
fixture leaking water—

I put my raincoat on, went outside,
but couldn't reach the roof.

I got soaked
in a fruitless effort to find anything
to bridge the twelve-foot gap—

I could have tried propping up
a wooden bench, or climbing
the brick and rock that line our home,
but was feeling too old
for that. God was resting when

I put the book down,
and I was relieved as I took
the light fixture off, relieved
our act of creation was still
creating. But this relief did not
relieve the rain, did not save
the bed for us that night; Allison
resting on the couch,

me wide awake in our spare room,
and the outside rain
filling a bucket.

JO NEACE KRAUSE

The Visit

“It’s me, Tammy,” she told him. “Your wife.”
She pulled back the heavy drapes as if across
A great distance to let the sun in over his bed.

“Day,” he said.

He wore a large hat, a cowboy hat
Of which he was part. It spoke for him.
It was clean and high. Like a sail.

” Wind.” he said.

An attendant came. Shaved him, took away the razor
Carried off the pan of water. His eyes followed the pan.

“Sea,” he told her. “Boat!”
The boat dashed by a storm fell into his drams, hurling him in against the vastness.

“Swim!” he said, making swimming motions with his arms.

“I’m here!” said his wife. “I’ll be here all day. Come on.”

Early Morning

No talking now, no turning on the news
No drunken smile or music
The room behind you sways in shadows
With sweetish warmth and sleep of dreams
Its your time to stand under the heavens
To blink back, drop jawed, at the splash of stars.
Even as a kid you lay on the roof and wondered
Where it all came from, where it started.
“I know but I’m not telling! I like to watch you squirm.”
Sister trying to be funny.
And Aunt Rose who kept her thoughts like her feet
on the ground, got frightened.
“Hush, honey,
don’t talk about stuff like that or I’ll whip you both.”

It’s still cool, chill as cherry blossoms
In the fog or the pear tree
Dappling its ice sickle fierceness
In the garden moonlight.

Far away in the immense
breathing space of darkness
wild and still, time breaks in upon you
opens itself to the famous
three o’clock morning air.

*“The world has written every poem
Played every tune , over turned every stone.
loosened with persistence every viewpoint on existence.”*

They sing like a hurricane in Aunt Rose’s church.
Glad for the truth, glad for the beauty, glad
For the stillness in the soul.

If Ronnie Gene had only listened he wouldn’t be
Locked up like he is.

A bird calls over the river
across the park
horse's hooves suddenly surge
where a light flashes in the trees.
What on earth?
Was that a scream?
A woman's frightened voice pleading
"Why Willie why Willie why Willie why?"
The beating hooves run on
hounding the question, on and on.
Almost a jabber, almost a chatter,
blue jay, crow, wren.
then quiet again.

What Kind Of Woman Was The Victim?

Pretty? Not exactly. Certainly not your usual victim. Yet highly excitable,
Like they all are. Looking for thrills, only on a higher order, mind you.

I can't think of her now without thinking sunlight on water.
Or a slender blond tree, wind rattling its leaves.
Rattled. Yes, that's the word. Rattled by something.
And she was all eagerness. Almost you'd say ecstatic
Every atom in her dancing

The way she threw herself into love as into a green briar riot
Or onto a barbwire hedge, not caring what pain might come
Yet within a month she exhausted herself. To give him credit
He didn't really know what she was like...but who would?
Like there was the time she threw the suitcase in the yard when she couldn't go
somewhere.
Like I say, who knows?
No doubt already the man's traveling mind was swimming in and out
Of that barbwire, needing to bottom feed and come home later and later.

Did she suspect something was being planned? Hard to say, the loving heart
has many places to hide its head. She saw no shadows
in his good clothes and polished boots
like the hovering shadows of hawks
whose talons struck the screaming kittens at play.

And he so eagerly showed her everything:
the new books just out, rocks, flowers, bones of swamp rabbits
shells from the beach.

One day they found a bird fallen from its nest.
I ask you: what is more pathetic,
what disturbs the spirit of mankind more
than a lost baby bird chirping frantically in the middle of this dumb cosmos.
It had fallen in some glades where a cat was watching
So they took it home and cared for it.
They called it Ishmael, or the Outcast of Apple Tree Nest, and gave it hamburger and fries
The American Death Diet, the man said. He was British, tough, slender, unknowable.
Ishmael thrived and grew a few fluffy feathers. It was their baby now.
They talked about it at parties, how it followed the woman around.
She hated to say what it looked like. Scrotum, she whispered and laughed.

Then one day Ishmael collapsed and make horrible gasping sounds
The man stood over the panting bird, decided to put the creature out of its misery.
He would gas it. He set about building a little execution chamber,
a little box with a hole in it.
Here in this hole is where the hose for the gas will go, he told the woman.
Now don't forget.
"How can I forget something like this?" she said in a strange voice.

When the man left her for another woman she knew what it felt like
To be swallowed up in the jaws of grief, to actually be digested
Alive by one horrible thought. It was winter. Snow piled up.
When she passed the enormous piles of snow
Heard the breaking down inside she knew that was like her soul breaking to pieces

She knew the world had cured itself with poetry many times
And so she wrote to save herself. She wrote
Oh, verse my sting and unbreak my wing
That I might learn to fly again!
For I am a woman grieving
One who loved and loved
And could not take it leaving

But her heart would not lift, it was too heavy to even move.
She needed the man's handsome hand, needed it so badly
She would accept any connection just to feel its warm strength upon her again
The night was on her, but the hand would take the night and bend it back
Back on back, open and open, like a great claw releasing her forever in the air
Like a song on the radio is released into the air and goes everywhere, far and wide,
Here and now and forever.

When the man heard of her death he lifted his head from the face of his new wife
Like an animal that had been drinking in a clear blue pool, and looked about in fear
There were many people who wanted to embarrass him with questions
They wanted to hear from him. Unknown people. Smirking strangers.
So he thought he would write. He would write something
He would write a song, dumb it down for the Americans
Who would make it a hit and sing it on their way to work
Singing in the morning traffic with their hair combed wet and still
With the hot jazzy spell of death stirring them, and the vision of the woman
In her nightgown falling through the sky as if she were on fire.

But no one liked his song. It was not a hit. The woman was still with them
She just kept on falling. That's the kind of woman she was.
Not exactly your usual victim. More like a glow somewhere far away.
Like a star that is gone, forever dead, but forever blazing too it seems,
with only those who have been in both places,
Where the dead live and the living have died, know what it's like.
To be a lady grieving, who loved and loved and could not take it leaving.

RICH MURPHY

Mireland Exile

The nets of religion, nation, and language,
cast by villagers hungry for security, snare
dolphins, swans, and Stephen Daedalus.
Ernest, the priest gone novelist, can't escape

a book's bathroom epiphanies that note
the rusting of his pump. Leopold Bloom
inhabits every body around himself
only under the cover of empathy to avoid

the cross hairs of a culture and nature.
Chimera, who lives to eat its own vomit
and would have loved the Dodgers
as it does everyone else in the brothel,

misquotes to survive the hardships beyond
the lotus eaters. PrrPrr: The god who is not
in service to character makes do with shapes
until the reader's laughter runs down cheeks.

Double-Vision

The crows and their scare, a golden bird,
negotiate over their field of corn. The kernel
by kernel pecking order rap love songs
against the inherited destitution, ensuring

a glazed red wheelbarrow another day.
The fowl of the silver spoon, stuffed with
the hay of a human, mimics Christ, the sun,
while harvesting literacy's richest and most

distant rows. Flapping the permanency
privilege, the menace of the airwaves perform
their Icarus while precious metal plugs
the ears of princes with history's lessons

of highs and lows. The flock scatters when
the heir of air perches on its limbs, its only
gift, the round about way to the sublime.
The direct route to the trailer park or slum

pans resources that the emperors waste.

Persistent Resistance

The reports from behind enemy lines
either dictated bodies dead
or described heritage disinherited.
Propaganda stepped over the villagers
one by one without recognizing the triggered
tongue in cheeks mowing down glory.
The unfortunate will left everything to will.
No parachute dropped the disappointment
and exclamation points that would have eased
promises and abandonment
for the partisan underground aiming to spook:
Oxymoron after oxymoron blitzed with farm tools.
Bunkers and root cellars blossomed
into craters: Cogito, cogito.
The witness pointing a gun and a pen at paper
subverted with irony and a steely stealth.
Utopian privileges ricocheted
surprising heirs in the identity crisis,
so sarcasm spasms infected the futile soil.
Rejecting the launch, trajectory, and news
to this day, the voice without lips suspends
rhythms where blintz poets used to make love,
mimicking with hyperbolic invectives in safe zones.
Contemptuous columns mock
the sure-footed world legislators
who crack spines to hold power in place.

NANCY SCOTT

Peter and Paul Church

Petr Petrovich Konchalovsky, oil on canvas, 1925

*In March, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in Pskov,
a city rich in parish churches, including Peter and Paul built in 1373.*

Among so many churches, why did the artist select
this quaint edifice isolated among thick summer foliage?

He limits his color palate—glints of grey, red, and brown,
but dabs and clumps of green and white create the surface texture.

The green onion-dome and lower roofs of the church
mimic the hues of trees and grass,
while white stucco walls merge with the cloud-driven sky.

The bells toll as they have for centuries,
in this glade,
this city,
this country, which has given
thumbs up or down
to so many martyrs and patriots,
yet, within these walls, many seek sanctuary.

Church, earth, and sky. Just that.

The Chicken Coop

Ernst A. Spuehler, watercolor, 1951

In the 1950s, my father was persuaded that the watercolor titled *The Chicken Coop*, by a local Midwestern artist, would, in time, realize a nice return on investment.

The painting in a gilt frame hangs in my living room, not because I feel an affinity to either the old shed, the rooster, or the wheelbarrow, but it was, after all,

my father's, and the palette is not unpleasant. After attending a watercolor class, I thought to examine the work more closely. I saw, for the first time, sun dappling

a dilapidated wood structure, half-hidden by a profusion of spring greens. Towering pink blossoms cast deep shadows on the white clapboard house nearby. Dark green wheelbarrow,

its red wheels askew, latch high on the shed door, bad news for the rooster pecking outside, and eight small, round air holes, no windows; how dark and uninviting for the poor chickens.

Today, six-year-old Leah and I sit on the sofa and stare at the painting, consider the colors and the fate of those chickens. No doubt his great-granddaughter's curiosity is a more favorable return than Dad could ever have hoped for.

Self Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle

Arnold Böcklin, oil on canvas, 1872

Villa Bellaio
San Domenico di Fiesole*

Herr Böcklin,
I've been here six weeks now,
sit under the portico writing.
A small, feisty dog doesn't approve,
escapes to nip at me,
oblivious to the caretaker's broom.

I often watch Il Duomo nesting
in low morning mist,
while orange-tiled roofs, cypress and fir
angle down hillsides.
Potted lemon trees ring the courtyard
just as you drew them.

The crumbling Etruscan wall holds,
the path overgrown with lichen
and moss. Perhaps in the shadows,
one, maybe two,
of your ebullient mythical creatures.

A young man brings fresh-killed
chickens, not plucked.
Basta, I say, *no more*, but he returns
again and again.
How persistent he is, Herr Böcklin,
as I imagine you
in your studio, palette and brush
defying death.

**Böcklin's home in Italy, late nineteenth century; author's vacation home, 1967*

JAMES VALVIS

Here in America

The elderly Jewish man, survivor of the Holocaust,
waddles to the hot tub, his feet so swollen
it's like he's walking on bowling pins.

His hair is sparse from chemotherapy,
belly bloated as if he swallowed a beach ball
like the one my wife and daughter
are playing with on this ordinary day.

I'm sitting at the table, reading Ploughshares.
He smiles at me, gives a little salute.
We're friends in that way strangers are friends
after they've seen each other over many years.

Grabbing the metal bar, arms doing all the work,
he lowers himself in the hot water,
one slow painful step and then another,
until at last he can rest inside the warm water
that brings him partial relief of pain that never ends.

His ancestors once helped put my savior on the cross.
My ancestors once put his family in ovens.
But he calls across the pool to my daughter by name
and asks how school is going.
And when he wants the jets on in the hot tub
I set aside my magazine and turn the dial for him.

Now that I think of it, here in America,
there's no such thing as an ordinary day.

Burn Bag

A burn bag is a bag
into which secret documents
are placed for disposal.

Like the body
into which the secrets
of the spirit are written.

All language is but scraps
from the documents
of our souls.

Most of who we are
remains in the bag, awaiting
the struck match.

AUTHOR NOTES

Danny P. Barbare

Danny P. Barbare's poetry has appeared in online and print journals locally, nationally, and abroad. He has been writing poetry for thirty years and has been published over five hundred times. His poetry has appeared in Writing Ulster, The Houston Literary Review, Boston Literary Magazine, Art Times, The Santa Barbara Review as well numerous other publications. His poetry won the Jim Gitting's Award at Greenville Technical College, where he is attending school.

About the Work

“The Beautiful Sun” was created one day, simply when I was looking out the window and wanted to write a poem. She is simply fiction. But something I can connect to. I compared the images to a woman using the sun as a concrete source. I recite the images over and over till I get them right, making sure it sounds right, the tone is clear, and trying not to get too flowery. I focus on the one image till I have some kind of form. That is the hard part. Once I have an idea of what I'm going to write about and what I'm going to compare it to, it becomes more simple. I then just have to say connect the dots. It is very enjoyable to me when I feel like I have said what I want. Only publication comes second.

“The Jelly Bean” is also about she. It is a more comical poem I wrote. I simply take a jelly bean, which I was eating at the time and just concentrate on the images. What compares. I think deeper into the images, making light the whole time. The subject, she can ultimately be fiction, but it does have to seem real and make sense. I think object and emotion or feeling have to go hand and hand. She is more of a feeling than an actual person. An emotion. To where the jelly bean is the concrete object that gives me reality.

“The Magnolia” is about my wife, so this poem was a little easier to write. And we do have a magnolia tree in the back yard, so the images are easy to come up with. But again the beginning of writing even this poem is the hardest. Inspiration has little to do with me writing a poem. I work hard because I'm a serious poet that practices everyday. To me it is not just a fly by easy thing to do. But still, I find some kind of enjoyment in what I do. Publication is just the conclusion. I simply go on to the next poem, as there is always something to say. Say in my own way. I understand I cannot write like everybody else, but I can read others poetry, go to workshops and listen. And ultimately do it my way.

Vanessa Blakeslee

Vanessa Blakeslee's work has been recognized by grants and fellowships from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Yaddo, the Ragdale Foundation and the United Arts of Central Florida, and has appeared in Harpur Palate, The Bellingham Review, Green Mountains Review, and The Southern Review, among other journals. She was a finalist for the 2011 Philip Roth Residency at Bucknell University and the Sozopol Fiction Seminars. Her short story "Shadowboxes" won the 2011 Bosque Fiction Prize. Please visit www.vanessablakeslee.com for more.

About the Work

The intersection of form and content sparked the vision for "Ed Dyess, Hero of Agoloma Point, April 22nd, 1942." I wrote it midway through the MFA in Writing program at Vermont College, when I was trench-deep in setting all types of challenges for myself as a writer. I wanted to stretch my abilities, write about people and situations vastly different from my (then) comfort zone of often thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction. I had first encountered the historical incident a couple of years before, when I was hired to co-write a screenplay about fighter pilots in World War II. In my research I came upon a first person radio transcript dated April 22nd, 1942, given by another fighter pilot who had escaped the Philippines to Darwin, Australia—the voice of my story originally stems from this primary source. The screenplay ultimately didn't fly, but for a long time the bizarre, true story of Ed Dyess and his band of pilots who ended up fighting a land mission in the Philippines with old Lewis guns from the first World War and oven mitts stuck in my imagination. If the screenplay wasn't going anywhere, why not salvage those great opening scenes, transfer them to another form?

But as with many ideas for potential fiction, I didn't attempt to put the story on paper because I didn't yet have a container for the narrative. Not until I studied with Douglas Glover my second semester and came across a short war story of his, "Swain Corliss, Hero of Malcolm's Mills, (now Oakland, Ontario), November 6th, 1814," did I have an *Aha* moment. I wrote the first draft as a self-imposed exercise and turned it in to Glover, noting my intention to pay homage to his tale with my own. The draft came back with all types of red marks and suggestions, but I finally had a style and narrative structure, enough to give it the dramatic thrust needed for a short story to work.

That was the easy part. The big problem I faced as I attempted revision (the story went through about five drafts) was that I had not yet inhabited the point-of-view sufficiently so that the *why* of the narrative was clear. As my third semester instructor Xu Xi posed to me, the first question was what makes Ed Dyess a hero, beyond the military sense—a hero that warrants this particular story be told of his life in this particular moment by this narrator? Another problem was that my initial descriptions of the action were strategic and not tactical or specific enough—not surprising, considering my lack of military expertise. But a writer's job is to render the fiction believable, so I had to nail the details. In the screenplay version these were much easier to leave out, of course—a screenplay being comprised of mostly dialogue and scant description, unlike literature.

To better capture the voice and tone, I studied Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Ha Jin's "A Woman from New York." I also studied James Salter's excellent novel, "The Hunters," a book that captures the consciousness of fighter pilots in an entirely believable way. Even after examining these texts I struggled with getting the voice right up until I worked through the other issues in the story. Once I knew Ed Dyess and the narrator better, the voice seemed to straighten itself out.

A somewhat easier task was nailing the concrete details. I moved a sentence from several paragraphs in, making it the opening line of the story. From there I had a clearer vantage point to render the events. This is a common pitfall when learning to write, for everything builds from the opening line you lay down. So if the opening line is faulty, like with a house, the rest of what you build will be on shaky ground. In the early drafts I had a lot of awkward back-and-forth that ended up being confusing; the story could just as easily be told chronologically. Often when writing short fiction you want to keep the backstory to a minimum, but in this case the historical details were integral to the understanding of the story. So for the subsequent drafts I focused on rearranged the telling to a more simple, straightforward approach. Once I had accomplished that, and fleshed out the details more, "Ed Dyess..." started to read less like a writing exercise and more like a story.

Finally, to develop the "why" of the narrative more fully, I focused on bringing out the character of Ed Dyess in a more precise and exacting way. Once he (and the narrator's perception of him) came into sharper focus, the comment I wanted to make about heroism, war and absurdity at this point in human history coalesced more fully.

Fiction, for me, is about living multiple realities through characters whose lives are radically different from my own, and rendering those inhabited realities believable for the reader to experience them, too. How else would I be able to experience, in a complete sensory and psychological way, a band of American pilots fighting the Japanese in World War II? Walk in the shoes of a young man in a Pacific jungle sixty-five years ago when I'm a woman in the twenty first century? Writing fiction, for those who are called to do it, is among the most important work on the planet, for it shows us what it is to be human. By inhabiting another's life different from your own, you learn to empathize with that person. The process of doing so is my dharma—there's nothing more frustrating, exhilarating, or challenging that I care to do. Sometimes it comes easy, sometimes not, but at the end of the day, the work is fun and the rewards infinite.

Vanessa Blakeslee on the Web

www.vanessablakeslee.com/

www.opendrive.com/files/24908653_Hgti4/VanessaBlakeslee_TrainShots.pdf

www.nthposition.com/meanjean.php

tinyurl.com/3s9hv2y

burrowpress.com/tag/the-shimmying-writer/

Joshua Comyn

Joshua Comyn is a South African writer and researcher living in Melbourne, Australia. His current research interests concern the intersection of literature with information and systems theory and their relevance to questions of subjectivity. His artistic work is at present an extended poetry and film project, the mapping of poetry onto films, films as poetic palimpsests. While not overt, the theoretical concerns of his research haunt his creative work.

About the Work

My ‘film poetry’ work began with Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, a film which began haunting me, and that haunted my notions of normality, both ethical and creative. I watched it over and over. Then I started watching it like an editor might, pausing the DVD, running it back and forth, playing it in slow motion, re-examining moments, writing down lines, and generally infecting myself with its details.

This experience led me to write about other films as well, one of which is *The Street of Crocodiles* by The Brothers Quay, a film which is in turn inspired by the book of the same title by Bruno Schulz. I haven’t read Schulz’s book, and didn’t want to before my poem was written because I didn’t want the book to interfere with my work on the film. The ‘film work’ I am engaged in is critical—I am interpreting the film as I write, but without necessarily trying to stick to the ‘meaning intentions’ of the original work; I am making a interpretation of the original as I ‘rewrite’ it, creating a parallel, alternate world.

The Brothers Quay’s film *The Street of Crocodiles* is a powerful, and powerfully ambiguous work of art, but utterly precise in its ambiguity. It is filled with utterly exacting lacunæ. Despite this it enacts a consistent narrative experience. For my part, I wanted to write something that could haunt the interstices of the film but which was consistent in itself. I wanted to write a ghost story for ghosts.

Charles Coté

Charles Coté is the author of a chapbook (*Flying for the Window*, Finishing Line Press, 2008) and is working on a full-length book of persona poems called *Shrink*, some of which appear in this issue of *Segue*. His poems have also appeared in: *Upstreet*, *Salamander*, *The Cortland Review*, *Free Lunch*, *Identity Theory*, *Blueline*, *Modern Haiku*, *Connecticut River Review* and *HazMat Review*. He studied social work at Syracuse University and is a psychotherapist in private practice, teaching poetry in his free time at Writers & Books in Rochester, NY.

About the Work

The Shrink persona evolved out of my struggle to write about my profession without divulging confidential information, to find a way to fashion a container for the suffering of others, which in reality turns out to be a way to contain my own anxiety. Physician, heal thyself! The first Shrink poem I wrote, simply titled “Shrink,” linked the subject of my chapbook, the death of my eighteen-year-old son from cancer, with my work as a psychotherapist, imagining Shrink in his office on the anniversary of his son’s death. When I shared that poem at the Palm Beach Poetry Festival with my workshop leader, Gregory Orr, he encouraged me to develop Shrink’s character and let the poems go wherever they would take me, to not censor the work in any way. “Shrink’s Winter” pays homage to Fernando Pessoa’s persona, Ricardo Reis, one of four distinct voices he employed when writing. As a therapist, the gap between one’s professional and personal life can be quite wide as the HBO series *In Treatment* so accurately portrays. I could say things behind a mask, a persona, that I’d be hesitant to say directly. In this case, we see a melancholic Shrink trying to connect with his wife, and yet falling short, a stark contrast to the help he offers his married clients by day. “Shrink’s Math” heightens this dramatic tension by exploring the implications of intimacy, how two halves rarely make a whole, an idea that fascinates me both as a therapist and bewildered spouse. This poem started as an exercise with homonyms. In “Shrink’s Elusive Moon,” we get an existential perspective: No relationship can fill that void, no matter how ideal. Shrink is moony, or in Jungian psychology, a puer, an adult child dealing with his mother complex, or at least that’s what Shrink’s own shrink might say. I’ll leave it up to you, the reader, to decide whether that assessment is correct.

Charles Coté on the Web

charlescote.blogspot.com/

www.bostonliterarymagazine.com/win08interview.html

www.poetrymagazine.com/archives/featured_poets/199603.htm

www.cortlandreview.com/issue/36/cote.html

www.identitytheory.com/verse/summer_2006.php

A.B. Datta

A. B. Datta lives in Bombay, India, and is currently a student of literature in the University of Mumbai. He also edits nether, a new independent Indian journal for writing and the arts.

Brian Diamond

Brian Diamond's poetry has previously appeared in such literary journals as Sycamore Review, Hotel Amerika, Los Angeles Review, 42 Opus, 14 Hills, and the Drunken Boat. He has an MA in Creative Writing from California State Northridge and an MFA from Arizona State University. Currently he lives in Los Angeles with his wife and dog, where he teaches writing and literature at American Jewish University.

About the Work

These poems are the result of my ongoing interest with the sonnet form. Or perhaps, I should say, a bastardized version of the sonnet form, owing probably more Berrigan and Lowell and Berryman than anything else. What interests me is the contrast between expansive subject matter (ranging here from mathematics to philosophy to daily ruminations) and the restrictions of a 14-line form. In this way, these poems serve as filters for a more expansive poetic language, employing sonnet-like turns on the external world as experienced through language.

All of these poems began with some larger idea, anchored in a particular image. The challenge in writing them, for me, is primarily the desire of the form for coherence, with the impulse of the subject matter to resist this coherence. I've tried to find, as best I could, the balance between a tolerance for ambiguity with an impulse for concrete images. I've looked to poet's like Rae Armantrout, Laura Riding Jackson, and Norman Dubie (thus his appearance in one of these poems) as a model for how to accomplish this.

For me, poetry is a framework for understanding the world. I turn to poetry for the particular form of clarity that comes out of complicating what we might otherwise mistake as simple.

Jeannie Galeazzi

Jeannie Galeazzi's work has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in forty-four publications including Fence, The Literary Review, Permafrost, Southern Humanities Review, Main Street Rag, Feathertale (Canada), Dotlit (Australia), Snorkel (New Zealand), and All Rights Reserved (Nova Scotia), and is forthcoming in Bryant Literary Review and Gold Dust (UK). "Fan Club" is for Judy Barr and Betty Houston, with much gratitude for their years of gracious encouragement.

About the Work

Writing is pruning. And knowing when—at each step of the way (researching, mulling the research, plotting, outlining, composing, editing, editing the edits, editing the edited edits, editing the edited edits of the earlier edits and then editing *those* to the point of nausea before skulking into the silent read-through phase and then, in disgust and despair, slashing and splicing and editing *again* before rereading, red-penciling all the while, until the only thing left is to read the damned thing out loud)—when to say “When.”

From inspiration to finished product? “Fan Club” sprouted from the author’s city-gal love of skyscrapers and her neat-freak fixation with skyscraper windows and the huge task of keeping them clean. And what if those windows were kept clean by a character whose life was a mess, who desperately sought to change? That bud of an idea—along with the seedling notion of a foil character through whom to explore themes of limits and obligation and the anguish lurking beneath decorum—bloomed into a novel called *Mephisto’s Bluff*, one of a handful of novels the author has been trying (and failing) for years to get published. Finally, fed up, she shifted from gardening mode to chop-shop mode: chapters and scenes and characters and turns of phrase hacked apart and melted down and molded afresh and soldered together into several short stories and a scatter of poems that, so far, by luck, have speed-bumped into print. At which point, in each case, the pruning was *forced* to stop, the author *forced* to gasp out a “When.”

The hard part? It’s *all* hard. Unless one can summon the focus to slip into the Zone: then time flows, pages fill, and the “hard part” is putting that pen (or red pencil) *down*. But beware: the more sterling and brilliant and lush this Zone-forged prose may at first seem, the longer the cool-off this prose will require before any intelligent editing—any objective pruning—can begin.

Resolving challenges? Shake it up! Write the last paragraph first and use it for target practice as you sweat out the rest. If you’re an outliner, don’t outline; if you aren’t, do. Try longhand. Try dictation. Try reading something “bad.” Leave the work and step outdoors and open your senses and walk until you see or hear or smell or taste or touch something that reconnects you to your plot and characters—and then walk *back* to the work free-associating: you’ll arrive revved up with insights. Above all, cultivate your own method that is natural to YOU, that gets *what-YOU-feel-is-worth-writing* written. That done, the big challenge may well turn out to be restraint: the challenge of *not* showing the work until it’s ready, until it has been suitably pruned.

Craft? Charm versus thrust. Any writer is lucky to have any readers at all. Great care must be taken not to outstay our tenuous welcome in those readers’ minds. We don’t bore with blather; we don’t shock just to shock; we make a point. It’s all in the pruning.

“When.”

Jeannie Galeazzi on the Web

www.perigee-art.com/7389/popups/0109/fiction3.php

www.snreview.org/0109Galeazzi.html

snorkel.org.au/008/galeazzi.html

www.bloodorangereview.com/v5-1/galeazzi_raqs.htm

superstitionreview.asu.edu/n2/bio.php?author=jeanniegaleazzi&bio=fiction

Sean Howard

Sean Howard is the author of two collections of poetry, Local Calls (Cape Breton University Press, 2009) and Incitements (Gaspereau Press, 2011). His work has been published in numerous Canadian magazines, as well as Illuminations (USA) and The Rialto (UK). His Shadowgraphs Project is currently being supported by a Creative Writing Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. Sean is adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University, researching nuclear disarmament issues and the political history of twentieth century physics.

About the Work

Since 2006, I have been working on a project to convert each Nobel physics lecture delivered in the twentieth century—some 150 addresses, all but *one* of them by men!—into a “shadowgraph,” a poetic X-ray or exposé of hidden themes, latent or repressed symbols, unconscious images, etc.

The name of the project is taken from the citation for the first Prize, awarded to Wilhelm Röntgen of Germany in 1901 for his (accidental) discovery of X-rays: “Now, when a foreign body impermeable to X-rays, e.g. a bullet or a needle, has entered these tissues its location can be determined by illuminating the appropriate part of the body with X-rays and taking a shadowgraph of it on a photographic plate, whereupon the impenetrable body is immediately detected.”

As I explained at a public reading (Cape Breton University, November 2007), “the unsubverted prose of the lectures constitutes, for me, an ‘impenetrable body:’ a solid wall of confidence in the capacity of modern western science to penetrate to the inner sanctum of nature and, in the inexorable process, deliver infinite progress and prosperity to humanity. But there is a terrible dark side to this enlightenment—a hidden or inner shadow that I think can be shown, its plots exposed, on the ‘poetic graphs’” resulting from a radical rereading.

The main technique deployed is a variant of the dada-inspired “cut-up” method pioneered most prominently by Brion Gysin and William Burroughs in the 1950s. I call the approach, which I first developed about fifteen years ago, “downlining:” copying the text onto a series of ten-word by ten-word grids, then reading the words *downwards*, exploring, reflecting and elaborating on the (often shocking; frequently hilarious; occasionally grotesque) images produced or suggested. The basic idea, as I noted in my presentation, is that when you “cut-up” or scramble a text, *any* text, you “transform it, release its bound poetic energy: you split—for peaceful, if creatively explosive, purposes—apparently dead, and deceptively solid, ‘atoms’ of meaning, symbol and sound.”

In 1997, the British poetry magazine *Envoi* published some of my early experiments in “downlining.” The editor asked for a short explanatory note, in which I wrote: “The following poems...aim to generate ‘meaningful coincidences’, or *incidents*, between different parts of a text (or between texts). The premise is that language can be taken out of its ‘natural’ or habitual, awoken state and put into a dreamlike state (something like the shift from the classical to the quantum physical world); and that that state can be monitored, and engaged with.”

On average, each shadowgraph takes around twelve hours to write: three or four to read the lecture and transcribe it onto the grids; eight or nine to uncover, work with, reflect on, amplify, select and edit the results. The easiest part of the process is pocketing the wonderful free

gifts sometimes offered by the re-juxtaposed words; the hardest part is forcing yourself to accept, to both witness and trust, the dream-logic involved, to neither force the issue nor impose a pre-emptive or reductive interpretation (as can sometimes happen in science itself).

I was particularly pleased, and peculiarly affected, by *shadowgraph 69*, a “poetic plate” illuminating the interior of Donald Glaser’s 1960 lecture “Elementary Particles and Bubble Chambers.” Glaser, inventor of the bubble chamber method of tracking particles released in atomic collisions, was only thirty-four when he received the Prize, and his lecture is full of youthful, infectious enthusiasm. Yet he also talks about peering into “ovens with windows” with no inkling, seemingly, of the broader, darker connotation of the phrase *as image*: the glimpse the words give into other chambers, where other experiments were conducted, particles destroyed.

In the early nineteenth century the English poet Charles Lamb wrote: “The true poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject.” To judge by the Nobel lectures, scientists very often *are* possessed by theirs; they cannot always see the shadow they cast. It takes a kind of dream to do that; and in our scientific-technological—our sometimes *sleepwalking*—age, poetry can be just that, a kind of cultural dreaming.

Sean Howard on the Web

www.zafusy.org/poetry/seanhoward

stonestone.unbc.ca/issues/authors/howard.html

Timothy Kercher

Originally from Colorado, Timothy now lives in Kyiv, Ukraine after living in the Republic of Georgia for the past four years, where he has been editing and translating an anthology of contemporary Georgian poetry. His manuscript *Nobody's Odyssey* was recently selected as a finalist for the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry, and his translation of Besik Kharanauli's long poem, "The Lame Doll," is set to be published in the Republic of Georgia next year. His poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of recent literary publications, including *Crazyhorse*, *upstreet*, *Versal*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Dirty Goat*, *Poetry International Journal*, *Los Angeles Review*, and others.

About the Work

All three of these poems were precipitated by one event: finding out my wife was pregnant with twins (actually, at first, they were triplets, but one absorbed). This was a wild time in my (our) lives—we had already decided to move from the Republic of Georgia to the Ukraine, but didn't know what this revelation meant to our plans. I've never had a single event change what I write about so much—every poem I was writing, it seems like, became an examination of this topic, and these three certainly belong in that category.

"Balance," perhaps, of all of them, was the most intentional. I was writing to a chapbook manuscript that included a group of poems about my wife's family members who had passed away (each year she lost someone important to her: aunt, father, grandmother, grandfather, and step father, in five successive years), and another group of poems about my having grown up with triplet little brothers, and another group of poems about our twin revelation (and the loss/disappearance of one of the three). In my mind, these three groups of poems are intimately connected—my mom tells the story that when she became pregnant with my triplet brothers (I was ten at the time), and this was after she just lost a baby, and had lost another before I was born—that I told her this was God's way of making up for those two losses. Also, when we found out that our third embryo did not develop a heartbeat (even though very normal for pregnancies with multiples), it was not easy to take—having grown up with triplet brothers, I maybe identified our own three too much with my little brothers. I wanted to use all these ideas somehow in a poem—to make a poem that all these ideas hinge upon, which would be important in unifying *The Trinity Cycles* chapbook thematically. It took a long time to get this one right.

"Gemini" was written in the same timeframe, but I wasn't writing specifically for the manuscript. I wrote this from an exercise I made for my students combining a couple of ideas given to me by my professor Richard Jackson, from an essay I wrote examining what makes Ilya Kaminsky's poetry work, an exercise called "20 Little Poetry Projects" from Robin Behn's *The Practice of Poetry*, and then I added some of my own ideas, like "relate a personal experience to classical mythology." I called it the Kercher Poem Poetry Idea, and have given it to my students for several years if they want an A in the poetry unit. Really, this exercise is meant to take the writer to a place he doesn't expect to go. I've written this exercise countless times with my classes, but this one in particular came out better than most, I think. And, as everything I wrote during this period (and to some extent, even now), the subject of the poem ended up being my wife's pregnancy with our twin girls.

“Rain in Paradise” was written, as happens in the poem, right after a rainstorm. We lived in a home on the outskirts of Tbilisi, a beautiful stone house that was poorly put together, and a light fixture above my wife who was reading on the bed began leaking. As the poem records, I was reading *Paradise Lost* at the time, and when I wrote the poem, my anxiety from thinking my wife was bleeding/had a miscarriage combined with Milton on the mind produced the poem.

I find it striking how good a subject for poetry birth and fatherhood are. I staved off having kids for as long as I could, having spent my teenage years helping raise my identical triplet younger brothers. But, oh, what an experience children are! I like what one of the poets I translate, Zviad Ratiani, has to say as to how he looks at poetry: “I write in order to understand my life,” and even though I’ve been writing a lot about birth and children, many of the poems end up staring squarely in the face of my own mortality. I think all three of these poems do this. I like HOW Galway Kinnell how remarked in an interview for NPR, “Mortality makes everything worth more to us,” and maybe these poems are an exploration of mortality in light of having children. Poetry to me is expression, revelation—it’s the process of making sense, and I’m still trying to make sense of the experience of fatherhood.

Timothy Kercher on the Web

dgvcfaspring10.wordpress.com/tag/tim-kercher/

web.mac.com/tomkoontz/Site_30/Kercher.html

www.eclectica.org/v14n3/kercher.html

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www.cavalierliterarycouture.com/online/pg14/Meeting%20Yevtushenko's%20Translator/

Dean Kisling

Dean Kisling is a high school dropout who learned to type when he was 47. He has been a soldier, laborer, taxi driver, welder, carpenter, performing musician, acupressurist, fractal artist, mountaineer, trail runner and fool. He writes what happened and also makes stuff up. He lives in America and is very happily married. More of his work is available at his [website](#).

About the Work

My aspiration is to write the story of us. Fiction has the potential to tell that story more completely because fiction includes the subjective. The story of us is not simply the objective facts, but also our discovery and experience of the facts, how we interpret them and what we choose to do about it. We struggle with the dualities in our own natures, struggle with love and hate, courage and cowardice, pride and shame, freedom and slavery. We try to be more than beasts. That struggle is the story fiction can tell, why we claim fiction can tell the truth. I think a large part of human dignity is in the fact that we keep trying to become better than we are.

A story is told from the interior of someone. Or several someones. For example: even in a story with only one character, the protagonist, narrator, and author might each have a point of view. They might interact with each other, compete, cooperate and connive for the reader's empathy and trust. They might all become the characters of the story. They all have personalities, histories, opinions, desires, fears, things to hide and axes to grind. Each one wants us to understand the story in a certain way. It is their interiors telling the story, maybe arguing about it, contesting how it is being told or what really happened, demanding a fair hearing or last rebuttal.

Written words can get inside the people living and telling the story in a way that is unique to literature. In a story, you can be told more about someone than they know about themselves. In a story, a variety of perspectives can tell a truer tale. The story of us is better told by many voices

I enjoy the challenge and the chance to speak from these multiple points of view, to try to tell a more true story. I think these layers of voices are the basis of the tradition of irony in literature. Irony requires some distance, some degree of separation from its object. Of course, the irony of telling the story of us is that all of us are one of us, and no real degree of separation is possible, believe whatever you like.

In a first person story, the protagonist and narrator are the same person. Part of the action of the story is that person changing, realizing something, deciding something, becoming this person now speaking to you as the narrator.

Sometimes the first person narrator is the conscience of the protagonist, or his dark side, or his apologist, or his main booster, could be anything, the attitudes of some authority figure now forever internalized...the point being to differentiate between his two characters: the protagonist he started out as and the narrator he became. In one sense, that is the real story, characters being changed by engaging life.

Dean Kisling on the Web

pneumerology.com

Jo Neace Krause

Jo Neace Krause has strong connections to southern and middle Ohio as do many people from Appalachia. Her family and connected relatives migrated from Breathitt County, Kentucky to the Clermont Country region after World War II. Krause is a short story writer as well as poet and folk painter (she hears she is a significant one!) with paintings in the permanent collection at The Kentucky Folk Art Center in Morehead. A short story, "Mothers and Children," will appear in the forthcoming issue of The Arch.

About the Work

My advice to anyone who wants to write is take this test. Read but be choosy. Read not just the quiet hidden minds of poets, but begin with the public ones. Start with the Bible for its dramatic poetics of over statement, its meglomania. "I am the resurrection," "I am the way, truth and the light." Then on to Shakespeare. Memorize the speeches of Hamlet talking to himself, and Henry V talking to soldiers, for they will turn you into music. Say them out loud when you are doing the dishes or laundry, carry on like someone come back from the dead with a headful of flashing secrets. And if the secrets take hold, if the flesh is hooked and heart swells, then you are in. You can sit down and make your start.

Rich Murphy

Rich Murphy's credits include the 2008 Gival Press Poetry Award for Voyeur; a first book, The Apple in the Monkey Tree; chapbooks, Great Grandfather, Family Secret, Hunting and Pecking, Rescue Lines, and Phoems for Mobile Vices; poems in Rolling Stone, Poetry, Grand Street, Trespass, New Letters, Pank, Segue, Big Bridge, Pemmican, War, Literature and the Arts, and Confrontation; and essays in The International Journal of the Humanities, Fringe, Journal of Ecocriticism, Folly Magazine, among others. Rich lives in Marblehead, MA.

About the Work

The Nietzschean idea of the mind of Europe led Paul Valery in 1919 to psychoanalyze the collective mind of Europe in his essay "Crisis of the Mind." He blames the "disorder on the mind" of Europe for the war(s), suggesting that it would bring down the European civilization. His diagnosis included "[t]he free coexistence, in all her cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and learning. That is characteristic of a *modern* epoch" (98). With the war to end all wars past and WWII just down the road, our hindsight suggests his letter prescient.

Later in 1929 Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* would suggest that the mind of Europe has a very extensive memory when he suggests that Rome is a kind of palimpsest: "Let us, by flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is ... a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—and entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one" (44).

Taken from different position the idea of the mind of Europe not only had deep historical roots going back to ancient Greece but its influence was felt in its European colonies whether the colonialists liked it or not. Critics such as Northrop Frye planted doubt in the idea of an original American literature. He granted the possibility of originality while also pointing out similarities in writers such as Homer. And Hart Crane may have been trying to build a Brooklyn Bridge to Europe and back for traffic in both directions but never could lay the foundation of the work. So while W.C. Williams was throwing a tub of English connotations out on a Saturday night in America, other North American writers and thinkers thought there may be a baby in the bath water.

The Nietzschean idea of the mind of Europe may then possibly have broad implications and applications. My recent poems (these included) are meant to belong to one of two collections in which I channel voices from the twentieth Century in Europe and the USA; reply to "contradictions," influences, and other "psychical entit[ies];" and comment on affinities as an American poet who thinks of himself as living in a postmodern epoch, free from inferiority complexes. I may find that my next collections of poems are not bridges to Europe but a search in the backyard for a baby.

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Rich Murphy on the Web

richink.wordpress.com/about/

www.linkedin.com/profile/edit?trk=hb_tab_pro_top

Erin Pushman

Erin Pushman is relatively new to literary nonfiction. Her essays have appeared in Thrift Poetic Arts, MoonShine Review, and Toasted Cheese Online Literary Journal. Her plays have been produced on stages around the Carolinas and excerpted in anthologies including Boomtown: Explosive Writing from Ten Years of the Queens University of Charlotte MFA Program and New Monologues for Women by Women, Volume II. Though she would like to move back to Michigan, she lives in North Carolina and is an associate professor of English at Limestone College, where she directs the Writing Center.

About the Work

Lately I have been writing about bodies, mostly my mother's and mine. The more I write about my mother and me, the more I realize how thoroughly we are connected, woven together like a DNA strand. It is not just our genes that bind my body to my mother's but a series of bodily traumas, the most poignant being her diagnosis with metastatic breast cancer and my experience as a pedestrian versus motor vehicle. I recovered from that accident, and my mother went into remission, but each of us now lives inside an altered body. The memory of those traumas is imprinted beneath my skin.

Some months ago, I finished revising a book-length memoir weaving together my mother's story and mine, explaining how we were able not just to survive these medical traumas but to *live* with them. Because book publication is a slow thing and because there are parts of this woven story I wanted to send out into the world more quickly, I decided to rework a chapter of the memoir, revising it into a stand-alone essay. I had rewritten the chapter several times for the memoir, but revising the piece as an essay was more difficult. At first I could not find a way to make the piece work as an essay, but then teaching freshman composition class one day, I heard myself reminding my students that revision literally means to re-see.

If I wanted the material from my chapter to stand alone as an essay, I had to re-see it as an essay. An essay could not rely on the rest of the manuscript to provide context, an ending or beginning, a cast of characters, OR a larger central theme—I knew my revision would have to be fairly radical. In the chapter version, I had taken the story of my mother beginning her cancer treatment and braided it together with a narrative of a dynamic time in my own recovery from the accident. For the essay, I decided to focus on the cancer, which meant culling out the material that dealt with larger themes of the book. I pulled out all pieces of the narrative related to my accident and recovery—there went a dozen pages, maybe more.

What I had left could not stand alone either, so I had to reconstruct the piece. I did not think the scenes depicting the story of my mother's cancer had to change much, but they were also not enough. Without the material about my accident, my presence as the narrator of the piece was minimal. And this was a memoir, so what about me? As the narrator, I was part of the story not only through the fact of my participation in my mother's experience but through the way I experienced my own body during my mother's cancer. I looked again at the section dealing with my adolescence and realized I needed to develop it a little further (this led to a revision of that section in the larger manuscript, too).

My own story was emerging as part of the essay, but when I sent a draft to my writing group, they thought it still did not stand alone. This all happened twenty years ago, they pointed out. Why was I writing about it now? And why would a reader care? Those were the questions that allowed me to fully re-see the piece. I was writing about my mother's cancer because I was looking down the lens of that disease as a woman not unlike the woman she was then, and it scared me. I wrote into that fear. And I wrote into the way my mother's cancer—in remission now for nearly two decades—still seems to follow both of us.

One of the challenges I face in writing nonfiction, particularly memoir, is deciding which parts of an experience to include. I certainly faced that challenge in revising "Revolving Glass." I have written the essay into a piece quite different from the version I started with, because I have included different aspects of my life. As the essay emerged through revision, I came to see that it had much to do with my being afraid of my own body and what I have learned to do with that fear. To fully realize this part of the essay, I had to include experiences that fell outside the content of the piece in its original chapter form. My dogged commitment to cancer screenings, the "fire drill" appointments with my mother, my own biopsy: each is a lived experience I had to recall in memory then decide to craft in writing for the essay.

Measuring by word-count, I'd say about one third of "Revolving Glass" is composed of material that is not part of the piece as it appears in the memoir. To write it as an essay, I have had to reshape and re-imagine, to cut away old tissue and graft on new, to re-see the connection between my mother's body and mine, and to lay it out again on paper, altered.

Erin Pushman on the Web

www.toasted-cheese.com/tclj/2008/8-1/pushman.htm

Mark Richardson

*Mark Richardson's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Switchback, Crime Factory, Nth Position, the anthology D*CKED, and Thirst for Fire. Richardson lives in Northern California and works as a marketing writer in Silicon Valley.*

About the Work

“Black String Bikini” was inspired by a story written by Alix Ohlin, one of my favorite writers. Her story included abrupt jumps into the future. I'd never seen that before and I really, really liked it. So many stories have back-story, of course, so why can't you have significant glimpses into the future? I've since had a chance to ask Alix what inspired her story. She said it was particularly influenced by *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark, which, according to Alix, “is full of flash forwards—it has this really confident narration that doesn't mind spiraling forward in time to inform you of the fates of each and every character.” I think it's cool how one piece of art can influence another and then another—an ongoing dialogue.

Typically when I write, I have an idea of the story, and I then struggle with the best way to tell it. “Black String Bikini” was the opposite. I knew the format I wanted to play with, but I didn't have a story. So writing it was very challenging! And it took me a long time to determine what the story was really about.

The easiest parts for me were the flash forwards. Those just flowed out of me. I had originally planned to write a story that focused on the main character (Ben) and his relationship with his parents. But the flash forwards mostly came out as glimpses into the future of Ben and his girl friend (Rachelle). So over time I realized that their relationship was the central focus. At first, Rachelle was in very few of the scenes, but dominated the flash forwards. I went back and included her in more of the story.

To me, the story is about the emotional power of your first love, and how that sticks with you throughout your lifetime. Also, there is more than one way to tell a story, and it's good to be open to stories that try non-traditional techniques. It is fun as a writer to try something different.

Mark Richardson on the Web

www.swback.com/issues/008/tattoo-woman/1.html

thirstforfire.com/2009/1009moaning.html

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Lynn Veach Sadler

(Dr.) Mary Lynn Veach Sadler has a B.A. (*Magna Cum Laude, Honors, Phi Beta Kappa*) from Duke and an M.A. and a Ph.D. (*Phi Kappa Phi*) from the University of Illinois, with postdoctoral study at UCLA and Balliol College, Oxford. She taught at Agnes Scott, Drake, and A&T and directed the Division of Humanities at Bennett College, where she set up what is considered the first microcomputer laboratory for teaching writing. She pioneered in computer-assisted composition, coined the term, and published the first journal in the field (done with desktop publishing). As Vice President of Academic Affairs at Methodist, she originated North Carolina's first conference on academic computing. A college president (Vermont), she won an Extraordinary Undergraduate Teaching Award and received a civil rights award, the Distinguished Women of North Carolina Award (education), and the NC Society of Historians Barringer Award for Exceptional Service to the History of the State. She was Visiting Distinguished Scholar at the US Office of Personnel Management, presented at the First International Milton Symposium (England), and directed an NEH Summer Seminar ("The Novel of Slave Unrest") for College Teachers. She is widely published in academics (five books, sixty-eight articles; editor of nineteen books/proceedings, three national journals) and creative writing. A novel and full-length poetry collection will soon join her novella, short-story collection, and seven poetry chapbooks. One story appears in *Del Sol's Best of 2004*; another won the *Abroad Writers Contest/Fellowship (France)*. She was *elizaPress 2007 Writer of the Year* and won *Wayne State's 2008 Pearson Award* for a play on the Iraq wars and the 2009 overall award (poetry and fiction) of the *San Diego City College National Writer's Contest*. She and her husband, Dr. Emory Sadler, a psychologist, have traveled around the world five times, with Lynn writing all the way. She now works fulltime as a creative writer and an editor and writes a newspaper column on local history.

About the Work

"Full Fathom Flat" is "deconstructed" from my unpublished novel, *My Computer Journal of Family Dining* (which is far more experimental than the story suggests!) I've published many short stories, but they have not often run to "Southern" and "family." In both the longer and shorter works, I suspect that I was slaying ghosts and trying to make sense of my own family. My parents separated when I was in the ninth grade at a time before divorce was accepted. I have never shaken off having to walk into school again with everyone "knowing." I was an only child, both of my parents re-married, and I came to have half- and step-siblings. I know little of them but have always been curious.

Among the autobiographical elements here? My stepmother did have breast cancer; my father's brother, cancer of the tongue. The latter died when I was a baby, but I grew up with horrific tales about and images of him. A half-brother went the druggie route. I, though female (and old), have much in common with the narrator, teenager Zy Slayter. I was a pre-nerd nerd, and my undergraduate degree is from Duke. I have spent much of my academic career on predominantly Black campuses and frequently offer Black characters (Doak in this story). Formally, my specialty is Milton, from whom I learned to examine all the alternatives before choosing—the philosophy of Granddaddy Bob that opens "Full Fathom Flat" and one that I always tried to apply as an administrator and still rely on in day-to-day upsets. Granddaddy Bob is the father-figure I wish my father had been, and he and Zy have the relationship I longed for with my father.

I don't think we give youth enough credit. Today's families are muddles, with teenagers closer to grandparents than parents, parents who have never grown up, etc. Throw into the mix cancer and the older generation's sense of Fate; sports; teenage slang; Black, White, and Gay relationships...and the soup thickens. How do the young cope? And with such good spirits and wit? They seem implicitly to grasp humor as a coping mechanism, have the graciousness at least to redden, and generally admit that they overstep; Zy and Doak cannot resist the incongruity of cancer and punning but "know better" (if I don't!). In "Full Fathom Flat," I aimed to do more than sip the soup.

To the Editors of *Segue*, I offer thanks and admiration. "Full Fathom Flat" has attracted attention, but I was always asked to "lose the poems." I refused, on the grounds that they are true to the character of Zy. An editor myself, I am generally not obdurate when confronted with editorial requests/changes; I was in this case. "They also serve who stand and wait."

Nancy Scott

Nancy Scott is the current managing editor of U.S.1 Worksheets, the journal of the U.S.1 Poets' Cooperative in New Jersey. She is a collage artist as well as the author of two books of poetry, Down to the Quick (Plain View Press, 2007) and One Stands Guard, One Sleeps (Plain View Press, 2009); and two chapbooks, A Siege of Raptors (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and Detours & Diversions (Main Street Rag, 2011). Nancy was a caseworker for the State of New Jersey for many years, working with homeless families, abused children, and those with mental health issues, and her experiences have informed many of her poems. Her poetry and/or collages have recently appeared in online and print journals, such as Slant, Pemmican, Poet Lore, New York Quarterly, Mudfish, Sea Stories, qarrtsiluni, The Meadowland Review, and Journal of New Jersey Poets.

About the Work

I became interested in ekphrastic poetry (poems inspired by works of art) about ten years ago and used the last line from an ekphrastic poem I'd written as the title for my second poetry book, *One Stands Guard, One Sleeps*. Last year the genre reemerged as a workshop assignment, and I have since compiled a manuscript of like poems (working title is *On Location*) that brings together art, poetry, history and memoir. I really enjoyed compiling this manuscript, which includes the three poems in this issue of *Segue*: one after the work of a Russian artist, the other two after a Swiss and a German artist. In the spirit of people and place, a recurrent theme in most of my work, the manuscript also includes poems after work by French, Danish, Nicaraguan, Belgian, American, and Hungarian artists, and one poem after a collage I created.

The manuscript is dedicated to my grandfather, who was born in Russia and emigrated in his late twenties. The first part of the manuscript consists entirely of poems inspired by Russian artists. Since I was never able to discover much about my grandfather's childhood (he focused on building a successful life in America, rather than harking back to the "old country"), it is probably not a coincidence that browsing a flea market for materials for my collages, I purchased several old Christie's and Sotheby's catalogues, which dealt exclusively with auctions of Russian works of art, primarily done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My grandfather was Jewish and was not permitted to travel freely in Russia, so he would not have been familiar with these paintings, though I believe he would have known about the historical events and recognized descriptions of the countryside.

With all three poems, I did research. For "Self Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle," after having searched the Internet, I decided I wanted a hard copy about Arnold Böcklin's life and work. Finding scant choices written in English, I arranged to have one book imported from Massachusetts through our local library system. It took two months for the book to arrive, and although I could only keep it for two weeks, it was well worth the wait. For "The Chicken Coop," I researched the artist online and found some information, which seemed irrelevant to the poem, whereas for "Peter and Paul Church," I included historical information to flesh out the poem. Much like creating a collage, I gather material/information, assess it, then toss what doesn't work.

A challenge for me in writing poetry has always been to control the craft. What is point of the poem? What am I trying to communicate? I tend to overwrite, but having developed a thick

skin over the years, I've also learned to cut, and cut some more, and if I get lucky, something unexpected and enduring will emerge. With a framework in place, I revise endlessly, switching lines and stanzas, changing line breaks, correcting syntax, examining every word, including "a" and "the," to make sure I've said exactly what I want to say. I will let a poem simmer, occasionally for years, and find I'm still not satisfied with it, or, upon reflection, I will go back to an earlier version. In addition, how a poem sounds when it's read aloud and how it looks on the page are very important to me. I also want the title to do some work. I hate poems titled "Untitled." With these three poems, after I had created new titles with epigraphs referring back to the artist, I decided that the artists' titles worked much better and borrowed them.

Nancy Scott on the Web

www.nancyscott.net

www.pemmicanpress.com/CurrentIssue/nancy-scott/nancy-scott-scars-jan-2011.htm

qarrtsiluni.com/2011/06/27/marielito/

seastories.org/2011/06/nancy-scott-3/

prose-poems.com/pagetwoBACK.html

James Valvis

James Valvis lives in Washington State. His work has recently appeared in Arts & Letters, Atlanta Review, Blip (Mississippi Review), Eclectica, Foundling Review, Rattle, River Styx, and is forthcoming in Pedestal Magazine, H_NGM_N, Hanging Loose, GW Review, New York Quarterly, Slipstream, Night Train, Verdad, and others. His full-length poetry collection, How to Say Goodbye, is forthcoming.

Segue

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"The silence of the crowd."